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A Tool in the Kit: Uses of Bullshitting among Millennial Workers

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Abstract

This study explores the nature, use, and social organization of one form of communicative action that is common in everyday life -- "bullshitting." We use this form of communication to assess the ways in which dimensions of community, power and status are created in interaction. Abiding by the canons of ethnographic content analysis, we gathered data from over one hundred student respondents to ascertain the behaviors, utterances, and stories that people define as "bullshitting." The study finds that members of the "millennial generation" hone skills both in the telling and detection of this form of communication as they participate in a variety of contexts, including school, work, and interpersonal relationships. Special attention is given to the ways in which bullshitting is used as a cultural resource for agentive action. Dramaturgical and organizational theories are drawn upon in theorizing the data.

A Tool in the Kit: Uses of Bullshitting among Millennial Workers

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This study explores the nature, use, and social organization of one form of communicative action that is common in everyday life—"bullshitting." We use this form of communication to assess the ways in which dimensions of community, power and status are created in interaction. Abiding by the canons of ethnographic content analysis, we gathered data from over one hundred student respondents to ascertain the behaviors, utterances, and stories that people define as "bullshitting." The study finds that members of the "millennial generation" hone skills both in the telling and detection of this form of communication as they participate in a variety of contexts, including school, work, and interpersonal relationships. Special attention is given to the ways in which bullshitting is used as a cultural resource for agentive action. Dramaturgical and organizational theories are drawn upon in theorizing the data. Key words: Ingratiation, Organizational Culture, Injustice Frame, Self-Presentation, Ethnographic Content Analysis.

In the following article, we look at how students acquire, define, deploy, and anticipate the use of "bullshitting" as a cultural resource, as they pursue both educational and work aspirations. In everyday conversation, the meaning of bullshitting seems obvious. According to Fergusson's slang dictionary (1994), bullshit is "nonsense, empty talk" and, in the verb form, the meaning is: "to indulge in empty or boastful talk or falsehood, in order to impress or deceive" (p. 31). As a form of narrative action, bullshitting is commonly defined as involving deception or the telling of a *tall tale*. Bullshitting, then, entails the construction of narrative that may ultimately highlight the ignorance, gullibility, or naiveté of the recipient. We use this folk concept in illuminating how students, in both their present jobs and as future workers, understand the structure of relations in the work place and script action in accordance with it. The topic is timely given that members of the Millennial Generation (i.e., those born between 1982 and 2002) are entering the work force in larger numbers. This study adds to insights that have been provided by other scholars on power in micro-structural relations (Collins, 2004), organizational processes (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003), and culture and identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), observing the ways in which power differences manifest themselves in communication.

Bowles and Gintis (1976), in a classic treatise on education, argued that the structure and experience of schooling in the United States shapes students in accordance with occupational and work demands sustaining a broader class system. The culture and normative structure of top preparatory schools and private colleges, for example, mold students for leadership roles encouraging creativity, independence, and identification. By contrast, public schools and community colleges—enrolling students with less cultural capital—emphasize the importance of labor discipline. This ethos is realized as students,

qua future workers, learn to empathize with administrative orders, defer gratification, and deliver dependable, consistent performances. However, while Bowles and Gintis provided an insightful analysis into the structural features of capitalist schooling, little is revealed about how students as social agents might draw upon a repertoire of meanings, definitions, identities, strategies, and tactics for either contesting or adapting to the structural arrangements of work. What is left unsaid is how public school students themselves anticipate, experience, and define their participation within the two arenas of school and work. By contrast, expressions of agency among "Millennial Generation" workers have received great attention from those threatened by potential, agentive action. For employers, the issue has gained increasing significance, as evidenced by the burgeoning number of management manuals bearing titles such as *Millennials Rising* (2000), *Managing the Generation Mix* (2006), and *Bridging the Generation Gap* (2007). We propose to shed light on these processes by looking at a particular implement within the "cultural toolkit" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273) commonly found in almost all social contexts – an implement putatively referred to as "bullshitting."

While the characterization of members of Generation X (i.e., those born between 1965 and 1981) paints them as cynical, albeit entrepreneurial, slackers, the characterization of members of the Millennial Generation is one providing a stark contrast: Millennials are said to be optimistic, confident, and involved (Howe & Strauss, 2000). With respect to attitudes at work, a similarity between members of both generations is the observation that they lack requisite levels of commitment to their employers (Oliver 2006). By comparison, the parents and grandparents of Xers and Millennials are noted for working long and hard hours at their jobs. Over the past few decades, rewards for loyalty and commitment to the organization have been overshadowed by down-sizing, re-organization, and displacement. For both Xers and Millennials, occupational identity has less salience than for workers in previous generations. Findings from the Meaning of Work International Research Team (cited in Oliver, 2006) suggest that part of the reason for this apparent erosion of occupational identity is the message young people receive concerning the plethora of job changes they will make throughout their working lives. Young workers appear to value personal flexibility over and above an occupational identity. To some extent, the importance of work in identity-formation has been displaced by issues of consumption and lifestyle (Oliver). Of primary importance to Millennials is the ease by which they can socialize and consume. In a recent Pew Research study (Taylor & Keeter, 2010) comparing Millennials with members of previous generations (including the Silent Generation, whose members were born between 1925 and 1942; Baby Boomers, whose members were born between 1947 and1964; and Gen Xers, those born between 1965 and 1981, Millennials were the only group that did not cite "work ethic" in response to the survey question: "What makes your generation unique?" The most popular responses Millennials provided to the question were technology, music, pop culture and style, and liberalism and tolerance (Taylor & Keeter, p. 13).

Coming of age in an era when digital technology has expanded the means of communication and personal expression, Millennials themselves consider "pop culture and style" as markers of their uniqueness (Taylor & Keeter, 2010, p. 13). Our study assesses "stylized" presentations of self by examining bullshitting across a variety of settings and situations. We pay particular attention to its actual and anticipated use by

members of the Millennial Generation in work contexts. Data gathered from Millennials enabled us to explore how bullshitting is used as a form of play or entertainment, as a self-presentation strategy, as a form of sociability, and finally, as an assertion of the experience of an injustice.

Organizational Contexts and Bullshitting

While bullshitting is hardly a new phenomenon, its actual and anticipated use among Millennials in work and other settings has not, to date, been explored. Indeed, as a folk concept and form of interaction, bullshitting has received little theoretical or empirical attention.

Prior studies of work settings carried out by organizational psychologists simply subsume the phenomenon under a more general class of action—"ingratiatory behavior" (Linden & Mitchell 1988, p. 572). Research on organizational influence indicates that when managers in the workplace face contestation from workers they more readily cede rewards to subordinates who ingratiate themselves to management (Kipnis & Vanderveer, 1971). Other studies have revealed more ambivalent results. Experimental research on the "influence tactics" used by workers and supervisors indicates that deferential behaviors by workers may ply loose the rewards they seek if they strategically wait until their boss or supervisor is "in the right mood" (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980, p. 442). Paradoxically, this same research found that the people who routinely cajole others, strategically make others feel important, lie, manipulate information, and/or pretend to understand the problems of others are not workers but managers in superior positions.

Beyond psychological research, sociological studies have assessed how workers attempt to strategically shape the perceptions that management come to hold of them (Homans, 1941) and resist the laboring process in doing so (Bramel & Friend, 1981). Still other studies have focused on the specific, verbal strategies through which workers assert self-presentations, fend off unwanted attributions, build reputations and construct accounts (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). Tedeschi and Melburg's research, representing perhaps the most thorough investigation of workers' dramaturgical repertoire, identifies "ingratiation" as "tactical and assertive impression management" (p. 37). By ingratiation they refer to "a set of assertive tactics which have the purpose of gaining the approbation of the audience that controls significant rewards for the actor" (p. 37). They distinguish between four general strategies, including: (a) the use of statements in front of the boss that are self-enhancing; (b) complementing or flattering one's supervisor; (c) making statements indicating similarity in belief or attitude with one's manager; and, (d) doing favors for the boss (pp. 38-40). Yet, while notable works in sociology have focused on how laborers craft workgroup routines (Burawoy, 1979; Kundra, 1992), professional culture (Fine, 1996; 2007) and forms of resistance (Fantasia, 1988; Grenier, 1988) little research focuses on the workgroup cultures of the Millennial Generation and even less on the specific folk concept of *bullshitting*. Investigation into the trope has more commonly been the object of philosophical rather than empirical inquiry (Frankfurt, 2005)—even though one might expect it to hold ethnographic interest for those doing research on joking and workgroup culture (For examples see: Roy, 1959; Scott, 1974; Sykes, 1966; Traylor, 1972; Ullian, 1976).

In light of research on ingratiatory behavior, the question remains: How does *bullshitting* differ sociologically from other forms of interaction in terms of the structure of situations, opportunities, and social relations in which is situated? And, how does this form of interaction play out among America's youngest workers? Throughout the remainder of the article we look at how students as present and future workers think about and formulate *bullshitting* both as an interaction strategy and as an experience embodying moral lessons. In doing so, we explicate the ways in which the structural arrangements of school, work, and everyday life establish the conditions under which this form of communication presents itself as either an implement in the cultural toolkit or as an organizational obstacle and source of annoyance. Special attention is paid to the ways in which this form of interaction is used in negotiating, contesting, and/or reinforcing inequality in micro-structural relations.

Methods: No Bull

We administered open-ended surveys through e-mail to undergraduate college students enrolled in various sociology classes at two state universities in the Midwest (N=110). (Please see the Appendix for a copy of the survey). Students enrolled in courses that each of us taught, as well as students enrolled in a colleague's course, constituted our convenience sample. Students were given the incentive of a few extra credit points for their willingness to complete the survey. Upon receiving completed surveys via email, we immediately gave each respondent a pseudonym. At both universities where data were gathered, approval was granted from the Human Subjects Review Boards.

We set out to ascertain how students define the term bullshitting, what experiences they have had that involve this phenomenon, and how bullshitting is perceived to be relevant as students find themselves in the workplace or anticipate occupational life. We asked participants to provide us with expansive, detailed descriptions of times when they either directly observed or experienced social processes exemplifying the folk concept, bullshitting. We also asked our respondents to tell us about the concept's "native use," providing us with a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) of the situations in which they have encountered bullshitting. We began our inquiry having students (ages 18-25) define the term, providing us with information on a variety of activities where the concept was used or was operable, telling us about their experiences, feelings, and cognitions in these contexts. In part, we asked students to tell us how they came to learn about bullshitting and to recount situations when they, personally, had participated in using this form of interaction. Respondents were also asked to anticipate the relevance or applicability of this form of interaction in the types of work contexts they envision themselves following graduation. Students provided rich examples of interaction with employers, family members, friends, romantic others, and strangers, sharing the experiences they had from which lessons and prescriptions might be drawn—lessons informing their roles both in future jobs and everyday life. The length of responses to each question varied, with some respondents providing a sentence or two and other respondents providing full paragraphs.

We uploaded all of the textual data into the qualitative software program *ATLAS.ti* (Muhr, 2009). Following Altheide's (1987) prescriptions for ethnographic content

analysis, we analyzed the narrative data using constant comparison for discovering emergent patterns. Working within the Grounded Theory framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we proceeded, line-by-line, to open-code, independently of one another, all of the data provided by our informants (Blumer, 1969; Glaser, 1992; Strauss, 1987), achieving inter-coder reliability slightly over 90%. We began our initial coding, as Charmaz (2001) advises, "by examining each line of data and defining the actions or events … occurring in it or … represented by it" (p. 341). For example, the following is a response from one of our female respondents to the questionnaire item: "Please describe an instance when you were bullshitting someone. Who was it? What was the situation? How did that person react? How did it make you feel?"

> One instance that I was bullshitting someone was when a parent came up to the pool and was complaining about our facility when there was no need be. For me being the manager at the time I felt that it was my duty to have a conversation with this lady. There was no way that I was going to get a word in because of how angry this mother was so I just bullshitted with her about different programs that the parks and rec[reation] was offering. I thought that maybe her children would like those better than the pool just so I could calm her down and make her realize that she was blowing something way out of proportion that she didn't need to be. The mother reacted surprisingly well to my bullshitting. She understood that the facility was old and that there was nothing anyone could do about it so she said thank you for my time and was on her way. I felt very good about the situation and my bullshitting. I think that sometimes it's ok to use it if necessary and if it doesn't hurt anyone's feelings.

This respondent addressed each question posed – she described an instance when she was the "instigator" of bullshitting, providing an explanation of the situation and describing both how the recipient of the bullshitting reacted and how the experience of bullshitting made her feel. The primary codes for this datum were "example of bullshitting at work" and "bullshitting as required activity." A number of codes emerged as we examined our data. Some examples include:

- Bullshitting as play lie or storytelling
- Bullshitting as exaggeration
- Bullshitting as impression management or self-presentation
- Bullshitting as required activity
- Reluctant bullshitting

Through our process of data analysis, we searched for dominant themes, strategies, and deviant cases, while paying attention to common narratives, accounts, and "native terms" (Spradley, 1979, p. 73). We did so in an effort to develop conceptual categories – these categories, in part, broadly representing the ways in which student workers identified communication as bullshitting, used the term itself in conversation, and talked about the dynamics and social contexts in which they encountered this form of interaction.

The ethnic composition of the sample represented both the schools and the regions in which the data were gathered, with the majority of respondents (91%) identifying themselves as White (Please refer to table 1).

Table 1. *Student demographic characteristics*

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total
White	36%	55%	91%
African American	2%	3%	5%
Native American	1%	1%	2%
Hmong	1%	0%	1%
Latino	0%	1%	1%
Total	40%	60%	100% (N=110)

Both of the universities where data were gathered are public institutions – one with a student population of about 24,000 students and the other with a student population around 10,500. While there is variability among our respondents with respect to past job history, parents' career contexts, and projected career paths, the majority of students at both institutions identified themselves as wage-earners. None of our students reported that they owned their own business. While less than five percent of our respondents reported that they supervised others at their jobs, the overwhelming proportion stated that they were supervised by others and worked for a wage. While we asked our participants about work experiences, we did not specifically ask participants questions about their class background or work history. Our knowledge of, and experience with, students at the two universities where data were gathered enable us to assert that many of these students have had jobs in high school and also work both during the academic year and over the summers. The Career and Student Employment Services office at one of these institutions reported (via the university's website) that the majority of students at their university work during the school year, during summers and while on break. Data that we gathered from a non-probability sample of students at the other institution—a convenience sample of over 200 students enrolled in introductory sociology courses—suggest that the majority of students self-identify as middle class (Martin, 2006).

We considered the multiplicity of meanings student informants associated with the folk concept, bullshitting, attending to the contextual uses of the term. Our high rate of intercoder reliability, in combination with our familiarity with the general backgrounds of students in our sample, enable us to assert that our findings are credible. In the following sections of the paper we interrogate bullshitting as a form of interaction, observing the ways in which this interaction is strategically constructed. Finally, we provide

commentary on the consequences of these interactions for organizational idioculture, student identity, and student/worker solidarity.

Bullshitting Results

Bullshitting as Play

While the definition of the folk concept, bullshitting, was variable among students, most respondents used the term to identify forms of jocular interaction where one or more actors fabricated stories, "facts" or identities, in creative, playful, and casual ways. Students provided their own explanations and examples of this narrative action across a variety of social contexts:

> Aaron: I have heard the term often in business school, around the house and at the workplace. I have heard "blowing hot air," "talking out your ass," and "jerking my chain," used in the same contexts. Overall it just means to make up interesting, fun, or amazing pieces of information and try to pass them off as the truth.

> Bob: Bullshitting is a form of joking around with someone or misleading them. Bullshitting is a form of "nonsense." If you bullshit with someone you have either lied to them or made them believe something that is not true. For example, I was in a rather formal group setting where some people knew each other and some did not. We sat in a circle and everyone had to say where they were from and an interesting fact about themselves. I told everyone that I was born in "Mezakistan" -- which to my knowledge is not a real place -- and that I had moved to Minnesota when I was five. I told everyone that "Mezakistan" was part of the Old Soviet Union and I described the village I lived in with small detail. The people in the group that knew me already knew that I wasn't telling the truth. Most of the people who did not know me before didn't know I was lying to them. Within a few minutes everyone found out that I was lying and everyone laughed for a bit and then we moved on. I think the big difference between straight up lying and bullshitting is that when you bullshit you do it for fun. There is no intentional harm being done to anyone.

In the data above, bullshitting is identified as narrative action that takes the form of a lie, playfully constructed for the sake of entertainment. As a form of play it is opportunistic, situated in contexts where common frames of social activity may be interrupted and/or subverted. During the laboring process of both students and workers, the primary purpose of this type of bullshitting is to transform otherwise mundane interaction into interaction "marked by mirth, fun, and tension" (Henricks, 2006, p. 12), that is, *play*. As in other interactions, bullshitting potentially involves a variety of role players. Goffman (1959) observed the existence of two broad categories of auxiliary players in everyday interactions. First there are confederates of the main performer who assist in sustaining the definition of the situation by lending legitimacy to his or her

performance. And, there may be informants who indicate to an audience of others that the performance or communication just issued is false and/or given in jest. In dyadic interaction, however, an individual may play the roles of both performer and audience to the performance. As one respondent, Andrea, reported: "It's fun bullshitting people who are drunk because they sometimes think you're serious. It's pretty funny."

Here, a sense of play is derived in the "put on," that is, the manipulation of the recipient's perceptual field. By definition, the more the perceptual field can be distorted or manipulated, the more artful the bullshitting is considered to be. While the activity may take place in front of an audience of others, such as a bar or at a party as suggested in the example above, audiences need not be present for bullshitting to occur. Instead, where bullshitting takes the form of playful storytelling, both the primary performers—the initiator and recipient of the communication—as well as auxiliary players, simultaneously serve as the audience. Here, entertainment is enjoyed in collective, reflective appraisal of the put on. Where the stories and ritual pranks become the basis for future interactions, they exist as elements of a workgroup's idioculture (Fine, 1979). In their respective analyses of the Allied Corporation's machine shop, both Donald Roy (1959) and Michael Burawoy (1979) observed that work contexts experienced as boring, monotonous, or arduous can be temporarily transformed into occasions that are sufficiently tolerable, if not fun, through social activities such as bullshitting. Note Roy's (1959) commentary:

> Among the host of writers and researchers who have suggested connections between "group" and "joy in work" are Walker and Guest, observers of social interaction on the automobile assembly line. They quote assembly-line workers as saying, "We have a lot of fun and talk all the time," and, "If it weren't for the talking and fooling, you'd go nuts." My account of how one group of machine operators kept from "going nuts" in a situation of monotonous work activity attempts to lay bare the tissues of interaction which made up the content of their adjustment. The talking, fun, and fooling … provided solution to the elemental problem of "psychological survival" … in intra-group relations. (p. 158)

While our students defined bullshitting in terms matching the description of Roy's machine shop culture, they also defined bullshitting in accounts suggesting its instrumental uses. In the following section we assess how students utilize this form of communication in the presentation of self. We observe the normative prescriptions that students adhere to even as they use bullshitting to shape images of themselves as competent, proficient, or knowledgeable workers through their performances.

Bullshitting and the Staging of Selves

Many student responses suggested that bullshitting is a form of game-playing in which the initiators of the communication claim to possess a stock of knowledge or expertise without actually doing so:

Jeff: Bullshitting means talking about something you know very little if nothing about and trying to convince the person you are talking to that you know something about the material in question.

Amanda: Bullshitting is acting like you know what you're talking about when you really don't, stating things you may not necessarily mean or actually believe to acquire the approval of others.

The data above suggest that bullshitting is a kind of "expression game" (Goffman, 1969, p. 5) in which people try to control the definition of the situation by constructing not so much an "ideal self" (Pin & Turndorf, 1990, p. 164), as a *virtual* self – one that is knowledgeable, competent and well-versed in the issues at hand, see Agger (2008), Martin (2010), and Whitson (2009). As a form of strategic interaction, the activity represents what Goffman referred to "as a *covering operation*, that is, a move or course of action designed to cover, conceal, or mask information considered to be of strategic importance" (p. 15). Conditions giving rise to this form of bullshitting are found within the structural arrangements of both work and schooling where individuals are expected to possess, produce, or share relevant stocks of knowledge. In the world of work, decision-making processes in all bureaucratically arranged organizations are perpetually plagued by varying degrees of incomplete knowledge and "bounded rationality" (Perrow, 1986, pp. 120-123), providing opportunities for managers and workers to embellish, dramatize or prevaricate.

In colleges and universities, students may either neglect their studies or find themselves unable to complete them for a variety of reasons, including work. Indeed, recent research on college students provides evidence that those working part-time structure their time better than their non-working counterparts and that work tends to impede educational aspirations when it becomes fulltime (Kalenkoski & Pabilonia, 2006).

Yet, regardless of the reasons for unpreparedness, both students and knowledge workers are still expected to display, if not defend, educated and informed positions. In his book, *On Bullshit*, philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005) similarly alludes to the structural pressures that lead to this form of communicative action:

Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled – whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others – to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant (p. 63).

Frankfurt (2005), of course, is implying that some amount of bullshitting is to be expected where people, per force, are compelled to express their opinions on matters. Consequently, one of the ways that students in our sample talked about bullshitting was as *discursive filler* – that is, as communication either superfluous or irrelevant to the

information requested but important as a prop in creating the impression that one is competent, prepared, and well-informed. Consider the following:

> Bob: Every test I have ever taken, speech I have given, or paper I have written involved a large amount of B.S. Consequently, I have been rather successful. The better a BS-er one is, the further they will go in life. If you can convince people you know more than they do, you will go far.

> Julie: What first comes to mind is that when you are explaining something and you don't really know what it means or you do and you can't think of any more things to write. This is when you start adding more filler and you repeat yourself or you make up some things that sound true but maybe aren't true at the same time.

In the context of writing exams or papers, students like those above talked about using "filler" in an effort to take up space and mask what they did not know. Manufacturing filler— bullshitting—is seen as a craft which, if perfected, might lend credibility to the artist. Here, success at *playing the game* means that one's performance is taken as authentic and knowledgeable. A common tool used in accomplishing this task is the artful dodge of direct questions. Here, performers may re-frame direct queries so that the information he or she does provide has some dramatic effect upon the audience. Dramatic effect is maximized whenever the audience assumes the performer knows the answer to the original question, allows for the development of the alternative line of inquiry advanced by the performer, and takes the original query to be mundane by comparison. Students observed that the dramaturgical ability to deliver such performances is a key resource in the world of work:

> Jenny: I feel like I have learned to come up with things on the spot. There have been situations in writing papers or participating in class discussions where even if I have not done the homework or the research, I seem to be able to come up with something relevant to say. That's probably going to be the most helpful thing for me in the workplace.

> Deborah: I learned to bullshit at home, work, and school. It is a good thing to know how to do for a career because it enables you to come up with a half decent answer that sounds smart and probable without missing a beat.

Students above observed that the connection between credibility and one's ability to play the game is fully revealed in improvisational performances – a skill that students hone as a matter of impression management. In their analysis of "staging one's ideal self," Pin and Turndorf (1990) note that such endeavours carry a risk: "The game can be dangerous or devastating if individuals' partners in conversation are better informed than they on the whereabouts of the people mentioned, or on the details of the symbolic places, shows, books, whatever" (p. 169).While Pin and Turndorf warn about the dangers of staging idealized albeit fictitious selves under the social spotlight, our respondents defined the

opportunities for such performances as both finite and of strategic importance, demanding that performers take full advantage of them when these opportunities present themselves:

> Deidre: Bullshitting is needed in order to get [to] where you want [to be]. Embellishing and emphasizing who you are and what you are about is sometimes presented during an interview. You want to make yourself seem extra special and the whole package. So you bullshit part of it.

However, even as students noted the importance of staging an idealized self, they also offered practical prescriptions for the activity, observing that both claims and performances cannot be overstated or overly dramatized if they are to remain credible:

> Julian: In a work setting, bullshitting someone can help and also hurt your career. If you bullshit someone just enough, they might see you as more competent about something. However, you don't want to bullshit someone to the point that they don't believe you and find you irresponsible or unreliable.

> Andrea: Bullshitting can be a wonderful tool in a great many instances, but should be used wisely. If you bullshit too often you run the risk of being labeled as simply "full of shit" – the equivalent of bullshit without the charm.

While the respondents above suggested that bullshitting as a set of exaggerated claims is acceptable if administered in moderate doses, some respondents advanced the moral prescription that bullshitting, as an instrumental form of communication, should be avoided altogether:

> Jane: Don't do it. That's my advice. In the professional world out there you are expected to behave a certain way and if you are being lazy or not following orders then you may just lose your job. I have learned this through my past job experience and I guess through my parents just because they both work in the professional world and they have geared me up to what to expect when done with college.

Students like Jane, however, represented the "deviant case" in our sample (there were very few such cases). More commonly, our respondents observed that the use of tall stories, exaggerated claims or embellished presentations of self are implements in the cultural toolkit best used with discretion. Considering their respective careers, students admonished that bullshitting should be guided by common sense:

> Chase: I think that it is good to have an open mind about things and be able to joke around, but I think there is a time and a place for bullshitting. Bullshitting with coworkers would be okay, but I think it needs to be respectful. Bullshitting with the wrong people could get one into a lot of

trouble or false rumors could be spread. I think it all depends on the situation and where one has a career.

While students were mindful of the need for tact and discretion in using this communicative form, they also emphasized that the world of work was rife with bullshitters, people who, through stealth and storytelling, are able to make their way to the top by manipulating customers, co-workers, managers, and others. Almost all of the students in our sample anticipated dealing with such problems:

Susan: Now that I've seen it everywhere, in different areas, and with everyone, I know how to recognize it. Not only did I learn how to recognize it, but I also know how to deal with it. Since I'm going to be a teacher, I'm going to deal with a lot of different students' stuff—serious lying, and just fooling around sarcastically.

Jake: I have learned how to read people better and know when they are telling the truth. This is huge in my job now and future career as a cop because people that I come across usually have done something wrong and aren't truthful about it.

Robert: I think that when I enter a career I will have learned enough about B.S. to know when someone is trying to put one over on me. I have learned from many habitually-lying friends that if something doesn't seem true, it is most often not true.

Above, the ability to detect less-than-truthful statements from a virtual "line-up" of performances and claims was regarded by our respondents as a key occupational resource—a skill that one of our students referred to as "having a finely tuned B.S. detector." Our research respondents commonly noted the ways in which skills at bullshitting might culminate in professional advancement, secure key resources, or stabilize relationships. They also observed that this form of communication is not without emotional consequences, as likely to leave the target of bullshitting feeling dissonant or resentful, as it is in a state of good humour.

In the following section we explore the social bases of experiences sensitizing Millennial Generation workers to the features of power and inequality that are transferable to the workplace. Claims concerning the generational characteristics of Millennial workers (Greenberg & Weber, 2008) as a key factor in workplace change commonly ignore the insights of social movement scholars on the importance of injustice frames and collective action in processes of resistance (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Gamson, 1992; Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982). While we see either explanation by itself as being incomplete in accounting for transformation in workplaces inhabited by Millennials, we note that locutions for talking about injustice are already part of their everyday vocabulary. This terminology is culturally available as people interrogate the claims they encounter or the accounts they construct (Lyman & Scott, 1970). We assess these dynamics throughout the remainder of the paper, beginning with

an examination of interaction episodes encountered by students as recipients of bullshitting.

Bullshitting: From Sociability to Injustice

In this study, most respondents identified a variety of experiences with the folk concept, bullshitting, using the term to identify exaggerated storytelling, playful put-ons, outright lies, and shared activity. The juxtaposition of these tropes highlights differences in the myriad uses, meanings, and social contexts in which bullshitting is situated. Following Mead (1934), bullshitting as a social object is consummated in the completion of an act. And, as a social object, its meaning is variable. One fundamental meaning for students was that of storytelling, where the telling of especially tall tales among family and friends was defined as fun and accepted with good humor:

> George: I think the biggest bullshitter I've ever met was my Grandpa George. One time he told me a story about how he got a big scar on his side from wrestling alligators. He used to tell all of his grandkids, myself included, that he was bitten by a big alligator many years ago when he use to wrestle them. I believed that story until I was about nine then I figured out that he'd been bullshitting us the whole time. He had the scar from an operation where he'd had his appendix removed when he was young. When I figured this out it didn't change my opinion of my grandpa. It just made him funny. In this case bullshitting was just a humorous fib to impress his grandkids.

While many similar examples were offered as students talked about encounters with their friends, these accounts yielded additional insights as our respondents demonstrated the native uses of the folk concept. Below, students recounted how they used the term to describe common interactions with friends and co-workers:

> Amad: Bob and I were just bullshitting for a while, while we were waiting for the food to get done cooking.

> Erin: My co-workers bullshit a lot. It helps to pass the time.

> Amy: Someone might ask you what you were doing tonight, you might respond with "I'm going to bullshit around for awhile then maybe go to the bar or something."

> Conner: We're really just bullshitting around, we've got nothing to do!

Situated in the formal context of taking an exam, students described bullshitting as an activity through which space —literally, blank space on a sheet of paper—might be filled. However, the data above suggest that there are at least two subsets of bullshitting when it is used as discursive filler—those that are *spatial* and those that are *temporal*. As students use the term to describe the activity of filling time, the meaning of the folk

concept is one of pure sociality. Interaction of the kind described above denotes interaction that is jointly constructed to fill time. It is notable that not just any kind of conversation or interaction facilitates the quick passage of time, however—only conversation that proves to be entertaining, interesting, or absorbing. This interaction, as the data from our students attest, may be regarded as a form of play, sociability, and friendly relations. While such interaction may be a routine occurrence in relationships as they occur in everyday life, our respondents also recognized the importance of practicing these skills in the world of their chosen profession:

> June: Bullshitting will be helpful because I think it makes a person a little more sociable and it helps people relate to one another. If a worker and a client have similar stories or experiences, they can bullshit about them…which might help with sales or their business.

> Delane: I have learned that bullshitting is a good way to get to know people. I think it will be a good skill to have as I form connections with people at my eventual place of work.

Essentially what students identified, as they discussed bullshitting as a form of play in conversation, was a medium for expression that could be used in creating and maintaining a sense of community. It is not surprising, then, that students routinely reported, "You are most likely to see bullshitting in a bar or at a party…I think the most bullshitting occurs when people are sitting around drinking." As Oldenburg (1989) reported, bars, taverns, and coffeehouses have remained, since the colonial era, key institutions through which community is formulated and maintained—precisely because they are arenas where conversation is both expected and encouraged. However, even as students used the term bullshitting to describe forms of friendly conversation, they also used a derivation of the term to describe what they considered to be untoward, dishonest, or detestable interaction strategies used by people to get ahead in the world of business. These accounts commonly included stories of interactions with unscrupulous salespeople, bosses, or fellow workers:

> Amelia: I was … buying a computer. The sales person that was helping me kept on saying that I needed to buy the most expensive paper for my printer and that normal printer paper wouldn't work and he kept on trying to sell me the most expensive … blank CD's saying that those were the only ones that would work on new computers. I knew he was lying, giving me a bunch of bullshit, because I knew anything would work on that computer…I ended up getting really pissed because I knew that the cheaper stuff would be just as good but he kept on trying to pull one over on me.

> Troy: When I was trying to buy a car a few years ago, I had a salesman that quite obviously was bullshitting me. He was trying to sell me a car that I obviously didn't like, but he kept talking it up. He made it sound like

the best car in the world. I knew it wasn't, so I was just nice about it. I knew he was bullshitting me … it was annoying.

Respondents indicated that exaggerated claims in the marketplace are annoying but not necessarily unexpected. Above, Amelia identifies the misleading claims that were used by a computer salesperson to deceive her as "a bunch of bullshit." Where respondents view such communication as instances of intentional deception, violating normative demands for honest, open communication, we refer to such communication, taxonomically, as *transgressive bullshitting*. Communications belonging to this category were identified by our informants as ubiquitous in everyday life, plaguing both personal, as well as, professional relationships. In reference to employers and supervisors, students recounted:

> Virginia: Once I tried to get a day off from work, my boss said I couldn't have it off because we were short staffed, but it turned out he was bullshitting me because he took it off anyways. It made me mad.

> Jamal: My old boss let me go a few years back, and his excuse was that he wasn't going to need me for the summer. I knew he needed me because I worked in a fishing department which is very busy in the summer. I told him I didn't care because I didn't get paid enough. I didn't really care about not working there but I was still mad that he lied to me. My girlfriend worked there also and I found out that he hired his son a week later.

Students described similar interactions they had with co-workers, suggesting that while bullshitting among co-workers may take the form of play, it also can be used for purposes of deception and manipulation. Below, students talk about experiences with fellow workers:

> Mike: Very often at work, I have had fellow coworkers try and bullshit with me. They try to make me believe something or another or come up with a response to a question to make themselves appear in a superior position. The way I felt? I guess I felt pretty damn insulted that they expected me to believe this.

> Sarah: Just recently a co-worker had told me she would cover the end of a shift of mine and when she didn't, she used a bunch of excuses, bullshit, to make herself look better or to cover her. I kind of expected her to use excuses towards me – so I wasn't surprised. It made me feel like I couldn't rely on her.

Thus, our respondents identified both superiors and co-workers as those who are "guilty" of bullshitting them. Both the collective, sociable use of bullshitting and the manipulative deceptive use of bullshitting may be present in asymmetric relationships (e.g., the boss and the employee) as well as across status lines (i.e., among co-workers).

When the intent of the bullshitting is manipulative and/or deceptive, individuals express a feeling of injustice and a proclivity for resistance. As Haenfler (2004) has observed, resistance may be enacted at various levels (i.e., micro, meso or macro).

We find, in the data, that deception and manipulation were not confined to the world of work but that intimate relationships, as well, contained dynamics that might best be characterized as instances of lying or bullshitting:

> Sandra: When someone was breaking it off with me he said, "It feels like we are supposed to be together, but not until ten years from now. Right now is just not the right time." It was an ex-boyfriend, he had first gotten me to trust him and like him again after we had first broken up, then told me he was actually dating someone but said he was going to break it off with her. I reacted in a very negative way, I didn't understand his reasoning if he felt we should be together. Now I know that maybe he just wasn't in to me and didn't want to say. The situation made me feel like he was trying to pull one over on me, like he didn't think I was intelligent to figure out what he was doing.

> Cindy: One instance I can remember vividly is when I was becoming intimately involved with a guy and I became suspicious of whether he was interested in me or in girls in general. I confronted him on it and he swore up and down that he would never … be untrustworthy like that ... The next day I saw him at a party making out with another girl.

According to the data above, experiences of being lied to commonly lead to feelings of injustice. Student proclamations declaring "This is bullshit!" range from instances in which a variety of experiences with others, including intimate partners, employers, professors, or unscrupulous sales personnel, are marked by asymmetric relations. From our observations, situations marked by transgressive bullshitting appear universal in generating a sense of violation and injustice. The exclamation "bullshit!" is used to denote that the event, process, depiction, or symbolization is inherently unfair. In such situations, the phrase serves as a conversational device that may be used in the construction of a nascent injustice frame (Gamson, 1992). In response to the survey question that asked students about the "native use" (Spradley, 197, p. 73) of the word bullshit, students replied:

> Harriet: If someone said, "That's a bunch of bullshit!" That means that something wasn't fair or that someone didn't like what happened.

> Alan: A person might use the term bullshit in a sentence to describe anger towards a situation. "This is bullshit!"

Gamson (1992) and other scholars have observed that politics begin with talk (Gamson et al., 1982). Among other social movement theorists, Snow and colleagues (1986) have pointed out that the seeds of social action are sown in instances of "frame-bridging" where conversations defining the source and nature of injustices are organically

linked to collective action frames (Snow et al., 1986; Benford & Snow, 2000). In such situations, use of the exclamation "Bullshit!" denotes a "hot cognition" (Gamson, 1995, p. 90)—that is, a single thought or line of thinking intermixed with an acute sense of injustice latent with potential for (collective) action. Among our respondents, the term *bullshitter* was never applied in reference to an actor who created, maintained, or benefitted from injustice, even as the phrase "Bullshit!" was used to designate the injustice created by their action.

The meaning of the term, bullshit, as the data have illustrated, is empirically variable. According to our respondents, bullshit can be used to describe a story or claim that is essentially worthless because it lacks validity. As a social object, the meaning of the folk concept is only discernible in the response of the recipient. Thus, while a claim or story may lack validity as a truth-claim, it may be considered culturally valuable because of its entertainment or instructional value. However, action involving the use of power that is arbitrary, unilateral, and unrepresentative of all stake-holders may be a "right of office," but will likely be defined as bullshit when it defies expectations for reciprocity, broader participation, or the consent of the governed. Here, the term serves a semiotic purpose, indexing or indicating the nature, type, and relation of the claim or communication to a broader structural arrangement. For members of the Millennial Generation, then, bullshit is a generic term describing a broad class of injustices experienced in interpersonal relationships, the classroom, and/or the world of work.

Discussion: Beyond the Bull

Studies of the linkages between work and private life have observed the effects of "spillover" as cultural elements of everyday life are carried over into the work context (Gutek & Cohen, 1992, p.133). We observed this cultural spillover among students in our study as they discussed their skills at bullshitting with friends, intimate others, teachers, and employers. Yet, several limitations in our study are evident. Claims regarding the adroitness and perceptiveness of our students in using and detecting bullshitting, relative to other generations of workers, are hindered without comparable data from either baby-boomers or members of Gen-X. The findings of our study must also be situated within the contours of race-ethnicity and class: the participants in our study are mainly White and middle-class. While our own work experiences lead us to believe that our findings are valid across an array of social contexts, only additional research will bear that out.

From our observations, it appears that bullshitting shares much in common with other forms of self-presentation and interaction strategies that are used to secure resources, win rewards or obtain favorable evaluations—especially for the sake of social inclusion. Within the social contexts of both schooling and work, it appears that bullshitting in its myriad forms—storytelling, general conversation, playful or instrumental lying—can be done across status lines. A subordinate may attempt to bullshit with his manager in the hopes of gaining favor. A boss may bullshit his employees about the reason a project deadline was moved up. Our data suggest that individuals' skills at detecting bullshitting are commonly developed as people participate in complex relations in a variety of social contexts and situations. What is evident as students talked about the telling of tall tales and playful lies within their families of origin

is that both bullshitting, and skills in its detection, are either developed independently or in concert with experiences at school. As implements in the cultural toolkit, both the use and detection of this form of communication are transferable to work contexts where students may find themselves subordinated in the laboring process.

Where our informants defined the activity and trope, bullshitting, simply as story-telling or holding an everyday conversation, this form of talk marks several processes. As workers share stories indicting the decisions, policies, or interpersonal skills of organizational superiors, bullshitting serves as a form of narrative action that frames those experiences as shared grievances. Supervisors, of course, may use bullshitting in the same way, venting feelings about problematic employees with their colleagues. Social movement scholars have demonstrated the importance of these everyday conversations in fomenting social change (Snow & Benford, 1992; Gamson, 1992). By contrast, where the point of bullshitting is not to raise a grievance but to engage in play, such conversation is precisely the vehicle through which a group creates and maintains its idioculture (Fine, 1979). While workgroup idioculture—the meanings, stories, joking, nicknames, identities, and games that workers play in while on the job— may not transform the workplace into a complete arena of enjoyment, it may make it more tolerable (Roy, 1959; Burawoy, 1979).

A related field of study, and one pertinent here, is the use of narrative in the transmission of collective memory. While collective memory would appear to be the *sine qua non* of work group culture, rarely is it studied as one of its essential components. Rather, it has primarily been scholars in the area of holocaust studies or nostalgia who have advanced theories of collective memory. In research on holocausts, researchers have observed the importance of collective memory as repressive structures and events are situated in a narrative that readily transmits people's experience with them (Etkind, 2009; Zaretsky, 2009). By contrast, studies of nostalgia note how stories of happy times serve as a palliative, source of entertainment, and identity for those constructing nostalgic narratives (Davis, 1979; Wilson, 2005). From our perspective, bullshitting is a primary form of communication in the creation of collective memory and a key cultural process in the maintenance of social bonds within workgroups. Unlike other language forms found in everyday speech—including ritual insults (Abrahams, 1962) sarcasm (Rockwell, 2006), irony (Winokur, 2007), and profanity (Hughes, 2006)—bullshitting facilitates both the creation of cultures of solidarity (Fantasia, 1988), from which contests with out-group members may be launched even as relations with in-group members are strengthened. But it also allows for much more than that. Sociologically, bullshitting is the social grease that lubricates institutional processes on a daily basis between individuals differentially located in formal systems of inequality. Moreover, bullshitting exists side-by-side with official, bureaucratic forms of communication including staff meetings, administrative communiqués, and formal directives. When workers find these formal channels of communication suspect or inadequate they may commonly rely upon everyday conventions—bullshitting—creating stocks of knowledge from which institutional or collective memories are culled.

Having provided insights into a common form of communication among our students as they talked about schooling, family, friend and work experiences, we are convinced that there is much more to be said about the Millennial Generation as they negotiate the social context of work. We invite other researchers to explore the ways in

which Millennial workers use bullshitting and other forms of communication as cultural tools, shaping their micro-relations. Specifically, we encourage the study of Millennials in the workplace, not only as they adapt to the structural arrangements they find themselves in, but as they set about to alter and reorganize those relations in ways that fit their own needs, desires and images. We believe that the study of such everyday forms of interaction will provide key insights into the ways in which new generations are molded by societal structures but also shed light on *the possible—* on the ways in which these structures might be molded, sustaining and ennobling the young generation of workers who occupy them.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

PART I. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION – PLEASE FILL OUT THIS FORM.

1. What is Your sex? Mark ☒ ONE box.

❏ Male   ❏ Female

2. What is your age? _____

➜NOTE: Please answer BOTH questions 3 and 4.

3. Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino? Mark ☒ the "**No**" box if **not** Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.

❏ No, not Spanish /Hispanic / Latino   ❏ Yes, Puerto Rican

❏ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano   ❏ Yes, Cuban

❏ Yes, other Spanish /Hispanic / Latino — Print name of group

↳_____

4. What is your race? Mark ☒ one or more races to indicate what you consider yourself to be.

❏ White

❏ Black, African Am.

❏ American Indian or Alaskan Native — Print name of enrolled or principal

tribe_____ ↵

❏ Native Hawaiian   ❏ Guamanian or Chamorro   ❏ Samoan

❏ Vietnamese   ❏ Japanese   ❏ Korean

❏ Filipino   ❏ Chinese   ❏ Asian Indian

❏ Other Pacific Islander — Print race.   ❏ Other Asian —   Print race.

_____ ↵   _____ ↵

5. Please indicate your marital/living status. Mark ☒ ONE box.

❏ Never married or had a lifetime partner

❏ Currently married or in a lifetime partnership

❏ Separated

❏ Divorced

❏ Widowed

6. Do you live with anyone? Mark ☒ the "**No**" box if **you live alone.**

❏ No ➔ Skip Question 7, proceed to Question 8.

❏ Yes ➔ proceed to question 7.

7. "I presently live with my ...." Mark ☒ all of the boxes that apply.

❏ Husband/wife   ❏ Roomer(s), boarder(s)

❏ Adopted son(s)/daughter(s)❏ Housemate(s), roommate(s)

❏ Stepson(s)/stepdaughter(s)❏ Unmarried partner

❏ Brother(s)/sister(s)   ❏ Foster child (ren)

❏ Father/mother   ❏ Other nonrelative(s)

❏ Grandchild(ren)

❏ Parent(s)-in-law

❏ Son(s)-in-law/daughter(s)-in-law

❑ Other relative — Print exact relationship ➠ _____

8. What is your major in school? _____

PART II. WRITTEN RESPONSE -- The remainder of this questionnaire demands that you respond in written, essay form. Please answer the following questions, writing as much as you would like in the bluebook provided. Please finish only when you feel your answer is complete.

9. What does the phrase "bullshitting" mean, in phrases such as "you're bullshitting me" or "I'm bullshitting you"?

10. Please describe an instance when you feel that someone was bullshitting you. Who was it? What was the situation? How did you react? How did it make you feel?

11. Who are the people in your life who do the most bullshitting? How? Why?

12. Please describe an instance when you were bullshitting someone. Who was it? What was the situation? How did that person react? How did it make you feel?

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