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Ritchie, L. David, Why the block is the block: Reinforcing community through casual conversation (2011). Communication Faculty Publications and Presentations. Paper 12. <http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/8783>

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Why the block is the block

Reinforcing community through casual conversation

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Prepublication version of article: **L. David Ritchie (2011). Why the block is *the block*: Reinforcing community through casual conversation. *Metaphor and the Social World*, 2, 240-61.**

Abstract

This study combines Discourse Dynamics (Cameron, 2007) with Perceptual Simulation Theory (Barsalou, 2007; Gibbs, 2006), to analyze a sample of talk among residents of an urban neighborhood about topics related to community safety and the quality of life in their community. The results demonstrate the role of casual conversation in structuring complex social relationships, and the usefulness of close attention to metaphors, story-telling, and humor. By their use, re-use, and development of metaphors and stories the participants in this conversation express and reinforce the patterns of sociability and mutual watchfulness that contribute to a feeling of safety and comfort in their neighborhood, resolve contradictions inherent in life in a diverse community, and

cultivate mutual commitment to maintaining the neighborhood as a pleasant community in which to live and raise children.

1. Introduction

Modern life is characterized by uncertainty and contradictions, including the widespread fear of crime and violence and the difficulty of maintaining a feeling of connectedness and community in the midst of material comfort and sophisticated communication technologies. In a middle-class neighborhood of Seattle, Washington, Reed (1998) found that residents believe public safety is primarily the responsibility of the community, not of police. Yet communities often fail in this responsibility, leaving individuals with a sense of isolation and alienation. In part this reflects the ambiguities of living in a post-industrial society, in which the natural contradictions between individuality and sociability are amplified by social and geographic mobility and rapid technological change.

For the community to maintain a sense of safety and livability, inherent contradictions must be collectively resolved. Community members' desire for privacy and personal freedom must be balanced against the need for normative constraints and protective surveillance, the time required to maintain interpersonal relationships and trust must be balanced against the time demands of busy lives.

Dunbar (1996) argues that 'centrifugal forces' of individual interests vs. 'centripetal forces' of collaboration and mutual assistance are maintained in a dynamic equilibrium primarily through casual talk. In his own data, Dunbar found that about 65% of talk is about relationships, exchanging information about the social

structure itself. Informal conversation helps strengthen bonds of friendship and trust through shared pleasure. Conversation also provides means for participants to develop and express views regarding the contradictions at the heart of their community, understand and reconcile differing views, and maintain mutual commitment, while entertaining each other, displaying and appreciating verbal competence, and enjoying each other's company. The purpose of this paper is to increase our understanding of community-building through ordinary talk, with particular attention to the role of metaphors and story-telling in resolving contradictions and maintaining the basis for trust and empathic communication (Cameron, 2007, 2011).

2. Method

The conversation from which the examples discussed herein are drawn took place in fall, 2007, among four homeowner-residents of a single block in Portland, Oregon, a mid-sized western U.S. city. All participants, one woman and three men, are college-educated professionals aged 45–60; only one participant, Todd, has children. The author, who lives on the same block, observed but did not participate. The conversation was moderated by Char Schell, a professor in the Communication Department at Portland State University, using a 'low-structure focus group' approach (Gamson, 1992; Sasson, 1995). The conversation was audio-recorded and transcribed, with names changed and identifying information removed, then stories, metaphors, and potential perceptual simulations were identified and interpreted according to criteria discussed in the following sub-sections.

Story-telling is universal, perhaps the dominant form of discourse (Bruner, 2002). In this essay, I examine metaphor use and story-telling as simultaneously *cognitive* and *social-interactive*, consistent with Cameron's (2007) Discourse Dynamics approach. Story-telling is cognitive inasmuch as both the telling and comprehension of the story are shaped by cognitive processes of speakers and hearers. It is social-interactive inasmuch as selecting, telling, and comprehending stories depends on and shapes the contexts of the conversations in which they occur (Harris-Lacewell, 2004), and it is often accomplished collaboratively or in direct response to previous utterances.

Researchers often define 'story' or 'narrative' in different ways. Schank and Berman (2002, p. 288) define story as "a structured, coherent retelling of an experience or a fictional account of an experience. A satisfying story will include... themes, goals, plans, expectations, expectation failures (or obstacles), and perhaps, explanations or solutions." Abbott (2008, p. 13) proposes a much simpler and more inclusive definition, which I will adopt for this essay: "Narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events."

Semino (2008, p. 1) defines metaphor as "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else." When using an idiom like '*icy stare*,' we think of an unfriendly expression in terms of frozen water. The Metaphor Analysis Project¹ web page provides a more general definition, defining the metaphor vehicle as "a word or phrase that somehow contrasts with (is incongruous or anomalous with) the topic of the on-going text or talk" and yet can be connected with the topic. I will follow a procedure based on this definition: a word or phrase can be identified as a metaphor if its basic or customary meaning is incongruous with the

apparent contextual meaning. Thus, *icy stare* applies a concept, *icy* for which the basic contemporary meaning (covered with frozen water) is clearly distinct from its meaning in context: ‘hostile’, an abstract concept, is not the sort of entity that can be covered with frozen water. Metaphors frequently appear in stories (sequences of causally-related events); they also often imply stories, and stories frequently serve as metaphors (Ritchie, 2010).

The word ‘metaphor’ is sometimes used more broadly as a general term for figurative, or non-literal, language, including metonyms (Schneider, 2008), which refer generally to the use of a word to reference another closely related concept; a familiar example is ‘*lend me a hand*,’ where ‘*hand*’ refers to the entire body. ‘*Lend*’ is an example of a use that could be considered a metaphor (the term usually refers to the transfer of a material object with the expectation that it will be returned) or a metonym (if ‘*lend*’ is interpreted as a reference to helpful actions in general). An example from the data, discussed in the following, is *eyes on the street*. Here, *on* is clearly metaphorical, since the eyes are only directed toward the street, but *eyes* is a metonymic reference to vision and the attendant social and cognitive processes. *The street* can be understood as a metonymic reference to events that happen on the street, or as a metaphorical reference to certain forms of social interaction. The phrase as a whole can be understood as a metaphorical reference to a willingness to take responsibility for the safety and well-being of others in the neighborhood. As will be seen, in the data analyzed herein metonyms play an important role; consequently I will mark them using the same typographical conventions as are used for metaphors.

Barsalou (2007) claims that perceptual simulation is the primary mode of cognition. As we process language, we experience simulated perceptions of internal physiological states (interoception) and cognitive states (introspection), as well as simulations of emotional responses and external perceptions such as vision, hearing, or touch. Metaphors can be processed by way of semantic or propositional connections, as when they are treated as semantic units, or by way of perceptual simulations (Ritchie, 2006, 2008); both processes may be simultaneously active to varying degrees. Stories are often metaphorical and, conversely, metaphors often imply a narrative (Ritchie, 2008, 2010). Although the view that metaphor processing involves perceptual simulations is supported by extensive research findings (for reviews see Gibbs, 2006, 2009), it is impossible to determine what simulations a hearer or reader experiences during actual discourse. Similarly, it is often difficult or impossible to determine whether any individual processes a phrase as metaphorical, or recognizes a sequence of utterances as a narration. Evidence can be obtained from the transcript itself or from other research, but the analysis of metaphors and story-telling in naturally-occurring communication has an interpretive quality that can never be fully overcome.

The analytic approach used here was to identify stories, metonyms, and metaphors, based on the criteria discussed above, then to identify the perceptual simulations that are likely to be activated in a typical hearer based on evidence in the transcript itself. These interpretations were examined for disconfirming evidence, for example evidence that a participant may not have processed an utterance sufficiently to recognize potential metaphors and stories or to form perceptual simulations. In all cases, the metaphors, metonyms, stories, and associated perceptual simulations are analyzed and

discussed within the broader context of the conversation in which they appear and the other metaphors and stories in the same conversation (Cameron, 2007).

Previous research has often focused on emotionally intense interactions (e.g., Cameron, 2007) or problematic interactions (e.g., Tracy, 1997). If social reality is constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and ideologies are transmitted and transformed (Harris-Lacewell, 2004) in the course of ordinary conversations, then it is also important to obtain and analyze discourse that at least approximates the conditions of ordinary conversation. The conversation analyzed in this essay differs from ordinary talk, in that a facilitator opened the conversation and introduced a topic, and intervened a few times by asking a topic-related question, and in that the participants understood that the conversation was being recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis. However, the setting, in the living room of one of the participants, and the fact that the participants all had well-established relationships were conducive to the development of ordinary patterns of talk. The humor, teasing, and story-telling that characterized the conversation also support treating this as a sample of how these neighbors interact in daily encounters.

3. The feeling of safety: *Why the block is the block.*

The conversation began with a brief discussion of current police enforcement of pedestrian cross-walk laws, but Sam changed the subject to fear of crime, which had been mentioned in the invitation to participate and again by the moderator in her introductory remarks. This led to an exchange in which this topic was contrasted with the relatively trivial concerns about crosswalk location and enforcement.

Sam: ... overall it's actually a very .. comfortable area where .. I tend not to feel unsafe walking on the streets an' it's .. y'know .. issues of livability have a lot more to do with ..

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crosswalks .. Y'know an' that .. y'know on this.. in this neighborhood there are all these .. kids .. riding their bike and we're more concerned .. 'Oh my! Did uh.. a five or six year old fall down?.. uh.. okay should I go run over .. No.. no.. no crying... huh uh.' [...] My sense is compared to many big cities our concerns about safety and livability have a lot more to do with infrastructure than they have to do with y'know a.. a fear of crime and maybe that's .. y'know ... and maybe that's .. like .. a comparison with other places so that ... y'know ... getting across [street name] to get to .. the bus stop.. is actually.. that's a.. that is a concern because ... Todd: I think we.. we'd just debate 'would you have it.. across from [the fruit market] or do you have it across from the new film developing store? Right? Or uh Or uh at [the bakery...]

Sam: [Well that's uh...]

Todd: Maybe we.. multiple crosswalks yah..

Leanne: See I think that's wonderful though that we live in such a nice neighborhood that that's our concern... Should we cross at [the fruit market] or cross at the film store..

Sam: Because... y'know one of the things that's.. y'know makes this uh... traditional issues of urban safety are not ones that.. there are not eyes on the street.

In this exchange, several themes were introduced that were taken up and woven through the entire conversation: the contrast between this neighborhood and other places where walking on the streets feels less comfortable, neighborhood children riding their bikes on the street without arousing concern for their safety, and another implicit contrast, the idea that the participants *live in such a nice neighborhood* that they can be preoccupied with the location of a crosswalk and other 'infrastructure' questions rather than worrying about 'serious' crime. Comfortable and livability are both common idiomatic metonyms expressing a large array of physical, emotional, and mental responses to a physical and social environment. At the end of the exchange, Sam introduced the phrase, eyes on the street, which serves both as a metonym for visual attention to the street and as a metaphor

for collaborative care and mutual protection. Simulations associated with these metonymic idioms and with children on bicycles, contrasted with ‘serious crime’, established an emotional tone that prevailed throughout the discussion. *Kids riding their bikes* also appears here to stand metonymically for a range of play activities, and generally for the presence of children, which figures prominently throughout the conversation. The story about a child falling off a bike is told as if it refers to a particular incident, but it serves a metaphorical function in that it refers to a more general state of affairs — this quasi-allegorical use of overtly particular stories to refer to more general and abstract concepts appears throughout the conversation.

The theme of contrast was picked up immediately by Todd, who has also lived in other, more archetypically dangerous cities. Todd divided crime into two types, the fear-inspiring *intrusive* (violent) crimes and the vandalism, petty theft, and occasional burglaries more typical of their neighborhood, which Todd minimized by telling a brief narrative about occasional thefts from his car (usually parked on the street) of some loose change, a repair manual, and some Jolly Ranchers™ (a brand of fruit-flavored hard candies), another example of a particular incident narrated in a way that serves as a metonymic reference to a more general situation. Todd then asked, *is there something about these blocks.. that uh.. that no-one’s been mugged on our block?*

This exchange used metonyms, metaphors, and referenced narratives to introduce crucial contradictions and contrasts: *comfort vs. fear*, minor incidents (*kids falling off their bikes* vs. serious problems (*being mugged*) and petty crimes (theft of some candy) vs. *intrusive crimes*. It also introduced a metonymic reference to the kind of neighborly sociability that helps resolve these apparent contradictions, *eyes on the street*.

Rich responded by noting the number of people who are home during the day (implicitly amplifying the *eyes on the street* trope), and a long discussion ensued, in which the theme of mutual watchfulness was elaborated as an explanation for the sense of safety and comfort experienced in this neighborhood. Thus, out of the theme of *contrast* emerged the idea of ‘our block’ as somehow different or special. Leanne picked up on this idea almost immediately, and connected it to sociability: *And I think another thing that helps with this neighborhood is that we have made such an effort to get to know one another .. and have a block party..* The metaphors here are interesting: The block party (an annual event in which the street is blocked off for the evening and picnic tables and barbeques are set up near the center of the block) is a *thing*, a valued ‘possession’ created through an ‘effort’ – but it is also personified in that it *helps with* this neighborhood. This sense of *VALUED POSSESSION* was generalized later in the conversation to include the feelings of friendliness and sociability and the neighborhood itself as a community.

3.1 Thematic contrasts

In the popular imagination, ‘crime’ and ‘big city’ are closely associated, but it was apparent that among these four urbanites, crime is not a preoccupation. The conversation had much more to do with uncovering, celebrating, and reinforcing the reasons for their collective *lack* of concern about crime than with expressing any *actual* concern. The transcript is filled with narratives, some extended over a minute or more of talk, others quite short, like Sam’s hypothetical account of seeing a child fall off a bicycle and Todd’s brief story about minor thefts from his automobile (both previously quoted). All of these stories were offered as examples of a general theme, and were told in a humorously ironic

tone that underscored the distinction between the ‘petty’, property-directed crimes in this neighborhood and more *intrusive*, person-directed crime.

This sense of safety and *COMFORT* was reinforced in several passages by contrasts to other cities, where Sam described *walking down the middle of the street and looking over my shoulder*, a narrative that seemed to activate simulations of fear and caution, in sharp contrast to the emotions of security and enjoyment associated with the descriptions of life in this particular neighborhood, and also served as a kind of implicit metonymic reference to the more general contrast with conditions in other, larger cities.

The few passages in which participants acknowledged any concern about crime conveyed a sense more of uneasiness than of actual fear. About 20 minutes into the conversation, Sam mentioned a place in the neighborhood where he feels *uncomfortable* walking at night, a segment of street between a mid-sized supermarket and a funeral home, both of which have blank, windowless walls and dense, overgrown bushes: *it’s always pretty dark ’cause there are no people*. There followed a long discussion about which street Sam meant. Once it was established that Sam was referring to the stretch alongside a local supermarket, Rich picked up the thread: *Yeah Safeways with its bushes and there are people in there.. sometimes in those bushes*.

In this passage Rich made an interesting contrast between the earlier mention of people who are *not* there and the people who *are* there. The people who are *not* there are the benign ‘watchers’, who prevent crime, and the people who *are* there are presumably homeless people or others who might commit crimes. The word *’cause* appears here to signify a connection between the emotional simulations associated with darkness and those associated with the absence of people (friendly observers) on that part of the street².

Sam subsequently made this explicit as a contrast between two sets of eyes: *The.. the fact that there are no eyes.. or there are different eyes on the street.. it does make a difference.* In spite of the tone of this talk about *people hiding in the bushes*, and the perceptual simulations of darkness, shadows, and a sense of uneasiness, it does not seem to have activated any strong sense of threat or fear. Rather, it seemed to imply an acknowledgement that, even in this safe neighborhood, a certain degree of watchfulness is wise. A similar implication, that watchfulness is required as a matter of sound policy rather than in response to any immediate threat, was conveyed by an earlier exchange, when Todd was asked about concerns about the safety of the young children. Todd replied, *Mostly you guys backin' out of your driveway an the toys'll get run over.* [laughter all around]. Here it appears, both from Todd's ironic tone of voice and from the laughter, that the comment was intended and taken as an ironic contrast with the stereotypical concerns about children as crime victims.

3.2 Watchfulness and sociability

The 'watchfulness' theme, summarized by Sam as eyes on the street, came up in several forms, and was expressed through several other metaphors, including critical mass, introduced by Sam to describe the cumulative effect of multiple people paying attention to what is happening in a neighborhood. The eyes metonym /metaphor appeared in the discussion of homeless people who might be hiding in the bushes near the supermarket, and it appeared in discussions of the attention everyone on the block gives to the children, and the collaborative parenting exercised by the four sets of parents on the block, discussed in a later section.

The complex metaphorical field that includes watchfulness and eyes on the street connects with and activates schemas that are familiar to most of us from early childhood, as well as from media fare such as suspense movies. The watchfulness theme was explicitly connected in several passages with the themes of sociability and friendly social interactions, discussed in the next section, and with the presence of children in the neighborhood, discussed in a later section. Each of these also activates complex schemas familiar to most if not all city-dwellers, and implicated in the contrast between the comfort and safety of this particular neighborhood and the sense of fearfulness associated with the stories told by both Sam and Todd about their experiences living in other, more dangerous, cities.

Throughout the conversation, the participants blended themes of ‘community’, *the block*, and ‘safety’, with emphasis on the absence of any need to fear violent or intrusive crime. These themes were developed and interconnected through metaphors and narratives, as discussed in earlier sections. The idea (introduced into urban theory by Jacobs, 1961) that an active street life is important to the health of neighborhoods was discussed at several points throughout the conversation, and Sam explicitly cited Jacobs late in the conversation, linking the eyes metonym/metaphor with Jacobs’s metaphor for neighborly watchfulness.

Sam: Because it.. what we’ve done is we’ve sortof.. y’know we’ve taken y’know everyone’s description of this block.. we’ve taken sort of the lessons of Jane Jacobs that, y’know.. Death and Life of Great American Cities.. but her.. [y’know whole notion] of eyes on the street

Leanne: [yeah]

Sam: that was.. one of the things she really promoted about how do you make a city really liveable, how do you make it safe, how do you make people feel comfortable.

Sam later commented that the children are always visible to the entire neighborhood because they play in their front yards, and *that's where you play so that the houses are oriented .. toward the street.. peoples.. people are on that street .. playing*. There ensued a discussion of the various ways in which houses are oriented toward the street, including the fact that one of the older couples who live on the street recently installed a park-style bench in front of their house, where they can sit and watch the street. The theme of *playing in the street* arose repeatedly throughout the conversation, always in a positive way, with emotional tones suggesting pleasure and affection and with no mention of such inconveniences as impeded traffic flow.

Given that at least half the residents of this neighborhood have pleasant back yards with patios, decks, flower gardens, and fish ponds, it is interesting that the implicit tension between the public life of front yards and the private life of back yards was not discussed. The ready suppression of this potential contradiction between opposing ideals is probably best explained in terms of Higgins's (2003) finding that communicators tend to tailor their comments to achieve and maintain shared reality.

The importance of ownership and owner-occupancy was mentioned twice during the conversation, and clearly formed a backdrop for the discussion. As Leanne expressed it near the end of the conversation,

Leanne: I think people were concerned about neighbors moving in before.. but in the last half dozen years ... we have decided to be more proactive about saying 'We are your neighbors and this is the kind of neighborhood and we're going to keep an eye on you We expect you to keep an eye on us and we're going to keep an eye on you. We want to know you.. you .. we... care about one another and we care about ... the feeling in the

community and the street' and that's important what Smiths down the street have said is 'we're going to grow old together.'

Here, Leanne explicitly made the connection between sociability and watchfulness, and connected it with a broader sense of continuity, safety, and ownership, both in the sense of owner-occupancy and in the metaphorical sense of commitment to the neighborhood and its values. She reinforced the *eyes on the street* theme by her triple repetition of *keep an eye on...*, spoken each time with emphasis. She made it clear that she was working, throughout the conversation, to affirm and strengthen the participants' mutual commitment to *the block* and to the larger community of which it is a part.

3.3 *The block*

The definition of 'community' and the boundaries of the neighborhood were the focus of a long exchange that began when the moderator asked whether this community is unique, then asked the group what they mean by 'community'. Although each of the four expressed a different understanding, all of them described 'community' in terms of places they routinely and easily walk to, where they recognize familiar faces, and where the residential character is similar (detached bungalows with small yards on tree-lined streets).

In practice, the participants seemed to define 'community' at three levels. The city itself was defined as their community in contrast to other cities. The local neighborhood, comprising about two square miles, was defined as *the community* in contrast to the rest of the city. But the block on which the participants all reside was understood by the four participants as their community in a particular, restricted sense of

sociability and mutual watchfulness. The topic of this particular block as a special place, a community in its own right, was linked to *safety* early in the conversation, when Todd cited crime statistics and observed, *But there... isn't .. a ton of crime .. on this block*. Then it was linked to sociability when Leanne mentioned the annual block party (quoted in a previous section).

Within the group, there were some subtle but interesting differences in how *community* is understood. Immediately after Rich denied that he thinks of community as *this block* and extended the definition to include a larger expanse, on the grounds that *I go there a lot*, Leanne attempted to define a more interactively intense concept of *community*: *But I would feel that this particular blo-ock , y'know with slight extensions maybe.. is.. is more than community*. In response to a probe from the moderator, she explained it in terms that echoed the *WATCHFULNESS* theme: *I mean I really do feel.. much more a sense of responsibility? for people on this block?*

Sam then reminded the group that residents of the next block over also have an annual block party and feel responsible for each other, and generalized to point out that *in this area there is a lot of that block by block*. This made explicit the link between sociability and community. Todd then restated the connection between these themes and safety: *To me it's like... the block is probably.. when we talk about.. crime.. the most important.. piece.. of.. although 'cause that's where you live and the crime upon you or where you live is ... is... very important thing*. He contrasted the feeling of safety *on the block* to *things that might happen to you when I'm off the block*. Sam referred to crime statistics as evidence that crime is more or less randomly distributed, and that their

neighborhood is not actually any safer than other parts of the city, whereupon Todd reinstated the focus on this block: *I feel very safe here..*

About ten minutes later Todd returned to the theme and made the connection between *the block*, watchfulness, and public safety explicit: *You know everybody who's on the block.. an' so.. if there's anything... that's different y'know... an=d.. that's..that's why .. um.. that's why the block is the block. Why the block is the block is an interesting phrase, similar to 'boys will be boys' or 'Cambodia is Vietnam's Vietnam', which can be understood as a truism (Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999) or as an implied analogy (an interpretation suggested by an anonymous reviewer). *Why the block is the block*, with vocal stress on the word *block*, emphasized the metonymic and metaphorical implications of *the block*, rendering salient its connection to the previously discussed topics. *The block* thus appeared as a distillation of all of the themes that were woven through this conversation — safety and liveability, sociability, the annual block party, and above all, the shared feeling of protectiveness, enjoyment, and affection toward the young children who live on the block.*

3.4 Children

Only one participant in the conversation has children, but much of the conversation revolved around children. Children figured prominently throughout the conversation in several ways, often as a marker of public safety, a kind of 'indicator species' for the health and safety of the community. Children also figured as a center of sociability and watchfulness, a source of interest and liveliness that attracts and rewards adult attention, and even as additional *eyes on the street*. Thus, children are not only vulnerable people

to be protected but also valued resources to be enjoyed, made welcome, and retained in the community: In every instance in which children were mentioned, the tone was warm and affectionate.

Sam introduced children as a marker of safety early in the conversation, in his brief narrative about how children could safely ride their bicycles around the neighborhood. Pursuing the topic of the safety of children, following the humorous comment about the fear that someone might back over one of his child's toys, Todd mused about when he might be willing to allow his young child to walk to school unaccompanied: *I'm thinking like how old will Mike be before I would let him walk to school by himself.. I think.. It's definitely high school.* [laughter all around]. Todd's over-protectiveness was converted into a joke, and he was gently teased about it by Leanne later in the conversation: *So maybe you're just a little protective?* It appears that Todd's primary concern is street traffic, not crime. However, after the participants exchanged stories of walking to school unaccompanied during their own childhoods, Todd mused that, *there's a perception.. I don't know whether the statistics .. the statistics would bear it out but .. but it's more dangerous now.* After musing about the time between now and when the child will be in high school, Todd invoked the *WATCHFULNESS* metaphor and connected it with his child's anticipated growth and eventual independence: *the question is.. is he able to watch out for himself?*

Shifting from the *safety* theme to more of a sentimental, even nostalgic mood, Sam echoed the *watching the street* theme in a very different sense, relating a conversation with his wife:

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Sam: We're watching the street and we're probably talking about ... our.. we're talking about growing up in sort of a.. a different era

Todd: Um hum

Sam: And at the same .. but also thinking.. how.. nice it would be.. to be growing up .. on this street right now.

Here, children seem to be a marker, not so much for *safety* as for the pleasantness and enjoyments afforded by the neighborhood — and for adult nostalgia precipitated by observing the children's carefree (but closely-supervised) play.

Sam continued this focus on sociability and the block as a good place to grow up by describing how the four sets of parents, all of whom live at one end of the block, collaborate in supervising — and entertaining — their children. Rich immediately claimed a part in this sense of caring and watchfulness:

Rich: And it's not just the parents ..

Todd: Yeah

Rich: I mean it's the rest of us

This theme of collaborative parenting was repeated and elaborated in several other places. Elaborating on the theme, Leanne described how,

Leanne: Last.. last.. six weeks for sure I have really noticed.. y'know that the kids are home from school

Todd: um hum

Leanne: An' they're out there having fun and I can talk to them and visit.. walking to our house

Todd: Umm hummm

Leanne: and there was always at least one parent out there with them.

Todd: Not sure which one it's gonna be, but

Leanne: You never know which one it's gonna be

Todd: Yeah

Leanne: but there's *always* kids and there's always a parent.

Todd: Yeah.

Here, both Leanne's choice of words and her tone of voice made it apparent that the children *out there having fun* are a source of enjoyment to her.

In several places the participants in this conversation made it evident that they regard the children as an asset to the community. In one instance, Leanne described a group of teenage boys on the next block over, who play basketball in the street and always politely step out of the way and chat with her when she passes on the way home from the bus stop. It is clear in this passage that she enjoys watching them and interacting with them. Her enjoyment of the children on the street was even more evident in a passage, ten minutes later, in which she described a conversation with one of the children who live near the end of the block:

Leanne: I was walking down the street.. she was sitting there she .. she jumps up and she said.. I said 'How are you?' she said 'Today was the first day of first grade! and it was just wonderful!' And she had on this .. this black leotard and white tights and little shoes.. and she said 'and I'm going to be going to dance class now, and *afterwards* my dad is going to take me to the park and it's like the best day of my life!' eh heh! And she was literally bouncing up.. and.. down.. I mean she could not stay still .. she was so excited ... that was just... wonderful .. you know? It was just fantastic to be able to live on a street where you can see that every day.

Here the story clearly refers to a specific incident that probably occurred recently, but it is offered as a more general example of the underlying theme of sociability and

neighborhood coherence. Given that children's normal behavior is often a source of inter-generational conflict, it is interesting that potentially disruptive aspects of children's play were never mentioned. To the contrary, through these narratives, related in tones of affection and amusement, the three childless participants made evident that they see the presence of young children as adding value, both for the social relationships they crystallize and for their contribution to the liveliness of the street. On the surface, these stories instantiate the relationship between sociability and security. But they also appear as part of a strategy of building and maintaining the integration of the young families in the community, reassuring parents that their children are welcome and valued, and securing the continued commitment of the four sets of parents, with Todd as a surrogate, to the neighborhood. By telling these particular stories about interactions with the neighborhood children, the other participants might hope to influence the conversations the young parents have among themselves.

3.5 Identities, roles, and themes

It is evident throughout the discussion that all four members of this group are proud of their city, their extended community, and the block on which they live. The two participants who have lived in other cities are more aware of the contrast between their community and other cities in which fear of crime is more widespread, but all of them take for granted that their community affords them a luxurious degree of safety from violent crime.

As previously noted, the participants seem to share an understanding that *community* is a multi-layered concept, but they focused their attention at different levels,

which to some extent reflected their different life circumstances. At one extreme, Leanne seemed the most possessive and the most proud of *the block* as a place that is special to her. She was instrumental in organizing the first block party and has been instrumental in maintaining it as an annual tradition. She accepts that other blocks in the extended neighborhood have similar traditions of sociability, and regards that fact as normal and good — but this particular block is her own block, and this is where her attention is focused. Todd shares Leanne's sense of *the block* as a special place, in large part as a place to raise his children. Like Sam, Todd has lived in several other cities, and chose this neighborhood in this city after a process of research that included investigating crime statistics. For both Leanne and Todd, *the block* is a haven, somewhat separated from the dangers and turbulence of the surrounding world.

At the other extreme, Sam advocated and pushed for a broader, more inclusive account of urbanity. For Sam, the sociability evident on *the block* and its causal relationship to the watchfulness signified by the metonymic phrase eyes on the street is important primarily as an illustration of a general pattern that is potentially true of every neighborhood. There is nothing either unusual or special about *the block*; although he and his wife enjoy living here and participating in the life of the community, they could as readily live in any of dozens of other neighborhoods in this city.

Rich expressed in many ways the most complex set of attitudes. Rich has lived on this block for over twenty years, longer than any other member of the group. However, he has also lived in other areas within the two square miles he defined as *the community*, and resisted according any special status to this particular block. Like Sam, Rich rejected the idea that this block, with its annual block parties and other instances of

sociability, is unique. It is likely that this resistance was also part of a more general resistance to the level of social interaction advocated by Leanne.

In addition to the previously described instance in which Leanne teased Todd about his protectiveness and Todd's own ironic joke about his fear that someone will run over his child's bike, there were several other instances of subtle humor and playfulness in the conversation. Rich has a reputation for being fussy about his flower gardens and at one point Sam used Rich as an example of how the houses on the block are all oriented toward the street:

Sam: Rich is in his front yard watering.. y'know..

Rich: All you can think about is the waahter [laughter]

Sam: Okay.. clipping his roses...

There were only a few examples of outright joking in this conversation, but there was evidence throughout of affection, good humor, and bits of subtle verbal play, all consistent with Dunbar's (1996) claims about the 'grooming' functions of language (see also Carter, 2004; Ritchie & Dyhouse, 2008). The word-play and humorous teasing that occurred throughout supports the claim that this conversation is typical of conversations these and other members of the community have on a daily basis, although this conversation was both longer and more focused on a particular set of topics than would be expected in a more spontaneous everyday interaction.

4. Discussion.

The participants in this conversation were invited to discuss "issues related to public safety and police-community interactions," but it is apparent that these issues had

minimal relevance to them, individually or as a group. They evidently regard their own neighborhood as a safe and enjoyable place to live, and they were primarily interested in understanding and maintaining the conditions that contribute to this feeling of safety and livability. The participants in this conversation frequently engage in casual interactions when they encounter each other on the sidewalks in front of their homes or at street corners and bus stops, and they evidently enjoyed the conversation as another opportunity for social interaction. It also appears, for example from Leanne's triple repetition of the *keep an eye on you* trope and from the many stories about watching the neighborhood children that the participants engaged in this conversation as an opportunity to contribute to the project of maintaining their community, consistent with Harris-Lacewell's observations about the role of everyday talk in maintaining the ideological underpinnings of society.

Upon first reading the transcript of this conversation, very little evidence of the contradictions within the concept of an urban community is apparent. The contradictions are more apparent in what was not said than in anything that was said, and in the repeated emphasis of certain themes. The tension between the urge toward privacy, as exemplified by the extensive development of back-yard living space by most of the residents of the block, and the need for street-centered socializing and mutual watchfulness was never mentioned. This contradiction was indirectly apparent in Sam's description of how homes on the block are turned toward the street and in Rich's apparent resistance to according this block any special status. In effect, all participants tacitly agreed that a certain degree of street-centeredness is important, and, at least for the duration of this conversation and for the sake of maintaining a kind of group consensus,

the contradictory tendency to turn inward, toward their own homes and their own backyard living areas, was suppressed.

Similarly, the tension between individual property rights and the collective interest in maintaining the neighborhood as primarily owner-occupied on the one hand, and the tension between the commitment of time and energy to maintaining the social structure of the community through routine social interaction and other demands on individuals' time and energy on the other hand were also effectively suppressed. The first was apparent primarily in Leanne's pointed emphasis of the importance of socializing new residents to the practices of mutual caring and watchfulness and the second in her repeated insistence on the importance of maintaining the annual block party and other instances of routine social interaction. As with Sam's discussion of the importance of orienting homes toward the street rather than toward their own back yards, the other participants may have had their private reservations, but openly acquiesced in and tacitly supported Leanne's assertions.

These and other instances, throughout the conversation, in which real contradictions were suppressed and limited resolutions of the contradictions emphasized and connected with the central *eyes on the street* trope with the active collaboration of other participants, appear to be much more than mere polite avoidance of open confrontation. They appear to be part of a continuing process of negotiating a dynamic equilibrium between opposing needs and forces. In practice, the behavior of various families in the community is often at variance with the ideas that were collaboratively expressed during this conversation: families frequently retreat to their own back patios, and families often schedule vacations or other activities that prevent them from

participating in the annual block party. The resolution of contradictions inherent in the idea of community includes a sustained public commitment to the ideals of community-centeredness through a handful of central organizing metaphors in routine conversations, along with complementary restraint and forbearance.

4.2 Narrative re-telling and memory

Pasupathi, Weeks, and Rice (2006) identify three broad functions of remembering and re-telling: those associated with the teller's sense of self, those associated with relationships with others, and those associated with problem-solving and goal-achievement. It is apparent throughout the conversation analyzed in the foregoing that remembering and retelling serve similar functions in maintaining a sense of community. Participants in the conversation repeatedly told stories that exemplified important aspects of the community. Many of the narratives seemed to reinforce the teller's sense of self in relation to *the block*, and thus asserted a sense of the social identity of the neighborhood collectively. Leanne's story about the little girl's first day of school appears to have reinforced both her self-identity as a friendly person who enjoys young children and at the same time expressed her identification of *the block* as a community in which children are welcomed and appreciated. Both the story about co-parenting and watching out for each other and the children, and Leanne's declaration, quoting another neighbor not present, that "*we are going to grow old together*" described and reinforced an ideal of sociable relationships within the community. Todd's ironic joke about worrying that someone might back over his child's bike and the repeated discussion of watchfulness, watching out for each other, watching out for the children illustrate a problem-solving function of story-telling. In all

cases, the content of the narratives was reinforced by the vocal qualities of tone, pace, and timing.

4.3 Constructing community

Each participant seemed to bring an implicit theory of ‘community’ to the conversation; throughout the conversation, these theories were compared, subtly adjusted, and harmonized with each other. Berger and Luckmann (1966) posited a social reality which is reproduced in its solid facticity in routine social interactions, but the social reality apparent in this conversation seems to have more the quality of a continuous negotiation and mutual adaptation (Higgins, 2003). Each participant appeared to be well aware of the tenuous nature of the social fabric that constitutes their community, and of the need for mutual accommodation and reinforcement to maintain its strength and vitality.

Throughout, the participants engaged in a process of accommodation and differentiation — now echoing and reinforcing each others’ metaphors and supporting each others’ stories, now rephrasing or restating a point in terms that were subtly different. Outright disagreements or challenges were infrequent, but the composite opinion of the group would be better described as a complex and dynamic tapestry of metaphors and narratives than as anything like a list of tenets or propositions. They clearly agree on the central value of *community*, and on the importance of sociability and mutual caring summarized in the *eyes on the street* trope, but they are only partially in agreement about the details that make up that sense of community and caring, or in the extent of their commitment to *the block* as a focus of sociability.

The participants in this conversation all participated actively and enthusiastically, but it was clear throughout that there were no new ideas. It was evident that everyone present had thought about these ideas and talked about them before, usually in much shorter bits of talk. As soon as Sam mentioned *eyes on the street* it was apparent that everyone present was familiar with the phrase and the ideas it reflects. It was also apparent throughout that everyone present values the annual block party both as an opportunity for socializing and because it helps to maintain a sense of stability, mutual watchfulness, and safety. Far from sharing or discovering new ideas, this conversation served as an opportunity to affirm, celebrate, and reinforce their mutual commitment to *the block*. Beyond this neighborhood, it seems likely that all of these little conversations merge into a web of conversations within this city and, beyond that, collectively constitute and maintain complex ideas of urbanity and community.

5. Conclusions

Living in a complex world with its uncertainties and conflicts presents us with many contradictions and dilemmas. Often these have no permanent resolution, but must be continually re-negotiated as individuals seek to maintain a dynamic equilibrium with their social and cultural environment. The process of building and maintaining the social bonds of community pose particular dilemmas and contradictions, many of which are evident in the conversation analyzed in the foregoing.

It is important to bear in mind that the participants appear to have enjoyed the conversation. The more direct motive of entertainment (‘grooming,’ to use Dunbar’s metaphor) appears to have been present throughout, very likely also motivates most of

the ordinary street-corner conversations, and is probably essential to accomplishing the more overtly serious purposes of constructing and maintaining the fabric of community.

Much of the work of this conversation, and much of the evident pleasure it yielded for the participants, stemmed from the telling of stories and the use of metaphors and metonyms that activate powerful and complex perceptual simulations (Ritchie, 2010) and invite hearers to enter into a common 'story-world' (Gerrig, 1993). Entry into a common story-world based on shared values and experience strengthens the basis for mutual trust and empathetic communication (Cameron, 2007, 2011) that, in turn, provides a basis for future talk, and for minimizing or resolving the paradoxes and contradictions of social life and thus for sustaining communities. Consistent with Norrick (1993), the humor and teasing that occurred in this conversation also appears to play an important part in maintaining a sense of sociability and trust.

The participants in this conversation made surprisingly sparse use of metaphors, given the abstract topics under discussion, but the handful of metaphors and metonyms that recurred throughout, notably those related to *eyes on the street* and the metonymic / metaphoric use of *the block*, seem to be central in their understanding of the role of community in maintaining a sense of public safety. At least in this conversation, stories were much more prominent than metaphors. Only a few of the stories were based on particular incidents (Leanne's story about the first day of school and Todd's story about the theft of Jolly Ranchers); many of the stories were based on things that typically happen, and others (for example Sam's story about the child falling off a bicycle) may have been invented to illustrate an abstract idea.

The results of this study support the importance of attention not merely to patterns of metaphor use but also to the interaction of metaphor and metonym with other forms of figurative language, particularly story-telling but also humor, teasing, and word-play. They also support the importance of casual talk in constructing and maintaining a sense of community that is vital to safe, enjoyable, urban neighborhoods (Jacobs, 1961). By the same token, these results also support the importance of attention to the patterns of casual talk, including the use of figurative language, as a basis for understanding the processes through which healthy urban communities are constructed and maintained.

Author's note

The author is indebted to Elena Semino for comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, to Dr. Char Schell for facilitating the conversation, and to four anonymous participants.

This project was supported in part by the Faculty Development Fund of Portland State University and in part by the Living With Uncertainty Project, Lynne Cameron, PI, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the United Kingdom.

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Appendix. Transcription Symbols

Transitional continuity

Completion of a thought	.
Continuing	,
question, uncertainty, or appeal	?
Speech overlap	[within square brackets]

Pauses

short pause	..
long pause	...

Emphasis

Terminal accent	!
segment of louder speech	^ ^

Vocal noises

Laughter	[<i>laughter</i>]
In-stream disfluencies and sounds	{transcribe phonetically, example: eh heh, umm}

Metaphors

marked by underscoring

NOTES

¹ Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology, Open University, Milton-Keynes, UK.

<http://creet.open.ac.uk/projects/metaphor-analysis/procedure.cfm?subpage=discourse-data>. Most recently accessed Dec. 15, 2010.

² I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.