Conversations into Texts: A Method for Studying Public Culture

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Abstract

Sociology has long struggled to develop methods adequate to its theoretical understanding of society as a reality *sui generis* (Durkheim, 1982). While culture is widely understood as the most collective aspect of societies, the methods sociologists use keep pulling us back toward an image of culture as produced by the interaction of individual minds. To try to capture more effectively what is genuinely collective about culture, we focus here on conversational interactions—the voices and actions that constitute the relational space among actors. Conversational journals provide us with a method: the analysis of texts produced by cultural insiders who keep journals of who-said-what-to-whom in conversations they overhear or events they participate in during the course of their daily lives. We describe the method, distinguishing it from other approaches and noting its drawbacks. We then explore the ways and settings in which participants in conversational interactions use culture, illustrating the methodological advantages of conversational journals with examples from our texts. We end with a discussion of what we have learned about culture in action and the method's potential in our setting as well as in other places and times.

Conversations Into Texts: A Method For Studying Public Culture

It is a truism of social analysis that methods of research and theoretical understandings are intertwined. This paper presents a method that, we show, has the potential to lead to new insights about culture and how it works. The method, conversational journals kept by local assistants, captures culture as a dynamic public activity in ways that few other methods are able to equal. As we show below, conversational journals offer new insights into cultural understandings of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. We also attempt to demonstrate that the method has wider substantive and theoretical implications.

While culture is widely understood as the outcome of collective production, (Durkheim 1982; Bellah 1973; Geertz 1973; Sewell 1999), the methods sociologists use nonetheless imply an image of culture as the outcome of the interaction of individual subjectivities, classically expressed in Weber's definition of "social action" as action whose "subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Weber 1968 [1920-22]). This emphasis on individual subjectivities (Wuthnow 1987)—culturally congenial to Americans in any case—is reinforced by the methodological individualism of survey research and interview methods, so that whatever the theories, the methods imply that culture is accessed through individual minds. As Andrew Abbott points out in "Transcending General Linear Reality" (1988), while the methods we use are meant to test arguments derived from our theories, they inevitably operate as models of the social world, shaping the ways we envision fundamental social processes.

To try to capture more effectively what is genuinely collective about culture, we focus on conversational interactions—the voices and actions that constitute the relational space among actors. Conversational journals give us texts produced by cultural insiders who keep diaries of who-said-what-to-whom in conversations they overhear or events they participate in during the course of their daily lives. They are like ethnographers in the sense that they are fully immersed in the field site and know the local language. But the texts they produce give us data at second-hand—what they, not we, remember and choose to write down about what they hear and see.[1] We use conversational journals to learn about cultural dynamics at a particular time and place: rural Malawi during the AIDS epidemic, as those threatened by the epidemic are attempting to navigate their way to safety (Watkins 2004). Although the setting is thus particular, we hope that it illustrates the potential of conversational journals for capturing culture in action (Swidler 1986) in other in other, more familiar, relational spaces.

We are not the first to focus on the dynamics of social interactions, to recruit "insiders" as research collaborators, nor to recognize the advantages of qualitative methods for studying AIDS.[2] Here, however, we have combined these approaches in a novel way

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[1] Much of what the journals record is what V.N. Vološinov (1973) called "reported speech," with the rich sense of social context such speech conveys.

[2] For excellent examples of symbolic-interactionist empirical work, see Hugh Mehan's (1979) studies of classrooms, Gary Alan Fine's more ethnographic studies of sites from restaurant kitchens to boys' baseball teams, or Jack Katz's (1999) work on such interactional complexities as a criminal suspect breaking down in tears during an investigation. The methods of social interactionists, however, tend to require close observation of a single micro-environment. Price and Hawkins (2002) trained "peer researchers" to conduct in-depth interviews with members of their social networks, under the assumption that familiarity and trust had already been established between the researcher and researched. Nonetheless, their texts are still interviews, not spontaneous conversations. Similarly, Williams and Kornblum (1985) had high school students keep diaries of their everyday lives. These documents convey the interior sense of life as it is lived by youth in poor neighborhoods with great poignancy, but do not attempt to capture the flow of public discussion. Valuable insights have come from "indigenous fieldworkers," but these are typically deployed to gain access to "covert communities" such as commercial sex

that gives unusual empirical breadth to what is usually limited to the intensive study of a single interactional context.

Conversational journals offer previously unexploited but powerful methodological advantages for students of culture, as well as several practical ones. *First*, conversational journals offer a different angle on the complex flow of culture and social life than does most interview or survey-based research, or even the typical ethnography. Our method is ideally suited to study the ordinary conversations of ordinary people—the relaying of scandals, consultations among friends on urgent problems, leisurely musings about sex, death, God and gender—in contexts that range from casual conversations, to women's group meetings to barroom brawls. Thus, the conversational journals reveal how culture is actually mobilized in mundane, natural social contexts (Swidler 2001; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). *Second*, they provide access to local understandings in ways that do not require the presence of an outsider, either interviewer or ethnographer. As we will show, this access to ordinary conversation reveals collective processes of analysis and debate—that are simply not available using other methods. *Third*, because a multiplicity of conversational journalists can sample a wide variety of settings, contexts and speakers, the texts they produce permit systematic analysis of the relations among speakers, contexts, and meanings—of culture in its multiplexity (Sewell 1992). As will be evident below,

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workers or injecting drug users rather than "unmarked" communities (e.g. Power 1994; Elliott et al. 2002). Other approaches to capturing the public aspect of public opinion include Noelle-Neuman (1993) who explores how survey questions can capture people's fear of disagreeing with others. Focus groups are also meant to capture this collective property of cultural meanings (Gamson 1992). Some ethnographers, such as Eliasoph (1998) give explicit attention to the group contexts in which public discussion occurs. Recently social scientists studying AIDS have used "targeted ethnographic investigation as a way of examining not only cultural meanings but also social processes, power dynamics, and similar issues" (Parker and Ehrardt 2001:109). None of these approaches, however, capture spontaneous, public conversation as it is occurring in a wide variety of geographical and social settings.

speakers joke and contradict one another (as well as contradicting themselves); in different contexts they bring different ideas to bear. Conversational journals capture, rather than filter out, precisely these complexities. *Fourth*, and theoretically most salient, because the method depends on texts that recall public social interaction, it foregrounds what is collective—and what is public—about culture.

In what follows, we begin by describing the bare bones of the method, distinguishing it from other approaches and noting its drawbacks. We then turn to the ways that participants in conversational interactions use culture for sundry purposes in a variety of different settings, illustrating the methodological advantages of conversational journals with examples from our texts. The excerpts are sometimes long, but we believe this is necessary to provide readers with persuasive images of culture as a public activity in which participants continuously constitute and reconstitute social life.

The Conversational Journals

In 1997 Watkins and several colleagues began to study the role of social networks in influencing responses to the AIDS epidemic in rural Malawi. Because the focus of the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) was demographic, the primary data would come from multiple waves of a survey, supplemented by semi-structured interviews.[3] After the first round of the survey in 1998 the researchers had a great deal of data about the composition and structure of the social networks in which rural Malawians talked about AIDS (Helleringer and Kohler 2005; Kohler et al. 2002). They had not however, learned much about the *content* of the social interactions--what people said to

[3] The MDICP has conducted three surveys in rural Malawi (1998, 2001, 2004, with a fourth round scheduled for 2006). The initial sample consisted of approximately 1500 ever-married women and their husbands; in 2004, a sample of approximately 1500 adolescents (ages 15-24) was added. Semi-structured interviews with randomly selected sub-samples of the initial sample were also conducted. More detail is available at www.malawi.pop.upenn.edu.

each other, rather than to interviewers, about AIDS or their strategies for avoiding infection and death—and even less about the wider public culture that shaped responses to the epidemic. Thus, the researchers improvised.

The researchers asked several high school graduates living in or near their study sites to be participant observers as they went about their daily routines. If they overheard anything concerning AIDS, they were to make mental notes of what people said and did, and then write their recollections word-for-word in commonplace school notebooks that evening or soon thereafter. The diarists wrote in English, a language learned in high school, and used parentheses or carets (< >) to set off their explanatory comments or translations from the local language. The handwriting and repetitions suggest they often wrote rapidly. We have preserved their grammar and vocabulary, although on occasion we have inserted obviously missing words in brackets for greater legibility. The notebooks were given to a local intermediary who mailed them to the researchers.

Conversational journals constitute the body of texts that we analyze below.[4] These texts record hearsay evidence: we hear only secondhand, from the journalists' ears—and their memories—to our eyes. Although the journalists are relatively well-educated, in rural Malawi many such people do not find jobs in the formal sector. Rather, they live in villages, side-by-side with those who have no schooling, and engage in the same tasks as others—small-scale trading, tending their maize fields, attending their church, going to

[4] Social analysts frequently draw on textual materials created by others—from the memoirs and letters historians analyze, to the newspaper accounts that social movement scholars rely on, to the documents produced by the inquisition (Ginzburg 1980). These documents always reflect the biases and interests of those who recorded them, and analysts attempt to take those biases into account. But such texts can also provide access to meanings that operate in a culture in spite of—but sometimes because of—the assumptions and prejudices of their creators (as in the fascinating work of Mohr and Duquenne 1997, analyzing texts produced by social service organizations in New York City). Conversational journals "artificially" produce an enormous number of texts that give unparalleled access to the meanings that circulate in a given society.

neighbors' funerals, and so forth. It will become obvious below that in places where only the fortunate few have a battery-run television, where there is modest access to the radio, and where many are unemployed or spend long hours doing sometimes dull tasks—weaving palm mats, sitting all day in the market hoping to sell something, taking the bus from one town to another, washing clothes at the well—sociable conversation adds spice to daily life.

Before proceeding further, we provide excerpts from two field journals to convey a flavor of their style, the remarkable level of detail the journalists recollect, and the number of people whose conversations and activities they report. The excerpts from the first journal are a series of comments about the death of Abiti [Miss] Baidon, known to all as a prostitute. These (much shortened) excerpts illustrate the multiple conversations that frame the collective narrative of AIDS. All proper names have been changed, and journal excerpts are cited using the pseudonym of the journalist and the date of the journal in year, month and day format.

The journalist meets two women walking to the funeral of Abiti Baidon, one of whom she knows from their school days, the other a stranger. The conversation begins with gossip about Miss Baidon. After invoking the common trope in the community that death from AIDS is a "salary" or just repayment for bad behavior, one woman confides to the others her own urgent concern, her fear that her own husband's infidelties will kill her and their children:

> After we greeted each other, Mrs. Bruce said to me that I did well to come and mourn for Miss Baidon because she would have killed all the people of V___ and other men from the outside areas. Miss Baidon has died of AIDS as a salary or gift for what she was doing.

> Her friend who [wore] a traditional suit, green in colour and the white sandals answered. She said that the death of Miss Baidon has concerned her very much because she was sleeping with her husband. She had been quarreling with her husband for a long time because of her and her marriage was near to an end. Her husband was challenging her that he could divorce her and marry Miss Baidon.
>
> About the AIDS disease, the woman said that her husband was advised at the church by the church elders and the *Nkhoswes* [traditional marriage counselors] that these days life is difficult because there is no time for enjoyment since there is the AIDS disease. Having one woman and depend on her is a very good thing because you can save your life and your children's life…. Though her husband changed his behaviour but the woman was still worrying…. Now if [Miss Baidon] was infected during that time that she was moving with [a colloquial term for promiscuity] her husband, it is openly that her husband was also infected and if he was infected it also means that she is also infected with that AIDS therefore she will just die for nothing. Her husband will kill an innocent woman like her. The woman was very worried a lot because she has children and she was saying that her children will suffer a lot if their parents will die because they are very young…. She began crying and I told her that she must stop crying because [she] had no evidence that she was also infected or not.

At the funeral, the diarist witnesses a public ritual rather than a personal conversation: here is spontaneous "AIDS education." The Village Headman says that his people should learn from Miss Baidon's death, for she was a prostitute and suffered a long time before she died of AIDS. Then the head of the mosque,

> Sheikh Abel stood up and talked to people about the behavior of prostituting. He said that he was very shy [ashamed] because she [Miss Baidon] cheated God. In the Quran, prostituting is forbidden but every Muslim should get married. As for men, they are very lucky that they are allowed to marry more than one wife but they should make sure that they are faithful to them and he is loving all of them equally.… AIDS has no medicine. If you are infected, just wait for the death but it is also the painful disease because takes a long time for one to get recovered and it also takes time for one to die and leave the world…. He lastly asked all the Muslims to stop prostitution and the men were also asked to stop having other partners who are not their spouse to reduce the number of people who die of AIDS (Alice 030523).

A second example from our texts is one of many, often lengthy, conversations among young, underemployed men hanging out at a trading center, talking in a bar, or playing *bawo*. Here a man uses "chatting" with friends to ask for help with an urgent

problem—the venereal symptoms he has been experiencing. This excerpt illustrates several characteristics of other journals: the raunchy terms in which the men, razzing their friend, talk about the symptoms of gonorrhea, peers urging a friend to be faithful or to use condoms, and the widespread misapprehension that sex with someone with AIDS means inevitable infection.

> When we were chatting there one of my friends there begun saying that now he is wondering as to what is happening to him. I asked to him what is happening to him which he is wondering of? He answered that he has only one sexual partner in his village but he had been sleeping with her for a quite long time and he had never noticed what he is observing rather feeling nowadays. One of the friends asked, what do you feel? He answered saying that he feels pain at the front of his penis more especially at the foreskin. I laughed and then his friend said that possibly the foreskin has a crack. His friend said that he doesn't see any crack at all and he had clearly observed it and seen that the foreskin is okay no sores at all.

The men discuss possible diagnoses—perhaps the problem occurred because the sufferer was not circumcised or wore underwear that was too tight. They ask for more symptoms, which the sufferer provides. One of the men says that the disease is *chizonono* [gonorrhea]; he establishes his authority by regaling the others with a vivid description of the disease's likely course if untreated, based on his own experience:

> [Eventually] the person becomes rather produces bad smell due to the pus he produces and even green flies follows him where ever he is which is the very insult to him and a great problem. I laughed and friend laughed too. Then friend went on saying that *chizonono* is a very bad and dangerous disease which requires fast treatment to avoid one becomes burren [barren, sterile] and producing the bad smell which results from the pus which he may be producing.

After a discussion of whether it is better to go to a traditional healer or to the hospital, the men begin in earnest trying to work out whether the young man's partner has endangered him by being unfaithful; note how they swiftly move from epidemiological logic to gender:

> Then I asked my friend why [if] he had been sleeping with her since November last year (2003) up to now in January 2004 that he had to face rather experience the pains he feels now and not from the first few months he started sleeping with her?

> One friend said that it could mean that the girl has another sexual partner apart from him. I agreed to what friend said. Then friend continued saying that these girls are very dangerous and when they are with you, sleeping with you they pretend to love you much there at that moment and when she is with someone else and also she pretend to love him very much and like she doesn't have anyone else but him alone. I agreed with him.

The man's friends urge him to "divorce" his girlfriend, but the young man says he can't drop her because he "loves her so much" and because of the gifts he has bought her (he lists the gifts and their cost). Then AIDS enters the conversation:

> His friend said that he made the great mistake falling in love with the school girl. His friend asked why a mistake? He answered saying that school girls are very unfaithful ones, they don't trust one sexual partner but go for many and the end result being spreading the virus…. He said that indeed for sure his sexual partner has no AIDS. His friend laughed and said that anyone who goes for more than one sexual partner nowadays of AIDS that one has a high possibility of having the virus which causes AIDS…. Friend said that even the radio says that those having sexual transmitted infections are more likelihood of also having this virus which causes AIDS. We were just listening, and friend [who was] criticised said that after recovery or after being healed certainly he will not drop the sexual partner…. He went on speaking that since he had been sleeping with her for a long time and moreover plain sex ["plain" is widely used to mean without a condom], then there is no need that he can divorce her for if it is the matter of AIDS disease then he had already contracted it and how can he avoid AIDS and if she has it it means he had it…. Chatting really proceeded to the extent that we came out of the topic. (Simon 040130)

<u>The Journals and the Journalists: How Good Are the Data?</u>

The diary excerpts above are from two of more than 600 journals written since 1999, each approximately 12 single-spaced typed pages, and each usually covering several different conversations or incidents, recorded on different days. Twenty-two journalists (9 females, 13 males) have contributed, with three (two males, one female) contributing very frequently, 13 frequently, and six only occasionally. The current collection of diaries covers thousands of distinct conversations, some overheard or witnessed by the journalists, others relayed to them through gossip. Since there are frequently several people

conversing, we overhear, at second hand, several thousand people. The journalists' close networks, the ones in which they spend most time, are homophilous, as are close networks elsewhere (McPherson et al. 2001), but many of the conversations they overhear have a very diverse cast of characters. For example, the most prolific of the female journalists is on many committees in her community and sometimes attends regional or national meetings of these groups, and many women, but also men, come to her for advice; the male journalists spend much of their time hanging out with friends in the nearby trading center, the bus depot, or at a bar, where there may also be friends of friends or strangers. The male journalists write primarily about men's conversations, the women about women's, reflecting the gendered interaction typical of sub-Saharan Africa.[5] The journalists were paid US$30 for an 80-page school notebook, an amount that was deliberately set high relative to incomes in rural Malawi, as an incentive to continue with the project.

Incentives raise the possibility of fakery. The journalists had worked for the MDICP as interviewers and shown themselves to be reliable, honest, thorough, and intelligent. But we are in the same position as classical ethnographers: neither we nor they could know with absolute certainty whether reports of informants are accurate. We have evaluated the journals in the light of other information (e.g. from the survey, the semi-structured interviews, and many months in rural Malawi participating in MDICP data collection). In addition, there is also evidence internal to the journals: because some of the more notorious characters in the area, such as the prostitute Miss Baidon, appear in the journals of more than one journalist, and some actors reappear in multiple journals of the

[5] In the 2001 MDICP survey, 89% of the AIDS conversational networks of female respondents consisted only of females; 88% of male; respondents' networks consisted only of males (see also Marshall 1970 and Oboler 1985).

same journalist, we can examine consistency of representation across journalists and over time. Most convincing, however, are the internal qualities of the journals. Kaler (2003) notes recurring themes in the journals, but also the relative absence of clichéd situations and characters. We (and other readers of the journals) are struck by their quality of verisimilitude. While only extended excerpts from many journals could make this point fully convincing, it is evident as one reads the journals that only a gifted novelist could have manufactured such a variety of voices, situations, incidents, and viewpoints. As Kaler (2003) observes, it would probably have been much more work to invent these situations and voices than simply to record them. To have confidence in the authenticity of the ethnographic journals also requires that the researcher spend enough time in the field to have an ear for what sounds right in that specific context and to establish reciprocal trust with the ethnographers.[6]

There is no doubt that the pay motivates the journalists to seek out situations in which AIDS is likely to be discussed. Initially, the journalists produced one or two journals a month, but their productivity increased, first after the poor harvest of 2001 and then dramatically with the famine of 2002 when grain prices rose by approximately 500% (Malawi National Vulnerability Assessment Committee 2002). Journalists also sometimes pad their journals, for example by reporting at numbing length on a village AIDS committee's informational meeting or reproducing nearly verbatim a pastor's sermon. We have not discouraged such tactics, feeling that it is better not to censor what the journalists

[6] One journalist was dismissed for fakery, but this exception demonstrates how unlikely it is that journalists have invented conversations. The journalist claimed to have attended meetings where AIDS was discussed, but we realized that he was in fact copying long passages—without masking their flat bureaucratic English—from donor documents. Both the fact that we noticed the fakery and the fact that when he wanted to increase his production he copied rather than inventing something give us additional confidence in the integrity of the journals.

write. But this increased output does not directly undermine the value of the evidence they give about where and when discussions of AIDS take place.

Despite the verisimilitude and the external and internal consistency of the journals, a journalist is not a mechanical amanuensis.[7] These are texts of recalled conversations, not recordings, and the journalists surely did not remember perfectly everything that was said, and by whom. But for those interested in culture, rather than in formal conversational analysis of the sort Emmanuel Schegloff, Harvey Sacks and others have pioneered, there are advantages (beyond the logistical impossibility of placing recorders wherever people gather to chat) to this reliance on local recall. The local journalists' selective memory is not unlike the selectivity that shapes what ideas get picked up and passed on, to become part of the larger culture (Varenne 1987). The journalists were given latitude to determine what counts as a "conversation about AIDS" and what does not. Thus, as with other methods of capturing culture, the journals reflect our informants' own understandings of AIDS, as well as their understandings of us.

What Conversational Journals Capture and What they Miss

Their Agendas, Not Ours

Virtually all data are collected by researchers whose own questions and interests structure the form of the interaction.[8] The researchers want to know about others, but their agenda, implemented by interviewers or focus group moderators from outside the local community, almost inevitably differs from or even disrupts ordinary interactions. In

[7] That the conversations are not tape recorded makes it impossible to do rich linguistic analyses of the conversations (e.g. Gibson 1980; Eder 1991; Stromberg 1993).

[8] Pierre Bourdieu (1996), Charles Briggs (1996), Aaron Cicourel (1974) and Alex Weinreb (forthcoming) offer penetrating analyses of the difficulties inherent in the researcher-respondent interaction. The solutions they suggest are different from ours, but the spirit of their efforts to capture actors' own agendas is very similar.

contrast, when researchers are in a position to overhear people's natural conversations, as classical ethnographers are, they can start to understand how cultural issues are raised when people are pursuing their own agendas. From the journals we learn what people talk about spontaneously—and what they do not talk about. We learn about people's purposes and their interests as these are enacted in their own social worlds.

Agency and Action

One of the great advantages of conversational journals is that they vividly capture the drama, the joking, the contradictions and disagreements of everyday talk (Swidler 2001). Surveys can provide data that permit analyses of network structure and inferences about the causal impact of variations in that structure, but even supplementing short-response survey questionnaires with semi-structured interviews or focus groups provides only a very partial glimpse of what goes on in social interaction (for examples taken from transcripts of semi-structured interviews, see Schatz 2002; Tawfik 2003; and Zulu and Chepngeno 2003).[9]

Why the difference? As Wendy Griswold (1987) has argued in a paper on methods for studying culture, cultural artifacts are produced by agents implementing their agendas in contexts that constrain what they can accomplish. In our case, those producing AIDS talk are evaluating and debating information, entertaining their friends, seeking advice, and assessing potential actions in pursuit of their own agendas, both collective and personal, in

[9] Although meant to stimulate natural discussion and debate, as implemented in research in sub-Saharan Africa at least, focus groups follow the agenda imposed by the research rather than producing more spontaneous conversation. Transcripts show not only participants but moderators following the model of classroom instruction in Africa, with the moderator asking questions and the participants answering one at a time, deferring to rather than joking with the moderator. Not surprisingly, the focus groups produce, as do the semi-structured interviews, responses that conform to current messages of AIDS prevention distributed through the prevention bureaucracy.

a variety of quotidian contexts. It is this sense of purposive action and evolving collective production that differentiates our method from interviews.

Classical ethnography does permit us to overhear the everyday conversations in which participants implement their own agendas. Nonetheless, village talk is likely to take a different turn when the anthropologist joins the conversation. As Philip Salzman notes, ethnography "gives us a good idea of what people will say to anthropologists, what pronouncements it pleases them to make, which self-image they wish to present to us" (Salzman 1999:96). Salzman is too dismissive. A good ethnographer, who observes and participates in at least some local settings and who has the skill to retain and record the details of conversational exchanges, would be able to capture some of the dynamics of everyday chatting, though obviously not in the number or variety of settings in which our several collaborators find themselves. Of course this also points up one of the limitations of the conversational journals. A traditional ethnographer who stays for years in his or her research site will find out what people actually do as well as what they say, what people's longer-term strategies and interests are, and how local institutions operate. But it is significant that even in excellent ethnographies one almost never finds the back and forth of everyday talk.[10]

Spontaneity and Silence

The usefulness of journals that chronicle what comes up in spontaneous conversations becomes evident when we query the "silence" that supposedly surrounds the issue of

[10] For a stunning exception see Chernoff's (2003; 2005) intimate portrait of the long-term career of a West African bar girl. Chernoff manages to capture the conversations in which his informant engages, the lives of her co-workers, friends, and lovers in vivid detail—relying on the reports of one extraordinary bar girl.

AIDS. In the journals we see instead the many situations that motivate active, engaged discussions of this supposedly sensitive, taboo topic.

Those involved in AIDS prevention programs scold Africans for their "silence." "Breaking the Silence About AIDS" was a theme of the International AIDS Conference in Durban in 2000, and the phrase has been widely repeated by international donors and national elites. For example, in 2003 when Malawi's president announced publicly that a relative had died of AIDS, he said "the family wanted the cause of death known to 'change attitudes, break the silence and initiate open talk about sex and Aids'" (BBC News World Edition 2003). But well before President Muluzi "broke the silence," our journals show, AIDS was being widely discussed in tones ranging from jocular to anguished.[11]

The journals show that the topic of AIDS arises spontaneously, in many contexts, and triggered by a wide variety of incidents. In Malawi at least, as in the earthy conversation of a young man asking a group of friends about his venereal symptoms, or a wife's worrying about whether she has been exposed to AIDS by her husband's encounters with a local prostitute, there appears little embarrassment or inhibition in talking about sex or AIDS.

We cannot estimate from the journals how often AIDS comes up in conversation compared to, say, the difficulty of subsisting with limited economic resources. But we have no doubt that AIDS is a frequent topic of conversation. Funerals alone provide abundant opportunities: the monthly average of funerals attended based on the 2001 MDICP survey is approximately four for women and five for men. In one five-week

[11] Many have argued that the extent to which people talk about AIDS deaths as been critical in turning the tide of the epidemic (Low-Beer 2003; Epstein 2003; Kagimu et al. 1998; Sikwibele et al. 2000).

period in 2003, a journal-keeper attended five funerals and herself talked with 9 people about these funerals (including relatives of the deceased who diagnosed the death as due to AIDS); she also overheard 16 others talking about them (only two of whom she knew by name) [Alice 031005]. In addition, she had ten other conversations, all of which focused on or touched on AIDS, with people whom she met as they were walking to or returning from funerals she did not attend, and she had several conversations about people who were seriously ill or who had died sometime in the past. For people who walk long distances to each funeral and often spend the night with the body, funerals are a major focus of sociability (Dunham and Klaits 2002; Smith 2004), providing frequent opportunity for the issue of AIDS to arise.

There may well be some, even many, people who do not talk about sex or AIDS in circumstances where they can be overheard, or with people who might repeat their confidences to others. By definition, these people do not appear in the journals. But the journals certainly show that many people do talk, and talk publicly, such that even those who do not talk but only listen will overhear, as the journalists do, the variety of perspectives, often contradictory, on AIDS that circulate in their community. Although people do not announce themselves as "HIV Positive" in the ways Western observers may expect[12]—in part because relatively few have been tested—it is clear that those who are diagnosed tell their relatives, who tell others. The elaborate stories that people tell about symptoms, sexual histories and death, the morals they draw in recounting these stories, and

[12] Vinh-Kim Nguyen (2004:246) analyzes the role of AIDS NGOs in promoting "confessional technologies (techniques deployed in workshops, such as role plays, using open-ended questions, and so on) to encourage Africans diagnosed with HIV to 'come out' about their illness and testify."

their advice to treat an STD, divorce a partner, or use condoms to avoid AIDS, are certainly not silence.

Capturing Collective Life: How and Where Culture is Mobilized

The conversational journals capture a central and often neglected issue in the study of culture: the different ways culture is mobilized in different social contexts. AIDS comes up at the borehole and the market, on the village path, in buses and jitneys, bars and *bawo* parlors, and in homes as well as more formal public settings like churches and village meetings. In these arenas we see the chaotic flow of ideas, the inconsistencies and disagreements, and at times the intersections, the agreements, and the (provisionally) authoritative understandings that start to emerge.

More important than the physical location of conversations are the *social* locations that elicit varying uses of culture: scandalous stories provide entertainment; a chance meeting at the borehole offers an opportunity to seek advice for a deeply personal concern; gossip about other villagers provides narratives of moral instruction; and a chat at a funeral may turn into a philosophical discussion. Below we illustrate how participants in conversational interactions use culture in a variety of different ways in different settings.

<u>Scandals and Gossip</u>

A surprising aspect of the diaries is the frequency of dramatic public incidents in which AIDS is invoked. In one journal, the diarist is at the market when he hears a commotion and hurries to follow the people rushing to one end of the market. He finds two men fighting. An onlooker explains that the men had been friends until the wife of one showed her husband a letter from the other, proposing a sexual relationship. Enraged, the husband confronts the seducer. The letter is read aloud, to much laughter from the audience. When

the husband says he still loves his wife, members of the audience approve, calling out that it is right for him to stay with such a faithful wife, she will save his life! The audience debates whether the bloodied seducer should be killed. One man says suppose the wife had agreed and the seducer had AIDS. Another member of the crowd picks up on this and shouts "look his blood is black, that means he does have AIDS." Someone else says the seducer was lucky this occurred in the market, if it had been in a less public spot he might have been killed.

The fight provoked laughter, but it served other purposes as well. For the women in the audience, the wife becomes, at least for the moment, a model of a faithful wife; for the men, the physical dangers of proposals are vividly enacted. Such dramatic incidents are evidently relished–in several instances the sole purpose of a visit to a neighbor is to relate a scandal, which—each time it is retold—offers yet more opportunities for further, and perhaps different, evaluations of moral and immoral behavior.

Gossip about others is a pleasurable exercise of imagination, but it is also an important way in which people use conversation to expand the boundaries of their understanding (Sabini and Silver 1982; Hannerz 1967; Dunbar 1992).[13] In a world without television, where even radio dramas are a rarity and almost no one can afford books or magazines (nor electricity by which to read during long evenings) conversation provides some of the same delights that literature, drama, and soap operas provide for contemporary Westerners (Radway 1991; Katz 1973-4; Press 1991; Burke 1973). The entertainment function of gossip no doubt affects the kinds of events the journalists hear about and thus report. The obvious relish with which gossip is received may also mean that scandals—

[13] Ulf Hannerz (1987) underlines the value of gossip for its recipients: "that the individual gets a map of his social environment including details which are inaccessible to him in his own everyday life." (p. 57).

and, more importantly, the collective evaluations that the anecdotes provoke—are more available as heuristics when listeners are faced with their own decisions (Abelson 1976**;** Kahnemann and Tversky 1973). At the least, such dramatic incidents provide a major context for evolving understandings of AIDS.

Seeking Advice, Solving Problems

Both journals we excerpted at the beginning of this paper—describing the wife who is worried that her husband has been infected by the notorious Miss Baidon and the young man consulting his friends about his venereal symptoms—illustrate the ways Malawian villagers seek and receive advice about AIDS. These are not abstract conversations about some distant threat or repetitions of standard slogans about the dangers of the epidemic (though these do occur). They are instead active, sometimes urgent, attempts to solve problems (Bourdieu 1990). When people are trying to think through a troubling patch in their intimate lives, they often turn to friends and acquaintances, and sometimes even strangers. In the following excerpt, an acquaintance seeks advice from the journalist. The acquaintance confides that her husband has other sexual partners; he has given her sexually transmitted infections; her newborn baby is ill and a previous one died; and her own body is changing in a way that suggests AIDS. Her account seems confused, as well it might be, given the tangles of her situation.

> Mrs. Iweni continued by complaining that she doesn't know what to do then because she should say that she would like to divorce her husband. That can be possible but still she will be suffering from that disease that she has already been infected. If there is death, she will die and leave her children orphans and if she asks her husband to use condoms with his other sexual partners, she would do nothing since she is already infected and if she asks her husband to use some condoms with her, her husband will not accept that. Now Mrs Iweni was stranded and she asked me what to do on that issue but I told her that I had no say [nothing to say] since there is no any other way that she can do there than keep on staying with her husband as a marriage. Then I asked her to allow me going to my maize

> garden and discuss again about her problem next time, and she accepted my request. (Alice 021108)

Passages like these expose the uncertainty and confusion of those engulfed by the AIDS epidemic, in a way that would be difficult to elicit in surveys, semi-structured interviews or focus groups. The woman has good reason for thinking she is already infected, and conversation with an acquaintance can only help her to worry the frayed ends of a thread that doesn't lead anywhere, since she sees no exit from her situation

Figuring Things Out

As the excerpts above show, people turn to others to try to solve personal problems, but sometimes they are also trying to solve what we might call cognitive problems. That is, they are using a social process to try to figure out something important about how the world works (Hutchins 1995). Cognitive anthropologists have emphasized the "problem solving" role of cognitive frameworks, metaphors, and models with which people think about experience (DiMaggio 1997; D'Andrade 1995; D'Andrade and Strauss 1992;Holland 1987; Lakoff 1980). This is certainly important with respect to illness of all sorts, but especially with respect to AIDS (Billig 1987, 1982; Gamson 1992; Setel 1999). Aside from using their social resources to diagnose their own symptoms and prognosis, rural Malawians are combining bits and pieces of information distributed among their network partners to develop a model of what AIDS is, how it is transmitted, and what, if anything, one can do to protect oneself.

In the following excerpt, two men discuss a sort of natural experiment. Much as epidemiologists would do, they draw on comparative evidence to decide for themselves whether condoms really work. The journalist has just been at a tavern, where he overheard two men listing the many disadvantages of condoms—from condoms retarding ejaculation

to condoms as a sin against God. The journalist then overhears another conversation that takes the opposite view, based on personal experience:

> And some boys were speaking with their friends at N___ Market that they trust using a condom because it protects one from getting sexually transmitted infections. One boy said that he slept with a woman whom people were saying that she had gonorrhoea, but since he had sex with her, he has no sign of gonorrhoea meaning that the condom he used at that time protected him. And he also said that his friend Fyson Nakoma slept with the very same woman a week after him and after four (4) days, Fyson also had gonorrhoea that is when he [Fyson] started trusting a condom. He told his friends that he uses a condom always whenever he is having sex with a sexual partner or any other woman. The boy is still unmarried as of now. Another man told Fyson Nakoma at that time that if he prolongs using a condom he might develop a disease called Cancer. So, he must stop using them. And if he can't stay without having sex, then he can get married to any woman whom he could love. (Derek 021221)

Even more common than such natural experiments is the construction of "social autopsies" where participants pool their local knowledge to formulate a collective account of an individual's road to death. Such narratives have important cognitive functions: in a context where few are tested for HIV, they help participants decide which deaths are reasonably attributable to AIDS. As we shall see, they have important moral functions as well. The narratives typically begin with news that so-and-so is visibly ill or has died, or perhaps that his or her spouse has died. The participants then draw on their local knowledge to piece together a medical history and a sexual biography that together create a suspenseful narrative of the growing certainty that the ultimate illness was indeed AIDS. The autopsy often begins with a recounting of a succession of gory symptoms—people vomit, have constant diarrhea, sores, boils, swollen legs; they become "as thin as a two year old child." But because these are also symptoms of other well-known illnesses, participants then support the physical diagnosis with a parallel sexual biography: genealogies of former sexual partners and their partners' former partners and whether they

had died of AIDS, or children who died in infancy or who are chronically sick (interpreted as a sign that one of the parents was HIV positive). By the time the funeral occurs, the community has used these autopsies to determine the cause of death.

Through the journals, we learn that figuring things out, and the resultant cognitive map, is an ongoing—and collective—project. In collectively constructing social autopsies over and over again, for the same person as he or she becomes ill and dies, and for successive deaths in the community, people domesticate abstract information about AIDS by developing cognitive models of the relation between sex and death, but models with particular local features that permit participants to identify with the sufferers, to say "this could have been me" (see Holland and Quinn 1987; Quinn 1996).

Moral Lessons

In rural Malawi ordinary conversations about AIDS are often chaotic, in part because participants drop one thread of conversation and pick up another, in part because participants hold inconsistent views,[14] in part because AIDS is particularly grotesque and frightening—it is a disease that has no cure and creates predicaments for which there are no comfortable solutions. But the specifics of physical and sexual histories often end in a moral generalization. The moral is sometimes implicit, but sometimes quite explicit: so-and-so was a womanizer and went to prostitutes but would never use a condom; he deliberately chose death.

The lessons are often partial and probably transitory, to be reworked in subsequent conversations. But at the end of most conversations, the participants reassure themselves that even if they feel overwhelmed, even if cognitive closure has not been achieved, there

[14] Of course, contradictions and confusions characterize casual conversation everywhere, not just in rural Malawi (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1990; Billig 1992; Swidler 2001).

is a "just world" that offers some direction for action.[15] Sometimes the lesson is explicitly what we should all do: we should depend only on our spouses, we should give up extramarital partners, we should use condoms. But sometimes the moral talk is less an overt lesson than a moral interpretation of events, the explication of a morally meaningful story behind the lurid details of the progression to death. The lesson of the social autopsies is that AIDS is not a random event that can strike anyone but is linked to people's moral biography–he was a womanizer; she was a prostitute but death was her profit.

Sometimes the moral closure occurs in a more civic context such as a court case, where the chief authoritatively expresses a new community standard. In the excerpt that follows, a woman has asked for divorce from a philandering husband. As both sides present their case, some members of the audience shout support for the wife, others their support for the husband. At the end, the chief announces the verdict:

> Woman, be free and do what seems good to you and to what you believe, you are a brilliant and courageous woman, I congratulate you, keep it up, such kind of behavior, that by doing that you are trying to teach stupid men a lesson and as well as protecting yourself from this deadly disease AIDS and also protecting the lives of others and children and those who still marry you in the future. (Simon 022602)

We see here the wide variety of settings in which people spontaneously, indeed urgently, seek cognitive understanding and moral closure. The task of reaching a shared opinion or evaluation is sometimes assigned by a researcher to a focus group (Gamson 1992). But conversational journals reveal the extent to which purposeful and collective moral discourse suffuses everyday conversation, as studies of gossip have insisted (Sabini

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[15] In "Religion as a Cultural System," Clifford Geertz (1973b) argues that religion operates to reassure people that the world is potentially masterable cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually—not to foster optimism, but to ward off "chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*" (p. 100).

and Silver 1982; D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Dunbar 1992; Epstein 1969; Gluckman 1963).

Philosophical Discussions

Often AIDS comes up in the context of dramatic scandals or urgent problems that need to be solved. But sometimes people muse about general issues, such as the innate characteristics of men and women or why death enters the world. Just as social autopsies may lead participants to speculate about gender or God's will, philosophical musings may lead back to AIDS. The extended conversation excerpted below occurs when rain has kept some who are attending the funeral of an elderly lady from returning to their homes at night. In a shelter built for the funeral, six men lie in the dark on three palm mats "chatting and snoozing." The diarist knows only one member of the group by name. Although he shares a mat with a stranger, by the end of the conversation the stranger has become a "friend." They begin with the death that occasioned the funeral, then move to religious interpretations of the origins of death, from there to AIDS, its epidemiology, the fallibility of modern science, the government's AIDS prevention programs, and then to potential practical strategies for avoiding infection, which returns them to religion.

> I heard these men saying that indeed life nowadays is at hand. A lot of people, death is taking anyone regardless of age, being old or young. He continued saying that it is like a joke, for example to us who have gathered here, that indeed the person we saw her yesterday, for example, now is a dead person…. Then he added, saying death started long ago and *imfa sizoloweleka* <Chichewa, meaning that no one gets used to death–but always fears it>. Then the man whom I slept together with said indeed, no one gets used to death; and it indeed started long time ago and as a punishment for what our forefather Adam did in the Eden and his wife Eva after [she was] bewitched by the Satan.

After a long excursus on Adam and Eva and the forbidden fruit, they return to the question of how death came into the world.

> Then the man who slept together with me said that God was clever enough. He knew all about this. He knew that if people could not be dying then the end result will be that the population will be [so] high that no place can be found uncovered, as we see nowadays that there [are] a lot of places uncovered like the national parks and game reserves. But had it been there were no deaths where could all people born everyday be living?

The men then segue from the philosophical to the present, from death in general to AIDS,

and from AIDS as a punishment from God to AIDS as spread by mercenary women:

> He went on saying that AIDS is killing a lot of people nowadays. Another one said indeed it's true, but of AIDS indeed God has really shown himself that he is above all. He is even more above the great scientists who are proudly boasting and claiming that they are wise enough to eradicate any kind of disease, but not in case of AIDS. AIDS came from God and He created it to minimize the population….
>
> The friend who slept with me said that indeed AIDS is claiming a lot of lives, not as some people say that AIDS is only killing those who move around with sexual partners. This is a total lie/total cheating, but this disease is a [world] plague (he said in Chichewa <AIDS *ndi mulili*>). And he went on saying that since it's a crisis and an outbreak expect that everyone will contract it because it's [a] penalty and punishment from God. You may be attempting to refrain from catching AIDS but AIDS is contracted in many different ways including sexual activities [but also] the sharing of razor blades and needles.
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> Then another one added, saying that indeed AIDS is contracted through the ways you had mentioned but the major way/means is sexual intercourse <he said *njira* (way) *yaikulu* (major), Chichewa>. Everyone agreed but my friend who slept with me said that indeed the major way is through sexual intercourse, this means [all will die] because no one refrains from having sex, for a normal human being [is] involved in sexual activities either through [a] love affair <*zibwenzi*> or through getting married.

Now come admonitions for behavior change, invoking the authority of official views of

AIDS in the media:

> Another one said but nowadays change of behavior is greatly and urgently needed because if this is not to be done <change of behaviour> then the end result is that we are all to die of it <meaning AIDS>. He went on saying that nowadays normal means of contracting AIDS are widely known to anyone now and only very stupid and very young people, especially children less than 6 years, are unable to have access to knowing more about AIDS, but any child from 6 years above as of nowadays I believe has an access to this message because nowadays, for example, here in Malawi, Malawi is developing in terms of media systems for, say,

> transmitting/disintermination [dissemination] of messages, of any messages, and as for AIDS these messages don't miss to be aired out every day through newspapers and those who are lucky that they know how to read are very accessible to reading and be having advices from the readings they read about this disease.

They then turn to a more down to earth discussion of the temptations that make it difficult to avoid infection.

> He said a lot of people are dying because they are not satisfied with their own women or husbands they have at home but want every woman to be his if he is a man and a woman wants every man to be hers if she is a woman/girl. Like the prostitutes, they do not want to be loved nor do they love the man, it's because they love the money the man has which we consider hypocrisy kind of love <he said *chikondi cha chinyengo*, Chichewa>. Someone added saying that money is the great causing [causative] agent that brings AIDS into one's life because when a girl or a woman sees that you do always have money or you work and be receiving money, say salary, a girl or a woman doesn't rebuff you because she wants to be given money and be buying her wants. (Simon 030125)

They continue by discussing strategies of prevention: how to develop self control in order to avoid alcohol and Indian hemp, and the possibility of dedicating oneself to God in order to be faithful to one partner. The conversation ends abruptly when a church elder orders silence so that he can begin preaching.

Such a meandering conversation reveals how Malawians themselves link one idea or image to others. In a way no focus group or interview could match—and in a situation unlikely to be shared by an ethnographer—we see multiple discourses and frames of reference jostle together. More critically, we see here that no "answer" to the problems of life and death–the sort of answer that might appear to be provided by a focus group, for example--reigns unchallenged for long (Billig 1987). Over the long term, one can see new common wisdom emerge as a product of ongoing, dynamic collective thought (Hutchins 1995).

Theoretical Implications: How is Culture Collective

Despite sociologists' commitment to the priority of the social over the individual, the methodological individualism of most social science methods evokes the image of social action as something like a ping-pong game in which one player hits the ball to another who responds in turn. Conversational journals, in contrast, make manifest a theoretically central aspect of culture: what happens in the relational space created by a collectivity of actors, some present and audible, others absent but invoked as authorities. Rather than a game of ping-pong, the journals' social space is more like a game of pool, with multiple players and multiple balls going this way and that. At any moment, the distribution of balls displays the cumulative consequences of past moves in a collectively produced space.[16] Players' interactions continually reconfigure that emergent world. Individuals certainly act, often with their own agendas, but they act in relationship to a collectively constituted reality which is continuously reshaped as each player makes his/her next shot.

Since the work of Clifford Geertz (1973c) and a revival of interest in Emile Durkheim (Alexander 1988; Bellah 1973) the most promising empirical attempts to grasp what is collective about culture have come from studies of public ritual (Sewell 1996; Alexander 1993; Bellah 1967; Olick 1999; Spillman 1997). These analyses show that what makes culture collective is not that it is shared in the sense that people agree about it, but in the sense that it is publicly deployed to create, enact, and express collectively defined realities (Keesing 1974). Conversational journals share the virtues of this focus on culture as public and collective, without focusing mainly on dramatic public moments such as cockfights, the storming of the Bastille, or even a fight between two men in a market in

[16] Attempts to formulate theories of "fields" (Martin 2003; Bourdieu 1993; 1996) move in the same direction, but have not generated methods that capture those fields empirically. Even Martin's (2003) general argument for the reality of fields is rendered in his empirical work as a structure of dyadic ties among individuals (Martin 2002).

rural Malawi. The journals maintain a methodological focus on culture as interactive and dynamic—without letting culture slip back into people's heads. The texts produced by local journalists recall the words and often the gestures of people as they are walking to an event, recounting it afterward, or simply talking about their ordinary lives. These texts capture the public deployment of meanings and the emergent collective realities those meanings create.[17]

Practice: What We Learn and What We Miss

In addition to the theoretical contributions that conversational journals can make, we have argued that this method offers practical advantages over both interview methods (from surveys to in-depth interviews and focus groups) and other ethnographic methods.

First, a major practical advantage of conversational journals that the first level of transformation from lived experience to text—the transformation of public conversation into a written account—is carried out by a local immersed in the situation. The freezing of social experience in a text the researcher can analyze happens as the journalist remembers and expresses what she or he has heard; it is a member of the community being studied who first creates a written account.

A practical *disadvantage* of entering into the midst of an ongoing conversational universe is that we see some ordinary practices, such as attending funerals, or proposals of sex, but we miss others that need no explanation for those in the conversations (Power 1994; Elliott et al. 2002), such as the details of the Adam and Eve story or what exactly a man means when he says of a good looking woman who passes by, "See how proud she is. I have to have sex with her to see what she's so proud of." We also have little sense from

[17] A skilled interviewer with rich knowledge of the local context, such as Farmer (1994) can also capture the evolution of collectively-generated understandings of AIDS, if not the detailed accounts of conversations that our ethnographers provide.

the journals of the institutional background that frames much of ordinary social striving: we will not find out from the journals how land is inherited (though we can and do ask informants, just as an ethnographer might), which has implications when divorce is considered as a strategy for avoiding AIDS, or what it means in this society for someone to stop schooling at Standard 2, as a journalist's momentary love interest did. Classical ethnographers would, as a matter of course, learn about social institutions, either by extended observation or by asking informants. Moreover, some patterns, such as market structure, are only barely visible in the journals because they are not visible to conversational participants: a woman buys a *chitenje* in the market, but does not see the political economy that leads from textile factories in Indonesia to the local vendor. Researchers who use conversational journals would have to turn to other sources of information.

Second, conversational journals are unfiltered by outsiders except for very general direction as to topics. Thus, conversational interactions are driven by the participants' rather than the researchers' interests. Paying attention to what the journalists didn't notice or didn't think was worth reporting provides interesting insights into local meanings. As the journals make abundantly clear, the diarists had no doubt that sex is related to AIDS. On the other hand, little is said about AIDS orphans or the caregivers of those with AIDS and there is little call for the government to do anything more or anything different about AIDS (see Whiteside et al. 2004). Either these issues do not come up in public conversation, or, more likely, the ethnographer did not think these conversations were related to AIDS.

Third, ethnographers know that their own gender, age, or life-cycle stage gives access to some but not other conversations and views of social reality (Powdermaker 1966; Ortner 1984). With multiple journalists, we learn what is said in a diversity of social locations. Even so, however, we miss the words of social isolates who do not talk with friends and neighbors. For some purposes, their absence from our texts is a limitation. But for our theoretical purposes, it is not: those who talk contribute more to the construction and alteration of the culture than do social isolates. Lastly, conversational journals, at least in our context, are relatively cheap. And because the method is cheap, it allows the possibility of systematic comparisons across time and social settings in a way that would be unimaginable for traditional ethnography. Importing thirty ethnographers to spend years in rural areas would not be practical.

Substance

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of conversational journals as a method is in what we can learn about the social world. Their value is that we discover things that we would not otherwise have known, not only about social life but also about our substantive focus, responses to the AIDS epidemic. Here we summarize some of the insights that the conversational journals added to our understanding of AIDS. We also suggest the kinds of questions that could be addressed with more systematic analysis of these data and the potential application of this method to other areas.[18]

The texts make evident that social interactions assemble an ongoing cultural construction to which multiple actors with multiple agendas contribute. We learn about the narrative structures through which people connect moral behavior and disease/death, as

[18] Some of the journals are available on the project web site, with all identifying information removed. For some questions analysts may wish to consider, systematic coding would be appropriate. Here we suggest lines of analysis such systematic coding would allow.

in the social autopsies; the actual ways in which the authority of experts and the media get invoked in popular discourse; and the ways that discourse gets reworked, altered, and interpreted to fit the experiences and the frameworks through which rural Malawians make sense of their lives. Strands of conversation that are too fragile, too brief to become incorporated into the weave (Varenne 1987) are lost—several people talking at once, the conversational gambit that is quickly passed over. But the journals do give us precisely the moments of a conversation that could be recalled, somewhat more orderly perhaps than in the original conversation, but still tacking back and forth, moving from topic to topic, as the dominant stream of real conversation does.

Even though we do not know precisely what larger population is represented in the journals, if over months or years the content of the conversations the journalists overhear changes—if for example people begin to dismiss many negative images of condoms—we may have some confidence that this represents a real change of opinion (or even more important, what local people think it is acceptable or interesting to say to each other), rather than survey respondents' increasing knowledge of what researchers want to hear. Indeed, because local journalists *are* local, they can track cultural stability and change as it is occurring. If over time conversations about AIDS become clearer and less chaotic—less likely to circle back on themselves or dissipate in uncertainty—that would indicate a growing collective mastery of the issue.

The journals were not meant to provide us with "facts," such as the frequency of extramarital partnerships. But they do create a healthy skepticism about reports on surveys, such as ours, where only 2% of women and 9% of men acknowledge having had more than one partner in the last twelve months. In a striking paper, Mary Plummer and

her colleagues (2004), who were interested in the frequency of premarital sex, directly compared five methods for studying the sexual behavior of more than 9,000 Tanzanian adolescents: biomarkers for sexually transmitted infections, a face-to-face survey, an assisted self-completion survey (designed to assure privacy), in-depth interviews, and participant observation. All the interview and survey methods had substantial problems of reliability and of validity when compared to the biological markers.[19] Particularly fascinating for our purposes, in the participant observation researchers recorded many "third-hand reports"—reports much like those that fill our journals. They note: "These third person reports of scandalous sexual behaviour are interesting in their own right … given that almost all of the individuals for whom there were such reports actually tested positive for two biological markers 2–3 years later." They go on to suggest that "such reports could be explored as a low cost alternative to a large scale survey in identifying high risk youth in rural areas…" (p. 55). These researchers thus suggest that a method like our conversational journals might give superior results even in the effort to get accurate data about sexual behavior.

The methodological advantages of conversational journals extend far beyond the study of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Because journals can be solicited on a multiplicity of topics (e.g. politics, economic distress, gender attitudes) from multiple journalists working in a variety of locations (the shop floor, the neighborhood barbeque, at church, in

[19] Despite extraordinary care to find interviewers who were native speakers of the local language and to create rapport, the researchers conclude that "If biological markers are used to validate this interview series externally, 32% of respondents provided unreliable responses, while an additional 8% provided reliable but invalid responses (a variable that could only be assessed for those who tested positively for biological markers). Nine (82%) of the 11 respondents with biological markers provided an invalid series of responses; however, if no biological marker data had been available, only three (27%) would have had inconsistent and thus clearly invalid reports, similar to the 32% inconsistent reports for respondents without biological markers." (p. 51)

welfare offices or hospital waiting rooms), they permit systematic analysis of a wide range of questions, tracing changes in collective understandings as these evolve over time. Systematic analysis of such journals could also address questions about the association between contexts and content (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003): Are some topics raised more often or more easily in certain sorts of groups? What contexts encourage more complex arguments about certain issues, versus more casual, unexamined observations (Dillon 1993)? Do some contexts elicit clichés and bromides, while others lead to vociferous debate and contestation? Multiple diarists also permit addressing new questions about what is systematically missing, what people cannot or need not talk about or which contexts make certain topics difficult (Eliasoph 1998; Noelle-Neumann 1993; Randall and Kopenhaver 2004).

Such methodological possibilities should be of great interest to those who study political life (who spontaneously discusses politics, the state of the world, or political corruption, and in what contexts?). One can also imagine measuring the salience of an issue by asking conversational journalists to record for shorter periods (a morning, afternoon, or evening) every conversation they overhear or participate in, so that one could ascertain how often people of different sorts in different situations discuss politics, or God's will, or the price of food.

A particularly intriguing area that systematic analysis of conversational journals can explore is how various streams of discourse come together. In our journals from rural Malawi we have been struck by the ways some elements of elite or official discourse on AIDS have become domesticated in local conversation and gossip, while others like the recommendation to use condoms, continue to meet articulate—if declining—resistance,

and still others seem not to have penetrated at all. One can imagine conversational journals used systematically across urban, rural, and village settings—or in the advanced democracies in central metropoles versus more peripheral backwaters—to explore when and how elements of elite discourse are adapted and altered as they are assimilated to common-sense understandings of the world, and perhaps how popular ideas filter into elite discourse as well.[20]

Conclusions

In conclusion, we think that conversational journals provide a distinctive perspective on cultural dynamics: it is a practical methodology that contributes to the project of studying public culture and to analyzing cultural change. By fixing episodes of public discourse as texts—granted an opportunistically-generated set rather than something like a systematic sampling of situations—conversational journals convey a sense of the larger public culture. While several theoretical traditions, from the Durkheimian to the symbolic-interactionist, posit such a dynamic yet objective public realm, few methods capture the texture of it. Through many journals, collected from multiple journalists in a wide variety of situations, we witness cultural understandings evolving, tacking back and forth, sometimes folding back on themselves or breaking down in confusion—but over time, even in the course of a single discussion, the collective understanding has shifted. At least about an important issue like AIDS, which is problematic, frightening, salient, and challenging, people don't just sit helplessly. Collectively and publicly, they dwell on the problem they face, piece together practical knowledge, gossip and authoritative opinion, to try to bring clarity, to construct a conversational universe and to map potential ways forward.

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[20] Carlo Ginzburg's classic, The Cheese and the Worms (1980), illustrates the remarkably complex interactions between elite discourse and popular thought, as does Tarver's (1997) analysis of political themes in talk radio.

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