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Emotional Landscapes of Risk: Emotion and Culture in American Self-sufficiency Movements

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Abstract
Americans who identify as "homesteaders" and "preppers" seek to live "self-sufficient" lifestyles by distancing themselves from institutions that mediate access to the environment. This paper asks why individuals adopt "self-sufficiency" based practices and finds that they respond to discomfort about being embedded in *risk society* by adopting self-sufficiency as an *emotion management strategy* that fits within an American *cultural logic* of individualism. Based on ethnographic methods including interviews and participant observation representing two sub-cultures of American self-sufficiency movements, I show that cultural narratives about risk generate uncomfortable emotions that must be managed, resulting in material changes to daily practice via emotion management strategies that embrace cultural individualism. Self-sufficiency allows participants to reconcile American individualism with the lived experience of dependence on untrustworthy institutions, that expose them to global, impersonal risks, thus alleviating discomfort and reinforcing cultural beliefs. The self-sufficiency practices homesteaders and preppers adopt result in changing relationships to the environment. This paper intervenes in environmental theories that overlook the significance of emotion in shaping environmental practices and calls for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between emotions, culture, and material practices.

Keywords Emotions · Environment · Culture · Self-sufficiency · Prepping · Homesteading

Introduction

Cultural commentators have observed that Americans live in a "culture of fear" (Furedi 2006; Glassner 1999; Hubbard 2003). Risk society (Beck 1992), which describes modernity's unique proliferation of global environmental and social risks, breeds insecurity and distrust in institutions that citizens have come to depend on for subsistence and well-being. Reliance

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on impersonal, bureaucratically organized structures to meet ecological needs produces alienating effects (Worthy 2008). Many people are aware of an array of global risks, such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, loss of biodiversity, resource depletion, toxic pollution, and the threat of ecological collapse. The same institutions that mediate access to food, water, waste disposal, health care, shelter, and energy are implicated in perpetuating these global risks, felt acutely, even as they are not fully understood. For many citizens of late modernity, social life is experienced as a landscape of risk.

Self-sufficiency movements such as homesteading and prepping have emerged as a popular response to risk society amongst contemporary Americans. Exploring how proponents of self-sufficiency make sense of socio-environmental risk illuminates the challenges that mostly middle-class Americans face, as they acknowledge the extent and magnitude of risks that result from industrialized political economies, but try to maintain their ideological commitments to the ideals of modernity—individualism, rationality, autonomy, and control of one's own life chances. This paper explores the practices of preppers, who aspire to be self-sufficient in case of disaster or the collapse of society, which they keenly anticipate; and homesteaders, who remake their daily lives in the model of American traditions of do-it-yourself, self-provisioning, and household production. Both aspire to be self-sufficient, which they define as minimizing reliance on institutions such as government agencies and markets, or as one blogger put it, to "become untethered to the work-earn-spend consumer economy" (Ivanko 2013).

Self-sufficiency is a longstanding ideal in American national culture that has appealed to citizens struggling to reconcile the cultural promises of laissez-faire capitalism (such as individual freedom as a path to prosperity) with the lived reality of rapidly expanding industrialization (Brown 2011). Back-to-the-land movements, communes, intentional communities, and separatist camps based on self-sufficient ideals (rarely fully-realized) have appealed to Americans of all political leanings since the late 1800s (ibid.), not long after self-sufficient household practices stopped being the norm (Dickinson 1995). Today's self-sufficiency movements emphasize self-procuring food (gardening, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, foraging), water (through water storage, wells, or streams), energy (through solar, woodstoves, and other household scale sources), and gaining skills and knowledge that allow for self-protection and self-healing in the case of illness or injury. Preppers also focus on self-sufficient security (keeping and knowing how to use guns).

Using ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviews ($n = 20$), and analysis of movement media content (including online materials and documents procured throughout participant observation), I observe that both homesteaders and preppers experience a wide range of problematic emotions around two major themes: (1) vulnerability related to dependence on institutions, and (2) distrust of those same institutions. Self-sufficiency is a practice that they adopt in order to (1) maintain the illusion of individual control and responsibility, and (2) re-connect to ecological networks that they rely on for survival and well-being, as they attempt to sever their dependence on institutions. In short, self-sufficiency practices serve as emotion management strategies that alleviate uncomfortable emotions about risk, modernity, and dependence by channeling difficult feelings into pleasurable, embodied practices like gardening, canning, shooting guns, and building alternative energy and water systems.

Homesteaders and preppers differ in terms of political identity, religion, and lifestyles, but the movements are mostly made up of middle-class white Americans. Self-sufficiency, which is consistent with cultural values of individualism, appeals to both groups, allowing them to

respond to their fears and concerns about modernity without giving up cultural beliefs, values, and practices associated with white, middle-class lifestyles. Caught between the ideals of individualism, and largely negative feelings about risk (such as guilt, anger, despair, fear), homesteaders and preppers adopt practices that alleviate these feelings in ways that reinforce their sense of autonomy and control.

Homesteaders and preppers are very aware of and concerned about environmental risk. But this concern does not translate to political action oriented towards institutional change. They turn instead to their own private practices, which resemble what Andrew Szasz calls "inverted quarantine," a social act in which individuals try to "barricade themselves, individually, from toxic threat, trying to shield themselves from it" (2007, 4). Szasz argues that inverted quarantine rarely works and potentially exacerbates the production of social and environmental risk, while reinforcing environmental privilege, as those who can afford to protect themselves do so at the expense of finding collective solutions that protect all citizens. So why do Americans continue to turn to individualized responses to collective risk? I answer this question by focusing on the centrality of emotions, in conjunction with cultural logic, in shaping people's environmental practices.

Szasz sees inverted quarantine as a "feature of contemporary political culture," but his analysis suggests an almost willful self-interest on the part of the American public. I extend his argument to show that people adopt self-sufficiency not out of imperviousness to the significance of collectively produced danger, but out of fear of its impenetrability. Prepping and homesteading allow for the management of difficult emotions in ways that reinforce familiar worldviews, and not only alleviate distress but produce pleasure. Risk society is anxiety inducing (Beck 1992). And fear, anxiety, and other intense negative emotions are not necessarily conducive to rational behavior change (Janis and Feshbach 1953; Loewenstein et al. 2001). Turning to embodied practices like gardening, canning fruits and vegetables, learning how to shoot a gun, or building a composting toilet is a far more palatable way of dealing with risk than the emotionally taxing tasks of taking on the political work of undoing risk society—tasks that have no real political precedent, are discouraged by American political cultures of apathy (Eliasoph 1998), and which may pose additional personal risk, as violence against activists is on the rise (Watts 2019). Understanding the emergence of new environmental practices requires attention to the physical, cultural, and emotional layers of landscapes of risk.

Landscapes of Risk

I use the metaphor of *landscapes of risk* to show how individuals navigate a multidimensional field that includes the material (environmental conditions and physical manifestations of social structure), the cultural (systems of shared knowledge, meaning, and practices), and the emotional (the affective interpretation of embodied, sensory feelings).[1] Greider and Garkovich (1994) theorize landscapes as symbolic environments conferred with meaning. The metaphor of landscape brings the significance of environment into the foreground of our

[1] I separate these layers out for analytic purposes only; in social life, they are deeply imbricated, and cannot be so easily separated. Structural conditions are informed by and experienced via culture, culture has material dimensions, and emotions are both material (in that they are embodied) and cultural (in that they are interpreted via culture). After pulling them apart for analysis, it is important that we not forget to put them back together again, although this poses its own analytic challenges.

attention to social practices, while allowing us to move between layers of analysis. Large, imposing, background features of risk that threaten the order of the material world (such as climate change, the threat of economic collapse, and current and present resource shortages) loom over the lives of people, like mountains loom over a valley. One cannot navigate a valley without reference to the mountains. Nor can one make sense of changing environmental practices under risk society without reference to ever-present, but often backgrounded, environmental risk.

Risk is a central organizing concept for sociological analyses of how people relate to the environment (Beck 1992, 2008; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; E. A. Rosa and Dietz 1998; Smith and Howe 2015). In times of socio-environmental change so significant that scientists have declared human impacts on the Earth's systems the cause of a new geological era (the Anthropocene) (Crutzen 2006), the effects of human activity shape virtually all landscapes (Boivin et al. 2016). Beck's (1992) theory of *risk society* offers a theoretical framework for the pervasiveness of global risk in contemporary capitalism, as the effects of industrialization produce new social landscapes that call for new sets of social movements and previously unimagined social organization.

Kari Norgaard (2006, 2011) has shown that people's responses to environmental risk is not exclusively rational, linear, or knowledge based, but rather, complex, socially constrained, and shaped by local cultures of emotion. As people are made aware of risks that pose serious, severe dangers to their lives, their responses are limited by both political opportunity structures (Meyer 2012), and the cultural narratives and tools available to them to shape their reactions and responses (Somers 1994; Swidler 1986). Much of the sociological work on environmental risk has focused on how powerful, elite-driven institutions are able to manipulate perceptions of risk to minimize social demand for more sustainable resource management strategies (Mccright and Dunlap 2013; Rosa 1998). Less has been done to understand how individuals participate in, respond to, or resist the manifestation of risk society in their daily lives.

What factors determine the ways individuals respond to risk society? Individuals experience environmental risk via cultural frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974) that make available selective codes, schema, and storylines, which social actors use to organize their perceptions of, and responses to, changing environmental circumstances (Ford and Norgaard 2020; Kahan et al. 2012a; Norgaard 2011). The cultural frames people apply are associated to social belonging, as people tend to make sense of information in ways that fit into their existing social worlds, rather than allow them to be challenged, thus endangering valuable connections to social others (Ford and Norgaard 2020; Kahan 2012; Kahan et al. 2012b).

Andrew Szasz (2007) observes the tendency of Americans to adopt individualized, consumer-based solutions in response to collective risk. He coins the term *inverted quarantine* to describe how individuals isolate themselves from collective risk rather than engage in political action to correct it. Such solutions are generally ineffective and have significant social and environmental consequences. Inverted quarantine, Szasz argues, is not inevitable, but a cultural mentalité, "a matter not of body but of mind" (234). It is here that I wish to intervene and argue that individualized responses to risk, and indeed, culture more broadly, are not exclusively matters of the mind, but are shaped equally by the mind (culture) and the body (in the form of emotion). Failure to acknowledge the role of emotions in shaping cultural practices (and their environmental outcomes) is a barrier to our understanding of why people adopt the practices they adopt—not because they are willfully selfish, disinterested, or irrational, but because they are scared, discouraged, uncomfortable, or overwhelmed.

Threats to personal safety contained in environmental risk invoke powerful emotions, such as fear, terror, anger, and despair. But threats to social belonging also invoke difficult emotions. Caught between physical and social risk, people turn to a familiar *cultural logic;* a system of reasoning that applies culturally specific sets of meaning to generate reasoning or judgement, “conditioned by the unique contingencies of life histories and structural positions in political-economic systems” (Fischer 1999). Attention to cultural systems helps explain what, to many scientists and environmental scholars, appears to be irrational behavior, but in fact makes a great deal of sense within social context. Inverted quarantine relies on the logic of individual responsibility, control, and empowerment, and thus maps onto a cultural logic that to most Americans is far more familiar and appealing than radical, system altering acts. As Norgaard (2011) shows, the confluence of emotions and culture helps answer *why* people adopt the practices they do.

Emotions as a Causal Mechanism in the Production of Practices

Emotions shape perception of risk, thus inciting action. Emotions also serve a signal function that cue socially appropriate responses (Thoits 1989) that do not transgress local feeling rules, norms, and institutional practices, signaling what types of emotions are appropriate, how they should be displayed, and by whom (Hochschild 1983; Hochschild 1979). Self-sufficiency serves as an *emotional bridge,* a connection between old and new practices that develops as individuals manage their emotions to suit new circumstances (Schweingruber and Berns 2005).

Emotions fundamentally shape how people experience the world at a sensory level, informing behavior. Emotions have a physiological basis (that is, they happen in the body), but are interpreted and thus acted on through cultural filters that individuals are socialized into (Feldman-Barrett 2017; Hochschild 1979; Shott 1979). The expression (or repression) of emotions is structured by social expectations and norms. Emotions incite action (Hochschild 1979, 1983; Norgaard 2011; Norgaard 2006; Shott 1979), serving as a *causal mechanism* in the production of social practices; that is to say, emotions effect behavior, which effects outcomes (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010). Emotions signal which practices and justifications are compatible with deeply held, often embodied, beliefs and habits, and which ones would require the undertaking of what Swidler calls “a drastic and costly cultural retooling” (Swidler 1986, 277). Thus, the study of emotion enriches our understanding of cultural practices, especially in cases where there are no clear or obvious pathways available, such as in the face of risk society; a context commensurate with Swidler’s understanding that unsettled times calls for renegotiated cultural strategies, often marked by highly articulated justifications of new sets of practices (Swidler 1986, 279). In unsettled times, ideologies are called upon consciously to “represent a break with some alternative way of life” (ibid., 279). This process is not exclusively rational or deliberative.

The second way emotions effect cultural-environmental practices is by shaping the strategies of action that actors adopt. The social meanings attached to emotions make certain practices more acceptable than others (Cancian and Gordon 1988; Gould 2009). Actors manage differences between their emotions and social expectations by engaging in *emotion management*, in which individuals induce or inhibit emotions to render their feeling states appropriate to social situations. Emotion management allows actors to reconcile felt states and socio-cultural expectations (Hochschild 1983; Turner and Stets 2005), to “maintain a

presentation of self that conforms to emotion ideologies, feeling rules and display rules" (Turner and Stets 2005, 37). Emotion management provides the possibility of stasis by preventing the disruption of emotional norms or breaks with emotional ideologies.

Emotions can also be harnessed into the disruption of social order, as in the case of social movements (Goodwin et al. 2002; Gould 2009; Polletta 2009), or even via small, daily practices (Cvetkovich 2012). I argue here that self-sufficiency allows actors to balance stasis and change. Becoming a homesteader or prepper requires change; it differs from default lifestyles of consumerism and dependence on institutions. However, the practice salvages attributes of dominant American culture that homesteaders and preppers remain attached to.

Self-Sufficiency and the Cultural Logic of Individualism

In addition to homesteading and prepping, self-sufficiency is a common theme in American lifestyle-focused movements such as voluntary simplicity (Grigsby 2004), survivalism (Mitchell 2002), and efforts towards "green" lifestyle change (Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Lorenzen 2012). Self-sufficiency has been proposed as a solution to collective social problems such as peak oil (Schneider-Mayerson 2015), excessive consumerism (Cherrier 2009), and alienation produced by industrialization (Brown 2011). Not all efforts to achieve self-sufficiency are environmental—the desire to minimize reliance on institutions that individuals distrust is also documented in Jennifer Carlson's work on gun culture (Carlson 2015), Jennifer Reich's study of parents who refuse vaccination for their children (Reich 2016), and Jennifer Lois's study on homeschooling (Lois 2013). In all these cases, individuals and families distrust major institutions that are tasked with keeping them safe, healthy, or educated, and choose to take matters into their own hands. In all these studies, the tension between rationalized, bureaucratically structured institutions and individual empowerment is palpable.

Individualism is a key concept in the cultural logic of most Americans. John O'Brien (2015) argues that individualism, more than a belief or value, is a discursive strategy of action that Americans across local cultures adopt to "emphasize their own agency and autonomy" (173). In addition to the centrality of individualism to American national identity, the appeal of cultural individualism is exacerbated by cultures of neoliberalism that put the burden of self-management on supposedly autonomous, rational individuals (Bellah et al. 1996; Reich 2016). It makes sense, then, that Americans would adopt environmental practices compatible with the cultural logic of individualism.

Data & Methods

Self-Sufficiency

In this paper, I examine the practices of homesteaders and preppers. When I set out to find preppers, I found that they frequently overlapped with homesteaders. While there were some key differences between the groups, both identified self-sufficiency as a primary ideal. As a result, homesteaders and preppers shared many practices in common, even as they offered overlapping cultural narratives to explain similar activities. The participants of both groups share many categories of social distinction; they are largely middle-class, although not exclusively. Most homesteaders and preppers I interacted with were white, although, again

there were exceptions. Gender presentation by homesteaders and preppers tended towards traditional binaries—cisgender men and women following heteronormative interaction norms. The clearest distinction between homesteaders and preppers came from what Lyn MacGregor (2010) calls moral or cultural orientations: "certain constellations of practices and assumptions" that "occurred together," generating socially distinct communities differently oriented in their relationships to institutions, and in their beliefs about social obligation and agency (9). While they shared overlapping practices, and were aware of each other, preppers and homesteaders engaged in boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002) to differentiate themselves from each other on several bases, including levels of environmental concern, temporal dimensions of practice, and interest in guns.

Preppers

Preppers are "prepping" (preparing) for various "shit hits the fan" scenarios, ranging from basic local emergencies to apocalyptic societal collapse. Scenarios include natural disasters; economic collapse that would interrupt access to food, water and energy; nuclear disasters; solar Electro Magnetic Pulses; and zombie attacks.[2] Preppers believe that preparing for disaster, impending risk, or simply the unknown is an individual responsibility, and that the rationalization of contemporary society has left many individuals without the necessary skills to take care of themselves without institutional intervention. Their actions are deeply political in that they arise from concerns about the trajectory of contemporary public life, but they do not see themselves as agents of social change. While some are concerned about environmental conditions, they do not report being motivated by them, nor do they seem concerned about the social ramifications of prepping as an individualistic political strategy. Their interaction with the environment is most apparent as they think about how to live off it in the event of the anticipated societal collapse. Preppers are often distinguished from homesteaders by their interest in security, primarily in the form of gun culture. Preppers consider firearms necessary for self-protection. Although preppers adopt some lifestyle changes in the present, they are in general future oriented, adopting current changes to set themselves up for survival in the future.

Homesteaders

Homesteaders, in contrast, are oriented towards the present moment. They believe that personal actions have the potential to influence social and environmental change, and they seek to alter their present lifestyles to prevent the scenarios that preppers prep for. Although they believe they ultimately have responsibility for their own circumstances, they also tend to see themselves as having responsibility for the social impact of their lifestyles. Homesteaders are largely motivated by environmental concerns and social justice. They focus their self-sufficiency practice on being producers of the goods that fuel their lifestyles, rather than merely consumers. They see their practices as an exploration of alternatives that can be used performatively to illustrate lifestyle possibilities other than consumer society. They are not, however, all optimistic that they will be able to do so in the face of major structural constraints. A secondary motivation for homesteading that many homesteaders alluded to, but had

[2] Zombies came up frequently amongst preppers, mostly in jest, but also as a heuristic device for working through a wide range of more likely scenarios.

complex feelings about, is the belief that self-sufficiency offers resilience in the face of system collapse if it does occur. Homesteaders are less interested in guns; some are outwardly anti-gun culture, and others simply express less interest. Overall, they focus much less on security than preppers.

Data Collection & Analysis

This study is based on a multi-case, multi-sited ethnography, which includes both in-depth, semi-structured interviews with homesteaders ($n = 13$) and preppers ($n = 7$), and participant observation of events, meetings, and classes. I also analyzed content produced by homesteaders and preppers gathered at events and online, including message boards, email newsletters, and blogs. I identified homesteaders and preppers by joining online clubs in two major metropolitan areas in Oregon; these clubs are open to anyone to join. Many events were mixed age and gender, except for some of the homesteading meetings, which were posted as "ladies only." My participant observation activities centered on club meetings, events and classes, but also included private gatherings, such as a field weekend on someone's private land, and a private harvest party, as well as public events to which we traveled jointly, like expositions and fairs. Some of these activities were focused exclusively on prepping, some on homesteading, and some targeted both, reinforcing my impression that they overlap in significant ways. For example, I attended a homesteading fair with a group of preppers from an online prepper club. Activities I participated in included but are not limited to berry-picking; canning jams, fruits and pickles; learning how to make dairy goods, such as yogurt, butter, ice-cream, cheese, etc.; a beginner pistol shooting skills class; a fall harvest party; a homesteading expo; a prepping expo; a field weekend that included building emergency shelters, clearing a fallen tree with hand tools, developing emergency plans, and learning about HAMM radios; and workshops to learn about body armor and food storage. During these events, I observed and participated in the physical activities, conversed with other participants, and listened to subjects discuss their projects, struggles, and aspirations. I was particularly interested in what motivated participants to adopt self-sufficiency, as well as curious about how they embodied these practices.

My field work and interviews took place throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2014, in Oregon. Twelve of my interviewees identified as men, eight as women. All the preppers I interviewed were men, whereas the homesteaders were mixed (eight women, five men). Ages ranged from late 20s to early 60s. All but three were white. All but one identified as middle class. The exception was a woman who came from a middle-class background but found herself living in poverty after a change in family structure. None of my participants identified their sexuality to me, but heteronormative interactive relations were common in both homesteader and prepper groups. One lesbian couple and their child regularly attended prepper meetings, but I was not able to interview them. The demographic breakdown of the sample I observed during participant observation was similar to that of my interview samples. Most of the participants were middle-class, white, and heterosexual, as indicated by traditional family configurations and demonstrations of gender normative roles. The gender balance of the audience tended to be roughly equal during public events for both homesteaders and preppers, with many participants attending as families. However, there was often a gender imbalance on the production side; most organizers and vendors targeting preppers were men.

Although I do not identify as a homesteader, prepper, or member of any other self-sufficiency sub-culture, I was not a novice at many of the activities that self-sufficiency participants do. I am a passable gardener, an experienced home cook, and I have been

preserving my own food by canning, dehydrating, and fermenting for years. I made use of these skills and shared them with the people I hoped to learn from when it seemed appropriate. Although I used what I had at my disposal, during many activities I was a novice: I had never shot a gun, foraged for food, dismantled a tree with an ax or saw, or built an emergency shelter. During these sorts of activities, my intervention was that of a "socially acceptable incompetent" (Lofland et al. 2006). In this, I no doubt mirrored the experience of many club members who came to group meetings with their own set of skills and experiences, hoping to share what they could and learn more from others.

Many of my questions for my research participants focused on their transition into prepping or homesteading and the point of tension between aspiration and practice. Existing studies of personal-level social change have found that ideal narratives only hold up some of the time; for example, Ergas (2010) noted that people living in eco-villages (communities aspiring to live semi-collective, "green" lifestyles) claimed not to own or use automotive transport, but in fact many simply kept cars offsite and used them more frequently than they admitted to in interviews or in conversation with each other. Corroborating interviews with observation in order to move beyond ideal narratives, I attempt to identify junction points in the paths of my respondents; the points at which an old way of being became untenable and a new one had to be crafted. In doing so, I follow a relational sociological approach (Cherry 2006; Emirbayer 1997; Norton 2014) that embeds sociological processes in situational contexts and avoids making essentialist claims about fixed social identities.

In addition to my field work, I triangulate my observations and experiences with online material from the emails and message boards of the online clubs I participated in, social media pages managed by or recommended by my participants that focused on self-sufficiency in the Pacific Northwest, as well as blogs and websites geared towards self-sufficiency movement participants. I consider these materials an extension of my sample when I was directed to them by my research subjects, who report using them to find information, resources, and community.

Interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded in ATLAS.ti. Data analysis consisted of line-by-line and axial coding following grounded theory methods until thematic codes emerged consistently, and then subsequently focused on these themes. Analytic strategies were influenced by grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998) but do not claim to be true grounded theory.

"They've Just Sold Us Out and They're Not Coming to Rescue Us": Dependence, Distrust, and Disappointment

Homesteaders and preppers have in common an awareness of the prevalence of risk linked to modernity, and a determination to protect themselves from perceived threats. While their specific orientations to self-sufficiency may differ, both homesteaders and preppers experience uncomfortable emotions linked to perceptions of impersonal, pervasive risk. Modern society, they report, is inherently risky. Their food is toxic, the water polluted. Economies are unstable. Disaster could strike at any point. It's best to be prepared. As I will show, participants of both groups adopt self-sufficiency practices to soothe the emotional discomfort that comes from navigating landscapes of risk. But they do so in ways that do not challenge the systems that produce the risk. Self-sufficiency allows participants to *feel* safe, but not *be* safe (Szasz 2007).

In doing so, participants reinforce cultural narratives that prize individual autonomy, putting to rest the emotional discomfort not just of impending disaster, but of a challenged worldview.

"People Who Control Food Control People": Dependence on Institutions

The experience of dependence on institutions for subsistence and well-being clashes with deeply held beliefs that homesteaders and preppers hold about individual autonomy and responsibility. Kai,[3] a prepper who runs a small business selling prepper supplies and trainings, describes his perception of dependence as problematic, leaving himself and others vulnerable to system collapse:

> We're trained and conditioned to rely on a system…there's this statistic that somewhere during the Cold War there was enough grain storage in the United States to feed the population, I think, for three months or something like that. Now there's enough to give every family half a loaf of bread worth of grain. So they've just sold us out and they're not coming to rescue us. We're going to be lining up for FEMA food stamp cards and it's just more of the dystopian predictions…

Kai's dependence is exemplified in reference to bread, highlighting discomfort regarding food security in the US. This most basic of subsistence level needs is threatened by a globalized economy dependent on imports and exports to distribute food, a system that American citizens are "trained and conditioned to rely on." Kai invokes the poor showing of the US government during Hurricane Katrina in the image of hungry citizens lining up for FEMA food stamps, calling this scenario "dystopian"—imagery pulled from a popular conspiracy theory infused with fear, anxiety, and discouragement in the integrity of the Federal government (Keller 2010). The phrase "they've sold us out" speaks to a sense of betrayal that was prevalent in conversation with homesteaders and preppers, who recognized their dependence on institutions that supposedly existed to meet human needs.

The illusion of independence is predicated on an environmental ethos that situates humans as separate from and superior to nature, in a position to cultivate and thus control the environment and to meet human needs (Cronon 1995; Di Chiro 1996; Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993). The expectation that human ingenuity will allow for technological solutions to environmental problems is central to the "dominant social paradigm," a set of widely held values, beliefs, and worldviews in which technological advancement and automation is unequivocally good, the division of labor is a measure of freedom from the constraints of having to tend to one's own subsistence, and unlimited economic growth will ensure a forward march to social progress (Dunlap and Van Liere 1984; Schneider-Mayerson 2015,18); however it clashes with *risk society*, in which individuals are exposed to global, industrial risks far from their own making (Beck 2008; Beck 1992).

The assumption that people will depend on institutions to meet their human needs threatens Kai's sense of what he calls "ecological security"—the ability to take responsibility for one's own physical needs:

> We're in such a precarious state where we're vulnerable to so many different potential political economic ecological factors mainly because we're not taking responsibility for our physical security and our own ecological security. So as we've outsourced that from

[3] All names are pseudonyms, changed to protect the identities of research participants.

> the family farm and the homestead to all these different levels of law enforcement agencies and all these different levels of industrial global economies, especially becoming an importer of food, and all these being leveraged so far out in our land in so many ways, it really violates the constitutional obligations that we're supposed to have as citizens to actually have militias that are not demonized, fringe, scary things. You're responsible to have these things.

Not only does Kai express displeasure at his perceived dependence on institutions, but he sees it as a moral failing that he and his fellow citizens have allowed themselves to become vulnerable to institutional control in the first place. In the cultural narrative of self-sufficiency, individuals are responsible for their own security, including ecological security, or the ability to survive on available resources. This mentality aligns with the qualities of cultural individualism that Bellah et al. (1996) observe as especially salient in middle-class American cultures, in which self-discipline and self-help are seen as morally superior qualities, and those who do not exhibit them are moral or social failures worthy of contempt.

Homesteaders and preppers both cited negative emotions about dependence as motivation for seeking self-sufficiency. Practices such as gardening and preserving food, making one's own soap and cleaning products, and relying on wood-burning stoves for heat, all served to re-establish a direct physical and cultural connection to the environment. For Annette, a leader in her local homesteading community, this was directly about control of one's own relationship to subsistence-level needs, such as food. Echoing Kai's framing of ecological security, she told me:

> A very big issue that is starting to leap into mainstream media awareness…[is] the whole patented seeds…basically, companies owning seed rights. And people who control food, control people [*laughs*]…So yeah, I think it's disturbing and I think that is a really big motivator [for] me having a garden and just wanting to keep food as close as possible… knowing how to grow food and how to preserve it…I wouldn't say they're fears, but it is disturbing information. (Annette, homesteader)

Without the skills and knowledge needed to grow or procure one's own food, there is little choice but to rely on industrial food production. This incites an emotional state Annette characterizes vaguely as "disturbing." While Annette downplayed her feelings as not quite fears, her laughter above was nervous, and her description of the situation as disturbing alludes to a negative affective response to her position in relationship to industrialized agricultural systems, which she framed as being motivated by profit, rather than a desire to feed people. Annette's declaration that "people who control food control people" reveals her discomfort with total dependency on institutions, a circumstance that homesteaders and preppers wish to circumvent.

"I Don't Know What They're Doing to the Food…": Distrust of "The System"

Recognition of dependence on institutions was deeply intertwined with a range of negative emotions that I characterize as distrust. Distrust, which was affectively loaded with emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger, emerged when homesteaders and preppers considered the circumstances that produced the risks they were concerned about. They named myriad risks inherent to industrial food production, including but not limited to genetic modification of food, toxicity, antibiotic use in food production, hormones, and an overall sense of

contamination both in food and as a byproduct of industrial production found in water, air, and soil. People reported feeling concerned not only with the health implications of these dangers, but with the social implications of industries holding unprecedented power, especially over food, signaling fears of bodily contamination.

> You know it's just scary...The big corporations, I don't know what they're doing to the food. Even the ethics; if it's not a food, if it's a product, it can look different to you. Like what person made that? And I know you can't do that with everything, *or you'd go crazy* and you wouldn't even have shoes! But sometimes you look into the background of these companies and it's like, "Wow, I don't want to give you my money." (Caroline, homesteader)

Caroline, a homesteader, expresses a variety of emotions in this moment. Although she does not state them all explicitly (emotions are rarely expressed this way), I interpret fear (it's not *just* scary), uncertainty (I don't know what they're doing), suspicion (what person made that?), overwhelm (you'd go crazy), and frustration or discouragement (I don't want to give you my money) that leads to a sense of resistance, even as resistance feels futile (and you wouldn't even have shoes!). These emotions emphasize the vulnerability of the individual, whose options are limited to whatever "big corporations" offer. For some, as in the case of Kai, quoted above, not only can institutions not be trusted, but they *shouldn't* be. This moral framing suggests that the arrangement of material life is more than just a rational calculation of how to best meet one's needs and avoid potential risk; it is infused with affective and prescriptive dimensions about how to live a meaningful life in a rationalized, risk society.

"Big Businesses Running This World": Disappointment and Discouragement

For some practitioners of self-sufficiency, the felt experience of distrust in institutions produced a secondary feeling of disappointment and discouragement. Despite widespread discomfort, some homesteaders and preppers expressed ambivalence about their relationships to state and market institutions, even as they felt uncomfortable about dependence upon them. For these practitioners, self-sufficiency was necessary but unfortunate; institutions *should be* trustworthy, but an out of control system based on greed has made most institutions impossible to trust. Ellen works for a local government agency and practices homesteading in her rented house. She hopes to one day own her own land in a rural, off-the-grid location, but for now makes do with gardening, wild foraging, and planning for her future homestead. She struggles to balance her affection for certain aspects of modernity (admitting that she occasionally enjoys eating Taco Bell) and her disappointment in its failure to ultimately create the world she wants to live in:

> Ellen: I think it's hard to trust claims of certified organic, it's hard to trust the claims of non-GMO, it's hard to trust the claims of, of anything. Because…the way that things are certified, some things fall through the cracks, they're not always as strict as they should be and it's not, you know, it's not necessarily the fault of the regulating agency. They don't have the time or the money. And big businesses don't like them. So…big businesses get mad at regulating agencies for too much regulation and it's like, we're…what?? [*laughs*].

> Allison: Do you think that it's a problem of under-regulation, or just existing regulation not done right?
>
> Ellen: Probably a little bit of both. But mostly under-regulation. And, you know, the scare of big businesses running this world because they do. (Ellen, homesteader)

In this case, even well-intentioned government agencies cannot be trusted because they are not given the resources to maintain control over an overwhelming system driven to profit. Ellen expresses the conundrum of consumers going unprotected while big businesses protest any form of regulation, with humor; but there is real frustration underlying her laughter. The gaps in protections that leave consumers unable to trust even basic safety labeling serves as evidence for why neither public nor private institutions can be trusted. As a public employee, Ellen is particularly aware of the challenges of public efforts to regulate environmental harm. Homesteaders perceive both public and private institutions to be driven by profit motive and greed, rather than interest in the public good, if only because "big businesses running this world." The drive for profit above all else was a central concern held by homesteaders and preppers alike. Institutions such as the health care system, educational institutions, government agencies and political actors ranging from local to international, the military, the media, corporations, and economic institutions such as Wall Street were identified critically as acting exclusively out of profit motive, a key factor in the generation of risk.

Ascribed Emotion: "We Have an Economy Based on Greed"

Inverting the utilitarian narrative that the economy functioned rationally, according to a patterned system of logic that would maximize the meeting of human needs, preppers and homesteaders experienced an economy driven by an out-of-control emotion: greed.

> The guiding value of economic development is one of maximizing profit. It is that we have an economy based on *greed*, essentially. (Noah, homesteader)
>
> But they have this orthodoxy that they embrace that the wise and invisible hand of the free market gets to decide everything for us because it's just so great. And then they nonchalantly brush aside all the true environmental and social costs so that the so-called wise hand of the free market is not all wise, it's more like a blathering idiot hand of the free market. We might as well have a chimpanzee with a Ouija board making society's most important decision for it. It's utterly absurd. (Don, homesteader)
>
> Here you're taught from an early age, if you work hard, you get ahead in life, you work a good job, you pay your taxes, and…and really…they just kind of plug you into the machine… Wall St., the banks, *whenever there's money to be made people will tend to gravitate towards the money*. And…um, you know, as long as you're making profit… [*trails off*]. (Bailey, prepper)

Homesteaders and preppers projected the feeling of greed onto institutions, and presumably the individuals who they perceived as driving their actions, and it incited a range of negative emotional responses in homesteaders and preppers, namely anger, resentment, and discouragement. Greed is a perceived rather than felt emotion that contributes to feelings of anger and despair, as homesteaders and preppers felt held hostage to someone else's more powerful

desires. The health care system was described as "economically driven" with more interest in profit motive than patient wellness (Annette, homesteader). Education was described as "brainwashing" the public to buy into a narrative of complacency, so that they could be plugged into the money-making machine (Bailey, prepper). Often, institutions were conflated into a conceptually ambiguous mass of power. Although some iconic companies or agencies were referenced by name (Walmart, Monsanto, the FDA, the EPA) for the most part, individuals referred to "the government," "big business," "corporations," or, in order to encompass the whole range of imbricated institutions, "the system."[4] The quotes above were delivered with resignation, anger, and a sense of frustration tinged with despair, respectively. Perceiving the power that a seemingly irrational economic system had over them left both homesteaders and preppers with uncomfortable emotions that they struggled to contain. The affect-laden quality of these narratives illustrates the intensely personal feeling of betrayal that came with the awareness of unavoidable risk.

Self-Sufficiency as Response: Managing an Emotional Landscape of Risk

Preppers and homesteaders framed state and economic institutions as responsible for current social problems as well as fears of system collapse. Yet their solution to this was to reform their own behavior. Homesteaders and preppers attempt to assuage negative emotions linked to dependence on risk-generating institutions by renegotiating their *personal* material dependence on these institutions. When preppers and homesteaders realized that their lived experience of risk society did not align with their cultural understanding of individual autonomy, they did *emotion work* (Hochschild 1979) to integrate their beliefs about independence with the actuality of dependence. The narratives of self-sufficiency emphasize individual responsibility, empowerment, and control over one's own life chances, despite uncertainty about the future.

> I think self-sufficiency is really important because you just never know [*laughs*] what's gonna happen! So if you know how to do things on your own, you can worry less about, um…you know, lack of…food or natural disasters or anything that might happen…you can have this ability to go and utilize the land in a way that is useful for the land and for personal consumption. (Ellen, homesteader)

Because narratives of individualism are contradicted by material dependence on institutions and lived experience of risk, homesteaders and preppers must do constant emotion management to maintain the illusion of control over their own circumstances (see Laurendeau 2006 for more on the illusion of control as a way of managing exposure to risk). Self-sufficiency arises as an emotion management strategy because it alleviates some of the experience of unmitigatable risk by making them *feel* like they are in control of some aspect of their present lives and future life-chances, even as the risk-producing institutions go unchallenged.

Maintaining an Illusion of Choice

The awareness of dependence on "greedy," untrustworthy, risk-producing institutions challenged preppers' and homesteaders' deeply held beliefs in individualism. A conversation that I had with Samuel, a prepper, illustrates the tension between his sense of individual

[4] The conflation of public and private interests is a hallmark of neoliberalism, according to David Harvey (2005).

responsibility and autonomy, and the lived experience of relying upon risk-generating institutions. Attempting to justify his reliance upon an institution that he ultimately admits to not trusting, without undoing a central cultural value, Samuel goes to great lengths to claim responsibility for his own actions, even while acknowledging risk factors far outside his control.

Allison: Do you trust food companies?

Samuel: [*long pause*] Well, the short answer to that is yes, because I buy stuff off the shelves and I put it in my body every day.

Allison: OK…

Samuel: So do I trust them? Yeah. Um, do I like it? Not really! Do I really trust them? [*emphatically*] No. I have no idea what's going on! And part of it's my ignorance. There's X number of rodent feces that are allowed in every can of chili. And it's pretty crazy how high, how big it is! So part of it is my own ignorance, and some of those things, if people heard it they would just be floored, they would just be really taken aback. So do I trust them? No. But do I trust them? Yes.

Allison: So your emotional response would be not trusting them, but you also act out trust by participating in the system.

Samuel: I think that's a true statement, yeah…

Allison: Do you feel like you have choice in that?

Samuel: Well, yeah, if I go back…yes! Absolutely! Absolutely I have a choice. Because… [*he gets up and goes to the kitchen comes back with a bowl of cherry tomatoes*]…I can tell you just about everything about these. 'Cause they came off a plant in the backyard. Now, can I tell you the potting soil that we got? I mean I do my research, I know the company…but can I really tell you that they didn't put something in there? 'Cause I know, I have a background in agrobiz, and I know that there are certain things that [they] will certify as organic, that it can have a certain amount of this or that in there, and I know that people will color it, color it very specifically to match the potting soil so it doesn't look like there's anything else in there, when there really is.

Allison: So that's a circumstance where you're doing everything you can to control what is in your food by growing your own tomatoes, but to a certain extent you still don't have a choice in what's in your tomatoes.

Samuel: Well…um…I would say that I don't choose to exercise the ultimate expression of choice. Because if I did, I could definitely get…you know…seven gallons of dirt, have it analyzed, know exactly what's in it, right? Know exactly the feed that the chicken used for my chicken manure fertilizer. Now I could go to that level. But I don't because…

Allison: It's extreme.

Samuel: For me that would be extreme, yeah…Want one? [*offers me a cherry tomato*]

In this passage, Samuel demonstrates a complex double reality (Norgaard 2014). By claiming that his practice of buying and eating industrial food stuffs symbolizes trust even as he acknowledges that he does not *feel* trust, Samuel struggles to make sense of his own actions in conjunction with a powerful narrative that revolves around choice and control. Indeed, he goes to great rhetorical lengths to insist that he *does* ultimately have a choice, and thus control over his own exposure to risk, even as he must identify more and more extreme actions that would be required for him to exercise that choice, as the logic breaks down. He does not *choose* to exercise the ultimate expression of choice (in this case having his backyard soil tested) because it becomes extreme, but he does not frame this extremity as a lack of choice in the first place.

Individualism is a strong cultural narrative, shaping Americans' perceptions of self and ideal relationships between individuals and institutions (Bellah et al. 1996). As O'Brien (2015) theorizes, it is also a strategy of action, a persistent way of ordering action through time, based on available cultural symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews (Swidler 1986). Individualism as a narrative is falsely empowering, though. Even as it centers the autonomy of the individual, it also burdens the individual with ultimate responsibility, drawing attention away from institutional constraints and actions. In trying to make sense of the disconnect between his actions (which indicate trust) and his feelings (which signal distrust), Samuel is left to question how much control he actually has over his life chances in a landscape of risk that requires him to feel two contradictory things (trust and lack of trust) at the same time.

"I'm Going to Do Something": Embodied Practice Alleviates Distress

Reaffirming a deeply held ideal with embodied practice alleviates the distress that comes from material dependence. While reports of uncomfortable emotions abounded, a second category of emotions arose from my interviews and field work as well: homesteaders and preppers reported feeling empowered, excited, calm, happy, and aspirational while participating in their self-sufficiency practices. Self-sufficiency empowers homesteaders and preppers to feel like they have some level of control over their lives—be it the health and safety of their bodies or a sense of community, even as they face what feel like overwhelming constraints. Self-sufficiency is also a daily practice that imbues ordinary tasks with deep, personal meaning. Household chores become resistance, renegotiation of important human-environment relationships, a symbol of a more secure, self-sufficient future. Self-sufficiency as an emotion management strategy helps keep negative emotions related to risk society at bay.

> I'm sure I do a lot of things that aren't great for the earth…just looking around [at] the state of the earth and there's just no need to buy new clothes, there's so much out there, food as well. There's so much food that goes to waste. But I guess, as much as possible, becoming self-sufficient or reusing things…at least I feel better about it. I don't know if it makes a big difference. (Julie, homesteader)

Even though she doesn't know if her actions have any bearing on an unstable, degraded environment, Julie reports that self-sufficiency makes her *feel better*. For many, the transition from a dependent consumer lifestyle to a more self-sufficient lifestyle was driven by the desire

to *do something* active, thus assuaging complex, difficult emotions, whether or not they believe their actions have any effect on the world outside of their own individual lives.

Parker, who once participated in food-oriented social movements, but now works at a local educational institute, equates self-sufficiency to liberation from the deep frustration of dependence on a system that feels unstable and unjust.

> Allison: And how does that [knowledge of system instability] feel?
>
> Parker: Well, it sucks! But it's what I was born into. It's where I'm at. So I have to deal with where I'm at.
>
> Allison: On the way to dealing with that, did you experience emotions like anxiety, depression, or fear?
>
> Parker: Oh, yeah. I mean, yeah. [*sighs*] Depression, I view that matter a little differently…I mean, absolutely, I've had those moments of realization of certain contradictions, and an inability to be able to fully address that...But some people go down the road of cynical reason on this, other people it's like, "No, *I'm going to do something*." And that can take its different forms. I'm one of these, "I'm gonna do something about it, even if I can't address it in a perfect way…"
>
> So yeah, I don't like it, I've had episodes in my life where I was not so very happy or kinda depressed, um, fearful's not…I mean, sometimes. Or you play scenarios in your mind…. I guess my big one is when I look around and think of what we could do with all the potentialities in this world, and then this is what we're doing with it?
>
> Allison: A little frustration, maybe?
>
> Parker: And so that's like a deep frustration. But it also feels like liberation; about being able to free up, to get past these sort of things…

Deep frustration, fear, and depression all mark Parker's path from exploration to homesteading, with its daily requirements of meaningful labor. Re-tooling his daily practice to reflect his values produced positive feelings of contributing to potential solutions as well as creating a practice that felt physically good. These daily practices allow homesteaders and preppers to channel their uncomfortable emotions into meaningful labor. Although fears, anxieties, and stress around an uncertain future do not disappear, they are effectively managed through practice. Having a well-stocked pantry and a supply of emergency water certainly makes an impending disaster feel less threatening. However, for many participants, the *process* of prepping or homesteading was as important as the result.

Both preppers and homesteaders cited the *habitual nature of practice* as an important aspect of self-sufficiency. Mastery of a skill requires repetition, and as such, it must be built into daily life, not attempted once and set aside until the zombies come. This is especially true of bodily skills, such as shooting, cooking, canning, and gardening. They must be done over and over again. And in the doing of things habitually, things can shift. In her affective account of depression as a public feeling, Ann Cvetkovich (2012) invokes the concept of a "utopia of ordinary habit," which "is forged out of the loss of connection—to the body, to a meaningful sense of work, to relations with others—that characterizes depression" (2012, 192). This

description of disconnect also arose out of conversations with homesteaders and preppers discussing their experience of contemporary life without a self-sufficiency practice. Bodily movements have the ability to effect emotional states (Carney et al. 2015; Laird and Lacasse 2014); habitual practices are powerful in shaping both physical and emotional landscapes. Although lifestyle changes may seem small, they can potentially be connected to broader social change (Lorenzen 2012). While Szasz (2007) worries that practices of inverted quarantine change people's experiences of risk, producing what he calls "political anesthesia," a sense of having adequately reduced the threat (195), Cvetkovich suggests that "daily life in all its ordinariness can be a basis for the utopian project of building new worlds" (Cvetkovich 2012,191).

Cvetkovich's study of coping practices for affective states includes a close examination of the potential of practices to integrate the personal and the political in ways that are socio-historically situated. Shifts in bodily practices have affective consequences that may transcend the narrative frames they are situated in. In my field notes from a pistol shooting class with the preppers (the first time I had ever held, let alone shot, a gun) I recount the embodied experience of the action of shooting (an activity I underwent with some hesitation). I felt hyper awareness of my body throughout the activity—its vulnerability as well as its malleability. As I was instructed to tune into my body, crouching at my knees to keep my weight centered and pulling my shoulders down my back to ensure a steady grasp of the gun in my hands, I felt the sense of presence and calm that accompanies a yoga practice (a cultural practice I am far more familiar with). All ideological doubts aside, I felt a surge of satisfaction when my shot was deemed steady after several rounds of practice. I made similar note of the physical experience of other activities, such as picking berries, chopping wood, building a fire, canning, working in the garden, and pressing apples for cider, all activities shared by both homesteaders and preppers. Many of these, despite the constant emphasis on individual practice, were also social, shared with others, who instructed, cautioned, praised, and stood elbow-to-elbow with me over a hot stove, hand-to-hand in the dirt, or crouched alongside me in a berry patch. In sharing common, embodied practices, cultural beliefs are integrated into lived experience that may serve as a bridge from one emotional experience (from distrustful, discouraged, and despairing) to another (satisfaction, pleasure, joy, and a sense of self-empowerment).

Creating Connection to Place and Culture: Self-Sufficiency as an Emotional Bridge

Many homesteaders and preppers reported experiencing a disconnect from the environment. Self-sufficiency practices rekindle a sense of connection to the biophysical world, serving as an *emotional bridge* between the old, dominant, default position of depending on institutions they distrust, and a new lifestyle marked by self-sufficient environmental practices, in which they aspire to fully embody independence, autonomy, and responsibility for their own life chances. Schweingruber and Berns (2005) define an emotional bridge as a connection between an old and new self that is in development as individuals manage their emotions to suit new circumstances.

The recognition of a connection to one's immediate ecological setting is central to self-sufficiency. Corinne, a white homesteader, bemoans the lack of connectivity that comes from status quo, white, middle-class consumer lifestyles, which have deprived her of connection to her roots, and which leach meaning from traditions that would otherwise root people to place:

> I don't know who my ancestors are, so…I'm craving culture, I'm craving tradition, and right now the traditions are so commercialized and have no meaning at all. And I'm basically starting at square one creating culture, creating meaning in our lives, and creating traditions that are meaningful to us. The best way you can do that is be connected to your place and be connected to the cycles all around us, all the different things, the moon and the sun and the seasons. And then, also, rites of passage, too, have gone to the wayside, weddings and coming-of age rites of passage. And I'm wondering if those sorts of things—if that might be the reasons why a lot of children are having depression. (Corinne, homesteader)

Corinne describes feeling alienated from a sense of history—connection to ancestors, place, and the meanings imbued in them. This loss is related to both whiteness—the loss of connection to place implicates processes of settler-colonialism that disrupted ongoing relationships to place—and consumer culture (which implicates capitalism), in which commercialization strips material flows of meaning. These bleak circumstances incite a "craving" for "culture." Corinne sees her self-sufficiency practices of what she calls "urban farming" as creating a new culture that connects her more directly to the environment and provides a positive emotional, embodied experience. Corinne's partner, Rick, shares this concern, noting that both history and nature are remote and otherized in a mainstream cultural environment. He and Corinne both quit secure, professional jobs to move to Oregon to pursue a more self-sufficient life. He recalls the backpacking trips they used to take to escape their urban environment for time in the wild, something they no longer do now that they feel connected to nature through their daily homesteading practice. Rick recounts,

> I'm starting to look at all the backpacking as kind of a selfish thing, and you're spending a lot of time to get up to the trailhead. It feels great when you're there, but it's a very selfish personal thing, and time could be spent doing—I try not to tell myself, "Oh, you always have to be productive" [*laughs*], but that's kind of what we're trying to do is be productive and get the most we can out of our space here and our time… we're trying to create kind of our own wilderness here, and it is a lot of fun just hanging out and spending time here. That's one thing, I don't feel as much need to go to some distant place. (Rick, homesteader)

Backpacking—temporary forays into wild places—shifts from being Corrine and Rick's main relationship with the environment, to being perceived as selfish because it is a non-productive way of relating to nature, thus perpetuating the ideology of nature as separate from humans.

Risk society leaves actors vulnerable and alienated from the very source of their own subsistence. Worthy (2008) calls this phenomenal dissociation, which he defines as the "lack of immediate, sensual engagement with the consequences of our everyday actions and with the human and nonhuman others that we affect with our actions" (149). Corinne and Rick see this transition away from seeking out nature as other as a mark of reinstated meaning in their daily lives through self-sufficiency practices. Self-sufficiency practices may serve to reconnect people to an "immediate, sensual engagement" with nature.

For Ellen, who lives in an urban area and works full time in an office, self-sufficiency allowed for some small daily connection to nature. Although Ellen claimed that trying to be more self-sufficient did not have any particular emotional ramifications for her, finding that it just made her feel "normal," the emotional tone of the conversation changed dramatically when we shifted from discussing her working life, which she described as generally alienating

and emotionally unsatisfying, to discussing her homesteading activities and time in nature. In explaining her desire to purchase land outside of town to run a small farm, she notes,

> If we ever do get land *I might not go as crazy* because I'll have land. Right now, if I can't get out and I can't go out into nature, I can sit in my backyard, I can just sit there, and I can prune my plants, and just the ability to interact with something natural and growing and watch it grow and develop, that's really wonderful.

The tautological explanation employed here suggests that the connection between ties to land and mental health is culturally unambiguous, taken for granted. She also alludes to a sense of "craziness" that is derived from living a lifestyle that is disconnected from the land, noting that even an urban backyard is palliative to the lack of interaction with nature that life in an urban area usually entails.

In growing at least some of her own food, Ellen can reduce her dependence on companies she deems untrustworthy. In doing so, she creates a direct, phenomenal connection to the environment that appears[5] not to be mediated by institutions. The actions Ellen and others take to attain self-sufficiency, help them manage the fear, concern, and frustration felt living in a society whose environmental management practices do not meet standards of sustainability or security. Although environmental messages often emphasize the need for concern about non-human nature or altruism to incentivize environmental action, sustainability is also deeply linked to security: access to resources that allow for health, wellness, and protection of life and limb. For homesteaders and preppers, sustainability includes reassurance that they have the skills, knowledge, and materials necessary to meet at least some of their own needs.

This renegotiation to the environment need not be driven by outwardly environmentalist beliefs. On the opposite extreme from Ellen was Benjamin, a prepper who stated outright that he "didn't care about the environment." He then, however, went on to recite a litany of environmental problems and the ways in which he was prepared to respond to the consequences of them, including climate change, increasing frequency and severity of storms, drought, oil spills, ocean acidification, radioactivity from Fukushima, mercury in fish, arsenic in chicken, general toxicity of food, and the potential for a near-future ice age. This did not sound like someone who "didn't care" about the state of the environment or was unaware of its importance to his own quality of life. I pressed him on this in the following exchange:

> Allison: I mean, it sounds like you have done a fair amount of research about the conditions of the environment. Why would you do that if you don't care?
>
> Benjamin: [*Long pause*] [*sighs*] I do care, but up to a point. It's just too hard. To care anymore. 'Cause I know that there's no point in fixing this. The only way to fix this is exactly what's happening.

In short, he reported, "I think that we're too late." Prepping for him became a way to cope with the overwhelming emotions that resulted in knowledge about environmental and social conditions that felt outside of his control. He acknowledged the multi-dimensional emotional quality of prepping in response to the follow question:

[5] Of course, very few of the activities homesteaders or preppers undertook were without institutional ties; supplies for gardening, canning, shooting, rainwater collection, etc. were generally made by multinational corporations, through regulated industries. The desirability of the appearance of a direct connection to the environment is noteworthy, regardless of the available potential for living this out.

> Allison: So, preparing is both stressful emotionally, but it's also kind of cathartic, in that you're working through scenarios because you feel more prepared you…alleviate that stress.

> Benjamin: [*interjecting*] Right! It actually, at the end, it calms you down. Right now, I know I'm pretty [prepared for anything] …pretty much. Except for the zombie apocalypse.

Environmental discourse has been accused of being overly apocalyptic, full of doom and gloom without much hope for solution. Although advocacy groups hope that urgent, negative messaging will spur people to action, excessive reliance on fear-inducing bad news can in fact be debilitating (Hart and Nisbet 2012; Janis and Feshbach 1953). In this case, Benjamin feels so overwhelmed with the bad news that he has given up on communal, public processes to solve these complex problems. Prepping itself is a solution that allows him to actively participate in alleviating his own stress, while reinforcing his sense that he must take care of himself and his family no matter what happens.

Discussion

There is a strong tendency towards individualized explanations and responses to environmental problems in the United States (Grigsby 2004; Guthman 2011; Lorenzen 2012; MacKendrick 2018; Szasz 2007). Homesteaders' and preppers' commitment to individualism, desire to reconnect to the environment, and emotion management efforts all contribute to their adoption of self-sufficiency as an ideal solution to the discomfort they experience that suits their cultural logic. The palliative effects of self-sufficiency are a positive finding; however, they have several limits as a strategy for environmental problem solving. First, there is the question of the efficacy of individual solutions to collective problems, many global in scope.

Do household-level changes make any difference in environmental and social problems that appear to be global in scale? Some sociologists argue that the roots of environmental problems are so deeply embedded in macro-historical processes such as capitalism and industrialization, that individual attempts to respond to them are meaningless (Foster et al. 2011). The forces that shape risk society are deeply structural and overwhelmingly outside of the control of individuals. Foster et al. (2011) point out that framing environmental problems as the responsibility of "consumers," rather than the result of industrial producers and the institutions that support them is a fallacy, as the environmental impacts of industrial action far outweigh the combined impact of individuals and households. Foster et al. (2011) note that many large-scale destructive environmental practices happen disproportionately in the process of production rather than consumption. In the case of waste reduction, "if an individual were to somehow cut out 100 percent of his/her household waste, that person's per capita share of total waste would largely be untouched" (283). In this context, are household level changes in practice meaningful? Andrew Szasz's (2011) analysis of the conditions necessary for consumer efforts to make meaningful environmental change shows that while it is theoretically possible, virtually none of said conditions are currently in place.

But this focus on impact is incomplete. An equally meaningful question that we might ask is, how do changing daily practices at a micro level inform or relate to social change at other analytical levels? Growing a garden and marching in a protest are not mutually exclusive. It is

worth questioning whether self-sufficiency practices and narratives cancel out or discourage collective action, as Szasz suggests (2010), or can be considered part of a broader range of politicized activities that make up social movements or collective action. Gould (2009) points out that the gay and lesbian fronted AIDS movement that would eventually turn into the confrontational street protests of ACT UP began with an earlier phase of activism focused on personal acts of caring for the sick and dying. She notes that this phase of care work served as an important precedent for later, more overt, political action. This conflicts with Szasz's fear of "political anesthesia" (Szasz 2007,195). Ehrhardt-Martinez et al. (2015) also point out that in composite, household-level practices can be quite meaningful in combatting specific environmental problems. In my observation, homesteaders and preppers are aware of and concerned about many of the political, social, and environmental challenges that we face as a society. Many had participated in social movements in the past and found them unsatisfying, emotionally taxing, and ultimately, felt discouraged with their failures. And while self-sufficiency is an inherently individualistic practice, many homesteaders and preppers were also interested in forming communities, sharing their skills and knowledge, and in supporting family members, friends, and neighbors when they could. Ultimately, the effects of individualized practices, which are culturally appealing to many Americans, must be analyzed empirically, something this study does not attempt.

Conclusion

> "New communities and alternative communities arise, whose world views, norms and certainties are grouped around the center of invisible threats." (Beck 1992, 74).

This paper argues that homesteaders and preppers turn to self-sufficiency to manage difficult emotions related to their lived experience of risk society, thus addressing the question of *why* individual responses to collective environmental problems are broadly appealing to many Americans. Previous cultural analyses of environmental practices illustrate the dominance of individualistic responses to environmental risk in American culture (Szasz 2011) but do not sufficiently explain *why* such responses are so appealing. Attention to emotions can help explain why people adopt the environmental practices that they do (Ford and Norgaard 2019; Norgaard 2011). Emotions serve as a causal mechanism that incite action according to the cultural logic of a social group. When risk becomes intolerable, homesteaders and preppers seek out a way to manage discomfort within the feeling rules of American culture that attach value to acts that exhibit independence, autonomy, and personal responsibility.

Risk society generates distrust, discouragement, and despair, while self-sufficiency serves as an emotional bridge between an old way of being (dependence) and a new one (self-sufficiency) that relieves the tension that comes from incompatible cultural narratives about self in relation to society. I show that homesteaders and preppers experience vulnerability in response to their awareness of dependence on institutions they distrust. Concern that they are dependent on a "system" ruled by greed generates a range of uncomfortable emotions, such as fear and discouragement. In response, homesteaders and preppers adopt self-sufficient practices that revolve around securing food, water, energy, and material goods, and sometimes services like health care, education, and security outside of institutions, such as government and markets. In doing so, they work to maintain the illusion of choice and reconnect to the environment, thus producing feelings of control and personal empowerment. The habitual

nature of embodied practices like gardening, food preparation, and shooting practice is pleasurable and calming. Self-sufficiency offers emotional relief that comes from "doing something" that confirms their cultural worldviews.

Both homesteaders and preppers reported positive feelings related to their practices. The most forceful of these was a sense of empowerment brought on by attaining skills and knowledge that allowed for a more personal relationship to the management of one's material wellbeing. The most neutral designation was achieving a feeling of "normalcy," something that had to be crafted to overcome the default setting of consumerism. Although practitioners acknowledged that attaining self-sufficiency is a lot of work and not always possible, they derive pleasure in the activities, finding like-minded people to share skills, knowledge, and ideas with, and in the results of their labor.

Although environmental sociologists are skeptical of the effects of individualized environmental practices, it is not clear whether or not they result in what Szasz calls "political anesthesia." Further research might explore this question, asking how environmental policymakers, educators, and others committed to mitigating environmental risk might make use of the finding that emotion management and cultural logic effect the practices that societies are willing to adopt.

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