

Winning to Learn, Learning to Win: Evaluative Frames and Practices in Urban Debate

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Abstract Sociologists of (e)valuation have devoted considerable attention to understanding differences in evaluative practices *across* a number of fields. Yet, little is understood about how individuals learn about and navigate multivalent valid group styles within a single setting. As a social phenomenon, many accept how central processes of evaluation are to everyday life. Accordingly, scholars have attempted to link research on evaluation to processes of inequality. Nevertheless, the sociology of evaluation only has tenuous, often implicit connections to literature on inequality and disadvantage. This article addresses these two gaps. Drawing on over two-hundred hours of ethnographic fieldwork in an urban high school debate league, twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with league judges, and archival data, we illustrate how high school policy debate judges employ evaluative frames and link them to the implementation of evaluative practices in a disadvantaged setting. We show that the cultural meanings that emerge within the evaluation process—in this case, urban uplift and competition—stem from the conflicted context in which evaluation is occurring. We also make a first step toward applying the conceptual tools within the sociology of evaluation to a disadvantaged setting, and more broadly, suggest that micro-processes of evaluation are important to the study of urban inequality.

Keywords Evaluation · Education · Inequality · Urban sociology · Culture · Policy debate

Sociological interest in understanding processes of evaluation has grown tremendously in recent years. Scholars have considered how evaluation functions in different settings, such as in the formulation of law school rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2007), the determination of fellowship recipients (Lamont 2009), and the selection of figure skating and classical music frontrunners (Lom 2010). Within each of these contexts, there exists a unitary “group style” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) or “evaluative culture” (Lamont 2012) from which individuals draw upon shared cultural scripts, meanings, and understandings to shape standards of

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excellence. Yet, little is understood about how individuals learn about and navigate multivalent valid group styles *within* a single setting.

As a social phenomenon, many accept that processes of evaluation are central to everyday life. Accordingly, scholars have attempted to link research on evaluation to processes of inequality (e.g., Lamont 2012). Focusing primarily on case studies of elite settings, sociologists of evaluation view the process as a way that status is bestowed and negotiated. Nevertheless, the sociology of evaluation only has tenuous, often implicit connections to literature on inequality and disadvantage. How might processes of evaluation and the bestowal of status or worth operate in other, less rarefied contexts?

In order to fill these two gaps in the sociology of evaluation, we make two interventions. First, we introduce the concept of *evaluative frames*, or the idea that the perceived purpose of an evaluation is a priori to the evaluation itself. While Lamont (2009) identifies evaluative cultures as instrumental in shaping criteria for excellence, we argue that the presence of evaluative frames may shape an individual's criteria for excellence.¹ Second, instead of focusing on an elite setting, we use data from an inner-city educational organization to study processes of evaluation. We draw on over two-hundred hours of ethnographic fieldwork in an urban high school debate league (hereinafter, "league"), twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with league judges, and archival data to support our argument.

Urban high school policy debate represents an ideal site for analyzing both the emergence and the implementation of evaluative frames. Similar to what Fine (2001b) describes in his study of elite debate squads in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota, judges must decide the winner of a debate round independently. While high school policy debate is structurally similar between Fine's setting and our own, the social contexts differ markedly. Specifically, the league touts urban debate as a large-scale, culture-changing educational intervention that aims to reduce the achievement gap for "urban students of color" and to "transform school culture." Despite these explicitly stated goals, the league does not require that judges structure their evaluations around these aims; instead, it permits judges to employ whatever standards of evaluation they prefer—those emphasizing technical points or life skills (described below)—within the context of the debate round. In particular, we argue that the evaluative practices each critic ultimately adopts depend on the evaluative frame employed, resulting in multiple standards for excellence between judges within the same setting. For example, judges who believe the organization is like any other competitive activity tend to use technical standards that are valued in national and suburban debate subculture. By contrast, those who emphasize the league's educational mission tend to evaluate debaters using a rubric grounded in life skills such as clearness of reading, eye contact, getting along with others, and general persuasiveness.

By linking how judges employ evaluative frames to the implementation of evaluative practices, our contribution is two-fold: First, we show that the cultural meanings that emerge within the evaluation process—in this case, urban uplift and competition—stem from the conflicted context in which evaluation is occurring. Second, we make a first step toward applying the conceptual tools within the sociology of evaluation to a disadvantaged setting, and more broadly, suggest that micro-processes of evaluation are important to the study of urban inequality.

¹ To some extent, Lamont (2009) recognizes evaluative frames without labeling them as such: "[D]efinitions of excellence that panelists employ...are influenced by their individual proclivities, and by various facets of their identity and of their intellectual and social trajectories" (58). However, Lamont continues that the "epistemological criteria that panelists value most... resonate with the definition of excellence that prevails in their specific discipline" (58). We demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, awareness of a discipline's dominant criteria for excellence is less salient.

Culture and Evaluation

Within cultural sociology, a nascent body of literature on what Lamont (2012) calls the “sociology of (e)valuation” studies evaluation and classification as basic social processes, along with processes like exploitation, standardization, and commensuration (Desrosières 1998; Espeland and Stevens 1998; Fourcade 2011; MacKenzie 2011a, b; Tilly 2008). Cultural sociologists have long studied classification, legitimation, and the bestowal of worth in various areas of life, including the judging of cultural products like art and the development of reputations (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993; Fine 2001a). More recent work has shifted toward understanding formal evaluation and classification processes, particularly those that systematize or quantify evaluation (Lamont 2009; Lom 2010; Stevens 2007), or those that require the assignment of monetary value to nonmarket goods (Fourcade 2011; Zelizer 2005). Like the subjective evaluation of art or reputation, these processes are often laden with issues of wealth and power as they involve the negotiation and assessment of worth or value. However, the manifestation of power dynamics in formal evaluation may look different from those in purely subjective settings: Formal evaluation processes are sometimes developed to lessen the influence of “illegitimate” forms of power in the designation of worth, though they often simply provide alternative pathways through which political and economic power operate (see Lom 2010; Porter 1995; Power 1997).

In her study of peer review, Lamont (2009) develops the concept of “evaluative cultures,” which she defines broadly to include cultural scripts used to discuss assessments, meaning given to the standards used, relative weight of various criteria, views on subjectivity, disciplinary boundary drawing, how evaluators understand excellence, and other factors. She further makes note of external influences and how they might affect evaluative practices. The criteria evaluators most value are those in line with the prevalent criteria in their discipline. Lamont acknowledges that these criteria are somewhat shaped by what we call evaluative frames: “The definitions of excellence that panelists employ in evaluating proposals are influenced by their individual proclivities, and by various facets of their identity and of their intellectual and social trajectories” (2009, 58). However, because the criteria of excellence within subfields are usually well settled, the prevalent disciplinary standards trump: Panelists’ definitions of excellence “often resonate with the definition of excellence that prevails in their specific discipline.” Lamont’s book describes, in the context of evaluation, the “group style” of academics going through the process of peer review, all drawing from the collective representation or vocabulary of “excellence” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

Importantly, an academic entering the world of peer review is immediately exposed to information about shared meanings and definitions in the adjudication of excellence. As Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003, 739) explain, “The moment people enter a group, they try to cue themselves into the group style, to answer, What style is in play here? If schemata for group settings are widely shared, enduring, and meaningful, then we can call them elements of ‘culture.’” These concepts of “group style” or “evaluative culture” are most effective for understanding institutional or group settings where only one group style is present, so that there are not multiple group styles that people must learn about and navigate. It is less clear how evaluative cultures or group styles work, or how people choose between them, when *multivalent valid* cultural tools are present in a single setting. The literature on evaluation and the literature on group style remain unclear as to how the external influences that Lamont mentions—individual proclivities, identity, social and intellectual trajectories—might become more salient in a given setting. Within the urban debate league we studied, the evaluative culture or group style is under

negotiation between at least two sets of evaluative practices. One could even consider the evaluative culture within the league as “unsettled.”²

From Cultural Frames to Evaluative Frames

To encapsulate the individual appetites and schemas based on prior experiences that judges bring in to evaluative cultures and use to engage in evaluative practices, we draw from the Goffmanian cultural concept of “frame” (1974). A frame is a cognitive tool or perspective through which individuals make sense of the social world. Goffman defined frames as “schemata of interpretation” that help individuals imbue occurrences with meaning, organize experiences, and guide future actions. Frame analysis has become a core aspect of cultural sociology, influencing the study of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986), poverty and inequality (Lamont and Small 2008; Small 2002; Small et al. 2010; Tach 2009), field theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2012), and other subjects including political culture and business discourse (Ghaziani and Ventresca 2005; McLean 1998).

Frame analysis also has much to contribute to the sociology of evaluation. Cognitive psychologists and urban planning scholars have used the term “evaluative frameworks” and related concepts (Benjamin 2008; Lowry 1993; Williams and Mandel 2007), but none have relied on sociological understandings of cultural frames. Our concept of *evaluative frames* builds on Lamont’s (2009) notion of *evaluative cultures*. As summarized in Fig. 1, multiple socially meaningful evaluative frames exist within evaluative cultures, ultimately shaping differences in evaluative practices. Regardless of the presence of dominant criteria for excellence within an evaluative culture, frames shape the criteria that evaluators use. Frames—in this case, *urban uplift* or *competition*—shape the development of multiple, sometimes competing practices that exist within the evaluative culture of urban debate (Lom 2010; see also Boltanski and Thévenot 1983, 2006). Evaluators draw upon frames not because the setting *dictates* a specific frame but because of their personal backgrounds, worldviews, and proclivities *project onto* the evaluative culture, and because even if there is a dominant set of practices, there are multiple legitimate sets of practices.

Lamont distinguishes cognitive psychologists’ and behavioral economists’ take on evaluation from the *sociology* of evaluation, explaining that these other disciplines focus on internal individual processes rather than evaluation’s dialogic and relational aspects that make evaluation socially and culturally significant (Lamont 2012, 6–7). We demonstrate that the frames from which judges evaluate urban debaters are not merely cognitive and internal. Evaluative frames develop based on social experiences, including perceptions of the purpose of the activity that emanate from external community and debate organizations, experiences at tournaments both within and outside of the league, and messages from the league itself.

Although Fine (2001b, 162–163, 185–188) highlighted the somewhat monolithic set of traditions and discourses within the policy debate subculture and explained that it yields heterogeneous toolkits for adolescent debaters, we emphasize heterogeneity *within* urban debate culture that is borne partly of resistance to the cultural traditions of national and

² Here, we refer to Swidler’s (1986) insight that ideologies more directly drive action in “unsettled cultural periods” or “periods of social transformation” (278).

This concept helps to illuminate why studying evaluative frames is important. If the evaluative culture and the set of evaluative practices within urban debate were more settled, we would not expect culture to drive action. Evaluative practice would be dictated primarily by long-established tradition, as perhaps is true in national debate. Yet, since the league’s evaluative culture is multivalent, judges’ framing of the activity matters much more for understanding how judges make decisions about rounds and send messages to students about valued forms of engagement with the activity.

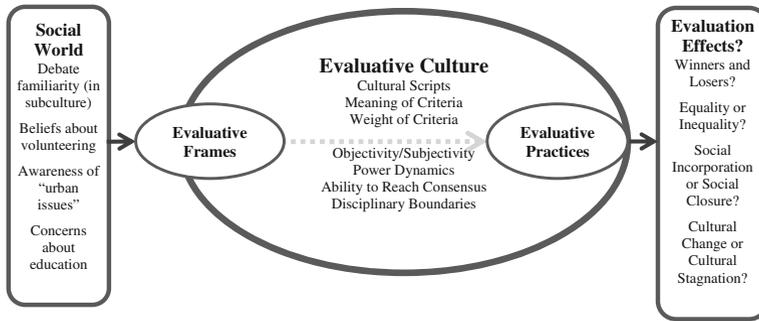


Fig. 1 Understanding evaluative frames

suburban debate. Some organizational behavior scholars have used frame analysis to understand institutional or organizational cultural heterogeneity (Creed et al. 2002; Fligstein and McAdam 2012); others have applied related but distinct concepts focusing on institutional “logics” (Friedland and Alford 1991; see Thornton et al. 2012 for a review). We prefer the concept of frame because it allows us to examine, at a micro-level, how individuals project meanings onto an institution and the kinds of shared practices that they adopt as a result of those meanings.

Evaluation in the Context of Disadvantage

Although Lamont explicitly connects her research on evaluation to broader processes of inequality, the sociology of evaluation has only tenuous, implicit connections to literature on inequality and disadvantage (see Lamont et al. 2014). Most scholars of evaluation examine the process as a way status is bestowed and negotiated. However, the settings studied tend to be elite, with research on peer review (Lamont 2009; Lamont and Huutoniemi 2011), law school rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2007), figure skating and classical music (Lom 2010), and selective college admissions (Stevens 2007). Accordingly, little is known about processes of evaluation and the bestowing of status outside of the most rarefied contexts.

Sociologists who study inequality and disadvantage largely overlook the social process of evaluation and assignments of worth, focusing instead on social processes like neighborhood selection and differentiation (Sampson 2012),³ peer and adolescent socialization (Harding 2009), family formation (Edin and Kefalas 2005), and activation of social ties (Smith 2007). Yet concerns about formal and informal evaluation underlie much research on urban inequality. For example, as the admissions process for elite colleges has been increasingly quantified (Stevens 2007), the evaluation of urban K-12 schools and educational interventions has increasingly become beholden to metrics and measurable outcomes (Koretz 2008; Polikoff 2012; see also Jack 2014). Education scholars and policymakers are confronting deep questions about the degree to which the educational experience is commensurable.

Issues like formalization and subjectivity arise in contexts of disadvantage as well. One of the most salient sites of evaluation in disadvantaged contexts is job search and hiring, a selection process that is alternatively formal and subjective with many implications for social inequality in both elite and non-elite settings (Rivera 2011; Smith 2005, 2007). Pager’s (2007) research on how criminal records affect job prospects for white and African-American men is, in effect, a study of salient factors for how employers evaluate job candidates. Employers use

³ Sampson’s work on neighborhood selection most closely invokes the concept of evaluation.

applicants' network connections to determine whether they are worthy of hiring; the evaluative culture within the low-wage labor market is heavily reliant on network referrals and the presence of ethnic niches (Waldinger 1996; Waters 1999). Bureaucratic evaluations of low-income women determine whether they receive public benefits (Lens 2009; Watkins-Hayes 2009), and social worker and judicial evaluations of parents that deem them "fit" or "unfit" has had a disparate impact on low-income families of color (Roberts 2002). Yet, despite the appropriateness of using the conceptual tools of the sociology of evaluation to understand numerous processes reproducing social inequality, these literatures rarely explicitly engage with each other (Lamont et al. 2014). We do not explore all of these processes here, but our work represents an early step toward linking these bodies of knowledge.

In some ways, our study returns to the ground level of the sociology of evaluation by exploring the micro-processes of categorization and ranking (Boltanski and Thévenot 1983; Lamont 1992, 2000). How do people reach shared understandings of value or worth in debate? What makes an urban debater "good" or "bad"? What types of criteria are valid within the institutional space of urban debate? This article applies the conceptual tools within sociology of evaluation to a disadvantaged setting and, more broadly, suggests that micro-processes of evaluation are important to the study of urban inequality. The cultural meanings that emerge within the evaluation process—urban uplift and competition—stem from the conflicted context in which evaluation is occurring.

Setting

This study presents urban high school policy debate as a case study of how different evaluative frames emerge and result in divergent evaluative practices within a single organizational setting. In each round, a judge completes an official ballot. The rules require her to determine a winning and losing team, assign speaker points to each participant, rank each speaker against the others, and then justify her decision. Despite the formality of this process, the bases for awarding speaker points and choosing winners and losers vary. While the league expects each judge to adhere to these formal rules for selecting a winner, the justifications behind each decision are heterogeneous, based largely on the evaluative frame each critic adopts.

Fine (2001b) first introduced high school policy debate as a meaningful social activity in his *Gifted Tongues*. As he explains, policy debate is a speech competition in which teams of two advocate for and against a resolution that calls for federal policy change. For instance, during the fieldwork on which this article is based, the national resolution was: "Resolved, the United States federal government should substantially increase its exploration and/or development of space beyond the Earth's mesosphere." Generally, one team presents a plan in support of the resolution, while the other team argues against the plan. Though some rounds may have panels of three to seven judges who are tasked with determining a victor, a debate judge evaluates each round independently (i.e., without outside consultation), using whatever decision-making process or "paradigm" she prefers and about which debaters may ask prior to the start of the round. Judges are asked to provide both oral and written comments to the debaters explicating their thoughts about the round at its conclusion.

While the activity's underlying structure varies little across settings, Fine's emphasis on two high school debate squads in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota represents a different social context from our "inner-city" environment. In Fine's study, debate is comprised of a small, academically select, predominantly male group of students. In ours, debate is designed to be a large-scale, culture-changing educational intervention, aiming to "reduce the achievement gap for urban students of color" and to "transform school culture" (archival materials). The

demographic composition of the league's debaters reflects the organization's attempt at inclusion. Instead of squads of 6–8 students, the league boasts an average of 35 students per team, which it claims to be four times the national average (archival materials). The league directly rejects the traditional debate model, maintaining that "urban debate is for everyone" and criticizing traditional debate teams for being "too small."⁴ Fine's debaters are largely white and Asian, and they tend to come from affluent homes. Our debaters come from largely black (56 %) or Hispanic (23 %) families⁵ and predominantly low-income backgrounds (78 % receive free/reduced lunch). Some debaters (8 %) have literacy and English-language challenges; the league started a Spanish-language division in the 2013–2014 season to better accommodate some of these students. Although we do not have precise numbers, we know from our interactions with students that a substantial portion are first- or second-generation immigrants to the United States.

Throughout the paper, we use the word "urban" to describe student debaters. Though we realize that this term is non-specific, we use it because our data suggest that, both for the organization and for the volunteer judges, the term serves as code for a bundle of marginalized identities. The students themselves are very diverse, but volunteers tend to treat them as if they are all "urban" and thus equally disadvantaged. Our interviewees, even those from similarly "urban" backgrounds, rarely drew distinctions between students and the types of hardships they might face. One respondent made note of class differences among the students, mentioning that a debater is the son of a school administrator and seems to have more resources than most other students. A few respondents discussed racial and ethnic differences among the students. On the whole, however, "urban" operates as a master status, a lens through which judges see debaters and decide what to expect from them, how to interact with them, and how to evaluate them. In this rare context, "urban" status subsumes and obscures identities that might be more observable and thus more salient in the broader world, including race, gender, and class.

More than just socio-demographic differences, institutional practices also vary across Fine's context and our own. In his setting, debaters may present any type of argument or evidence they desire, and the winner of the debate is the side that presents the strongest argument. It is inconsequential whether each team had similar resources for conducting research and crafting arguments. Preferred judges are experienced coaches or former debaters with technical acumen; they are almost always paid. Our league, however, explicitly discourages focusing solely upon the competitive aspects of debate. Most debaters are limited to certain arguments and evidence files to encourage inclusion. Due to its large size, the organization relies on volunteer judges, many of whom have no previous debate experience. Trained immediately before the tournament in the rudimentary structure of debate, first-time judges are assured that "you can't be wrong" when determining a victor. As one of our respondents will describe, the league's mission differs from national and suburban debate's "Ayn Rand-type world," which emphasizes individual victory rather than group uplift.

⁴ Because teams are large, training resources are distributed disproportionately toward newer debaters. The average technical skill level among the debaters is thus lower than one might have observed in Fine's world, and likely in other, more selective urban debate leagues (field notes). Further, debaters being inconsistently evaluated on technical versus life skills may contribute to their lower average technical acumen.

⁵ These numbers are based on the number of students who attended *at least one* tournament in the season. Although we believe these numbers hold true, a smaller group of students *consistently* participates in the activity. In addition, the racial numbers obscure important diversity: For example, the top debaters from the 2011–2012 season included three black women, all of immigrant descent from either Africa or the Caribbean; two African-American males; two white males; one Asian-American male; one Arab-American male; one white female; and two Latina females (one of whom is also African-American). Several students who would be classified as "white" for numerical purposes are recent immigrants or of Middle Eastern descent.

These institutional variations are important because, with some exceptions, those who view competition as a core aspect of debate's purpose (competition frame) tend to emphasize technical criteria of evaluation, while those who view debate primarily as a means of addressing urban inequality (urban uplift frame) tend to use "life-skills" debate standards, preferring colloquial argumentation and persuasive speech.⁶ Table 1 compares technical and life-skills standards of evaluation. In general, technical standards emphasize evidence-based argumentation to make substantiated claims, no matter how bizarre the claim, about a particular topic in a systematic and strategic fashion. By contrast, life-skills standards highly reward speaking style and delivery, valuing analytical arguments based on everyday experiences. Understanding "competitive" and "life-skills" standards provides a framework for understanding our findings.

Data and Methods

This paper adopts an ethnographic approach to the study of evaluation, supplementing over two-hundred hours of fieldwork with twenty-seven in-depth interviews with league judges. This methodology answers sociologists' calls for ethnographic methods to explore how different evaluative frames shape specific situations of evaluation (Beljean 2012). Having secured permission from our university's Institutional Review Board to conduct both interviews and ethnographic observations, we began our fieldwork in January 2012 by serving as volunteer judges, focusing only on the ethnographic component of our research. In order to build rapport with staffers and other volunteers, we volunteered at as many debate tournaments and league events as possible within the next month. Being both consistently available for and present at these events turned out to be a fruitful endeavor, as league staff and other volunteers quickly recognized us as a dependable and helpful presence. Through our volunteer work, then, we were able to embed ourselves within the league's work so that we were viewed as important contributors to its mission, bridging the researcher-subject divide.

We employed a two-pronged ethnographic approach. We first served as participant observers at multiple league-sponsored policy debate tournaments. We judged dozens of debate rounds, usually separately, in order to more fully understand the milieu within which evaluation occurred. We judged rounds in all "divisions" of the activity, novice (brand new debaters), junior varsity (debaters with slightly more experience), and varsity (usually the most experienced debaters). We judged preliminary rounds, in which anyone who signs up may compete, and "out-rounds" or "elimination rounds," where only the most competitive teams participate and which multiple judges usually evaluate.⁷ In order to ground our findings in the larger context of urban debate, we traveled to Washington, D.C. in April 2012 to judge (Asad) and observe (Bell) rounds at the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) National Championship.

Second, we volunteered at relevant supplemental events for the debaters, including a suburban tournament where urban debaters participated, a workshop featuring a geophysicist with expertise on aeronautical missions (the season's debate topic), and a league end-of-season

⁶ Of course, adoption of a frame does not always lead to a specific set of evaluations; we show a strong association, but make no causal claim, between frames and practices. Furthermore, one set of evaluative practices does not necessarily lead to a certain outcome. Technical judges often disagree with each other, and life-skills judges frequently disagree with one another as well.

⁷ These distinctions are important because many respondents reported that they evaluated debaters differently depending on the division and the stage of the tournament. Also, the process of judging elimination rounds is different from preliminary rounds, as we show later.

Table 1 Comparison of technical and life-skill standards in high school policy debate

Technical standards	Life-skill standards
Little-to-no concern about speaking style (speed reading or “spreading” common, up to 400 words/minute)	Emphasis on speak style and delivery (dislike “spreading”)
Value evidence-based argumentation	Value analytical arguments with less concern for evidence
Openness to all types of arguments, even objectively bizarre ones	Less familiar with “specialty” arguments and how to weigh them (topicality, kritik, and framework) ^a
Weighing arguments, often based on debate theory	May or may not “flow” debate round
Decision-making using a very formalized, systematic form of note-taking (“flowing”)	Some personal evaluation of an argument’s merit or introduction of personal beliefs
Strategic considerations	Assess students’ comfort with arguments

^a “Topicality” refers to the affirmative burden to prove that the specific plan presented is an example of the resolution. To prove topicality, debaters often define words in the resolution. “Kritik” refers to a philosophical argument that questions a metaphysical assumption of the plan; often it involves the nature and effects of debate itself. “Framework” is an attempt by the debaters to change the structure and/or rules of debate within the context of a round. They present their own interpretation of how the debate should be evaluated, and debate the merits of this framework throughout the round

banquet. We recorded informal exchanges at tournaments, at the organization’s offices, and over dinner. These events gave us further access to the league’s conceptualization of its mission and the important role of reliable, knowledgeable, and dedicated judges play in their work. Judging at the suburban national qualifier tournament was instructive because it allowed us to experience, alongside the urban debaters, the alternative evaluative culture of suburban speech and debate.

We recorded fieldnotes separately at every tournament. In rounds where either one of us served as the only judge, we used our “flows” (notes) of the round to write down any notable interactions or events during competitors’ preparation time and immediately after the round finished. This form of note taking was innocuous since taking notes of debate rounds on laptop computers has become commonplace in the activity. We employed a similar strategy when we served as part of a panel. We took care not to discuss anything we had observed without having first written our observations independently. Such a strategy was especially important given our use of collaborative ethnography (Buford et al. 2000). As two researchers who bring different traits into a diverse field setting—Asad is a former national-level policy debater of Arab descent and Bell is a former suburban Lincoln-Douglas⁸ debater of African-American descent—the interactions we observed and how we interpreted them could have varied. Since neither researcher had previously participated in urban debate, reaching interpretive consensus was important in order to report our findings in a way that faithfully represented our observations.⁹

⁸ Lincoln-Douglas, or “LD,” is a debate event founded in 1979 as an alternative to policy debate. In LD, individual students, rather than two-person teams, debate balancing competing values (e.g., liberty and equality) instead of policy.

⁹ One example of interpretive consensus comes from our findings on mutual evaluation among league judges, presented below. Both researchers observed some judges’ highly presentational nature, but could not determine how to make sense of this behavior independently. Were these judges actually performing? If so, for whom? After triangulating our observations with interview data and additional participant observation, we agreed that some judges engage in a kind of performance to bolster their legitimacy in the face of other, more technical judges.

We supplemented our ethnographic study with twenty-seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with organization coaches, volunteers, and alumni, all of whom have served as league judges. Having gained a reputation as committed volunteers through participation at the above events, we approached league officials and expressed to them our interest in conducting a research project that used their organization as a case study and requested permission to interview league judges. After negotiation, and with the organization's assistance, we circulated an email to previous volunteers and asked that they contact us directly if they were interested in participating in the study. We recruited 10 participants through this method. With the permission of league officials, we then secured 17 additional interviews by distributing flyers and collecting volunteers' contact information at league tournaments. All 27 judges volunteered at tournaments where we also observed. They comprise an eclectic mix of debate experience: Seven respondents are not former debaters, 3 are former non-policy debaters, 16 are former policy debaters, and 1 had been a policy debater more than 20 years ago.¹⁰ Nearly equal numbers of men (14) and women (13) from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds were interviewed, and ages range from 18 to 68. The median age is twenty-four. Notably, there is no one between ages 31 and 53 in the sample. Reflective of this age distribution, a majority of respondents (15) are full-time students.

We conducted interviews between February and June 2012; they averaged about 85 minutes in length. We asked respondents about their debate backgrounds, views on urban debate, and approaches to evaluation within debate rounds. Where possible, we attempted to match each respondent with the researcher who most closely resembled the interviewee's racial or ethnic background. Doing so allowed us to maximize our respondent's comfort level such that they spoke openly with us about their experiences with urban debate.¹¹ In situations where it was not possible to match interviewers by race, our status as doctoral candidates allowed us to connect with the majority of our respondents, who were also enrolled in graduate or professional schools. Although it may not be possible to completely avoid interviewer effects (Young 2004), we are confident that our interviews, triangulated with our ethnographic observations, represent a faithful account of our respondents' perceptions of urban debate and their approaches to evaluation. Interviews both corroborated and refined our observations. The combination of interviews and ethnography allowed us to draw conclusions based not only on judges' retrospective description of evaluative practices but also on real-time observation. Interviews were transcribed, and all interview subjects were assigned pseudonyms. We also reviewed archival data, including league annual reports, volunteer recruitment emails, and debater recruitment posters.

Findings

Evaluative Frames: Picking Winners and Losers

At the conclusion of each round, debaters pack up their belongings while the judge remains seated, reflecting on the debate she just witnessed. She must now independently select a

¹⁰ Distinguishing between 20 years ago and less than 20 years ago is important because policy debate evolved from emphasizing traditional communication skills to emphasizing technical argumentation, often at the cost of persuasive speaking. See Fine (2001b).

¹¹ Matching respondents by interviewer racial/ethnic background was beneficial in many respects, most notably in facilitating respondents' comfort with speaking openly. Lee, a white lawyer, felt secure enough with Asad that he openly used racial slurs when recounting stories about his interactions with some of the debaters. Likewise, Davin, an African-American former league debater, told Bell that he "hated" whites before getting involved with urban debate.

winning and losing team, potentially shaping the final outcome of the tournament. We find that judges differ markedly in the decision-making processes they utilize, though two predominant modes of evaluation surface based on the evaluative frames they bring to the activity. The main frames, identified inductively through analysis of our interviews and experiences in judges' lounges and on judging panels, are "competition" (focus on winning debates and engaging in competition as a core goal of the activity) and "urban uplift" (greater focus on educational opportunity, addressing the achievement gap, and improving life skills through the activity). Almost all of our respondents fell clearly into one of these categories. Some nuance emerged within the urban uplift frame; some respondents focused more on literacy skills while others focused on life skills and group interaction. Nonetheless, all respondents who used an urban uplift frame described their involvement as a means of addressing educational inequality, a sentiment that differed sharply from the motivations of competition-focused judges. Although we offer a straightforward typology here, each respondent actually fell somewhere on a continuum between *Competition—Urban Uplift* and *Life-Skills—Technical* (see [Appendix A](#)).¹²

Emblematic of a more technical approach to selecting a winner, the first approach is systematic, almost mechanical. As Lauren illustrates:

I think in my mind, "What am I comparing here?" For example, I might be comparing the [affirmative side's] plan to the status quo. Or maybe [the negative team] presented a counter policy alternative or some other framework for viewing the debate. Then I look at my flow, and try to figure out what are the main advantages and disadvantages to each of those different, competing alternatives? I have two columns in my head: The two things I'm comparing, and then the advantages and disadvantages to each of those things. And then for each of those pros and cons, you have to evaluate them on a more micro-level, and look at the arguments that the debaters made, and what ended up persuading you on that particular issue, and how much weight you are going to give it. And once you figure out that micro-level debate, you step back and ask, "OK. Do I prefer the world in which we do this? Or do I prefer the world in which we do that?" And then I sign the ballot.

In line with the technical standards of evaluation highlighted in [Table 1](#), Lauren presents an elaborate decision-making process. An experienced policy debater in her own right, she views debate as a "highly structured, strategic game." Her evaluative frame, then, is one that recognizes the competitive nature of the activity and her mechanical evaluative practices correspond accordingly. She compares different types of arguments based on her understanding of the structure of debate and then weighs the advantages and disadvantages to each proposal based only on statements students made in the round (recorded on her "flow"). Once these questions are resolved, she evaluates the debate holistically, voting for the team that presents the most reasoned claims. For Lauren, it is unimportant that league debaters tend to have a different class status and racial background than the national-level and suburban debaters with whom she competed—she applies her belief that debate is a "strategic game" universally. In this way, Lauren's evaluative frame—debate as a competition—shapes her evaluative practices.

¹² Although we recognize the complexity of each respondent's perspective, we believe the differences between these two evaluative frames and how they link to evaluative practices is more analytically salient than the fine distinctions and complexities between individual judges. The broader pattern suggests that this typology is useful for thinking about evaluation in this context (see [Barton 1955](#); [Lazarsfeld 1937](#); [Menger 1883/1996](#); [Weber 1922/1978](#)).

The second mode of judging focuses less on applying policy debate's subcultural evaluation standards and more on the standards that average people or "laypersons" would use, skills that would matter more in "real life." These criteria include whether they thought the debater spoke clearly and whether they ultimately found the debater's argument persuasive. Whereas Lauren related her decision-making process only to the substantive arguments debaters made in each round, other judges focused on speaking style or simply whether they found one of the substantive arguments convincing regardless of students' argumentation technique. Danielle bases her evaluation on the quality of a debater's oration. She focuses on:

If I understood your argument well, if you're very organized, if you're a very passionate speaker, if I like your tone and your speed, if I like this particular argument, and if I thought it was very strong. I gave debaters comments on verbal things that they did, things like [saying] "blah!" and twirling their hair and little things that came up. So, really stylistic things.

Generally speaking, judges who make their decisions based on stylistic issues approach their decision-making from an evaluative frame that emphasized educational or urban uplift concerns. Danielle views the purpose of the league as empowerment through speech and "promoting the [debaters'] confidence to just get out there." When asked about the comments she generally writes on her ballots, Danielle focused exclusively on stylistic concerns. Because she views debate as an activity meant to "empower" the league's debaters, she was less concerned with debaters' facility at playing the "game" (using Lauren's words) and provided comments more directly related to improving debaters' life skills. Her evaluative frame—the urban uplift model—thus shapes the evaluative practices that she employs.

Several judges who, unlike Danielle, are former debaters also reported making decisions based on speaking style. Sandra, for example, explained that the first thing she looks for in a good debate is clear speaking. She finds "spreading," or speed talking often used in policy debate, "kind of annoying." Life-skills judges repeatedly expressed concern about debaters' "decorum," criticizing urban debaters as "rude" or "aggressive." Elise, for example, believes several judges dismiss or even fear urban debaters because of "their speaking style" and "extreme aggression" during cross-examination. Although such behavior is characteristic of the national debate subculture (see Fine 2001b, 265–266), several respondents for whom the urban uplift frame is most salient expect debaters to be polite and respectful, to exhibit the type of behavior that will help them succeed in school and the workplace long-term.¹³

Some judges, like Lauren, believe the competitive aspects of debate are valuable insofar as they increase the educational aspects of the activity. Yet others are concerned that the selection of winners and losers may *hinder* educational benefits. Aaron, a judge who is also a coach, is so concerned about this outcome that he will hide results from debaters who are especially unsuccessful at a tournament. He explains, "If a team did really bad, like 0–4, we try to hide that from them, and not give them their judges' ballots, so as to not crush them. They always feel like they've done really well, and we don't want to set them up for disappointment." If these teams ask to see the ballots, Aaron dodges them by sharing some of the judges' feedback without letting them see the ballots. If they ask who won a round, he responds, "Oh, I think you won that one."

Selecting winners and losers is perilous. A discouraging tournament could drive urban youth from an activity that claims to improve school performance, college attendance, and community leadership, as well as to deter deviant behavior (see Anderson and Mezuk 2012;

¹³ Although these statements are laced with racial meaning, it is worth noting that one of the students whose "aggression" sparked the most controversy during interviews is white.

Mezuk et al. 2011; archival material). Awareness of the potential impact of winning or losing drives debate judges in different evaluative directions. Some, like coach Haley King, try to learn more about the technical aspects of debate to help debaters win rounds in front of technical judges even though they do not apply technical standards within rounds that they evaluate. Others, like Neal Patel, choose criteria that emphasize life skills precisely *because* they believe the stakes of winning or losing each round are so high. Still others reject the notion that winning matters much in debate. Davin Ballard, a former urban debater, believes debaters maintain involvement despite losing because the activity's "family-like" atmosphere fills a void in many participants' lives. Thus, consistent themes emerge in the link between evaluative frames and evaluative practices,¹⁴ but the relative importance of the competitive aspects of the activity shapes how seriously each judge takes selection of a winner and loser within each round. But from where do these evaluative frames originate?

Nascent Frames: Motives for Judging Urban Debate

Judges, almost all volunteers,¹⁵ give up their Fridays and Saturdays to hang out with high school debaters, usually rewarded only with bagels, coffee, cookies, and verbal expressions of gratitude. These judges come to debate through numerous pathways and carry multiple experiences with them that shape their expectations and decision-making practices. How they learned about debate, specifically urban debate, contributed to their framing of debate judging.

Judges who are former debaters (16 of 27 respondents) often framed their volunteer work for the league as an extension of their previous experience with the activity. To explain his emphasis on the competitive aspects of debate, Josh Greenberg described that he "grew up in debate" on the national circuit. Josh wanted to work with urban debaters to compensate for being unable to debate in college; his science major was not directly linked to debate skills. Initially, he criticized urban debate teams for lacking the "killer instinct" that he had as a high school debater. As a competition-focused judge, Josh struggled to make sense of how his own experience differed from urban debaters' during our interview, ultimately deciding that an "indoctrination" takes place in national debate that does not occur within the urban debate milieu. National circuit debate taught Josh that winning was not merely a positive outcome; strategizing and winning were worthy of "love":

In the national league, the drooling over advice [from coaches and mentors] and the "We've got to win; what do we do?" That's a thing that you learn to do. You learn to *love* winning on the national circuit. You learn to *love* talking to mentors or coaches and getting that killer argument. *That's* what you learn is awesome.

¹⁴ We are confident that evaluative frames and evaluative practices are two separate phenomena because, while there are consistent links between both, there are important divergences. Some uplift-frame judges employ technical standards, while some competition judges utilize life-skills standards. All of our competition-life-skills respondents were inexperienced with policy debate. For example, Annaliese, a competition-life-skills judge, decided after a few rounds that she had been judging "wrong" and attempted to modify her evaluative practices to more closely match the technical model. If evaluative frames and practices were the same phenomenon, we would expect them to correlate perfectly; we find variation and conclude that they exist separately.

¹⁵ Most judges are unpaid volunteers, but some league alumni are paid \$100 per tournament to remain present for all rounds. Some coaches and debaters criticize this practice because the alumni may view themselves as more technically skilled than they actually were or bring personal feelings about their former opponents into their judgments. Others point to benefits: it keeps alumni connected to the league, ensures that judges familiar with technical aspects of debate will be available to evaluate elimination rounds, and adds diversity to the judging corps.

Greenberg's debate experience taught him that doing whatever it takes to win a round is "awesome," and he was mystified at urban debaters' apparent disconnection from this worldview. Many urban uplift judges, often from a similar race and class background as Josh, seemed at times hyper-aware of the obstacles that urban debaters face in daily life that might reasonably distract them or discourage them at a debate tournament. Josh is the opposite. He thinks of debate primarily as an extension of his own debate career rather than as a way to help "disadvantaged" youth or to close the racial achievement gap. For Greenberg and several other judges, the "former debater" identity predominated even though they believed that urban debate "is designed for a certain subset of kids" who were excluded from suburban and national leagues. Several respondents viewed debate as a reaffirmation of their identity as former debaters and a way to contribute to the "debate community" at large. They nostalgically reminisced on their "debate days" with the authors. Many respondents viewed debate as a defining aspect of their adolescence and a critical juncture in their transition to adulthood (see Fine 2001b, 241–243).

Other judges come to debate as a community service activity, sometimes comparing debate judging to volunteering at soup kitchens or homeless shelters. Community service judges, with a few exceptions, are not former debaters. They often learned about urban debate through church or a local umbrella service organization. At our first tournament, a gray-haired African-American male (notable because many of the debaters are black males while virtually none of the volunteer judges or league officials are), explained that he learned about debate through his church, one of the oldest and largest predominantly black churches in the city. Judging urban debate appealed to him as an unconventional community service opportunity. At his first tournament, he was so confused by the activity that he thought, "What have I gotten myself into?" Yet, he attempted to rise to the challenge, continuing to participate despite initial bewilderment. Danielle Bellaire, like many first-time volunteers, came to debate through her law school's public service organization. She liked debate for its "empowerment through speech" model, which appealed to her as a forum for addressing urban disadvantage.

At least two of our community service-oriented respondents, however, were extremely experienced former policy debaters. Jeannette Greer, who participated in mock trial in high school but transitioned to debate during college, started volunteering with urban debate because she was looking for a "community service" project. Having grown up in an economically depressed town, her primary reason for judging debate was to "give back to a similar community to where [she] came from." After migrating to the U.S. and moving to a suburb of a formerly industrial city, Neal Patel struggled to learn English. Debate improved his English-language skills and connected subjects that he struggled with in high school to the real world. He became a regular urban debate volunteer and volunteer recruiter after an official told him, "These kids need to see people like you—minorities at [elite universities]." Although Jeannette and Neal are former competitive policy debaters, their personal experiences led them to view urban debate *primarily* through a community service lens. Like other former debaters, they perceived debate as a turning point in their life course. Yet for both, the *nature* of that turning point was the addition of middle-class repertoires and aspirations to their "cultural toolkit," repertoires and aspirations that are often available to national circuit and suburban debaters due to influences well before high school (see Lareau 2003). Jeannette, for example, spoke at length about how her experience changed the way she viewed her approach to education (looking beyond standardized tests and grades) and exposed her to the way suburban students approached similar tasks.

Professional educators usually approach debate from a distinct paradigm, viewing debate as an extension of the classroom. As respondent Haley King described, she just "wants to see kids thinking." Because "thinking" is her main focus, Haley is unconcerned about the "best" ways

to read evidence or evaluate rounds; rather, she believes the activity's value rests in getting participants to engage in critical thinking. Aaron Jackson, another teacher, also emphasized the educational value of debate. He heard about debate 3 years ago from a student who had heard the league's pitch about higher college attendance rates and lower high school dropout rates at a community meeting. Neither Haley nor Aaron had preexisting allegiance to "the debate community" or viewed the activity purely as serving "the underprivileged."

Some judges seek out urban debate for human connection. Constance, an elderly female who heard about debate at church, commuted more than an hour each way to attend every tournament in the 2011–2012 season. A retired school bus driver, she volunteered because she missed spending time with young people. Several respondents volunteered because they were new in town and thought debate would attract an appealing set of potential friends. Davin Ballard, the league alumnus from above, came to urban debate through a classmate and fellow gang member. Davin, now a coach and community college student, joined the team because he heard it was a good way to meet girls and get free pizza (a benefit that another former urban debater mentioned). Having left his gang, he views the league as his "family." He often checks in with his debaters through casual phone calls or text messages to make sure their home and school lives are going smoothly. For Davin, the tournaments are largely incidental to the main benefit of debate: community. Debate yields access to self-affirming social networks.

Although judges often have multiple motives for judging, one motive tends to predominate. For example, Neal Patel remembered loving the competitive aspects of debate, but his chief reason for involvement was its potential impact on urban youth. These various motivations map on to evaluative frames. Nostalgic debaters who relished the competitive aspects of the activity come to urban debate expecting participants to share their love of the "strategic game." Community service-seekers come to debate as a way to help "disadvantaged youth" gain skills and increase their college prospects; educators share this perspective but view their work as less of a "service project." The social network motivation maps on less clearly to the competition or uplift frame. For social network judges, the norms of evaluation *within* urban debate, not the frames that develop based on their notions about the purpose of the activity, may be more salient for shaping their evaluative practices. As discussed below, the activity's own formal and informal mechanisms for conferring status to certain judges—evaluation of the evaluators—may add content to judges' evaluative frames, which thereby shapes their practices.

Developing Frames: What (Urban) Debate Means and Why It Matters

Respondents' evaluative frames varied as well. Evaluative frames emanate from individual judges' perceptions about what the purpose of her evaluation is. We find that there are competing evaluative frames associated with a judge's stated evaluation process. For some respondents, policy debate is viewed primarily as a competitive environment similar to that described by Fine (2001b). Josh Greenberg, the respondent who learned to "love" winning through policy debate, describes how the league discouraged him from teaching debaters "sneaky" strategies seen on the national debate circuit to win debate rounds. Instead, more "proper" strategies were encouraged that would foster inclusivity for debaters of all levels and avoid "polluting the league with competitiveness." Josh continues: "I would like for them to engage in the activity as much as possible. Usually, engaging with it in a proper sense means trying to win. A competitive atmosphere is a byproduct of engaging with debate very well."

Extolling the value of this atmosphere, Josh joins 11 other respondents who view urban debate primarily as a competitive activity. He explains that his evaluative practices are reflective of “policy debate having to do very little with rhetoric”:

If someone can understand [the importance of refuting] and engaging the other team’s arguments, while also reiterating their own arguments and presenting me with a picture of what’s going on, that shows me that they understand [the debate] and they’re probably a good debater. But with policy debate, that doesn’t influence my decision. My decision is very technical.

Importantly, Josh divorces being a “good debater” from the selection of the round’s winner. A polished presentation, while impressive, does not guarantee that debater’s victory. More than just responding to their opponents’ arguments, a successful team weighs arguments, draws comparisons between the relative worth of evidence, and systematically explains which arguments are to be preferred based on how the round has progressed argumentatively. In this way, like other competitive-technical judges, Josh’s evaluative frame of debate as a competition is inextricably linked to his highly technical evaluative practices.

While Josh primarily framed debate as a competitive activity, most respondents (15) did not. They instead highlighted debate’s function as an educational activity or equality-enhancing opportunity for disadvantaged youth. This mission is in line with the league’s stated goal and is reflected consistently in judges’ training sessions at the start of each tournament. At one of these sessions, officials from the organization lowered volunteers’ expectations about the abilities of some debaters, warning, “They are likely to be bad, just to be honest.” But, officials continued, as long as debaters “speak or ask one question the entire tournament, that’s a success.” How “success” is defined, however, varies for individual judges. One judge praised debate for instructing them on how to solve conflict with words, while others view urban debate as particularly important in closing the achievement gap between inner-city schools and those in more affluent environments. As Lee, a debate mentor, indicates:

These [urban] students are developing the full package similar to those of middle class, upper-middle class, and extremely advantaged kids who attend Andover or Exeter. They learn that you have to do the work, but you also have to learn how to respect other people, and how to communicate. But that means both listening and speaking, and it means overcoming fears in a lot of ways. It means focusing on your work without being pulled into distractions, like lots of underage drinking and sexual activity.

Viewing debate as a forum for inculcating its participants with middle- and upper-middle class values, Lee believes that the activity can teach students how to work hard, respect others, and communicate effectively. He almost sees debate as a panacea for urban disadvantage. Associated with this urban uplift frame, his evaluative practices tend to focus on stylistic concerns. The purpose of urban debate stands in opposition to that of “competitive” debate. Lee describes the “best” rounds as those in which “everybody’s respectful to each other,” not “loud and obnoxious.” His perspective on urban debate contrasts sharply with Josh’s.

Aspects of these descriptions of urban debate may seem patronizing or condescending. There is, in some statements, a subtle suggestion that urban debaters are less capable than their suburban counterparts. However, not all urban uplift judges operate from the framework of “rescuing” students. Most judges from racial or class backgrounds similar to the urban debate students also embraced an urban uplift frame but gave different justifications for it. As described above in the cases of Neal and Jeannette, they were more likely to describe how

debate made a difference in their lives and wanted to help offer the same opportunities to students facing similar circumstances.¹⁶ Other judges are neither personally motivated nor patronizing; they reject the competitive frame of the national debate subculture simply because they find it counterproductive. Thus, there are multiple pathways to an urban uplift frame, some of which could be criticized for essentializing “urban” schoolchildren and others that emphasize their high ability. What is important about the urban uplift frame is not *why* judges adopt it, but that it tends to generate a similar set of evaluative practices *regardless* of the reasons for its adoption.

Although we find two predominant frames, debate as a competition and debate as a vehicle for urban uplift, some respondents do not fall completely into either category. Instead, they possess multiple ideas about what the activity represents in different circumstances. For example, Neal Patel, a highly successful former high school and college policy debater, views the activity’s purpose primarily as an educational intervention:

[Urban debate] isn’t as much of a competitive organization as it is a way to give kids an alternative thing to do after school from any number of things they *could* be doing. And I think, in that sense, it’s just getting bodies to go through the events, and I think there is value to that. I don’t think it’s competitive, unlike the sort of Ayn Rand-type world I grew up in.

Neal draws a sharp boundary between his competitive suburban debate team of origin and urban leagues. In his experience as a debater, “getting bodies to go through the events” would not be a sufficient goal. Yet, for the league, that goal is adequate. Drawing upon this evaluative frame, Neal’s evaluative practices are more in-line with life-skills standards of evaluation when judging for the urban league but more technical in other settings:

It’s hard for me to explain what criteria I use because they change drastically. They are very individual. My ballots are always very personal. But I think that’s the value of having mentors judge. It’s getting more people who are connected to these guys as individuals rather than looking at this set of criteria that was developed by a tenth-year debater and that’s what they were evaluated on and won, you know, the Tournament of Champions.¹⁷ Like, *that’s so foreign* to these kids.

However, when asked how he would evaluate suburban debate he replied: “If the kids were ‘game players,’ my ballot would be very different for them.” Despite extensive experience within suburban policy debate subculture, Neal operates from two different evaluative frames when making his decision at the end of a round depending on the *evaluative culture* in which he is participating. Among “game players,” (suburban or national-level debaters), he adopts technical evaluative practices, based on the same rules that lead national circuit debaters to the Tournament of Champions. Among urban debaters, however, these rules are too “foreign.” In the urban setting, Neal selects winners based on their improvement over time. Zach Colby also explains that, while he is a desired judge in national circuit tournaments where he employs technical evaluative practices, he chooses to use life-skills methods for urban debate because “the expectations are different... In [national circuit] debates, I do—and this is something I’m

¹⁶ Omitted from our analysis are non-volunteers, those who might not only criticize the urban uplift frame but also the league’s emphasis on middle-class (“white”) values. However, some judges—even those who adopt an urban uplift frame—are still concerned that other volunteers have a patronizing or condescending view toward students.

¹⁷ The Tournament of Champions (TOC) is an elite, highly competitive policy debate championship. Debaters must qualify by achieving a certain level of success at national-level debate tournaments in order to earn a “bid” to the TOC. Two bids are required to qualify.

more hesitant to do in an urban debate round—I will vote for a team that I thought didn't do as good a job debating if they won the argument.” In determining which criteria to apply, Zach looks to the broader mission of the activity in three different contexts, urban, national circuit, and “other forms of suburban white debate”: “What are you trying to do?” he asks.

These examples reveal how important *selection* of an evaluative frame, based on the context of the evaluation, is to evaluative practice. The perceived purpose of the evaluation—either to support debaters in a competitive or educational fashion—influences judges' decision-making processes. Our findings are more than merely correlative: Culture (evaluative frames) drives action (evaluative practice) because of the presence of *two legitimated sets of practices within the evaluative culture of urban debate*. Unlike Eliasoph and Lichterman's (2003) model linking culture and action in groups, a league volunteer asking “What style is in play here?” would not know the answer to her question from the moment of entry. She would know only that most judges use one of two sets of rubrics, focusing either on debate technique or life skills. We find that people's frames of the activity tend to determine which set of rubrics evaluators find most compelling and thus use in rounds. Counter to our expectation that the level of debate experience alone would shape evaluative practices, judges are often *aware* of competing ways to view the activity of policy debate. They select a frame to apply based on what they view as most appropriate (more beneficial or simply more accessible) to urban debaters. The frame judges choose, then, usually link to a specific set of evaluative practices.

Oral Feedback: Spoken Evaluation

More than just selecting who wins and who loses a debate, judges must also provide both oral and written feedback to debaters. Because league officials are concerned that announcing winners and losers immediately after rounds would make some winning teams complacent and discourage some losing teams, judges are prohibited from such disclosure. However, they are expected to offer debaters verbal suggestions. While some judges view oral feedback primarily as a way to correct debaters' mistakes for subsequent rounds, others view it as a way of validating debaters' decision to participate and encouraging future involvement.

The types of feedback students are offered tend to coincide with the judges' evaluative frames. For those who view debate as a competitive event, oral feedback consists largely of constructive criticism and argumentation-related suggestions. At one tournament, a technically oriented judge began his oral critique with an ominous statement, despite the league's request that oral feedback be framed positively: “I voted for the team that tried to lose the round the least.” He then explained what aspects of the debate he viewed as “technically messy” and offered suggestions for improvement. However, a few technically oriented judges, like Lucy and Jeff, restrict their oral feedback to positive remarks. As Lucy explains:

I pretty much always tell debaters it was a good debate round. It's probably not always true. In my verbal critique I try to be 90 % positive. I try really hard not to embarrass them in the verbal comments. I'll *write* some more constructive stuff, like about things that they didn't do so [well].

As Lucy demonstrates, some judges are aware of the technical improvements debaters should address in future rounds, incorporating these suggestions on the ballot as they select the round's winner. However, the *public nature* of verbal evaluation tempers their zeal for the competitive aspects of debate. The priority in spoken evaluation is to avoid debaters' embarrassment.

While those who view debate competitively offer more technical advice, many who view debate from an uplift framework and apply evaluative practices that emphasize life skills limit

their feedback to positive comments with small amounts of often-indirect criticism. As Douglas Gallant explains, his feedback is “intended to *uplift* the students”:

My oral feedback is very targeted and intended to *uplift* the students. First and foremost, they have to feel good that they went through this experience, and to be reinforced that it was worthwhile for me to listen to them. Every single debate, then, I make sure it’s sincere and that they hear that from me. Second, if I feel I can contribute something significant to make the debater aware about a glaring mistake, I’ll tell them that I follow the guidance that too much oral feedback is as good as none, so I try to keep that limited and focused.

Douglas encourages debaters to stay involved in debate to support the league’s educational mission. He makes sure the debaters feel that he valued hearing them speak, that their words were meaningful to him. Both authors have judged several rounds with Douglas. At the end of each round, Douglas, often wearing a sweatshirt from one elite university or another, briefly recounts his own experiences debating in high school and explains to the debaters how the activity affected his life. He uses this time to ask the debaters about their school progress and college plans. None of these comments directly relate to the round, but they make sense for judges who view debate almost solely as a means for improving students’ educational outcomes.

Not all judges who ascribe to Douglas’ uplift frame limit their comments to positive feedback, as Neal demonstrates: “I think there is a real hesitancy on the part of a lot of judges to offer substantive feedback. I think the tendency is to coddle... It’s just—people don’t want to say anything mean.” As such, Neal’s comments are often similar in tone and directness to competition-technical judges. However, the *types* of comments he offers are different. When Neal mentions the “substantive” aspects of debate, he is not referring to technical points. Instead, he takes a critical approach to life-skills observations, informing each debater of her stylistic shortcomings and ways to improve. The tone of his oral feedback might match that of a technical judge, but his urban-uplift frame continues to inform the substance of his critique.

Judging Evaluative Practices: Mutual Evaluation

Despite variation in evaluation criteria, the league appreciates both technical and life-skills standards. At times, it explicitly rejects the growing emphasis on technical points and under-emphasis on presentation and analysis. As noted above, each judges’ training session begins with an announcement that the judge “can’t be wrong.” Yet our data reveal both subtle and direct cues that informal *evaluation of judges* often relies on adherence to the technical ideal.

The authors took fairly distinct evaluative approaches that resulted in different evaluation of their own work. While the organization expressed appreciation for both authors’ contributions, coaches and debaters frequently asked Asad, because of his technical prowess displayed in post-round oral feedback, to help their teams. Coaches and debaters also valued Bell’s participation, but with somewhat less enthusiasm. They appreciated Bell’s meticulous ballots but were aware that she had less technical policy debate expertise than Asad.

Interview data corroborates this perception. Jeff, in his fourth year volunteering for the league, believes that debaters and coaches valued him as a judge because of his debate experience: “I think it’s one of the reasons why—I don’t like to brag, but when I showed up, I was a very well-received judge.” Annaliese Muller, a newer judge, changed from using life-skills criteria to using technical criteria after speaking with other volunteers after her first round of judging debate. In so doing, she learned that persuasion was not considered a “proper” criterion among competition-focused judges; she had been to judges’ training but,

as explained above, the league-run training does not discourage evaluative practices that emphasize persuasion. Other respondents considered the lack of technically savvy judges an institutional drawback attributable to the league's recent rapid growth. According to Aaron Jackson:

Because the league is so large now, and so volunteer-based, and there are so many people who don't know what they're doing and don't know what they're looking at, it's one of those evils of success. I was told by a judge that the team that just lost in the finals this time in JV had been in the finals of the last tournament and lost on a 3–2 decision. And one of the judges that voted against them said the only reason I voted against them was that I didn't like one kid's attitude.

Voting based on a debater's attitude is a devalued evaluative practice, but the league has become so large that it needs any interested adult, regardless of her knowledge of the activity, to ensure that every debater can participate. Other respondents, like Elise, spoke about the difficulty of finding "judges who care" or "judges who take the kids seriously." Davin Ballard exuded righteous indignation as he flipped through his team's ballots from the previous weekend's tournament. Complaining about a judge who awarded points below the league's recommended range, he scoffed, "Judges like this need to get smacked. I'm sorry." Mythologies surround particularly abhorrent judges: judges who fall asleep, interrupt debaters, choose winners based on eye contact, or choose winners without justification. In at least one respect, our debate world mirrors Fine's: "War stories" about poor judges abound (2001b, 125–127).¹⁸

To avoid the reputational costs of lacking technical expertise, some judges engage in impression management strategies designed to keep league participants from becoming aware of their relative ignorance of technical rules (see Goffman 1959). This is most apparent in elimination rounds (quarterfinals, semifinals, and final tournament rounds), in which there are usually at least three judges and a cadre of spectators. Most audience members are eager to hear what each judge has to say at the end of a round, hoping to ascertain from the context some clues about how each judge voted. The public nature of elimination-round feedback, coupled with the debaters' usually greater skill, makes maintaining the appearance of expertise a challenge. Moreover, the rules of debate, unlike the rules of academic peer review (Lamont 2009; Mallard et al. 2009), *prohibit* evaluators from using dialogue to come to a consensus. Judges are not permitted to discuss how or why they voted in a particular way before handing in their ballots.

The reputational stakes are high; thus management strategies are abundant. Douglas always demands to give his comments last. If a judge who speaks before him offers a powerful technical argument, he states that he agrees with it and then gives encouraging remarks. Also, we observed and participated in several multi-judge panels where judges disregarded the rules prohibiting collaboration. When both authors were judging with Joaquin, a former urban debater who is insecure about judging, he requested to view the other judges' ballots because he did not know for whom he should vote. The other judges reminded him, per the rules

¹⁸ Fine explains that one of debaters' favorite pastimes is complaining about judges. Although most judges on the national debate circuit are well-paid and fairly expert in policy debate's subcultural rules, there are usually a few who are less well-versed in the technical style of judging. The TOC touts the technical skill of its judging pool as one reason for the tournament's superiority: it "strives to offer the national high school debate community the highest quality judging, impartial tournament officials, and a friendly, congenial atmosphere" (archival materials). Of course, debaters sometimes complain when a technically skilled judge votes for the other team despite having good reasons to do so. Part of community building in any debate division often includes sharing stories about particularly egregious judges.

announced at every training, that such collaboration was prohibited and he had to decide independently. Joaquin was one of two judges, Asad included, who voted for the losing team.

Both authors experienced making a public “wrong” decision during our fieldwork. In the final round at a national qualifying tournament, with at least thirty spectators, both authors participated in a five-judge panel in which Bell was the only judge who voted for the losing team. Dave Gammond, a frequent judge, approached her afterward to sympathize: “Yeah, it’s always tough to be on the wrong side of a 4–1.” At the national tournament semifinals, Asad also served on a five-judge panel in which he was the only judge to vote for the losing team. Asad disagreed with the decision but was aware that onlookers might interpret his decision as technically deficient, especially given the hyper-elite pedigrees of the other judges.

Although technical expertise was a central criterion for judge evaluation, it was never the *sole* criterion. Dedication, demonstrated through consistent volunteering, working Saturday evening rounds, and simply paying attention to the debaters and taking notes, was perhaps the most important informal assessment criterion. Accordingly, life-skills judges did not necessarily feel *devalued*. For example, as Bell chatted with Constance, the retired bus driver, at the year-end banquet, a senior league official approached Constance to thank her for attending every tournament. Constance is wholly unaware of national circuit debate techniques, even criticizing students who are too “focused on the task.” Yet, through this gesture, league officials expressed gratitude for her dedication. Constance promised to try to make every tournament next season.

Evaluation of judges is largely informal but it has at least one formal component: the Outstanding Judge Award. Before elimination rounds at each tournament, the league holds an awards ceremony. Officials present at least one small trophy to an especially valued judge. Students complete nomination forms for the award with space for a written explanation of the judge’s excellence. If a judge received a nomination, the organization emails a scanned copy of each nomination form to the judge on the Monday following the tournament. Asad, who has received three judging awards, has received several student nominations. However, nomination forms are not the only method used to determine award recipients. Bell received three awards based on ballot quality but has received a student nomination only once. Douglas received a judging award for recruiting fifteen other volunteer judges through a local civic organization. One judge, a league alumnus, complained that the award is “a joke,” claiming that the league gives it to any reasonably useful judge to encourage her to keep volunteering, regardless of the judge’s actual contribution to debaters’ improvement. Humorously, he received one of two judging awards later than afternoon.

Judge evaluation is part of urban debate’s evaluative culture, as it is essentially “negotiation about proper criteria and about who is a legitimate judge” (Lamont 2012, 7). Like education systems that include informal and formal teacher and professor evaluation, evaluation in urban debate is mutual. Judges, like teachers, must evaluate debaters, but the system also offers an opportunity to give positive or negative feedback to the evaluators. This differs considerably from other fields that evaluation scholars have studied, like academic fellowships (Lamont 2009); figure skating and art (Lom 2010); restaurant and consumer product reviews (Blank 2007), and law school rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2007), where there is less immediate feedback, if any, given to the evaluators by those evaluated.

Especially for repeat judges, the presence of *mutual evaluation* is another influence on their evaluative frame. Mutual evaluation creates a feedback loop: Judges perform in a certain way, and both informal and formal processes of evaluation give them information about valued evaluative practices. Depending on the messages to which an individual is inclined (which often relate to her reasons for volunteering with urban debate or perceptions of the activity’s purpose), judges take that information and adapt their evaluative practices for in future rounds.

This might be especially true for judges who, like several of our respondents, initially sought out the opportunity to judge debate as a way to make friends or become part of a community. If that community evaluates volunteer judges and the primary (albeit not exclusive) source of valuation is technical expertise, this might influence the way a volunteer comes to see the activity and affect the evaluative practices that volunteer applies to debate rounds.

Conclusion

Our study is a micro-level depiction of how evaluative frames contribute to evaluative cultures and produce the adoption of evaluative practices. Our research contributes to the cultural sociology of evaluation by adding more parsimony to Lamont's "evaluative cultures," grounding them through application to an understudied setting. We also add specificity to this theory, identifying one of many ways that evaluative practices both exist *within* and are affected *by* culture and social processes. The very *existence* of "urban debate" is a response to educational inequality, for example. We have argued that "evaluative frames"—how judges view the purpose of evaluation when entering the evaluative culture—shape their evaluative practices. On a micro-scale, our work addresses an enduring question in cultural sociology: How does culture connect to action? We have offered one answer to this question in our explication of how frames of urban debate are connected to the action of selecting winners and losers when multiple legitimated practices exist within an evaluative culture.

Yet there is more to learn about the precise mechanisms through which frames link to practices. In our research, we expected more of a clear overlap between debate experience and technical evaluative practices, but experience told only part of the story. Judges' conceptualization of urban debate was shaped by many social influences, only *one* of which was previous participation in competitive policy debate. Other factors included how volunteer judges learned about the organization, preconceived expectations of difference between urban and suburban children, and respondents' own experiences of childhood disadvantage. Future research in the sociology of evaluation should explore these questions more closely. How are evaluative frames created, and what social influences are most salient both within and across settings? How do evaluators adopt practices, particularly within overlapping or unsettled evaluative cultures?

Another future step for the sociology of evaluation is to think seriously about *evaluation effects*. What are the implications of different evaluative practices and different evaluative cultures for important outcomes like social resilience and mobility? How does evaluation matter for the study of inequality? In the sociological quest to understand how society works and how interconnected sets of basic social processes produce certain social structures or outcomes, it is not enough to understand the process itself; researchers must also explore specific consequences of processes, linking them to elements of the process and understanding broader processual implications (Couch 1992; see Tilly 1998). As Beljean (2012) notes, more ethnographic studies that explore how evaluation takes place on a micro-level in different contexts would shed light on these questions; longitudinal or "multi-wave" ethnographies might also produce such information. Likewise, longitudinal quantitative studies that connect specific evaluation processes and practices to outcomes might also contribute to this body of knowledge.

Although our cross-sectional data prevent us from exploring the long-term effects of these alternative modes of evaluation, preliminary data suggest that some students, particularly those who have developed technical acumen in debate, resent life-skills judging practices and feel that the strong presence of this style of judging in the league makes it difficult for them to compete at national-level and suburban tournaments. These students prefer competition-

technical judges, who are more likely to provide advice that is portable to other debate settings. Some have complained that they do not feel challenged within the league and thus put forth minimal effort.

Yet there is countervailing data. Many debaters who have developed strong technical acumen are committed to the urban uplift approach; they want to make debate even larger, more accessible, and more available to students who need “transformation.” They help recruit students to join the debate team, emphasizing college opportunities and minimizing competitive and technical aspects of the activity. They prefer competition-technical judges for themselves but like urban uplift-life-skills judges for others. We have seen students visibly deflate after losing a round for technical reasons, especially when they had otherwise performed well. Some students have said that because they fear highly technical debate, they choose to compete in lower league divisions where they expect more life-skills judging practices. These data are tentative, but they shed light on potential evaluation effects. They also hearken to larger questions: When seeking to educate “disadvantaged” students, what strategies are most effective? Should educators apply the same standards and use the same methods for students regardless of racial and socioeconomic differences? Should they use distinct standards and strategies for “urban” students, recognizing the specific challenges they face? Or should they cater educational strategies toward urban students but apply universal standards? Our study provides no answers to these questions, but it does illuminate how these broader issues are made manifest in a micro setting.

We thus also contribute to research on social inequality. We establish a link between research on the basic social process of evaluation and the study of social processes that reproduce disadvantage. In addition to the processes more frequently recognized in scholarship on urban disadvantage, evaluation, both formal and informal, is a process that has implications for inequality through job search and hiring; the criminal justice system; parenting and child custody; welfare distribution; housing selection; and, most prominently, education.

Understanding how evaluation works in *devalued* settings, such as urban public schools, is critical for theory building about the reproduction of inequality. Evaluative practices, like accountability testing and teacher evaluation, emanate from specific evaluative frames, or beliefs about the fundamental purposes of the education system. What differences do these practices make for students? The present study does not resolve those questions, but we hope that our focus on an urban, lower-income setting will spur greater research on evaluative frames and cultures in settings of disadvantage and inequality. This research should span several domains, going more deeply within education and across other domains of social life.

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