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James Dobson and the American Right: Interdiscursivity and the construction of rhetorical agency

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James Dobson and the American Right
Interdiscursivity and the construction of rhetorical agency

by

James McAfee

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Rhetoric and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
David Russell, Co-Major Professor
Richard Benjamin Crosby, Co-Major Professor
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Nathaniel Wade
Greg Wilson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2013

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ABSTRACT

James Dobson is a pediatric psychologist best known as the figurehead of Focus on the Family, an important social conservative organization that helped to define the American Right’s concept of “family values.” The books, videotapes, and radio broadcast about parenting that Dobson produced in seventies and eighties, particularly the bestselling *Dare to Discipline* (1970), were particularly important for shaping arguments used by the conservative side of what we now call “the culture wars.” During the past three decades, Dobson has become an increasingly prominent participant in partisan politics, but his career as a public figure is built atop his work as parenting expert.

A defining aspect of Dobson’s career is his deployment of *agentive interdiscursivity*. Through careful fusions of arguments drawn both from his expertise as a psychologist and from religion, Dobson’s rhetoric give moral and political force to arguments about professional uncertainties. Dobson is a seminal figure in contemporary American politics, and rhetorical strategies he pioneered in his books about parenting continue to define American social conservatism. Describing Dobson’s work as a rhetorical project which depends on interdiscursivity complicates notions of agency, equips scholars to better understand rhetorical strategies still used by the Religious Right, and suggests new starting points for discussing expertise in public life.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: HOW INTERDISCURSIVITY BUILDS WORLDVIEWS

During the 1970s and 80s, conservative Evangelicalism, aided by its conservative Catholic allies, emerged as an important political force in the United States. While the Religious Right’s reputation has suffered in recent years as it has fallen increasingly out of step with more and more Americans on issues like LGBT rights and contraception, it remains an important part of our political landscape, and American debates about education, sexuality, marriage, and abortion are unintelligible without some understanding of conservative Christianity. The most high profile rhetors associated with the Religious Right include controversial religious figures like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and prominent conservative politicians who make religious appeals a central part of their campaign platforms (e.g. Rick Santorum). However noteworthy famous figures like those might be, rhetoricians interested in the American Right should be careful not to overlook the less conspicuous work of describing and maintaining social conservatism as a perspective concerned with practical problems. Policy debate matters, but partisanship is also constructed through arguments about everyday life. A key figure responsible for initiating and sustaining this less remarked upon but equally crucial project is James Dobson.

Dobson, the founder and guiding influence on an organization called Focus on the Family, is a pediatric psychologist (he has a PhD from University of
Southern California) who, in the early 70s, gained fame as a parenting expert who advocated the use of corporal punishment. In 1976, he left his career as psychologist and in 1977 founded Focus on the Family, an organization that distributes practical, professionally informed advice about parenting and marriage (along with occasional forays into more specialized topics like abuse, addiction, and depression) to an Evangelical audience, not only through its ubiquitous radio show, but also through its website, pamphlets, magazines, and books. Focus on the family also maintains a network of professional therapists who answer letters and emails individually. Through its massive, coordinated efforts to provide therapeutic advice, Focus on the Family has helped to shape conservative conceptions of family values for over three decades. Focus on the Family has influenced political debates in essential ways, even while it rejects the implication that it is politically driven, and the disconnect between Focus on the Family’s political influence and its own claims as an apolitical entity points to its sophisticated use of rhetorical agency, a concept of increasing interest to language and communication scholars.

Today’s scholars widely agree that agency is no longer the possession of autonomous individuals, but it is the product of social interactions and authoritative moments and spaces. Carl Herndl and Adele Licona, for example, argue that in order to exert influence, one must recognize where and when within the elements of a situation exists an opportunity for efficacy. They argue that “agency is a social location and opportunity into and out of which rhetors,
even postmodern subjects, move” (134). Where were such opportunities in a
career as a pediatric psychologist or a public expert about parenting? What
agentive strategies allowed James Dobson to shape American political discourse
from within a largely apolitical therapeutic project?

My contention, which I will explicate through close readings of important
texts from Dobson’s career, is that Dobson occupies such a powerful position in
American public life because of his judicious deployment of agentive
interdiscursivity. By agentive interdiscursivity, I mean that Dobson uses
strategies that combine multiple discourses together in a way that creates a
politically implicated view of reality. Buttressed by his authority as a professional
expert, Dobson linked controversies within mental health care to a vision of the
world as a place of moral uncertainty and intellectual chaos. Because of his
strategic use of multiple discourses, particularly from mental health care and
religion, Dobson was able to exert considerable political influence while
remaining independent from conventional partisan politics.

In this opening chapter, I will survey Dobson’s career, and I will explain
why agentive interdiscursivity, which is my derivation from Ernesto Laclau’s and
Chantal Mouffe’s articulation theory, is an important rhetorical strategy. I will
then discuss my methodological choice of concept oriented criticism, and finally,
I will preview the rest of the dissertation. I hope that my project not only allows
for better insight into Dobson’s work, but that it also leaves rhetoric better
equipped to discuss the balance of rhetorical forces that enabled the Religious
Right’s ascendency and continues to fuel the success of American conservatism. This project also suggests new ways to discuss the role of expertise in policy debate. James Dobson’s legacy as a rhetor is a complex and important one, not only because his books, lectures, and radio work fostered the creation of a vast and important Evangelical mental health project, but also because the texts that enabled his success are rich cases for thinking about rhetoric and public life.

Who is James Dobson and what did he accomplish?

James Dobson, the son of a traveling Nazarene Evangelist, and the grandson and great-grandson of ministers, graduated with a psychology degree from a Nazarene college near Los Angeles called Pasadena College in 1958, and he earned a PhD from USC in 1967. A brief sketch of his family history and early biography suggests the novelty of his appearance as a public figure during the early seventies, as during the sixties, psychology was sometimes stigmatized in the Evangelical Christian community. At Pasadena, Dobson was influenced by Paul Culbertson, a pioneer of Christian psychology who “supplement[ed] textbooks with his own teachings because the field was so new” (Gilgoff 21). After receiving his PhD, Dobson began a successful career as a psychologist, teaching at USC’s Keck School of Medicine and working as a therapist at USC’s Children’s Hospital. During this period, Dobson oversaw a multimillion dollar study about children with developmental difficulties, worked as a family counselor, and worked as an assistant to Paul Popenoe, an important figure in the history of therapy who helped to invent marriage counseling.
Popenoe wrote the foreword to *Dare to Discipline* (1970), the book that launched Dobson as a public figure. *Dare to Discipline*’s central argument is that the social unrest of the late sixties was a direct result of the advocacy of “permissive” parenting by popular parenting experts of the postwar period, particularly Benjamin Spock. Not only was *Dare to Discipline* Dobson’s first foray into popular writing, it was an immediate sensation, particularly because of Dobson’s fiery advocacy of corporal punishment. By 1972 *Dare to Discipline* was so widely understood as a conservative touchstone that a copy of the book was specially bound and added to the White House library, and it has gone on to sell three million copies (Buss 45).¹ *Dare to Discipline*’s reputation as pro-spanking polemic is somewhat at odds with what the book actually is. While it does contain inflammatory passages advocating corporal punishment, *Dare to Discipline* has a much broader agenda than the advocacy of spanking. For Dobson, “discipline” is an attitude toward moral order that encompasses every facet of society, and although Dobson believed that the family was the site where this “discipline” was primarily instilled, *Dare to Discipline* talks about a wide spectrum of sites where it had, in his view, lapsed, including schools and the mental health profession.²

After *Dare to Discipline*’s success, Dobson began booking speaking engagements, often at churches and PTA meetings, and he began making appearances in the popular media. Dobson followed *Dare to Discipline* with other books, and while none of them had the same impact as *Dare to Discipline*,
Dobson’s work from the seventies, including What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women (1975) and The Strong Willed Child (1978), established the themes that Dobson expounded upon for the rest of his career. In 1976, Dobson took a sabbatical from teaching at USC and from working at Children’s Hospital to focus on his speaking career. In 1977, as a way to avoid the constant travel a career as a paid speaker entailed, Dobson released, through a Christian publishing house, a bestselling series of videotapes of his lectures called Focus on the Family, primarily to evangelical churches.

The success of the Focus on the Family tapes was a turning point in Dobson’s life, as it led to the launch of a radio show that aired on religious stations, also called Focus on the Family. The show, delivered in a talk show format, discussed parenting and marriage in a way that combined Dobson’s expertise as a therapist with a moralistic, religious vision of the family. Dobson was something of a cutting edge figure in the Christian media world. In 1977, the burgeoning Evangelical popular culture we have today did not yet exist, and Dobson’s professional, issue oriented (rather than strictly religious) work was groundbreaking. Jeb Jackson, who worked for Dobson during the seventies and became a member of Focus on the Family’s board of directors reports: “The majority of Christian radio programing at that time was pastors who would edit their preaching from a Sunday service and put it on the radio. […] There weren’t many talk shows. There were shows with missionaries and about church people doing things, but this was different” (Gilgoff 25).
During the eighties, the Focus on the Family organization expanded into a ubiquitous Evangelical media empire. Not only did the radio show air on over 800 stations by the end of the decade, but Focus on the Family began to produce magazines, books, and educational materials. One of the more unique developments that occurred during this period, and a development that suggests how primarily *therapeutic* (rather than conventionally political) Focus on the Family’s mission was, was that Focus began to keep a network of licensed counselors to answer the thousands of requests for advice that the organization received. During the early 90s, the organization moved to a large campus in Colorado Springs. At that time, Focus on the Family’s budget was approximately 80 million dollars (Buss 118-119). Presently, Focus’s radio show, still the centerpiece of the ministry, reaches over 200 million people internationally (Daily).

Even though Dobson’s career has primarily been that of a public expert about parenting, he has sometimes participated in more traditional political activity like public service and political advocacy, and these activities have allowed him to exert considerable influence over the direction of the organized American Right. In 1981 Dobson founded the Family Research Council, a lobbying organization devoted to promoting social conservatism. Dobson was also an important public figure during the Reagan administration, serving on Reagan’s National Advisory Commission to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention from 1982-1984, on the Citizens Advisory Panel for Tax
Reform as a Co-Chair, on the United States Army’s Family Initiative from 1986-1988, and on the Meese Commission on Pornography from 1985-1986. After the election of Bill Clinton, Dobson emerged as a more forceful voice for the right, and he became increasingly engaged in political advocacy. Even though Dobson’s emergence as a more conventional political figure was primarily an antagonistic response to liberalism, he has been something of a gadfly to a Republican party that has not honored its social conservative rhetoric with legislative action. Dobson has thus helped to push the GOP rightward on issues like same-sex marriage and abortion.

By the late nineties, Dobson had so much clout in conservative circles and had become so outspoken and uncompromising that he attracted attention within beltway circles with threats to, in Glenn Utter’s and John Storey’s words, “wreak havoc on Republicans unless the party delivered on issues of importance to religious and social conservatives” (83.) In response to his controversial reputation, Dobson said “My goal is not to see the Republican Party prosper” (Wilcox and Robinson 64). In 1997 Dobson signed, along with other Evangelical leaders and Catholic bishops and archbishops, a document called “We Hold These Truths: A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship.” Damon Linker writes that although the document “received little attention from the mainstream media, its message reached millions of devoutly religious Americans” through churches, newsletters, radio programs, lobbying organizations, and the Catholic press (109). As a response to tensions between
the more pragmatic approach favored by political organizers like Ralph Reed and the outspoken approach of figures like Dobson, in 2002 The Arlington Group, a collection of social conservative leaders, including Dobson, banded together to coordinate their efforts. The Religious Right’s push for a Constitutional amendment forbidding same-sex marriage during the 2004 elections was largely a response to this coordination and James Dobson’s uncompromising position (Gilgoff 141-142).

Even though the last two decades of Dobson’s career have found him increasingly involved in more conventional political activity, his life’s work remains that of a therapist involved in public outreach, and Focus on the Family has remained, until very recently, his primary vehicle for engaging the public. In a surprisingly sympathetic profile of Focus on the Family, journalist Donna Minkowitz writes, “. . . niceness, in so many ways, is what Focus is all about, and the reason you probably haven't heard of it, despite its power.[ . . .] Focus's agenda of helping people in pain isn't just cheap icing it throws on to distract us from its right-wing cake . . . .” 5 During the past decade, Dobson gradually reduced his involvement in Focus on the Family, and in 2010, he separated himself completely. These changes were carried out to ensure an orderly transition for Focus (especially important because Dobson was so closely associated with the organization) and to allow Dobson a sort of phased retirement. Dobson now leads a smaller organization called Family Talk. From
Family Talk, Dobson still gives regular addresses on the radio and sends out emails and newsletters about current events to subscribers.

**James Dobson, articulation theory, and the American Right**

My biographical sketch already begins to suggest Dobson’s importance to American social conservatism, but a deeper look at the way that his rhetoric presents a well-developed conservative philosophy to a popular audience suggests that his impact has been even bigger than his conventional contributions to national politics suggest. When Dobson was establishing himself as a public figure during the 1970s, social conservatism was in the process of becoming an organized force. Activist organizations like Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum (1972) and Jerry Fallwell’s Moral Majority (1979) came into being, and The American Christian Cause (1974) and The Christian Voice (1978) were founded to help conservative Christians politically organize. James Dobson’s contribution to this burgeoning movement was to forge important new connections between mental health care, religion, and politics. Not only did he help to found a project that is now an important part of the infrastructure of American conservatism, but the rhetorical strategy Dobson used, which combines a paradoxical rhetoric of anti-elitist expertise with a moralistic rhetoric of timeless traditional values, was an important precursor to strategies used by contemporary American conservatism. As I suggested in the preceding section, Dobson uses his authority as a parenting expert and the authority of religious rhetoric to construct a critique of contemporary liberalism, which he argues has
compromised the integrity of institutional life and undermined social order. For Dobson, arguments about the family are also arguments about society and morality. While a moralistic view of the family is not in and of itself novel, Dobson’s strategy for politicizing the family, which involves making seemingly incongruous connections between arguments about psychology, religious rhetoric, and right wing populism, was new.

This interdiscursivity Dobson used to politicize the family is what Laclau’s and Mouffe’s articulation theory, as explicated in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, predicts. Their view of political work, sometimes called articulation theory (and which is an extrapolation of Gramsci’s hegemonic theory), is that politics is done through the articulation—both iteration and extension—of disparate, incommensurable discourses. (This kind of “incommensurability” recalls Feyerabend’s ironic invocation of the concept rather than the Kuhnian problem that rhetoricians have more often used as a point of departure.) For Laclau and Mouffe, political work is a struggle to control the connotations of language and to connect together different discourses in an effort to enroll people into a particular worldview: “we will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (105). For Laclau and Mouffe this kind of rhetorical work is, quite literally, everything:

Our analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms: a) that every object is constituted as an object of
discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence; and b) that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioral aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning which is structured under the form of discursive totalities. (107)

Politics is not the struggle of people who are connected for historical reasons, nor is it debate about specific policy issues; it is instead the linking together of diverse ways of understanding reality into a worldview into which people are enrolled.

As anti-realist (or perhaps merely cynical?) as Laclau’s and Mouffe’s view of political work sounds, there is quite a distance between their position and the postmodern straw man. Laclau and Mouffe insist on discourse as the medium of all politics because discourse is not essentialist or inevitable. There is no particular reason that any particular group of people will understand its social or economic predicament in any particular way, and there is nothing essential about scientific, professional, or technical discourses that make them immune to appropriation by political partisans. Laclau and Mouffe insist that political identity (and social class) cannot be understood strictly in terms of material circumstance, but in terms of the articulations and disarticulations between people, material reality, and symbols; “the category of articulation acquires a different theoretical status: articulation is now a discursive practice which does
not have a plane of constitution prior to, or outside, the dispersion of the articulated elements” (109). What matters for the observer trying to understand how people are enrolled into public identities are not economic or sociological facts, but how various interpretations of those facts are combined together into worldviews.

One reason that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is particularly appropriate for framing James Dobson’s work is that the book was written as an effort to understand the success of the American right under Reagan. Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theory, which is an extension of Laclau’s earlier work on populism (1977), was originally written as a response to the very same right wing populist movement that Dobson helped to construct and later helped to intensify. In Laclau’s and Mouffe’s account, during the late seventies and early eighties, relationships between various strands of conservative thought, including conservative Evangelicalism, libertarianism, and neo-conservatism, were reimagined and combined into a new conservative “common sense” that defined the ground upon which American policy debates happened. This description matches perfectly some strategies explicitly endorsed by influential conservative intellectuals as early as the 1960s, particularly *National Review* editor William F. Buckley and political theorist Frank Meyer. Meyer coined the term “fusionism” to describe his argument for the construction of a robust coalition of libertarians, political conservatives, and Evangelical Christians (along with conservative Catholics like Buckley). The similarity of “fusionism” to
“articulation” suggests something of a match between the deliberate strategies of the conservative thinkers who helped pave the way for the political realignment that happened under Reagan in the 1980s and the version of hegemonic theory that Laclau and Mouffe designed to explain these political shifts.

Methodology: Concept oriented criticism and agentive interdiscursivity

My exploration of Dobson is an exploration of how articulation takes place within a specific body of work, and my development of agentive interdiscursivity as a key concept is an effort to transform Laclau’s and Mouffe’s insightful discussion about how partisanship and public identity function into a lens for close reading. If we follow Laclau’s and Mouffe’s logic, conservatives are bound together not by economics, tradition, or geography, but by the ways they describe the world, and if we want to think about how rhetors construct these descriptions, we need to pay special attention to how different ways of seeing reality have been connected to each other. It is no wonder that James Dobson, who recognized that mental health expertise and religion could be articulated together to make the family an important site for political work, should have been an important figure in the evolution of the American conservative project. While it is reductive to say that James Dobson was successful simply because he expressed conservative moral concern through arguments derived from both mental health care and religion, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that such interdiscursive strategies are important for meaningful participation in arguments about social reality.
Criticism that seeks to develop a theory through analysis has sometimes been called “concept oriented criticism.” James Jasinski writes that concept oriented criticism “[does] not advance a method to be imitated [but] rather advance[s] a conceptual equation in need of additional exploration” (139). Concept oriented criticism has become a dominant mode of criticism in rhetoric. Stephanie Houston Grey writes: “Rather than identify themselves with one methodology or template, many critics now prefer to allow texts of cultural significance to suggest interesting conceptual questions” (341). Concept oriented criticism is a particularly useful method for deploying articulation theory because the affordances that the tradition of close reading and hegemonic theory might offer each other have yet to be deeply explored. While *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* includes several specific examples that demonstrate how language animates the politics of the American right, it does not engage in anything resembling the kind of sustained attention that close reading demands. Similarly, other rhetoricians have used Laclau and Mouffe in their work, but no one has explored agentive interdiscursivity, which is central to Laclau’s and Mouffe’s work (although they do not use that particular phrase) to examine strategies that might lead to rhetorical efficacy.

This critical approach is, to use Jasinski’s language, a practice of “abduction,” “a back-and-forth movement between the critical object . . . and the concept(s) that is being investigated simultaneously,” rather than an orderly, methodologically guided deduction that seeks to uncover the characteristics of
the object of study (139). Concept oriented criticism does attempt to understand how a text functions through close reading, but it is equally concerned with exploring the value of a particular theoretical frame (or “concept”). The idea of concept oriented criticism is to perform a close reading of a text, but the close reading is to be guided by the interests and insights afforded by the given concept. When done well, concept oriented criticism affords insights into both the text being analyzed and the conceptual frame being employed. In my case, the texts are important moments from James Dobson’s career, and the frame is agentive interdiscursivity, which is my extrapolation from Laclau and Mouffe.

My exploration of how interdiscursivity can be used to create agency shares some goals and theoretical assumptions with Michael McGee’s ideographic criticism. Michael McGee’s influential work takes traditional close textual analysis to task for enshrining the text as an independent, bounded object of analysis. McGee argues that rhetorical criticism should be the examination and reconstruction of significant textual fragments: “The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made.” McGee also argues that the rhetorical critic’s job is to reconstruct new texts by linking together artifacts that share some significant cultural context and political purpose:

\[\ldots\text{ the solution is to look for formations of texts rather than "the text" as a place to begin analysis. [...]}\]\n
I think we can reconcile traditional modes of analysis with the so-called post-modern condition by understanding
that our first job as professional consumers of discourse is *inventing a text suitable for criticism*.

Where rhetorical criticism traditionally seeks to explain the relationship between a specific and a hypothetical reader, McGee argues that criticism is the work of a specific, politically invested writer who engages in disciplined re-appropriation of various fragments into a new text that clarifies how specific works fit into a political context. This postmodern approach can be understood as a refinement of McGee’s earlier call for rhetorical criticism to concern itself with the recovery of “ideographs,” patterns of language use (like “liberty” or “justice,” for example) that define an ideological position (1980). Rhetoricians have described Laclau’s and Mouffe’s understanding of language and politics in ways that make their theory very similar to McGee’s project. Sharon Crowly’s *Toward a Civic Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, for example, uses Laclau and Mouffe to perform criticism that is very much like McGee’s ideographic program. Conversely, James Jasinski stresses, in his discussion of ideographic criticism, the importance of “articulation,” in which an “ideograph [is] subtly modified as the ideograph [is] extended to a new topic” (310). Celeste Condit and John Lucaites similarly stress that ideographs are “totally arbitrary and absolutely polysemous,” and might therefore be articulated to lots of contexts (xiii).

Even though articulation theory has much in common with ideographic criticism (and has sometimes been almost interchangeable with it), my approach to criticism points toward a method that is quite different from the aggressively
intertextual approach that McGee advocates. I do not have any particular objection to patching together objects of study by looking for important patterns of language use, particularly because of the expanded affordances that this kind of analysis allows (and some of these affordances have yet to be fully explored), but ideographic criticism pulls the critic away from engaging the complexity of specific artifacts. I am not looking to trace the usages of particular language that binds social conservatism together; I am trying to understand how a strategy used in a particular set of influential texts functions. Micheal Leff argues that “The text itself defines the horizon of critical attention. Nothing pushes the critic across intertextual space in the effort to locate and assess the movement of rhetorical strategies and themes” (228). Leff’s argument is that criticism always involves close attention to specific works, and that this kind of attention can push one toward considering historical context. Leff’s description of the relationship between criticism and history perfectly describes my intentions.

One of the challenges of studying James Dobson is that he has been a remarkably prolific rhetor. In addition to hosting a daily radio show and penning regular newsletters for Focus on the Family for thirty years, he has maintained a busy public speaking schedule and written over two dozen books, some of which have been revised into multiple editions. My goal in selecting artifacts for study was to pick texts that stick out from the constant stream of writing that Dobson has produced because they represent particularly important moments in Dobson’s career. Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs might call these “touchstone”
texts, because they represent “potentialities realized only through their enactment in discourse” (270). The texts analyzed here are moments that helped Dobson to define himself as a public figure. One such text is the seminal *Dare to Discipline* (1970). Another is *The Strong Willed Child* (1978), an unofficial sequel to *Dare to Discipline* that was published just as Focus on the Family began. These two books are important moments in Dobson’s transition from practicing psychologist to public figure. Both books have been through multiple reprints and revisions, and they remain a part of the core of Dobson’s legacy.

In addition to these parenting books written while Dobson was still a practicing therapist establishing himself as a public figure, I am interested in artifacts in which Dobson participated in more direct political engagement. Three particularly noteworthy examples of that kind of engagement were the letter that Dobson wrote to accompany the Meese Commission report about pornography (1986), a jeremiad-like argument against the Clinton administration’s proposed changes in stem cell research policy (1993), and an open letter warning about the dangers that Barack Obama posed to the country if elected (2008).

Through analysis of this corpus I will be able to talk about the strategies Dobson used to claim an agentive position from which he could participate in public debate. These texts represent important moments in the career of an important rhetor, and they merit the kind of sustained attention that seeks to produce criticism that, to use Stanley Fish’s phase, “slow[s]down” the experience
of reading so that we can better understand how important texts work (qtd. in Jasinski 93).

The Structure of the dissertation

One of the biggest challenges of using interdiscursivity as a frame for concept oriented criticism is that it could potentially result in analysis that is scattered or superficial. If my analysis merely points out the different discourses present in Dobson’s work and claims that the presence of those discourses gives Dobson ethos, I will have failed to make my case. I have to explain which discourses Dobson uses, I have to describe how he positions himself within those discourses, and I have to describe how he reconciles them with each other. Because agentive interdiscursivity provides a frame for untangling intricately articulated rhetoric, it affords a method for carrying out the kind of complex analysis that articulation theory demands. I have organized my dissertation so that each chapter builds on the previous one, beginning with a chapter exploring the ways Dobson uses mental health rhetoric, then building on that analysis with a chapter that explores how Dobson combines mental health rhetoric with religious rhetoric, and finally demonstrating how Dobson uses interdiscursivity in different contexts. Also, I have organized my use of artifacts chronologically, and so a sketch of the arc of James Dobson’s career emerges at the same time that my theoretical concerns are thickened.

The next chapter, “Expertise and Uncertainty: James Dobson’s Strange Modernism,” is a discussion of how Dobson’s work from the early 70s responds to uncertainties in mental health care, and the artifact analyzed is Dare to
Discipline. The goal of this chapter is to understand how Dobson initially made an impact by making his quarrels with his discipline, particularly his quarrel with Benjamin Spock, public. I show not only how Dobson used his authority as a pediatric psychologist to acquire ethos, but also how his arguments can be understood as a response to contemporaneous predicaments in mental health care.

In order to do this job, I need to address a gap in American rhetoric. At present, although there is a lot of good work that might be understood as a part of a “rhetoric of mental health care” project, an agenda for this project has yet to be defined. I understand “the rhetoric of mental health care” as an exploration between the push and pull between the dominant view that mental health care should be a Modern (“Modern” is Bruno Latour’s term, which is explicated in the chapter), biologically oriented medical practice and the view that mental health care is fundamentally a culturally situated interpersonal practice. Mental health care is not homogenous, and many mental health care disciplines (including the branches of applied psychology that are most important to Christian mental health care) are invested in socially oriented, rather than biomedical, concepts of research and practice, but scholars have argued that since the shift toward medicalization that led to the publication of the DSM-III in 1980, the biomedical has been the perspective to which mental health care must respond (Berkenkotter 2008, McCarthy and Gerring 1980). The conditions that led to this shift are an important context for James Dobson’s contemporaneous work
as a public expert, particularly in the way that Dobson uses behaviorism to talk about parenting and social order.

Following my consideration of James Dobson’s use of mental health rhetoric is Chapter III, “Expertise and Evangelicalism: James Dobson’s Construction of Sacred Space,” an exploration of Dobson’s use of religious rhetoric. Religious rhetoric can be identified by its use of strategies that somehow set apart a sacred space from which a rhetor can claim higher moral authority. This concept of religious rhetoric is drawn from Kenneth Burke’s description of religious language in *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, from work about Kairos and sacred space by Dale Sullivan and Richard Crosby, and from Robert Reid’s, Jeffery Bullock’s, and David Fleer’s concept of experience oriented homiletic. This chapter includes more analysis of *Dare to Discipline*, and it includes analysis of passages from *The Strong Willed Child* (1978). *The Strong Willed Child* is a particularly significant book in Dobson’s career both because it is something of a sequel to *Dare to Discipline* and because it was published just as Dobson left his career as psychologist and began Focus on the Family. In addition to exploring another layer of the interdiscursivity that defines Dobson’s work, my analysis will hint at Dobson’s development as a rhetor around the time he fully made the leap from being a famous psychologist to being a professional media figure.

My fourth chapter, and the most single-mindedly devoted to the rhetorical analysis, is “Interdiscursive Agency and the Public Sphere: James
Dobson’s Hegemonic Rhetoric.” Here I discuss Dobson’s later career as a more traditional political actor. In this chapter, I expand my discussion of Laclau and Mouffe with a brief consideration of the concept of hegemony, and I analyze artifacts that show Dobson making more conventionally “political” arguments, specifically the letter that accompanied the Meese Commission report about pornography (1986), Dobson’s jeremiad-like argument against the Clinton administration’s proposed changes in stem cell research policy (1993), and Dobson’s apocalyptic warning about the dangers that Barack Obama posed to the country if elected (2008). Through this analysis, I demonstrate how the strategies Dobson invented as a parenting expert were useful for more overtly polemic work. In some ways, this chapter is the payoff for the preceding chapters, not only because my analysis talks about Dobson’s overall strategy, but also because this chapter shows this strategy “in action” in specific debates.

My conclusion, “Looking Forward: Expertise and Evangelical Mental Health Care,” is an acknowledgment of some of important issues in rhetoric that my project conjures but does not explore. Because my dissertation examines how Dobson used his professional expertise as a public actor and how Dobson helped to inspire a politicized industry of Evangelical mental health professionals, it suggests very big questions about relationships between expertise, politics, and rhetoric. Dobson’s career is based on his knowledge as a therapist and researcher, but some of the claims that Dobson and Focus on the Family make, particularly about gender and sexuality, are out of the mainstream. This issue is
particularly important as Dobson’s legacy is strongly felt in many contemporary
debates. Dobsonian rhetoric presents us with difficult questions about legitimacy
and epistemological boundaries that are important in contemporary democratic
life. In the work that I have so far done about Dobson, I have largely ignored, or
relegated to the margins, my concerns about the validity of some of the
arguments Dobson has made, but the issue looms large. In “Looking Forward:
Expertise and Evangelical Mental Health Care,” I propose an expansion of my
project that would confront questions about the practices of conservative
Christian therapists. In an effort to begin to lay the groundwork for this project,
this concluding chapter includes a discussion of the range of what we might
include in a study of Evangelical mental health care.

My conclusion suggests starting points for better defining the massive
project that James Dobson helped to pioneer. Evangelical mental health is an
important and complex set of practices, and it deserves serious attention from
scholars interested in expertise, politics, or religion. This dissertation is designed
to be a starting point for a much larger scholarly endeavor, and so it concludes
with an eye toward future investigation. Even though Dobson’s work is a rich
site, it barely begins to deal with either the complexities or the scope of
Evangelical mental health care.
CHAPTER II

EXPERTISE AND UNCERTAINTY

James Dobson’s Strange Modernism

As my first chapter explains, James Dobson’s contribution to contemporary American conservatism was to provide both a theoretical and infrastructural foundation for politicizing the family, and he was an important, if indirect at first, participant in the social conservative project. Dobson was hardly the first rhetor to connect the family to public controversy, but he was a pioneer in that he articulated what was seen by many as the social chaos of the late sixties to “liberal” attitudes about early childhood development. For Dobson, the violence of the sixties was not born of legitimate anger at social inequality, authoritarianism, or war; it was, instead, an outbreak of chaos caused by mid-century social experiments, particularly the progressive parenting advocated by Benjamin Spock. *Dare to Discipline* (1970) was the book where Dobson first used his authority as a pediatric expert to participate in the conservative project, and it is the foundation for his career as a political agent.

Because the political arguments in *Dare to Discipline* depend upon James Dobson’s authority as a psychologist, they present the rhetorician with a difficult problem. Political rhetoric, according to Laclau and Mouffe, involves complex articulations between different ways of knowing. The agentive interdiscursivity that enabled Dobson’s success depends heavily on his authority as an expert
about parenting, and so a description of Dobson’s work must take into account
the ways in which Dobson’s rhetoric is rooted in his credentials as a psychologist.
In order to proceed with a discussion about Dobson’s use of arguments drawn
from his work as a researcher and therapist, I must deal with an important
question about mental health care: what are the cultural circumstances of
mental health care, and how do they allow for mental health rhetoric to be
appropriated for political purposes?

Bruno Latour’s concept of “Modernism,” because it directly addresses
some of the epistemological tensions inherent of problems of the mind (which
are sometimes embodied in disciplinary conflicts between mental health
professionals), is a particularly useful starting point for rhetoricians attempting
to explore mental health care. Latour defines “Modernism” as the rhetorical
separation of the material, the discursive, and the social. In the case of mental
health care, “Modernism” can be felt in the influence of biomedical psychiatry,
which, during the past four decades, has become an increasingly important part
of how professionals who do mental health research or therapy define their
work. Biomedical psychiatry seeks to transform mental health care into
something like physical medicine, as opposed to understanding it as an
interpersonal social practice. Not every mental health care discipline has become
medical; instead, the push to define mental health along Modernist lines, along
with the backlash against this trend, provides a useful starting point for the
rhetorician to culturally locate mental health care. Paying attention to the
assumptions of Modernism affords us a way to examine how James Dobson’s arguments about parenting respond to some of the shifts in mental health care taking place during the seventies.

The chapter begins with a demonstration how *Dare to Discipline* makes broad, interdiscursive arguments out of Dobson’s professional claims about parenting. Then it includes an explication of what a non-Modern view of mental health care (“non-Modern” simply refers to investigation of the mechanisms that produce Modernism and their effects), and then it includes an analysis of *Dare to Discipline* that discusses how Dobson’s arguments respond to the tensions that underpin mental health care. It concludes with a brief discussion of articulation theory that looks forward to my third chapter, “Expertise and Evangelicalism: James Dobson’s Construction of Sacred Space,” which describes how Dobson connected his stance as a psychologist to the authority of religion.

**Dare to Discipline and agentive interdiscursivity**

James Dobson’s public career can be described in terms of its wide ranging importance. Not only did he help pioneer what became a huge mental health care project; he also founded an Evangelical media empire, served in several important positions for the Reagan administration, and became an occasionally prominent participant in policy debates. This diverse career began with the publication of *Dare to Discipline* in 1970, and in it we can see the origins of Dobson’s multifaceted life’s work. Not only was *Dare to Discipline* a pioneering text in its focus on parenting as a political issue for conservatives to
be concerned about; it was the text in which the interdiscursivity that enabled Dobson’s prominence first appeared. The following is a frequently cited passage from the introduction to *Dare to Discipline*:

Children thrive best in an atmosphere of genuine love, undergirded by reasonable, consistent discipline. In a day of widespread drug usage, immorality, civil disobedience, vandalism, and violence, we must not depend on hope and luck to fashion the critical attitudes we value in our children. That unstructured technique was applied during the childhood of the generation which is now in college, and the outcome has been quite discouraging. Permissiveness has not just been a failure; it's been a disaster! (13-14)

Dobson’s rhetorical war against “permissiveness” is both an argument by an expert against a specific school of parenting (or perhaps a popular version of it or even a strawman of it), and an attack on the values of the Left. In the catalogue of social ills Dobson presents (“widespread drug usage, immorality, civil disobedience, vandalism, and violence”), “permissive” parenting is linked to social protest, which is linked to petty criminality, substance abuse, and meaningless violence. Dobson’s primary purpose is to compare different parenting strategies, but he articulates this professional advice so broadly that a passage about his differences over pediatric psychology with Benjamin Spock becomes a jeremiad-like indictment of an entire generation. (At this point in my analysis, I will refrain from discussing the “jeremiadic” nature of Dobson’s
argument, but Dobson’s suggestion of religion is important, and I will discuss his use of religious rhetoric in my next chapter.)

I will present a fuller description of Dobson’s interdiscursive strategy in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, but as a first step, I need to discuss Dobson’s use of mental health rhetoric. Dobson’s authority as a pediatric psychologist is the foundation of his public persona, and, in fact, he still presents himself as “Dr. James Dobson,” even though he abandoned his work as a psychologist decades ago. Dobson’s pioneering work as a parenting expert in the 1970s can be understood as a response to the larger cultural tensions surrounding mental health care, and historically, his arguments about uncertainties in his field mirror the concerns that led to the drafting of DSM-III. *Dare to Discipline* is, after all, nominally a book about child care, and the bulk of *Dare to Discipline* is very specific advice about parenting delivered by an expert. (There are long explanations of the appropriate ways to use parenting tools like allowances, chores, and punishment, for example.) In order to examine it as a rhetorical artifact, then, I need first to establish grounds for a rhetorician to discuss the cultural circumstances that surround mental health care.

**A non-Modern approach to the rhetoric of mental health care**

*Dare to Discipline* appears at first to present a problematic boundary between the “inside” and “outside” of scientific expertise in a context that is occasionally marked by an oppositional ideology. Psychology does not construct the family according to the same rules as does Evangelical Christianity or
conservatism, and while all three share the goal of promoting stable, flourishing families, they have different epistemological assumptions and different cultural allegiances. Dobson’s rhetoric, which transforms arguments about pediatric psychology into political speech, might be understood as a site where we can examine a rich commensurability problem. A science-based way of understanding the family is in contact with, and presumably sometimes in conflict with, a particular set of religious beliefs and a political agenda. As I discussed in my introductory chapter, Laclau and Mouffe argue that incommensurability is a necessary part of political rhetoric; a rhetorical strategy capable of enrolling people into a worldview functions by disarticulating and rearticulating different ideas from different contexts. However, articulation theory presents a problem for rhetoric that uses science, since it means that language taken from science is being used in way that seems to damage, or at least to disregard, the integrity of a scientific discipline, as the acknowledged limitations that afford science credibility are disregarded.

One of the problems with framing *Dare to Discipline* (along with, presumably, other popular books written by mental health professionals) as a commensurability problem is that it suggests that science exists outside of economic, institutional, and linguistic contexts— that it is a culture of no culture. Bruno Latour writes, “For the epistemologist the scientific disciplines have to become solid and reliable without being connected through any sort of vessels to the rest of their world. The heart will be required to pump in and out, but there
will be no output, no body, no lungs, and no vascular system” (109). Bruno Latour calls the culture/nature/language divisions that define post-enlightenment thought “the Modern Constitution,” and he argues that these separations authorize science (*We Have Never Been Modern* 11). Donna Haraway similarly uses the metaphor of type O blood to describe science: just as blood without certain antigens can be taken from one person and given to another, science without culture can travel “into many kinds of bodies” (218).

Interrogating the post enlightenment perspectives that empower science, particularly the assumptions of positivist epistemology in scientific and technological culture, has been an important project for rhetoricians. (For example, Carolyn Miller’s seminal 1981 article, “A Humanistic Rational for Technical Writing,” frames professional communication as a response to positivism, and Stephen Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis* is an extended meditation on post enlightenment thought and rhetoric.) Carl Herndl’s contribution to this discussion has been to align rhetoric explicitly with Bruno Latour’s “Non-Modern” (as opposed to “anti-modern”) sociological project. Latour argues that an anthropological methodology allows us to recover a kind of realism by describing science as networks of activity. Of particular interest to rhetoric is Latour’s focus on the centrality of writing in the scientific process. In *Laboratory Life*, an ethnographic account of scientists working at the Salk Institute, Latour says that scientists are a “strange tribe” of “compulsive and manic writers . . . who spend the greatest part of their day coding, marking, altering, correcting,
reading, and writing” (48-49). Herndl argues that because discourse is central to the paradoxical purification and extension of impure (mixtures of material, discursive, and cultural) networks that define scientific culture, rhetoricians are particularly well equipped to explore these processes: “rhetoric articulates and rearticulates networks building broader, more extended networks by enrolling actants from the material, the discursive and the real” (230-231). Non-Modernism asks rhetoricians to look at science not as epistemology, but as an enterprise of connecting people and things into networks of activity. This enrollment depends heavily upon rhetoric not only because texts form many of the linkages in the networks of activity that constitute science (notes, records, journals, meetings), but also because discursively constructed neutral materiality offers science an authority that allows it to perpetuate itself.

Non-Modernism is meant to describe any kind of scientific enterprise, but it is particularly useful for framing a discussion of mental health care, an uncertainty fraught project that includes a wide spectrum of approaches to both therapy and research, in part because it is a project that has a particularly difficult relationship with Modern culture. Human psychology and its difficulties sprawl across the nature/culture/language divisions that define Modernism. Depending on the orientation and specialty of a particular therapist, mental health care could be either/both a medical practice or/and an interpersonal practice. Add to this confusion the fact that therapists sometimes practice in absentia by using popular media (public health pamphlets, self-help or advice
books, television or radio appearances, websites, etc.), and one can see that mental health care has a particularly strange relationship with Modernist science. Not only does mental health care exist in diverse professional and social contexts, but those contexts construct the topic in different, sometimes even opposing, ways. Depression is not the same kind of problem for a bio-medically oriented psychiatrist as it is for a pastor with a counseling certification, even though both may use the same diagnostic criteria and recommend some of the same treatments.

Choosing mental health care’s relationship to Modernism as a way to center my own interrogation has two advantages. First of all, this strategy allows me to build upon already existing rhetorical scholarship about mental health. Psychiatry has been thus far the discipline most often chosen for study among humanities scholars. Secondly, and more importantly, this approach usefully frames a dominant trend in mental health care during the past few decades: the attempt to align mental health care with the material part of Latour’s Modern Constitution. Medical humanities scholar Kevin Aho writes that contemporary mental health care has become preoccupied with “breaking down and classifying all of the various diseases of the brain and nervous system; identifying criteria that allow the psychiatrist to diagnose the proper disease; and prescribing psychotropic drugs and/or short-term cognitive-behavioral therapies” (246). One of the side effects of our increasingly biomedical understanding of mental illness is a tendency for psychiatry to extend its diagnostic apparatus deeper and
deeper into everyday human behavior. Psychiatrist Paul Chodoff writes that “some American psychiatrists, in their eagerness to include all varieties and vagaries of human feelings and behavior in their professional domain, are running the risk of trying to medicalize not only psychiatry but the human condition itself.” The trend toward biomedical diagnostic works exactly as Latour’s theory of Modernity predicts; the practical and rhetorical construction of culture-free materialism allows for networks of practice to extend themselves further and further across different social contexts.

Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and Joan Page Gerring argue that the DSM-III, published in 1980, was a “charter” document designed to transform mental health care into a “high status profession built upon investigatory science rather than a heterodox set of practices with no secure theoretical and empirical knowledge base” (158). Even though biomedical psychiatry is a push toward data-driven, culturally neutral diagnosis that uses evolutionary description, psychiatric diagnosis will never have the same kind of straightforward validity that physically oriented medicine does. To offer an example of the relative authority that medicine has, Scott Graham’s “Agency and the Rhetoric of Medicine: Biomedical Brain Scans and the Ontology of Fibromyalgia,” describes the effort to construct a disease through the grounding of that disease in the physical. Fibromyalgia, a pain disorder with an unknown etiology, became a “real” disease when scientists could take pictures of it, even if the brain scans that showed patterns of pain were only representations of symptoms. Its
“reality” was solidified when it could be treated with a chemical: “Lyrica approval functioned not only as a policy statement but also as an ontological pronouncement—i.e., it enfranchised the reality of FM” (376). Even though the means to construct Fibromyalgia as a physical problem were indirect, the fact that it could be constructed as one meant that it was “real.” Mental health care, even though it tries to imitate physical medicine with biological description and psychopharmacological treatment, exists in a much slipperier place.

Richard Vatz’s and Lee Weinberg’s “The Rhetorical Paradigm of Mental Illness: Thomas Szasz and the Myth of Mental Illness” goes so far as to implicitly question whether or not psychiatric diagnoses are not entirely cultural, political phenomena. Thomas Szasz argues that mental illnesses are constructions that serve as mechanisms for enforcing social norms, and he argues that psychiatry had adopted a “medical” ethos as a means of establishing credibility for what was a rhetorical way of categorizing behavior: “For Szasz . . . the alleged medical/scientific discovery of such ‘problems’ amounts to no more than the rhetorical creation of problems through strategic defining. . . (314).” Vatz and Weinberg argue that the trend toward biomedicine that consumed psychiatry was a strategic “attempt at proof or authentication” (319).10

This trend toward the biomedical does not, of course, define all mental health care (in fact, one of mental health care’s defining features is plurality), and it has hardly gone unnoticed. The recent history of mental health care is filled with explicit and sometimes bitter public debates between those who
advocate a biomedical, evolutionary perspective and those who advocate an interpersonal, discursive perspective. Significantly, the skeptical views of the ontological status of mental health care discussed above are not wholly dissimilar from the view that many insiders, like the aforementioned psychiatrist Paul Chodoff, have. The ongoing work being done to draft the *DSM-V*, for example, has provoked statements of protest from professional organizations and petitions with thousands of signatures from therapists (Waters). Carol Bernstein, the past president of the American Psychiatric Association who helped to initiate the creation of the *DSM-V*, explains that the categories of the various editions of the *DSM* are “useful placeholders, based on careful descriptions, but not on deeper understandings,” and while the *DSM* has been a useful tool for guiding research and standardizing the kinds of diagnosis that are appropriate for therapists to make, “That very success . . . has given rise to a serious unintended consequence: *DSM* diagnoses have come, over the last four decades, to be treated as "real entities" in the world, that is, they have been reified.”

Even though many who participate in the wide spectrum of disciplined practices that we might label “mental health care” reject the biomedical, it is the hegemony to which they have to respond. Hegemony, after all, is not monoculture. Many mental health care disciplines are invested in socially oriented, rather than biomedical, concepts of research and practice. T.M. Lurhmann’s *Of Two Minds*, an ethnographic account of contemporary training
in psychiatry, writes that biomedical psychiatry is compelling because it is tangible: “. . . in the world of rationalized and rationed medicine, . . . claims [for the efficacy of psychodynamic, socially oriented mental health care] seem unbearably ambiguous. They provide no guidelines to anyone about the length of adequate trial of therapy, about its type, or about who should deliver it” (207).

Carol Berkenkotter’s study of narrative in psychiatry notes that psychodynamic interaction and storytelling are central both to the history of mental health care and to its current practice, but increasingly, legitimacy has been defined according to data driven, biomedical standards: “The effect of the *DSM-III* . . . was to codify the classifications of psychopathology and to mandate therapists’ use of a nomothetic nomenclature, despite many therapists’ insistence on the idiographic and interpersonal nature of their clients’ problems” (160).

*Dare to Discipline* was published during the period when mental health care was evolving toward the biomedical, and the Modernist tensions surrounding mental health care are an important, and overlooked, context for the arguments that Dobson makes. McCarthy and Gerring argue that from the mid-sixties to the early eighties psychiatrists who subscribed to Emil Kraepelin’s theory that mental health care should be a medical practice concerned with treating well defined illness mounted a campaign to establish a new consensus in mental health care: “the sheer number of pieces sharing the neo-Kraepelinian orientation forced mental health researchers to acknowledge the importance of the biomedical model” (158, 160). While James Dobson’s response to
uncertainty in mental health care was very different one from those of the neo-Kraepelinians whose work established the foundations of biomedical psychiatry, we can understand his pioneering early work as being a part of the same conversation, particularly because Dobson so emphatically grounds his arguments in behaviorism and biology.

**Dare to Discipline’s Modernist vision**

While biomedical psychiatry was attempting to rearticulate the disarrayed disciplines concerned with mental health care, James Dobson was building his career as a public figure. Of course, Dobson, a psychologist who was concerned about parenting, had a very different agenda than psychiatrists who were trying to standardize diagnoses according to a medical ideology, and his arguments do not perfectly parallel those that lead to the emergence of biomedical psychiatry. The following passage from *Dare to Discipline* is Dobson’s survey of the disorder in his discipline:

> The American public has been subjected to many wildhorse opinions about child discipline, which have galloped off rapidly in all directions. Everyone. . . has his own unique viewpoint about how children should be controlled, and what is worse, the experts have often been in direct contradiction with one another. The cause of their disagreement is simple: the principles of good discipline cannot be ascertained by scientific inquiry. [. . .] Despite the disagreement in the past, I am thoroughly convinced that the proper control of children can be found in
reasonable, commonsense philosophy, were five key elements are
paramount. (25)

Dobson’s claim that “scientific inquiry” (presumably quantitative, controlled
research) cannot address parenting initially suggests that we see him as being
radically divergent from the neo-Kraepelinian movement in psychiatry, but this
passage echoes it in important ways. While Dobson defends the validity of
psychology as a professional field, his purpose is to lament that expert opinion is
scattered “in all directions,” and even though he does not go so far as to declare
other perspectives invalid, he claims that he is putting to rest the disorder
through a more logical ideology.

Both Dobson and contemporaneous advocates of biomedical psychiatry
were motivated by concern with the muddle of mental health care research and
practice, and both preferred to ground their arguments in biological causality.
For biomedical psychiatrists, this meant an advocacy of quantitative research
about diagnosis based on evolutionary theory and symptom oriented treatment.
For Dobson, this meant an advocacy of experience-based arguments for cause-
and-effect behaviorism. Dobson writes in his introduction:

The recommendations in this book are not experimental or speculative. [. . ]
They are not based on abstruse theoretical assumptions, but rather on
practical consequences. As Jack London has stated, “the best
measurement of anything should be: does it work?” (14)
While Dobson refuses to call for quantitative research, he is interested in a kind of empiricism: that of practical experience. The reference to naturalist Jack London is a preview of Dobson’s approach to psychology; his answers to questions about childhood development are drawn from behaviorism. Dobson believes that children need to be “trained” in certain ways to accept and internalize authority. In important ways, this model resembles Freudianism, with a politically conservative slant and a biologically specific twist. The superego, for Dobson, is constructed not from social pressure, but from proper training. In his chapter describing specific parenting techniques, “The Miracle Tools,” he begins with a long story about teaching tricks to his dog Siggy (named after Freud) using cookies as rewards:

This reinforcement technique was useful in teaching Siggy to go chase a ball . . . . [...] More serious attempts have been made to teach sophisticated behavior to animals by the principles of reinforcement, and the results have been remarkable. (64-65)

He goes on to describe different principles of Skinnerian reinforcement as it might apply to parenting. He often includes maxims derived from behaviorism, such as “any behavior which is learned through reinforcement can be eliminated if the reward is withheld long enough” and “parents and teacher are also vulnerable to reinforcement” (78, 88).

Dobson uses this naturalist frame not to only to discuss narrow issues about the psychology of parenting, but also to talk about broad social concerns.
He begins the first chapter of the book with a biological analogy describing the dangers of drug use and sexual freedom. He is arguing in this passage that because society has slowly changed into a more liberal place, we are unable to recognize the dangers of permissiveness. He begins by setting up his story as a description of scientific realism: “Nature has generously equipped most animals with a fear of things that could be harmful to them. Their survival depends on recognition of a particular danger in time to avoid it” (15). He quickly shifts into a more colloquial voice and offers an example:

But good old Mother Nature did not protect the frog quite so well; she overlooked a serious flaw in his early warning system that sometimes proves fatal. If a frog is placed in a pan of warm water under which the heat is being increased very gradually, he will typically show no inclination to escape. [. . .] He will just sit there, contentedly peering over the edge of the pan while the steam curls ominously around his nostrils. Eventually, the boiling frog will pass on to his reward, having succumbed to an unnecessary misfortune that he could easily have avoided. (15)

Dobson admits that he has moved from a naturalist description of biology (explaining that fear is a survival mechanism) to using frogs as a metaphor, but he does so without abandoning his “naturalist” grounding:

Now obviously, this is a book about parents and children, not frogs. But human beings have some of the same perceptual inadequacies as their
little green friends. We have passively accepted a slowly deteriorating youth scene without uttering a croak of protest” (16).

This move is particularly rich, as it admits to the extravagance of Dobson’s allegory (the cultural changes of the 60s and 70s were like a frog being slowly boiled alive!?) while holding onto the authority of expertise. He argues that we cannot assess our degraded state because we suffer from “perceptual inadequacies” that are cognitively similar to an animal in an unnatural situation for which its warning mechanisms are ill-equipped.

Here we see how Dobson articulates his responses to his discipline to other discourses. This passage is at once a simple fable that espouses common sense through a tall tale-like colloquial story (that he did not invent), an expert’s explanation of cognitive phenomenon, and a blistering assessment of contemporary America. The frog serves as an accessible story, but also a rather grim example. It is not that Dobson has a difference of opinion; it is that we are being boiled alive and do not know it. A naturalist argument that people become acclimated to their environments is articulated to a warning that our cultural norms have become dangerous. Again, we see ordinary common sense and expert opinion intertwined.

One of the key paradoxes of Dare to Discipline is that Dobson creates identification with his audience by positioning himself against the elite opinions of the mental health establishment. Dobson begins the book with a horror story of an unruly, intolerable child and an ineffectual mother shackled to the
“unworkable” and “permissive” philosophy of child care that foregoes the use of discipline:

Mrs. Nichols and her little daughter are among the many casualties of an unworkable, illogical philosophy of child management which has dominated the literature on this subject during the past twenty years. This mother had read that a child will eventually respond to patience and tolerance, ruling out the need for discipline.” (11-12)

The persona Dobson adopts here is that of an expert-- he is qualified to comment that a school of parenting that has “dominated the literature . . . during the last twenty years” is “illogical.” As the passage continues, Dobson’s complaint implicitly transforms from being a strictly professional opinion into being a commonsense observation and moral judgment:

She has been taught that conflicts between parent and child were to be perceived as inevitable misunderstandings or differences in viewpoint. Unfortunately, Mrs. Nichols and her advisors were wrong! She and her child were involved in no simple difference of opinion; she was being challenged, mocked, and defied by her daughter. (12)

Dobson characterizes progressive “permissive” parenting as being an acceptance of a peer relationship between a child and an adult, and he argues that the unruly child is not just being disruptive, but actively challenging the social order. Dobson concludes the anecdote with a reiteration of this grim take on the situation: “the real issue was totally unrelated to the water or the nap or other
aspects of the particular circumstances. The actual meaning behind this conflict and a hundred others was simply this: Sandy was brazenly rejecting the authority of her mother” (12).

Dobson’s argument is that the faddish trends in mainstream pediatric psychology (or at least, he makes an “expert” claims about these trends) should be done away with and replaced by a school of parenting that conforms to a commonsensical behaviorist cause-and-effect model. This is a rich stance that, curiously, allows him to make a naturalist argument authorized by expertise that is also a populist, anti-elite argument. Dobson is not only an expert; he is a wise expert, capable of critiquing mainstream mental health care through the common sense of the superior moral grounding of the everyday social order. Parents and children cannot be peers or society will fall apart. The reader is invited not only to consider Dobson’s practical advice, but to take comfort in the acceptable common sense and moral certainty to which it is articulated. Dobson writes, “I reject [laissez-faire parenting] and I have considerable evidence to refute it” (13). This rhetoric divides the practical, ethical, morally grounded “we” from an aloof elite who would risk families and societies for their ideological commitment to permissiveness.

The various contexts that Dobson has put his argument in include professional judgment, common sense, timeless moral law, and social critique, and this interdiscursive strategy invites the audience to share not just Dobson’s narrow opinions about techniques of raising a child, but an overarching
worldview. Dobson’s argument is both “my professional opinions cut through the muddle of the mental health care establishment and you should listen to me” and “your moral responsibility is to establish a social order and quell dissent.” The strangely hostile language Dobson uses to describe children makes sense only when we see his arguments in the light of the political and moral contexts in which he places them. Dobson writes, in one of the most famous and controversial passages from the book:

> When a youngster tries this kind of stiff-necked rebellion, you had better take it out of him, and pain is a marvelous purifier [. . .]. You have drawn a line in the dirt, and the child has deliberately flopped his big hairy toe across it. Who is going to win? Who has the most courage? Who is in charge here? (27)

Dobson’s style here might be read as a challenge to the “permissive” school of parenting or as an effort to steel the noncommittal parent for her (Dobson uses feminine pronouns and mothers as his representative weak parents) responsibilities, but the evocation of “hairy” rebellion is an almost overt evocation of the sixties counterculture. This strange language choice (hairy toes on a toddler?) is also suggestive of threatening un-subdued wildness. The child threatens to become a dissident hippy or a demonic beast. Dobson argues that if rebellion is not quelled at the earliest possible stage in a child’s development schism and disorder are inevitable:
A controlling but patient hand will eventually succeed in settling the little tyrant, but probably not until he is about four years of age. Unfortunately, however, the child’s attitude toward authority can be severely damaged during his toddler years. The parent who loves her cute little butterball so much that she cannot risk antagonizing him, may lose and never regain his control [. . .] The proper time to begin disarming the teen-age time-bomb is twelve years before it arrives. Perhaps the most difficult problems referred to me occur with the rebellious, hostile teen-ager for whom the parents have done everything wrong since he was born. [. . .] For a psychologist, this problem must be approached as a physician views terminal cancer: "I can't cure it now; it's too late. Perhaps I can make its consequences less painful." (33-34)

Dobson ends this narrative that connects disciplining small children to juvenile delinquency to moral chaos with a medical analogy. Even though he has gone to the trouble of transforming his professional judgments into common sense and then into large scale social commentary, he resolves the incongruities of the political and social conflicts he is using to frame his warnings about disciplining toddlers by steering the audience back into a biologically oriented therapeutic context. Dobson frames his argument with appeals to conservative prudence, appeals to timeless wisdom, invocations of moral panic, and appeals to a “commonsense” distrust of elitist, faddish science, but ultimately, Dobon’s
argument is held together by his ethos as a psychologist and by behaviorist arguments about psychology.

**Articulation, paradox, and interdiscursivity**

Dale Buss writes that “. . .even Dobson agrees that *Dare to Discipline* was far from a literary tour de force.[. . .] The book is actually a somewhat loosely packaged collection of essays and snippets of advice whose subjects are mainly united by being Dobson’s passions in those days” (45). While I agree with Buss’s (and Dobson’s) assessment that the book is a strangely organized outpouring with a wildly shifting authorial voice, the book is “united” in ways that are more important than he acknowledges. Richard Vatz argues that rhetorical situations are defined not through the intrinsic properties of a case, but through rhetorical activity: “When political commentators talk about issues they are talking about situations made salient, not something that became important because of its intrinsic predominance” (160). The work of articulation, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is simply the work of “making salient” some aspects of a situation while denying others. In *Dare to Discipline*, Benjamin Spock, violence, and drug abuse share a context that excludes, for example, the Vietnam War or the violence directed toward the civil rights movement.

In his description of articulation theory, Lawrence Grossberg writes: “The concept of articulation provides a useful starting point for describing the process of forging connections between practices and effects, as well as of enabling practices to have different, often unpredicted effects” (54). Behaviorism was not
a theory that reified commonsense conservatism until James Dobson recognized that it could become one. This new articulation is a surprising one, as behaviorism seems to be at odds with the moral agenda of Dare to Discipline. Biological theories about human behavior have often found itself odds with the religious movement with which Dobson is associated; behaviorism is a theory explained by evolution, which James Dobson does not believe happened.

One of the curious aspects of Dare to Discipline is that it is simultaneously a book that depends on expert authority (and a book that is a response to disciplinary problems in psychology), and a populist complaint about elitism. Laclau’s “On Populism” (a precedent for Hegemony and Socialist Strategy) argues that populism is not native to any particular kind of politics, but is instead a kind of rhetorical strategy built out of “interpellations and contradictions—which constitute the raw material on which class ideological practices operate” (161). Populism can be directed toward lots of different purposes, and it is deeply entangled in self-contradiction. Dobson uses expertise to argue that the social order of tradition is better than expertise. Dobson’s rhetoric, which uses Modernist rhetoric to argue against the chaos of the present, might seem strange, but this kind of idiosyncrasy is how populist strategies function. We must ask not only what the political consequences of these strategies are, but we must examine how they are constructed.

This kind of paradox is not, according to articulation theory, novel. Grossberg writes that articulation “often involves delinking or disarticulating
connections in order to connect others” (54). Dobson’s work can be understood not only as a conservative rant about the dramatic social changes of the 1960s, but also as a response to cultural tensions surrounding his discipline, but even as Dobson constructs an ethos of expertise, he positions himself as rebel against his discipline. The particular contradictions Dobson constructs are not the only way that expertise can be used for political purposes, but the paradox of the strange figure, the Modernist anti-elitist expert, that Dobson becomes in his writing suggests how the serious are the challenges inherent in using expert knowledge to find political agency. More immediately, this figure helps us to think about the popular conservative rhetoric that has become one of the dominant voices in our politics.

We can see in James Dobson’s nuanced arguments with his discipline a rhetor working to reorient the relationships between politics and science, and even if his authorial voice slips from time to time, the possibilities that Dobson created with this brilliant performance became very important for public life in the United States. I have begun, in this chapter, to suggest the strategies Dobson used to connect his opinions about psychology to other discourses, but I have not yet explored them in depth. The following chapter, “Expertise and Evangelicalism: James Dobson’s Construction of Sacred Space” discusses Dobson’s construction of religious rhetoric, and it explores the ways that Dobson connects his expert authority to the moral certainty of conservative Evangelicalism. I have so far addressed agentive interdiscursivity in terms of
Dobson’s articulation of his professional perspective to a broad social agenda. I will now complicate matters further by talking about how Dobson defined mental health care and religion as a part of the same worldview.
CHAPTER III
EXPERTISE AND EVANGELISM

James Dobson’s Construction of Sacred Space

In his discussion of articulation theory and conservatism, Lawrence Grossberg argues that the American Right’s success can be attributed not to conservatives’ skill at conventional political debate or organizing, but to their attention to cultural work. Grossberg argues that discourses that encourage cultural affiliation are more important than the campaigning and arguing that we conventionally understand to be “political” rhetoric. He writes, “rather than attempting to win the minds of the nation, this is a struggle over its heart and body. This project works at the intersections of politics, everyday life, and popular culture. [. . .] In this contest, culture leads politics” (255). Grossberg’s analysis illuminates how James Dobson, whose work is intimately concerned with the everyday business of parenting and marriage rather than with policy debate or electoral politics, participates in the shaping of conservative partisanship.

So far, I have discussed the rhetorical strategies Dobson used to articulate his expertise as a psychologist to a populist conservative perspective. Paying attention to those strategies allows us to understand how Dobson’s informed responses to contemporaneous issues in psychology helped him to participate rhetorically in “the intersections of politics, everyday life, and popular culture,”
where political work happens. Understanding how Dobson used his expertise as a psychologist in his earliest popular work allows us to see the foundations of the even more intimate engagement in the life of his audience that he undertook through his work with Focus on the Family; by writing about the family Dobson became a broadcaster who made daily appearances in the homes of his audience. His occasional forays into conventional politics (as opposed to the kind of politically important cultural work that articulation theory describes), which began in earnest during the Clinton Administration, are a big part of Dobson’s legacy as a prominent conservative, but his work as a public psychologist is arguably more important. Not only did Dobson help to pioneer a conservative Christian mental health care industry and help create evangelical popular culture, he also established important new ways for social conservatives to speak.

Dobson’s expertise as a psychologist is the foundation of his career as a prominent rhetor, but there is another important discourse that must be taken into account in order to describe how Dobson’s rhetoric functions: religion. While religion is an obviously important part of Dobson’s work (not only has James Dobson collaborated with other important figures from the Religious Right but Focus on the Family is nominally a ministry), it is a difficult topic to treat appropriately. First of all, even though Evangelical Christianity is a key element in Dobson’s work, Dobson is not primarily a religious rhetor. Religion is, instead, a part of the agentive interdiscursivity that defines Dobson’s rhetorical
strategy. A responsible analysis of Dobson’s work must seriously explore the ways that Dobson uses religion without succumbing to the temptation to define him as a polemicist for conservative Evangelicalism. Such a view suggests something duplicitous about Dobson’s mental health expert persona; if Dobson’s use of mental health rhetoric is compromised by a fundamentalist agenda, then he becomes disingenuous charlatan rather than a sophisticated rhetor. Secondly, an analysis that seeks to understand Dobson’s use of religious rhetoric must have a way to delineate “religious rhetoric” from other kinds of argument. What makes a rhetorical strategy “religious”? Is it a use of particular cultural signifiers? Is it the use of dogma as a part of an argument?

In this chapter, I argue that in order to understand Dobson’s interdiscursive use of religion, religious rhetoric should be understood as rhetoric that sets aside sacred space from which a rhetor can project moral authority, and I explore strategies that Dobson uses to combine religious rhetoric with arguments drawn from his expertise as a psychologist. I begin with a discussion of the importance of religious rhetoric in Dobson’s work, first by responding to approaches other rhetoricians have taken and then by explicating my own approach to defining of religious rhetoric as sacred space. Then I perform analysis of passages from Dare to Dare to Discipline (1970) and The Strong Willed Child (1978). The Strong Willed Child is, in many ways, a sequel to Dare to Discipline, both because it contains more developed versions of the arguments found in the earlier book, and also because it directly addresses the
controversies surrounding it. *The Strong Willed Child* is an important artifact in Dobson’s career because it was published in 1978, the year that Dobson left his career as a psychologist to start the *Focus on the Family* radio show. It therefore offers a snapshot of Dobson’s development as a rhetor at an important moment in his career. Finally, I return to a discussion of articulation theory that looks forward to my fourth chapter, “Interdiscursive Agency and the Public Sphere: James Dobson’s Hegemonic Rhetoric.” That chapter, the final in the dissertation that includes rhetorical analysis, discusses how Dobson has used combinations of expert rhetoric and religious rhetoric in public debate.

**James Dobson and religion**

James Dobson is generally (and appropriately) understood as part of the Religious Right, and so we must take seriously the ways that religion informs his rhetorical strategies. Even though religion is important to Dobson’s career as a public figure, I wish not to argue that Dobson is somehow “really” a religious leader working through texts about parenting, but that he articulates the authority of religious rhetoric to arguments derived from his experience as a psychologist. Even if Dobson’s opinions about parenting and marriage do not always reflect contemporary research in psychology (and the distance between Dobson and mainstream mental health care has widened over the years), as the previous chapter demonstrates, his model of family life is built upon expert arguments about psychology. Not only does Dobson draw from his experience as a therapist, but his arguments are a reflection of the cultural tensions that
surround mental health care, and he positions his work within contemporaneous debates about developmental psychology. While we cannot understand Dobson’s career as a public figure without discussing religion, I do not mean to suggest that his formative works are something other than efforts to popularize a particular expertise-informed perspective about parenting. Dobson is a rhetor who makes populist arguments that depend upon expertise and upon religion. Evangelical Christianity and applied psychology are, for Dobson, complimentary ways of understanding social order, and an analysis of his work should try to understand how he combines the two.12

Taking seriously the religious aspects of Dobson’s work while avoiding the trap of describing Dobson as a religious figure can be difficult. Even Dan Gilgoff, whose book about Focus on the Family argues emphatically that Dobson’s work should be primarily understood as therapeutic rather than religious or conventionally “political,” titles a chapter about the Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs, “The American Vatican.” Sharon Crowley’s Toward a Civic Discourse, a book length examination of the Religious Right that uses Laclau’s and Mouffe’s articulation theory as its lens, includes a discussion of Dobson that offers an example of the hazards of discussing Dobson’s use of religious rhetoric without carefully considering the ways that these arguments depend upon a project concerned with advice about the family. Crowley’s most sustained engagement with Dobson is an explication of an exchange between Dobson and George Stephanopoulos about Senator Daniel Patrick Leahy’s
supposed hatred of conservative Christians because Leahy took a religious phrase out of an oath. Crowley writes:

Dobson’s outburst can be read as an example of the conservative Christian habit of conducting argument from premises that are certified, prima facie, to be universally true. In the model of argument anyone who omits God’s name, innocently or not, on a ceremonial occasion wherein god has in the past been ritually invoked obviously does not have access to the divine reality wherein all events are dictated by the will of God. [. . .] And so Dobson’s tirade must be read as an example of Christian self-victimization. (161)

This treatment of Dobson badly misrepresents him as a public figure, and because it fails to locate the argument Dobson was making about Senator Leahy within his larger project, it neither helps us understand how Dobson uses religion rhetorically nor does it help us to understand how Dobson constructs “the religious” in his rhetoric. While Crowley’s intent is, of course, to make arguments about the Religious Right as a whole rather than to examine Dobson specifically, removing Dobson’s most strident statements from a long and important career as a parenting expert ignores the family-oriented project that made Dobson important.

More seriously, Crowley’s treatment of Dobson reflects a problematic dichotomy between “liberalism and Christian fundamentalism” that informs her understanding of the Religious Right (2). While Crowley’s point about Dobson’s
reliance on the authority of religion is well taken, the implicit dichotomy she
draws between Dobson’s irrational, intractable partisanship and rational,
deliberative liberal discourse does not take seriously Laclau’s and Mouffe’s
argument that all political work happens through rhetorical strategies that
construct affiliation. Crowley writes: “A hegemony is any set of signifiers and
practices that achieves a powerful, near-exclusive hold on a community’s beliefs
and actions. [. . . ] It is important to remember that hegemony does not name an
entity; a hegemony is a relation among competing ways of constructing the
world” (63-4). By cordonning off the Religious Right from other rhetoric that
engages in political articulation, Crowley obscures some of the important
relations upon which Dobson’s rhetoric depends, specifically Dobson’s responses
to cultural tensions surrounding the status of mental health care. The partisan
articulations Dobson’s project constructs are founded, in part, upon the rational
liberal tradition that Crowley claims are their opposite.

Jim Kuypers’s analysis of a letter Dobson wrote in 1993 in response to a
change in policy about how fetal tissue could be used in research, while more
sympathetic to Dobson and more inclusive in its understanding of the
parameters of appropriate public rhetoric, similarly fails to take into account the
complex intersection that Dobson’s rhetoric constructs. In a Focus on the Family
newsletter, Dobson lambasted the decision as an assault on the unborn because
it would (according to Dobson) eventually make late term abortion a common
procedure. Kuypers argues that Dobson has been unfairly demonized because
his rhetoric opposes scientism in favor of an agentive, morally aware religious rhetoric:

For Dobson, we are all implicated whether we want to be or not. Societal and human redemption begins with an individual’s agent’s action, however. Dobson was ‘going through’ drama here—science side steps human drama and does not confront moral issues. (155)

While Dobson’s outraged, quite literally Jeremiadic (Dobson even invokes an apocalypse with references to Megiddo) religious response is a morally challenging rhetoric that implicates all of society, Kuypers idea that Dobson moves beyond scientism is overly neat, and it misses a key strategy in the letter.

Dobson’s letter is a religiously oriented moral drama, but it is also an argument that depends upon an ethos of medical knowledge. The articulation of rhetoric that depends upon interaction between Dobson’s expertise as a therapist and religious discourse is the kind of hegemonic work that Laclau and Mouffe encourage us to think about. The center of Dobson’s religious argument (I agree with Kuypers that Dobson’s argument is religious because of the strategy of “setting apart” the drama he constructs from the ordinary through the use of Jeremiad-like features, not because Dobson is motivated by religion) is a gruesome description of one particularly ghastly procedure for performing a very late term abortion:

That process is not widely understood because the fetal researchers apparently don’t want the public to know what they are doing. [. . . ]
Their method is called dilation and extraction or D & X. Over two days the cervix is dilated. Then an ultrasounds device and forceps are used to reach in a grab the baby’s feet. The little body is pulled downward until just the head remains in the cervix. Next, the abortionist grasps the nape of the neck and cuts open the back of the skull with blunt scissors. A device called a cannula is then inserted into the wound and the brain material is sucked out. [. . .] Does this happen routinely? No, because there is no reason for a woman to carry a baby to term if she does not intend to let it live. But the advent of tissue harvesting changes the equation. (qdt. In Kuypers 159-160)

Dobson introduces this section of the letter with a claim of special expertise: “the process is not widely understood” because the medical community has not been willing to discuss it with the public. He also makes a point to use unnecessary jargon. His choice to label the “cannula,” for example, does nothing to enhance our understanding of the procedure since he does not actually explain what it looks like or how it works. Dobson’s sometimes ironic “the” constructions (the “neutral” effect of the hypothetical “the” is here used as a way to outrage the reader) also demonstrate his ability to talk “like a doctor.” Also, the claim that a gruesome procedure that is almost never used would become common if the moral “equation” were changed by fetal tissue research implies knowledge about medical ethics and culture that the layperson does not have. Would opening a new line of fetal tissue lead to more late term abortions? Dobson’s claim is
supported primarily by his “expert” persona. Dobson, as a staunch pro-life voice, is, as Kuypers argues, rebuking the ethic of expediency (to borrow a phrase from Steven Katz) that he sees as a defining feature of medical research, but he is doing so as an insider. He is not sidestepping scientific culture, but strategically using fragments of it.

The articulation of sacred space

Of course, both Crowley and Kuypers have agendas other than my own, and I do not mean to suggest that their analyses are not useful. However, their analyses fail to take seriously the ways in which religious rhetoric is a part of an intersection with professional expertise in Dobson’s work, and so their work does not explain how Dobson came to occupy such a powerful agentive position, nor does it paint a full picture of Dobson as a public figure. In order to describe religion as a part of an interdiscursive strategy, I need criteria for describing religious rhetoric that allows me to not only to identify religious rhetoric, but that allows me to discuss what religious rhetoric does. What is religious rhetoric, and what does religious rhetoric add to the authority and logic that a rhetoric of professional expertise provides?

A starting point for a defining religious rhetoric is to define linguistic features that we might call “religious.” Kenneth Burke argues that religious discourse is defined by language that sets apart. Religious language, for Burke, reminds us of the distance between the scared and the profane, and the distance between the intelligible and the transcendent. Burke explains that religious
words function through difference and negation or through the appropriation of
words in ways that are overtly metaphorical. In a religious context “father” and
“bread” have meanings contrary to their literal definitions. Some words, in fact,
like “spirit” or “glory” have become so enmeshed in religion that their
naturalistic origins have been obscured. Other religious language functions
through “not” word formations (“immortal”). Although the specific linguistic
phenomena that Burke describes provides one way of defining religious rhetoric
for analysis, the more general point Burke makes, that religious discourse is
concerned with setting apart sacredness, defines religious discourse as a
particular kind of rhetorical strategy that might be constructed and used in many
different ways.  

Robert Reid, Jeffery Bullock, and David Fleer argue that contemporary
American Christian discourse, which they call a “new homiletic,” is defined by
dramaturgical rhetoric rather than reason: “We believe that the most productive
aspect of this emerging paradigm shift in homiletic method is its focus on the
creation of experience as opposed to a propositional privileging of content” (1).
Their analysis provides a useful starting place for considering how Burke’s
definition of religious language points toward criteria for describing religious
discourse as a rhetorical strategy, and it begins to help us understand how
religious rhetoric can be used as a source of authority. Richard Benjamin
Crosby’s “Kairos as God’s Time in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Last Sunday
Sermon,” is an example of criticism that explores one particular strategy for
“setting aside.” Crosby’s argument, which draws from Dale Sullivan’s idea that “belief” rhetoric is kairos oriented, is that Martin Luther King’s rhetoric creates “pauses” in time to set aside a sacred space in which persuasion can happen: “. . . We might surmise that, for King, the authority of God derives not from an opaque structure or strategic symbol; rather, it is located within a sanctified zone, a place set apart from the proverbial ‘outside’” (267). King’s formal approach mimics the concept of sacredness (which means “set apart”) and his purpose as a political actor: “[Rhetoric] is . . . a tool for social change– a way to alter the trajectory of time itself” (265).15

While formal analyses like Crosby’s are valuable for identifying features that might make rhetoric sacred, my own approach to thinking about religious discourse as one of several incommensurable hegemonic discourses is a bit different from Crosby’s project of exploring how sacredness is constructed. In order to discuss James Dobson’s work, I must acknowledge his use of rhetoric that sets his argument apart from the profane, but I must not do so in a way that does not fail to take into account the ways religions rhetoric is combined with arguments that depend upon his status as a psychologist. My response to Kuypers’ analysis of Dobson’s open letter about fetal tissue research and abortion (that artifact will be revisited in the next chapter) suggests how a text can draw from both professional expertise and religion, and the following analysis will further develop my treatment of agentive interdiscursivity in Dobson’s early work. My goal is not to refute my previous characterization of
Dobson’s work as being primarily concerned with the dissemination of expertise about the family, but to build upon that analysis by demonstrating the ways that Dobson uses religion to lend moral weight to his arguments.

**James Dobson’s sacred spaces**

*Dare to Discipline* was Dobson’s entrance into public life, and it is therefore more narrowly focused on issues pertaining to pediatric psychology than his later work. When he wrote *Dare to Discipline*, the conversation that Dobson developed with his audience and with other public figures about parenting, family, Christianity, and culture was in its infancy, and the interdiscursive strategy that defined his career as a public figure, articulating psychological expertise with religious authority, was not yet fully developed. *Dare to Discipline* has, therefore, far fewer overtly religious statements, mostly delivered in passing, than texts Dobson produced just a few years later. I do not mean to suggest that there are *no* overtly religious references in the book or that Dobson’s arguments were not intended for a conservative Christian audience. Significantly, the book was published by Tyndale House, a Christian publisher, and in the book’s introduction, Dobson includes a quintessential example of his blend of religious rhetoric and expert authority:

> The recommendations in this manuscript are not experimental or speculative. They represent an approach to child management than can be trusted. [Discipline] bridges the generation gap which otherwise separates the family members who should love and trust each other. It allows the
God of our fathers to be introduced to our beloved children. [...] It encourages a child to respect his fellow men, and live as a responsible constructive citizen. (14)

Here, Dobson augments his argument that his advice is practical and based on experience with an invocation to a past that is removed from transient everyday life. By instilling discipline, a parent can not only mend the “generation gap,” but she or he can piece together a lineage that runs to the distant past where “our fathers” lived. Here, Dobson argues that his advice moves the reader from the chaotic everyday world into a timeless, complete space. Here Dobson attempts, to use Crosby’s phrase, “to alter the trajectory of time itself” (265).

Few statements in *Dare to Discipline* are as markedly religious as the one analyzed above, but the strategy of stepping outside of the disordered present often reoccurs. Revisiting a few passages analyzed in my last chapter with a focus on looking for instances when Dobson “sets aside” his arguments from what he characterizes as the dysfunctional muddle of the present suggests that even though Dobson was not yet forcefully advertising his Evangelical Christian worldview, the strategies he used might be characterized as proto-religious rhetoric. Early in the book, even before Dobson has established the “tradition vs. transient fad” theme that drives his argument, Dobson claims that “The recommendations in this book are not experimental or speculative” (14). Later, when Dobson defends his advice by positioning it as a grounded alternative to the contemporaneous confusion in mental health care, he writes:
The American public has been subjected to many wildhorse opinions about child discipline, which have galloped off rapidly in all directions. Everyone... has his own unique viewpoint about how children should be controlled, and what is worse, the experts have often been in direct contradiction with one another. (24)

During the same discussion, Dobson steps outside of the present moment to argue that the contrast he draws, between timeless common sense and contemporary chaos, is one that might apply to any point in human history:

Methods and philosophies regarding control of children have been the subject of heated debate and disagreement for centuries. [. . .]

Unfortunately, the prevailing philosophy at a particular time seems to be more influential on parental approaches to discipline than does common sense. (23)

Throughout the book, Dobson characterizes contemporary social changes as chaotic disorder caused by this transience. For example, he writes: “The rapid reversal of sexual mores is unparalleled in man’s history. Never has a society abandoned its concept of morality more suddenly than occurred in America during the decade of the sixties” (167).

Even though full-fledged religious rhetoric is scarce in Dare to Discipline, looking at the text with knowledge of Dobson’s later work allows us to recognize an embryonic version of the religious rhetoric that defines Dobson’s work. In 1978’s The Strong Willed Child we can see Dobson more forcefully use religion
to argue that the wisdom of tradition is a remedy for faddish and destructive trends in contemporary psychology. *The Strong Willed Child*, while not nominally a sequel to *Dare to Discipline*, is in many ways a further development of the discussion began in the earlier book, and it often explicitly discusses the public career that *Dare to Discipline* began. The interdiscursivity that Dobson uses in the earlier book to unite his behaviorist program for parenting with moral authority and sacred space is found here in a form that is much more considered and much more explicit. By comparing the two texts, not only can we see Dobson becoming a more controlled, deliberate rhetor, but we can also more clearly the discourses that make *Dare to Discipline* more than just a parenting manual. In *The Strong Willed Child*, the gifted but sometimes erratic writer who wrote *Dare to Discipline* has grown into a more seasoned and bolder participant in public debate.

Dobson begins the second chapter of *The Strong Willed Child*, an extended explanation of his behaviorist program of using corporal punishment entitled “Shaping the Will,” with anecdotes about children who attempted to destroy copies of *Dare to Discipline* because the book led to their getting spanked:

Dr. Benjamin Spock is loved by millions of children who have grown up under his influence, but I am apparently resented by an entire generation of kids who would like to catch me in a blind alley on some cloudy night. It is obvious that children are aware of the contest of wills between
generations, and that is precisely why the parental response is so important. (30)

Similar callbacks to *Dare to Discipline*, both thematic and explicit, run throughout the chapter and throughout the book. Clearly, Dobson’s agenda is to further explicate the themes of *Dare to Discipline*, and when we consider the timing of the book (it was published the same year that Dobson left his career as a psychologist to start the *Focus on the Family* radio show), Dobson’s choice to revisit a crucial moment in his career seems significant. We can see *The Strong Willed Child* as a touchstone text in Dobson’s career; it is Dobson’s forceful reassertion of himself in the public eye when he was at the cusp of his emergence as an everyday presence in his audience’s life.

Because *The Strong Willed Child* is specifically organized around the theme of tracing Dobson’s plan for discipline through different stages of a child’s life, his expertise in early childhood development is even more strongly felt than in *Dare to Discipline*, and Dobson occasionally uses language and argumentative strategies that are much more strongly marked by his background as a psychologist than he did the earlier book. *The Strong Willed Child* is much more clearly articulated to Dobson’s specific professional knowledge, and this knowledge is more precisely articulated to Dobson’s worldview. For example, in a discussion about corporal punishment and toddlers, Dobson is careful to connect corporal punishment to social order (notice the word “justice,” used only semi-ironically) to biological information about cognition: “A toddler’s memory
is not sufficiently developed to permit even a ten-minute delay in the administration of justice” (47). Later, Dobson engages in a long discussion of a study published in the *APA Monitor*: “It is increasingly clear that the origins of human competence are to be found in a critical period of development between eight and eighteen months of age” (49). In other places, Dobson deepens his engagement with other psychologists, including one passage that is something of a reconciliation with Benjamin Spock (98-99), and others that bash specific contemporary psychologists for advocating what Dobson saw as radical permissiveness:

Let me repeat that these recommendations were not written by an unknown crank from somewhere out in never-never land. They are the philosophical offering of one of America’s best known educators. [ . . . ] Mr. Holt’s views are shared by others who “advocate the overthrow of parental authority in just about every area.” A psychologist named Richard Farson has written a similar and equally outrageous book entitled *Birthrights: a bill of Rights for Children*. (166-167)

*The Strong Willed Child* repeats *Dare to Discipline’s* strategy of fusing behaviorist explanations with a rhetoric of conservative common sense and social order, and Dobson repeats the strategy of drawing from his experience as a psychologist in order to make his points. Siggy, Dobson’s dog whose training was used to illustrate behaviorism in *Dare to Discipline*, even makes another appearance as an object lesson (12-13).
The Strong Willed Child’s response to mental health care is similar to that found in Dare to Discipline, but where Dare to Discipline was disorganized and sometimes vague or hyperbolic, The Strong Willed Child is strategic in its organization and crisp in its deployment of professional expertise. Dobson positions Benjamin Spock as a new ally (he points out that Spock advocates corporal punishment) and finds more outspokenly progressive parenting experts to position himself against. Dobson quotes mainstream psychological research at length. Siggy, Dobson’s mascot for behaviorism, is no longer an anecdote, but a figure who bookends the text, appearing in the introduction and in an epilogue describing poor Siggy’s last days. (In the first edition, Siggy also appears in pictures of Dobson and his family that appear in a glossy insert in middle of the book.)

As striking as the further development of Dobson’s response to mental health care is in The Strong Willed Child, the newly emphatic deployment of religious rhetoric is even more so. Dobson includes long passages about the Bible, and he includes material originally published in a Christian magazine. In Dare to Discipline, Dobson was speaking to a conservative Christian audience, but in The Strong Willed Child, an audience of conservative Christians is explicitly invoked. More importantly, he engages in rhetoric that sets the sacred aside as a space from which he can speak with greater authority, and he uses religious rhetoric to buttress his claims about parenting. The hints of sacred space Dare to Discipline contain (along with the one explicit invocation of it) are,
in *The Strong Willed Child*, more forcefully and methodically constructed. In a passage about Thomas Gordon, a progressive parenting expert who was then popular among Christians, Dobson writes:

I sympathize with Dr. Gordon in his suspicions of human wisdom. I would lack confidence, too, if I had no standard of guide upon which to base my parental judgments and determinations. However, the Christian mother and father need not “lean on their own understanding,” for they have access to the wisdom of God Himself. [. . .] . . . I’m inclined to see his system as only one of many recent offerings in the field of psychology which blatantly contradict the Judeo-Christian ethic. Traditions which have been honored for several thousand years are suddenly vilified. (176)

Here the implication of temporal and spatial set apartness that was mostly hinted at in *Dare to Discipline* is explicitly acknowledged. Where *Dare to Discipline*’s use of sacred space is mostly implicit, *The Strong Willed Child* emphatically connects Dobson’s behaviorist model of parenting to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Religious rhetoric provides a position from which Dobson can complain about the transient nature of contemporary psychology and from which he can venerate common sense, cause-and-effect parenting, which for Dobson is a behaviorist program that enforces social conservativism. In a passage from “Shaping the Will” (“the will” is a biblical allusion), a chapter largely devoted to tailoring punishments to a child’s state of cognitive development, Dobson includes the following passage:
Most of the favorable attitudes that should be taught are actually extrapolations of the Judeo-Christian ethic, including honesty, respect, kindness, love, human dignity, obedience, responsibility, reverence, etc.

And how are these time-honored principles conveyed to the next generation? The answer was provided by Moses as he wrote more than 3,000 years ago in the book of Deuteronomy: "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

(56)

Although this passage is less closely articulated to the substance of Dobson’s argument, it is much more emphatic in removing the reader from everyday life into a space into an overarching “timeless” tradition. Dobson literally says that his advice is supported by a 3,000 document, but the implication of giving voice to a major figure from the Bible is that his vision of the family is eternal.

For a contemporary reader one of the most striking aspects of *The Strong Willed Child* is that it includes, in a chapter about adolescence, a long discussion of abortion. Dobson concludes the chapter as follows: “Why have pastors and ministers been so timid and mute on the vital matter? It is time that the Christian church found its tongue and spoke in defense of the unborn children who plead for their own lives” (230). Here we see Dobson, using temporal
language reminiscent of Martin Luther King’s language discussed in Crosby’s essay, attaching the audience that he has invoked to fight about a specific issue. This passage hints at how the worldview Dobson articulates throughout the text would come to define partisanship in the United States in the coming years.

**Articulation and public life**

“Articulation” is a rich term. Like many terms from cultural studies theory, it is ambiguous and pun laden. To articulate might mean to join together, to put into motion, or to explicate rhetorically. In *Dare to Discipline* and *The Strong Willed Child* we see James Dobson articulating, in all three senses, a new vision of the family. He is hardly the first conservative thinker to argue that we should understand society in terms of the family, but his particular fusion of arguments drawn from expert opinion and religious rhetoric connect social conservatism to contemporary scientific culture, commonsense logic, and supernatural authority in important new ways. Dobson also connects broad opinions about social order to the most intimate relationships in his audience’s lives. This fusion animated a broad Evangelical mental health care project, and it helped to define an emerging “family values” discourse. By joining together mental health care and conservative Christianity, Dobson also provided an important model for persuasive rhetoric. In the following chapter will turn my attention to considering how the particular interdiscursive strategy that Dobson invented can be used in direct rhetorical combat.
The following chapter, “Interdiscursive Agency and the Public Sphere: James Dobson’s Hegemonic Rhetoric,” contains analyses of Dobson’s letter accompanying the Meese Commission report about pornography (1986), further analysis of the jeremiad-like argument against the Clinton administration’s proposed changes in stem cell research policy (1993), and analysis of a widely commented upon epistolary editorial Dobson wrote about the dangers that Barack Obama posed to the country if elected (2008). My rhetorical analysis of those texts offers further consideration of Dobson’s interdiscursive strategy, and it demonstrates how strategies Dobson pioneered when he was a parenting expert proved useful in his later work as a polemicist. While my primary aim so far has been to explore the importance of everyday cultural work that articulates cultural perspectives and political affiliations, agentive interdiscursivity is also a useful lens for analyzing artifacts concerned with arguments about public policy. The strategies Dobson invented through his work as a parenting expert allowed him to occupy a powerful position in public life, and it remained important to his rhetoric when he was directly engaged in arguments about public policy.

One of the major contributions that Laclau and Mouffe (along with precedents like Gramsci and later developers of articulation theory like Grossberg) have made is to provide a framework for discussions of politics that happen outside the “political” sphere. Articulation theory asks us to see “culture” as a shifting set of tensions against which social class and political partisanship are formed, and it points us toward taking seriously the rhetorical work of
constructing the everyday. In my treatment of Dobson so far, I have tried to suggest that rhetorical criticism, which has typically been concerned with unpacking the ways that important, “political” artifacts function, can benefit substantially from further engagement exploring how “apolitical” texts help to construct political partisanship. James Dobson’s contributions to policy debate and his comments and writings about electoral politics are important, but this work was founded on his work as a parenting expert. The following chapter is a demonstration of the connections between James Dobson, the family therapist, and James Dobson, the conservative firebrand.
CHAPTER IV
INTERDISCURSIVE AGENCY AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

James Dobson’s Hegemonic Rhetoric

Articulation theory is an extrapolation Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Hegemony, often described as something like “the status quo” or “socially produced common sense,” simply refers to the ideological assumptions that keep a society in order. Hegemony is both the beliefs that justify the economic and political order and the spectrum of arguments that are permissible within that order. Hegemony is, to use a Marxian commonplace, that which allows for the reproduction of the means of production. Laclau’s and Mouffe’s contribution to hegemonic theory is to emphasize the degree to which hegemony is contingent. What we understand as common sense is always being remade upon a shifting ground of rhetorical opportunity. For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is not a monolithic set of social rules, but a discursive horizon within which different ways of talking about reality are disconnected and reconnected in ways that both reflect and shape our social and material circumstances. Hegemony, according to articulation theory, is not a list of maxims or a coherent worldview into which subjects are enrolled, but the grounds for a complex and often self-contradictory struggle over rhetorical situation.

Because articulation theory emphasizes connections between discursive strategies and their consequences, it can be described as a broad and profoundly rhetorical way of understanding political work. I have, through my exploration
of agentive interdiscursivity, attempted to foreground the rhetorical aspects of articulation theory by exploring the ways in which civic participation is enabled by incommensurable combinations of argumentative and stylistic elements. More specifically, I have argued that James Dobson was able to position himself as an important agent and to enroll his audience into a specific partisan worldview through strategically interdiscursive rhetoric. James Dobson became a public figure by giving expertise informed practical advice about the intimate, everyday aspects of his audience’s lives (usually, and most importantly, about parenting, but his early works also include advice about marriage, friendship, mental health, and sexuality), but his advice is bound to a particular conservative narrative about recent American history, to broad claims about epistemology in psychology, and to the authority of conservative Christianity. While it would be reductive to argue that Dobson was a successful popular public mental health expert and an influence on American public life just because he used a particular rhetorical strategy, I can safely claim that the interdiscursivity that defines Dobson’s work allowed him to occupy a position that, to borrow a feminist slogan, made the personal political. Dobson might not have often ventured into conventional activism until recently (as I will discuss in this chapter, in 2004 he became a more direct participant in Republican Party politics), but when we consider his rhetoric in light of the articulations that it constructs, the importance of agentive interdiscursivity in Dobson’s career becomes apparent.
The interdiscursive strategy that defines Dobson’s work can be found in a somewhat embryonic form in the occasionally powerful but often undisciplined prose of Dobson’s debut, *Dare to Discipline* (1970). In *The Strong Willed Child*, Dobson’s rhetoric is much more carefully controlled, and the combinations of psychological expertise and religious authority that define his work are much more emphatic. In this following chapter, I will explore how the interdiscursivity that defines these formative works appears in more conventionally “political” texts from later in Dobson’s career. My first goal in doing so is simply to incorporate a broader corpus of texts into my analysis. Since my contention is that agentive interdiscursivity is a central part of Dobson’s success and influence, I need to show more examples of Dobson using it, and so by expanding my analysis to include different kinds of artifacts written across several decades, I hope to demonstrate further the centrality of agentive interdiscursivity in Dobson’s career. My second goal is to demonstrate a clear relationship between the partisan enrollment the rhetorical strategies Dobson used in his early career enabled and the explicit political advocacy that became an increasingly important part of Dobson’s legacy to the social conservatism. My argument is that the interdiscursivity that marks Dobson’s work as a public mental health professional should be understood as a kind of political rhetoric, and so I need to demonstrate a relationship between Dobson’s nominally apolitical writing about parenting and his more emphatic forays into activism.\(^{17}\)
I will begin with a discussion of the tension between Dobson’s public persona as a mental health expert and his status as an important conservative activist. Despite his importance to the Religious Right and despite his reputation as a staunch figure from the Religious Right, Dobson has consistently described himself as a reluctant participant in political debate, even going so far as to maintain that his career is primarily apolitical. I will then perform analysis of three prominent examples of Dobson’s work as a polemicist: Dobson’s letter accompanying the Meese Commission report about pornography (1986), his jeremiad-like argument against the Clinton administration’s proposed changes in stem cell research policy (which I discussed briefly in my last chapter) (1993), and a widely commented upon epistolary editorial he wrote warning about the dangers of the election of Barack Obama (2008). I will conclude with a brief discussion of the ways that Dobson’s use of his authority as psychologist might be considered problematic that looks forward to my concluding chapter, “Looking Forward: Expertise and Evangelical Mental Health Care.” Throughout my analysis of Dobson’s rhetoric I have avoided confronting issues about the legitimacy of Dobson’s use of expertise in his work, and I have avoided talking about the larger project of Christian mental health care that Dobson helped to pioneer. My concluding chapter will acknowledge complications that might be brought to bear upon my work, and it will look toward future research about the political consequences of Christian mental health care. My dissertation concerns
public address that sprang from Evangelical mental health care. As I go forward in my work, I hope to engage more closely Christian mental health care itself.

**James Dobson the activist**

In the forward to his *2007* history of Focus on the Family, Dan Gilgoff argues that Focus on the Family is *the* most important conservative organization in the United States, but its power has been largely overlooked because, paradoxically, Focus on the Family is “primarily [an] apolitical organization” (XV). Similarly, throughout his career James Dobson has consistently presented himself as a parenting expert whose sense of social responsibility has led him occasionally into the limelight rather than as an influential political figure. When Dobson has participated in conventionally “political” work, he has used his “apolitical” status as a rhetorical tool by presenting himself as having been forced to speak out because of the gravity of the circumstance. For example, in a 2004 interview with the *New York Times* about his participation in activism against marriage equality, Dobson claimed, “There are dangers [in becoming too partisan] . . . and that is why I have never done it before. But the attack and assault on marriage is so distressing that I just feel like I can’t remain silent” (qtd. in Buss, 6). Dale Buss’s sympathetic authorized biography of Dobson argues that in 2004 Dobson’s increased profile on the national stage was not an inevitable development that grew out of Dobson’s longstanding associations with the conservative movement but the result of his being compelled to enter the limelight because of an impending crisis:
Dobson sensed no freedom regarding the decision to cross the great divide into partisanship and take Focus with him. Instead, he felt absolutely compelled to do so, coming to believe that this decision was at the same time a logical, necessary, and even divinely inspired culmination of everything he has accomplished and everything else he had strived for over the previous quarter century. (7)

The circumlocution of Buss’s explanation is striking; Dobson’s emergence as a partisan activist was a departure from his work as a parenting expert that was forced on him, but it was also somehow the “culmination” of his career as a public figure.

Dobson’s approach to political engagement did change somewhat in 2004 in that he became a part of the movement against marriage equality and in that he explicitly endorsed and campaigned for George W. Bush. Before 2004, Dobson’s political engagement, both in his nominally apolitical work as family expert and in his forays into public service and into debating specific policy, was less aligned with the Republican Party, so much so that he was something of a problem for them. As I discussed in my opening chapter, Dobson has, when he has participated in traditional partisan politics, pushed the GOP further to the right on social issues. Before 2004, Dobson was more of a threat from the right than an advocate of the GOP platform, and his claims to have avoided partisan politics can be understood as a description of his sometimes antagonistic relationship with his party. It is worth noting that during Dobson’s pre-2004
career, he sometimes enrolled figures from across the political spectrum into his rhetoric. For example, in his note accompanying the report from Meese Commission on Pornography, he sympathetically quotes Andrea Dworkin, a militant feminist. (Also, my previous chapter discusses his positive mentions of Benjamin Spock in *The Strong Willed Child*.)

However, even before he explicitly began to act as an ally for the Republican Party, Dobson was consistently involved in defining the political fault lines of American politics. It is noteworthy that he served on several committees for Ronald Reagan, but he was a harsh critic of Bill Clinton. While he held back from actively collaborating with the Republican Party in electoral politics until 2004, Dobson was anything but non-partisan during the eighties and nineties. If anything, Dobson’s independence from the conservative establishment and the huge audience he commanded as the figurehead of a popular conservative media empire made him a *more* partisan, if less noticed by those outside of his primary audience, figure than he would have been if he had been willing to compromise his principals to help the GOP through electoral cycles. And of course, 2004 was hardly the first time that James Dobson had made noteworthy contributions to public debates that strayed from his expertise as a parenting expert. In 1981, only three years after the *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast began, Dobson co-founded the Family Research Council, an organization devoted to lobbying for social conservative causes (FRC was at that time affiliated with Focus on the Family), and during the nineties was actively
involved pushing the Republican Party toward a more ideologically pure stance on social issues, particularly abortion. In 2002 Dobson became a member of the Arlington Group, a panel of social conservative leaders who helped to make opposing marriage equality a central issue in the 2004 election. It is noteworthy that two of the three strongly polemic artifacts analyzed in this chapter predate Dobson’s 2004 “coming out” at a conservative activist by over a decade.

Even though I disagree with a characterization of Dobson, who a 2005 profile described as “the religious right’s 800-Pound gorilla,” as anything other than an active and powerful participant in partisan politics, James Dobson’s disavowals of his status as a political animal (and those of his supporters) are neither disingenuous nor simply wrong (Learning). James Dobson’s career demands a more nuanced and inclusive idea of “politics” than one that would exclude the important work that Dobson did to define American social conservatism. If I take issue with Dobson’s and Buss’s claims that Dobson has abstained from politics until 2004, it is because they define “politics” as a very specific type of activism while I define it as the work of enrolling an audience into a particular worldview through articulation. For me, Dobson became an important political figure with the publication of 1970’s Dare to Discipline.

As Donna Minkowitz notes, for Dobson, religiously motivated “right-wing goals and [a] nurturing agenda are one,” and Dobson has always presented his work as a public figure as an outgrowth of his concern with the family. Dobson’s
denials of his status as a political figure are not subterfuge; they are examples of the kind of incongruity that articulation theory predicts. Laclau and Mouffe argue that politics is cultural work that connects together new rhetorical situations, and Dobson’s articulation of “right wing goals” and “a nurturing agenda” represent a powerful example of that kind of work. Lawrence Grossberg writes that articulation “often involves delinking or disarticulating connections in order to connect others” (54). Dobson is an important political player, but his self-presentation as apolitical figure is not fraudulent. Making sense of that apparent contradiction demands an alternate framing that takes into account the paradoxes that articulation includes.

James Dobson’s nuanced arguments about mental health care and his use of religious discourse does not suggest a disingenuous manipulator cheating his audience, but a rhetor working to reorient the relationship between professional expertise and personal conviction. I have demonstrated the ways that Dobson’s arguments about the family depend both upon his authority as a psychologist and upon behaviorist arguments drawn from cultural tensions surrounding mental health care, and I have discussed how Dobson combines these arguments with rhetoric that creates sacred space. In the following analysis, I will discuss the ways that Dobson modulated his interdiscursive rhetorical strategy for different contexts. While Dobson’s forays into conventional political debate construct the same kind of complex articulation as his writing about parenting, and while we can understand Dobson’s “political”
writing as being a part of the same rhetorical project as his therapeutic writing, he skillfully modulates the articulations of mental health expertise to religion for different rhetorical situations.

**James Dobson’s contribution to the Meese Commission**

One of Dobson’s first prominent appearances in national politics was his participation in writing the report for the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography (more often referred to as the Meese Commission after Attorney general Edwin Meese), in 1986. Dobson had been involved with national public service before, including having worked on the Task Force for the White House Conferences on the Family for Jimmy Carter and having been appointed by Reagan in 1982 to the National Advisory Commission for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, but the Meese Commission was a much more contentious and powerful post. The commission’s report could lead to a wide spectrum of actions, including criminal prosecution. While the makeup of the panel was diverse, given the political climate of 1986, the purpose of the panel was implicitly to provide for more stringent enforcement of obscenity laws. A section entitled “Recommendations For The Justice System And Law Enforcement Agencies” contains the following passage: “Deterrence should be a significant factor in fashioning an appropriate sentence in [obscenity] cases. Only public awareness of firm but fair sentencing practices in obscenity cases can foster an environment conducive to controlling the flow of these materials.” Later, in the same section, the report argues “… we are engaged in a winnable
war! America could rid itself of hard core pornography in 18 months if the recommendations offered in the following report are implemented. We have provided a road-map for . . . the mobilization of law enforcement efforts around the country.” The research conducted in preparation for the report focused not on only depictions of consensual heterosexual sex in mainstream pornography, but on “underground” and sometimes already illegal material, and the report includes a disproportionate focus on depictions of extreme fetishes, sadomasochism, pedophilia and bestiality. Accompanying the report is a personal statement from Dobson that dwells almost entirely on graphic descriptions of sexual sadism and child abuse. Dobson writes:

When asked to describe pornography currently on the market, they think in terms of airbrushed centerfolds in the popular "men's magazines." But steady customers of pornography have long since grown tired of simple heterosexual nudity. Indeed, a visit to an adult bookstore quickly reveals the absence of so-called "normal" sexuality. [. . .] This is the world of pornography today, and I believe the public would rise up in wrath to condemn it if they knew of its prominence.

Dobson focuses almost exclusively on deviance and criminality, and he indiscriminately lumps together alternative sexual practices with child abuse and bestiality. His statement is clearly designed to outrage. He concludes by charging American citizenry with the responsibility to wipe out the plague that is the adult entertainment industry:
Accordingly, it is my hope that the effort we invested will provide the basis for a new public policy. But that will occur only if American citizens demand action from their government. Nothing short of a public outcry will motivate our slumbering representatives to defend community standards of decency. It is that public statement that the pornographers fear most, and for very good reason. The people possess the power in this wonderful democracy to override apathetic judges, uninterested police chiefs, unmotivated U.S. Attorneys, and unwilling federal officials. I pray that they will do so. If they do not, then we have labored in vain.

As my analysis will demonstrate, Dobson strategically uses interdiscursivity in order to “render salient” a context, to borrow Vatz’s phrase, which makes this call to arms credible (160).20

Early in Dobson’s statement, he frames the Meese Commission report in quasi-religious terms, suggesting both a sense of moral obligation that informs his call to arms against the adult entertainment industry and a sense of righteous authority for the report’s findings. Dobson writes:

I now understand how mountain climbers must feel when they finally stand atop the highest peak. They overcome insurmountable obstacles to reach the rim of the world and announce proudly to one another, "we made it!" In a similar context, I feel a sense of accomplishment as the Commission releases its final report to the President, the Attorney General, and the people. For a brief moment in Scottsdale last month, it
appeared that our differing philosophies would strand us on the lower slopes. And of course, we were monitored daily by the ACLU, the pornographers, and the press, who huddled together and murmured with one voice, "they are doomed!" But now as we sign the final document and fling it about to the public, it does not seem pretentious to indulge ourselves in the satisfaction of having accomplished our goals.

Dobson does not simply use grandiose, religious-sounding images; he uses metaphors that create sacred space in which he locates his argument. Dobson’s metaphorical mountain is not just a vaguely religious-sounding, impressive description, but a subtle allusion to Mt. Sinai, the place where God handed down the law to the Israelites. (This allusion is indirect and playful, but real, as the popular expression “down from the mountain” to which Dobson clearly alludes refers to Exodus.) The suggestion that the Meese report is somewhat like the Old Testament might be read as self-effacing since the grandeur on display here is uncharacteristic of Dobson, who generally writes in a “folksy” vernacular, although Dobson’s awareness of the “pretension” of the passage suggests not. (This passage is also reminiscent of Martin Luther King’s description of civil rights as being a mountaintop, described in Crosby’s essay.) Dobson’s emphasis on the struggle the committee had to assemble the report dramatizes the labor of writing the report in a way that emphasizes both the seriousness of the commission’s task and the physicality of Dobson’s metaphor. The clause “For a brief moment in Scottsdale last month, it appeared that our differing
philosophies would strand us on the lower slopes” encourages us to imagine the Meese commission as having worked to travel to a different space, as does “But now as we sign the final document and fling it about to the public.” The Meese report comes, according to this rhetorical strategy, from a space removed from the everyday world, “the highest peak” of a mountain that could only be reached by an arduous journey.

Although Dobson’s mountaintop passage does not borrow any rhetoric from mental health care, implicit in the passage is his authority as a psychologist. The “differing philosophies” that were the cause for the struggle to the top of the mountain alludes to Dobson’s professional expertise (which the reader can learn about in detail in a biography page at the beginning of the report). Later in the report, Dobson occasionally slips into a voice that suggests an expertise-oriented persona. For example, he writes “Though social research on this subject has been difficult to conduct, the totality of evidence supports the linkage between illustration and imitation.” The audience is encouraged to accept Dobson’s claims that “the totality of evidence” supports his position, even though he admits that research on the topic has been “difficult to conduct.” Later, Dobson’s arguments assume the kind of commonsense behaviorism that characterizes his writing about the family: “For a certain percentage of men, the use of pornographic material is addictive and progressive. Like the addiction to drugs, alcohol or food, those who are hooked on sex become obsessed by their need.”
Near his conclusion, Dobson pulls together the various strands running through his statement into an argument about social order strongly reminiscent of his writing about the family. His argument is ultimately that the addictive properties of pornography and the subversive images contained therein undermine the family, which, for Dobson, is the foundation of society. Dobson writes:

Furthermore, what is at stake here is the future of the family itself. We are sexual creatures, and the physical attraction between males and females provides the basis for every dimension of marriage and parenthood. Thus, anything that interjects itself into that relationship must be embraced with great caution. Until we know that pornography is not addictive and progressive ... until we are certain that the passion of fantasy does not destroy the passion of reality ... until we are sure that obsessive use of obscene materials will not lead to perversions and conflict between husbands and wives . . . then we dare not adorn them with the crown of respectability. [Ellipses Dobson’s] Society has an absolute obligation to protect itself from material which crosses the line established objectively by its legislators and court system. That is not sexual repression. That is self-preservation.

The key moment in this passage, because it establishes context for the rest of the passage is, “We are sexual creatures, and the physical attraction between males and females provides the basis for every dimension of marriage and
parenthood.” In the worldview Dobson establishes here, social order grows out of an almost mechanistic view of nature. Men and women are physically designed to fit together, and when something “interjects itself into that relationship,” society is threatened. While Dobson does not make any religious appeals in this passage, the divide between timeless natural order and transient, impulsive social experimentation implies a contrast between the authority of sacred space and the chaos of the profane, particularly when presented as wisdom delivered from a sacred mountain. When is framed by this worldview, which puts tradition, nature, and God on one side and immorality, violence, and uncertainty on the other, Dobson’s call for a more authoritarian approach toward sexually explicit media is not prudish or outdated, but urgent and morally powerful. The force that Dobson’s articulations of sacred space to strategies derived from his expertise as mental health care professional carry suggest the power of rhetoric that engages with hegemony. Dobson builds upon powerful presumptions, and so his arguments seen current even as they resist contemporaneous popular culture.

James Dobson’s statement against stem cell research

My previous chapter provides analysis of a Focus on the Family newsletter, written in 1993, in which Dobson lambasted a decision by the Clinton administration to open up new lines of stem cells for research. Dobson argues that Clinton’s decision would affect the norms of medical ethics so that late term abortion would be more common. My analysis was a response to Jim Kuypers’
analysis, which argues that Dobson’s letter sets aside scientism in favor of moral
drama. Kuypers overlooks the ways that Dobson’s expertise as a therapist is a
part of the context that Dobson creates for his argument. Dobson’s graphic
description of late term abortion, which includes medical jargon, references to
specific instruments (that are not described for the reader), and syntactical
features of scientific writing, is a key part of the text.  

The interdiscursivity identified in the passage I scrutinized my third
chapter runs throughout the letter. This artifact is noteworthy because it is a text
where Dobson uses especially pronounced medical rhetoric alongside especially
pronounced religious rhetoric. Even though interdiscursivity is a key part of
Dobson’s rhetorical style, his incorporation of both professional expertise and
religious discourse is sometimes implicit rather than strongly marked. In the
1993 letter, we see Dobson talking directly to an Evangelical audience about
public policy that pertains to his expertise as a therapist, and so his strategies are
both strongly informed by his expertise and strongly informed by religion.
Before Dobson offers the graphic description of late term abortion I discussed in
my last chapter, he explicitly signals his medical expertise, using a strategy that
creates a rich context for his argument. Dobson writes:

There is something deeply troubling about cannibalizing tiny bodies of
living babies—even for humanitarian purposes. More unsettling is the
method by which their tissue is taken from them. That process is not
widely understood because the fetal researchers apparently don't want the
public to know what they are doing. There have been only a few descriptions of methodology in medical journals, which gives us a clue that sensitive information is being withheld. (qtd. in Kuypers 159)

This passage not only depends on Dobson’s expert authority but argues that, in this case, medicine is in conflict with the natural order. His choice of the word “cannibalizing” to describe using fetal tissue in research frames the practice not just as a violation of medical ethics but as the violation of an ancient taboo; parents do not eat their young, and so this kind of stem cell research is unnatural. Dobson does not make a philosophical argument against the practice; instead, he makes an argument that it is wrong because it is “deeply troubling.” While this particular deployment of Dobson’s strategy of favorably contrasting timeless tradition versus social experimentation is not specifically religious, it does posit a fit between the natural order and tradition, and it argues forcefully against social experimentation. Again, Dobson argues that both biology and tradition exist outside of the chaos of the present.

The dichotomy Dobson establishes in setting up his argument provides a context for the rest of the message. He is an expert sensitive not only to issues of medical research and practice and of how they do and do not conform to what is natural, but also to the value of timeless wisdom and ancient authority. As the message continues, both of those appeals become more prominent. He argues, for example, that he knows not only the technical details of late term abortion, but that he understands enough about medical culture to be able to anticipate
how changes in stem cell research policy would affect how doctors would understand their work: “. . . there is no reason for a woman to carry a baby to term if she does not intend to let it live. But the advent of tissue harvesting changes the equation. [. . . ]. Growing babies only to be dismembered for the use of their organs appears to be on the horizon.” His word choice “growing babies only to be dismembered” (qtd. in Kuypers 160) again suggests that the wrongness of using cells from fetuses for research is directly related to its unnaturalness. The passage not only suggests Dobson’s expertise, but it also evokes a dystopian horror reminiscent of science fiction. The letter climaxes in a passage that explicitly evokes religion and that places Dobson’s argument in a different temporal and special context:

Just one week earlier, [I] had visited the archeological ruins of the ancient city of Megiddo, described nine times in the Old Testament. This 6,000-year-old city is thought to be one of the "high places" where King Ahab and Queen Jezebel led the Israelites in Baal worship and the wholesale sacrifice of children. Still standing in what was the courtyard of the city is a large circular altar on which scholars believe untold numbers of babies were murdered.

[. . . ]

As I stood among the ruins of Megiddo and contemplated the horrors that occurred in that tragic place, I found it difficult to fight back the tears. Among the rocks surrounding the alter, we found numerous bone
fragments, which a physician in our party believed to be from very young children. I could almost hear the screams of babies echoing across more than 27 centuries and attesting to the depravity of mankind. What struck me in the ruins of that sad city was how little has really changed. (qtd. in Kuypers 161)

Especially noteworthy is Dobson’s choice to include allusions to forensic evidence in this passage, including a mention of a physician. Dobson’s articulation of science and religion has become so pronounced that his description of policy change about stem cells is both a technological dystopia and a jeremiad.

Just as he does in his statement accompanying the Meese Commission Report, Dobson concludes by placing the family in a timeless social order. He writes:

Among the primary objectives of Focus on the Family is a commitment to the disadvantaged, wherever they may be found. In a sense, the family itself is in that position today. It has been ridiculed and written off as an anachronism. But with your continued help, we will stand our ground in defense of every good and perfect gift that comes from the Father. (qtd. in Kuypers 163)

Dobson does not connect the dots between late term abortion and dissolution of the nuclear family, but the suggestion is that disrupting order through changing policy about stem cell research would lead to more serious disruptions in the
fabric of society. This passage, in which “anachronism” of the patriarchal family is equated with the timeless “good and perfect [gifts] that come from the father” again places Dobson’s worldview outside of the transience of ordinary time, and it reads as a benediction for the biomedical jeremiad he has just delivered.

Again, Dobson connects his outrage at contemporary American life to powerful, hegemonic discourses.

**James Dobson speaks out against Barack Obama**

In 2008 James Dobson made perhaps his most high profile foray into conventional politics when he distributed a long (16 pages) polemic against Barack Obama through Focus on the Family. Dobson retired completely from the organization just two years later, and we might understand this missive as Dobson’s parting shot before moving to a less high profile organization called Family Talk. This document might be understood as Dobson’s final word about American politics particularly because it is so inclusive. The text is a rambling artifact that attempts to cover every conceivable issue that a conservative like Dobson might have with American liberalism, including abortion, free speech, foreign policy, health care policy, tax policy, pornography, gun rights, the war on terror, the “fairness doctrine” (a proposal a small handful of liberals have endorsed that the FCC impose that talk radio give equal time to liberal and conservative programming), marriage equality, and gay rights. Because it is a much more explicitly and unguardedly “political” document, because it strays widely from Dobson’s expertise about the family, and because it comes from the
end of Dobson’s career as a public figure, Dobson’s open letter is a much less carefully controlled example of the interdiscursivity that defines his rhetoric. Not only is Dobson’s knowledge about psychology less relevant here, but Dobson is also much less careful to root his arguments in his professional knowledge because he is bolder about being a “political” rhetor. However, even in this unguarded and messy artifact, Dobson is careful to locate his arguments within religious space and expertise, and he is careful to contrast social order with transient chaos.

The curious epistolary conceit the text uses is that Dobson is writing to his fellow American in a dystopian future that has come to pass just four years in the future. After an introduction that explains that the letter from the future is meant to describe what could happen were Barack Obama elected rather than a prediction of what would happen (a prescient bit of hedging since none of Dobson’s predictions came true), Dobson opens his letter with a curious patriotic flourish:

I can hardly sing “The Star Spangled Banner” any more. When I hear the words,

O say, does that star spangled banner yet wave

O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

I get tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat. Now in October of 2012, after seeing what has happened in the last four years, I don’t think I can still answer, “Yes,” to that question. (2)
While Dobson does not frame the contrast between 2008 and 2012 as explicitly Christian, the move he makes here creates the kind of temporal dislocation that defines religious rhetoric in a particularly complex way. By becoming a time traveling narrator, Dobson imagines himself apart from normal temporal space, and Dobson’s use of the national anthem, a song designed to be used in a ceremonial context, suggests sacredness. Paradoxically, the break with normal temporal space finds Dobson writing from a world that has fallen prey to the worst aspects of the chaos of social experiment. The conclusion of the letter puts this dislocation in a more specifically religious context:

I still believe God is sovereign over all history, and though I don’t know why he has allowed these events, it is still his purpose that will ultimately be accomplished. He alone can say of all history, “There is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” (Isaiah 46:9-10). (16)

Just as in his 1993 stem cell letter, Dobson uses sacred space to imagine a dystopia.

While this rambling and explicitly political (in the narrow sense that Dobson would define the word rather than the way articulation theory understands it) message does not use Dobson’s professional knowledge as centrally as texts that more directly concern the family or sexuality, Dobson is careful to frame the letter as expert opinion rather than polemic. Throughout the
text, Dobson includes copious citations in his footnotes, which send an unusual mixed signal. This document is simultaneously a dystopian (perhaps Jeremiadic) speculative fiction, and a carefully researched, almost pseudo-academic analysis. Dobson also ends his letter with a statement advertising that it is meant to be understood as something other than “political”: “This letter may be reproduced without change and in its entirety for noncommercial and nonpolitical purposes without prior permission from Focus on the Family Action.” (Of course, this kind of statement might also be understood as an effort to protect Focus on the Family’s non-profit status.). While the exhaustive nature of the text means that Dobson cannot always relate every issue to parenting and families, he is preoccupied with doing so whenever possible. For example, in a section about marriage equality, he worries about how same-sex marriage would affect the Boy Scouts and how it would affect Christian private schools (4-5). For Dobson, the family is the center of social order, and it is the prism through which social change is understood.

**James Dobson and Evangelical mental health care**

I have, through my analysis of key texts from Dobson’s career, demonstrated the importance of interdiscursivity in his work, and my analysis suggest how such a rhetorical strategy allowed Dobson, a research psychologist and family councilor by training, to play a prominent role in American public life. By articulating his expert responses to his field to a broad perspective about social order, a perspective that depends not just upon conservative difference to
tradition but also upon religious authority, Dobson created a new rhetorical space for social conservatism and pioneered what is now a huge Christian mental health industry. Dobson’s public career is filled with paradox. He has been a powerful voice for the American Right, but his power depends, in part, upon an expertise-oriented ethos acquired from decades of abstinence from direct participation in conventional partisan politics. Focus on the Family and The Family Research Council are important organizations in the history of the Religious Right, but Dobson is not primarily a religious rhetor. Perhaps most importantly, he helped shape American political discourse while maintaining his independence from the political establishment.

As my analysis in this chapter demonstrates, whenever James Dobson has been a conventional political rhetor (a rhetor arguing directly about public policy or elections) his work contains the same kinds of articulations and paradoxes that inform his writing about the family. The position that he created for himself in his work as a parenting expert was a useful one from which to participate in debates about public policy, and whenever Dobson has stepped onto the bigger public stage, he has carried with him the broad perspective about social order that he constructed through his work as a mental health expert speaking primarily to conservative Christians. Political work requires incommensurable combinations of discourse, and we can see throughout Dobson’s career the strategic deployment of an interdiscursivity that creates complex articulations. Dobson’s “political” texts contain logical arguments and moral outrage, but more
importantly, they suggest, through their use of different argumentative strategies drawn from different kinds of authority, a worldview.

In my consideration of Dobson’s rhetoric I have pushed aside a crucial issue: the relationship between Dobson’s use of arguments drawn from his expertise as a mental health professional and contemporary research and practices of mental health disciplines is a more contentious one than I have acknowledged. While Dobson is a scientifically-oriented expert engaging a particular public, his arguments do always not reflect the consensus of the mental health care establishment. My setting this issue aside is particularly glaring since Dobson’s stances about same-sex relationships has become increasingly out of step with that of mainstream psychology. The heteronormative, patriarchal view of the family that Dobson (along with the organizations he founded) espouses is drawn from his expertise as a psychologist, and his arguments do respond to cultural tensions in mental health care, but Dobson’s views about same-sex relationships have remained impervious to contemporary research and to shifting social dynamics of the past few decades. Because of its harsh stance on homosexuality, The Southern Poverty Law Center currently lists The Family Research Council as a hate group. To state the case bluntly, when Dobson, Focus on the Family, or The Family Research Council use evidence drawn from mental health expertise to argue about same-sex relationships, they wildly misrepresent what contemporary psychology knows about same-sex relationships. (Dobson’s attitude toward
same-sex marriage is perhaps the most conspicuous example, but, it is hardly the only place where his version of social conservatism is at odds with contemporary mental health research. For example, Focus on the Family’s website recommends *A Solitary Sorrow*, a book about helping women cope with “post abortion syndrome,” which the APA does not recognize.)

This problem is not a flaw in my argument, but a complication that points toward further research. The discussion of Dobson’s use of mental health care expertise in my second chapter demonstrates that although Dobson’s arguments sometimes diverge from consensus in psychology, his arguments respond to both the cultural predicament of mental health care and to Dobson’s experience as a researcher and clinician. The intersection of religion, politics, and science that Dobson’s work represents is a rich one, and if it necessarily makes talking about him as a popularizer of scientific knowledge problematic, it presents opportunities to do exciting work about how expert knowledge operates in specific rhetorical contexts. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, rhetorical strategies that articulate expert knowledge to particular circumstances can yield powerful results that defy our expectations.

In my concluding chapter, “Looking Forward: Expertise and Evangelical Mental Health Care,” I will discuss the future of this project. So far, I have described the interdiscursive strategies James Dobson used to initiate a politicized Christian mental health care project, I have discussed how the conversation about parenting and marriage contained in Dobson’s work create a
particular vision of social conservatism, and I have demonstrated how Dobson’s interdiscursive strategies empowered him as a political rhetor. As I pursue this project further I want to begin looking at the practices of Christian therapists. My analysis of Dobson’s rhetoric suggests serious questions about the political consequences of using expert knowledge in specific contexts, and I believe that it presents new directions for rhetoricians interested in science. I will, in the next chapter, discuss briefly some of the complications to our discussions of public expertise that my work suggests, and I will discuss my intention to study the ways that the articulations contained in the rhetoric of conservative Christian mental health care affects the practices of actual Christian therapists. When James Dobson began practicing as a therapist, Christian mental health care was in its infancy. Today there are several large professional organizations for mental health professionals who identify as Evangelicals and who understand their work as being a faith based enterprise. Christian mental health care is a complex intersection of science based practice, religion, and politics, and it is a fertile site for future scholarship in rhetoric.
CHAPTER V
LOOKING FORWARD
Expertise and Evangelical Mental Health Care

When I was completing this dissertation in the spring of 2013, the Supreme Court was hearing two cases that attracted widespread media attention: whether or not to uphold a lower court’s overturning of California’s ban on same-sex marriage and whether or not to overturn the federal Defense of Marriage Act (which prevented the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages granted by states). The argument put forth by the conservative side in both cases was that marriage should be defined by its “procreative potential.” The kind of biologically oriented rhetoric James Dobson helped to create in the early 70s remains central to social conservative rhetoric, so much so that attempts to link biology to social order might turn out to be the last stand for the Religious Right. To posit “procreative potential” as the justification for marriage is to argue for a sort of “fit” between biology, social norms, civil rights, and religion. The interdiscursivity implicit in the concept is not only strongly reminiscent of James Dobson’s efforts to relate a particular parenting style based on behaviorism to a moral perspective; the phrase “procreative potential” is a stark reminder that arguments derived from biology can take many different forms. The normative point of view espoused by opponents of marriage equality seems foreign to biology, but articulation allows for surprising, even paradoxical, uses of scientific rhetoric.
James Dobson is, of course, not the sole originator of such strategies, nor was he, despite being one of its earliest and most prominent proponents, the sole inventor of conservative Christian mental health care. But he is undoubtedly the most important rhetor associated with this project. Because he is not a conventional partisan rhetor, he has been often overlooked as a major force in American conservatism, but he has been a guiding force within the Religious Right for decades. The *Focus on the Family* radio program is ubiquitous in conservative Evangelical households, and Dobson’s books and home videos are essential items for the libraries of conservative churches across the United States. Dobson was an early and important participant in the construction of both conservative Christian mental health care and Evangelical popular culture. Although he is as a complex rhetor whose life’s work was as a family therapist working through mass media rather than as a polemicist or politician, those interested in the Religious Right cannot ignore the impact of a rhetor whose expert advice is so emphatically articulated to a political perspective.

Throughout this dissertation, I have engaged Evangelical mental health care using what James Jasinski describes as a “concept oriented” approach (139). My project is designed not only to understand Dobson’s career better, but also to develop agentive interdiscursivity, an idea important but implicit in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, into a well-developed lens for close reading. Articulation theory is an obvious precedent and influence on other rhetorical projects (particularly Michael McGee’s ideographic criticism), but my
exploration of the ways that Dobson uses incommensurable combinations of argumentative strategies models a potentially valuable new way to incorporate hegemonic theory into rhetoric, particularly because it pushes us to consider the relationship between rhetoric and agency.

One reason Dobson’s project is a particularly valuable site for rhetoricians is that Dobson’s work demonstrates surprising, even troubling, uses of expertise in public debate. Johanna Hartelius uses the term “multifarious expertise” to describe rhetors “whose education predicts knowledge in one specific subject matter . . . , but whose expert opinion is solicited and circulated in media.” At first glance, it seems as though “multifarious expertise” is simply an overly suspicious description of the kind of knowledge characteristic of any public intellectual, but the problem of how to understand the articulation of logic, knowledge, and authority drawn from specific expertise to complex arguments that do not neatly fit into a particular disciplinary space is much too prescient for such a dismissive response. James Dobson and other conservative Christians who use mental health rhetoric are, of course, especially “multifarious” experts, but the kind of rhetorical problem they present is hardly unique. Richard Dawkins is a biologist who has used his authority and expertise to become an influential participant in discussions about theology, philosophy, politics, feminism, and history. Richard A. Muller is a physicist with no expertise in climate science who has used arguments drawn from his discipline to participate in debates about global warming. Popular applications of academic research like
Stephen Levitt’s “Freakanomics” project, the TED conferences, or Malcolm Gladwell’s writing present even more complex combinations of disciplined knowledge, politics, and culture. Multifarious expertise is an important aspect of contemporary public life.

Evangelical mental health care is particularly useful point of departure for discussions of expertise because the tensions surrounding Evangelical mental health care are so strongly felt. When James Dobson uses his knowledge of developmental psychology to make arguments about the reasons for the dramatic social disruptions of the late 1960s, some audiences will certainly balk at the expansiveness of Dobson’s argument and at the reductive way that he understands social turmoil. More troublingly, some of Dobson’s opinions are immune to new research; James Dobson will continue to insist that children need both a father and a mother regardless of what social scientists say. Since the problems with Dobson’s work are so readily apparent, he presents a particular challenge. If our response to Dobson is to regard him as a dishonest or illegitimate rhetor, what implications does his example have for other experts who are concerned with complex social or philosophical problems that do not fit neatly into their disciplinary knowledge? More immediately, what are we to do with the Christian mental health project that that Dobson helped to initiate?

I have, I hope, already demonstrated that I reject a view of conservative Evangelical mental health care as simply a corrupt or dishonest enterprise. While citizens have a responsibility to reject arguments drawn from expertise
when the strain between a rhetorical strategy and the circumstances of a case are too great, and while my interest in James Dobson stems in part by from my own discomfort with American social conservatism, Evangelical mental health care is too valuable and too sophisticated an enterprise to discount so easily. Some might see Dobson’s use of mental health rhetoric in politics as cynical or wrong; we should instead understand Dobson as a rhetor working to reimagine the relationship between therapeutic expertise and public life. Dobson articulated together a worldview from religious conviction, conservative sentiment, and therapeutic expertise. If the strange hybrid he created seems cobbled together from incongruent parts, Laclau and Mouffe remind us that so too is any ideological position.

My ambition for this dissertation is that it will be the starting point for a larger project about conservative Christian mental health care. This project would offer insight into the ways that all mental health practitioners negotiate with specific social contexts, it would suggest new insights about the nature of religious rhetoric, and it would offer new ways to discuss American conservatism. As I turn my attention toward this larger investigation, I need to frame my project with a deeper consideration, however tentative, of how to define conservative Christian mental health. Intersections between conservative Christianity and mental health rhetoric include a wide spectrum of potential categories to consider. Medical practitioners who are indistinguishable from secular providers, mainline ministers who have professional degrees in a mental
health field, credentialed non-practitioners who work in “ministries” concerned with disseminating expert advice to an Evangelical audience (like James Dobson), and people without any institutional credentials in either religion or psychiatry might be understood as being a part of conservative Christian mental health care.

The remainder of this chapter will attempt to find purchase within this wooly topic. I will describe three professional organizations that suggest the kinds of practitioners who might be of particular interest. While my description of conservative Christian mental health care is more of a thumbnail sketch than a well-developed taxonomy, it suggests starting points for future research about intersections between mental health care, religion, and politics. I am not yet charting a course for the future of this project; I am instead describing promising points of departure.

**What is Christian mental health care anyway?**

Christian mental health care includes professionals with various degrees of ideological commitment to religion, to conservative Evangelical politics (some Christian therapists have no such commitments, of course), and to biomedical psychiatric discourse. Christian mental health care includes a broad spectrum of professional service and advocacy, and it includes different kinds of advocacy, from Evangelism to partisan political work to defenses of mental health care. My goal at this point is merely to identify a handful of organizations that have meaningful relationships to both religion and to mental health care so that I can
begin to consider the different kind of therapists who might be of particular interest. My examination of James Dobson’s work offers an example of the sort of rhetorical work done in popular Evangelical mental health discourse. What is the relationship between the public face of Evangelical mental health care the practices of actual therapists? How do therapists combine religion with mental health care? To what extent are they politically invested? To what extent are they invested in debates surrounding the biomedical in mental health care? The discussion below, which briefly describes three professional organizations, does not offer a definitive portrait of the variety of intersections between contemporary Christianity and therapy, but it offers suggestively contrasting versions of Christian mental healthcare.

The American Association for Pastoral Counseling is an organization for pastors with graduate degrees in a mental health field or with some form of professional certification. AAPC’s website is especially concerned with issues of professional credibility and gatekeeping. AAPC includes a diversity of Christian perspectives and is not primarily an Evangelical or conservative organization. The site includes a long description of the requirements for receiving an AAPC “Pastoral Councilor” certification:

Under the auspices of AAPC, pastoral counseling adheres to rigorous standards of excellence, including education and clinical training, professional certification and licensure. Typical education for the AAPC-certified pastoral counselor consists of study that leads to:
- a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university
- a three-year professional degree from a seminary
- a specialized masters or doctoral degree in the mental health field

A significant portion of this education is spent in clinical training.

Post-graduate training involves completion of at least 1,375 hours of supervised clinical experience (that is, the counselor provides individual, group, marital and family therapy) and 250 hours of direct approved supervision of the therapist’s work in both crisis and long-term situations.

(AAPC)

Not only are the criteria for membership in AAPC rigorous, but the organization’s website is entirely concerned with issues that a secular therapist would be concerned about. While AAPC is made up of ministers, it seems, at first glance, entirely consistent with the kind of professional organization that secular therapists would join.

The Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors is a more specifically Evangelical organization. To become certified by BCPPC, a therapist needs a postgraduate degree, an ongoing professional practice, and liability insurance. The biggest differences between BCPPC and AAPC are that BCPPC includes counselors who are not ministers and that BCPPC is more rigorous in its definition of Christianity. The organizational website contains a doctrinal statement, presented in a bullet list. BCPPC members are supposed to believe:
- In one God, creator and sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally co-existing in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are the inspired and trustworthy Word of God, the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of human beings, and the final authority for all matters about which it speaks.
- That human nature derives from two historical persons, male and female, created in God's image. They were created perfect, but they sinned, plunging themselves and all human beings into sin, guilt, suffering, and death.
- That the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ and His bodily resurrection provide the only grounds for justification, forgiveness, and salvation for all who believe, and only those who trust in Him alone are born of the Holy Spirit, true members of the Church, and will spend eternity with Christ.
- That the Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration and renewal for believers in Christ, that He makes the presence of Jesus Christ real in believers, and that He comforts, guides, convicts, and enables believers to live in ways that honor Him.
- That ministry to persons also acknowledges the complexity of humans as physical, psychological, social, and spiritual beings. The ultimate goal of Christian counseling is to help others move to personal wholeness,
interpersonal competence, mental stability, and spiritual maturity.

(BCPPC)

BCPPC works harder at making sure that everyone agrees what “Christian” is. Do therapists who join BCPPC understand themselves as a part of a political project? Do they understand therapy in a specifically religious way?

The Psychiatry section group of the Christian Medical and Dental Association is much more explicitly interested in advocating Evangelical Christianity than either the AAPC or the BCPPC, and their newsletters often discuss disagreements between secular medicine and Evangelical Christianity. Ethical issues surrounding sexuality and psychiatry are of particularly interest in the organization’s newsletters and conferences. Mainstream mental health care’s acceptance of LGTB identities is a sticking point for the organization, and the issue of helping gay Evangelical Christians to live a heterosexual lifestyle is of particular interest. Other topics where the Christian Medical and Dental Association disagree with secular psychiatry include abortion, divorce, and exorcism. This group is particularly interesting, as they are, of the three organizations surveyed here, both the most clearly articulated to biomedical psychiatry and the most emphatically conservative and Evangelical. How do the members of this group understand the conflicts between their faith and mainstream psychiatry? Do they see themselves as therapists who happen also to be Evangelical Christians, or do they understand their practices as having a religious dimension?
Christian mental health care and public life

The chimera that Dobson constructed, a political philosophy built out of mental health care and Evangelicalism, suggests fundamental epistemological problems with which any theory of psychology must contend. As different as biomedical mental health care and Evangelical Christianity are, they can both be understood as efforts to describe the complex, hybrid realities of human psychology in ways that seek to manage the unsolvable, amorphous cultural-philosophical problems that describing “the mind” can present. That Dobson is able to combine these two discourses in such a powerful way speaks not only to his ability as a rhetor, but to the inherent messiness of the philosophical problems with which mental health care must contend. We can see these problems bubble to the surface in debates between mental health professionals oriented toward biomedical psychiatry and those who advocate an interpersonal approach, and we seem these problems in popular complaints about how increasingly widespread psychiatric diagnosis has become. Editorials complaining about psychopharmacology are, at this point, something of a cliché. Conservative Christian mental health care is, because it introduces explicit politics into these tensions, a particularly rich site for thinking about mental health, and it is a promising site for a broader exploration of the work that Modernist discourse does.

James Dobson is an oddly neglected figure, and the conservative Evangelical mental health project he helped to pioneer is a rich but scarcely
acknowledged site for the study of expertise in public life. Articulation theory asks us to broaden our understanding of politics to include cultural work, and if we accept Laclau’s and Mouffe’s description of political work as fundamentally incommensurable, the intersections of mental health care and religion that Dobson’s work represents should be understood as sophisticated efforts to address complex problems rather than illegitimate appropriations of mental health discourse. A cursory glance at the larger Christian mental health care project that Dobson helped to pioneer suggests that Christian mental health care is a complex and diverse series of sites where rhetoric might uncover even more rich articulations of expertise to specific social contexts.

Aspects of Dobson’s work are problematic, but he deserves to be taken seriously, not only because he has helped to popularize important therapeutic practices like marriage counseling and grief counseling, but also because he has also done pioneering work to help take away the stigma associated with mental health care in conservative communities. Thousands of people suffering from abuse, addiction, and depression have benefited from Focus on the Family. Evangelical mental health care is an important mechanism for bringing care to people who need it. But as valuable as Evangelical health care has proven itself to be, we cannot forget that conservative Christian therapists and researchers have participated in abusive projects like “reparation therapy” (therapy meant to turn people into heterosexuals), and the kind of expertise oriented rhetoric that Dobson pioneered often finds its way into public debate in troubling ways. I
began this chapter by noting the similarity of Dobson’s rhetoric to arguments against marriage equality. This, too, is James Dobson’s legacy.

My analysis of James Dobson’s rhetorical strategies is a first step in a potentially far-reaching investigation. As important as Dobson is as a public figure and as a rhetorical innovator, he is in many ways merely the tip of an iceberg. Since Dobson began his career, therapeutic rhetoric and conservative Christianity have become increasingly intertwined, and Christian mental health care has become a sprawling enterprise. The particular intersections of culture, religion, politics, and expertise that constitute this project present enormous opportunities for rhetoricians.
NOTES

1. That figure includes sales of a 1992 revision called *The New Dare to Discipline*.

2. Dobson’s work echoes Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, which also makes a broad argument about how various kinds of “discipline” serve as mechanisms of social cohesion. Foucault, of course, also began his career in a mental health field, and his earliest work as a philosopher was directly influenced by his responses to that field. I have not explored the ways that Foucault’s work might respond to Dobson’s conservative attitude toward discipline, but there are obvious and interesting points of comparison.

3. While Dobson’s rhetoric is often strikingly moralistic and sometimes authoritarian, he can also be surprisingly progressive, particularly in his treatment of childhood sexuality. This dissertation is primarily concerned with Dobson’s conservative politics, but it should be emphasized that Dobson is a more complex figure than his reputation as a conservative firebrand would suggest.

4. The Family Research Council has had a somewhat tenuous relationship with Focus on the Family, at times being affiliated or even a part of Focus, and at other times not. The organizations have also shared board members, including Dobson. In 1994 The FRC became completely independent organization, in part because the lobbying activity that FRC engaged in threatened Focus’s tax exempt
status. The FRC has been a more outspoken and overtly political organization than Focus, and has been labeled a hate group for its anti-gay rights advocacy by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Southern Poverty Law Center).

5. “Surprising” because Minkowitz is as a feminist writer who covers gay and lesbian issues. She is a GLAAD award winner, and she is perhaps most known for uncovering the story of Brandon Teena.

6. As someone with a PhD, James Dobson is a doctor, and he is allowed to use the title. However, since he writes for a popular audience that is likely unfamiliar with the distinctions between psychiatrists, psychologists, and other kinds of therapists, at the very least, “Dr.” seems designed to carry a medical connotation, particularly since Dobson clearly uses the label to hint at his therapeutic experience rather than his academic authority. In his popular work, he discusses his experience with clients, not his scholarly research.

7. I am aware that I seem to make broad generalizations at this point. Because my analysis is grounded in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s articulation theory, the cultural work that discourses do are more important than the subtleties we might find when looking more closely at the communities that they represent. I do not mean to say that an Evangelical Christian has a simple, easily defined idea about the family. I mean to say that Evangelical Christianity, when it is a part of a controversy, depends on different assumptions than psychology.
8. Even though I will set aside these concerns about disciplinarily and legitimacy for now, I do not mean to say that this worry is invalid. There are certainly important questions about legitimacy to consider when science is used in political debate, and I will acknowledge them in my last chapter through a consideration of the problem of the “multifarious expert.”

9. Psychiatry has been attractive for study for two reasons. First of all, psychiatry can be studied as a part of the already established “medical rhetoric” project. Secondly, psychiatry, which began in professional journals among asylum keepers during the eighteenth century, was the only mental health care discipline until the twentieth century, and so it offers scholars a bigger tradition to study.

10. Michele Foucault and Erving Goffman also made influential arguments about how psychiatry is articulated to cultural expectations. Although neither approved of the label, Foucault and Szasz are often mentioned as the fathers of “anti-psychiatry.

11. Laclau’s argument is that populism is an expression of angst that is related to capitalism. Populism uses pre-capitalist symbolism (often agrarian) to construct a rhetoric of opposition between some kind of authentic folk culture and contemporary technological culture
In recent years, Dobson’s work has become increasingly out of touch with contemporary psychology, and his writing has become increasingly polemical, so much so that his missives have sometimes pushed against the boundaries of Focus on the Family’s non-profit status. I want to remind my reader that this dissertation, chapter four excepted, is concerned with Dobson’s influential formative work, which is more clearly articulated to mainstream mental health care and more narrowly concerned with parenting advice. I also want to remind the reader that I am concerned with importance of therapeutic discourse in Evangelical Christian popular culture, not with assessing the validity of applied psychology in a conservative Christian context. Dobson remained, until his retirement from the organization, intimately involved with coordinating the mental health outreach in which Focus on the Family engages. Someone familiar only with Dobson’s more recent public statements might quarrel with my emphasis on Dobson as a psychologist rather than a polemicist, but Dobson’s role as a public mental health advocate is central to his importance in the Evangelical community and to his influence on the conservative movement.

Dobson is a psychologist, and not a medical doctor, but characterizing his rhetoric as “medical” is, in this case, fair. The slippery nature of mental health care allows for rhetors like Dobson to use philosophical, practical, and medical arguments. It is worth noting that when he was a practicing psychologist, Dobson worked in a hospital and his research is about developmental
difficulties. He is not an M.D., but he has connections to physical medicine that not every psychologist has.

14. Randall Lake’s “Order and Disorder in Anti-abortion Rhetoric: A Logological View” is an example of rhetorical analysis that adheres closely to Burke’s work on religion.

15. Defining religious rhetoric as rhetoric that constructs sacredness through setting apart is also reminiscent of Mircea Eliade’s The Sacred and the Profane, which argues that religion is defined by the creation of sacred spaces that provide anchor points for the ordering of reality.

16. Dobson published What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women in the interim. What Wives Wish Their Husbands Know about Women is a fascinating text that fits into the larger project analyzed in this dissertation, but it is not as politically invested as Dare to Discipline and The Strong Willed Child.

17. In my justification for the analysis in this chapter, I have glossed over an important issue: agency. The model of an autonomous agent making choices about strategy that I suggest is, to some degree, in tension with postmodern cultural theory, which suggests that subjectivity is contingent upon social and discursive context. The neglect of this tension is one of the concerns of Dillip
Goankar’s “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science.” I will not address this issue at length, but I will note that my concept of subjectivity follows Herndl’s and Lacona’s “Shifting Agency: Agency, Kairos, and the Possibilities of Social Action,” which I cite in my introductory chapter. Herndl and Licona, in an effort to mediate between classical rhetorical and postmodern theories of subjectivity, argue for a notion constrained agency that exists within different social, institutional, and discursive positions. Agency and identity might be contingent, but humans can make choices about where they position themselves. The reader will note the influence of Herndl and Licona in some of my own rhetorical choices; when I say that I understand articulation theory in terms of “discursive opportunity” or when I say that Dobson “occupied a position” through a rhetorical strategy I am following Herndl’s and Licona’s work about agency.

18. For more information about the specifics of Dobson’s long but sometimes contentious relationship to the Republican Party, see Dale Buss’s Family Man or Dan Gilgoff’s The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and Evangelical America Are Winning the Culture War.

19. The most disturbing artifacts described in the report, child pornography and bestiality, were not purchased or produced in the United States, but seized by customs. The choice to include unsettling descriptions of child pornography
alongside descriptions of the commercial pornography industry suggests that the commission understood all depictions of sex as criminal.

20. Dobson’s blurring of consensual sex practices carried out by adults with child abuse and rape is one of the more problematic aspects of his statement, and my treatment of this element of his argument deserves comment. My rhetorical choices attempt to convey Dobson’s characterization of pornography as extreme and violent, but I disagree with the way Dobson pathologizes sexual practices that fall outside of “conventional” heterosexual intercourse. For example, I use the word “deviance” above in my characterization of Dobson’s description of pornography to suggest the perspective put forth in the statement, not to endorse Dobson’s point of view. I also want to emphasize that the socially conscious alternative pornography produced by feminist, kink, or queer activists that exists today did not exist in 1986, nor did the more permissive but still critical attitude toward pornography that many feminists have adopted. Contemporaneous feminists like Robin Morgan, whose maxim “Pornography is the theory; rape is the practice” is quoted by Dobson (through Dworkin), were outspoken in their condemnation. As a feminist, I find much to sympathize with in Dobson’s concerns, but I find his wholesale disgust at sexuality unlike his own to be dangerous. The passage quoted above reveals that Dobson’s idea of erotica that reflects a healthy sexual appetite is “images of simple heterosexual nudity,” meaning images of women intended for men. One of the more chilling moments
in Dobson’s statement is his complaint that adult bookstores are “centers of disease and homosexual activity.” The Meese report, and Dobson’s comment on it, seems calculated to shock the reader, and while some of the material described in the report is deeply disturbing, the attitudes informing the report are sometimes even more so.

21. In the following discussion I waffle between discussing Dobson’s expertise as specifically “medical” or merely “therapeutic.” Dobson is not a physician, but his rhetoric includes the influence of the biomedical, and the artifact analyzed here sits between medical and therapeutic language. Sorting out the distinction is, for my purposes, largely unnecessary.

22. Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a philosopher’s extended explication of these problems.

23. I define “Modernism” according to Bruno Latour’s definition. My second chapter includes a discussion of Latour and a discussion of Carl Herndl’s program for understanding rhetoric as a non-Modern practice. It also explicates the tensions surrounding the trend toward biomedical diagnosis in mental health care and explains how Dobson responded to this tension.
REFERENCES


Lake, Randall. Order and Disorder in Anti-Abortion Rhetoric: A Logological


