American Journal of Cultural Sociology
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-025-00264-w

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Micropolarization: performances of antagonism and struggles for recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Accepted: 2 May 2025

Abstract

This article theorizes how political divisions permeate social interaction, transforming the political into the personal in everyday life. Drawing on affective polarization research, we highlight the central role of identification and emotions in shaping political in-groups and out-groups. Moving beyond conventional measures of cross-group resentment, we conceptualize polarization as the lived experience of political antagonism. We argue that polarization materializes through struggles for recognition, shaped by the perception and processing of political conflict as it circulates through public communication channels. Adopting a performance-theoretical lens, we connect the symbolic language, emotions, and misrecognition in micropolarization to the broader public drama of political conflict. Using interview data on family and friendship disputes related to COVID-19 vaccination denial in the UK and Germany, we examine how public conflicts manifest in interpersonal relationships. This study suggests a research agenda that explores interactional dynamics across online and offline spaces, diverse social groups, and varying levels of relational involvement, offering a deeper understanding of the micro-foundations of political polarization.

Keywords Phenomenology · Interaction · Recognition · Cultural sociology · Polarization · Political talk · Political conflict

This paper deals with how political divisions articulate themselves in interpersonal relations through struggles for recognition; how the political becomes personal in the most mundane local contexts; and how individuals manage experiences of

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Published online: 28 June 2025

fundamental disagreement within "local interaction orders" (Goffman 1983). We refer to the phenomenon we are exploring as *micropolarization*. We posit that for polarization to become "real," individuals must first perceive and feel a sense of division from and antagonism towards others. Secondly, they negotiate these perceptions and emotions in their everyday lives, and at times enact resulting antagonism in interpersonal relationships. We argue that the dynamics of public political antagonism are not significantly different from interpersonal political divisions. Indeed, we suspect that by focusing upon how the latter play out, it will be less mystifying to comprehend the intensity of feelings surrounding the former.

Political antagonism and affective polarization

Polarization, as we see it, goes beyond attitudinal or ideological gaps between political cleavages. It involves overriding feelings of political antagonism, surpassing the effects of specific issue disagreements measured in traditional public opinion surveys. At stake in micropolarization is the very right of an opponent to be worthy of recognition. Labeled as fanatical, irrational, and beyond reason, the opponent is cast outside the bounds of common respect—an antagonist perceived primarily with affective distaste. Building on the idea of affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), we emphasize that the political divisions of concern revolve around political identification and emotional aversion against political out-groups (Brewer 2001; Cairns et al. 2006). Beyond to the original conception of affective polarization of *partisan* identities (Iyengar et al. 2012), we understand affective polarization as attached to broader and contextually malleable ideologies (Coggins and Gruschow 2024) but also specific political positions, like Leave and Remain regarding Brexit (Hobolt et al. 2021), which transcend partisan divisions.

We draw on performative polarization theory (Revers 2023) and see micropolarization as infused by and an articulation of the public drama of political antagonism. The meanings, gestures, and feelings of this drama are transposed into everyday interactions. While intersubjectivity is always anchored in multiple meanings beyond the interactive situation (Tavory 2023), micropolarization involves meanings of oppositional valence and sometimes different sources. We might say that micropolarization is polarized political culture in interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), involving a reciprocal exchange between (macro) symbolic orders and (micro) interaction orders. On a micro level, this reciprocity implies that public political antagonism must, above all, feel personal to the individual. Political antagonism becomes affectively charged through meanings that address an individual's embodied identity—be it bodily autonomy, gender identity, faith, or national belonging. Social media and mobile connectivity intensify this affective entanglement by collapsing the boundaries between the personal and the political, enabling individuals to experience large-scale events through the intimate lens of everyday life. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, social media platforms foster emotionally resonant publics that are not solely mobilized by rational deliberation but by shared feeling and sentiment. Even public figures, who exert disproportionate influence over public events, are embedded in this dynamic; they, too, engage in and

witness political conversations within their personal lives or filtered through the lens of social media—with all its refractions and clouding. Although overall the public political drama exerts more influence on interpersonal interaction than vice versa in most cases, the meanings they create do not just slot into individuals' interpretive schemas as neatly as frame–alignment theory suggests (Snow and Benford 1988). Public meanings are creatively engaged, adapted, combined, and sometimes discarded in social interaction. Furthermore, everyday interactions, understood as performances, are best envisioned as symbolic rehearsals from public scripts, more argumentative bricolage (Erickson 2004, pp. 165–174) than perfectly executed arguments.

Antagonistic political conflict is a defining feature of polarized political cultures. We see political antagonism as an ongoing social drama (Turner 1974), predominantly witnessed and participated in through media. What sets apart the social drama of polarized societies is the perpetual nature of the conflictual crisis, which is triggered by a breach of norms. Such societies are stuck in a liminal state with an imminent further escalation of the crisis, characterized by the "social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between contesting parties," as described by Turner (1974, pp. 41). In these cultures, public conflict remains unresolved.

We explore the intersection of public and interpersonal political drama in intimate relationships—family and close friendships—examining the conditions of eruption and containment of antagonistic conflict. We conceive polarization phenomenologically, as the lived experience of political antagonism. We mean antagonistic conflict in a broad sense, akin to how Gøtzsche-Astrup (2022) theorizes the experience of contention as expression of the *potential* of conflict. This experience involves engaging with the public drama, envisioning oneself as part of collective struggles, occasionally participating through online discussions, activism, voting, etc. It also involves directly confronting opponents, whether strangers, acquaintances, or friends and family.

Political conflict is crucial in understanding affective polarization, as feelings of hostility not only cause conflict but also stem from prior conflicts. *Antagonistic* conflict is defined in creating seemingly insurmountable differences between opponents, leading to friend/enemy distinctions, moral attributions, and associated feelings. Existing research often measures affective polarization through survey "thermometer ratings" and social distance measures (tolerance of inter-party marriage of one's child [see Druckman and Levendusky 2019]), providing insights into the extent of divisions over time and across societies. However, we learn little about the affective experience of polarization, feeling rejected by others and its implications for relationships. Furthermore, the emotions and divisions triggered by political elites, their communication, and influence on perceptions and interpersonal political discord need attention. Elite polarization (McCarty et al. 2006) not only hampers decision-making (Binder 2015) but also fosters perceptions of divisions through effective partisan sorting (Levendusky 2010). Likewise, media representations of polarization also strengthen these perceptions (Levendusky 2013; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016; Robison and Mullinix 2016). Based on the degree to which these representations are factually unwarranted, some scholars qualify such mediated perceptions as "false polarization" (Fernbach and Van Boven 2022). To us, such perceptions

are relevant as they shape audience experiences and materialize in "deep stories" (Hochschild 2016), regardless of their factual justification.

Polarization in and through communication is a yet under-researched area, though a number of studies focused on the polarizing effects of exposure to diverse and divided encounters on social media (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Banks et al. 2021). Brüggemann and Meyer (2023) recently suggested an analytical framework for discursive polarization, which links ideological and affective polarization regarding substantive and structural dimensions of communication (see also Yarchi et al. 2021). Exceptions notwithstanding (Balietti et al. 2021; Branković et al. 2020; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020), research on polarized offline communication, conflict, and conflict avoidance in this context is rare. We aim to show how the public drama of political antagonism—its scripts, emotionally charged symbols, and moral boundaries—disrupt interpersonal relations in ways that are both political and polarizing.

Political conflict in interpersonal relations

The following sections delve into narratives of face-to-face political conflicts in family and close friendships. We expected higher personal stakes in disagreement compared to remote online contexts, often with strangers. Acknowledging the prevalence of online polarization (Barnidge 2017; Stromer-Galley et al. 2015), we argue that micropolarization experiences are most profound in contexts in which social interactions are inescapably shared, jointly sustained, and mutually affecting. Face-to-face interactions, always interwoven with mediated communication (Couldry and Hepp 2016), encompass a fuller range of physical and psychic experiences and risks, and thus offer a comprehensive access point to micropolarization.

While it is important to study micropolarization in a range of settings and relational contexts, we mainly focus on family communication as our primary reference, which has typically viewed effective communication as overcoming intersubjective ambiguities, involving a delicate balance between upholding a shared sense of reality while allowing idiosyncrasies of individual members which families invest time and energy to establish. From this functional perspective, conflict means "the perception by at least one person that another person is blocking the first person from achieving a personal, relational, or instrumental goal" (Koerner and Fitzpatrick 2006, p. 161). Much attention is therefore paid to developing "resiliency" within families as a means of adaptive protection against internal threats to shared horizons (Socha and Yingling 2010, p. 102).

Most family communication research does not deal with *political* disagreements. Families exist within macro-social environments in which conflicts over policies, preferences, and values are prevalent. While there is strong evidence to suggest a strong correspondence between family ties and political values (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Iyengar et al. 2018), there has not been much research on political cleavages within families, either in terms of their dynamics or their consequences. While Coleman (2020) has explored conflicts within families in relation to the UK's Brexit referendum, there is scope for a more detailed understanding of how families

cope with situations in which members' worldviews threaten one another's sense of ontological security and (in the case of COVID vaccination) physical well-being.

Interviews about political family conflict around COVID-19

Anecdotal press accounts of family rupture over vaccination have drawn attention to the pathos of such disagreements (Abramson 2021; Banks 2021), but we still know little about the dynamics through which they are performed, avoided, exacerbated, or resolved. Our analysis provides initial insights, drawing on a limited number of interviews about conflicts related to COVID-19 vaccinations in the UK and Germany.[1] Our participants included mostly opponents and few supporters of vaccinations who experienced rifts with vaccine-hesitant loved ones.

Anti-vaccination beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic served as a strategic research site (Merton 1987) for exploring political conflict in close personal relationships. In purposely selecting such a high-stakes issue, we are under no illusions to make general claims about the conditions of political family conflict but hope to illuminate and theorize social processes of micropolarization. While issues extended beyond vaccinations, they were central to the conflicts. Our aim was not comparative but to diversify across two politically charged domains with comparable affective polarization levels[2] and right-wing nationalist backlash,[3] fostering deep political divides. Despite shared societal tensions over COVID-19, the two countries differed significantly, with Germany having a more organized anti-vaccination movement amid enduring post-totalitarian opposition to governmental intrusions on privacy, contrasting with the UK's weaker movement and general cynicism towards government.

The political struggle during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany was largely driven by the "Querdenken" movement, which opposed government-imposed

[1] Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Arts, Humanities, and Cultures Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds in July 2022 (approval reference number LTCOMM-050).

[2] Based on longitudinal election survey data on party affect, affective polarization decreases over time (until 2020) in both countries but is overall lower in Germany than the UK (Boxell et al. 2020) and comparable in another study which accounts for multiparty systems (Wagner 2021). Using this method but focusing on partisans reveals similar absolute levels in 2020, over time (from 1960 to 2020) a small decline in Germany and increase in the UK (Garzia et al. 2023).

[3] Germany and the UK have experienced a recent surge in net immigration, accompanied by increased support for "authoritarian-populist parties" after decades of relatively low support and low authoritarian attitudes in the population (Norris and Inglehart 2018). This is what brought the seismic EU referendum in Britain and the rise of the Alterative for Germany (AfD), which polled just shy of 25% at the time of writing this paper. The far-right played a substantial role in driving the Brexit referendum, creating political identities of Leave and Remain (Hobolt et al. 2021; Sobolewska and Ford 2020). This division is particularly pronounced on "culture war" issues, as indicated by the British Social Attitude survey. (https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39478/bsa39_culture-wars.pdf). In Germany, a study on the societal center (Zick et al. 2023) reveals a notable increase in extremist attitudes among the electorate, rising from 1.7% in 2020/21 to 8.3% in the 2022/23 survey wave. Another study highlights the polarization induced by the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, with approximately a third of the population harboring authoritarian aggression against opposing groups—such as the vaccinated versus the unvaccinated (Decker et al. 2022).

restrictions such as lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccination campaigns and cited concerns over personal freedoms, government overreach, and associated conspiracy theories. A much-discussed book (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022) characterized the position underlying this movement as "libertarian authoritarianism," a resistance against socio-political coordination that challenges ideas of self-actualization and self-determination. In contrast to the authoritarian character of critical theory, the sacred center of this position is not a political leader but the self.

The movement spread across Germany from the summer of 2020, where some protests escalated into confrontations with the police. Tensions escalated in the fall of 2021 when a narrative of "the pandemic of the unvaccinated" seized public discourse (e.g., Blome 2021), initiated by leading politicians (Siggelkow 2024). It implied that Querdenker were not only held responsible for occupying intensive care units (Laghai et al. 2021) but also the spread of infections and the protraction of lockdowns by a public which was tired of restrictions. Larger protests were banned in late 2021, which led to unannounced demonstrations called "walks" (*Spaziergänge*) that were perceived as public provocations. Because various groups and ideologies joined Querdenker protests—including extremist groups, especially in East Germany—the movement has been put under observation of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) in April 2021 to investigate "extremist aspirations" among its more "radical forces" (Unger 2021).

The UK also had its share of COVID-19 protests in opposition to government mandates. Protests emerged as lockdowns extended into 2021, with groups opposing mandatory mask-wearing, business closures, and restrictions on gatherings, arguing these measures violated personal freedoms. Large-scale demonstrations in London were organized by groups like Save Our Rights UK, and many others occurred across the UK, occasionally leading to clashes with the police. In summer 2021, the "Freedom Day" lifting of many restrictions brought further criticism from public health advocates who feared a resurgence of infections. Vaccine mandates for certain professions and the introduction of vaccine passports in late 2021 fueled additional unrest. Unlike Germany, these protests were more varied and fragmented, involving anti-vaccine activists, libertarians, broader civil liberty groups, and were less marked by political extremism.

In Germany, recruitment for the study primarily utilized Telegram and snowball sampling from a local Querdenker chapter in a northern city. The first author attended three rallies in that city and followed discussions in the Telegram channel. Recruitment efforts also targeted online support groups for those who lost family members to the movement, on platforms like Facebook or Reddit. This approach yielded twelve interviews, including eight vaccination opponents and four proponents. One participant withdrew due to concerns about the confidentiality of their details following legally sensitive remarks. In the UK, we interviewed eight people—four from an anti-vaccination group opposing COVID regulations and four regular attendees at a martial arts gym in a northern post-industrial city. Additionally, we informally observed meetings of an anti-vaxxer group in a local park in a small town in the north of England.

A total of twenty interviews were conducted in the latter half of 2022 to explore varied experiences, reflections, and strategies concerning political ruptures within

close relationships. Our interview questions inquired how intense and seemingly intractable political divisions manifest in everyday interactions. The objective was two-fold: to test and illustrate our theoretical model and to further stimulate theory-building of micropolarization mechanisms for subsequent empirical examination.

There are important differences between our empirical object, narratives of conflict, and our object of theorization: experiences of conflict. While direct observation would be potentially valuable for further examination of the microsociology of interpersonal conflict, it would also limit us to the immediate experience of it. As we will argue further on, micropolarization is about the sustained experience of political antagonism in the interplay between public and interpersonal drama, the ways in which individuals feel and reflect about these experiences and how it orders their public and private lives moving forward. Furthermore, there are methodological reasons to not reduce interview data to discourse and as completely separate from practice. As Tavory (2020) convincingly argued, while few researchers infer directly from interview narratives to situated action, making no such inference would be just as foolish. In practice, different facets of interviews require different kinds of inference. Rather than thinking of interview narratives as representations of future and past actions, they tap into what Reed (2011) terms *landscapes of meaning* and thus "tell us something about how people make sense of their world well beyond the interview situation" (Tavory 2020, pp. 458). Furthermore, interviews have specific advantages over ethnography for our theoretical interests, including that it is particularly well suited to study emotion. Interviews inform researchers about possible inconsistencies between how people wish to be perceived and how they feel (Pugh 2013). Narratives of interaction are also removed from the immediate affective experience of the situation enriched by reflection (forming an emotional experience, which can only be gained after the fact). In that context, relative to observing situations, only through narratives of reflectively processed experience can researchers know which situations were significant (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

Our participants described a wide range of ruptures in their close relationships. While most maintained some level of contact, a few completely cut ties—or were cut off—and had been estranged from loved ones for over two years by the time we spoke. Some recounted persistent attempts at persuasion or emotional blackmail ("Your mother cries because of you") from family members, creating ongoing conflict that often required setting boundaries. Others experienced brief but intense episodes of conflict before avoiding any discussion of the pandemic altogether, allowing them to preserve their relationships. Emotional echoes in the interviews ranged from disdain and desperation to feelings of being misunderstood or excluded; some participants were openly defiant, while others struggled to contain their anger despite their best intentions.

The micropolarization drama of COVID-19

We theorize micropolarization at the intersection of public and interpersonal drama of political conflict by focusing upon struggles for recognition within intimate family and friendship networks. We argue that affective sanctions and negative

attributions that emerge within political disputes are features of contestation concerning the status order. The affordance of status depends upon relational struggles at both the public (macro) and local (micro) levels. At each level, recognition is an outcome of communication, with the terms of macro-recognition played out locally and informally within interpersonal networks, while the details of micro-recognition reflect macro-narratives and scripts. In this article, we explore the terms of these recognition struggles by focusing upon how people learn to express political emotions and meanings in micropolarization dramas (*entrainment)*, including stigma arising from effective and perceived misrecognition, and how this drives micropolarization. By recognition, we refer to the notion of "the equal moral worth of persons" (Fraser 1995, p. 89) which should determine how people are heard, treated, and counted, regardless of their positions or dispositions. As a normative element of justice, respect for a person should not be withdrawn because their perspectives lack credibility or can be easily associated with a stereotypical position that the person in question has not actually advocated. Indeed, recognition is most tested in situations of disagreement and conflict in which there is a temptation to dismiss or disparage an adversary. Respectful recognition depends upon an openness to generous and nuanced appraisal rather than lazy attributions prompted by the heat of disagreement.

Entrainment and enactment of political emotions and meanings as pathways to interpersonal conflict

Micropolarization dramas are not conducted in terms that are freshly invented for each agonistic episode. They rely upon cultural referents that allude to a "deep background of collective representations" (Alexander 2004, p. 530). In short, polarized performances tend to depend upon scripts which pre-exist any given enactment and persist from enactment to enactment (Schechner 1977/2012, p. 69). Successful performance scripts evoke and condense key elements of cultural representation unequivocally and in morally binary ways. Script and representation become loosely coupled, allowing actors to strike a balance between remaining true to extant symbolic meanings and inventive and believable forms of immediate and situated enactment.

Public performance scripts that an audience perceives as meaningful do more than evoke familiarity when reenacted or repurposed—they serve as models for symbolic expression that individuals learn, internalize, and adapt. Once carried into everyday life, these scripts become "restored behavior" (Schechner 1985), emphasizing the embodied and iterative character of cultural learning. We argue that the learning of emotions is not just an extension of this process but a central mechanism of micropolarization, as publicly performed emotional expressions are rehearsed, reinforced, and felt in private. Crucially, the scripts of performances we oppose can be even more formative in this context, giving rise to counter-performances and oppositional forms of restored behavior, which further shape experiences of polarization.

Our interviews, first, illustrate how meanings implicated in the public drama of political conflict emerge in the scripts of private conversations, which critically involves social stigma (see next section). Second, emotions arising from this drama permeated interpersonal disputes our participants experienced. In this sense, micropolarization research examines the links between interpersonal political conflict and political emotions and representations. How do public emotions and meanings become so personal? We borrow the concept *entrainment* (Collins 2004)[4] to conceive not only how the public adopts emotions but also symbolic meanings. With regard to affectively polarized identity groups, entrainment means learning to feel and express resentment and most importantly becoming familiar with the opposite camp's feelings and expressions of resentment. Public conflict is a source of entrainment. Depending on its intensity, the entrained language and emotions of public conflict can take over relationships and trigger interpersonal conflict. From the perspective of the public performer, the drama is successful when the meanings and emotions they project resonate within the public in ways they are expressed in their interactions with others. Performative success involves, as Morgan (forthcoming) argues, providing resolutions of deep feelings. We argue that it also consists of making the public feel things they have not felt before in the same way. Some witnesses of an angry populist are confirmed in their original anger, while others are impelled to become angry or angrier than they were.

In the confrontations our interviewees described, they and their loved ones constructed scripts based on preferred public imaginaries in order to express personal points of view and confront one another. Whether introduced inadvertently or deliberately, a mere catchphrase can set the direction and often trigger the conflictual outcome of a conversation. By incorporating symbols, which are already entangled in polarized public debates, interactants signal opposition, distancing or approval, and frame themselves and their opponents in morally coded ways. On the public stage, polarization involves spirals of performance and counter-performance in which polarizing performers continuously interlink new meanings to established antagonisms and in the course of which these meanings and actors themselves become symbolic representations of political divides (Revers 2023).[5]

As important as this symbolic work is for providing the symbolic language of conflict, it is on the private stage of the local interaction order that these public scripts, including conspiratorial scripts, are rehearsed and fine-tuned and where political antagonism is ultimately realized on a large scale. Alan, a British interviewee who

[4] Randall Collins (2004) argued that people learn how to feel appropriately through interaction rituals. Drawing from Katz (1999), he uses laughing at each other's reflections in a hall of mirrors as a simple example of a socially learned emotion, which emerges through interaction, rather than the visual stimulus alone. Von Scheve and others (2014) explain entrainment through Durkheim's observation that people identify with groups and their symbols through ritual processes of shared and mutually sustained emotions.

[5] This has an important emotional dimension, which is that actors dominating the interaction not only become sacred objects but "symbolic repositor[s] of the group's emotional energies" (Collins 2004, p. 124). Correspondingly, in performative polarization performers become symbols of evil and repositors of negative emotional energy for the antagonistic audience.

had worked in the pharmaceutical industry until he was made redundant early during the COVID lockdown, drew on public claims about the illegality of UK government rules to enforce social distancing:

> I know for a fact it's unlawful … If you just look at the government website it says that you can only lock down a population if you've got a highly infectious disease. Now, COVID was downgraded from a highly infectious disease to standard cold or flu. Therefore, by enacting emergency powers the government enacted treason.

The force of such scripts need not correspond to empirical reality but need to be asserted as if they are revealing a layer of evidence that is concealed from most people. The expressive tone of the script is suggestive: the speaker knows something that others have not taken the trouble to unearth. Alan was at pains to explain that "I'm not a conformist. I see patterns and trends." And later in the interview, "For me, it's always about asking questions; not just accepting it." The implication is that those accepting the pandemic narrative are dupes. Another British interviewee, Lee, who is a martial arts trainer whose work was severely disrupted by lockdown, lamented the uncritical collusion with authority of most people. At one point in our interview, he addressed the following comment to an imaginary pro-vaxxer: "You're believing everything you're told. You're not questioning. You weren't taught to find the other side of the coin. I believe that you people just need to do a little bit of research."

Emphasizing the epistemic practice of "doing my own research" (cf. Tripodi 2018) and dismissing normies as credulous dupes were common assertions in the interviews. The skeptic as lone individual fighting a system of oppressive conformity entails an incorporation of a standard liberal trope into a personal script. Consistent with such heroic individualism was distrust of democratic institutions, especially the government and the news media. Michaela, a German interviewee who studies abroad, described how her mother became absorbed by conspiratorial anti-government thinking, rapidly moving from considering the possibility of being vaccinated to: "'No vaccination—they contain nanoparticles; they contain chips' and then 'Corona is not real' and finally 'the vaccination existed before Corona,'" all within half a year.

Her mother's beliefs were not only limited to COVID-19, including rejection of the state and modern medicine, but propagated to ideas of the future, present, and the past, including rejection of refugees, climate activists, and the Green Party. Obligatory comparisons between Querdenker and the German Jews were paired with trivializing beliefs about the Holocaust. "There is no topic which she does not associate with conspiracy theories," Michaela said, which has led her to drastically reduce contact and to accept that the mother she knew "is not here anymore." This tendency for scripts to become more extreme and all-encompassing in response to conflict and rejection was not confined to Michaela's mother. At the time of interview, Alan had arrived at the view that governments were "Satanic conspiracies" and that most laws in existence, including those enforcing mortgage payments, were acts of treason.

Indeed, several of the anti-vaccine activists we interviewed reported an expansion of their anti-COVID scripts over time, leading them to branch out into new areas of civic resistance. Thomas, a German interviewee, described in detail how the Querdenker movement not only politically sensitized him but also raised his suspicion against those he now perceives as the main antagonists: the German government and the news media. In a remarkably reflexive fashion, Thomas said he adopted an "obstructive posture" (*Sperrhaltung*) that made rational discussion impossible.

Symbols of political identity are important devices of political conflict. In the case of COVID-19, such symbols include common objects like masks, vaccines, and supposed treatments (e.g., Ivermectin) and their respective meanings and emotional valence for each side. They also include slurs like "covidiots" or *Schlafschaf* ("sleeping sheep") to denigrate anti-vaxxers or the gullible majority, respectively. Several of our interviewees told us that it was often the inadvertent or deliberate use of a word, rather than the substance of an argument, which triggered dispute. By responding emotionally, people are not only confronting opponents but situating themselves as political subjects.

For example, Frank, a student whose grandmother joined the Querdenker protests, and who was himself active in counter-protests against the movement, explained how he and his grandmother mainly avoided the pandemic in their conversations, but the topic bubbled up on occasions when his grandmother endeavored to re-frame the identity of the Querdenker movement by, for example, trivializing the influence of the far-right within it or drawing problematic historical comparisons:

> There was a situation in which my grandmother said: "The regulations at the moment are like with the Jews back then," and then I freaked out because I can't accept that in any way, and I got a bit loud. And then the rest of the family tried to calm me down and [told me] that I shouldn't make such a fuss.

Frank's immediate emotional response was to both object to his grandmother and position himself within the fight against the pandemic and Germany coming to terms with its past. His feelings about public controversies, such as when protesters wore the Star of David at Querdenker demonstrations (Fröhlich 2022), next to his regular disdain for Holocaust analogies, took over the interaction in this situation. Holocaust analogies were common in our interviews and, aside from a well-documented discursive strategy of victimhood reversal by far-right politicians (Wodak 2015), our participants conveyed experiences of alienation and repudiation through such comparison.

Bordering symbolic and emotional landscapes of politics are not only drawn and received through media discourse but also personal experience, especially among activists. When Tina, one of our German participants, first joined the Querdenker protests, she took to the streets *in opposition to* social divisions that had emerged during the pandemic. But her emotional journey ultimately took her to express that "I *want* to be divided from you." This transformation was a response to experienced hostility:

> We were pelted with eggs, my children were spat on, inflammatory speech from the side of the street …. My sister and I were always: "now more than

> ever!" With this hatred we were faced with—by the media, people on the street, interviews with people and politicians—at some point came my own hatred.

This feeling carried over into her personal relationships. Though the public drama of political conflict is obviously instrumental for emotional entrainment, it is in interactions with others within specific, localized situations that the form and intensity of emotional expression are played out. Within the family, they do not always erupt into open confrontation. But when they do, interactants often find themselves re-enacting public scripts. Thomas, for example, felt that his father and brother were adopting the public's perception of Querdenker to categorize him. Domestic relations became tense as these stereotypes hardened, and he felt a need to distance himself.

Interviewees identified emotions as the source of family conflict in the stories they told us. Speaking to us, they conveyed a degree of empathy for their estranged family members, but were unable to communicate it to them directly because their relationships had been tainted by feelings of disrespect. A good illustration of this is Martin's emotional trajectory, which led him from initial fear of the dangers of the coronavirus towards the dangers of the vaccination. His sister, on the other hand, was unperturbed at the beginning but became fearful of the virus and a strong proponent of vaccinations. Even though Martin expressed understanding of his sister's fear to us, ever since she told him she hoped for compulsory vaccinations "so that idiots like me will also finally get injected" communication between the siblings had broken down.

In some cases, family arguments emotionally surged within a particular situation, but were suppressed for the sake of sustaining a semblance of harmony. Will, a British martial arts trainer, described a moment of such defusion during a heated debate between two fronts within his family at Christmas:

> And when you added in a bit of food, a few sherries, and a few Christmas beers and all that, and yeah, that did get quite a bit heated. It went on and on and I just said 'We'll just have to leave it there because we're not gonna agree on it. And it's Christmas. And you know we've got other things to do without sort of just arguing about this all night.' And then, yeah, after that I don't think it escalated and we moved on and I don't think there was lots of ill feeling after it.

Perhaps it was the presence of a moderating third party and the convivial context, but this exemplifies affective management geared to sustain the local interaction order.

The divisive force of stigma

Most people avoid conflict most of the time. This is not the only reason why Erving Goffman's work, which mainly deals with how people manage to avoid confrontation, contain their unconscious impulses, maintain social relations, foster favorable impressions, and separate contexts of candor from public civility, enlightens

micropolarization dramas. Goffman's ([1963] 1986) work on stigma provides a framework for understanding interpersonal political conflict as a form of *agonistic misrecognition* (Wells and Friedland 2023). Through stigmatization, a group is denied recognition and discarded as illegitimate. This cuts across power differentials and affects both dominant and subordinate groups (Lamont et al. 2014).[6]

According to Goffman, the construction of stigmatized identities involves attributions (e.g., blame, stereotypes) and norms regulating contact with "normals." Regarding the case at hand, not getting vaccinated against COVID-19 in 2021 not only meant being excluded from parts of social life but also involved being held responsible for fatalities and for prolonging lockdowns.

Our interviewees recounted being blamed in emotional terms. For instance, Laura, a German caretaker with long-held anti-vaccination beliefs, actively participated in Querdenker protests with her children, even attending "walks" when protesting was illegal. She recalled one particularly distressing incident three times during the interview: "I am not a person who cries often, but one thing really hurt me: there were children who actually booed us on the side of the road." While emphasizing that she did not want to draw a direct comparison, when she was booed and showed the middle finger by these children she likened it to a scene from "Schindler's List." Laura expressed feeling ostracized and isolated due to public and personal disapproval, stating she no longer wants to socialize with vaccinated individuals. Goffman notes that individuals respond to stigma by making it a central part of their life and by building supportive social environments based on it. For Laura, her anti-vaccination group serves this function, a community she affectionately calls her "new Corona family."

In the following, we highlight three key aspects of stigma in micropolarization dramas: (1) passing and negotiating boundaries between stigma and normality, (2) the danger and contagiousness of stigma, and (3) stigma reversal.

Passing and negotiating boundaries between stigma and normality

Goffman argued that when the stigmatized are among "normals," they are passing when they make their identity and stigmatized attributes invisible to avoid discrimination. Though vaccination status is not visible, for several interviewees passing was compromised by the context collapse of online and offline social life (Marwick and Boyd 2011) and their outspokenness online. Disagreements emerged when friends and family noticed or inferred deviant views from social media or instant messaging updates.

Depending on their level of identification as vaccination opponents and associated beliefs, transitioning into the "normal" group stirred feelings of disloyalty, often leading to open disagreements. In a family discussion regarding the role of

[6] The salience of stigmatization depends on *groupness*, as Lamont and others (2016) showed for communities affected by ethnoracial exclusion in the US, Brazil and Israel, including the degree of self-identification, shared norms and homophily within the group, aside from macro factors (material, institutional, historical, cultural) which define its position in society.

vaccination refusal in the pandemic, passing vaccination opponents faced the dilemma of either remaining silent or defending themselves, their own and their beliefs. Some resorted to lying to preserve relationships, leading to subsequent guilt. For instance, Sarah joined Querdenker protests in solidarity with friends more deeply affected by "compulsory vaccination." Her strongly pro-vaccination best friend, on the other hand, completely isolated herself except for the support bubble with Sarah's family, which was less exclusive as she was led to believe. Sarah admitted, "oh god, when you talk about that you feel terrible—*I lied to my friend*." She believed this breach of trust would irreparably damage their friendship if revealed, even years later.

Though rules and sanctions against protests or entering public spaces without vaccination proof organized public life during the pandemic, criteria of morally appropriate behavior in private was mostly negotiated. Laura, who remembers taking to the streets from early on in her life, was initially sympathetic with her mother's decision to isolate herself from her grandchildren because of a lung condition. However, her mother's insistence on Laura's family getting vaccinated led her to break off contact:

> There has been a huge rift and for her, all protesters are Nazis and now we all love Putin and agree with what he does. *Judging*—without discussing with me or talking to me. And that's not how I have been raised, and I cannot keep my mouth shut. If I would sit at hers, it would clash.

Through her sister Tina, she learned what her mother thought of people like Laura, namely that "we Querdenker were murderers." She felt deindividuated by being stereotyped rather than perceived as a unique individual—by her own mother, of all people—who then stopped being just her parent but became an embodiment of public social condemnation. Other interviewees were less able to avoid family members and thus had to use other strategies to retreat in the face of stigma. Alan, who lived with his mother, a former NHS nurse who totally rejected his opposition against COVID vaccination, tried to persuade her and others not to get vaccinated, yet his stigma led him to choose his communicative opportunities carefully:

> You get put into a box by your friends and your family and I know people who basically have to walk away from the family now because their belief systems are completely different and they think you're nuts … I'm very self-aware, so I know if I continue to harass them you turn down a certain path and you lose friends and family. I've got to bite my tongue.

Alan combined this pragmatic strategy of selective dialogical engagement to disabuse his stigmatizers with a fatalist outlook where the system will inevitably create its own undoing and "wake [people] up to the truth."

Danger and contagiousness of stigma

Like other meanings charged with moral significance, stigma is contagious and represents a source of danger (Douglas 2005; Durkheim 1995). At the height of the

COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine denial could threaten livelihood, reputation, and relations, besides physical and mental well-being. Boundaries of the stigmatized identities are porous: the more intense and moralized the public conflict, the greater the danger of being identified, including when commitments are unclear. Beyond relatively tangible group affiliations (like protest movements), beliefs predominantly viewed as pernicious may become stigma when externally ascribed. For instance, being labeled as a racist, rightly or wrongly, can be a powerful stigma. People may also be stigmatized in more than one way. Our research participants were not only viewed as conspiracy theorists but also associated with far-right beliefs. Tina explicitly blamed the media for this:

> having been described as crazy and incompetent. […] In one week, we were radical right-wing, then the week after terrorists, war supporters, Querdenker, deniers, conspiracy theorists, Putin-understander. I take to the streets for other reasons: human rights, freedom of speech.

While Tina clearly distanced herself from the far-right by emphasizing that she would never join protests organized by such groups, she also said she could not preclude their attendance in the crowd. Her statement also evokes another important role of the movement for her: justification and purpose. Participants in both countries identified with protecting legal rights to dissociate themselves from the polluting force of stigma.

Stigma reversal

One limitation of Goffman's stigma theory is the assumption that there is a stable normative order, which overlooks contestation and possible flipping of stigma–normal boundaries (Becker 1966). Stigmatized groups establish "separate systems of honor" (Kusow 2004, p. 188) by distancing themselves from the dominant group and elevating their cultural values as distinct and superior to it. They, furthermore, engage in stigma reversal, which involves the "imputation of guilt and moral inferiority to the members of the dominant group" (Killian 1985, p. 9; italics in the original). Our informants, who described their family members as uncritical, unable to think for themselves, dependent, and docile "sheep" voiced this performative strategy. Paul, a passionate member of the Querdenker movement, admitted that he sometimes belittles "normies":

> When people get on my nerves, I sometimes say "mehehe, the sheep," which is totally stupid. And I know I need to stop this, and I know that this is a judgment which I cannot afford to make, to degrade others like that.

Though he knew it was counter-productive, he found reverse stigmatization hard to resist, probably in defiance of the vilification he himself has experienced. When opposed by a clear majority, as was the case facing vaccination opponents in Germany and Britain, reverse stigmatization is an uphill battle, often fueled by the networked self-assurance of online communities.

Theoretical contribution

The emotional intensity of micropolarization dramas in this study notwithstanding, direct confrontation is rare in both offline and online interactions in most people's lives, including the most radical anti-vaccine activists. In an inversion of Eliasoph's (1998) work on the avoidance of discussing politics in public, this study focused upon the containment of political disagreement in private.

Micropolarization dramas encompass the complex choreography of interpersonal political conflict avoidance and eruption. We argue that micropolarization is shaped by meanings and emotions translated from the public drama of antagonistic political conflict and articulated (or suppressed) in contexts of local interaction in which recognition of adverse identities are at stake. Ontologically speaking, micropolarization comprises a level of disagreement and disputation in which ideological positions and preferences are not central objects, but devices shaping interpersonal antagonism. The interviews we presented offer only a glimpse into the broader research agenda we propose, which is to further examine the interpersonal mechanisms of polarization while considering larger structures of meaning and emotion that feed into them and which they contribute to in turn. This micro-understanding of polarization will hopefully inspire research on a larger scale and also help to illuminate potential pathways towards depolarization. Our approach and theoretical argument have implications for two fields of investigation: affective polarization and political talk.

Affective polarization in interpersonal relations

Affective polarization implies that political divisions are about pronounced identities, emotions, and moral evaluations of political out-groups and in-groups. When members of such divided publics engage in political discussions with strangers and acquaintances, they carry feelings of political antipathy and sympathy with them, to varying extents and in suppressed form. Despite the continuous reproduction of political conflict as a dichotomy, divides are as multiple as the topics under discussion. Misrecognition occurs through performative actions in micropolarization dramas, with opposing individuals labeling each other based on collective affiliations (e.g., alt-right, woke), overshadowing more fine-grained perspectives and hindering constructive dialogue. In that sense, *one* large political divide is something of an illusion, but becomes real through feelings of misrecognition and their consequential actions. Despite exceptions, it was notable how several of our German interviewees aligned with the Querdenker movement on various issues, including the War in Ukraine.

Power differentials involved—whether rooted in class, racial, gendered, or other hierarchies—are themselves contested, intersecting and subject of mutual misrecognition between conflicting parties. A White working-class person may not recognize the subjugated position of an upper-middle-class African American person and vice versa, selectively emphasizing or ignoring historical racial injustice and current levels of affluence. As meta-discourses of recognition (Wells and Friedland 2023),

disputes about privilege and disadvantage are key features of micropolarization dramas.

Our research participants employed conspiracy theory scripts, commonly intertwined with contemporary political conflicts, and notably amplified by social media (Enders et al. 2023). Extant research focuses on how conspiracy theorists socialize into these epistemic cultures though alternative knowledge claims (Olshansky et al. 2020; Ward and Voas 2011). Our evidence suggests a deep entanglement of public culture and emotion and the importance of learning associated feeling rules. This paves the way for fruitful research into how conspiracists adopt the emotions of their epistemic culture and how these emotions compel them to filter and assert specific truths.

Political talk and dispute

Research on political talk has broadened the understanding of the field of public opinion research, which is not only about choice but also about understanding and making sense of politics more broadly. Political talk is not "just talk" but an essential part of civic life; it is *practical politics*, as Katherine Cramer (2007) put it. The goal of studying political talk with respect to public opinion is "to distinguish how people themselves combine attitudes and identities—how they create or constitute perceptions of themselves and use these to make sense of politics" (Cramer 2016, p. 22).

Much of this research relies on firsthand observations of political conversations, particularly in small groups of like-minded participants, which are challenging to access (Eliasoph 1998; Gamson 1992). Cramer's (2004) early insight highlighted that political discussions in such settings are constrained by the dominance of identity-based perspectives. However, the family context disrupts this dynamic, as social bonds are rooted in kinship and familial intimacy rather than political agreement. This makes these bonds susceptible to conflict when political disagreements arise.

Political ethnographies, often centered on small group conversations, usually focus less on political conflict. An exception is Cramer's (2007) work on intergroup dialogue programs: These conversations do not fit the simple dichotomy of consensus and disagreement, and are instead characterized by ambivalence, debate, and contestation, all of which are productive for interracial understanding, Cramer argues. However, the context of family and friendship differs, given stronger expectations of agreement, high personal stakes, and greater potential for affective derailments.

Coleman's (2020) research on political conversations surrounding Brexit suggests that much of political disputes involves meta-communication, centering on who says what to whom and how, tied to social status and ascribed characteristics. Political conflicts about Brexit, Coleman (2020, p. 104) argues, "seemed more like surges of affective energy that brought into focus enduring patterns of relational disquiet … [and] layered patterns of accumulated distrust, often leaving disputants barely aware of their motives for entering the fray." The family conflict narratives in our study unveil participants' perceived social position and others' attitudes towards them,

uncovering paths of distrust and exclusion that stretch back into their pasts, others emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, these narratives show how individuals navigate personal relationships amid the influence of political culture and emotion, revealing how these forces shape everyday social interactions.

This study also emphasizes the strength of interviews relative to observational research (unless combined), which is the benefit of hindsight and reflection about past political conversation, at the expense of the unreliability of memory. Factual accuracy, however, is immaterial for understanding the lasting impact of interpersonal conflict for participants. Interactions, though fleeting, carry substantial meaning in shaping future actions and sensitivities. We thus see the state of *being polarized* as perceptions and feelings which linger and occasionally erupt in social interaction.

Conclusion

In this article, we define micropolarization as the processes by which political divisions are experienced personally and expressed interpersonally. We argue that polarization becomes tangible when individuals perceive and feel political antagonism from others—an experience most manage to contain in everyday life, but which can occasionally escalate into interpersonal conflict, particularly triggered by acts of explicit or implicit misrecognition. The tension between harboring animosities, avoiding conflict, and engaging in it are at the core of micropolarization, turning in-group and out-group divisions into visceral experiences of personal identity recognition. Political emotions and public stigma, which are often strategically produced and amplified by political and media actors, seep into local interaction orders and fuel these visceral experiences. We illustrated this by examining micropolarization within families and close friendships surrounding COVID-19 vaccination denial in the UK and Germany.

We have argued that the micro–macro link is fundamentally reciprocal, rendering any search for a singular "first cause" or linear cascade—from media condemnations to viral hashtags to kitchen-table expressions of suspicion and distrust—misleading. Instead, the stigmatization of vaccination opponents unfolds through interlocking feedback loops: private conversations, online shaming, news narratives, and policy pronouncements continuously reshape and reinforce one another, producing stigma without any definitive point of origin. Given this recursive interplay, the micro-level offers a powerful entry point for untangling how private and public dynamics co-produce polarization. Micropolarization then serves as a research agenda, urging further exploration of these interactional dynamics across online/offline communication, diverse groups, and identities, varying levels of personal involvement and relational bonds. This integrated approach seeks to unravel the complexities of political antagonism, offering insights to navigate political conflict in personal relationships while highlighting its deep interconnectedness with public political discourse and disputes.

Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the confidential nature of the qualitative interview data and ethical restrictions on participant privacy.

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