

Narratives

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A narrative or story is an account of a sequence of events in the order in which they occurred to make a point. Formally, narratives are composed of (1) an orientation, which sets the scene; (2) a series of complicating actions (implicit “and then . . .” clauses) ending with one that serves as dénouement; and (3) an evaluation, which can appear at any point in the story, establishing the importance of the events related (Labov & Waletzky 1967). As a rhetorical form, stories are distinctive in their use of sequence to denote causality, their integration of explanation and moral evaluation, and their reliance on a structure (plot) that is familiar from prior stories.

Scholars of social movements have used narrative materials such as life histories and news stories to capture dynamics of protest, and scholars often present analyses in narrative form, as for example, in accounts of the rise and fall of particular movements. They have also treated narratives as objects of analysis, for several reasons. Methodologically, it is fairly easy to isolate narrative in a chunk of discourse. This makes it possible to compare narratives over time and across contexts, examining how changes in stories create new arenas for and stakes in contention. Second, there exists a large multidisciplinary body of scholarship on how narrative figures in processes such as cognition, identity transformation, and persuasion. Scholars have drawn sometimes counterintuitive hypotheses from that literature about culture’s role in mobilization. Third, the fact that stories are a familiar rhetorical form as well as a conceptual one makes it possible to identify how institutional rules and popular norms limit the ways in which one can use culture to challenge the status quo.

While many scholars of social movements have treated stories as a persuasive rhetorical

tool, showing how stories can, among other things, mobilize participants, build solidarity, and secure third party support, other scholars have made a stronger argument. Stories are strategic *and* they set the terms of strategic action. Available stories and norms for telling stories shape the interests on behalf of which people mobilize, the kinds of action they see as effective, and the conditions in which they are able to achieve their goals.

Thus, with respect to why movements emerge when they do, scholars have drawn on narrative to account not only for why groups act on preexisting interests but also why those interests come to exist in the first place. Protest is likely, goes one argument, when the stories that govern action and interaction in a particular institutional arena lose their force. For example, Luker (1984) showed that physicians who routinely performed abortions developed a stake in abortion reform when medical advances rendered implausible the moral story that they were acting to save the life of the mother. Since stories integrate description, explanation, and evaluation, institutional stories, in this view, both describe institutional practices and legitimate them. When the description is no longer accurate, the moral warrant suffers too. Newly vulnerable to challenge, physicians mobilized to gain legal protection for abortion.

People may also develop a stake in protest when new stories come to animate an institutional arena. For example, Davis (2005) attributes the rise of a movement against child sexual abuse to the institutionalization of a new storyline derived from the anti-rape movement. Before the 1970s, child sexual abuse was seen through the lens of family systems and psychoanalytic therapies. Harm to the victim was not considered inevitable and was rarely thought to be long lasting. Family members, and even the victim, were often seen as collusive with the abuser in tolerating the

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abuse. That account changed when antirape and child protection movements converged on the issue of child sexual abuse. The rape experience was transposed to the experience of sexually abused children. In the new storyline, abuse was widespread but unrecognized, even by victims themselves, victimization was clear cut, and harm was profound and long lasting. The appropriate response to such abuse was for victims to mobilize to speak out and gain rights. The adoption of a new story thus made it possible for people to interpret their experiences in new ways, and in ways, crucially, that gave them a stake in collective action.

Once movements are underway, activists use stories strategically to enlist support, make claims in diverse political contexts, and defuse opposition. Activists use other rhetorical forms, of course, such as arguments and logical explanations. But recent research in communication shows convincingly that stories are better able than other kinds of messages to change people's opinions (Slater & Rouner 2002). This is especially true when audiences are not already invested in the issue in question, a situation that social movement activists confront routinely.

However, activists are not unconstrained in their efforts to use narrative to advance their cause. One constraint comes from the range of stories that are considered relevant and believable. Activists with access to widely known and oft-told stories of collective resistance undoubtedly have an advantage over those who have not. Yet the very familiarity of such stories also poses obstacles. Nicaraguan Sandinistas could claim the historical figure of Augusto Sandino as inspiration and guide because Sandino had largely dropped out of official memory; he was thus available for the taking. By contrast, since Emile Zapata remained prominent in Mexican national memory, Zapatistas had to struggle with the state to claim his legacy (Jansen 2007).

Often, activists' claims, in whatever form they are made, are heard against the backdrop of stories that have taken on the character of common sense. For example, advocates for the poor in the 1980s fought cuts to welfare that

were justified as curbing welfare "dependency." The new idea that dependency was a psychological problem rather than a structural relation made sense in the context of stories that were circulating about (chiefly women's) dependency on drugs, alcohol, and destructive relationships (Fraser & Gordon 1994).

A second kind of constraint on effective storytelling comes from institutional norms governing how and when stories should be told. For example, plaintiffs making claims of gender discrimination in employment have been pressed by judges to provide stories of individual episodes of discrimination, even when their claims have rested rather on patterns of disparate treatment (Schultz 1990). Adult survivors of child abuse who appeared in court seeking monetary damages were advised to emphasize the debilitating consequences of their past abuse, not to present themselves as survivors who were in control of their lives rather than controlled by their pasts (Whittier 2009). Media reporters' tendency to tell stories about people and events may make it difficult for activists to communicate the structural causes of the injustices they fight (Smith et al. 2001).

Certainly, activists can challenge conventions of narrative performance. Plaintiffs could have refused to have women tell personal stories of discrimination, insisting that proving a single case of discrimination was not their point. But doing so would have been risky. Culture shapes strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression – here, institutional norms of storytelling – yields more calculable consequences than challenging them. Moreover, there is no reason to expect that activists themselves are immune to popular beliefs about storytelling. Animal rights activists discouraged women from serving in leadership positions because they believed that women were seen by the public as prone to emotional storytelling. That would cost the movement credibility. However, activists spent little time debating whether women were in fact prone to emotionalism or whether emotional stories rather than rational arguments were in fact bad for the

movement (Groves 2001). So their calculations were strategic but only in the context of a set of questionable assumptions about the relations between emotion, reason, stories, and gender. Like other cultural constraints, those imposed by the conventions of narrative's use and evaluation are not insuperable but, like the distribution of financial resources or the structure of mainstream politics, they operate for the most part to support the status quo.

Finally, studying stories can shed light on how and when movements achieve the impacts they seek. This, however, is an area that merits much further study. Scholars have shown that movement groups possessing strong narrative traditions of overcoming are better able to withstand setbacks than those that do not possess such traditions (Voss 1998). Movements that have prominent spokespeople in politics, even after the movement is over, are better positioned to gain public acceptance for their preferred storyline than those without such spokespeople (Meyer 2006). We do not know, however, just what kinds of benefits flow from winning public acceptance of a movement's preferred storyline. Congressional representatives now ritually tell the story of the civil rights movement – but in a way that casts further protest as unnecessary (Polletta 2006). And although we know that stories about past movements and their accomplishments or failures are contentious, we know little about just what is at stake in those debates and what is required to win them.

More generally, we do not know what kinds of stories prove the most politically effective: whether, for example, simple stories are more effective than complex ones, or just how accurate stories have to be to remain convincing, or whether it is possible to tell stories that depart from familiar ones. Better answers to questions like these should advance our understanding of how stories figure in much broader dynamics of political change and constraint.

SEE ALSO: Claims-making; Collective memory and social movements; Culture and social

movements; Discourse analysis and social movements; Framing and social movements.

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