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PART VII

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS CULTURE

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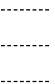

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CHAPTER 18

NARRATIVE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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For social movement activists, the key question about narrative is this: Are groups challenging the status quo well-served by telling their stories? If you are a feminist charging sex discrimination in hiring, are you better off documenting statistical disparities in women's promotion rates or having a few women testify to their stifled aspirations? If you are an adult survivor of child abuse, does telling your story of pain and humiliation motivate others with the same experience to step forward? Or does it alienate people who are unwilling to see themselves as victims? If you are in a group protesting the war in Iraq and you are lucky enough to secure a spot on the evening news, should you tell poignant stories of mothers who lost their soldier sons? Or should you concentrate on enumerating the political and economic benefits of military withdrawal?

Our answer to these questions is yes and no. Yes, stories are powerfully persuasive rhetorical devices. The research in communication that we will cite shows convincingly that stories are better able than other kinds of messages to change people's opinions. This is especially true when audiences are not already invested in the issue in question, a situation that social movement activists confront routinely. So telling stories can help movements elicit public interest and support.

But telling stories is also risky, for at least two reasons. One is that people understand stories in terms of stories they have heard before. Stories that stray too far from the familiar risk seeming unbelievable, idiosyncratic, or simply strange. Insofar as activists often have to challenge the ideological commonsense that underpins laws, policies, and practices, however, they *have* to tell new stories. We will show that

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activists have found themselves bedeviled by audiences' tendency to assimilate their stories to the familiar, no matter what they actually say.

This is one way in which activists struggle with the constraints levied by narrative. The other has less to do with narrative's form than with the conventions of its use and evaluation. Modern Americans view stories in diverse, indeed, contradictory ways: as authentic but also deceptive, universal but also idiosyncratic, and normatively powerful but also politically unserious. However, these views are patterned: Concerns about the credibility, generalizability, and value of storytelling are more likely to be triggered by some users and in some contexts rather than others. Narrative's power, in other words, is unevenly distributed. In this sense, culture may curb challenge less through the canonical limits on what kinds of stories can be imagined than through the social conventions regarding when and how stories should be told.

Neither set of constraints has been much explored by sociologists of social movements. We believe that both are crucial to understanding the trajectories and fates of movements. Moreover, each illuminates cultural dynamics that reach well beyond movements. This is, in part, because of movements' relationship with the cultural mainstream. Insofar as activists seek to change the status quo, they have a stake in hewing to dominant cultural codes where it serves them and challenging such codes where it does not. By paying attention to the trade-offs, they face in doing both—conforming to and challenging cultural commonsense—as well as to the calculi by which they rule options in and out of consideration, we can see how culture sets the terms of strategic action, without simply locating those processes in people's heads.

Another reason for studying storytelling in movements is that it points to a broader approach to culture, one that treats culture less as texts than as rule-governed performances. Sociologists of culture have tended to analyze *meaning* more than *the social organization of the capacity to mean effectively*. Not everyone is equally able to convey the meaning they want, however. This is not necessarily because of the way they speak, but also may be because of the way they are heard. Particular statements, but also particular discursive *forms,* such as storytelling, arguments, statistics, and interviews, are judged to be more or less authoritative depending on the setting, the topic, and the speaker. Paying attention to the norms of narrative's use and evaluation—and to the variable character of those norms—offers, thus, a second way to see how culture reproduces the status quo.

The rest of the essay proceeds as follows. We discuss briefly the main approach to culture in movements, that of collective action framing. Then we show how a study of storytelling can respond to gaps in framing theory and, in particular, can help to account for the cultural and institutional constraints activists face in trying to develop persuasive messages. We draw on examples from a range of movements, mainly American, including second wave feminism, the gay and lesbian movement, animal rights activism, campaigns to reform the criminal justice system, and the contemporary right. In each case, we show what activists have been up against in their efforts to use culture strategically. We treat activists as practical, instrumental

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actors, but also ones who, like the rest of us, rely on commonsensical criteria of instrumental rationality. These criteria both open up strategic possibilities and shut them down.

One can study stories as a way to understand other dimensions of social movements. For example, tracing the institutional processes by which old stories become contested or new ones available can shed light on the conditions in which new movements emerge (Polletta 2006; Luker 1984; Davis 2005; Alexander 2004). Scholars have turned to stories to account for movement endurance and dissolution (Benford 2002; Voss 1996; Jansen 2007; Owens 2009) and for movement success and failure (Meyer 2006). These are all fruitful lines of analysis. We choose to focus on activists' variable success in using stories as a persuasive tool because it may produce insights that are valuable to sociologists of culture more broadly.

Frames and Narratives

Scholars have drawn on an array of concepts to capture the role of culture in movements—among them, ideology, discourse, schema, identity, rhetoric, and belief. But the concept of collective action "framing" has held pride of place (for a good overview, see Snow 2004). Frames are sets of beliefs that "assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford 1992: 198; Benford and Snow 2000: 614).

What makes a frame successful in doing those things? Frames that are clear (Stoecker 1995: 113), articulate, focused, and coherent (Cress and Snow 2000: 1072, 1078, 1079) are more likely to persuade people to join and support the cause. The diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components of the frame should be richly developed and interconnected (Snow and Benford 1992: 199). There should be a clear "we"—those to whom the injustice is done—and an obvious "they" who are responsible for the injustice (Gamson 1992; Stoecker 1995). Effective frames are "empirically credible," that is, they are consonant with what their audiences know to be true (Benford and Snow 2000). Those who articulate the frame should be credible as well (Benford and Snow 2000).

Effective frames are, in addition, "salient" to their audiences. That is, they call on beliefs that are already strongly held. Frames also should be "experientially commensurable" (Snow and Benford 1992: 208; Benford and Snow 2000). They should resonate with people's everyday experiences. Finally, they should be characterized by "narrative fidelity" or "cultural resonance." They should accord with familiar "stories, myths, and folktales" (Snow and Benford 1992: 210; Gamson 1988).

Framing theorists talk about narrative in two ways. Effective frames accord with cultural narratives (Snow and Benford 1992; Gamson 1988). And frames often make use of stories as a powerful rhetorical device (Benford 1993; Gamson 1992). Both

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claims seem right. However, fuller attention to storytelling—drawing on the insights of a multidisciplinary body of scholarship on storytelling—can respond to at least two problems in framing theory.

One problem centers on framing theorists' contention that effective frames are clear, coherent, and consistent. These claims have been more asserted than empirically tested. We simply do not know whether clear frames are more effective than ambiguous ones; whether frames with consistently related diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components are more mobilizing than those without; and whether effective frames do rely on a sharp delineation of adversaries.

When it comes to stories, logical consistency is by no means a criterion for persuasiveness. Good stories rely on ellipses, allusion, and ambiguity (Polletta 2006, ch. 2). Of course, stories may persuade differently than do frames rendered through other discursive forms such as arguments or exhortations. Later we will suggest that that is the case. Another possibility, however, is that even frames rendered in those other discursive forms *also* make sense in terms of familiar narratives. Such narratives may constitute a backdrop of understanding against which logical arguments have meaning. We use the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably in this essay, but one might, alternatively, conceptualize "story" as a discursive form on a par with arguments, statistics, and explanations, and "narrative" as those background myths in terms of which all discursive forms have meaning.[1]

Of course, aside from the methodological difficulties of getting at narratives that are so familiar as to not need articulating (Gerteis 2002), the previous statement seems to suggest that only a limited number of stories are even thinkable. That seems implausible given our capacity to rework familiar stories, that is, to rearrange plotlines or recast characters so as to arrive at a completely different endpoint. In fact, we will argue in a moment that stories structure common sense less though their uniformity than through their variety. Our point for now, however, is that we need a better understanding of how persuasion works than framing theory has yet provided.

Such an understanding must encompass the commonsensical assumptions that exist alongside people's explicit beliefs. To give an example that we will take up again later, a judge may believe firmly in women's equality with men. And, yet, he may hand down rulings that systematically disadvantage women. This is not because his professed egalitarianism is a lie but rather because he understands gender equality in the context of a whole cluster of assumptions about men and women and difference, and biology and preferences. Those assumptions may bias his decisions without his even realizing it. Activists often find themselves struggling to craft a frame capable of debunking symbolic associations that are difficult to even name. As analysts, we need tools to get at these processes.

The second problem in framing theory's calculus of frame effectiveness is a limited understanding of how frames are shaped by their audiences. Certainly, framing theorists have always acknowledged that there are multiple audiences for movements' framing efforts. Although early work concentrated on potential recruits, researchers since then have studied activists' framing to reporters, in court, and on television talk shows. They have drawn attention especially to the conflicts created

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by the generally moderate messages, required by the public, and the more radical ones that resonate with movement participants (Ferree 2003; Whittier 2001).

However, to talk about the different audiences to which activists must appeal risks suggesting that frame success is just a matter of resonating with the personal beliefs of the people who have power within a given institutional arena. It misses the specifically institutional requirements of claimsmaking. These requirements often center less on the substance of a group's claims than on the form in which claims are to be made. To return to the example above, a judge may require that women in court tell stories of the discrimination they have experienced because that is the standard way of testifying about discrimination, even though individual stories may be incapable of documenting the type of discrimination that is at issue. In short, to understand why particular frames succeed or fail, we need to know more about how institutional and popular norms of cultural expression shape what activists can say.

Why should an analysis of narrative help us to do these things? Thanks to substantial literature on narrative in diverse fields, we know a great deal about how narrative achieves its rhetorical effects. This should contribute to a fuller understanding of persuasion than framing theory currently provides. In addition, narrative is a folk concept. Unlike frames, ideologies, and discourses, all of whose referents are defined by analysts rather than the people who produce or act on them, most people know when they are telling a story. They know how to construct a story, when and why they should tell stories, and how to respond to a story. Some conventions of storytelling are formalized, as is the case in courtroom testimony. Other conventions are not formalized and can be gleaned, rather, from stories' distribution across settings and speakers and topics of discussion. People often reflect openly on what they see storytelling as good for and where they see its limitations. From there, we can begin to determine the work that popular theories and conventions of storytelling do in sustaining institutions and in shaping strategies for transforming them (Polletta et al. 2011).

In the following, we treat narrative as an object of analysis (rather than, as Ewick and Silbey (1995), put it, a means of analysis or a mode of presentation), but we do so in three ways. One, we treat narratives as identifiable chunks of discourse, comprised of standard features that can be isolated in texts. Two, we treat narratives as background accounts in terms of which messages, whether they are narrative in form or not, are understood. And three, we treat narrative as a practice that is guided by institutional norms.

How Stories Persuade

Define a narrative, fairly uncontroversially, as an account of a sequence of events in the order in which they occurred so as to make a point (Labov and Waletsky 1967). Formally, narratives are composed of (1) an orientation, which sets the scene;

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(2) a series of complicating actions (implicit "and then…" clauses) ending with one that serves as dénouement; and (3) an evaluation that can appear at any point in the story, establishing the importance of the events related (Labov and Waletsky 1967).

Narratives have characters: protagonists, antagonists, allies, and witnesses. Events are recounted from a point of view. The point of view may be that of the protagonist (which is usually the case in first person stories); or it may be that of another character or an unnamed narrator or it may shift among characters. Events are usually recounted in order, with later events explaining earlier ones. What links events, however, is less empirical probability than the gradually revealed structure of the story. This structure or "plot" is familiar from other similarly emplotted stories. The dénouement of the story is both explanatory and evaluative. It projects a normative future; this is the moral of the story (Bal 1985; Brooks 1984; Jacobs 2004; Polletta 2006).

Finally, along with its reliance on characters, point of view, plot, and a normative point, narrative is distinctive in its allusiveness. Stories require our interpretive participation. They require that we work to resolve ambiguities as events unfold and to anticipate the normative conclusion to which the story is driving. Of course, analyses, arguments, descriptions, and formal mathematical proofs can also be interpreted to yield multiple meanings. But we *expect* to have to interpret stories, and, accordingly, we are more likely to do the work necessary to make sense of a confusing passage or what appear to be contradictory developments (Polletta 2006, ch. 1; Miller 1990).

As psychologists, folklorists, and sociologists have shown, we tell stories for many reasons: to entertain, instruct, envision alternatives, comfort, dramatize, live with the contradictions that are an unavoidable feature of existence, grasp temporality, and feel—the list goes on. We also tell stories to persuade, that is, to change people's opinions. It is narrative's persuasive capacity that is of most interest to those challenging the status quo.

Ask anyone if stories are persuasive and the answer will be affirmative. Stories "tug at our heartstrings," people often say. They "identify" with the characters; they are "gripped" by the plot, "sucked in," "transported," and "involved." Later, we will subject these popular beliefs to scrutiny. For now, we point out simply that people's intuitive grasp of the power of stories is in some ways right. Recent experimental work in communication has demonstrated the persuasive force of stories. Until recently, communication scholars argued that audiences processed messages in one of two ways: "centrally," where they scrutinize a message and evaluate its claims critically, or "peripherally," where they absorb a message casually, judging it less by its content than by the appeal of the speaker or by the mood they are in at the moment (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Peripheral processing may lead to attitudinal change , but it does not last. To get people to change their opinions requires that they process information centrally. The hitch is that they are likely to do that only when they already have a personal stake in an issue (Slater and Rouner 2002). For activists, the challenge is to persuade people who do not already have a personal stake in the issue, since they represent the vast majority of the public.

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This is where narrative comes in. Recent research suggests that audiences process stories neither centrally nor peripherally, but rather by a third route. They immerse themselves in the story, striving to experience vicariously the events and emotions that the protagonists experience. Green and Brock (2000) found that subjects who were highly absorbed in a story (indicated by statements like "activity going on in the room around me was not on my mind" while reading the story, and "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative") were likely to report beliefs consistent with those implied in the story. To probe the dynamic involved, subjects were asked to circle every "false note" in the story. The more absorbed they were, the less likely they were to see such false notes (Green and Brock 2000). This suggests that when they hear or read stories, audiences suspend their proclivity to counterargue, that is, to raise doubts about the veracity or relevance of the information they are hearing. They truly suspend disbelief, and they do so in a way that has lasting effects. The attitudinal change brought about by stories tends to persist or even increase over time (Appel and Richter 2007). Tell an absorbing story, this research suggests, and you can win people to your cause.

However, narrative research has also identified an important condition for stories' persuasive power. Stories have no effect if their message is too explicit (Slater and Rouner 2002; Slater, Rouner, and Long 2006). This is not surprising. Readers resist being beaten over the head with the moral of the story. They want the events recounted in the story to yield their own meaning. But events in a story *never* yield their own meaning. We evaluate, even understand, what is happening in a story by reference to stories we have heard before. As we listen or read, we gradually recognize events as part of a David and Goliath story about the little guy triumphing over the big guy or a "Pride Before a Fall" story about the little guy biting off more than he can chew (Brooks 1984). The plotlines available are multiple and diverse, and the stories they undergird take innumerable versions. Still, stories that stray too far from the familiar risk seeming unbelievable, unintelligible, or just strange.

A story's dependence on previous stories offers activists valuable resources. Movement groups can gain moral authority and political capital by linking themselves to celebrated revolutionaries and freedom fighters (Jansen 2007; Nepstad 2001). Leaders secure followers by recounting their personal transformation from apathy to commitment and blindness to clarity in terms known from other stories (Hunt and Benford 1994; Wechsler 1982). They denaturalize the current state of things by substituting a familiar story of exploitation for one of legal entitlement (Kane 1997) and justify violence by incorporating it into a tale of heroic fortitude (Fine 1999). They withstand setbacks by interpreting them as narratively familiar tests of character on the way to victory (Voss 1996).

Insofar as stories constitute a kind of cultural backdrop, against which, not only stories, but also arguments and assertions make sense, they may make it possible for diverse beliefs to hang together in a way that defies logical consistency. For example, advocates for welfare reform in the 1990s argued that that welfare was fostering in its recipients a pathological dependence on the state. The idea that government was responsible for people's poverty—logically, a surprising claim—made sense because

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it was heard against the backdrop of stories of women's, especially black women's, addictions. In those stories, dependence was psychological or chemical, a character flaw rather than a structural relation. And in line with those stories, Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser (1994) have shown, economic dependency came to be more broadly understood not as something that everyone at some point experiences, but as a personal failing to be remedied by the denial of assistance. The arguments made by welfare reform advocates seemed logical only because of the stories behind them.

How Stories Constrain

Stories' canonicity also poses real problems for those wanting to effect social change. The storytelling that takes place in small groups may lead people to recognize their problems as more than personal—to see them as political and as demanding of collective action. But it may not do those things. In the group discussions about sexual assault that Joyce Hollander (2002) observed, women sometimes described themselves successfully resisting their assailants. But they characterized those episodes, just as much as ones where the victim was raped, as experiences of victimization. In other words, their stories of forestalling rape were assimilated to stories of victimization in a way that ended up reproducing a view of women as always vulnerable. Collective storytelling may discourage the emergence of a collective oppositional consciousness.

Even when activists have succeeded in creating a movement, and in gaining access to the venues where they can make their case, familiar stories pose a problem. Here, the problem lies less in the stories activists tell than the stories with which they are heard. Let us give an example of the problem and then try to clarify it. When women went to court in the 1980s to prove employers were discriminating by sex, they armed themselves with statistical evidence of longstanding disparities in men's and women's rates of hiring and promotions (Schultz 1990). That evidence should have countered employers' claim that women simply did not want jobs that had traditionally been held by men.

But in case after case, Vicki Schulz found, judges were not satisfied with that evidence. They wanted victims—individual women who could tell a story of having aspired to the higher-paying job and been denied it. As the judge in the famous *EEOC v. Sears* case put it, plaintiffs might have won had they produced "even a handful of witnesses to testify that Sears had frustrated their childhood dreams of becoming commission sellers" (Schultz 1990: 1809). To which the answer should have been: Who dreams of becoming a commission seller? The stories judges wanted to hear mistakenly assumed people's work preferences were forged only before they entered the work world, rather than also evolving in line with the possibilities they perceived once in the work world. Such stories left the real problem intact: the

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practices of sex-segregated advertising and word-of-mouth recruiting that effectively defined high-status jobs as male. Plaintiffs should have been able to say, "This is a story not about dreams, but about the obstacles to dreaming." But that story—not really a story at all—would have been much harder to tell.

Moreover, when plaintiffs did tell stories about aspiring to the higher-paying but traditionally masculine jobs, they often met with skepticism. Employers argued that most women did not want jobs that were stressful, "heavy," "dirty," and took time away from their families. That argument was convincing against the backdrop of the countless stories we have all heard of girls being different from boys,—girls liking "clean" things, women sacrificing for their families, families being a haven in a heartless world, and so on. By contrast, when plaintiffs claimed that they wanted what men wanted, they seemed to be saying that women were identical to men. That claim flew in the face of common sense, as more than one judge put it.

Plaintiffs in these cases were encouraged to tell their stories. But the particular assumptions about women and work that those stories had to challenge were already part of more familiar stories. Importantly, those stories came in so many versions and forms they seemed to capture a complex reality. This is the larger point. Stories' power comes less from the explicit moral instruction they provide than from the normative possibilities that are excluded from the pattern of their relationship. The argument, which goes back to Claude Levi-Strauss's (1963) structuralist analysis of myth, is that culturally resonant stories chart, in similar fashion, the relations between the privileged and the denigrated poles of familiar cultural oppositions. For example, we grasp what reason is by telling stories that thematize not only reason's difference from passion, but its similarity to men's difference from women, and culture's difference from nature, and so on.

What poststructuralist theorists add is the insight that it takes active *work* to ensure that alternative relations are ruled out (Derrida 1978; Scott 1994). To continue with the example, our understanding of reason requires that people make emotional performances of reason in other words, that they demonstrate in speech, tone, and gesture the seeming lack of affect that passes for reasonwhile at the same time maintaining that emotion and reason are opposed. The stability of legal, political, and other institutions, to extend the argument, depends on institutions' promotion of stories that thematize familiar oppositions. Such stories are powerful, not because they are told over and over again in identical form, but rather because they mesh with other familiar stories that navigate similarly between the poles of well-known oppositions (see Polletta 2006, ch. 1 for a fuller development of this argument; and see Smith 2005 and Jacobs 2004 for somewhat different arguments linking binary codes to politically powerful narratives).

What activists are up against is not one single, canonical story, but many stories, whose diversity and complexity give them the feel of the real. Against that backdrop, activists' stories are likely to seem thin and abstract. They may be easily assimilated to one of the other more familiar stories. Or they may be heard as simply idiosyncratic. When plaintiffs in the sex discrimination cases told stories of women having *wanted* stressful, dirty, masculine jobs, the stories were heard as atypical or implausible.

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Let us give another example, this one from activists' efforts to secure legal equality for battered women. Battered women who strike back at their abusers should be able to plead innocence by reason of self-defense. After all, they acted to save their own lives. And yet in the early 1990s, only a quarter of the battered women who pleaded self-defense in homicide cases were acquitted (Trafford 1991). More significant, convictions of battered women who pled self-defense were overturned on appeal at a substantially higher rate than were convictions in other homicide cases (40 percent compared to 8.5 percent [Maguigan 1991]).

The problem was not the law itself. The legal standards for pleading self-defense were not inherently biased against battered women. Most jurisdictions did not impose a duty to retreat before using force, and those that did usually exempted a person attacked in her home. No jurisdiction prohibited the use of a weapon against an unarmed attacker. Standards for self-defense were just as capable of handling violence in which parties were intimates and where the imminence of danger extended over a substantial period.

The problem was not the legal standards but the fact that judges, juries, and even women's own defense lawyers were unwilling to see battered women's use of deadly force as reasonable under those standards (Schneider 2000; Maguigan 1991). Why not? Because it would have required seeing battered women both as victims and as rational agents. In our society, those categories are seen as unalterably opposed. As legal theorist Martha Mahoney puts it, "Agency does not mean acting for oneself under conditions of oppression; it means *being without oppression*, either having ended oppression or never having experienced it at all" (Mahoney 1994: 64). Victimization, for its part, means being without agency. We have heard countless stories of victims—real victims—as passive, pitiable, and pathetic. We have heard stories of people who are smart, savvy, and agentic, who avoid being victimized or escape victimization. And we have heard stories of people who *pose* as victims, people who disingenuously and sometimes cunningly feign victimization. These stories, which appeared in multiple versions, constituted the background of "reality" against which battered women defendants' stories were heard.

The woman who had killed or assaulted her abuser accordingly faced two equally unacceptable options. She could assert her agency, telling a story of her actions in which she appeared composed and in control of herself. But then she might not be seen as victimized at all. Or, she could emphasize her victimization. But then her actions risked being seen as unreasonable. They might be excused through an act of judicial solicitude but they would not be seen as justified by her experience of abuse. If she departed from the stock image of the victim; moreover, if she was angry, aggressive, or insufficiently remorseful, or if she was none of those things but was black (given images of black women as powerful), she might not be seen as a victim, no matter what she said (Stark 2007; Schneider 2000).

So, did telling stories work for battered women? Lawyers, judges, and scholars heard the stories that battered women told. But they heard them through clusters of familiar plotlines. On one side were the familiar plotlines of legitimate self-defense: the soldier on the battlefield, the man defending his home against an unknown

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intruder, and the barroom brawler. On the other side were stories of mad women who were victims and bad women who were not. As a result, the legal plea of self-defense, which was ostensibly available to women, was effectively denied to them.

If whatever activists say is heard in terms of familiar stories, stories that, variously, naturalize gender differences and make victims irrational, what should activists do? Are their stories doomed to be heard either as supporting the conventional wisdom or as unintelligible? No. We want to suggest two possible answers to the problem. One is that audiences can be instructed to suspend their narrative expectations. For example, in her 1998 ruling on the status of expert testimony in cases of battering, Canadian Supreme Court Judge Claire L'Heureux Dubé wrote, "A judge and jury should be told that a battered woman's experiences are generally outside the common understanding of the average judge and juror, and that they should seek to understand the evidence being presented to them in order to overcome the myths and stereotypes which we all share" (quoted in Schneider 2000: 142). People can be encouraged to understand in ways that are not narrative (Tilly 2002). Presumably, Judge L'Heureux Dubé thought this was possible. Whether it is possible or not, or just how difficult it is, remain open questions.

The second answer is to tell stories, but noncanonical ones. This takes literary skill. Contrary to the commonplace view that powerful messages are simple ones, it is worth pointing out that great writers do not write simple stories. They write stories that tap into our expectations and defy them. They jigger familiar plotlines, characters, and situations. They use tropes like irony, ellipsis, and shifting points of view to make what is familiar strange. They let us think we're hearing one kind of story and then tell us another.

This suggests that, rather than trying to tell simple stories, activists should use all the literary tools at their disposal to tell stories that are canonical enough to make sense but different enough to expose the flaws in the familiar. For example, in a film made to try to reform the law around battered women's legal defense, advocates in Maryland did the usual things: They had four women who were serving sentences for homicide tell their stories of domestic abuse. At first glance, the film seemed to cater to views of battered women as passive and pathetic. When three of the four women admitted that they didn't even remember taking the action that killed their partners, they seemed the opposite of reasonable actors—so brutalized as to be unconscious of their own actions (Public Justice Center 1990).

Yet the film also worked powerfully to counter that impression (Polletta 2010). The women came off as victimized, but also as sharply insightful. They used irony not only to comment on their own naiveté but to draw attention to the social norms that led them to mistake a man's pathological possessiveness for caring and to believe that keeping the family together was more important than their own safety. Halfway through the film, they substituted a heroic storyline for a tragic one. Through a series of discordant images, the film became not about each woman's decision to kill but about her discovery that she wanted to live. The climax of the film was the moment when each woman discovered her wherewithal, her agency, when she *stopped* being a victim, when she won the battle with herself. Indeed,

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when each woman described attacking her partner, it was anticlimactic, simply an extension of her decision to live.

After the governor of Maryland saw the film, he not only became an ardent supporter of the cause but in his public statements repeatedly referred to battered women defendants as both victimized *and* rational (Lewin 1991). Such a combination surely would have seemed odd to those who had only heard standard stories of victimization. The lesson for activists might be: Use the familiar to draw audience into the story. When they are absorbed, use the most sophisticated literary tropes you can find to tell your audience something different than what they are expecting to hear.

What Stories Are Good For

In her study of activism by adult survivors of child abuse, Nancy Whittier (2001; 2009) found that when survivors gathered in movement conferences and at marches, speakers told stories of personal fortitude and of fear ceding to pride. With titles like "Sing Loud, Sing Proud" and "Courageous,Always Courageous," movement magazine articles and workshops encouraged participants to emphasize their recovery rather than the details of their abuse. When survivors appeared in court to seek compensation as crime victims, however, the stories they told were different. Survivors described the fear, grief, shame, and hurt produced by their abuse but made no mention of their subsequent anger and pride. These kinds of emotional performances were required in order to prove that the survivor was a victim deserving of compensation. Articles in movement magazines warned that going to court was a demeaning experience and that survivors should find outlets to tell other parts of their stories—but that betraying their anger in court would hurt their case.

On television talk shows, another place in which child abuse activists appeared frequently in the 1980s; survivors told stories of abuse and enduring trauma. Guests often cried while clutching stuffed animals or speaking in childlike voices. They were usually joined by therapists who interpreted their stories to the audience, further reinforcing an image of them as childlike. Whittier (2001) points out that that image may well have repelled others suffering from abuse, who instead might have been mobilized by stories of focused anger and personal overcoming.

Certainly, one can challenge the conventions of narrative performance. Survivors could have told stories of anger on talk shows and could have recounted moving from shame to pride in courtroom hearings; but doing so would have been risky. Culture shapes strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression yields more calculable consequences than challenging them.

Moreover, there is no reason to expect that activists themselves are immune to popular beliefs about storytelling. The animal rights activists whom sociologist Julian Groves (2001) studied discouraged women from serving in leadership

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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 (see Jasper 1999). 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.

What are those assumptions? If "story," like other cultural objects, has meaning in terms of the symbolic oppositions along which it is aligned, then it makes sense that beliefs about what stories are good for come from the structure of those oppositions. Of course, such beliefs are historical (Plummer 1995; Polletta 2006, ch. 5; Illouz 2008). Today, we argue, Americans tend to see stories as better able to capture particularity than universality, and concreteness rather than abstraction (Polletta 2006; Polletta et al 2011). They tend to associate stories with emotions rather than logic and see them as typical of informal and personal relations more than formal and public ones. As a result, they associate narrative with groups, settings, and ways of knowing that are also associated with the particular, the emotional, the personal, the concrete, and the informal. So they think of storytelling as characteristic of women and nonprofessionals—common in private settings rather than public ones; good for expressing moral concerns rather than strategic ones; the hallmark of folklore rather than science; and of custom rather than rules.

The foregoing is misleading, however, in suggesting that people have a single and consistent view of storytelling. That is not the case. Just as they evaluate the other terms we mentioned in mixed ways (the "public" is important but also impersonal; what is "moral" is right but also impractical; "custom" is comfortingly familiar but also constraining), most people are ambivalent about storytelling. Compared to other discursive forms, stories, and especially personal stories, are seen as normatively powerful but politically unserious, as authentic but also deceptive, and as universal in their implications but also dangerously idiosyncratic.

This ambivalence on its own poses challenges for activists. Even more challenging is the fact that people's mixed views of storytelling are contingent on the speaker and the setting. Concerns about stories' triviality, deceptiveness, and generalizability are more likely to be triggered by lower-status speakers than by higher ones. Indeed, higher-status speakers may be less likely to be heard as telling stories, rather than stating facts or advancing logical explanations.[2] Concerns about stories' worth are also likely to be triggered on occasions that are seen as technical, procedural, or expert. Since activists are often in a position of having to call attention to the political dimensions of ostensibly neutral categories and criteria, they may be tempted to tell stories to do so—and disserved in the process.

That said, activists have also been able to capitalize on Americans' complex views of storytelling. For example, storytelling is symbolically opposed to technical expertise. But Americans are often skeptical of technical expertise, seeing it as impersonal, sometimes impractical, and manipulative. Against these views, storytelling has the appeal of common sense. This may account for the surprising

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presence of ordinary people and grassroots groups in the mainstream American press (Ferree et al. 2002; Gamson 2001). Research has shown that when audiences hear or read news stories in which someone affected by an issue is profiled, they are likely to see that person's views both as widespread and persuasive. This is true even if audiences are presented factual evidence that contradicts the profiled person's views (Zillman and Brosius 2000). By supplying news producers with the "person on the street" who has been affected by an issue, movement groups can also communicate their perspective on the issue (see discussion in Polletta 2006, ch. 5).

In his study of a movement to institutionalize alternatives to criminal prosecution for drug offenders, James Nolan (2002) shows that activists made the case for drug courts by telling poignant stories of drug addicts diverted from a life of crime. Even in the absence of compelling statistical data on recidivism rates for drug court graduates, the testimony of judges who had been emotionally touched by particular graduates was apparently enough to secure continued financial support for the courts. Storytelling was successful, Nolan argues, because of the broadly therapeutic bent of contemporary American culture (see also Illouz 2008). But on a slightly different reading, personal storytelling was compelling because it was counterpoised—and seen as a corrective—to the abstract (ir)rationality of the criminal justice system.

Activists have also dealt with the conventions of storytelling by making them the target of explicit challenge. Indeed, one of the ways in which movements may have an impact is by gaining institutional purchase for new distributions of storytelling authority. For example, in the 1980s, AIDS activists succeeded in gaining formal representation on federal research review committees. But they also gained recognition for AIDS patients' personal accounts of their illnesses as authoritative knowledge in drug research (Epstein 1996). The 1980s movement against child abuse successfully reformed laws around the admissibility of children's stories of abuse: in many cases, relaxing the requirement that children testify in court or confront their abuser (McGough 1994). Children's stories were granted legal authority that they simply had not had before; and, according to experts concerned about children's suggestibility and capacity for recall, should not have had.

Conclusion

Paying attention to activists' strategic use of storytelling can shed light on the distinctly cultural obstacles that activists face in effecting change. Such obstacles are never 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.

Culture does not constrain challenge only, or even mainly, by limiting what activists can aspire to. Just as much as the analysts who study them, activists are broadminded in the options they perceive and canny in devising ways to pursue

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them. They use culture generally, and stories in particular, practically and creatively. The problems they face are twofold. One is that the stories that they tell cannot but seem thin and abstract compared to the multiple, diverse, and overlapping stories that together make up a common sense about an issue. Against that backdrop, stories that challenge the conceptual oppositions underpinning the common sense about an issue are either disbelieved or assimilated to more familiar stories.

The other problem lies in the norms governing how stories are heard and evaluated: when they are considered appropriate, believable, serious, and so on. Such norms are historical, but also institutional. This is why activists telling stories of their victimization have fared better in the media than in court. In the media, activists' stories have been heard as those of "Everyperson." Activists have been able to connect their own experiences to a larger normative point. In court, by contrast, storytellers have been expected to hew to familiar images of victims—passive, pitiable, and like all other victims—and then penalized when they have done so.

The picture is not entirely grim, however. Activists have also been able to capitalize on the norms of narrative's form and evaluation. For example, they have pitched their stories to the media at the same time as they have struggled to tell them effectively in court and they have used canonical storylines in the service of their cause. Even more interesting, we believe, are the ways in which activists have been able to counter the challenges posed by the norms of narrative's form and evaluation. In one strategy, activists have used literary tropes, such as irony and shifting points of view, and have combined genres to craft appeals that resonate while still being heard as truly different from what people have heard before. In this respect, activists have leaned not on audiences' attraction to the familiar, but rather on audiences' assumption that a story will be allusive and their willingness to do interpretive work to make sense of it. In another strategy, rather than limiting storytelling to venues in which it is acceptable, activists have challenged head-on the hierarchies of credibility in terms of which rhetorical forms are heard. There may be strategic advantage to demanding authority for personal storytellers where science reigns supreme and, conversely, fighting for the admission of statistics where personal stories are deemed appropriate.

For cultural sociologists, an analysis of narratives in, by, and about movements points to dynamics that go well beyond movements. It suggests, first, that hegemony operates, not by way of a single canonical story repeated over and over again in identical form, but rather by way of many stories that are quite different from each other but navigate similarly between the culturally privileged and denigrated poles of familiar symbolic oppositions. Stories are not the only way we make sense of and reproduce those oppositions. But stories' resistance to critical evaluation, that is,the fact that we truly do suspend disbelief when we hear a story, may allow stories to "hang together" in a way that produces the complex, variegated feel of the real.

Our second conclusion—that activists' success in telling stories is shaped as much by beliefs *about* storytelling as it is by the actual stories they tell—suggests a broader approach to culture. Rather than focusing on meaning, this approach centers on the social organization of meaning, or better, the social organization of the

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capacity to mean effectively. Just as there is a prevailing common sense about what narrative is good for, when it is appropriate, and what relation it has to truth, so there is a common sense about other discursive forms. Speeches, confessions, interviews, statistics, and biographies are the subjects of popular beliefs about their epistemological status and conventions of their proper uses. Most people know what those conventions are. They know when it is inappropriate to give a speech, and why analysis is more trustworthy than storytelling. If they do not know personally, they can turn to any number of practical guides. The researcher, too, can draw on these materials to piece together a cultural common sense about the interview or storytelling and, in particular, an epistemology of the form: a set of assumptions about its relation to truth and knowing.

A sociology of any of these discursive forms would look to see how beliefs about them have evolved over time; how they vary across institutions; what stands behind them; what political and social work they do; and how they shape selves and social interactions. It would also investigate the possibility that such beliefs vary depending on the context and the speaker and would try to decide whether the contingency of such beliefs works to reproduce existing inequalities.

NOTES

1. We choose not to do that for two reasons. One is that theorists have distinguished story from narrative in a variety of ways; for example, treating story as the events as they occurred and narrative as the represention of events (Bal 1985); or reserving story for fictional events (Polkinghorne 1988); or treating story as a less analytic version of narrative (Mahoney 1999). To avoid confusion, we rely on conventional usage, which treats the two as the same thing. The other reason is that treating narrative as more general meta-stories risks assuming, rather than showing, that all background understandings are narrative in form. We do not believe that is the case; whether it is or not, we emphasize narrative's difference from other discursive forms as a way to elucidate the distinctive work narrative does.

2. This is similar to Bourdieu's (1984; 1991) argument that people have socially endowed levels of competence to use culture effectively. However, we argue that the authority and value of cultural *forms* are contingent on the status of their users and the occasion of their use.

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