PERSONAL STORYTELLING IN PROFESSIONALIZED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS[*]

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Professionalized movement organizations today rely on outside expertise in fundraising, recruitment, lobbying, management, and public messaging. We argue that the risks that accompany that development have less to do with experts' mixed loyalties to the movement than with the tendency of expert discourse to remake political problems into technical ones, thereby obscuring the dilemmatic choices movement groups must make. We focus on expert discourse around personal storytelling, a strategy that has become popular for raising funds, advocating for policy, and building public support. Our interviews with activists and consultants and content analysis of stories they rated as successful point to an expert discourse that emphatically rejects "victim" storytelling. Instead, activists are instructed to tell stories of hope and resilience, avoid referring to the graphic details of abuse, and only hint at their emotional pain. Experts justify these strategies as the best way to avoid exploiting storytellers, and only coincidentally as also appealing to audiences. However, we argue that, rather than superseding the tension between empowering movement participants and persuading those outside the movement, storytelling as currently practiced has reproduced that tension.

Personal storytelling today is part of the strategic repertoire of many movement groups (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Braunstein 2012; Fernandes 2017; Nicholls 2013). Undocumented students and victims of sex trafficking tell their stories to Congress; people who have been homeless tell their stories to journalists; women who have had abortions tell their stories online; trans youth tell their stories to potential donors, and so on. Proponents of personal storytelling argue that, more than dry statistics or logical arguments, stories engage their audiences emotionally (Braddock and Dillard 2016; Graaf, Sanders and Hoeken 2016). Stories draw people into unfamiliar worlds and help audiences to empathize with people very different from themselves. They puncture the myths and stereotypes that stand in the way of social change. If told well, stories can compel people to act on behalf of causes they once considered remote.

Accordingly, movement organizations now help people affected by an issue they target to craft and communicate their stories. Activists in this role face a challenge, however. The experiences for which they seek to gain a hearing are ones of abuse and injustice. But they firmly reject the notion that storytellers should present themselves as passive, pathetic, or otherwise worthy of pity. Joining scholars (Meyers 2016; Whittier 2001), they argue that styling oneself a victim is psychologically destructive and politically disempowering. The practical question, then, is how to tell stories of suffering without victims, or how to persuade audiences while empowering tellers.

To handle that challenge, activists can draw on a veritable industry of storytelling coaches, strategists, and media producers. In the United States, there are nonprofit organizations dedicated to training advocates to tell their stories and/or to producing print and digital stories for activists' use. Storytelling consultancies market their services to advocacy organizations and nonprofits. Large advocacy organizations' media and communications departments have budgets

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for producing stories, and there are numerous handbooks, workshops, and webinars aimed at training activists to tell their stories effectively. More than a dozen foundations have programs devoted to storytelling in advocacy.

The result, we argue, is storytelling in a new register. We interviewed 62 people in the field of professional activism who work on issues ranging from homelessness to sex trafficking and who, as part of their work, collect, coach, and communicate the stories of people affected by the issue. Our interviews, in conjunction with our observation of storytelling workshops, reading of how-to materials, and analysis of advocacy stories reveal a distinctive set of norms for telling personal stories. Professional activists and consultants today encourage a performance of modulated suffering. In this mode of storytelling, you do not wallow in your pain. You subtly betray your emotions rather than performing them. You show "scars, not wounds," as one activist put it. You emphasize hope more than hurt, and resilience more than suffering. You focus on the part of your abuse that audiences can easily understand, and perhaps have experienced. You connect with your audience rather than overwhelm them. What the new mode of storytelling strives for is a relationship with the audience that is marked by respect rather than pity: a connection with the listener through story sharing, with the implication (if not the reality) that the listener will share a story in return.

We trace the rise of this new discourse of storytelling, and we identify some of its consequences. Activists and the experts with whom they work maintain that as much as this approach to storytelling honors the agency and dignity of the people affected by the issue, it also works to raise funding and to build public support. Yet, we are not convinced that the result is a win-win for everyone involved. Aside from the fact that storytellers may sometimes want to tell their story in a way that emphasizes their suffering, there may be stories that cannot be neatly packaged as inspirational. The coaching that experts claim is necessary to tell effective stories is in tension with the belief that people gain power from telling their own stories in their own way. Moreover, expert claims that all good stories have the same features miss the possibility that what is required to make a pitch effective in Congressional testimony may not be the same as what is required at a fundraising luncheon, or a YouTube video versus a community organizing event. In these ways, the contemporary discourse of storytelling may disserve activists.

In tracing the mixed effects of the contemporary discourse of personal storytelling in social movements, we also seek to contribute to a fuller understanding of the consequences of movement professionalization. We do so by focusing on professionalized movements' reliance on outside expertise. This focus reflects the landscape of movement advocacy today and draws attention to problems that go beyond those typically attributed to movements' professionalization. Experts, variously, in fundraising, management, recruitment, legislative lobbying, legal strategy, and, in our case, public messaging, claim authority on the basis of their ability to solve practical problems. In the process, however, they may obscure the dilemmatic, and therefore political, character of those problems. We begin, then, by locating our questions within the literature on social movement professionalization.

ACTIVISTS, PROFESSIONALS, EXPERTS, AND EXPERTISE

Movement scholars have defined professionalization as the replacement of voluntary positions in a movement organization with paid staff, and more generally, as movement organizations becoming more "business-like": hierarchically and centrally organized, and with decisions made by staff rather than members (Staggenborg 1988; McCarthy, Britt, and Wolfson 1991; Minkoff and Powell 2006; Maier et al. 2016). In accounting for the causes and consequences of professionalization, scholars have focused on movement organizations' relations with funders. Organizations often professionalize in order to secure foundation or government funding (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; McCarthy and Zald 1977). But they may moderate their strategies and tactics as a result. They may substitute service provision for advocacy or adopt forms of advocacy that are unlikely to alienate funders (Jenkins 1998; Salomon 2012). Alternatively, funders' preference for

more moderate organizations may lead those types of organizations to survive where more radical ones disband (Minkoff and Agnone 2010). The growth of professional staff, moreover, often distances movement organizations from their members, who are reduced to writing checks or dispensed with altogether. Members lose the chance to develop political skills (Sobieraj 2006; Fisher 2006), while movements shift away from the goals of their constituencies (Skocpol 2003).

In contrast with this rendering, however, scholars have pointed out that professionalization is not necessarily associated with tactical moderation (Staggenborg 1988), that professionalized organizations have often combined bureaucratic and collectivist structures (Chen 2009), and that increases in foundation funding have not deradicalized the movement sector overall (Minkoff 1999). More important for our purposes, scholars have also recognized that foundations play roles in movements that go beyond funding, including creating new organizational forms or sectors and, especially, providing expertise (Walker 2015; Bartley 2007; Quinn et al. 2014). At the same time, scholars have called for attention to movement-supporting organizations other than foundations (Edwards, McCarthy, and Mataic 2018).

Today, the latter include fundraising consultants, legal counsel, recruitment specialists, public messaging experts, management consultants, website designers, lobbying consultants and others. These actors provide nonmaterial support, and especially, expertise, and they have grown in scale and importance in recent years. It is difficult to estimate how many movement organizations rely on consultants. Dana Fisher (2006) found that 25 percent of the largest left-leaning membership organizations outsourced canvassing. Edward Walker (2014) documents a surge in the 1980s of "public affairs" consultancies, which specialize in mobilizing public support for government policies (see Nicholls and Uitermark 2015 on experts in the immigration and LGBTQ movements, and Braunstein 2012 on experts' role in faith-based organizing). Nonprofit organizations rely increasingly on outside expertise (Hwang and Powell 2009; Cyr 2010). For example, a study of 190 nonprofits in the Bay Area found that two-thirds hired one or more consultants (Hwang and Powell 2009: 279; and on governments' increasing reliance on consultants, see Ylönen and Kuusela 2019).

Several factors are likely behind the trend. The same surge in advocacy that led to new funding opportunities for social movement organizations and the replacement of voluntary workers by paid staff also led to the establishment of groups specializing in recruitment, fundraising, legal work, and so on (Walker 2014). The growing complexity of tax regulations, Internet technology, and media relations led nonprofits to turn to outsiders for help (Abramson and McCarthy 2012). Outsourcing movement tasks to consultants may also be a way for movement organizations to save the costs of hiring full-time staff (Cyr 2010). When it comes to public messaging, which is our focus here, the Internet and social media have created new routes to persuasion, but also huge competition for media consumers' attention. Movement organizations require ever more expertise to craft messages that resonate (Kaminer 2018; Sachs 2012). At the same time, corporations have come to embrace causes that were once the purview solely of nonprofits and movement organizations (Bromley and Meyer 2017; Elliott 2014). Not only have top advertising and public relations agencies increasingly taken on advocacy groups as clients (Elliott 2014), but new fields of public interest communications (Fessman 2017; Downes 2017) and cause-related marketing (Elliott 2014) have emerged to service nonprofits that are devoted at least in part to advocacy. Finally, mimetic processes may be involved as organizations respond to uncertainty by hiring consultants who are familiar with the strategies, tactics, and organizational forms that are used by other organizations perceived to be successful (Bromley and Meyer 2017).

In seeking expertise, movement organizations may turn not to paid professionals but instead to materials that professionals have produced and disseminated, often online. Thus, with respect to public messaging, activists today may not hire a public interest communications specialist, but rather participate in a webinar offered at low cost by the public messaging consultancy, read a handbook produced by a nonprofit communications group, attend a meeting on messaging sponsored by a foundation, or glean tips from an article appearing in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* or *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. This is in line with the character of expertise more generally. As Gil Eyal (2013) argues, expertise today is less an attribute of credentialed

professionals than it is a set of techniques, practical know-how, and normative commitments produced by a dispersed network of people and organizations. Indeed, Eyal argues that new fields of expertise are likely to emerge not as the result of controlling access to knowledge (the sociology of professions view) but rather of enrolling others in the coproduction of new knowledge (on expertise as dispersed, see also Kakonen and Seeck 2011; Murray Li 2007).

What is the effect of movements' growing use of outside expertise? The topic has received little attention. As we noted, scholars have tended to treat the dangers of movement profes-sionalization as lying in professionals' conflicting allegiances. A professionalized activist may put her job over the good of the organization, or may put the organization's financial health over the movement's chances for impact, or may put the goals of elite staff members and supporters over those of the movement's constituency. But formulating the problem as one of conflicting allegiances makes less sense when we are talking about movements' reliance on outside expertise. For one thing, the organizations that rely on such expertise tend already to be professionalized (Walker 2014: 146). In these cases, turning to professional service firms does not involve the replacement of volunteers by professionals, but rather professionals by other professionals. Moreover, a movement organization is under no obligation to retain a consultant who is recommending actions that are inconsistent with the organization's aims and commitments. And indeed, the public affairs consultants Walker (2014) interviewed were committed to the causes on which they worked. Finally, since much of the outside expertise that movements rely on comes not from paid consultants, but from materials produced by consultants and made widely available at low or no cost to movement groups, movement groups have considerable freedom to choose the solutions that are consistent with their aims.

This does not mean that outside experts and expertise always serve movement groups effectively, but it does suggest that rather than assuming conflicting interests, we should focus more closely on the role of experts and expertise in turning movement goals into practical action. Consultants' task more generally, as Magda Pieczka (2002: 322) writes, is to "reinterpret . . . [clients'] needs in ways malleable to professional expertise." It is in that process of making move-ments' needs amenable to expertise that we may see compromises on movement organizations' ability to act effectively and in tune with their ideological commitments.

Expertise always risks obscuring the features of movement groups' practical choices that do not lend themselves to expert solutions. The fact that the expertise relevant to movement organizations is rarely offered to movements alone increases such risks. Few consulting firms would survive if they served only social movement organizations. Instead, most market their services to nonprofits generally, and sometimes to government agencies and for-profits as well. Consultants themselves see that as their strength. As one of the public affairs consultants Walker interviewed put it, "What we're able to do as consultants is stay on top of the latest trends and developments, and we're able to borrow and move things across worlds" (2014: 141). This is likewise true of the how-to materials that consultants produce. Borrowing across institutional worlds can open up new possibilities for effective action. But it can also obscure the distinct needs of different kinds of organizations. For example, in Walker's study, movement organizations hired public affairs consultants to mobilize participation. Consultants did this efficiently by targeting the citizens who were most likely to participate, namely those who were more educated and affluent. But, unlike nonprofits, movement organizations must represent their grievances as shared by broad segments of the public (Andrews and Edwards 2004). Consultants met one movement goal—cost-efficient participation—as they frustrated another: that of broad partici-pation. Relying on outside expertise similarly posed a risk for the movement organizations Fisher (2006) studied. Here, the canvassing consultants hired by movement groups trained college students to drum up memberships but trained them for little else. Canvassers soon burned out and quit, and movement organizations lost out on the prospect of politically engaged recruits (Fisher 2006). Unlike nonprofits, movements must not only mobilize people efficiently, but also recruit some of those people for longer-term and more intensive commitments (Mansbridge 1986; Jasper 2004).

In both cases, the problem was not experts' mixed loyalties to the organization's interests but rather the assumptions experts made in the course of helping the organization pursue those interests. We can think here of the operation of expert discourses as conceptualized by Michel Foucault (1980; 1982): congeries of beliefs, practices, and conceptual categories that become dominant at a certain point in time. Discourses are practical: they include techniques as well as knowledge. But discourses are also constitutive in the sense that they define the problems to which the techniques are solutions.[1] That expert discourse misrecognize the problems facing movement organizations is by no means inevitable. But insofar as it is offered to nonprofits broadly, and sometimes for-profits, too, expert discourse may obscure dilemmas that are unique to social movement organizations.[2] In addition to the two dilemmas we just noted, a third is that movement organizations make claims *on behalf* of a larger group, but they must decide whether to do so in line with group members' expressed needs (Nicholls and Uitermark 2015; see Jasper 2004 on other movement dilemmas). This question, like the other two, is a dilemma insofar as there is no easy answer. On one hand, empowering movement participants by encouraging them to voice their demands in the way they want may come at the expense of winning support from influential allies. On the other hand, voicing participants' demands in the way that influential allies want may be perceived as violating the movement's commitment to empowerment, which may lose it participants. As is true of the other dilemmas, each choice comes with likely costs as well as benefits; winners and losers. The dilemmas are political insofar as they require hard decisions, and ideally ones based on deliberation within the organization. But neither the choices nor their dilemmatic character is always obvious to organizational members (Jasper 2004).

Expertise may be appealing precisely insofar as it recasts dilemmas as solvable problems. This is the practical value of expertise, but also what makes it hazardous. Expert discourse may obscure the political choices that must be made in at least two ways. One is that it supplies not only a definition of and solution to the problem, but also the criteria for evaluating the solution (Murray Li 2007; Kakonen and Hirsch 2009). As a result, alternative criteria for assessing the utility or appropriateness of a chosen solution are sidelined. For example, Anu Kantola and Hannele Seeck (2011) show that consultants brought ideas about corporate competitiveness that were popular in management circles to national governments, spurring energetic efforts to manage nations like firms. This was despite the fact that there was very little evidence of the strategy's effectiveness. Instead, its association with corporate management was taken as indication of its value. Studies of development projects have shown that, once scientists have been asked to estimate the risks of a planned project, criticism of the project has been restricted to questioning the validity of the risk assessment (Kakonen and Hirsch 2009). Civic engagement specialists organize public forums for corporations seeking to secure employees' acquiescence to down-sizing. Specialists insist that the democratic character of the forum should be judged by how genuinely participatory it is—this is where their expertise lies—not by whether decision makers are in any way bound to the results of the forum (Lee 2014). As these examples from outside the realm of movements suggest, expert discourse may be counterproductive insofar as it marginalizes alternative, perhaps more appropriate, methods for assessing the value of a particular strategy. A second way in which expert discourses may obscure the dilemmatic and therefore political character of particular strategies is by defining the subjects of expertise. Subjects are two things: they are the topic of discourse and they are those who are made agents by the discourse. They are actors whose desires and capacities are imputed to them by the discourse (Foucault 1997). In this sense, expert discourse defines problems, but also defines people's wants and needs. Expert discourse may turn political problems into technical ones by defining groups' needs in ways that make them easily fulfilled. Or they may do so in ways that underestimate differences within groups. For example, development projects like the ones we described above sometimes have been pressed to include public participation as a counterweight to the power of scientists. But the experts brought in to organize public participation have defined "ordinary" members of the public in ways that have excluded people with claims that are more contentious (Braun and Schultz 2010). We might ask, then, whether expert discourses make certain experiences normative in a

way that marginalizes other experiences and those speaking for them. That may create liabilities for the movement.

How would we ascertain whether these things are happening? By studying the expert discourse to which movement groups have access, discourse about fundraising, public messaging, management, lobbying, litigation, and other strategies. In this article, we identify an expert discourse about one form of public messaging: personal storytelling. The discourse is used by consultants who are hired by movement organizations but it is also used in how-to materials—in magazine articles, blogs, online training courses, and in-person workshops—that are available at low cost to activists. It is used, too, by the activists who have drawn on such sources of expertise. Again, activists' fluency in such discourse reflects the character of contemporary expertise, which gains legitimacy not by its exclusivity but rather by the breadth of its use (Eyal 2013). We identify the ways in which the discourse a) sets the terms for its own evaluation and b) constitutes subjects; that is, represents the needs of storytellers and audiences. It does so, we argue, by valorizing "authentic" storytelling. Stories' authenticity is made simultaneously the ineffable measure of stories' effectiveness and something that can be crafted with expert help. Stories' authenticity is defined as meaning true to the storyteller (rather than the audience) *and* true to the audience, a conflation that makes tellers' and audiences' needs deceptively similar. Experts, activists, and the discourse they rely on thus obscure the dilemma facing movement organizations: the fact that, more than nonprofits generally, movement organizations are supposed to empower participants at the same time as they persuade audiences outside the movement.

DATA AND METHODS

To parse a contemporary discourse of advocacy storytelling, we draw on a combination of interviews, observation, and an analysis of online materials. We interviewed 62 professionals who recruited and coached people on how to tell their stories, coordinated the performance of their stories for different audiences, and/or produced their stories for use online or in other media. Interviewees were staff members of activist groups, foundation executives, and communication, strategy, and leadership development consultants who worked with activist groups. We were able to interview the consultants who are hired for their expertise in storytelling (but also often offer it free of charge), the foundation executives who pay the consultants to provide their expertise to activist organizations, and the professionalized activists who rely on expertise in storytelling. The stories our interviewees helped produce were told for purposes of fundraising, policy advocacy, and public consciousness raising. Stories were often delivered in person (in speeches to potential donors, legislative testimony, and interviews with journalists), but they were also written up in brochures, ads, articles, and blog posts. Some were produced as online videos. The issues interviewees tackled included homelessness; the rights of sex workers, people with disabilities, undocumented immigrants, drug users, and trans people; reproductive choice and justice; economic justice; environmental justice; labor; climate change; sex trafficking; and police brutality (see table 1). These were predominately progressive causes, and with the exception of some participants involved in antitrafficking, most of our interviewees identified as progressive.

We recruited interviewees in several ways. Francesca Polletta was initially contacted by the Health Media Initiative of the Open Society Foundations. The group has trained a number of its grantees who work in advocacy contexts in storytelling. Polletta proposed a study of activists who use storytelling, and the Health Media Initiative invited its grantees to participate. Those who were interested contacted Polletta. Nine of our interviewees came to the study via this route. In addition, Polletta, Tania DoCarmo, and Kelly Marie Ward contacted people in advocacy whom they knew and asked for leads to people who used storytelling in their work. At the end of each of the twenty-one interviews that came about through these two routes, we asked for leads for other people it would be worth talking to. Another twenty-two interviewees were recruited in this way. Finally, we contacted and interviewed ten people who were cited in publications on storytelling in advocacy.

Table 1: Organizations Represented by Type and Substantive Issue Targeted

Issue	Organization Type			
	Activism	*Messaging, Strategy, and Leadership Development*	*Foundation*	*Total*
Anti-sex trafficking	8	0	0	8
Economic justice and workers' rights	4	1	0	5
Homelessness	3	1	0	4
Immigration	2	0	0	2
LGBTQ	3	0	0	3
Health and disability	4	0	0	4
Reproductive rights and justice	7	3	2	12
Multi-issue	1	21	2	24
Totals	32	26	4	62

Polletta, DoCarmo, and Ward conducted interviews via Skype. These were semistructured and ran from forty-five minutes to two hours. After asking how interviewees used storytelling in their work and how the interviewee and his/her group came to use storytelling, we asked how the interviewee typically chose storytellers and crafted stories; what made stories work and what "working" meant. We used Dedoose to code the interviews for a number of themes. During this process, we were struck by interviewees' concern with empowering rather than exploiting story-tellers, but also the curious ways in which interviewees seemed to conflate the needs of storytellers and those of audiences. We reread the transcripts and found this conflation appearing repeatedly. We drafted a series of memos detailing our emerging analysis and then scoured the transcripts for evidence in support of our analysis as well as statements that challenged or complicated it.

After completing our interviews, we compiled a list of stories that interviewees identified as especially successful, either in our initial interview or in response to a follow-up email we sent asking for stories that "got wide attention or seemed to have an impact on policymakers or funders." Jessica Callahan analyzed forty-five of the stories that were intended for an Internet audience and therefore available online. She coded the stories for emotional expression, dramatic conflict and the performance of suffering and agency. Finally, all the authors read numerous consultant-produced handbooks, articles, blog entries, and reports on how to tell stories effectively. Polletta participated in two one-day workshops on narrative strategies; she and the other authors participated in a shorter workshop on storytelling; and DoCarmo and Callahan partici-pated in online webinars on storytelling. All of these were offered by narrative consultants like the ones we interviewed.

In the following, we draw on our interviews in conjunction with secondary materials to show how contemporary expertise about advocacy storytelling claims to solve the problem of per-suading audiences to support the cause while empowering the people affected by it. We flesh out a kind of how-to of advocacy storytelling, a practical discourse of the form used by consultants, funders, and activists. There were some differences among interviewees in their approach to storytelling, which we discuss at the end of the article. However, the differences did not corres-pond to interviewees' job as an activist, consultant, or funder. If the problem of professionalization was one of competing loyalties (consistent with the earlier literature), one might expect to see funders and consultants emphasizing the importance of persuading audiences and activists the importance of empowering storytellers. Instead, funders, consultants, and activists all emphasized authentic stories' capacity to do both. We show how the discourse of storytelling sets the terms for its own evaluation and how it constitutes speakers and audiences, doing both in ways that foreclose alternatives.

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING DISCOURSE

Movements have always told stories, from abolitionists' stories of escaping slavery to pro-life activists' accounts of the unplanned pregnancies they carried to term (Polletta 2006). Beginning in the mid-2000s, however, personal storytelling in advocacy was celebrated, promoted, and professionalized in a way that was genuinely new. That personal storytelling would become so popular was by no means a given. After all, personal storytelling had been a popular advocacy strategy in the late-1980s and early 1990s, before coming under virulent attack later in the decade. Critics charged that victim storytelling was contributing to an "empire of trauma" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) in which everyone claimed to be suffering from some injustice. Progressive activists, for their part, worried that encouraging people to tell their stories of victimization denied them any sense of agency and strength. Building on criticisms of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other transitional justice initiatives, activists also worried that telling personal stories of trauma could be "retraumatizing" since it required a victim to relive her experience of suffering for a remote audience outside a therapeutic context (Crowe 2015; Fletcher and Weinstein 2002).

Our interviewees were familiar with the latter criticism, and indeed, expressed it themselves. "What are the ethics of bringing people in over and over again to tell a traumatic story?" a filmmaker who works with advocacy groups asked rhetorically. An economic justice activist said flatly, "if it's still traumatic for somebody, then the campaign doesn't mean that much to [make it worth it to] traumatize, retraumatize people." "[A]lmost having to relive this experience can also have the potential to be traumatizing," an antihomelessness activist observed. It was too easy to forget that "the people who are sharing those stories are the owners of those stories," an indigenous rights advocate insisted. "This is still your story. You made this; it belongs to you." To require a storyteller to perform his suffering was to take that ownership away. Indeed, it was to turn the teller into an object. "An object of compassion is still an object," an antitrafficking activist pointed out. The teller became her story, which could then be taken from her and circulated to other audiences who would profit from the story. An immigrant rights activist criticized stories becoming a "kind of currency."

Given this suspicion of stories, it is perhaps surprising that activists have embraced personal storytelling so wholeheartedly. That they have done so reflects in part the growth of a field of nonprofit public messaging. In the 1980s, Fenton Communications was the only major public relations firm serving nonprofits, but by 2018, the public relations newsletter O'Dwyers listed over a hundred public relations firms serving nonprofits exclusively (O'Dwyers 2018). The Communications Network was founded in the late 1970s for nonprofit communication professionals, but a number of other networks, academic centers, journals, and conferences were launched in the 2000s: the Social Marketing International Conference, Georgetown's Center for Social Impact Communication, the University of Florida's Center for Public Interest Communications, along with an academic chair there in the subject, the Halo Award for cause marketing, the Frank Conference, and the journal Public Interest Communication.

For nonprofit communicators, storytelling became an important tool (Morrissey 2017). Professionals argued that evocative personal stories could cut through the barrage of information to which people are subjected daily (Rockefeller Foundation 2014; Hodges 2014; Jensen 2014; Sachs 2012). But they also cited the success of the marriage equality movement and the undocumented student Dreamers as proof that changes in public opinion were possible in a political landscape that was hostile to progressive reform. Stories could change the "hearts and minds" of an indifferent public (The Culture Group 2013; Callahan 2014; Harold 2014; McQueen 2013). As a commentator put it in 2017, "Storytelling is all the rage in nonprofit communications. Everyone, it seems, is jumping onto the storytelling bandwagon" (Kendall-Taylor 2017). Numerous universities now offer certificates in "Social Impact Storytelling" or "Applied Storytelling." Also, there are conferences, workshops and summits on storytelling for nonprofits, and many consultancies bill themselves as experts in storytelling specifically.[3]

Foundations also began to promote personal storytelling, first, as a way to publicize the work their grantees were doing (Siska 2005), and later, as an advocacy strategy in its own right. The Atlantic Philanthropies partnered with the Ford Foundation to create the Narrative Initiative, the Rockefeller Foundation partnered with Hattaway Communications to create Storytelling for Good, and the Open Society Foundations contracted with Narrativ to train its grantees in storytelling. All aimed "to connect the art of storytelling to the act of social change," as the Ford Foundation put it (Van Slyke and Sen 2016). At the time we conducted our interviews, at least twelve major foundations were funding initiatives for storytelling in advocacy, including, in addition to the ones we mentioned, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

THE DISCOURSE OF AUTHENTIC STORTELLING

One might imagine that communications experts would promote personal storytelling by citing its effectiveness in accomplishing tasks important to advocacy organizations such as raising funds, securing media coverage, getting issues on the policy agenda, creating public awareness, and changing public opinion. One would expect to see in briefs for storytelling evidence of stories' persuasive power. In the how-to literature, one would expect to see advice on how to tell stories to different audiences; say, potential funders versus legislators or journalists, or stories online versus in person. Given foundations' usual concern with measures of tangible impact, one would expect to see guidance on how advocacy organizations might tell stories that demonstrate impact. Given activists' commitment to empowering those who have suffered from injustice rather than exploiting them further, one might expect to see them wrestling with the trade-offs involved in having people recount their experiences of suffering and see them worrying that the kind of victim stories that secured public sympathy might deny storytellers the opportunity to express their anger.

Yet neither experts, activists, nor foundations talked about stories in these ways. Little time or money was spent on measuring stories' effectiveness. Occasionally, interviewees referred to a video they had produced that was more popular than others, or a storytelling campaign that received media attention. The Ford Foundation commissioned a report on storytelling in reproductive rights advocacy that sought to assess knowledge about the effectiveness of such stories. When the Open Society Foundations contacted Polletta, it was to ask whether there was research on stories' effectiveness in policy contexts. The website Storytelling for Good (n.d.) established a page devoted to evaluating stories' effectiveness. But these efforts to assess stories' impact systematically were unusual.

Instead, experts and expertise about storytelling tended to assert people's deep psychological need for and love of stories. Briefs for storytelling and how-to guidelines usually began with a statement like, "Narrative is basic to what it means to be human" (Atlantic Philanthropies/Ford Foundation 2017); "stories speak to our hearts and our fundamental values" .(Advocacy and Communication Solutions, n.d.); or "We need stories to survive" (Joyaux 2014). Guidelines attested to the fact that people have been telling stories for thousands of years ("what are cave drawings but stories" [Joyaux 2014]), that we are "narrative animals" (Bioneers n.d.), that we are "hard-wired for stories" (Kendall-Taylor 2017); that "[o]ur brains are literally wired to take in and preserve stories" (Storytelling for Good, n.d.); and that "[s]tories are essentially the software of our brain" (Black 2014). In either a biological or evolutionary sense, then, storytelling was represented as fundamental to who we are as human beings.

These claims rarely distinguished between telling stories and hearing them. The implication was that as much as audiences naturally wanted to hear the stories of those affected by the issue, those affected wanted to tell their stories. Expert discourse often referred to story*sharing* (Atlantic Philanthropies/Ford Foundation 2017; Rockefeller Foundation 2014; National Community Trust Land Network 2016), suggesting that stories were reciprocated in an egalitarian fashion. Rather than a person performing her suffering for an anonymous

audience, the image instead was one of a small group trading stories. A blurb on a handbook for storytelling in advocacy observed that "when two people sit down to tell stories from their lives and to listen, something happens"—this, although the book was about storytelling to large and usually anonymous audiences (Working Narratives 2016). "We are a campfire people," an antitrafficking activist said to explain the value of stories.

The goal of storytelling in advocacy was to persuade. In this regard, stories' authenticity was crucial. "A well told, authentic story will work with anybody, any culture, any age," a storytelling expert said confidently (Bridgespan n.d.). "Authenticity is the mark of a great story" (Black 2014). Organizations needed to find and publicize their "most authentic stories" (Fuld 2017). "Authenticity" was what distinguished a story from a "formulaic anecdote" (Rockefeller 2014: 10); it "often trumps production quality" (EveryAction Team, 2016); and it resists calculation: "[I]t can be difficult for organizations to capture and convey an authentic story, because authenticity—by its very nature—is not something that can be manufactured" (Meyer Foundation 2014). "The most meaningful stories come from people with authentic and insightful experiences to share" (Rockefeller Foundation 2014).

Despite the suggestion that authenticity inhered in the story and not in how it was communicated, authenticity did not mean spontaneous or unrehearsed. How-to articles usually referred to the "five essentials" or "four elements" or "three principles" of stories that would make them "feel authentic and ring true" (Atlantic Philanthropies/Ford Foundation 2017), and "showcase your authenticity" (Chen n.d.; see also Atlantic Philanthropies/Ford Foundation 2017; Joyaux 2014; Meyer 2014; Working Narratives 2016). Authentic storytelling required expertise. The professional activists we interviewed were similarly clear on the issue. An anti-homelessness activist said: "You have to coach. I mean, that's all there is to it. . . . With any storytelling endeavor, there has to be a sense of rehearsal, of timing, of intentionality." And an activist for Serbian women's rights: "If it is an authentic story, no matter how much time you invest in rehearsing that, it will still be an authentic story."

The expert discourse around storytelling thus identified the problem (to change the hearts and minds of the public and policymakers while at the same time empowering those affected by the issue), named the solution (storytelling that was implicitly reciprocated), and supplied the terms for assessing the strategy's use (stories' intrinsic persuasive power). Metrics of stories' effectiveness were unnecessary given people's basic need for stories. Yet, authentic storytelling required expert tools. Authenticity was rationalized, in the Weberian sense of being achieved through prescribed steps, even as it was held out as the opposite of the calculative rationality of numbers and formulaic spin. This, we argue, was one way in which the discourse of storytelling rendered technical the political problem of whether to focus on persuading potential supporters or on helping movement participants voice their claims in their own way.

A second way in which the discourse of storytelling rendered the political technical was by constituting the needs of speakers and audiences as complementary. To be sure, interviewees described strategies to protect those they asked to tell their stories. They ensured that storytellers were ready to tell their stories and that they understood how little control they would have over their story once it began to circulate publicly. Interviewees described stopping journalists' questioning when it became intrusive and pushing back against people even in their own organization who wanted voyeuristic accounts (see also Gregory 2016 and Baker 2015 on preparing storytellers for a public role). But interviewees also talked about the importance of telling stories *authentically*, in the sense of true to the speaker's desires. As an organizing consultant insisted, "People need to tell their stories in ways that are authentic to who they are." An economic justice activist explained that stories should be told "in an authentic way that's real and true to their experience." An activist for trans youth describes creating a forum for young people to share their experiences, "a space for young people to be able to speak out in a way that felt authentic to them." Stories should be expressions of tellers' experience, identity, and perceptions, in this view. Stories should not confront their tellers as something alien and apart.

This suggested that storytellers should tell their stories any way they wanted. But people's stories told the way they want are often boring, confusing, or unbelievable. Any of us, asked to tell our story, tends to skip over important details and harp on seemingly irrelevant ones; we tell stories that are so formulaic as to be unengaging or so unique as to be unrelatable. Interviewees did not discuss this problem but acknowledged it when asked about it. Given that problem, it was interesting that interviewees also described authentic stories in a second, and somewhat different, way. Authentic stories were ones that connected the teller with the audience, not those that freed her from the demands of the audience. The same economic justice activist quoted above explained, "Powerful storytelling is when it's real and when it's authentic and when you're showing your real self." Authentic meant true in a deeper sense than merely empirically accurate. It meant telling audiences something fundamental and important about the teller's experience. "You can tell when somebody is still delivering something that they're in touch with," said an organizing trainer. An abortion advocate described an authentic story: "Look into my eyes. I have a heartbeat and I'm a real person." And a progressive filmmaker: "We want to really reveal . . . the authenticity of all these families." How-to guides similarly defined authenticity in terms of the story's relationship with the audience, not with the teller. "Authenticity is what sustains the connection between your audience and your character," one put it (Meyer Foundation 2014: 14).

In this dual use of the term authenticity, storytelling discourse narrowed the gap between the needs of the speaker and those of the audience. If authentic stories were both true to the teller and true to the audience, and if authenticity was something that could be expertly crafted, then activists need not worry about possible tradeoffs between telling stories effectively and telling them in a way that the speaker wanted. If told authentically, stories could persuade audiences at the same time that they empowered tellers.

HOW TO TELL AN AUTHENTIC STORY

We describe three features of authentic storytelling as it appeared in the expert discourse. We present them as injunctions, although our interviewees did not do so in so schematic a fashion. But we want to capture the ubiquity of these themes in storytelling handbooks, webinars, and online articles, as well as in our interviews with consultants, foundation executives, and activists. In each case, the power of the expert discourse lay in its ability to turn dilemmatic choices such as whether to instruct people who had suffered on how to tell their stories into nonchoices. The discourse "solved" the dilemma in a way that simultaneously recognized and mis-recognized it. It was not that storytelling consultants did not care about the needs of people who had suffered. But they—or better, the discourse of advocacy storytelling—*constituted* those needs so as to make them consistent with the requirements of persuading distant audiences. The fact that activists talked about storytelling similarly to the way consultants and foundation staff did points to the power of the discourse.

1. Emphasize Hope Rather than Despair—the Victim's Resilience Rather than Her Suffering

We expected that interviewees would describe a tension between emphasizing people's victimization and their agency. After all, the experiences they needed to convey were ones of unjust suffering: homelessness, poverty, the exploitation associated with sex work or the inability to secure medicine and so on. Instead, interviewees were unequivocal: stories should emphasize hope and resilience rather than despair and suffering. It was a misconception to think that authentic stories were stories of "very difficult scenarios," said an activist who worked with low-income people. "That, for me, is a very important piece to really work on. That it's not actually about trauma, it's about agency." An antitrafficking activist: "I think particularly the picture of the girl being rescued and being completely helpless, it's a very negative picture in trafficking because it kind of gives the impression of they're just needing complete and utter

help and there's nothing we can really do, nothing they can do to help themselves. Which of course is really unhelpful for them." A storytelling how-to guide instructed, "Focus . . . on solutions, not problems" (VanDeCarr 2015).

An antitrafficking activist recounted that his group had "really shifted gears to not telling the individual rape stories . . . [but instead a] story about an individual girl's move towards the future, what her hopes and dreams were, what she was becoming, what she's learned about herself, and moving further away from salacious details that quite frankly are personal and belong to that particular survivor." For this interviewee, storytellers should not have to reveal stigmatizing information as the price for being heard. Antitrafficking activists in particular, but others too, insisted that painful stories were disrespectful to the subject of the story. "[I want to find] storytellers, the clients, who are able to speak from a position of power instead of a position of victimization and vulnerability," said one activist.

The point was to avoid exploiting the storyteller. However, interviewees also described "sob stories," "victim stories," or "woe is me stories" as ineffective. A child rights activist: "You don't have to rely on the sad pathetic pictures of starving children to generate people's interest and concern. When you see people being empowered, then they feel happy to be able to give money." A human rights activist: "If the stories are developed with more emphasis or focus on the challenge, it comes out like a pity story or a victim story. And I don't think it works much for—people wouldn't want to share it anyway."

Note how the last interviewee moved from the likely ineffectiveness of the story for persuading audiences to the likely unwillingness of the teller to tell the story. An antitrafficking activist made the same move when describing the importance of conveying "hope" and "how important it is to not just smack people over the head, punch them in the face with this awful message. That's not enough *and it also doesn't serve a client very well either*. It reinforces all these ideas about pity that we can have toward people in a different culture" (our emphasis). Donors admired organizations that portrayed survivors with dignity, one activist observed.

The point of telling stories of resilience and hope was to honor the teller's dignity and agency. But it was also to appeal to audiences who were turned off by "despair porn," as one put it, and inspired by stories of overcoming. In this vein, a writer in the *Nonprofit Quarterly* complained about storytelling becoming "abuse" when organizations featured children in their efforts to raise funds. Such storytelling was "re-traumatiz[ing]" for the children, she wrote (McCambridge 2013). But the main consequence, she went on, was that it led funders to fund the wrong things; for example, Cambodian orphanages when most kids in need were not orphans. Again, the argument remade the solution to the political problem into a win-win. More generally, activists alluded to a possible tension between goals of persuasion (by using the story) and empowerment (by not "using" the storyteller), and then erased that tension: telling stories that empowered storytellers also happened to be what made them persuasive. Story-tellers' needs complemented those of the audience. Again, though, the needs were constituted by the discourse: people were empowered by being represented as having hope.

2. Feature Victims who Contain Their Emotions, or Better, Subtly Betray Them

To be sure, one should not omit the suffering altogether. But experts strove to produce stories in which suffering was portrayed sensitively, in ways that seduced the audience without discomfiting it—again, though, in the interests of protecting the teller. In the videos that our interviewees rated as effective, the people featured tended not to display strong emotions. For example, in a video commissioned by antihomelessness organizations, a young man described his homeless childhood as a series of adventures. His account of living in cars and under bridges was interspersed with original rap lyrics and cartoon dragons. In a matter of fact tone, he recounted being turned down for jobs and finding it difficult to fall asleep indoors as a result of his disorganized upbringing (Film and Family Homelessness Project 2014). A video produced by the Center for Reproductive Rights and picked up by multiple media sites, featured actress Jemima Kirke, famous from the "Girls" television series, recounting her abortion (Center for

Reproductive Rights, 2015). In an affectless tone, she described discovering she was pregnant and deciding to have an abortion. The only point at which she showed emotion was when she wryly laughed before saying that she had had to borrow the money for the abortion from her boyfriend.

We found this pattern in other online videos. Sometimes, the subjects were simply happy, determined, or hopeful. But often, the subject was shown struggling to restrain his or her emotions. Interviewees similarly described a strategy of having storytellers display measured or modulated emotions. Activists did encounter well-meaning fundraisers or other advocates who urged them to push storytellers to cry, they said. But they retorted, not only that doing so was unethical, but that it was unnecessary. A filmmaker recounted, "I definitely have worked with some organizations who are all about making their subjects cry on camera because they feel like that's what's going to get the best total response. I push back and say no, it's if your audience cries at the story, not necessarily if your subject cries."

Indeed, too much emotion on the part of storytellers could backfire, alienating audiences rather than emotionally moving them. An activist for women's rights described hearing a young woman tell a deeply moving story to a small group about abuse she had suffered and inviting her to tell her story to a larger group. When she became emotional while telling her story to the large group, "It just didn't work," the interviewee observed. "It felt like she was just— everybody was: what's the point of this? And it felt awkward. It felt awkward for her, it felt awkward for the audience." Similarly, an antitrafficking activist described a situation in which a survivor broke down in tears during a fundraising event in a private home. "And we walked out of there with zero dollars, the entire event," he commented. "And it was because it was emotionally moving but it was really awkward." Another antitrafficking activist observed, "It's not that tears are always a bad thing but . . . you have to be intuitive in those moments to know if it's okay or not." The goal was that survivors are "able to own that past and they present it like it's a scar, not like it's a gaping, open, bleeding, oozing wound . . . the best storytelling is scars."

The point of modulating tellers' emotional performance was to treat them with respect, to avoid a voyeuristic presentation of victims overcome by pain. But the resulting performance also avoided discomfiting audiences. Interviewees did not say this, but it is possible that such performances were even more engaging because audiences knew that, at any moment, the teller might dissolve in tears. Adopting an affectless tone may have indicated to the audience that the story was so traumatizing that the storyteller could only disclose the unemotional parts of it. The audience was invited in to elicit the meaning of the tight grin or the shaky voice. If this was true, the same thing that protected the storyteller according to the expert discourse—that tellers were discouraged from performing their suffering—would also make the story appealing to the audience.

3. Feature Experiences that are Recognizable to Audiences

Storytelling consultants instructed storytellers to focus on the particulars of the events they recounted (Meyer Foundation, 2014: 14; Deroy 2018). They should precisely describe what they saw, heard, and touched, focusing not on interpreting events or even describing their emotions but rather on capturing the details. Doing so would give the audience a sense of witnessing the events being recounted. For that reason too, storytellers should emphasize experiences that were likely familiar to their audience. An article in the *Nonprofit Quarterly* offered the advice to "Ensure others can see themselves in the story," as one of the "Five Ways for Nonprofits to Tell an Ethical Story," elaborating that "we can all be inspired to give money or time because we see our own moments of need reflected in our neighbors' stories" (Marple 2014). Note the author's argument that *ethical* storytelling—i.e., storytelling that served the needs of the teller—required that the audience see itself in the story. Similarly, a how-to guide on storytelling quoted the executive director of a center serving religious minorities: "We never want to 'other' our clients," in their storytelling, the executive director said (Meyer Foundation

2014). "We want people to relate." Casting clients as similar to audiences, in this rendering, was a way to treat them respectfully. "Asking people to tell their stories is ultimately not about you; it's about the storyteller, since this is a very personal process for most," a storytelling guide counseled, emphasizing, like our interviewees, the importance of being true to the storyteller. "If, however, *you take the time to listen fully and authentically, you are likely to hear stories that reflect both your key messages and messages that will resonate with your audiences*" (Bridgespan, n.d.; our emphasis). Authentic storytelling, along the lines prescribed by story-telling experts, effectively revealed the complementarity of storytellers' needs and those of the audience.

A communications consultant criticized a union's messaging campaign during a rapid transit worker strike. The union made a strategic mistake by showing the transit workers in their trains, she observed, "rather than showing them with their families or coaching Little League or whatever it is *they authentically do*" (our emphasis). One might ask why operating a train was not what train workers authentically did. In the contemporary discourse of storytelling, the answer was that what was authentic to the teller just happened to be that which made the teller similar to her audience.

Sometimes, experts argued that the person who might connect with her audience best was either not the most typical victim or not the victim at all. There was advantage to having stories told by people who did not fit the stereotype of the person suffering from the issue in question. "The more surprising or unlikely a storyteller is, the better," explained an antihomelessness activist. He went on:

> To illustrate my point, if [the formerly homeless person] looks like an executive, nice pressed suit, and they've been working at their job that pays a living wage for X number of years and then they come in and share their story about how addiction led them onto the street and they were spiraling into substance abuse for five plus years and now they've been clean and sober for the past five because of a program that allowed them to get off the streets, that's pretty powerful. . . . Oh wow, I never would've expected that person to have that story.

Challenging the powerful stereotype would make clear to audiences that they too could fall victim to the issue in question. Their middle-class status would not necessarily have protected them from sex trafficking, abortion, or unemployment. This could build the empathy that would lead audiences to act on behalf of the issue.

Alternatively, stories might feature not the victim himself but rather the person who helped the victim. A video created to spur support for American intervention in Syria combined footage of an infant being rescued from a collapsed building in Aleppo with an interview with the rescue worker (Syria Campaign 2014). Since the infant was saved, the focus was on heroism and triumph rather than on suffering. The film also relied on the same modulation of emotion that we saw in victims. After the rescue worker recounted the rescue, the interviewer asked him if he had visited the family of the infant since then. No, he said, with a knowing laugh; there was no time. The camera lingered on his face as he seemed to be processing emotionally the fact that there were so many lives to be saved, and so many lives lost. The effect was to give the audience the sense of being present in the moment when the rescue worker realized the enormity, the horror, of his task. The rescuer contained his emotions but the viewer had the sense that doing so was difficult. In another example of focusing on the heroes rather than the victims, antihomelessness activists in an American city proudly described videos they had produced: one, featuring a landlord who had decided to rent to formerly homeless people and the other, a community that helped a homeless family. Activists here told the story not of stigmatized groups but of their supportive allies. Those allies tended to be more like audience members. The effort to protect the victim by not requiring that he even tell his story thus dovetailed neatly with the instruction to ensure that audiences could see themselves in the story.

Activists recognized, though, the danger of presenting the ally as a hero rescuing a pitiable victim (Marple 2014; Hodges 2014). This would be at odds with a view of those who had suffered as agentic. Accordingly, stories of supportive allies tended to include passing

testimonials to the agency or courage of the victim. For example, in the video in Syria, the rescuer noted the courage of the two-week old infant he helped rescue, although courage is not something we commonly associate with infants. In an antitrafficking video that was told from the point of view of a man who liberated a trafficked young woman, the man said, "she inspired me with her determination and courage," although the film up until then had given no indication that the man even knew the young woman.

RISKS OF THE CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE OF STORYTELLING

Interviewees were contemptuous of a style of storytelling they characterized as sob stories or victim storytelling. They rejected a confessional style in which one performed one's suffering in the hope of psychological closure and healing. Asking victims to retell their stories was voyeuristic and exploitative. It asked people to define themselves in terms of their pain. It represented victims as passive, pitiable, and generic. It represented them as without agency, to be helped only by way of the intervention of the viewer.

This was the storytelling that was common in the 1990s. In the alternative favored by activists, experts, and foundation executives today, one did not wallow in one's emotions. One subtly betrayed them. One showed "scars, not wounds." One emphasized hope as much as pain; resilience as much as suffering. One used irony to demonstrate one's distance from the trauma. Stories curated in this mode were true both to the teller and to the audience.

But were there also risks associated with storytelling in this new register? Yes. For one thing, victims sometimes wanted to tell stories of their suffering. An interviewee worried, he said, that people "default to trauma," in their stories. But framing the problem in psychological terms implied that telling a story of suffering was necessarily bad for the teller, which it may not have been. Certainly, the stories curated by activists never depicted subjects as angry, indignant, or resentful. Several interviewees wrestled with the liability of that strategy. As one consultant put it, the two options of "narratives that are either problem-saturated and oppressive or relentlessly upbeat" did not really encompass storytellers' experiences.

Choosing a storyteller who defied the stereotype risked compromising activists' commitment to empowering the people most affected by the issue. The danger was that the most mainstream representatives of the group would be encouraged to tell their stories: the undocumented students who were high school valedictorians, the women who aborted only because fetal anomalies had been detected, the elderly people who lost their home when their landlord raised their rent, the people who had contracted Hepatitis C through a blood transfusion rather than drug use. An interviewee described with dismay a training session for advocacy around transgender issues she had attended, in which the trainer explained, "we want the right looking transgender people to be spokespeople" (see Braunstein 2012 on groups struggling with the issue).

There may also be more narrowly instrumental costs to an uncritical embrace of personal storytelling. Some experimental research suggests that while personal storytelling is effective in persuading people to change their own behavior—to wear sunscreen, for example—it is not effective in persuading people to support social change. Rather than seeing the person in the story as a victim of the situation he or she describes, and thinking about policies needed to ameliorate that situation, audiences tend to focus on what the person featured in the story might have done differently to avoid the situation (Zhou and Niederdeppe 2017). In the same vein, one of our interviewees complained that poignant personal stories of homelessness sometimes led audiences to want to contribute money to the individual person or family featured in the story—not to the organization combatting homelessness. Another potential problem stemmed from experts' claim for stories' universality. The essentials of telling an effective story, they suggested, were the same whether the audience was a corporate board, a Congressional representative, or the Internet. But that may not be true. For example, where research suggests that

public audiences tend to be turned off by a clear "ask" at the end of a story (Slater and Rouner 2002), policymakers expect the ask (American Association of Family Physicians, n.d.).

One could certainly have assessed these possibilities. Were there ways to tell personal stories that connected to the larger social problem? Was there a way to negotiate the needs of storytellers and the needs of the audience? Were there distinctive requirements of stories told in particular institutional settings or in relation to particular issues? But there was little effort on the part of experts or activists to engage in those kinds of assessment. Nor were there efforts to assess the relative costs and benefits of personal storytelling that was upbeat, emotionally modulated, with familiar characters and dilemmas. Surprisingly, given foundations' usual insistence on measuring initiatives' impact, storytelling seemed to have been exempted from those expectations. It is possible that foundations' enthusiasm for storytelling as a way of publicizing their grantmaking has come to encompass storytelling as a way of measuring the impact of their grantmaking. Alternatively, proponents' claim for stories' natural qualities was enough to warrant their use. This was how the discourse of storytelling turned a political problem into a technical one. The political problem was how to ask people who had already suffered to ask for help from people with money and power, not even for their own benefit, but for the benefit of an abstract cause, and to do so in ways that they might not choose themselves. The expert discourse turned the problem into a technical one by investing a certain way of asking—personal storytelling—with intrinsic properties. If done authentically, storytelling was empowering rather than exploitative. The task of expertise, then, was to show activists how to do it authentically.

Eliding the needs of the audience and those of the group activists represented obscured trade-offs that activists may have wanted to consider explicitly. Doing so might still have led activists to ask storytellers to perform their stories in ways that would appeal to affluent donors or conservative politicians—but also, perhaps, to give storytellers the opportunity to recount their stories exactly as they wanted to an audience of sympathetic supporters (Swerts 2015). Denying the dilemmatic character of personal storytelling in advocacy contexts also discouraged activists from considering other communicative strategies for mobilizing support, such as appealing to principle or shared interests rather than to poignant stories. And it may have discouraged activists from using personal stories in other ways: as a means of building a group agenda, for example, or as a means of political education (Ganz 2011).

In fact, some of our interviewees used stories in just these ways. For example, an organizer said that in their meetings with public officials, a person affected by the issue would tell her story. At the next meeting, that person would take the role of presenting the group's demands. A consultant described eliciting young women's personal stories as a starting point for exploring the structural forces behind their experiences of poverty. Several of the interviewees who articulated these alternative approaches to storytelling had backgrounds in community organizing, but not all of them. We also heard alternative approaches to storytelling from foundation executives and public messaging consultants. This suggests to us that the more familiar discourse of storytelling, the one to which these were alternatives, extends across occupations. Again, the problem lies less in experts than in an expert discourse used by diverse actors.

CONCLUSION

Activists described the strategies they used in storytelling as necessary to treat storytellers with sensitivity and respect. That the strategies may also have made the stories more effective was, as they saw it, a happy coincidence. But we have raised questions, not only about whether the stories were in fact more effective, but also about whether there may have been unrecognized costs to the contemporary discourse of storytelling. By defining what audiences wanted, that discourse made it less important to assess how effective stories actually were. And by defining what storytellers needed, it put experts in the position of coaching tellers, not only to tell their stories in the appropriate way, but also to accept the idea that they had more control of stories—

that the stories were more *theirs*—when the stories were about hope rather than pain, about experiences that audiences also had rather than experiences that were different, and when suffering was hinted at rather than fully expressed.

It is perhaps ironic that public messaging experts have staked their authority on their capacity to produce "authentic" stories. We tend not to think of authenticity as something that is expertly engineered, sometimes for a fee. As recent scholarship has shown, however, there are many people in the business of producing authenticity; from the owners of blues clubs (Grazian 2005) and gourmet food writers (Johnston and Baumann 2007) to sex workers (Bernstein 2007) and religious leaders (Banet-Weiser 2012). Emphasizing authenticity in movement messages is probably shrewd given popular public images of movements as properly spontaneous, grassroots, and driven by passion (Walker and Stepick 2019).

Experts in public communication, like those in lobbying, canvassing, fundraising, and the other tasks necessary to contemporary professionalized activism, are usually supportive of the cause. The danger for movements does not lie in the fact that experts' commitment to the movement is undermined by their competing commitments to their job, to the obligations of their profession, or to the conservative demands of funders. These are the kinds of dangers traditionally associated with movement professionalization but they are less relevant to movement organizations that are already professionalized. For movements, the danger of relying on outside expertise is that it obscures important political decisions movement organizations have to make. Instead, it turns political problems into technical ones, solvable by way of the expertise at hand. Especially when experts and expertise serve multiple kinds of nonprofits, and sometimes for-profits as well, it may be difficult to recognize the dilemmas that are characteristic of movement organizations alone. Failing to recognize such dilemmas, in turn, may lead activists to miss the trade-offs they are making in pursuing particular lines of action.

For movement scholars interested in these dynamics, the analytic tasks are to: (1) identify a standard way of talking within a movement field about a strategy or approach to a movement task, such as lobbying, fundraising, recruiting, working with the media, and so on; (2) trace the sources of the discourse; (3) zero in on how the discourse defines the problem to which it offers a solution, along with how it constitutes (a) the subjects of the strategy or tactic, and (b) the criteria for assessing the strategy or tactic; (4) ask whether these definitions of subjects, and subjects' needs and capacities, work to obscure trade-offs involved in the use of the strategy. That this may happen is by no means inevitable, but it is worth paying attention to—and for activists, guarding against.

NOTES

[1] Foucault treats discourses as characteristic of an era. Thus, in the modern era, discourses are the product of disciplines: "apparatuses of knowledge" that produce new ways of knowing and new forms of power (Foucault 1980). However, scholars have also treated discourses as more local in time and place and as defining expertise in specific institutional areas (Power 2011).

[2] Many nonprofits include activism or advocacy among their purposes, but advocacy is not commonly their central purpose (Salomon 2012). Our focus here is on nonprofits whose central mission is advocacy or activism, which we also call social movement organizations. We recognize, though, along with Andrews and Edwards (2004) that the lines between advocacy organizations, interest groups, and nonprofits are blurry, and reflect as much disciplinary divides as they do differences in purpose, method, or form.

[3] See, for example, Georgetown University's Certificate in Social Impact Storytelling (https://scs.georgetown.edu/programs/480/certificate-in-social-impact-storytelling/?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=Search&utm_campaign=FY19_Search_PC_Storytelling&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI3KPmlM2A5AIVF4zICh3jfgp-EAAYASAAEgJyuvD_BwE). Also, see the Uiversity of Washington's Certificate in Storytelling and Content Strategy (https://www.pce.uw.edu/certificates/storytelling-and-content-strategy): and The Graduate Institute's Applied Storytelling Certificate (https://www.learn.edu/applied-storytelling-certificate). The conferences in 2018 alone include the Future of Storytelling Summit (https://futureofstorytelling.org/), the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference (https://nonprofitstorytellingconference.com/), and the National Storytelling Summit (https://storynet.org/nsnevents/conference/).

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