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"It Was Like A Fever . . ."
Narrative and Identity in Social Protest*

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Although the 1960 student sit-ins were not nearly as uncoordinated as contemporaneous and subsequent accounts suggested, their repeated characterization in participants' accounts as "spontaneous" merits explanation. Analysis of campus newspaper articles and letters to the editor, speeches, and organizational and personal correspondence shows the emergence of a coherent and compelling narrative of the sit-ins, in which spontaneity denoted not a lack of prior coordination but independence from adult leadership, urgency, local initiative, and action by moral imperative rather than bureaucratic planning. Narratives of the sit-ins, told by many tellers, in more and less public settings, and in which spontaneity was a central theme, helped to constitute "student activist" as a new collective identity and to make high risk activism attractive. It was the storied character of representations of the sit-ins that compelled participation. This case suggests the more general importance of narrative—as distinct from collective action "frames"—in accounting for mobilization that takes place before the consolidation of movement organizations.

On February 1 1960, four Black students sat-in at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina and touched off a wave of similar demonstrations around the South. Two months later, Harvard graduate student Michael Walzer returned from a tour of Southern colleges to report that "every student" he met had given the same account of the first day of protest on his or her campus. "'It was like a fever. Everyone wanted to go'" (Walzer 1960a:111).

Metaphors of wildfire, fever, and contagion were common in early accounts of the sit-ins. The *New Republic* reported in April 1960: "No outside organization masterminded the recent uprisings. . . . In almost every instance, they were planned and carried out by students, without outside advice or even contact between schools except by way of press and radio news" (Fuller 1960:13). The *Nation* in May: "Up to this point, the student demonstrations have been spontaneous." *Harper's* (Wakefield 1960:404) in June quoted an NAACP branch president: "How can I correlate anything when I don't know where and when it's going to happen" (Lomax 1960:47). Paul Wehr (1960), one of the first academic observers of the sit-ins, was surprised by the "absence of any effective liaison" among sit-in groups on eight campuses (quoted in Oberschall 1989:35). Martin Oppenheimer, in another early study, dismissed prior organizational links as explanation for the spread of the sit-ins, arguing that "the sit-ins caught on in the manner of a grass fire, moving from the center outward" (1989:40; see also Carson 1981; Matthews and Prothro 1966; Piven and Cloward 1977; Zinn 1964). A grass fire indeed: by the end of February, demonstrations had spread to thirty cities in seven states; by the end of March to fifty-four cities in nine states. By mid-April, fifty thousand people had taken part in the sit-ins (Carson 1981; Chafe 1980).

Twenty years later Aldon Morris persuasively challenged the alleged spontaneity of the student sit-ins. As part of a broader assault on sociologists' neglect of the activist traditions and

networks that precede social protest, Morris revealed that the Greensboro sit-inners were members of an NAACP Youth Council and had close ties with people who had conducted sit-ins in Durham in the late 1950s. Their discussions of nonviolence and direct action were pursued in an organizational context of skilled strategists. After the sit-in began, a network of ministers, NAACP officials, and other activists swung into action, contacting colleagues to spread the news, training students in sit-in techniques, and persuading adults to support the protests. The church was the linchpin of student activism, Morris argued, supplying leaders and guidance, training and inspiration. "To understand the sit-in movement, one must abandon the assumption that it was a college phenomenon. . . . The sit-ins spread across the South in a short period because [adult] activists, working through local movement centers, planned, coordinated, and sustained them," he concluded (1984:200, 202).

Subsequent chroniclers have taken Morris's lead in detailing the extensive adult networks that preceded the sit-ins (Blumberg 1984; Chafe 1980; Powledge 1991). Why then did Walzer's interviewees say they had been "like a fever"? Why, in interviews with reporters, statements to Congress, letters to friends, articles and editorials in campus newspapers and in the *Student Voice*—organ of the brand new Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—did sit-inners describe the protests as sudden, impulsive, and unplanned? Certainly, there were good strategic reasons for conveying that image to the American public. Spontaneity deflected charges of communist influence, and were likelier to garner public support for a "homegrown" protest. But students also referred to the spontaneity of the sit-ins in less public statements, in articles and letters in campus newspapers, and in communications with each other. One would imagine that the chief aim in these communications would be to make sense of unfolding events and to inspire and mobilize fellow students. Why then emphasize the *absence* of planning, represent the sit-ins as driven not by concerted student action, but by a zeitgeist over which students had no control? Would not the latter undermine the sense of collective efficacy essential to successful mobilization (Benford 1993a; Gamson 1992, 1995; Klandermans 1988, 1997; McAdam 1982; Piven and Cloward 1979)?

My examination of students' descriptions of the sit-ins as they were occurring suggests that "spontaneous" did not mean "unplanned." In the stories that students told and retold about the sit-ins, spontaneity denoted independence from adult leadership, urgency, local initiative, and action by moral imperative rather than bureaucratic planning. Narratives of the sit-ins, told by many tellers, in more and less public settings, and in which spontaneity was a central theme, described student activists and potential activists to themselves and, in the process, helped to create the collective identity on behalf of which students took high-risk action. Sit-in stories—and their narrative form was crucial—also motivated action by their *failure* to specify the mechanics of mobilization. Their *ambiguity* about agents and agency, not their clarity, successfully engaged listeners.

The analysis that I present here draws on cognitive psychology and literary theory as well as the sociology of social movements to respond more broadly to two lacunae in theories of collective action "framing." Framing has been defined as how "social movement organizations and their agents . . . 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 1988:198; see also Benford 1993a, b; Gamson 1988; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1994). As such, it has been limited to the persuasive efforts of already established movement organizations. This neglects the discursive processes that precede the formation of movement organizations or that take place outside their auspices. We still know little about how the interpretive processes occurring in oppositional subcultures and indigenous institutions, and occurring *during* initial episodes of collective action (strikes, marches, occupations, etc.) yield movement identities on behalf of which people are willing to sacrifice their personal welfare (Klandermans 1988, 1992; Oberschall 1989; but see Hirsch 1990; Steinberg 1996; Taylor and Whittier 1992).

I argue that narrative is prominent in such interpretive processes because its temporally con-figurative capacity equips it to integrate past, present, and future events and to align individual and collective identities during periods of change. Narrative's reliance on emplotment rather than explanation further engages potential activists precisely by its *ambiguity* about the causes of collective action. These features distinguish narratives from frames, which are said to contribute to identity-formation through taxonomic atemporal and discursive processes of analogy and difference. Frames' mobilizing capacity, moreover, is allegedly dependent on clear, not ambiguous, specification of the agents, intentions, and efficacy of protest. My purpose in this article is thus to show how narrative identification supplies powerful incentives to participate.

To make my case, I draw on accounts of the sit-ins that appeared in: articles, editorials, and letters to the editor culled from eight campus newspapers;[1] articles, letters, and personal narratives published in the *Student Voice*, a monthly that began publication in May 1960, and newsletters, speeches, personal correspondence, and memos circulated among sit-in leaders and participants beginning in February 1960 that were deposited in SNCC's extensive files (which contain more than 93,000 pages of documents). Materials included communications to small audiences as well as large ones, to friends and family as well as strangers, and to fellow activists as well as funders, the media, and government. Together, these data help to counter the instrumentalist and organizational biases of recent social movement theorizing by eluci-dating the social-psychological and discursive processes involved in recruitment that takes place outside of formal organizations.

In the rest of the paper, I will more fully distinguish the concept of "narrative" from that of "frame," make several propositions about the mobilizing role of narratives in conditions of "loose structure" (Oberschall 1989), and then turn to an analysis of students' accounts of the sit-ins.

Frames, Plots, and Protest

Mancur Olson's (1965) identification of the "free rider" problem set the challenge for sociologists of collective action. Under what circumstances will people overcome their rational reluctance to participate? When and why do their cost-benefit calculations tip in favor of participation in spite of the fact that they will lose little from non-participation?

Concepts of "frames" and "framing" have proved useful in answering these questions. Frames are "interpretive schemata that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (Snow and Benford 1992:137; Snow et al. 1986:464; see also Tarrow 1994; Zald 1996). Frames combine a *diagnosis* of the social condition in need of remedy, a *prognosis* for how to do that, and a *rationale* for action (Benford and Hunt 1992; Snow and Benford 1988). Gamson (1992, 1995) identifies injustice, identity, and agency components of frames. The injustice component refers to the cognition that a situation is wrong and that it is political rather than merely personal, or "situational" rather than "individual" (Klandermans 1988:179). The agency component denotes a sense of collective efficacy, a belief that the situation is not immutable and that "we" can change it. The identity component refers to this "we," and to the "they"—human antagonists rather than impersonal forces like hunger or poverty—against which collective action must be mobilized."[2] Other theorists emphasize discursive processes of "association and disassociation"

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1. In twelve other campus periodicals examined by me or by college archivists, there was no mention of the student demonstrations in 1960 or 1961, this despite the fact that students from those institutions had been involved in sit-ins. One former student at Lincoln University remembers the administration prohibiting coverage of the sit-ins in the campus newspaper (interview with Elizabeth Wilson by Linda Catalano, September 29, 1997).

2. Gamson suggests that although the identity of the "they" in an adversarial ("us and they") frame may be elusive ("In the pursuit of cultural change, the target is often diffused throughout the whole civil society and the they being pursued is structurally elusive" [1992:85]), the "we" must be clearly specified ("In sum, frames with a clear we and an elusive they are quite capable of being fully collective and adversarial" [85]).

(Hunt and Benford 1994), "typification" (Benford and Hunt 1992), "comparison" (Klandermans 1988, 1997:18), and "categorizing and labeling" (Klandermans 1992:83) in developing the collective identities on behalf of which people participate.

What makes for successful frames? At a minimum, say McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, "people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem" (1996:5). Snow and Benford argue that the diagnosis, prognosis, and rationale for action provided by frames must be "richly developed and interconnected" (1988:199), empirically credible, and congruent with potential adherents' beliefs and broad cultural understandings (see also Gamson 1988). Successful frames connect information and experiences in new ways, or in ways never before "clearly articulated" (Snow and Benford 1992:138). They foster "a sense of severity, urgency, efficacy and propriety" (Benford 1993a:209), supply a "clearly interpretable" rationale for participation, and discourage "fatalism" (Snow and Benford 1988:203). They convince people "that they have the power to change their condition. Such a conviction presupposes the presence of agents that impress people as politically efficacious, by virtue of either their success in the past or their potential efficacy" (Klandermans 1997:18). In each of these accounts, then, frames motivate participation by persuasively distinguishing insurgents ("us") from antagonists and irrelevant others ("them"), and by clearly representing the possibility, necessity, and efficacy of collective action by deliberate actors.

Recently, framing theorists have included narratives—stories, tales, anecdotes, allegories—in their discussions of framing (Benford 1993a; Fine 1995; Hunt and Benford 1994).[3] Narrative is treated as a discursive form through which frames are "expressed and made concrete" (Fine 1995:134), and "exemplified" (Benford 1993a:196). However, subsuming "narrative," under the broader category of "frame" obscures distinctive features of narrative. Indeed, an analysis of movement narratives, understood as chronicles invested with moral meaning through emplotment (White 1980), can fill some significant gaps in recent framing analyses.

First, narratives' configuration of events over time makes them important to the construction and maintenance of individual and collective identities. This temporal dimension of identity has been underemphasized by theories of framing which, again, represent identities as developed through discursive processes of analogy and difference.[4] Narrative understandings of identity, by contrast, emphasize the structuring of events into evolving wholes. Life events are "rendered intelligible" say Gergen and Gergen, "by locating them in a sequence or 'unfolding process'" (1997:162; see also Ricoeur 1984). Narratives not only make sense of the past and present but, since the story's chronological end is also its end in the sense of moral, purpose or telos, they project a future. This is the basis for self-identity and action. We act not after the kind of categorization that frames imply (in Polkinghorne's [1988] example, "I am 40 years old; I should buy life insurance"), but by locating events within an unfolding life-story ("I felt out of breath last week, I really should start thinking about life insurance").

These features point to narratives' role in the development of collective as well as individ-

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3. Interest in narrative in sociology, anthropology, political science, history, psychology, and law is burgeoning. For an extensive bibliography of work on narrative in the social sciences see Hinchman and Hinchman (1997). For sophisticated treatments in sociology see the essays collected in a special issue of Social Science History, Vol. 16, no. 3 (1992), as well as Somers (1994); and Polkinghorne (1988). There is also renewed interest in narrative as a mode of presentation as well as object of investigation. See the Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) bibliography, Polkinghorne (1988), and for an interesting critique, Tilly (1998).

4. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, Hunt and Benford (1994; see also Benford and Hunt 1992) argue that frames configure identities in dramatic form. Listeners/readers are encouraged to see themselves in the role of hero, to see movement antagonists as villains. This would seem to suggest the narrative configuration that I'm describing. However, as Polkinghorne points out, "To play a social role is not the same as configuring one's life into a plot that is one's personal identity." Distinguishing a narrative perspective from a Goffmanian dramaturgical one, Polkinghorne argues that roles rather "take on meaning from the perspective of the single adventure that is one person, as defined by the life plot" (1988:153).

ual identities. In telling the story of our becoming—as an individual, a nation, a people—we establish who we are. Narratives may be employed strategically to strengthen a collective identity but they also may precede and make possible the development of a coherent community, or nation, or collective actor (Carr 1997; Ginsburg 1989; Hart 1992; Sewell 1992; Somers 1992, 1994). They may be especially important during periods of ongoing or potential social transformation. Narratives retain continuity in change, preserve the self or collectivity through change (as in cases of serious illness [Williams 1997], recovery [Denzin 1987], and politicization [Ginsburg 1989]). They connect through narrative reversal the group under conditions of oppression and the group under conditions of liberation. Stories thus explain what is going on in a way that makes an evolving identity part of the explanation.

A second difference between narratives and frames centers more specifically on how events are linked to outcomes in each one. What makes a frame successful, say Gamson (1988, 1992), Snow and Benford (1988, 1992), and Klandermans (1997), is clear specification not only of the injustice against which protest must be mounted but the agents and likely efficacy of that protest. People must be shown that deliberate action will have its intended effect. But individual intention is just one among the principles that may link events in a story. The question in a story is often just what the linkage is: are things happening because of chance or divine intervention, conscious intention or subliminal drive? This is what grips us, what keeps us listening or reading. A story whose end was immediately apparent would be no story at all—would be the moral without the story. Narratives which "underspecify" (Leitch 1986) risk unintelligibility; those which overspecify risk the loss of narrativity, of readers' or hearers' engagement with the text. Wolfgang Iser writes that, "It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism" (1972:285; see also Bruner 1986). Narrative necessitates our interpretive participation, requires that we struggle to fill the gaps and resolve the ambiguities. We struggle because the story's end is consequential—not only as the outcome but as the moral of the events which precede it.

Literary critic J. Hillis Miller argues that even the story's conclusion may not resolve the ambiguity—another reason for narrative's hold. Along with plot and personification, all narratives are characterized by repetition of a "complex word," Miller argues, a word with multiple, indeed incongruous, meanings, as "right" may mean to have the right, to be right, or to be straight (as in "right angle"). Each of those meanings may or may not be simultaneously operative in the same story; this indeterminacy is both what compels our attention and calls for more stories. "[W]e always need more stories because in some way they do not satisfy," Miller suggests (1990:72). I will expand on the argument later. For now, my point is that the difficulty of logically explaining some events (because they are unfamiliar or defy conventional rationales for action)[5] may compel a narrative explanation, which in turn preserves the ambiguity that calls for more stories.

To illustrate, let me turn to the "Hundredth Monkey Story" which, according to Benford (1993a), demonstrates the importance of severity, urgency, propriety, and efficacy components of frames. The book, which became a powerfully persuasive tool for the American antinuclear movement, opens with an allegory:

> The Japanese monkey, Macaca fuscata, has been observed in the wild for a period of over 30 years. In 1952, on the island of Koshima, scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes, but they found the dirt unpleasant. An 18-month-old female named Imo found she could solve the problem

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5. Psychologist A. E. Michotte (1963) found that when presented with small colored rectangles moving on a screen, viewers constructed elaborate narrative plots: " 'It is as if A's approach frightened B and B ran away.' 'It is as if A, in touching B induced an electric current which set B going.' 'The arrival of A by the side of B acts as a sort of signal to B. . . .' 'It is as if A touched off a mechanism inside B and thus set it going' " (quoted in Sarbin 1986:13). Observers often laughed at the rectangles' movements. The experiment suggests our proclivity to turn to narrative to make phenomena intelligible.

by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates also learned this new way and they taught their mothers too.

This cultural innovation was gradually picked up by various monkeys before the eyes of the scientists. Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable. . . . [sic]

Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes—the exact number is not known. Let us suppose that when the sun rose one morning there were 99 monkeys on Koshima Island who had learned to wash their sweet potatoes. Let's further suppose that later that morning, the hundredth monkey learned to wash potatoes. THEN IT HAPPENED!

By that evening almost everyone in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them. The added energy of this hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough!

But notice. The most surprising thing observed by the scientists was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then spontaneously jumped over the sea—Colonies of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakiyama began washing their sweet potatoes!

Thus, when a certain critical number achieves an awareness, this new awareness may be communicated from mind to mind. . . . You may furnish the added consciousness energy [sic] to create the shared awareness of the urgent necessity to rapidly achieve a nuclear free world. (quoted in Benford 1993a:196)

Benford argues that the story promotes efficacy by demonstrating "the power of the new awareness and your role in the unfolding drama" (196). Yet the story's demonstration of the power of conscious individual action is not at all clear. "THEN IT HAPPENED," the story goes, but it is not clear just *what* happened, nor why all the Koshima monkeys and monkeys in distant tribes suddenly, "spontaneously," began washing potatoes. How did monkeys that were not in contact with the original tribe learn the practice? The story raises more questions than it answers, indeed, seems to attribute the spread of the practice to some force beyond rational control. Contrary, then, to Benford's contention that a successful frame specifies agents and agency, it seems that this story was successful precisely by its failure to supply a logical explanation for action. It promises to explain the link between action and outcome but then simply places us, the reader/listener, at the victorious end. Penetrating the mystery of collective action requires more stories, and indeed, requires not only stories, but that we ourselves act.

Of course, self- and collective narratives are *social* narratives, created not solipsistically but from the wider narratives at hand (Somers [1994] similarly distinguishes between "ontological" and "public" narratives). We can as little imagine a nineteenth century thief narrating his life in terms of a lack of self-esteem as we can imagine him lodging that defense in a court of law. This points to a third critical difference between narratives and frames. To be effective, say framing theorists, frames must resonate with extant "ideology, values, belief systems" (Gamson 1988:220). But since "every coin has two sides; every argument has its opposite arguments" (Klandermans 1992:84), there is still plenty of room for ideological maneuver. Framing theorists thus emphasize the multiplicity of coexisting, often contradictory value positions that can be mobilized by activists. By contrast, narrative's dependence on a limited stock of culturally resonant plots—on a canon—emphasizes the *constraints* levied by dominant cultural understandings. Narrative theorists differ on just how many plots there are, and just how universal they are. But there is agreement that stories not conforming to a cultural stock of plots typically are either not stories or are unintelligible. Activists' very understandings of "strategy," "interest," "identity," and "politics" may be structured by the oppositions and hierarchies that come from familiar stories. Thus, if part of the power of mobilizing narratives lies in their polyvalence of meaning, oppositional meanings must always contend with more conventional ones. In the case of the student sit-in narrative, I will show how the anchoring theme of "spontaneity" both galvanized action and weighted subsequent strategic options unequally. Spontaneous protest—sitting-in—was represented as moral, urgent, and radical (contrary to the amoral, gradualist, and moderate protest of adult activists). But it was also characterized, by implication, as *non*-political and *non*-strategic.

Mobilizing Identities in Fledgling Movements

Narratives' capacity to make sense of unfamiliar events, to engage as they explain, and to sustain identity during periods of rapid change suggests that they would be especially prominent in movement discourse that develops before movement organizations have been consolidated or that occurs outside their auspices. This phase of protest remains generally understudied. Indeed, says Oberschall, analysts have tended to project the aims of the formally organized phase of the movement backward to explain its beginnings. So, for example, "they write about a civil rights movement when there was yet only sporadic and disjointed challenge to segregation. . . . Black leaders and participants in the 1960 sit-ins were not yet conscious of forming a civil rights movement nor creating one according to some well thought-out master plan" (1989:46).

Oberschall's "diffusion model" responds to this bias by describing mechanisms of recruitment in "loose structures," collectivities where there is no prior overarching organization, ideology, or dependable flow of resources. In these circumstances, actors tend to overestimate the likelihood of repression and underestimate the possibility for success. But "[s]uppose that in a similar social milieu protest is initiated by people much like oneself, with whom one shares a common identity, and that the outcome and conflict circumstances become widely known" (41). When widely diffused, for example via media coverage, such perceptions cause people to revise their calculations of success and to participate. Applied to the sit-in movement, this scenario has students learning about the Greensboro protest through friendship networks, basketball leagues, and media coverage, then planning their own campus meetings, and rallying their fellow students to demonstrate. Against political process analyses, Oberschall argues that church networks and movement organizations such as the NAACP, SCLC, and CORE responded to the sit-ins and helped to sustain them, but did not initiate them.

Oberschall's model is persuasive but it leaves underspecified several key mechanisms. How is it that protesters elsewhere come to be seen as "much like oneself," and worthy in their efforts? How does a common identity come to be shared and to compel participation? Are perceptions that retaliation and repression are less severe than originally thought enough to explain activism that is still physically demanding and dangerous? Friedman and McAdam (1992) provide answers to these questions by emphasizing the normative dimension of participation. Highly regarded roles within communities may come to be linked with activism in a way that makes participation a requirement of the role. In the early part of the civil rights movement, activism was linked with—normatively required of—churchgoers; in 1960, *student* became linked to activist, became a "prized social identity" that supplied the selective incentives to participation.

Contemporaneous and retrospective accounts suggest that in 1960 activism did become normative for Black college students. As Tallahassee sit-in leader Charles Smith put it: "a spirit of competition has found its way into the civil rights arena, and no college or university wants to be left behind or be found wanting in this kind of courage or conviction" (Killian 1984:781). In his survey of sit-inners on eight college campuses shortly after the wave of sit-ins began, Wehr (1960) found that "one common response to the question 'Why did the movement start at your school?' was 'we wanted to jump into the movement before [another school]" (quoted in Oberschall 1989:35). Laue noted similarly that:

> [T]he response of Negro students to Greensboro was almost always phrased in terms of "keeping up" with the other students. "When students came to me to talk about their protest plans," recalls Tuskegee Dean Charles Gomillion, "I asked them, 'Where are you going to sit-in here?' [in predominantly rural Macon County, Alabama.] 'We *have* to go,' they said. 'What will other colleges think of us if we don't?'" (1989:82)

Friedman and McAdam's claim that student and activist identities had become normatively fused is persuasive but their explanation for it is unclear. "In the first stage, the emerging movement grows out of but remains dependent upon preexisting institutions and organiza-

tions . . . *established groups* redefine group membership to include commitment to the move-
ment as one of its obligations" (1992:162–163, emphasis mine). If they mean that Southern
college officials deliberately promoted an activist identity, such an assertion is belied by the
evidence.[6] According to Orbell (1972), most student sit-inners experienced their college
administrations and faculties as unsupportive of the sit-ins (46% of sit-inners enrolled at pri-
vate colleges reported support from both administration and faculty; 50% of state college
demonstrators reported that faculty was supportive of their efforts, but only 15% reported
that administrations were). By the end of the 1960 spring term, over a hundred students had
been expelled from Black colleges for their participation (Laue 1989:77).[7] My own examina-
tion of campus newspapers showed that many made no mention of sit-ins in which their own
students were participating; archivists attributed this lacuna to the conservatism of campus
administrations.

If Friedman and McAdam mean instead that the equation of student and activist was
effected by students themselves through informal framing processes that were as much about
making sense of current developments and trends as they were about persuading people to
mobilize, then we need a better understanding of those processes. To account for the emer-
gence of a mobilizing identity on Black college campuses, and the development of such identi-
ties more broadly, we need to examine not only the instrumental framing efforts of
indigenous and formal movement organizations but also: (a) the larger social and cultural
context in which an idiom of student activism made sense (cf. Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994);
and, (b) the diffuse, noninstitutionalized discursive processes by which people's efforts to
make sense of initial protests turned into a rationale for participation.

With respect to the first, Black college students in 1960 could not but be affected by the
association of student and activist that was occurring on a world historical stage. "There was a
feeling that it was the 'dawn of a new era,'" SNCC founder and advisor Ella Baker recalled,
"that something new and great was happening and that only [students] could chart the course
of history" (see also Flacks 1971).[8] The sit-ins came at a time when students were playing visi-
ble and dramatic roles in regime changes around the world: they had toppled military regimes
in Turkey and South Korea, and had blocked President Eisenhower's visit to Japan (partici-
pants at the 1960 National Student Association conference heard from student movement
representatives from all three countries).[9] It was not only students, but *Black* students who
were the change makers. "Sure we identified with the Blacks in Africa," Nashville sit-in leader
John Lewis said later, "and we were thrilled by what was going on. Here were Black people,
talking of freedom and liberation and independence, thousands of miles away. We could
hardly miss the lesson for ourselves" (quoted in Viorst 1979:116). African students studying at
Black colleges participated in the Nashville sit-ins, Lewis recalls. Representatives of the Repub-
lic of Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and other nations visited Black college campuses in 1959 and
1960, and Black campus newspapers devoted considerable coverage to events in Africa during
this period. "Today, the dark people on the other side of the earth are protesting and dying for

6. Johnston, Larana and Gusfield (1994) thus paraphrase and criticize Friedman and McAdam: "there are leaders,
committees, or cabals that plot the best collective identity for a movement, much like marketing executives strategize
the best way to present a product. It is a "top down" approach to collective identity that seems to be more useful . . .
when SMOs are established and likely to be thinking in these strategic terms. At earlier stages, however . . . it makes
sense that a more "bottom up" approach is, if not the entire answer, then at least deserving of a place in the theoretical
equation" (1994:18).

7. SNCC reported that near 200 students had been expelled during that period ("from you know who . . ." NA,
ND [July 1960], SNCC microfilm reel 1 #291). Michael Walzer (1960b) wrote that the sit-ins had galvanized a surge of
church-based adult movement organizations. But "the students, for the most part, do not attend the weekly meetings in
the churches. Embarrassing moments often follow suggestions that students present rise and be applauded. They turn
out to have stayed on campus for a meeting of their own."

8. Ella Baker interview in Stoper 1989.

9. "Theopolis Fair, John Baker, Jerry Byrd, Henrietta Eppse Represent Fisk," *Fisk Forum*, September 30, 1960.

their freedom," a Howard University student noted in calling for student activism in early 1960. "All over the world a new generation of leadership is emerging," wrote a Fisk student. And another, "We realize that students can play an important role in the development and redevelopment of society."[10]

Students at Black colleges were thus exposed to students as change-makers through their direct contacts with international student activists, through national media accounts, and through their own campus press. At the same time, campus newspapers in 1959 and early 1960 referred frequently to the problems of student "apathy," and editorials chastised students for their lack of political and intellectual engagement: "The majority of our students are now apathetic toward student government;" "General student apathy towards affairs pertaining to them—political, social or otherwise—is a 'campus disease' badly in need of therapy;" "Throughout American education there is a growing concern for what has been labeled by some 'student apathy.'" The "beatniks" were discussed critically in several editorials, and their repudiation of middle-class conventionality was attributed to a pervasive normlessness. The cultural media to which students were most directly exposed thus offered and evaluated two modes of being a student, with the revolutionary aspirations of the international students lauded and the deviance of the beats condemned.[11]

The dynamic involved in the "fusion of prized role and activism" that Friedman and McAdam (1992) describe seems to have been less an established organization pitching a role than students perceiving it on a world historical stage. But how did a collective identity of student activist come to be associated with a particular set of expected *behaviors*? Even after news spread of the Greensboro protest, one can imagine "student activism" meaning rallying financial and moral support for the sit-inners, or organizing campus discussions about race relations or about the upcoming Presidential election. How and why did "student activist" come to mean "putting one's body on the line," participating directly in nonviolent desegregation efforts?

The equation of student and sit-inner on a wide scale was in part the result of strategic framing efforts by representatives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the campus coordinating group formed when SCLC activist Ella Baker convened 200 sit-in leaders to discuss strategy in April 1960. In the following, I describe SNCC representatives' efforts to legitimate and promote participation. But SNCC was given only a modest role by campus groups who were insistent on maintaining autonomy. And characteristic of a loose structure, SNCC's voice was only one of many. In the weeks and months after the Greensboro sit-ins, spokespeople for the fledgling movement were legion: sit-in leaders and rank and file, participants and supporters, Northerners and Southerners told stories of the sit-ins in letters to the editor of the *Student Voice* and to SNCC, letters to the editors of Black campus newspapers and letters among members of student groups such as the National Student Association, the YMCA, and YWCA. These stories, along with movement organizations' strategic framing efforts and a consciousness of students' international political role, contributed to the development of mobilizing identities.

10. Joan Burt to the editor, *Hilltop*, May 31, 1960; *Fisk Forum*, October 28, 1960; "Retreat Best in History of School, Declares Dean Green," *Fisk Forum*, September 30, 1960. On African students and representatives at Southern colleges, see transcript of John Lewis interview, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center; "Cameroun's (sic) Foreign Minister Visits Xavier U. Campus," *Xavier Herald* October 1960. SNCC invited the brother of Tom Mboya to be keynote speaker at its first conference, addressing the "relationship of the African freedom movement to our own fight" (Marion S. Barry, Chairman, to Dear Friend, October 10, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #920).

11. "Campus Politics," *Xavier Herald*, January 1960; "Student Sloth," *Xavier Herald*, October 1960; *Fisk Forum*, September 30, 1960; "Like—Being Way Out," *Aurora* (Knoxville College), March 1960. The fact that some of these characterizations appeared when the sit-ins were well under way, and at the same time as some were referring to 1960 as "the year of the student" [*Fisk Forum*, September 30, 1960] suggests that accusations of student apathy continued a powerful challenge.

Stories Versus Frames

Story-tellers had diverse aims: garnering adult support; urging federal intervention; commenting on the larger significance and likely course of the movement; and mobilizing participants. Did they, as framing theorists would suggest, emphasize the injustice of their situation, cast their identity in terms of their differences from clearly specified antagonists, and assert their own capacity to bring about the changes they sought? My examination of students' discussions suggests not. The injustices they described were often vague: denial of "the humane aspects of the American dream;" of "equality and dignity;" "dignity;" the injustice of "a passively immoral society;" not only "the existing conditions, but . . . the snail-like pace at which they are being ameliorated;" and the "accumulated indignities suffered by Negro Americans since Reconstruction days." Sit-inners pitted themselves against "apathy"—a condition that seems more unfortunate than unjust.[12]

Contrary to framing theorists' contention that successful frames make protest's agents and agency clear, in these accounts, students' control over their own actions was ambiguous. The students acted, powerfully, transgressively, with immediate, real consequence. And yet they were simply the carriers of a force beyond them. The sit-ins came from nowhere—"boom"—and were the culmination of "centuries of accumulated anger." Narrators were as likely to deny conscious intent as to assert it (when one group of students launched a demonstration, "[t]his was a surprise (and shock) not only to the whole town but to themselves as well"), to declare themselves followers rather than leaders ("Some great leaders are present today," a student wrote in the Morris Brown College *Wolverine*. "Let us follow them wherever they go"), to predict rather than claim their own activism ("As soon as the movement broke, I knew I would get into it"). "No one started it . . ." a sit-inner insisted—his claim denying collective identity altogether.[13] Students attributed the sit-ins not to conscious, collective intent, but to forces over which they had no control. Rather than planning, they emphasized spontaneity.

Sit-In Narratives

The narrative form of students' representations of the sit-ins is striking. They told stories, and similar stories, over and over again. A piece published in the Shaw College campus newspaper in May 1960 opened:

> It was night time Tuesday, Feb. 9. Radio and television commentators had announced that 'it' was not expected to happen in Raleigh. Wednesday morning, Feb. 10, 10:30—BOOM!—'it' hit with an unawareness that rocked the capital city from its usual sedateness to a state of glaring frenzy.[14]

The same month, from a letter sent by the just-formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to Congressmen:

> The sit-ins began February 1st in Greensboro N.C. when four freshmen at Negro North Carolina A and T sat down at a variety store lunch counter after purchasing several items in other departments of the store. They were refused service. Their action was a spontaneous rebellion against the accumulated indignities suffered by Negro Americans since Reconstruction days. "Why must we be continually under tension and indignity when we want to eat, or find a lodging place, or use a rest room?" they asked. Their action has led others to ask the same question—and to do something about it. Since February, the sit-ins have spread to almost 100 cities in every Southern state.[15]

12. "Sitdown Protest in Pictorial Retrospect," *Shaw Journal*, May 1960; "Justifiable Recalcitrance," *Shaw Journal*, March-April 1960; "The New Freedom," SNCC microfilm reel 4 #108; "An Appeal for Dignity," *Student Voice*, November 1960, reprinted in Carson, 1990: 23; "Call for Unity in Struggle for Freedom," *Hilltop*, March 7, 1960.

13. "A Report on the Student Direct Action Movement at Penn State as of March 31, 1960," SNCC microfilm reel 44 #22; "The Price for Freedom," *Wolverine Observer*, October-November 1960; Jane to Dave, August 14, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #810; "Call for Unity in Struggle for Freedom," *Hilltop*, March 7, 1960.

14. "Drama of the Sitdown," *Shaw Journal*, March-April 1960.

One can imagine other ways of representing the sit-ins. Writers or speakers might have first described the current state and scale of the sit-ins in snapshot rather than chronological form (for example, "there are students currently sitting-in in fifty cities"). They might have begun by questioning or advocating the future course of the demonstrations ("we must build on the sit-in movement to fight for more radical changes," "after the sit-ins, what next?"), or by appealing directly to fellow students' commitment ("your fellow students are putting their lives on the line. Where are you?"). Instead, they recounted events in chronological order from "the beginning," with the moral of the story conveyed by the events themselves. Newspaper accounts are more likely to recount events in narrative form than are speeches or personal letters, and I cite more of the former than the latter. But newspaper stories typically do not display the degree of suspense, moral as well as temporal directionality, and ambiguity around causality that the sit-in narratives did. Interestingly, the very first campus newspaper accounts of the Greensboro sit-in, which appeared in the Agricultural and Technical College *Register*, used much more conventionally journalistic and editorial formats. The difference between these and subsequent accounts suggest that the narrative representation of the sit-ins took some time to develop.[16]

Students' narratives of the sit-ins exhibited each of the elements that Miller (1990) sees as characteristic of the form: plot ("an initial situation, a sequence leading to a change or reversal of that situation, and a revelation made possible by the reversal of the situation" [75]); personification ("a protagonist, an antagonist, and a witness who learns" [75]); and repetition of a complex word. With respect to plot, the sit-ins reversed a situation of student apathy and a movement dominated by adult gradualism; they created a new, student-led, action-oriented movement. The revelations generated by the reversal were multiple. To the country, they showed the level of Black discontent, to mainstream civil rights organizations, they showed the inadequacy of a moderate agenda, to students themselves, they showed the potency of students' collective agency. "Saint Paul College students have been joltingly awakened to the fact that we must do our part as thinking Negro Americans, and take a definite stand in the fight for equal rights," a student writer ended his account. "Because of [the sit-ins] Baltimore will never be the same," another concluded. "When, in the future we look back on the 60's may it be remembered as the years in which the American Youth forced the nation to dedicate itself to turning the American Dream into a Reality."[17]

The successful plot makes the familiar unfamiliar or, as Roman Jakobson puts it, "the ordinary strange" (quoted in Bruner 1991:13). We read because we sense that the story we know will transpire differently on this occasion. The sit-in narrative made the quotidian act of sitting down at a lunch counter and ordering a cup of coffee—what should have been a nonpolitical act—a dangerous and unpredictable epic. In conversations with North Carolinian students, Michael Walzer observed that they "told one story after another about . . . minor but to them terribly important incidents in the buses, in stores, on the job. The stories usually ended with some version of 'I ran out of that store. I almost cried. . .'" (Walzer 1960a). The sit-in narrative thus transformed a too-common story of humiliation into one of triumph. In several accounts, the adventure was funny as well as exciting. Editors of a college newspaper wrote, "Here were two harmless young people sauntering through a store . . . stalking them in true dragnetness were no less than half a dozen police officers, while customers and managers hov-

15. "Newsletter to Congressmen." August 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 1 #291-2.

16. The latter used an explicitly persuasive mode—"you as students can believe me when I tell you this will benefit every one of us who sit at the Woolworth counter"—and emphasized not transformation but continuity: "The waitress ignored us and kept serving the White customers. However, this is no great surprise to me because I have been exposed to segregation at lunch counters for 15 years and the situation is predominately unchanged" (*Register* February 5, 1960).

17. Saint Paul's College (Virginia) *Student Journal*, May 1960; "The Sitdowns Came in 1960, But They Remain for 1961" by George Collins, SNCC microfilm reel 44 #98; Joan Burt to Dear Editor, *Hilltop*, May 31, 1960.

ered in corners as if the invasion from Mars had come!" A Knoxville College writer composed an "Ode To A Lunch Counter:" "Little lunch counter with your many stools/And your nervous pacing manager fools/How do you feel amid this confusion and strife?/Do you object to a change inevitable in life?"[18]

Students who did not participate in the demonstrations constructed narratives in which the sit-ins were a subplot of their own larger story. For example, a White high-school student wrote to sit-inners of his experience in a race relations-themed summer camp:

> And now it is September. For many of us we will return to homes and schools which will irritate us even more after knowing and living what we have learned and what we have lived. But we do seem to agree that we cannot behave quite the way we did before we came to this camp. We have talked so much about what the sit-in movement means to us. It would be almost impossible to know how much it means to you. To us it is an affirmation of so many things. Of the courage of our young people. Of the miracle of spontaneity. Of the faith in people who will do something about what they believe.[19]

Conversations about the sit-ins, about "the miracle of spontaneity" were thus integrated into campers' own story of enlightenment. Swarthmore College editors wrote in the same vein, "Because our minds are knit into a web, the agitation of a few will tremble in all dimensions. Students cannot control, they can only communicate, in a Tokyo snake dance demonstration, a Nashville sit-in, or a chorus behind their printed word."[20]

Personification was a second key feature of the sit-in narrative. The witness role that Miller (1990) refers to was fulfilled by at least four players: the sit-inners themselves who realized their own capacity for transformative action; adult movement leaders; the national public; and potential student activists who would recognize their potential selves in the sit-in story. Dramatis personae expressed a set of appropriate emotions. Sit-inners were "weary" of oppression and the slow pace of change, "tired" of waiting for the "American dream to materialize." They were "apprehensive" about the repercussions of their actions, plagued by "butterflies." Yet, they were "all so very happy that we were (and are) able to do this to help our city, state and nation," and "maintain[ed] high enthusiasm." None of the stories represented the sit-inners as angry, cynical, or calculating. SNCC's Jane Stembridge wrote to a sit-inner that she had "read and re-read" his story "with the deepest pain, joy, laughter, and chills. . . . You have written a story of Life," she observed. "We can write fact after fact about the movement, and never touch the real elements."[21] Narrative made "real" the movement in a way that non-narrative "facts" could not.

Miller's (1990) third narrative feature, repetition of a complex word, occurs in the repeated reference to the spontaneity of the sit-ins. Again, in these communications aimed at mobilizing fellow students as well as understanding what had happened, why would students draw attention to—indeed, celebrate—the unplanned character of the protest? There were good strategic reasons for representing the sit-ins that way. Spontaneity offered some defense against charges that the demonstrations were led by "outside agitators"—read, communists. The students' image as eager, impatient, and fearless also may have allayed potential financial supporters' fears of communist inspiration, and gave older leaders a valuable bargaining chip in their threat of disruption.[22] But an exclusively instrumental account is belied by the fact

18. "Column from Cambridge Correspondent." SNCC microfilm reel 62 #130 (ellipses in original); "Ode to Lunch Counter" by Robert Booker, *Aurora*, June 1960.

19. Sidney Simon to Dear Friend, September 8, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #1230.

20. *Albatross* (Swarthmore College).

21. Marion S. Barry to Congressman Byron L. Johnson, August 22, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 1 #285; "Sitdown Protest in Pictorial Retrospect," *Shaw Journal*, May 1960; Edward King to Dear Friend, September 12, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #920; NT, Henry Thomas report, ND (July 1960), SNCC microfilm reel 5 #170; Fuller, 1960:16; "Civic Interest Group Progress Report," October 13, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #1279; Jane Stembridge to Henry James Thomas, July 20, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 5 #174.

that students represented the sit-ins as spontaneous in communications with each other as well as in more public settings.

It is unlikely that if asked, they would have denied the involvement of specific adults and organizations in helping to plan the sit-ins. Referring to the spontaneity of campus mobilization was not at odds with the existence of planning networks. For example, one group of sit-inners described their action as "the result of spontaneous combustion," then went on to chronicle the planning that had preceded it. They emphasized, however—and this seems to be the point of using the term "spontaneous combustion"—that "there was no organizational tie-in of any kind, either local or national." But they also acknowledged "in order to make the story complete" that members of the sit-organizing group had previously received a "Letter to Christian Students" from the National Student Christian Federation urging them to seek ways to participate.[23] This insistence on spontaneity in spite of evidence and acknowledgment of planning suggests that the term meant something other than that the sit-ins were unplanned. Closer examination of student sit-in narratives suggests three meanings.

First, the sit-ins' spontaneity signaled a decisive break, both with students' prior apathy, and with adults' moderation. Howard University's newspaper, *The Hilltop* ran a story titled "Students Picket in Spontaneous Move" which opened: "A group of 130 Howard students did much recently to destroy the myth of student 'apathy.'" Editors of a new campus journal wrote: "No longer may students be called the 'Silent Generation.' Dissatisfied with a passively immoral society, they are increasingly involved in the world they want to change." "Our impatience with the token efforts of responsible adult leaders, was manifest in the spontaneous protest demonstrations which, after February 1, spread rapidly across the entire South," SNCC's chair Marion Barry told Platform committees at the Democratic and Republican national conventions.[24] The sit-ins were thus represented as signaling the death of an old movement and the birth of a new. Commending the formation of a new Black periodical, SNCC wrote to its editors, "There is no longer a way to rationalize gradualism. It did die on February 1, 1960, in Woolworth's of Greensboro. It will die again and again when every individual rises to his responsibility. . . . We hope for [the continuation of the *Atlanta Inquirer*] and its effectiveness as a death blow to apathy, fear, and gradualism." A piece published in the *Student Voice* referred to the student sit-ins as giving "birth" to a "freedom child." "The Baltimore Sitdowner," read a flyer for that city's movement, "was born on a bitter, cold night in March."[25]

A second prominent theme in the sit-in narrative, one again evoked by the term spontaneity, represented the demonstrations as motivated by a moral imperative rather than a strategic plan, a directive to lay one's body on the line that did not admit of negotiation. "Despite fears, the sit-ins will continue for a long time," one story concluded. "Many more tears will be shed, and perhaps many of my friends will be hurt. They feel that they must go on." A piece in the *Student Voice* opened, "It is really strange—to do things alone. Sometimes we have no alternative," then described student Henry Thomas's frustrated efforts to mobilize students in St. Augustine, Florida. "'I decided to make another try at it," Thomas was quoted. "Still thinking

22. NAACP head Roy Wilkins announced a nationwide economic boycott as the sit-ins spread, explaining, "We have always used persuasion through various means of political and economic pressure, but now we're going to use it much more intensively than in the past because the membership has become restless over the slow pace of the civil rights proceedings" (Bennett 1960). Lewis Killian argues that the need to deflect red-baiting charges led the organizations assisting the sit-inners in Tallahassee, Florida to deny their own involvement (1984:782).

23. "A Report on the Student Direct Action Movement at Penn State as of March 31, 1960," SNCC microfilm reel 44 #22.

24. *Hilltop*, March 7, 1960; "The New Freedom," SNCC microfilm reel 4 #108; "Statement submitted by SNCC to the Platform Committee of the National Democratic Convention," July 7, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 1 #243-248.

25. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to Mr. Bill Strong, July 31, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 1 #207; Bob Moses, "A Freedom Child," ND (July 1960), SNCC microfilm reel 4 #939; "Inside the Sitdowner," ND, SNCC microfilm reel 44 #100.

of the opposition I would have, I decided to carry out my plans regardless if there was no one but me—I did it alone.'" "Hank Thomas road a train South"—now the editor's voice. "He had to do this thing now. People on the train talked, said go slow, said don't try too hard, said no to Henry . . . but the train did not stop till it got home and Hank was on it." The story combined agency and zeitgeist: Hank acted on his own and yet was just a passenger on a freedom train.[26] Seven of the thirteen students interviewed by sociologist James Laue in 1962 attributed the start and spread of the sit-ins to the "tenor of the times," or called them "inevitable." "Your relationship with the movement is just like a love affair," said one. "You can't explain it. All you know is it's something you have to do" (quoted in Laue 1989:62, 78).

Howard University's Lawrence Henry related the story of that campus's sit-ins: "Who started it? No one started it. What united us was the American principle of freedom and equality and the fact that we want to be free." Jane Stembridge told members of the National Student Association, "The fact that the protest broke out overnight and spread with fantastic speed said simply this: the Negro, despite the thoughts of too many Whites, is NOT content. . . . And *nobody* could escape this." For students at Penn State, the sit-ins were "symbolic of a new era in race relations and of a new Negro—one who is unwilling to wait until the sweet by-and-by." "We had been ready to do something like this for a long time;" "We have been planning it all our lives;" "We're living in a jet age and we're tired of moving at an ox-cart pace;" "Sure we've been influenced by outsiders, outsiders like Thoreau and Gandhi. But our biggest influence has been inside—all those years of second-class citizenship;" "We have 'taken it' since the day we were born;" "After 95 years of discussions, delays, postponements, procrastination, denials, and second-class citizenship, the Negro of today wants his full citizenship in his day"—formulations like these peppered the sit-in narratives. Editors of Shaw University's newspaper wrote, "[T]he students say—and it is reasonable to believe them—that they are tired of waiting for the humane aspects of the American dream to materialize."[27]

Students of Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas wrote, "The spirit reached the boiling point at 11:00 a.m., March 10, 1960. It was on this day that the students of Philander Smith College cast their lots into the New Student Movement." On this rendering, protest was an expression of centuries of frustration. SNCC's letter to Congressmen said of the sit-inners: "Their action was a spontaneous rebellion against the accumulated indignities suffered by Negro Americans since Reconstruction days." Third, then, the sit-ins were represented as driven by an imperative over which individuals had no control, as expression of a world historical force. "This situation was inevitable," a speaker told Howard University students. "Negroes are in the process of discovering a new self-image; and they are no longer willing to accept the injustices done to them." The "current wave of demonstrations is the spontaneous ground swell of the profound determination of young Negroes to be first-class citizens" wrote students at Vanderbilt University. From SNCC: "We know now that we must inexorably win the battle against injustice."[28]

Descriptions of the student protest "burst[ing]," "breaking," "exploding," "sweeping," "surging," "unleashed," "rip[ping] through the city like an epidemic," of students "fired" by the "spark of the sit-ins," of "released waves of damned-up energy," of a "chain reaction" were common and suggested again an unstoppable moral impetus. Attacks on desegregated accom-

26. Stephen Henderson "A White Student Sits-In," *Social Progress*, February 1961; Jane Stembridge to Henry Thomas, July 20,1960, SNCC microfilm reel 5 #174; SNCC newsletter entry, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 5 #190.

27. "Call for Unity in Struggle for Freedom," *Hilltop*, March 7, 1960; Speech to NSA by Jane Stembridge, SNCC microfilm reel 44 #1280-1283; "A Report on the Student Direct Action Movement at Penn State as of March 31, 1960," SNCC microfilm reel 44 #22; Fuller 1960:13; Walzer 1960a; Dykeman and Stokely 1960:10, "Justifiable Recalcitrance," *Shaw Journal*, March-April 1960; Letter to the editor, *Aurora*, April 1960; "Sitdown Protest in Pictorial Retrospect," *Shaw Journal*, May 1960.

28. "Up Against the Obstacles." NA, ND, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #980; "Newsletter to Congressmen," August 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 1 #291-2; "Author Says Sit-Ins Were Inevitable," *Hilltop*, April 29, 1960; "This is Important," ND, SNCC microfilm reel 44 #113; Edward B. King to Dear Friend, September 20, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #920.

modations were just one manifestation of a protest that could expand in myriad ways. "It was not the coffee that caused an unbelievable wave of demonstrations to arise spontaneously and, within weeks, to cover the entire South. It was, as the Atlanta students wrote, 'an Appeal for Human rights.'"[29]

If the twentieth century American "standard story" is one in which significant actions occur as consequences of the deliberations and impulses of independent, conscious, and self-motivated actors (Tilly 1998), then students' representations of the sit-ins as spontaneous challenged that rationale for action, along with its connotations of adult gradualism and amoral instrumentalism. Students narratively constructed what was happening in order to make sense of it, but also to signal its significance. In the process, they created a new collective identity of student activist. "The sit-ins," SNCC Chair Charles McDew said in October 1960, "have inspired us to build a new image of ourselves in our own minds" (McDew 1967). That identity supplied the selective incentives that made "high risk activism" (McAdam 1986) attractive.

Narratives of the sit-ins also motivated by their very failure to convey a single meaning. References to the sit-ins' spontaneity simultaneously explained and failed to explain the sit-ins in a way that called for the story's retelling—and reenactment. To clarify, I return to the third feature of Miller's (1990) characterization of narrative. Again, the complex word at the heart of all narratives is not only polyvalent but finally indeterminate, Miller argues; its core meaning is unfixable. The impossibility of a conclusive meaning calls for more stories that recapitulate the dilemma, but differently. All stories both explain and fail to explain, Miller goes on, but the dynamic is clearest in stories of humankind's origins. The point at which man separates himself from beasts is unknowable, since "whatever is chosen as the moment of origination always presupposes some earlier moment when man first appeared" (72). The question cannot be answered logically, and the alternative is a mythical narrative whose illogical premises will nevertheless require that it be retold. Thus Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* depicts a man who both has and has not broken the incest taboo—that which separates humans from all other species—and is punished (punishes himself) for that which he did not know. The enigma is revealed but unresolved; hence the need for more stories—for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*. "What cannot be expressed logically, one is tempted to say, we then tell stories about," Miller concludes (74).

The question of origins is just as unanswerable in the case of social movements. When does protest begin? In this case, did it begin when the first students were arrested? Did it begin with the Montgomery bus boycott? With *Brown v. Board*? Did it begin with the first slave rebellion? With the first song sung, or African tradition preserved, or Christian ritual reinterpreted in what James Scott (1990) calls an "infrapolitics of dissent" stretching back to Africans' enslavement in this country? The question of origins is historical but also personal. When does collective action begin? When can I call myself an activist? The sit-in narrative posed those questions and resolved them in a way that called for their re-asking. The students acted, and yet it was a force that made students act, an impetus that acted through the students.

The word "spontaneity" means both voluntary and instinctual (involuntary)—contradictory meanings contained in the same (complex) word. In the sit-in narratives, spontaneity functioned as a kind of narrative ellipsis in which the movement's "beginning" occurred; "IT HAPPENED," and the non-narratable shift from observer to participant took place. This ellipsis

29. Jane Stembridge to Lillian Lipsen, August 18, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #207; Sample Fund-Raising Letter for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC microfilm reel 3 #785; Bennett 1960:35; "An Appeal for Dignity," *Student Voice*, November 1960, reprinted in Carson 1990:23; "Across the Editor's Desk," *Student Voice*, November 1960, reprinted in Carson 1990:22; *Student Voice*, special supplementary issue, November 1960, reprinted in Carson 1990:20; "Drama of the Sitdown," *Shaw Journal*, March-April 1960; "Students Continue Woolworth Picket," *Hilltop*, April 8, 1960; "Dear Congressmen, from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," August 12, 1960, SNCC microfilm reel 12.

or ambiguity strengthened the engagement of the listener/hearer in one of two ways. Either, following Iser (1972) and Leitch (1986), its underspecification of the mechanisms of participation forced listeners/hearers to fill in the missing links, to become co-authors of the story. Or, following Miller (1990), the story could not establish, could not fix the motivation for participation and so required its retelling. And since the story was a true one, retelling required reenactment of the events already described. Either way, ambiguity was crucial to narrativity, to readers' engagement and identification with the story.

A concept of narrative thus captures the action-compelling character of the discourse around the sit-ins better than does the concept of frames by virtue of narrative's combination of familiarity and undecidability, convention and novelty, and truth (representing reality) and fiction (constituting reality). It was not the sit-in narratives' clarity about the antagonists, protagonists, stakes, and mechanics of struggle that made them so compelling but rather their containment of ambiguity, risk, and mystery within a familiar discursive form.

Institutionalizing Spontaneity

How compelling were the sit-in narratives? In addition to the number of students who joined the sit-ins (70,000 by September 1961 [Oberschall 1989]), the challenges created for SNCC as a fledgling organization by the sit-in narratives suggests their potency. Spontaneity, emblematic of students' independence and their unique contribution to the movement, became organizational commitments which both animated and constrained strategic action. Students called for coordination but were resistant to direction, wanted the movement to speak to the nation but were wary of leaders, wanted to expand the scope of protest but distrusted adult advice. Southern Regional Council official Margaret Long advised SNCC workers on their fundraising activities: "I wonder if it is really true, as this brochure says, that you 'seek to be a coordinating agency.' I see a great deal of uprising and brave and impeccable and successful marches on the Bastille, but I don't see any coordinated movement by you or anybody else. And I don't know that there should be."[30] SNCC leaders apparently took Long's advice, for in funding appeals, newsletters, and speeches, they represented the group as extension of the spontaneity of the sit-ins, and of the values of moral imperative, local autonomy, and radicalism that spontaneity connoted. A narrative of the sit-ins warranted SNCC as a kind of "anti-organization," as observers would later call it, an organization that sought not so much to guide the struggle as to go where people were "moving;" that was less interested in executing a well-planned agenda than in enacting in its own operation the society it envisaged, and that privileged direct and moral action over political maneuvering.[31]

The strength of the sit-in narrative, and its equation of student protest with moral—as opposed to political—action, is also suggested by the internal conflict SNCC faced the following year in moving from direct action (sit-ins and freedom rides) to voter registration. Proponents of voter registration within SNCC were careful to emphasize that "the only group that could do a complete voter registration program southwide was a student group,"[32] thus asserting SNCC's distinctive identity as a *student* organization. But they still met with fierce resistance (Carson 1981; Zinn 1964). Detractors were wary of the federal administration's support for a voter registration campaign and worried about cooptation. They also saw electoral politics as "immoral," and as antithetical to the moral protest that had animated SNCC's activism thus far (Stoper 1989).

An organizational split was averted only through the intervention of advisor Ella Baker, who persuaded the group to form direct action and voter registration wings, an arrangement

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30. Letter to Julian Bond from Margaret Long; Heirich to Jane Stembridge, SNCC microfilm reel 4 #122.
31. *Student Voice*, April and May 1961, reprinted in Carson 1990:2.
32. SNCC Minutes, July 14-16 1961, SNCC microfilm reel 3 #792-5.

abandoned as some direct action proponents left the organization and others shifted to voter registration. SNCC workers were also discovering, as one put it later, that "voter registration *was* direct action" (Charles Jones quoted in Stoper 1989:197). Accompanying Black people to southern courthouses to register provoked the same violence and disruption as had the sit-ins and served equally well to dramatize to the nation the denial of African-Americans' constitutional rights. Marches and demonstrations to protest the harassment of civil rights workers drew new members to local movement organizations; "Freedom Days" where people went to the courthouse en masse built solidarity; and public facilities-testing through direct action did both (Carson 1981; Payne 1995).

Yet SNCC workers never fully integrated direct action with political organizing, a failure evident in field reports that allude to conflicts between residents' desires to test public accommodations and SNCC directives to focus on electoral mobilization.[33] Organizers' commitment to "letting the people decide" the direction and methods of struggle sat uncomfortably with their persistent suspicion of direct action as not properly *political*. In 1963, for example, SNCC workers framed the choice between voter registration and direct action as whether "the emphasis should be political or religious, spontaneous or rigidly political."[34] The formulation is revealing. "Spontaneous" had come to refer to action not oriented to electoral politics, action motivated by religious commitment rather than strategic calculation, and action orchestrated by local groups rather than national committee. Its meaning went far beyond an absence of planning, but remained locked within a set of dualities: spontaneous versus political; political versus moral; moral versus instrumental. Since even proponents of direct action accepted these dualities, they were ill-equipped to challenge direct action's relegation to the sphere of the personally satisfying but politically ineffectual. The problem thus lay in the power of the canonical narrative to shape strategic options. In this movement, like in others, the conventional storyline that has people acting out their moral commitments in emotional and impulsive protest overwhelmed one in which people acted emotionally, morally, *and* in politically instrumental ways.[35]

Conclusion

I have argued that although the sit-ins and the groups they galvanized were not without prior organizational affiliation, their narrative construction as spontaneous was central to an emerging collective identity. The Black students who launched the sit-ins, then kneel-ins, wade-ins, and pray-ins, and who founded SNCC, departed from the existing civil rights organizations not so much in long-term goals (integration), nor even in strategy (nonviolent resistance) as in militancy and organizational form. The sit-ins were represented as a break with the gradualism of prior Black protest forms (spontaneity denoted urgency), a break with the incomplete engagement of adult leaders (spontaneity denoted a moral imperative to act) and a

33. See, for example, Meridian Report, November 23, 1964, SNCC microfilm reel 66 #1259-1230; Field Report: Perry County, Alabama, Jan. 16–25, 1965, SNCC microfilm reel 37 #123; Overall Report, Southwest Georgia, February 1965, SNCC microfilm reel 37 #839b-843.

34. Summary of Selma Workshop, December 13–16, 1963, SNCC microfilm reel 9 #382-389. Among White new leftists, the skepticism was even greater. In 1961, Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society praised SNCC's "new emphasis on the vote" as "signal[ing] the decline of the short-sighted view that 'discrimination' can be isolated from related social problems." "The moral clarity of the movement has not always been accompanied by precise political vision," he went on, "and sometimes not even by a real political consciousness." Another SDS leader concluded in 1962 that, "The focus of action on Negro campuses in the non-violent protest movement has been largely 'non-political.'" (To SDS, From Hayden Re: Race and Politics Conference, ND [1961], SNCC microfilm reel 9 #1142; "For Dixie with Love and Squalor," by Robb Burlage, ND [1962], SNCC microfilm reel 9.)

35. Rosenthal and Schwartz (1989) note that a tendency to associate spontaneity with expressive, even irrational action is common in sociological accounts of collective action.

break with the hierarchy and bureaucracy of existing organizations (spontaneity denoted local initiative). Narratives of the sit-ins helped make normative a physically demanding and dangerous form of activism.

To be sure, representing the surge of student protest as spontaneous defused charges of outside planning by left-wing groups. And tying SNCC to the sit-ins legitimated it as organizational expression of the sit-ins. However, my account suggests that this kind of instrumentalist view is limited. Representations of the sit-ins as spontaneous coincided with rather than followed the establishment of a student protest organization. My account thus builds on Oberschall's (1989) theory of the diffusion of protest by showing how high rates of participation can occur by means other than the formal recruitment strategies of already established movement organizations. But contrary to Oberschall's argument that it is simply information about the reduced costs of participation that leads people to join fledgling movements, I have argued that narratives of the sit-ins, told in formal and informal settings, made participation normative. Rather than simply persuasive devices deployed by strategic collective actors, narratives help to *constitute* new strategic actors. After a formal movement organization was consolidated, the sit-in narratives shaped contests over legitimate strategies within it.

Further examination of the role of narrative in mobilization promises several analytical payoffs. First, it will help us to better understand the dynamics of mobilization before the consolidation of a formally organized movement. As Klandermans (1988, 1992) observes, we still know little about how collective identities emerge from "subcultural networks and indigenous structures" and emerge during episodes of collective action. Further investigation of the discursive processes that unfold in such settings should detail the causal schemes that underpin popular vocabularies of motive. Is the dominant logic one of individual intention and collective efficacy, as framing theorists maintain? Or are events represented as unfolding by narrative necessity, as I have suggested? Is a critical discursive ellipsis, a point in the story where the non-narratable movement beginning takes place, a characteristic feature of movement-founding stories?

Activists do more than tell stories, of course. They storm barricades, negotiate with authorities, evaluate past tactics, march. They use referential, persuasive, and expressive modes of discourse as well as narrative ones (Polkinghorne 1988). Under what other circumstances, then, are they likely to turn to narrative? This is a second important line of research. After formal organizations have been established, activists probably continue to tell stories in order to sustain and strengthen members' commitment since, as Stephen Cornell puts it, in telling stories, "we not only make sense of ourselves; through stories we create ourselves: we become subjects" (1996:3). Movements in which the goal is self-transformation as much as political reform may see personal story-telling *as* activism. Narratives undoubtedly figure more in movement decision making than classical rational models would have us believe (March and Olson 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Activists may legitimate and evaluate drastic transformations in agenda or strategy by telling stories that configure past decisions in a broader narrative of enlightenment. Veteran activists may stake their authority on a superior knowledge of the movement's history. However, stories are not only legitimating but evaluative, they are lenses through which opportunities and obstacles, costs and benefits, and success and failure are assessed (King 1986). Jo Freeman argues that "past experiences" constrain the resources available to movement groups for action (1979:177). But experience is filtered through discursive frames, among them stories. This suggests more attention to the role of narrative in movement decision making.

Narratives' dependence on a stock of plots, on a canon, suggests a point of conceptual entry into the relationship between the hegemonic and subversive features of (movement) culture. Rather than counterposing oppositional stories to hegemonic ones, we should ask whether there are features of narrative—not shared by other discursive forms—that make it prone to reproducing hegemonic understandings even when used by oppositional movements. Drawing on Ewick and Silbey's (1995) study of legal narratives, we can identify several such features. Since narratives rely for their intelligibility on their conformity to familiar plots,

modern Western movement stories may tend to attribute insurgency to individual, independent actors rather than to the relationships that social movement scholars know are so important in generating and sustaining participation. It may be easier to tell a story of short-term triumph than one of long-term endurance.[36] Since narratives do not lay out the grounds for their credibility, relying on emotional identification and familiar plots rather than on testing or adjudication of truth claims, they are better able than other discursive forms to rule out challenge. This may be a good way to stifle internal dissent, but if leaders seek to prefigure a fully democratic society within the movement itself, then this feature of narrative surely proves a hindrance. Finally, narratives often work by "effac[ing] the connections between the particular and the general" (Ewick and Silbey 1995:218). A compelling story seems to speak to a shared experience but without demonstrating its representativeness. The danger for movements is that my particular story is too easily seen as that of "women" or "gays," in a way that erases difference within the group.

Stories, like other cultural forms, both reproduce the existing and provide tools for changing it. The key, of course, is to understand how and when they do each. And that requires grasping not only the formal features of narrative that distinguish it from other discursive forms, but the social conditions in which stories are more and less familiar, easily communicated, and authoritative.

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36. Kim Voss argues that Poland's Solidarity movement was sustained in periods of defeat by activists' invocation of the "Catholic belief in the successive stations of the 'via dolorosa' to explain failures, the implication being that while early uprisings resulted in Crucifixion, eventually insurgency would bring Resurrection and Life" (1996:8). Derrick Bell (1992) has described similarly sustaining narratives among African Americans.

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