

## Storytelling in Social Movements

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### ABSTRACT

Activists, like prophets, politicians, and advertising executives, have long recognized the power of a good story to move people to action. But what is it about stories that render them more politically effective than other discursive forms? Just as important, are there political risks to telling stories—especially for groups challenging the status quo? Drawing on cases ranging from nineteenth century abolitionism to twentieth century movements around AIDS, abortion, child molestation, desegregation, and domestic abuse, I make two non-intuitive arguments. One is that stories' power comes not from the clarity of their moral message but from their allusiveness, indeed, their ambiguity. The other is that activists' ability to tell effective stories is shaped as much by the norms of stories' evaluation as by the norms of their content. In this sense, culture may curb challenge less through the canonical limits on what kinds of stories can be imagined than through the social conventions regarding when and how stories should be told. In addition to making a case for storytelling's variable benefits, the chapter shows how an analysis of movement storytelling can shed light on dynamics of cultural constraint that have been difficult to grasp with the conceptual idiom of framing.

Activists, like prophets, politicians, and advertising executives, have long recognized the power of a good story to move people to action. The tale of a chosen people's wanderings that end in the promised land becomes a clarion call to revolution. A political official is reimagined as an emperor without clothes and dissent that was only whispered becomes voluble. An ordinary man recounts the moment at which he cast off years of fear and shame to acknowledge publicly his homosexuality and members of his audience resolve that they too will come out.

But what is it about stories that render them more politically effective than other discursive forms? Just as important, are there political risks to telling stories—especially for groups challenging the status quo? If you are a feminist charging sex discrimination in hiring, are you better off documenting statistical disparities in the promotion rates for men and women or having a few women testify to their stifled aspirations? If you are an adult survivor of child abuse, does telling your story of pain and humiliation motivate others with the same experience to step forward? Or does it alienate people who are unwilling to see themselves as victims?

In this chapter, I draw on cases ranging from nineteenth century abolitionism to twentieth century movements around AIDS, abortion, child molestation, desegregation, and domestic abuse to support two non-intuitive arguments. One is that stories' power comes not from the clarity of their moral message but from their allusiveness, indeed, their ambiguity. The other is that activists' ability to tell effective stories is shaped as much by the norms of stories' use and evaluation as by the norms of their content. In this sense, culture may curb challenge less through the canonical limits on what kinds of stories can be imagined than through the social conventions regarding when and how stories should be told.

My aim in this chapter is not only to assess the mixed political benefits of telling stories but to make a case for studying storytelling as a form of movement culture. I argue that

analyzing the stories told in and about movements can help us to gain purchase on a question that has been difficult to answer. How are activists constrained in their ability to use culture effectively? Presumably, activists hew to dominant cultural norms where it serves them and challenge those norms where it does not. Yet, that calculus is never transparent. Activists, like the rest of us, are risk-averse. And they struggle to master the norms of cultural expression at the same time as they decide whether to defy them. Paying attention to storytelling, and especially to how activists strategize in their use of stories in different institutional arenas, can shed light on the cultural constraints that activists face and why they only sometimes succeed in overcoming them.

Let me begin, then, by defining narrative and making several claims for its virtues as a window onto broader cultural processes.

### Why Stories?

Although scholars have drawn on an array of concepts to capture the role of culture in movements, among them, ideology, discourse, schema, identity, rhetoric, and belief, the concept of collective action “framing” has held pride of place (for a good overview, see Snow 2004). Frames are sets of beliefs that “assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherent and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow and Benford 1992: 198; Benford and Snow 2000:614). What makes a frame successful in doing those things? Scholars have drawn attention to features of the frame itself and to features of the group that is targeted. With respect to the first, frames that are clear, coherent, and consistent are more likely to persuade people to join and support the cause. The diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components of the frame should

be richly developed and interconnected (Snow and Benford 1992: 199). There should be a clear “we”—those to whom the injustice is done—and an obvious “they” who are responsible for the injustice (Gamson 1992; Stoecker 1995). Effective frames are “empirically credible,” that is, they are consonant with what their audiences know to be true (Benford and Snow 2000). Those who articulate the frame should be credible too (Benford and Snow 2000).

Effective frames are “salient” to their audiences. That is, they call on beliefs that are already strongly held. Of course, people’s beliefs are multiple and diverse (Gamson 1988). Still it is possible to identify a hierarchy of popular salience (Gamson 1988; Snow and Benford 1992: 205). For example, many people believe that animals should be taken care of but believe more strongly that medical researchers should be given as much freedom as possible if their research might generate cures for diseases. In addition to being credible and salient, frames should be “experientially commensurable” (Snow and Benford 1992: 208; Benford and Snow 2000). They should resonate with people’s everyday experiences. Finally, frames should be characterized by “narrative fidelity” or “cultural resonance.” They should accord with familiar “stories, myths, and folktales” (Snow and Benford 1992: 210; Gamson 1988).

Framing theories talk about narrative in two ways. Effective frames accord with dominant cultural narratives (Snow and Benford 1992; Gamson 1988). And frames often make use of stories as a powerful rhetorical device (Benford 1993; Gamson 1992). Both claims are plausible. However, I argue that fuller attention to storytelling, drawing on the insights of a multidisciplinary body of scholarship on storytelling, can respond to several problems in framing theory, specifically with respect to its account of how and when frames are successful.

One problem centers on framing theorists’ contention that effective frames are clear, coherent, and consistent. These claims have been more asserted than empirically tested. We

simply do not know whether clear frames are more effective than ambiguous ones; whether frames with consistently related diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components are more mobilizing than those without; whether effective frames do delineate adversaries sharply. Given the fact that, as framing theorists themselves have pointed out, most ordinary people's beliefs are vague, shifting, diverse, and internally contradictory (see also, Merelman 1998; Billig et al. 1988), why should we expect that people will put a premium on clarity and consistency in the messages they attend to and believe? We need a better understanding of how persuasion works than framing theory has yet provided. We need to grasp how combinations of words (and images) work to garner attention, establish authority, provoke new ways of thinking, and spur action.

The second problem in framing theory's calculus of frame effectiveness is a limited understanding of how frames are shaped by their audiences. Certainly, framing theorists have always acknowledged that there are multiple audiences for movements' framing efforts. Although early work concentrated on potential recruits, researchers since then have studied activists' framing to reporters, in court, and on television talk shows. They have drawn attention especially to the conflicts created by the generally moderate messages that are required by the public and the more radical ones that resonate with movement participants (Ferree 2003; Whittier 2001). However, to talk about the different audiences to which activists must appeal risks suggesting that frame success is just a matter of resonating with the personal beliefs of the people who have power within a given institutional arena. It misses the specifically institutional demands of claimsmaking. These demands often center less on the substance of groups' claims and justifications than on their form. For example, in court, activists may be discouraged from giving the kinds of personal accounts that are familiar in everyday life but considered

inappropriate in the law (Conley and O'Barr 1990). On a television talk show, they may be discouraged from providing statistical evidence rather than purely personal accounts. In short, to understand why particular frames succeed or fail, we need to know more about how institutional and popular norms of cultural expression shape what activists can say.

The third problem in theorizing about the conditions for frames' effectiveness is an assumption that culture, understood as beliefs, values, myths, and worldviews, is separate from experience. This assumption is evident in the idea that frames' "empirical credibility" and their "experiential commensurability" (Benford and Snow 2000) can be appraised separately from their resonance with cultural myths. Surely, however, people's personal experiences are shaped by their cultural beliefs, values, and perceptions. In this sense, the challenge for activists is not only to frame persuasive claims but also to frame intelligible ones. Activists must challenge not only people's formal beliefs but also their common sense. To give an example that I will take up again later, a judge may believe firmly in women's equality with men. And yet he may hand down rulings that systematically disadvantage women, not because his professed egalitarianism is a lie but because he understands gender equality in the context of a whole cluster of assumptions about men and women and difference and biology and preferences. Activists often find themselves struggling to craft a frame capable of debunking symbolic associations that are difficult to even name. As analysts, we need tools to get at this background common sense with which activists must contend.

Moreover, activists themselves are vulnerable to the cultural constructions that pass as common sense. That statement may raise a red flag by suggesting that activists are falsely conscious, somehow blind to their own best interests. Of course, individual activists, like all of us, have blind spots and superstitions. The challenge, however, is to show how those blind spots

and superstitions are widespread and powerful enough among activists to systematically foreclose strategic options. What we need then, is a fuller understanding of the mechanisms that make certain claims risky.

In sum, theories of collective action framing have been limited by their failure to probe the rhetorical vehicles of framing, the institutional norms that delimit appropriate ways of talking, and the underpinning common sense in terms of which frames are understood. Why should an analysis of narrative help us to do all these things? Define a narrative, uncontroversially, as an account of a sequence of events in the order in which they occurred so as to make a point (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Formally, narratives are composed of (a) an orientation, which sets the scene, (b) a series of complicating actions (implicit “and then .|..” clauses) ending with one that serves as *dénouement*, and (c) an evaluation, which can appear at any point in the story, establishing the importance of the events related (Labov and Waletzky 1967).

Thanks to a substantial literature on narrative in diverse fields, we know a great deal about how narrative achieves its rhetorical effects. What makes a story believable, persuasive, resonant? First, the fact that narratives integrate description, explanation, and evaluation. Think about how we hear or read a story. We tack back and forth from the events that are described to the larger point that they add up to. We assume that later events in the story will make sense of earlier ones and that details that are irrelevant to the story’s point will be omitted. Depending on how dramatic the story is, we experience the events’ resolution as a veritable release of psychic energy; we talk about a story’s “climax.” We also expect that the resolution of the story will be moral. It will project a desirable or undesirable future. Of course, some stories moralize more explicitly than others. But all have what linguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967)

call an *evaluative* component specifying why the story is important to tell. Storytellers rarely say explicitly to their audiences, “and the moral of the story is....” Rather, the story’s larger meaning seems to be given by the events themselves. The final events in the story resolve the problems raised by earlier events in a way that tenders a more general normative point.

Framing theorists argue that effective frames tightly link diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements. Stories do exactly that. However, they do so the basis of a narrative logic rather than a formal one. Developments in a story make sense because we have heard (something like) them before. Stories depend on plots, on a limited number of structures that configure events and their meaning. Certainly, as Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey observe, “Narratives are fluid, continuous, dynamic, and always constructed interactively—with an audience and within a context—out of the stuff of other narratives” (2003: 1343). Still, most theorists agree that there is a cultural stock of plots. Stories that draw on plots outside that stock or that are incompatible with “the stuff of other narratives” risk being seen as bad stories or as incomprehensible ones.

However, if stories must hew to familiar plotlines, a story that was so familiar as to be entirely predictable would be no story at all. It would be the moral without the story. Social psychologists have shown that stories in which the normative message is too pronounced are unlikely to persuade their readers (Slater and Rouner 2002). As literary theorist Wolfgang Iser writes, “It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (1972, 285). Stories require our interpretive participation. They require that we work to resolve ambiguities as events unfold, to anticipate the normative conclusion to which the story is driving. Indeed, the closure stories promise may never be fully realized. The story’s meaning remains elusive. Stories are thus distinctive in their openness to interpretation. This is not to say that other forms of



discourse are not interpretable. To the contrary, analyses as much as narratives can be plumbed for multiple meanings. So can arguments, descriptions, and formal mathematical proofs. But we *expect* to have to interpret stories. By contrast, we tend to see ambiguity in logical arguments as imprecision or error. We are less likely to do the work necessary to make sense of an allusive passage or what appear to be contradictory developments.

For my purposes, these features of narrative suggest, first, that stories may be mobilizing on account not of their clarity but their engaging ambiguity. In this vein, J. Hillis Miller (1990) maintains that stories' meaning hinges on a key gap at the story's center, an ellipsis in which the reader or listener is forced to fill in meaning. That process can prove mobilizing. In the stories told by black student sit-inners in 1960 and budding feminists in 1970, an ellipsis (often literally three dots; "...") captured the point in their stories at which individuals became a collective and acquiescence turned to action, and did so in a way that demanded more stories, and more actions to recount (Polletta 2006). Another way in which stories may persuade more through their ambiguity than their consistency lies in their use of point of view. Point of view is the perspective from which the story is told. That perspective may shift among characters during the course of the story; it may transcend the characters (the omniscient narrator); it may be obvious or opaque. Indeed, authority may be created by selectively revealing and concealing point of view in stories; that is, by rendering "we" and "they" obscure rather than clear (Polletta 2006).

A second implication of stories' form is that, to put in the language of framing, stories' empirical credibility and experiential commensurability may both be a *product* of their narrative fidelity. Stories may seem resonant because they are familiar but they may also seem empirically *true* because they are familiar; because they conform to stories that we have heard before (White 1980). In a related vein, social psychologists have shown that people are likely to report

information that they know to be invented as true if they hear it in a story. Apparently, their absorption in the events recounted in the story diminishes the likelihood that they will hear facts critically (Green and Brock 2000). So, the information contained within a story may be credible because it is presented in story form and because it is familiar from previous stories.

Stories conform to familiar plots. But that statement is problematic: it suggests that there is a single canon, one set of tellable stories that together impart a coherent moral canon. That is clearly not the case. For every story that enjoins us to turn the other cheek when insulted, another instructs us to let no assault on our dignity go unavenged. Stories attesting to the power of the unencumbered individual are countered by stories about the power of loyalty to the group. Instead, then, consider this possibility. Stories' power comes less from the explicit moral instruction they provide than from the normative possibilities that are excluded from the pattern of their interrelationship. The argument, which goes back to Claude Levi-Strauss's (1963) structuralist analysis of myth, is that culturally resonant stories chart in similar fashion the relations between the privileged and denigrated poles of familiar cultural oppositions. For example, we grasp what reason is by telling stories that thematize not only reason's difference from passion, but its similarity to men's difference from women, and culture's difference from nature, and so on. What poststructuralist theorists add is the insight that it takes active *work* to ensure that alternative relations—and alternative meanings-- are ruled out (Derrida 1978; Scott 1994). To continue with the example, our understanding of reason requires that people make emotional performances of reason, that they demonstrate in their speech, tone, and gesture the seeming lack of affect that passes for reason—while at the same time maintaining that emotion and reason are opposed. The stability of legal, political, and other institutions, to extend the argument, depends on their promotion of stories that thematize familiar opposition. Such stories

are powerful not because they are told over and over again in identical form but rather because they mesh with other familiar stories that navigate similarly between the poles of well-known oppositions (see Polletta 2006, ch. 1 for a fuller development of this argument).

In addition to the fact that it is easy to identify narratives in discourse, and that we can draw on a body of scholarship on how narratives work rhetorically to produce a fuller, and in some ways, counterintuitive understanding of how persuasion works, narrative has a third virtue. It is a folk concept. Unlike frames, ideologies, and discourses, all of whose referent is defined by analysts rather than the people who produce or act on them, most people know when they are telling a story. They know how to construct a story, and when and why they should tell stories, and how to respond to a story. Some conventions of storytelling are formalized as are, for example, those in courtroom testimony. Other conventions are not formalized and can be gleaned rather from stories' distribution across settings and speakers and topics of discussion. People often reflect openly on what they see storytelling as good for and where they see its limitations. From there, we can begin to determine the work that popular theories and conventions of storytelling do in sustaining institutions and in shaping strategies for transforming them.

To study narrative sociologically, then, is to study not only stories but also stories' performance. It is to study not only the conventions of narrative's form, but also the conventions of its use, interpretation, and evaluation. It is to study not only meaning but also the social organization of the capacity to mean effectively.

### Strategy and Storytelling

One can use the concept of narrative that I have outlined above to shed light on a variety of movement processes. For example, the fact that we can isolate narratives in discourse and can

isolate different versions of the same narrative makes it possible to trace the careers of particular stories, exposing the political processes by which they come to be tellable or authoritative but also the dynamics by which newly legitimated stories produce new modes of action and new terrains of contention (Polletta 2006, ch. 1; Davis 2005). The stories told by people in fledgling movements provide insight into individuals' decision to participate rather than free ride on the efforts of others (Polletta 2006, ch. 2). The stories told about movements provide a measure of movements' impacts (Polletta 2006, ch. 6).

In this essay, however, I want to focus on activists' strategic use of stories to persuade. Their persuasive efforts go beyond recruitment, of course. Activists seek to persuade funders to support their efforts; reporters to cover their demands; judges to hand down favorable decisions; Congressional subcommittees to press for legislation; ordinary citizens to think differently about their everyday practices. It is easy to see the appeal of stories in all these tasks. Personal stories, especially, make the abstract real and the political personal. Told in court, to the press, in the halls of Congress, and at the head of marches, they turn shadowy institutional forces into heroes and villains, and turn complex goals into moral imperatives. Sometimes, they expose the bias in governmental policies by showing that supposedly universal categories and neutral standards embed the experiences of only some people. Personal stories compel their audiences to sympathize and, occasionally, to act.

On the other hand, progressive activists, and especially feminists, have been keenly aware of the dangers of telling personal stories. They worry that stories of injustice and exploitation, of hurt and humiliation, require that their tellers trade agency for passivity. Surely representing oneself as a victim, and as powerless, pitiable, and generic, cannot but diminish one's own capacity for action (Bumiller 1988; Kaminer 1993; Minow 1993). Surely casting

women or gays or lesbians as victims rather than as proud challengers worthy of respect and power will repel rather than attract potential recruits (Wolf 1993; Roiphe 1993; D'Emilio 1992; Epstein 1987). And even if successful in gaining the sympathy of the powerful, surely such stories will translate into protection at the expense of power (Wolf 1993; Kaminer 1993).

These concerns are certainly legitimate. But they are by no means intrinsic to the form. It has been possible, at other times, to conceptualize victims differently. And this is in part because people have conceptualized *storytelling* differently. They have operated on a different theory of narrative and knowing, a different set of expectations about how stories affect their audience's understanding and emotions. Consider the stories told by antebellum abolitionists who were former slaves. In these stories we might well expect to see victims as we commonly think of them: passive rather than active, to be helped rather than emulated. However, that was not the case. As Kimberly Smith (1998) has shown, slave narratives were modeled on Christian conversion narratives. These were familiar to many Americans and they were typically told by people petitioning for membership in congregations. In eliciting sympathy on the part of congregation members, the petitioner successfully demonstrated his understanding of God's glory and his suitability for membership in the church. But the sympathy listeners experienced was thought to lead to their own enlightenment. On that model, slave narratives sought not to elicit their audience's pity. Rather, they sought to produce a sympathetic identification, to make the audience feel about slavery as the slave did. This helps to explain a peculiar feature of the slave narratives: they did not spend much time making a case against the institution of slavery. The assumption was that the story itself would educate the moral intuitions of readers in a way that would compel right action. On the template of the Christian conversion narrative, then, slave

narrators were victims but also moral guides. Victims were seen differently than they are now because stories were heard differently.

Since then, activists have continued to tell stories of their suffering in ways that have highlighted their fortitude and insight. In the consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement, women told personal stories to prove that they knew better than any expert the sources of and solutions to their problems (Echols 1989). "Coming out" stories have inspired others to proudly declare themselves gay (Plummer 1995). Stories of abuse "survivors" have emphasized the victim's recovery (Dunn 2005; Loseke 2000). So, conceptions of the victim as moral guide, expert, and survivor have existed alongside side that of the victim as a passive object of pity. Yet, activists have often found it difficult to gain acceptance for these conceptions outside the movement. They have tried and failed to get victims seen as people struggling against constraints rather than as people who are entirely powerless. They have tried and failed to get victims seen as heterogeneous, united only by their common experience of hurt rather than as homogenous.

The fault lies less with movements' bad strategy than with the institutional settings in which they operate. In her study of activism by adult survivors of child abuse, Nancy Whittier (2001) found that when survivors gathered in movement conferences and at marches, speakers told stories of personal fortitude and of fear ceding to pride. With titles like "Sing Loud, Sing Proud," and "Courageous--Always Courageous," movement magazine articles and workshops encouraged participants to emphasize their recovery rather than the details of their abuse. When survivors appeared in court to seek compensation as crime victims, however, the stories they told were different. Survivors described the fear, grief, shame, and hurt produced by their abuse but made no mention of their subsequent anger and pride. These kinds of emotional

performances were required in order to prove that the survivor was a victim deserving of compensation. Articles in movement magazines warned that going to court was a demeaning experience and that survivors should find outlets to tell other parts of their stories—but that betraying their anger in court would hurt their case.

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

Certainly, one can challenge the conventions of narrative performance. Survivors could have told stories of anger on talk shows and could have recounted moving from shame to pride in courtroom hearings. But doing so would have been risky. Culture shapes strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression yields more calculable consequences than challenging them. This is clear in the case of women who challenged workplace discrimination in court in the 1970s and 1980s. Judges sometimes explicitly encouraged plaintiffs to put women on the stand who could testify to their experience of aspiring to a higher paying but traditionally masculine job and not getting it. This was in spite of the fact that providing a few such stories could not, on its own, demonstrate *patterns* of disparate treatment. Presumably, some women were interested in the higher paying jobs and some were not, just as some men were and some were not. What such witnesses could not do was prove that they were representative of the larger pool of eligible workers. Only statistical evidence of gender disparities in hiring and promotion could do that. Plaintiffs could have refused to frame their

claims in terms of individuals' experience of discrimination. But when they did, they were much more likely to lose their cases (Schultz 1990).

Why? Because judges wanted something like a liberal storyline to counter the congeries of stories that stood behind the conservative argument. Employers' argument that women did not want the higher-paying jobs, which were intrinsically "heavy" and "dirty," was convincing because it squared with countless familiar stories about little girls liking to be clean and little boys to be dirty and women being different from men. That women preferred not to do masculine jobs was a matter of common sense, as conservative courts often put it. Against that common sense, plaintiffs only argued that women's preferences were not fundamentally different from men. But that claim suppressed gender differences rather than accounted for them. This was why it was so important for plaintiffs to produce witnesses who could testify that they had wanted nontraditional jobs. Although such witnesses could not prove that their experiences were representative of the larger pool of workers, they could tell something like a liberal story of women who, but for their sex, were exactly like men and therefore entitled to the same jobs.

So what was the harm in plaintiffs' producing those victims? By corroborating the storyline expected of them by liberal judges, Schultz shows, plaintiffs ended up challenging only *some* of employers' discriminatory practices, leaving others intact. By hewing to the liberal storyline, in which work preferences were formed through socialization processes outside the labor market, they were ill-positioned to show that workers' preferences themselves were influenced by employers' practices. Why would women want a job that was advertised and described through word of mouth as a man's job? This question was not asked.

The problem for women charging sex discrimination was not only that they were forced to style themselves generic victims. The deeper problem was that in the absence of a compelling



story of how women came to forge their job preferences, women effectively ceded terrain to conservatives, who did have such an account. The conservative story was detailed, variegated, and meshed with countless stories told in other settings about gender differences and socialization processes. The liberal account, which was made up of dry abstractions and denials of a causal chain rather than the assertion of one, was no match for the conservative story, and for the countless other stories against which—in terms of which—it was heard. I want to underscore the last point. Narratives are hegemonic not because there is a single story that is told over and over again but rather because stories mesh with other familiar stories that navigate similarly between the culturally privileged and denigrated poles of well-known oppositions.

Could plaintiffs have told an effective story? Could women working in lower wage jobs have described how the higher paid jobs they heard about were represented as inappropriate for them, with their descriptions bolstered by social scientists explaining how preferences are forged in the labor market rather than prior to it? Would telling this admittedly more complex but also truer story have worked? We do not know. But we can see how women's more complex stories fared in a different area of the law. Women who are abused by their partners and who strike back against them, wounding or killing them, should be able to plead innocent by reason of self-defense. They acted to save their own lives. And yet in the early 1990s, only a quarter of the battered women who pleaded self-defense in homicide cases were acquitted (Trafford 1991). More significant, convictions of battered women who pled self-defense were overturned on appeal at a substantially higher rate than were convictions in other homicide cases (40% compared to 8.5% [Maguigan 1991]). Clearly, there were problems in how such cases were being tried.

One problem lay in popular expectations about what true stories sound like. As Kim Scheppelle (1992) points out, women who have been the victims of domestic abuse, as well as those who have been the victims of rape, incest, and other forms of sexualized violence, often delay in recounting their experiences. When they do tell their stories, their narratives often have a fragmented character. Their accounts change over time as they piece together what happened and begin to retreat from their initial impulse to normalize their experience. But judges and juries operate on the assumption that true stories are told immediately and stay the same over time. The stories that women tell later are often heard suspiciously. A prevailing narrative epistemology has thus operated to discredit women's accounts of their abuse.

Battered women's activists' success in making expert testimony admissible in court should have helped in this regard. Experts could account for the discrepancy between the victim's earlier and later stories by citing the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition to strengthening the battered woman's credibility, activists believed, experts would describe both the psychological mechanisms that prevented women from leaving abusive relationships and the economic and cultural ones: the lack of support services; the norms that expected women to keep families together at all costs, and so on. Experts would also help to expose the real possibility faced by the abused woman that she would be hunted down and attacked by her abuser if she left. Experts would show that the defendant's apprehension of imminent danger and great bodily harm was reasonable.

Yet, the introduction of expert testimony has not been enough to secure abused women equality in their legal defense. This was the other problem facing battered women defendants: often, their own defense attorneys did not think them capable of meeting the standards of reasonableness necessary for a self-defense claim (Schneider 2000). The problem was not, as

some scholars maintained, that the legal standards for pleading self-defense—imminent danger, proportionality, and the duty to retreat--were inherently biased against battered women. Most jurisdictions did not impose a duty to retreat before using force, and those that did usually exempted a person attacked in her home. No jurisdiction prohibited the use of a weapon against an unarmed attacker. Standards for self-defense were just as capable of handling violence in which parties were intimates and where the imminence of danger extended over a substantial period. The problem was not the legal standards but the fact that judges, juries, and lawyers were unwilling to see battered women's use of deadly force as reasonable under those standards (Schneider 2000; Maguigan 1991). Familiar stories of the soldier on the battlefield, the man defending his home against an unknown intruder, and the barroom brawler continued to shape legal decision makers' thinking about what constituted legitimate self-defense. Against the backdrop of those stories, it was difficult for legal professionals to imagine that women were acting reasonably when they assaulted their partners.

The challenge was to see women as victims *and* as rational agents. As Martha Mahoney writes, in our society the two are seen as unalterably opposed: “[A]gency does not mean acting for oneself under conditions of oppression; it means *being without oppression*, either having ended oppression or never having experienced it at all” (Mahoney 1994, 64; see also Dunn 2005; Loseke 2000). When the battered woman has killed her abuser, emphasizing her victimization undermines her claim of rational agency. That, in turn, has made it tougher to meet the standard of reasonableness necessary to claim self-defense. In this respect, advocates' victory in gaining the admissibility of expert testimony has been mixed in its effects. Lawyers for battered women have encouraged experts to testify to the defendant's so-called learned helplessness rather than the fact that she acted to save her own life. Battered women's syndrome has become a popular

term and is often used simply to indicate the existence of a battering relationship. But its connotation of an impaired mental state has made it difficult for lawyers, judges, and juries to comprehend the reasonableness of the woman's act. Instead, women have been encouraged to register pleas of insanity or manslaughter; both clearly less serious than homicide but still quite different from a plea of innocence by reason of self-defense.

The woman who has killed her abuser faces two equally unacceptable options. She can assert her agency, telling a story of her actions in which she appears composed and in control of herself. But then she may not be seen as victimized at all. Or, she can emphasize her victimization. But then her actions risk being seen as unreasonable. They are to be excused through an act of judicial solicitude rather than justified by her experience of abuse. If she departs from the stock image of the victim, moreover, if she is too angry, aggressive, or insufficiently remorseful, she may not be seen as a victim, no matter what she says.

So, does telling stories work for battered women? Lawyers, judges, and scholars hear the stories that battered women tell. But they hear them through familiar plotlines with stock characters. On one side are stories of the soldier on the battlefield, the man defending his home against an unknown intruder, and the barroom brawler, stories that have defined what counted as legitimate self-defense. And on the other side are stories of mad women who are victims and bad women who are not.

Activists use stories strategically. But they are up against at least two obstacles. One is that their stories are heard against more familiar stories. To achieve equality, women need to reject both poles of the dichotomies I have described. Women are like men in some respects and unlike them in others. Women in some situations are victimized *and* agentic. They are autonomous *and* dependent, to note another opposition that has limited women's legal remedies

(Fineman 1995). But what makes it so hard to challenge such dichotomies is that they are reproduced in many *different* narratives, appearing in movies and magazine articles, political speeches and news stories, in self-help books and television commercials. The credibility of such narratives comes from the fact that they are both ubiquitous and diverse: coming in innumerable versions, they seem to capture a reality that is complex. A story that is palpably at odds with those stories is easily discounted as unbelievable, idiosyncratic, or simply unintelligible.

The other obstacle lies in prevailing beliefs about what makes some stories and storytellers credible. Such beliefs are historical, as I noted. They are also at once institutional and popular. A complainant in small claims court who tells an otherwise credible story of having been bilked by his employer loses his case because his story fails to specify the unambiguous chain of causality that is expected of testimony in court. A woman who tells the story of her rape loses her case because, like many victims of trauma, she has filled in missing parts of the story as she has retold it, and now she violates the jury's expectation that true stories remain identical in their retelling. The small claims complainant is hurt by beliefs about narrative that are peculiar to the institution of American small claims court. The rape victim is hurt by popular beliefs about narrative that operate within legal settings but extend beyond them.

When encountered by activists, these kinds of cultural constraints are practical. They are not attributable to activists' false consciousness or their inability to perceive alternatives. Rather, they reflect the institutional rules of the game that those wanting to effect change must play. But, without accusing activists of false consciousness, it is hardly surprising that they sometimes fail to anticipate fully the costs of playing by the rules.

### Telling Non-Canonical Stories

Is there any solution? Are activists' stories fated to meet with disbelief or incomprehension, capable of producing emotional catharsis but not practical action, effective only where they affirm rather than challenge popular cultural beliefs? No. I want to conclude by showing how activists have put features of narrative's form and the conventions of its evaluation to surprisingly effective use.

I argued earlier that narrative's allusiveness—the fact that it compels its audience to fill in the gaps, and indeed, that its meaning is always provisional—accounts in part for its role in engaging audiences' attention. I want to suggest now that that feature of narrative can do more: it can help audiences to hear non-canonical stories, stories that refuse the antinomies that are responsible for policies' uneven benefits. Let me turn again to legal defense of abused women. As I said, the hurdle has been to get legal decision makers to see battered women who kill or wound their abusers as both victimized and rational. In 1989, as part of a Maryland campaign to gain the admittance of expert testimony, battered women's activists made a film in which four women in prison for their offenses told their stories (*A Plea for Justice*, 1990). The film was shown to legislators, the governor, parole commission officers, activists, and the public. And remarkably, where past efforts had failed to gain traction, this one succeeded in securing public officials' support and then action.

In some ways, the film seems to reproduce the problem. The film is organized around the observations of an expert, Lenore Walker, who describes the successive phases of a battering relationship, from the early days of intimacy, to increasingly more severe abuse, to the woman's desperate act of violence. Excerpts from interviews with the four women are intercut to illustrate Walker's points. Then former assistant attorney general Benjamin Civiletti summarizes the relevant law and makes a case for reform.

The women are not named until the very end of the film and their testimony always follows Walker's descriptions of the stages of a battering relationship, matching them closely enough to justify Walker's references to "the" battered woman and to a generic battering relationship. The women seem not only generic but helpless, so incapacitated as to have been unconscious of their actions. After describing the escalating violence to which they were subjected, three of the four narrators say that they do not even remember taking the action that killed their partner. "I didn't feel my hand pull the trigger. I don't remember shooting him. All I remember was handing him the weapon and him grabbing it and I remember it going off." said one. Another: "I don't recall stabbing him no twenty-two times with no scissors." And a third: "My daughter said that I loaded the gun, and it will be five years this September, and I still don't remember loading that gun." Such actions seem the opposite of reasoned and the women responsible for them the opposite of agentic.

Yet in other important ways, the film undercuts this image. The women come off as victimized and agentic, in pathological relationships but not pathological themselves, unable to recount the details of their murderous actions but compelling in their candor and insight. How do they do this? By way of the stories they tell and the literary tropes they rely on, tropes that are familiar to literary critics but less so to social scientists: shifting point of view, irony, and antithesis. Each trope, notably, highlights the ambiguity of meaning. I am not arguing that the abused women or the activists who put their stories on film were conscious of the sophisticated literary tropes they relied on. Rather, some women knew how to tell evocative stories, the film's director knew how to choose evocative stories, and the film's editor knew how to present and combine evocative stories. Let me rehearse in some detail how they did so.

Although some portions of the women's stories are rendered vividly, one never loses the sense that events are being related by a narrator. Yet, rather than a clear, obvious "I" who is recounting events, the point of view in each woman's story shifts repeatedly: between the narrator now, who is trying to understand at the same time as she relives the experience of her abused self, and the narrator then, who is that woman. We get two points of view and two images: the women as insightful and naïve; rational and victimized.

The narrators display not only distance from the events they describe but also a rueful irony with respect to them. One woman says, "He would hit me with anything. He would bite me all over. Pick up things and throw them at me and hit me with them. But I never went to the hospital for anything. It was too embarrassing. I was so determined that this was going to work if I would just stop and just make him happier." She sounds bemused: that even as she was abjectly victimized, she was convinced of her own power to make the relationship work. The strangeness is the idea that a relationship in which violence is kept at bay by the wife's unrelenting effort can be said to be working. Another woman recounts, "Soon after we started dating I had noticed that he was kind of possessive and he was very jealous. But I didn't really count it as out of the ordinary; it kind of flattered me to be honest. I kind of thought, well, he loves me this much that he cares, he don't want me speaking to this one or he don't want me going there without him. And I kind of thought that was really kind of nice, so I must have been something really special." Drawing out the word, "special," the woman highlights her own confusion of possessiveness and caring. The irony is that her dehumanizing abuse began, in her mind, as the recognition that she was special.

An ironic stance is even clearer when a third speaker recounts her response to her boyfriend's suggestion that he quit her job: "I was like, girl, my boyfriend told me I don't have to



work, he's going to take care of me so I don't have to go to work nowhere." She goes on, "I didn't know he was in the process of putting me in his own little prison." Here, as in the previous account, the woman mocks her misinterpretation of her partner's blandishments. But in doing so, she exposes the societal norms that make such misinterpretation easy. The real ironies, in other words, are that pathological possessiveness in our society is taken as a sign of romantic passion; that the line between violent relationships and ones that are thought to be "working" is so thin; and that women fantasize of rescue from the world of work. We, the audience, may begin to recognize that the narrator was trapped by powerful social norms as much as by a violent man.

The women also defy an image of themselves as passive victims by telling an altogether different story than the experts relate, one that relies on surprising gaps and discordant elements. The story is not about women so brutalized and degraded that the only option they see, "rightly or wrongly"—as the film's narrator puts it-- is to kill their abusers. It is not about their progressive loss of will but about their assertion of it. The climax of the story is not the point where the woman strikes back at her abuser but rather earlier, when she decides that she wants to live. In each case, however, that moment is rendered strangely. I want to rehearse in some detail the segment of the film, occurring two thirds of the way through, in which these transitions occur. One woman describes believing that her boyfriend would kill her and not caring. She wouldn't be leaving children, she explains, and she hadn't even come from a loving family, she says in what sounds like a kind of obituary. Then she describes her boyfriend beating her in the kitchen as her boyfriend's friend looked on. "But right in mid-stream, as he was beating me and as I was sliding down my refrigerator, something inside me was like: I wanna live. You know, I have something to live for. Something is out there for me and I'm going to get it. And I'm not gonna die, and I'm not gonna let him kill me in here with his friend watching. I meant that." She

decides she wants to live when she is “sliding down my refrigerator”—an odd image. And she vows to herself that she will not die with her boyfriend’s friend watching. It is the idea of someone watching her own murder that is repugnant to her.

The absurdity of the situation is gripping; and it is the narrator’s recognition of the absurdity of the situation that moves her from passivity to action—we surmise. For in a way that is characteristic of stories, the central transition, the key causal relation, is represented but not explained. That gap—between passivity and self-assertion—is what engages us. “But right in mid-stream, as he was beating me and as I was sliding down my refrigerator, something inside me was like: I wanna live.” This is the climax of her story. Its importance is suggested by the fact that this is in fact the second time we hear her say it. Her statement, “But right in mid-stream, as he was beating me and as I was sliding down my refrigerator...” opens the film as a voiceover to images of a police officer knocking on a door; a woman being handcuffed; and a prison door being closed by a female guard. At the beginning of the film, the statement is easily ignored; when it is repeated, it becomes thematic, what the film is about.

When this woman describes not wanting to live any longer, she is the third to express the same feeling. The first woman, who has described her husband playing a sadistic game of Russian Roulette with her, says, “Because I kept thinking, when is the time, when is it going to be? We kept playing these little games with the gun up to my head, and I kept thinking, well one day, it’s just finally going to be over. And I really can’t wait until it’s over.” The film then cuts to a second woman who sighs loudly and says tiredly, “Many times I thought I would die. Many times I didn’t want to live anymore. Because what was going on, I thought it would never end. I thought it wouldn’t. I said, if he don’t kill me, I’m sure I’ll kill myself, because it was that painful.” The third woman, whom I quoted a moment ago, begins, “And on the night that I

stabbed my boyfriend...” in a way that suggests her story follows on from that of the woman before. But her story takes a different turn: as her boyfriend’s friend watches her slide down the refrigerator, she determines that she wants to live, and says so in a voice that is assertive and powerful, unlike the women who have preceded her.

The film now cuts back to the second woman who, crying, “I know I want to live. No, I don’t want to die. I don’t want to have anybody beat on me or threaten my life.” She does not explain the change from her last statement about expecting to take her own life. It seems almost as if the preceding woman’s story is her own—despite its strange particularity. “I want to live,” she says, echoing the woman before. She has also shifted verb tense. She recounted her feelings of wanting to die in the past tense but her knowledge that she wanted to live in the present. According to sociolinguists, shifts from the past tense to the conversational historical present are generally used to introduce a new and critical segment of the story (Wolfson 1979). Here, “I know I want to live” expresses the key shift, the point at which the woman refuses to acquiesce to her abuse. That event, her determination to live, is the climax of the story—not her decision to strike back at her abuser.

At this point, the film cuts back to the first woman, who had recounted wanting the gun her husband put so often to her head to go off. Now, without any preliminaries other than an “ummm,” she says, “So he went and got the gun. He loaded the service revolver. And I was on my knees begging him for life. And for a long time, he was taunting me. And I told him, I couldn’t do this. Of all the things, I didn’t want to die, I really didn’t want to die.” Again, the shift from wanting to die to wanting to live is not explained, only rendered, strikingly so.

When each of the four women describes picking up a weapon and attacking her abuser, it comes after the story’s climax. The women seem genuinely not to remember what happened. But

set against their clear and striking memory of the point at which they decided to save their own lives, it seems almost unimportant. The important point, and the one with which the viewer identifies, is the moment that each woman discovers her desire to survive.

The women's stories emphasize their choice to live far more than their decision to kill; indeed, recast their decision to kill as a determination to live. They do not explain that decision—for, in fact, can anyone explain a decision to live rather than die? The women tell a different story than the experts in another way. The experts repeatedly emphasize the limits on battered women's perception of the imminence of the threat they face. The narrator opens the film by describing battered women's syndrome and saying, "and in the darkest part of that trap, she reaches a point here she believes, rightly or wrongly, that to protect herself or to protect her children she must kill her abuser." The legal expert explains the doctrine of "imperfect self-defense" in which a person *believes* that his or her life is threatened. Lenore Walker describes the condition of learned helplessness and describes the expert witness's role as to "explain to the jury why *in her mind* it was reasonable for her to perceive that she was in imminent danger. And imminent danger is not just immediate danger for a battered woman. To understand the danger *that's in her heart and in her mind* all the time" (emphasis in the original). To talk about the danger "in her mind" suggests that the danger is imagined, not real.

The women interviewed in the film sometimes use the same phrases, or otherwise echo experts' view of their limited grasp on reality. One woman says, "it hurts knowing that, *in my heart*, I was protecting me and my children from abuse" (emphasis in the original). Another notes how hard it was to get others to understand why she had not left her abuser and then says, "it's a sickness." Yet, the women also make clear that they really *were* in mortal danger. The woman who said that "in her heart" she was protecting her children had described earlier an

episode in which her husband had turned from beating her to choking her daughter. The danger clearly lie in more than her heart. The woman who said “it’s a sickness” then repeated her husband’s chilling threat; “if you leave me you’re going to look behind your back, you better watch out.” She continues, “And I believed him because I knew what he could do.” Her thinking seems indicative not of a sickness but of common sense. Interestingly, immediately after this excerpt, Lenore Walker describes the phenomenon of learned helplessness. But she does so somewhat confusingly, in contrast to the clarity of her other comments: “When somebody develops learned helplessness, they lose the capacity to believe that what they do will really protect them. That their natural responses will make a response predictably that will be okay. So they only will—if they’re in danger, they will only do something that has the most prediction of working.” The psychological explanation seems inadequate.

Finally, at the very end of the film, in the last frame, the line between (rational) expert and (irrational) victim is erased. The film’s narrator, who earlier had been identified as an education director at a battered women’s clinic and had described herself as a battered woman, is shown to be even closer to the profiled women: it is revealed that she served five years of an eight year sentence for having attempted to kill her abuser.

The protagonists in these stories were pathologically dependent on abusive men, they lacked supportive friends and family, and they killed another human being. What made the women sympathetic was neither the sheer pathos of their stories (which would have elicited only audiences’ pity) nor the fact that their stories made them seem just like their audience (which likely would have been impossible to do, leaving their acts still unfathomable). Instead, the profiled women used literary tropes to tell a different story than the one they were ostensibly telling, a different story than the one that an audience anticipates when the topic is husbands,

wives, abuse, and murder. The women's stories shifted point of view in a way that combined an abject victim and a rational, insightful actor in the same person. They used irony to highlight the social norms that kept them with a violent man. And they used discordant images and ideas to draw the audience's attention to a different point in the story than the one it expected: not the moment when the woman decided to kill but the moment she decided to live.

Of course, I am speculating that the stories had these effects. In support of my interpretation, however, I offer not only the fact that, after viewing the film and meeting with the profiled women, Maryland's governor became a staunch advocate for the women's cause despite the fact that he had never before supported legislation to help battered women, but also how he explained his change of opinion. "This isn't something they made up," he told reporters. "A long history of abuse, terrible abuse . . . So I felt that some of them, there was not any question in my mind, that they were in danger for their own life" (Lewin 1991a). The governor referred to the women's victimization but then made clear that the women were acting in self-defense. He eventually commuted the sentences of eight women convicted of killing or attempting to kill their abusers and pressed successfully for legislation allowing the introduction of testimony about a history of abuse and about the phenomenon of battered women syndrome. In subsequent news stories, his criticism of a justice system that made it difficult for abused women to plead self-defense was as prominent as his description of their horrific abuse (Lewin 1991b).

If the film was indeed partly responsible for these effects, this is not to say that the women "spun" their stories or misrepresented them. It is not to say that activists should stop themselves from recounting their experiences honestly and authentically. To the contrary, speaking from the heart probably means speaking in a more literary fashion than challengers have often done when they have concentrated instead on generating a simple, unitary message.

If activists have been able to capitalize on stories' allusiveness, they have also been able to capitalize on the institutional norms of stories' use and evaluation. I have described the dilemmas of telling personal stories to secure equality in court. By contrast, personal storytelling in the media has proven easier. A distinctively American skepticism of professional expertise has given ordinary people and grassroots groups a surprising presence and, indeed, voice in the mainstream American press (Ferree et al 2002; Gamson 2001). Critics have tended to bemoan the media's focus on individuals over structures, a focus, they say, that makes it difficult for activists to press their case (Bennett 1996). But some activists have countered that since reporters want access to people affected by an issue, movement groups can supply not only the people but information on the larger issues that their experiences illuminate (see discussion in Polletta 2006, ch. 5). This insight is substantiated by recent social psychological research. When audiences hear or read news stories in which someone affected by an issue is profiled, they are likely to see that person's views both as widespread and as persuasive. This is true even if they are presented factual evidence to the contrary (Zillman and Brosius 2000). The well-placed person on the street may indeed serve to popularize the movement's views.

Finally, insofar as current conventions of storytelling do reproduce existing inequities, activists can make them the targets of challenge. They can turn a Congressional hearing into a speak-out or a courtroom appearance into a seminar. Indeed, one of the ways in which movements may have an impact is by gaining institutional purchase for new distributions of storytelling authority. For example, in the 1980s, AIDS activists succeeded in gaining formal representation on federal research review committees. But they also gained recognition for AIDS patients' personal accounts of their illnesses as authoritative knowledge in drug research (Epstein 1996). Challenging the institutional rules of storytelling can have powerful effect.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that paying attention to the stories that are told in and about movements can help us to grasp dynamics of mobilization that have been difficult to get at from a framing perspective. In particular, studying stories offers insight into how frames actually persuade; into the institutional norms that encourage some kinds of claimsmaking and discourage others; and into the underpinning common sense against which frames seem intelligible—or not. This can help us to do several things: to account for why people participate in collective action rather than free-ride on the efforts of others; to understand why some institutional practices come to be subject to contention when they do; to trace the consequences of social movements. In this chapter, however, I have concentrated on a different movement process. I have argued that paying attention to activists' strategic use of storytelling can shed light on the distinctly cultural obstacles that activists face in effecting change. Such obstacles are never insuperable, but like the distribution of financial resources or the structure of mainstream politics, they operate for the most part to support the status quo.

Culture does not constrain challenge only or even mainly by limiting what activists can aspire to. Just as much as the analysts who study them, activists are broad-minded in the options they perceive and canny in devising ways to pursue them. They use culture generally, and stories in particular, practically and creatively. The problems they face are twofold. One is that the stories that they tell cannot but seem thin and abstract compared to the multiple, diverse, and overlapping stories that are told in many media and in many forms and that together make up a common sense about an issue. To put it another way, hegemony operates not by way of a single canonical story repeated over and over again in identical form but rather by way of many stories



that are quite different from each other but navigate similarly between the poles of familiar symbolic oppositions. Against that backdrop, stories that challenge those oppositions are either disbelieved or assimilated to more familiar stories.

The other problem lies in the norms governing how stories are heard and evaluated: when they are considered appropriate, believable, serious, and so on. I have argued that these norms are historical. Victims today are unlikely to be granted the moral authority they were in antebellum America to an audience that was familiar with Christian conversion narratives. Our assumptions about how stories affect their listeners are just different. Norms of stories' evaluation are also distinctive to particular institutions. In this respect, activists telling stories of their victimization have fared better in the media than in court. In the media, activists have been able to style themselves Everypersons, connecting their own experiences to a larger normative point. In court, by contrast, the expectation that true stories remain identical in their retelling has hurt women who have suffered sexual trauma and whose stories, as a result, have changed from the initial fragmented account they gave to police. Note, however, that beliefs about true storytelling are not specific to legal institutions. Rather, they form part of a popular theory of narrative and knowing, a theory which transcends and may, indeed, contravene institutional instructions.

So culture is stacked against those who would use it to effect change. Perhaps that is no surprise. In addition to shedding light on just *how* culture is stacked against challengers, I have pointed to ways in which challengers have overcome that disadvantage. In short, they have successfully exploited narrative's reliance on *ambiguity* and the *ambivalence* with which it is evaluated as a rhetorical form. With respect to the first, activists have used literary tropes such as irony, shifting point of view, and antithesis to craft appeals that manage to resonate while still

being heard as truly different from what people have heard before. Activists have capitalized on audiences' assumption that a story will be allusive and their willingness to do interpretive work to make sense of it. With respect to people's ambivalence about story as a credible form, I have suggested that in institutions characterized by a popular skepticism of expertise, for example, media reporting, activists may be advantaged in their use of stories. Where that is not the case, activists may be served by challenging the hierarchies of credibility in terms of which rhetorical forms are heard. There may be strategic advantage to determinedly telling stories where statistics are called for and fighting for the admission of statistics where personal stories are deemed appropriate.

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