

## ONE

# Narrative and Social Movements

*The Power of Stories*

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The past two decades have witnessed a great flowering in writing about narrative and the effort by a wide variety of scholars to incorporate it into their disciplines. The study of narrative in fiction has, of course, long been central to literary theory. More recently, however, narrative study has moved out of English Departments to take on new prominence in psychology, philosophy, semiotics, folklore studies, anthropology, political science, sociology, history, and legal studies. The “narrative turn” (Mitchell 1981) in so many fields of human inquiry, has, no doubt, many and complex causes. This development, however, is clearly part of a renewed emphasis in these fields on human agency and its efficacy, on context and the embeddedness of human experience, and on the centrality of language to the negotiation of meaning and the construction of identity in everyday life (see Hinchman and Hinchman 1997).

In specific areas of inquiry, however, both within and across these disciplines, a concern with narrative has often been slow to develop, and research on social movements is paradigmatic. Within sociology, for instance, there has been a resurgence of interest in narrative as a social act and form of explanation, on storytelling as a social process, on life histories and “accounts” as social objects for investigation, and on the narrative constitution of identity (see, for example, Davis 2000a; Griffin 1993; Maines 1993; Richardson 1990; Somers 1994). Yet, with respect to social movements, little of this interest in narrative can be found. As Gary Alan

Fine has observed, narrative “has barely been explored by social movement researchers” (1995: 133). For some, a neglect of narrative stems from the continued sway of theoretical orientations that emphasize structural and interest-oriented explanations, to the near exclusion of ideational factors. A certain resistance might also be explained by the antipositivist and postmodern stance of some sociologists who promote a focus on narrative. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Benford 1993b; Fine 1995; Hunt and Benford 1994; Polletta 1998a), even scholars who have sought to reinvigorate movement research with increased sensitivity to issues of agency, context, and language have tended not to directly engage the concept of narrative. Neglect from this quarter is especially surprising because social movements are dominated by stories and storytelling, and narrative goes to the heart of the very cultural and ideational processes these scholars have been addressing, including frames, rhetoric, interpretation, public discourse, movement culture, and collective identity. The investigation of narrative in social movements is both warranted and overdue.

Combining theoretical analysis with empirical studies of narrative in specific movements, this volume argues that narrative is both a vital form of movement discourse and a crucial analytical concept. It demonstrates that studying narratives, their functions, and the conditions under which they are created and performed adds to the growing “cultural turn” in the study of social movements by offering analytical insights and understandings that extend contributions in the recent constructionist and new social movement scholarship. The analysis of narrative, as the contributors show, overcomes key limitations in the framing perspective and illuminates core features of identity-building and meaning-making in social activism. It also sheds new light on movement emergence, internal dynamics, and public persuasion, and addresses cultural aspects of activism that get short shrift in movement research.

Moreover, this book’s empirical cases include movements that are prominent on the American landscape and that have high rates of participation, but that typically have been regarded by social movement scholars as too apolitical or individualistic to be considered social movements, and therefore ignored. Unlike movements with an explicit focus on the state, self-help and New Age movements, like many other “culturalist” new social movements, have looser, more fluid structures and direct activism toward far more diffuse and decentralized forms of social power. These forms of collective action represent challenges to power relations that are

inscribed in social institutions and cultural practices, including aspects of everyday life. They engage what Anthony Giddens calls “life politics,” a politics that concerns “issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts” (1991: 214). Studying movement narratives, as the case studies show, provides analytical purchase on unifying and oppositional elements not only in state-targeted movements but in these less overtly political movements as well.<sup>1</sup>

*Stories of Change* was conceived for all those interested in movements and the role that stories and storytelling play in them. Given the sociological orientation of the volume, however, theoretical developments and debates within that field form its backdrop. In order to provide some context, I begin by briefly reviewing the new theoretical emphasis on culture and the construction of meaning within social movement research. I then turn to the concept and the functions of narrative in social movements.

## THE CULTURAL TURN IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

Over the past twenty years, resource mobilization theory in its several versions (political, entrepreneurial, and political process) has been the dominant approach to the study of social movements. In this perspective, and in contrast with the earlier models of collective behavior it effectively replaced, social movements are viewed as “normal, rational, institutionally rooted, political challenges by aggrieved groups” (Buechler 2000: 35). They are studied in terms of conflicts of interest, like other more conventional forms of political engagement, and in terms of their organizational dynamics. Movement participants are viewed as rational actors, who are recruited and who choose involvement based on a straightforward cost-benefit calculus. Movements, however, unlike established special-interest groups, arise outside the polity and therefore must rely on noninstitutional means to achieve political influence and change. Thus, the cost of movement participation is higher than in conventional politics and so movements must typically provide additional “selective incentives” to recruit members. In explaining movement origins, resource mobilization theorists have argued that grievances per se have little explanatory value since they are always present and essentially a constant. The resources necessary to carry out activism, however, are variable and so group mobilization of resources (funds, talent, contacts, and so on), usually in formal organizations, is the key explanatory mechanism.

There have been many specific criticisms of resource mobilization theory (see, e.g., the review in Buechler 1993), but in particular, critics have in various ways focused on the perspective's failure to engage the cultural and symbolic processes that underlie collective action. As a response to these deficiencies, new perspectives have been formulated over the past decade and a half that directly challenge resource mobilization's rationalist, individualist, and instrumental/political assumptions, as well as its overemphasis on formal organizations and deemphasis of ideational factors. These perspectives—new social movement theory in Europe and the social constructionist approach in the United States—have laid new, in part renewed, stress on the role of ideas and identity, the symbolic and expressive, in the analysis of social movements (see, e.g., Jasper 1997; Melucci 1989; Morris and Mueller 1992; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; Johnston and Klandermans 1995a).<sup>2</sup> They have sought to reinvigorate movement study with a focus on culture, the construction of symbolic systems of meaning, and the larger social and historical context of movement mobilization.

The new social movement (NSM) approach originated in Europe in the 1980s. In general, NSM theory has two principal dimensions. One is a causal argument about the connection of contemporary social movements to broad structural changes in society as a whole—notably features of postindustrial society, including capitalistic markets, bureaucratic states, instrumental rationality, pervasive social control, and so on. While NSM scholars differ on the nature of the specific structural dislocations, the general approach concentrates on specifying the link between these dislocations and the resulting novel “morphological changes” in the structure and action of social movements (Melucci 1989). In short, this dimension of the theory is concerned with the relationship between movements and macrolevel social changes. The second dimension of NSM theory is an argument about features of contemporary movements (of the 1960s and after) that distinguish them from the working-class (labor) movements of the industrial period. A key task for NSM scholars has been to identify these features and to develop analytical tools to study them. Scholars argue, for instance, that NSMs, with a complex social base decoupled from the class structure, have an ideological outlook centered on autonomy and identity. NSMs emphasize quality of life and lifestyle concerns over economic redistribution and challenge the “structures of representative democracies that limit citizen input and participation in governance, instead advocating direct democracy, self-help groups, and cooperative

styles of social organization” (Pichardo 1997: 415). As a result, these groups tend to structure themselves in a fluid, decentralized style, to emphasize the reflexive construction of collective identities and the moral meaning of everyday life, and to rely on cultural and symbolic forms of resistance at least as often as more conventional political activism. While these features are not unique to contemporary movements, they are characteristic of many and this dimension of NSM theory centers on the signal role of values, symbols, and sources of consciousness in these movements.

The social constructionist research on movements began to appear in the mid-1980s in the United States with the initial formulations of the “framing perspective.” Unlike NSM theory, however, constructionism has been closer to resource mobilization, seeking to compliment its structural variables by drawing attention to the neglected relationship between mobilizing beliefs and ideas and identification with and participation in social movements. Scholars working from this perspective focus on the “signifying work” of movements to “frame” grievances and mobilize support. And they stress the importance of interaction, interpretation, and discourse in the framing process and in the building of collective identities (Gamson 1992, 1995; Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994; Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; also see Fine, this volume).

In the framing perspective, “collective action frames” emerge through an interactive and negotiated process as a group consciously fashions its grievances, strategies, and reasons for action by drawing on and modifying existing cultural beliefs and symbols. These frames are ways of understanding offered by the movement that “inspire and legitimate” movement activity, both in terms of the need for such activity and the desirability of undertaking it (Snow et al. 1986). In diagnostic framing, for instance, the movement defines the problem it seeks to address as well as the actors (groups or individuals) who are the cause of the problem. Prognostic framing involves the identification of possible remedies, and may include the delineation of appropriate tactics and strategies. In motivational framing, the rationale for activism is specified and a sense of agency to affect change and urgency to do so are called out (Snow and Benford 1988). Though subject to ongoing revision, as these frames are defined, they serve to guide collective and individual participant action. Frames, according to constructionist scholars, also serve as a persuasive tool for enlisting new participants. Movements seek to recruit outsiders through attempts at aligning movement frames with the personal experiences, interests, and beliefs of potential participants, and use a variety of frame alignment

processes beyond motivational framing (Snow et al. 1986). When successful, these processes foster a link between an individual's personal identity and the collective identity of the group (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994).

In NSM theory and social constructionism, social movements represent more than collectively organized action: they also consist of collectively constructed and shared meanings, interpretations, rituals, and identities. In attending to the strategic use of signs and symbols, and not just structures and resources, these theoretical approaches have provided a language for analyzing the social construction of collective action. They have focused new attention on the internal cultural dynamics of movements. And they have led to a greater recognition of diffuse expressions of social activism, and less programmatic and conventionally political agendas for social change. Contemporary movements, as NSM theory especially has emphasized, may or may not place their locus of activity within specific organizations, state their goals programmatically, make clear distinctions between leaders and followers, or draw sharp lines between participants and nonparticipants. Even the individual and intimate relations can be sites of movement activity, as in self-help movements and movements that engage in "identity politics." NSM theory and social constructionism, then, offer new ways of understanding contemporary movements' symbolic and social-psychological dimensions (and, it might be added, hitherto neglected features of older, more established movements), their changing forms, and the specific social and historical conditions they reflect and to which they respond.

In the introduction to a 1995 volume entitled *Social Movements and Culture*, the editors suggested that the emerging emphasis on frames, identity, and other symbolic-expressive processes may represent a "paradigmatic shift" toward culture in the study of social movements (Johnston and Klandermans 1995b: 3). Although subsequent events have not bore this prediction out, such a strong statement from two noted social movement scholars does suggest that the cultural turn has had significant impact within the field. The emphasis on the cultural and performative dimensions of activism has opened up new and productive avenues of research and shed light on overlooked aspects of social movements and their dynamics. In addition to strengths, however, this scholarship has also had its limits. NSM theory (see the review in Pichardo 1997) and, to a much lesser extent, the framing perspective (see Benford 1997) have been the subject of critical attention. Many of these criticisms go

afield of this volume and so need not be reviewed here. But certain weaknesses are relevant because, I want to argue, attention to the concept of narrative and the stories activists tell would help to overcome them.

The relevant weaknesses, in brief, converge around a tendency in NSM theory to skirt the problem of meaning-making and in the framing perspective to overemphasize cognitive factors. While NSM scholars have emphasized the constructed nature of collective identity, they have not typically shown how activists themselves fashion their identities and interests. Similarly, among some of the most prominent NSM scholars, including Alain Touraine and Jürgen Habermas, there has been a tendency to overlay their own interpretations on those of activists, instead of seeking to understand how activists themselves make and modify meanings in specific settings (Jasper 1997: 72). As described in the literature, the concepts of framing and frame-alignment suffer from an overemphasis on logical persuasion and consensus of belief. In matters of recruitment, for instance, the framing perspective draws attention to the inherently moral claims of movements, but focuses on cognitive dynamics and provides little illumination of how specific moral responses are aroused. The perspective intimates the importance of emotions that mobilize and demobilize, yet concentrates on congruent and logical beliefs as organizing experience, building a sense of personal efficacy, and guiding action. Moreover, framing scholars have argued that the frame alignment process is precarious and depends on resonance with preexisting meanings in the wider culture, but tend to focus only on external threats to alignment and tend not to systematically explore the preexisting meanings. They have recognized that the framing and alignment processes are fluid and dialectical, yet have directed minimal attention to internal movement processes and the situated and negotiated nature of participant engagement and solidarity.

Beyond specific issues not well handled in current cultural approaches, there are additional cultural dimensions of social movements that tend to be neglected altogether in movement theory. In *The Art of Moral Protest*, for example, James Jasper suggests several such cultural dimensions and argues that each deserves substantive consideration. His list includes the influence of time and place—"the ways that we place ourselves in the world and in history" (1997: 70)—the symbolic significance of singular events and individuals, and the life passages and existential moments that help determine the meaning of life. Like morality, emotions,

identity, internal movement culture, and so on, the study of narrative could also provide a window on these neglected cultural dimensions. Indeed, it seems fair to say that all cultural elements, all symbolic expressive aspects of movements, can be related to narrative and illuminated by its study. Culture is more than stories, of course; and not all cultural features of movements necessarily involve narratives. But, and this is my point, these features *might* involve narratives—be it vocabularies of meanings, expressive symbols, music, film, rules, rituals, histories, sacred places, or so on. Attending to stories is *one* way—but not the only way—to bring these crucial features of movements into the foreground and explore their context and explanatory significance.

To this point, I have argued that the cultural turn in social movements research has opened the way for, and would greatly benefit from, another development: a new focus on narrative as a social practice. In order to develop this thesis further, to illustrate more concretely the power of narrative for the study of movements, the concept of narrative itself must be explored.<sup>3</sup> What is a story? What makes a story a story? How does a story differ from other, nonstory forms of discourse?

### THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE

According to the opening line of a book on narrative theory, “Everyone knows what stories are.” And a fortunate thing it is because, the author continues, it has been extremely difficult, despite many efforts, to formulate a rule that unequivocally distinguishes “things that are stories from things that are not” (Leitch 1986: 3). Literary theory, where the most important work has taken place, offers diverse and divergent perspectives on how to define and analyze narrative. Modern approaches to narrative fall roughly into three clusters (see Martin 1986): the first treats narrative as a form or representation (a sequence of events; “plot” in the traditional sense) and focuses on principles of narrative structure; the second, exemplified in part by the French structuralists, treats narrative as a manner of speaking about events (a “discourse” produced by a narrator) and focuses on certain techniques of narration (“point of view”); and the third, exemplified in part by reader response theory, treats narrative as verbal acts in a social transaction highly sensitive to context, as something constructed “between” narrator and audience. This third approach focuses on the reader as an essential feature of the narrative situation. In addition to the-



oretical plurality, the boundary between narrative and other forms of discourse is simply not sharply marked off. Features characteristic of narrative, such as temporal sequencing, change, and closure may be found in other discursive forms (a sonnet, for instance, or an essay) and stories may be found that lack key narrative features. The relationship between stories and human experience can also be conceptualized in different ways. Among other possibilities, stories can be conceived as simply after-the-fact representations of the experiences they recount, as cultural scripts that supply guidelines for understanding and action, or as performances that create as well as comment on prior experiences. While recognizing that narrative is not a simple or fixed concept raises definitional challenges, it also highlights the generative complexity of narrative and the possibility of multiple analytic strategies. No single definition or approach exhausts its meanings.

In general, social scientists, concerned with nonfictional historical or social narratives, have emphasized the traditional meaning of narrative. Maines (1993), for instance, argues that narratives have three irreducible elements: events, sequence, and plot. Polkinghorne suggests that “narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole” (1988: 18). Griffin notes that

Narratives are analytic constructs . . . that unify a number of past or contemporaneous actions and happenings, which might otherwise have been viewed as discrete or disparate, into a coherent relational whole that gives meaning to and explains each of its elements and is, at the same time, constituted by them. (1993: 1097)

These offerings, and others like them, emphasize plot structure, the notion of narrative as an unfolding of “events” (meaning both human actions and experiences), and the central importance of time. In narrative, as contrasted with other discursive forms, past events are selected and configured into a plot, which portrays them as a meaningful sequence and schematic whole with beginning, middle, and end. In terms of efforts to identify a minimal universal narrative form, this is the basic description.

It is also one description that informs the meaning of narrative in this book. In the next section I will briefly elaborate on each of the characteristics that define the classical narrative form. At the same time, however, I also want to emphasize, with recent narrative theories, that (1) character

and plot are interdependent, and both are dynamic elements of stories; and that (2) narrative is not only definable in terms of its structure but also in terms of its mode of presentation. Stories do not just configure the past in light of the present and future, they also create experiences for and request certain responses from their audience. They are fundamentally transactional, and this, in addition to their organizing operations, accounts for their discursive power.

### *Characteristics of Stories*

Whatever their theoretical persuasion, most scholars of narrative would certainly agree with Donald Polkinghorne that narrative is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (1988: 1). In stories, whether of individuals or collectivities, the meaning of events is created by showing their temporal or causal relationship to other events within the whole narrative and by showing the role such events play in the unfolding of the larger whole. Narrative explanation works through “emplotment.” Narratively, to understand an event, even to explain what caused the event, is to locate it within the temporal and relational sequence of a story, linking it with both previous and subsequent events over time. Further, once emplotted within a story, the character and function of that event in the development of the entire temporal sequence can be comprehended, and thus the meaning of the event defined. The order and position of an event within a story explains how and why it happened. In an important sense, then, narrative explanation operates retrospectively, since the events earlier in time take their meaning and act as causes only because of how things turned out later or are anticipated to turn out in the future (see Martin 1986: 74). Stories reconfigure the past, endowing it with meaning and continuity, and so also project a sense of what will or should happen in the future.

In order to understand this unique and powerful form of meaning-making, the place to begin with is the end. Stories are predicated on an “end” in a double sense. One sense is of a teleology, some valued endpoint that the sequence of events, the plot, displays. Stories are told to explain, to exhort, to persuade—to communicate a perspective on what happened in the very process of telling what happened. Perhaps, as Hayden White suggests, “every fully realized story” is in fact a “kind of allegory,” which has as its “latent or manifest purpose the desire to mor-

alize the events of which it treats” (1981: 13–14). In the personal experience stories recounted in this book, such as those of codependents, battered women, or drug court clients, the moralizing impulse seems clear enough. But if that goes too far for all stories, as some critics have suggested, then, at a minimum, we can say that informing the unfolding of a story is a “moral,” a “point,” a “theme” that provides its rationale as a unitary whole and for which, to some important degree, the story is told.<sup>4</sup>

The second sense of an end to a story, and related to the first, is that of a termination. The function of the ending is to bring closure to the chain of events set in motion by the beginning. The beginning of a well-formed story, according to Lionel Trilling, “is not merely the first of a series of events; it is the event that originates those that follow” (1980: 125). In a well-formed story, the meaning is immanent in all of the events from the beginning, and so beginning, middle, and end are closely and coherently linked. The story’s denouement brings resolution to the action and typically provides or confirms the point of the story. Thus, the classic story moves from some initial event or situation through a series of conflicts or complications to a point of resolution and equilibrium at the end. However, this tidy pattern is by no means the only or even the most common possibility. Many stories accommodate ambiguity and resist closure, at least in the sense of providing a resolution. In chapter 3, for instance, Robert Benford describes social movement stories that leave the outcome open-ended, projecting different possible endings depending on whether collective ameliorative action is undertaken or not. Much the same indeterminacy can be seen in personal experience stories like those of the New Age participants interviewed by Michael Brown (chapter 5). Their self-narratives project a future, but because these narratives are continuously in process, made and remade, they remain necessarily unfinished. In these “endless” stories, a line of development is implied but closure is indefinitely postponed. Thomas Leitch, in a discussion of interminable stories, notes that

Stories do not necessarily promise (although they may) that conflicts will be definitively resolved or the truth manifested once and for all; they promise only that something further will happen, or that there is something else to learn. (1986: 122)

Stories, then, may not reach a final resolution or state of equilibrium but always provide at least a premise or point of departure (and hence gain coherence as a unity).

The valued endpoint of a narrative guides the selection and evaluation of events for the telling; the plot makes the chosen events cohere. In constructing stories, tellers select some events for inclusion, while excluding other actions and details that do not serve to make the endpoint “more or less probable, accessible, important, or vivid” (Gergen 1994: 191). As Hayden White observes, “every narrative, however seemingly ‘full,’ is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*” (1981: 10; emphasis in original). Further, since the selected events are not all of equal relevance to the endpoint, tellers evaluate events, giving greater prominence to key actions and turning points. Tellers then link the selected and evaluated events together along a temporal dimension so as to display the effect one event has on another, and to portray an interdependent and meaningful whole. The plot governs this ordering process.<sup>5</sup> Plot transforms a mere succession of events into a configuration (Ricoeur 1984: 65). E. M. Forster’s famous example is suggestive. Of the following two sentences, according to Forster (cited in Martin 1986: 81), only the second is a plot.

1. The king died, and then the queen died.
2. The king died, and then the queen died of grief.

By adding cause and effect to temporal succession, the second turns time into a plot. Although skeletal in the extreme, the combination of temporal succession and causality endows the events with a narrative “design and intention”—to borrow a phrase from Peter Brooks’s (1985: xi) definition of plot—that the first statement does not possess.<sup>6</sup>

In the classical narrative tradition since Aristotle, plot is the heart of narrative and is a representation or display of human action. Theoretically, action has priority; the consideration of character—regarded as a static element, along with setting—is subordinate. Although some argue that in modern narrative (notably the novel) the hierarchy is reversed with character, rather than action, having priority, theorists generally treat the relative emphasis on action/plot or character as a variable. The stress on one or the other varies in different kinds of stories. Recent theorists, notably structuralists, have also insisted that plot and character are inseparable, existing in a reciprocal relationship. Roland Barthes, for example,

argues that characters are defined at least in part by their relation to the plot, while coming to understand the characters illuminates the significance of the actions in the plot (Martin 1986: 116–117). Character, in other words, is interdependent with plot, and so it, too, should be considered a dynamic element of narrative.

Characters have been defined as those story agents who are not simply a byproduct of the function they perform in the plot. Characters have qualities “neither required by nor expended in the action” (Leitch 1986: 149). They are not entirely predictable and convey some sense of depth and a capacity to change. In contrast to characters (or “round characters”) are those agents (sometimes called “static characters” or “flat characters”) who are more or less just a plot function (though, as Jerome Bruner [1986: 38] argues, story figures always convey at least “some inkling” of what they would be like in more general terms). In the battered women’s stories cited by Bess Rothenberg in chapter 9, for instance, the victim (wife, girlfriend) is a character. As narrator (and thus authority), the victim describes episodes of abuse while also displaying her reactions, fears, desires, intentions, and so on, while the victimizer (husband, lover), on the other hand, is exhausted by his role in the plot as the causer of harm: he has no depth, no pangs of conscience, no capacity to grow. While displaying a wide range of complexity, characters exhibit a stability of identity. To be coherent as characters, they must behave characteristically (Fisher 1987: 47). Of course, characters in many stories do undergo a transformation, but when this happens, the story itself is typically told to explain the transformation, often in terms that maintain the character’s consistency.

Characters are woven together from the depiction of various traits, including physical description, mental attitudes, actions, and interrelations with other characters. Yet to see characters as simply a bundle of traits is to miss something fundamental about their display. Characters are more than the sum of their traits. They are perceived as a unified *Gestalt*, not as a list of traits (Bruner 1986), and so we describe them as compelling, memorable, as having depth, and so on. In addition to the imputed traits and the development of the plot, something more is at work. This further element is not so much a quality of the story itself as it is of the transaction between teller and audience. Characters, like stories more generally, are meant to be apprehended in a particular way. We cannot understand the dynamism of either without considering the response that both are designed to arouse.

*Stories as Social Transactions*

So far I have argued that the narrative form is powerful because it configures experience by selecting and plotting events within a temporal order that infuses these events with significance and exploits them for valued ends. But stories are also powerful for another reason: because they are social practices. Stories involve two parties, a teller (or narrator) and an interpretive audience (listeners/readers), and well-told stories establish a relationship between the two. According to narrative theorists, this relationship is created by the teller's engagement of the audience's "narrativity," their ability to fill in connections that are required to make sense of the characters and events in the story. For the teller's part, engaging the audience's participation means filling out a "given pattern or idea by providing enough details to make the audience's narrativity necessary and rewarding" (Leitch 1986: 63). The teller's task, in other words, is to say "enough" but not too much. What is left out of a story and underspecified in characters is also critical to their success. According to the reader response theorist Wolfgang Iser, "It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism." These omissions are crucial because they give us the opportunity "to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (1972: 284–285). A well-told story is a creative process that implies certain connections, speculations, and emotional reactions but avoids spelling everything out or attempting "to control an audience's emotional or psychological reactions too openly" (Leitch 1986: 36). On the contrary, the "unwritten" part of a well-told story stimulates the audience's creative participation and identification and invites them to supply what is unspecified yet required.

The story, then, is more than the text, for as Iser argues, the "text only takes on life when it is realized" (1972: 279). It is the reader/listener that "sets the work in motion," a process that in turn "results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself" (1972: 280). By engaging the audience's narrativity, storytellers draw the audience into the story because the connections being made are the product of the reader/listener's mind and not simply a perception of what is written or heard. As a result, he or she can feel involved in events and care about characters even when they are, in fact, very far from his or her own experience (a point of obvious importance to social movements). And, of course, the same story can differently affect different reader/listeners. Iser calls the product of this

creative activity the “virtual dimension of the text.” The virtual dimension, he writes, “is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination” (1972: 284).

In activating the audience’s narrativity, the storyteller seeks to provoke a particular type of response. Although dealing with a larger class of speech acts than just narrative, the description of “tellable” assertions by the literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt nicely captures the kind of audience experience that storytellers aim to create. She contrasts assertions, whose primary purpose is to exchange information (e.g., answers to questions), with tellable assertions (such as stories) that “represent states of affairs that are held to be unusual, contrary to expectations, or otherwise problematic” (1977: 136). In making a tellable assertion, she argues, the speaker

is not only reporting but also verbally *displaying* a state of affairs, inviting his addressee(s) to join him in contemplating it, evaluating it, and responding to it. His point is to produce in his hearers not only belief but also an imaginative and affective involvement in the state of affairs he is representing and an evaluative stance toward it. He intends them to share his wonder, amusement, terror, or admiration of the event. Ultimately, it would seem, what he is after is an *interpretation* of the problematic event, an assignment of meaning and value supported by the consensus of himself and his hearers. (1977: 136; emphasis in original)

Central to this interpretative consensus is identification between storyteller and audience. Reader/listeners who identify with the storyteller step into the story, recreate the world it presents, and retain the experience. They make, in short, the story their own.

Inviting the audience to join in the creative process, the storyteller fosters identification by stimulating recognition and empathy. According to the philosopher Walter Fisher, audiences assess stories according to principles of narrative coherence and fidelity. They ask about a story and its characters, whether they “hold together” and add up to a “reliable claim to reality.” And they ask whether or not a story (or a character) is consistent with related stories (characters) that they already know and believe (1987: 194). On this account, for narratives to be persuasive, they must appeal to what audiences think they know, what they value, what

they regard as appropriate and promising. Readers/listeners conceive of themselves in specific ways, and so if a story, as Fisher argues, “denies a person’s self-conception, it does not matter what it says about the world” (1987: 75); there is no basis for identification with story or teller. This, he notes, is why the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is correct in observing that “the utterance of protest is characteristically addressed to those who already share the protestor’s premises” (1981: 69; emphasis deleted). Rival movement activists talk past each other because their rival stories “deny each other in respect to self-conceptions and the world” (Fisher 1987: 75). If what a story communicates about the world is to be accepted, it must affirm not negate the self-conceptions that audience members hold of themselves.

Storyteller-audience identification is necessarily context dependent since it hinges on how successfully the teller accommodates the interests of the audience (Herrnstein Smith 1980) or delivers the rewards the audience has been led to expect.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, since stories are always produced and told under particular social conditions and constraints, historical, institutional, and biographical contexts are always critical to understanding the intelligibility, believability, and relevance of stories. The social norms and conventions operating in various cultural and institutional contexts govern when stories are told (expected, demanded, or prohibited), what kinds of stories can be told (rules of appropriate content), and how stories are told (rules of participation) (Ewick and Silbey 1995). For example, in chapter 7, James Nolan describes in detail the content rules that govern client narratives within the drug court movement. To be successful in court, and even apart from actual changes in drug-using behavior, clients must tell the “right story,” communicating in their participant narratives the expected attitudes toward themselves and their therapy (they have a disease, are in need of treatment, and so on). Those who fail to tell a story in terms of these content rules can meet with serious consequences. The drug court, when contrasted with the criminal trial, also illustrates different rules of participation. In the drug court, the judge is defined as the principal audience, while in a criminal trial, as described by Jeffery Tatum in chapter 8, the participation rules assign the primary audience role to the jury. Further, the contrasting rules assign the storyteller role differently and specify differently who can speak, about what, and according to what forms of interaction.



Viewing stories as part of a social transaction draws attention to the role of the audience and to the social context in which stories are produced and experienced. These aspects of narrative, in turn, suggest some important ways in which stories are different from more expository forms of communication. Unlike propositional arguments, which aim to make their claims concerning causality and truth explicit and therefore testable or debatable, stories invite their audience to an imaginative and emotional involvement, and employ techniques that are designed to control the responses and inferences the audience has to the story characters. Further, the underlying criteria used to determine event selection, causality, and significance is not directly displayed. In stories, as White observes, events seem to “tell themselves” (1981: 3). This makes stories difficult to test or challenge. Unlike propositional arguments, one does not need specialized knowledge or theoretical sophistication to judge stories. According to Fisher, audience members do not have to be taught narrative coherence and fidelity; they culturally acquire these skills “through a universal faculty and experience” (1987: 75). Finally, narratives reach beyond logic and proposition, working not by deduction and reflection but by suggestion and identification. Stories appeal to the intellect to be sure, but also to emotion and imagination, to moral and aesthetic intuition, as well as logical reasons.

### *Group Stories and Self-Narratives*

The storytelling process, as a social transaction, engages people in a communicative relationship. Through identification and “cocreation” of a story, the storyteller and reader/listener create a “we” involving some degree of affective bond and a sense of solidarity: told and retold, “my story” becomes “our story.” While narratives may certainly be strategically used to strengthen a collective identity, as several of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, they can also be the basis on which social relationships are organized. Interpretive communities come together around stories, constituting and reaffirming themselves as groups with particular attributes (Carr 1986; Hinchman and Hinchman 1997; MacIntyre 1981). Collective memory is directly tied to story employment. This is no less true of social movements, as several of the chapters in this volume make clear. In chapter 2, for instance, Francesca Polletta, drawing on student’s

accounts of the 1960 Southern sit-ins to protest racial segregation, argues that narratives gave coherence and directionality to rapidly unfolding events, helped to constitute and sustain a collective identity, and configured emotions so as to provide incentives to high-risk participation. In chapter 10, Gary Alan Fine argues in detail that internal social movement culture is basically a storied process; the continuous telling of stories helps to foster, sustain, and guide movement participation and allegiance.

As collective identities are constituted by stories, so too, many scholars have argued, are individual identities (e.g., Bruner 1986; Kerby 1991; Ricoeur 1988; Somers 1994). In this view, identity is not some inner essence but rather an ongoing story that emerges in and through the selection and emplotment of experience. Individuals search for self-understanding by imposing narrative structure on their lives, an interpretive process that both looks back in time and projects into the future. The self-narrative configures key experiences into a meaningful whole, introduces a sense of coherence and temporal unity to one's development and future direction, and at the same time serves as the basis by which individuals represent themselves to others.

Conceiving of identity as a narrative focuses attention on the evaluative and goal-directed nature of self-understanding, as well as highlighting the importance of past and future. Self-narratives plot the type of moral agent the individual is, and his or her purposes and intentions. As the philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) has shown, individuals define their identity in reference to a moral horizon or framework. "To know who you are," he argues, "is to be oriented in moral space" (1989: 28). Moral space is a realm of questions about what is good, what is worthwhile, and what has meaning. In this perspective, identity cannot be detached from the individual's beliefs about what things have significance, from his or her fundamental evaluations with regard to questions of the good in life. Self-narratives reveal the value determinations and distinctions in the narrator's life "by selectively plotting only those actions relevant or tributary to certain central purposes" (Kerby 1991: 56). The past is interpreted in light of an anticipated future (more or less distant), the possible self that one might be or become.

Self-narratives, however, are not "free fictions," but influenced and structured by many types of preexisting narratives, from cultural myths to the stories of one's family (Ezzy 1998). The process of interpreting and "narratizing" personal experiences—"biographical work"—is artful, to be sure, but it is also constrained by the repertoire of stories available and

sanctioned in one's context of action. As the sociologist Margaret Somers notes, "all of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*" (1994: 606; emphasis in original). Stories, even self-stories, are inherently social. We are selves, according to Taylor, only in relation to certain interlocutors, both those who were essential to our achieving self-definition, and to those who are now crucial to our "continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding" (1989: 36). We cannot be a "self" outside these "webs of interlocation," or as Somers (1994) calls them, "public narratives," for the language through which we articulate our moral frameworks and self-understandings is always relating us to others. Taylor notes:

We may sharply shift the balance in our definition of identity, dethrone the given historic community as a pole of identity, and relate only to the community defined by adherence to the good (of the saved, or the true believers, or the wise). But this doesn't sever our dependence on webs of interlocation. It only changes the webs, and the nature of our dependence. (1989: 39)

Culturally and institutionally embedded narratives with which we identify, then, shape the construction of our self-story. And interpersonal networks, moral communities, and public institutions, including, importantly, social movements, both sanction and supply such narratives.

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

As the foregoing discussion has suggested, viewing narratives as social acts, and not only as structures, highlights the functions they may accomplish for the individual or collective storyteller, the conditions under which they are constituted and performed, and the responses they call forth from their audiences. This perspective also directs attention to narrative variability. There are many possible narrative transactions, many purposes that storytelling might serve, and many effects stories might have (for more on narrative variability, see Fine, chapter 10). This multiplicity suggests that narrative—and here I draw on the typology of Ewick and Silbey (1995)—can be a focus of research in at least two ways. The first way is as an object of inquiry and explanation. In this approach,

researchers study how stories are socially produced and function to mediate action and constitute identities. The second research approach treats stories as a method or means of studying social life. Researchers collect and examine narratives as a lens or window through which other aspects of the social world can be accessed or revealed. While these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, they do suggest different ways in which narrative analysis can play a role in research. Both approaches are represented in the following chapters. Exploring the conditions and strategies of narration within social movements, stories are shown to be a powerful vehicle for producing, articulating, regulating, and diffusing shared meaning. At the same time, authors demonstrate how narrative study can illuminate social movement emergence, recruitment, internal dynamics, resource mobilization, and public persuasion.

Within social movements, we can make an analytical distinction between personal and collective level stories, although these are never entirely separate and not uncommonly run together. At the personal level are the stories people tell about themselves, the self-narratives through which their experience and their selves attain meaning. These vary in their temporal range, from configurations of a whole life to stories of significant life passages, existential moments, and traumatic events. The battered women's accounts (Rothenberg, chapter 9), the final taped interviews with the decedents played at the Kevorkian trial (Tatum, chapter 8), the "histories" of codependents (Rice, chapter 4), and the "life stories" of New Age participants (Brown, chapter 5), are all examples of self-narratives. Self-narratives precede movement involvement but may be deeply influenced by another type of more delimited personal experience story, what Robert Benford (chapter 3) calls "participant narratives." In these stories, the protagonist is the movement participant, who relates his or her own (though sometimes others') movement-related experiences. Examples of participant narratives include the spontaneity accounts given by the sit-in students (Polletta, chapter 2), the "happy ending stories" of drug court clients (Nolan, chapter 7), and the testimonies of attendees at New Age workshops. All movements spawn such stories. They may be of only passing significance to the teller's deeper self-narrative or may be emplotted within that self-narrative and even become the basis for a comprehensive biographical rewriting (e.g., a conversion). For many movement participants, movement-mediated transformations in identity are one of the key legacies of activism (cf. McAdam 1988).<sup>8</sup>