Subverting Our Stories of Subversion

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Extended Abstract

Three theoretical moves or themes have gained attention in the emerging literature at the intersection of social movements, institutions, and organizations. We have contributed to each of these three themes, showing them to be inter-related, in our previous work that draws on the case of the adoption of gay-friendly policies by organizations:

i.) The construction of social identities as the basis for social movement mobilization by active agents. (We found that everyday encounters in which agents share and thereby mold both the distinct and prosaic elements of an identity help to legitimate that identity (Creed and Scully, 2000).)

ii.) The creation – and we would add, diffusion – of repertoires of action by these agents. (We found that not only did domestic partner benefits partially diffuse among organizations in a field, but the activists’ tactics, such as “stealth legitimation,” diffused as well, enabling some organizations to be deeply involved in the issues even if they were not yet adopters; the adoption / non-adoption distinction becomes a less crucial outcome than the mobilization of ready agents and tactics (Scully, Creed, and Ventresca, 1999).)

iii.) The appreciation of symbolic resources (e.g., discourse, framing) as tools for action. (We found frames from the political realm are in some ways adopted wholesale and in some ways translated and manipulated by agents pursuing change in local workplace settings (Creed, Scully, and Austin, forthcoming).)

Together, these three themes begin to build a new narrative of how social movements are carried forward by grassroots organizational members. In this chapter, we push on these concepts, examining both their explanatory usefulness – with particular attention to what is left out or obscured – as well as their implications for the prospects for success of social movements. Pushing harder on our own work is in the spirit of what Hirschman (1995:1) calls “the propensity to self-subversion,” which he describes as “questioning, modifying, qualifying, and in general complicating some of my earlier propositions about social change and development.” We find it fitting that theorizing about subversion of the status quo – even about the fairly subtle subversions of activists in the workplace – should take this reflexively subversive approach (Scully, 2002).

We revisit each of the three themes and find dilemmas in how we have posed each of them. Regarding the first theme, the creation, legitimation, and celebration of strong identities can mobilize activists. But the dilemma is that these strong identities can also be
enacted through the drawing of narrow boundaries around a group identity. These narrow boundaries may have several problems: they may diminish the prospects for cross-group understanding if activists are too busy proclaiming to listen, they may thereby diminish the prospects for alliance-building among likely allies with shared concerns who get divided into narrow identity silos, and they may make it difficult for people whose identities span or do not fit these groups to find a place for their claims.

Regarding the second theme, the creation and diffusion of repertoires of action reveals the important role that pro-active (not merely scripted or reactive) agents play in social change programs. This perspective corrects earlier tendencies in institutional theory to posit a naïve agent with nearly automatic responses. However, the pendulum can swing too far toward an account of agents making completely new repertoires. A close look at the strategies of change agents who seek to enhance diversity in the workplace reveals that they are patterned across settings, and specifically, they are strongly influenced by the repertoires of action that govern business: they hold meetings, use flip charts, create an email distribution list, write up a mission statement, pursue sub-goals, form subcommittees, prepare power point presentations with bullet points, court senior allies, etc. The insights of institutional theory, combined with a power-oriented perspective on the dominance of the business way of doing things, are helpful here for assessing the hallmark elements of micromobilization.

Regarding the third theme, symbolic resources such as discourse are important inputs into social movement mobilization. Sometimes they are outcomes as well; for example, new language enhances the sense of inclusion of formerly marginalized groups. But the dilemma is that other, more material outcomes, such as the redistribution of wealth, should not be overlooked. Symbolic resources have previously tended to be under-estimated. They have the special property – that Hirschman ascribes to “moral resources” – that they are increased through use, rather than depleted through use (and in fact, they are depleted when not used – such as, for example, social capital or civic involvement). We have argued for the importance of considering symbolic resources. That said, it can become temptingly easy to place the focus on symbolic resources. The literature and practice of social movements, in its shift toward identity politics, may be losing sight of interests and of the hard-boiled economic resources that pose distributive dilemmas (resources that are, by way of contrast, what Elster calls non-partitive, scarce, etc). In the shift away from class, labor, or economically based politics toward identity politics, redistributive issues can be lost. There seems to be less willingness in social identity based politics to tackle the redistributive issues that are often at the heart of social justice and the most difficult public policy debates. A focus on social identity often seeks to enhance inclusion and belonging – moral resources that are not finite and that can be expansively applied to all in a way that enriches social life for all. But where is the concern about the growing wage gap? about poverty? Identity politics will have more power when more of the marginalized identity groups that might be mobilized– e.g., former welfare recipients who have lost jobs – are enabled, by naming and speaking their identity, to advance material interests, not just to be heard and accepted. A true study of subversion should not shy away from thorny issues of redistribution.
“To the barricades!” How do we keep the meaning of this phrase? What’s at stake:

We have nothing to lose but our sauces?

W. Richard Scott, August 2001 (paraphrase)

In the evolving literature exploring the intersection of social movements, institutions, and organizations, the question of agency or institutional entrepreneurship has figured prominently. The emergent depiction of agency suggests that agency entails reinterpreting and applying established cultural schemas across contexts in order to mobilize both people and cultural resources in new and different ways (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Seo and Creed, 2002). Closer examination of this simple depiction reveals three theoretical themes or theoretical moves that are underway:

1. Social identities – constructed through the meaning making activities of active institutional entrepreneurs – are linked to the mobilization of collective action.

2. New repertoires of action undergo theorization – that is, these repertoires are created through the reinterpretation of existing institutional logics and linked as
appropriate courses of action to the identities of potential adopters –and are then
diffused.

3. Symbolic resources (e.g., discourse, frames, logics of action) – transposed and
deployed across settings – appear as critical tools for the maintenance or change of
institutional arrangements.

In previous work drawing on the case of the adoption of gay-friendly policies by
organizations, we have contributed to the understanding of these three theoretical moves,
showing them to be inter-related. Regarding social identities, we found that everyday
encounters in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) workplace activists
share and thereby mold both the distinct and prosaic elements of an identity help to
legitimate that identity and advance their efforts to create equitable and safe workplaces
(Creed and Scully, 2000). Regarding repertoires of action, we found that not only did
domestic partner benefits partially diffuse among organizations in a field, but the activists’
tactics, such as “stealth legitimization,” diffused as well, enabling some organizations to be
deeply involved in the issues even if they were not yet adopters of particular inclusive
human resource policies. This diffusion of tactics indicates that the adoption/non-adoption
distinction becomes a less crucial theoretical outcome than the mobilization of ready
agents, discourses, and advocacy tactics (Scully, Creed, and Ventresca, 1999). Regarding
symbolic resources, we found that frames from the political realm are in some ways
adopted wholesale and in some ways translated and manipulated by agents pursuing
change in local workplace settings (Creed, Scully, and Austin, forthcoming.) And, tying
the third theme back to the first, in that translation of frames, contesting parties construct identities to legitimate their right to use culturally potent symbolic resources, such as the discourse of civil rights. So, the theoretical argument—the story—that threads through our work goes something like this: Agents deploy symbolic resources to legitimate new social arrangements – and also to legitimate the players and tactics involved. In other words, in the process of advancing change, these institutional entrepreneurs construct the social identities and the logics of action for those populating the social arena—the protagonists, antagonists, and the potential participants in the collective action designed to change the social order. Together, these three themes begin to build a new narrative of how social movements are carried forward by grassroots organizational members.

In this chapter, we bring together in one place some of our findings and arguments so we can push harder on our own theorizing and empirical work in the spirit of what Hirschman (1995:1) endorses as “self-subversion,” which he describes as “questioning, modifying, qualifying, and in general complicating some of [our] earlier propositions about social change” and agency. Hirschman’s model of self-subversion is fitting; theorizing about subversion of the status quo—even about the fairly subtle subversions of activists in the workplace—should take this reflexively subversive approach (Scully, 2002). For example, without this reflexive and critical move we might risk misusing the concept of a social movement as merely a metaphor for the mobilization of collective action rather than as the process driving fundamental social change. Dick Scott said it best when, as discussant at an Academy of Management symposium entitled “To the Barricades”—which had papers applying concepts from social movement theory to the spread of workplace diversity activism, recycling, shareholder activism and Nouvelle Cuisine—he quipped, “To the barricades! We have nothing to lose but our sauces.” Scott was both
warning against the trivializing of the social movement framing and issuing a call to live up to the “to the barricades” imagery and the history of bold social activism that it invokes. His call points to the important distinction between “collective action” – people working concertedly toward some goal, which could include French chefs overturning traditional cuisine – and social movements, a term that should be reserved for radical mobilizations that fundamentally contest the distribution of resources and power (Scully, 2001).

So our goal here, first, is to return to the data and experiences of social activists we studied, posing three specific dilemmas in an effort to subvert the three moves/themes described above and advanced in our own work. Below we lay out the three dilemmas —

1) “But Enough About Me…..:” The Pitfalls of Identity as the Basis for Mobilization; 2) Let’s Have a Meeting: What Really Needs to Happen During Micromobilization; and 3) Back to the Barricades: The Tough Issues of the Redistribution of Power and Resources — discussing what probing each dilemma means for the theoretical moves/themes in the literature.

Regarding the first dilemma – the pitfalls of identity as the basis for mobilization – the creation, legitimation, and celebration of strong identities can mobilize activists, but such strong identities can lead to the drawing of narrow boundaries around a group identity. These narrow boundaries may pose serious problems: i) they may diminish the prospects for cross-group understanding if activists are too busy proclaiming to listen, and ii) they may thereby diminish the prospects for alliance-building among likely allies with shared concerns who get divided into narrow identity silos that make it difficult for people whose identities span or do not fit these groups to find a place for their claims.
The second dilemma problematizes what really happens during micromobilization organizations. The creation and diffusion of repertoires of action reveals the important role that pro-active agents play in social change programs, but a close look at the their efforts and presentations of self are embedded in hegemonic business logics and practices. The insights of institutional theory, combined with a power-oriented perspective hallmark elements of micromobilization.

Regarding the third theme, we agree that we must consider the importance of can become temptingly easy to place the focus on symbolic resources. The literature and interests and of the hard-boiled economic resources that pose distributive dilemmas. There seems to be less willingness in social identity based politics to tackle the policy debates. Identity politics will have more power when more of the marginalized identity groups that might be mobilized—e.g., former welfare recipients who have lost jobs to be heard and accepted. A true study of subversion should not shy away from thorny issues of redistribution.

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by both activists and academics. In order, the first dilemma has probably been given the most critical attention in the literature (e.g., Gusfield, 1994; Piore,
Activists have also begun to work on outreach to members of other identity groups. An appreciation of the simultaneity of identities requires a realization that those “other” identities may be within one’s own ranks (Holvino, 2001). Thus, for example, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has launched a major initiative to reach out to gay people across race and class lines. The second dilemma addresses an issue that is, by its very nature and definition, harder to see – the taken-for-granted reasonableness of a businesslike approach to activism. Both researchers and activists have given this issue less attention. Our third section is the most speculative, as it reaches toward the limit of where reflective practitioners and academics committed to praxis have gone: the thorny question of redistribution and the disruption that a true social movement could cause. Are we really ready to go “to the barricades?” The three sections below reflect this trajectory from more to less considered concerns, and from lesser to greater radical implications.

Three Dilemmas

1. “But Enough About Me…..” The Pitfalls of Identity as the Basis for Mobilization

One of the theoretical moves identified above concerns how the construction of social identities is linked—through the meaning-making activity of organizational change agents—to the mobilization of collective action. Although social identity is obviously front and center in the collective action of identity movements, the construction of identity is critical to all types of social movements: “actors ‘produce’ collective action because they are able to define themselves and their relationship with the environment” through a contested, nonlinear process of identity construction (Melucci, 1995:43). This claim
implies that the social construction of collective identity involves defining the action that the actors inhabit, as well as their interests, ends, and means. This all takes place in the context of a network of relationships (comprising organizational structures, influence, and negotiation are part of the process of identity construction. In addition, passions are aroused (Scully & Segal, 2002). These constructionist notions have emerged construction is a key feature of institutional entrepreneurship and that “institutional entrepreneurs” are actors who have the ability to motivate cooperation by providing and possible (1997b:398).

Our own work has contributed to this picture in two ways. One way was through of mobilization might look like at the micro-sociological level. For example, in “Songs of Ourselves: Employees’ Deployment of Social Identity in Workplace Encounters,” we and deploy their stigmatized identities in workplace encounters that can be the context for micromobilization. We found that GLBT workplace advocates purposefully bring the "life thereby politicizing the personal and challenging “the penumbra of social expectations” (Gamson, Fireman, et Retina, 1982:15) that holds sexual orientation to be a private matter (Woods, 1994).
In this research, we found a complex interdependence between the deployment of social identity, institutional settings, and organizational change projects regarding diversity and inclusivity. By telling personal stories, GLBT employee advocates both helped key potential ally understand the issues on a more personal and emotional level and furthered the legitimacy of their personal identities in corporate contexts (Creed & Scully, 2002). At the same time, the success of this form of political agency appears to hinge on two factors. The first is whether the individuals' presentations of self are both personally authentic and achieves a narrative fidelity with the audience that justifies their participating in a challenge to the authority of existing social arrangements (Gamson et al, 1982). We believe that in many cases, the listeners appeared to have been won over to challenging the status quo through an increase in their capacity to identify with the experiences of others. Fligstein (1997) argues that the ability to imaginatively identify is critical for institutional entrepreneurs, but this observation leaves us with the question of whether such enhanced empathy may be the basis for a new, collective identity and for the collective action of a social movement. Does identification imply the possibility of solidarity?

The second factor has to do with the issue of institutional constraints on the deployment of identity. We should think of collective identity in terms of a field populated by actors declaring their right to be recognized and by those others (adversaries, allies, and third parties) who will or will not grant them recognition and standing (Melucci, 1995). To paraphrase Melucci, it is a contested process, so collective identity unfolds in a circular relationship within a system of opportunities and constraints. Actors seek to locate themselves within the system of relationships through the production of “symbolic orientations and meanings” that enable them to recognize themselves as the “subjects of
their actions” (1995:46, 48). Hunt, Benford & Snow (1994) refer to this system as identity fields.

We explored what the dynamics of identity fields looked like in institutional change processes. At the level of the micro-encounter, we found that the political and institutional conditions of the workplace did shape the way GLBT employees strategically deployed their many different identities. For example, they strategically deployed their identities as corporate insider, veteran employee, licensed professional, grandfather, committed member of the community, and person of color in conjunction with their subjective experiences as GLBT people in purposeful enactments of social identity designed to gain recognition and influence. This is a form of collective action where the individual and collective identities are at once accomplishments and deployable resources.

We also crossed levels of analysis in our exploration of the dynamics of identities fields, using theoretical arguments about the relationship between cultural accounts or institutionalized logics of action, and local legitimating accounts as the lenses through which to examine the construction of collective identities in the interest of movement goals. We found that the rendering of legitimating accounts is intertwined with the construction of various social identities. On the one hand, the identity constructions serve to legitimize an account maker’s set of justice claims and participation as a protagonist in the discourse, while also constructing the identity of the opposition as the antagonist responsible for a wrong. On the other hand, identity constructions also serve to mobilize the involvement of proponents and crucial audiences through telling them what it means to support the cause—in effect, who they are if they support or oppose a policy proposal (Creed, Scully, and Austin, 2002). For example, in the debate over the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, proponents framed those people whose support they hoped to
mobilize as “right thinking Americans” taking their place in the historical struggle for civil rights. Opponents of ENDA framed the protagonists as economically powerful sodomites, their supporters as good-willed people misled by homosexuals’ use of the rhetoric of civil rights, and opponents as the defenders of biblically-based morality and freedom.

We like these stories of collective action as identity deployment in micro-encounters and legitimating accounts as political processes of identity constructions. It makes our GLBT employee advocates sound like skilled users of culture and situates some level of power at the grassroots. It also suggests that “identity practices” (Kurtz, forthcoming) are among the critical repertoires of action for institutional entrepreneurs, a point we will discuss more later. Our first move of self-subversion then is to challenge the neatness of this picture of the link between identity construction and mobilization.

To start, we will summarize some of Gamson’s arguments on this linkage. According to Gamson, social movement participants must address the identities of who has been wronged in society, by whom they have been wronged, and who should be invested in changing the situation. To mobilize collective action, actors must frame the moral indignation broadly enough so that there is a shared sense of injustice. This can be difficult across the sedimented divisions of social identities. Likewise, it is to the advantage of a social movement to identify the “we” who will be the agents of change as broadly as possible, while not making the "we" so broad that collective mobilization becomes too difficult. In addition, for a collective identity to be a resource for social change, a movement needs to construct its collective identity, the "we," in opposition to a "they." Gamson suggests that if "we" and "they" are too abstract, collective action becomes unlikely.
The dilemma is that strong identities—celebrated and deployed in collective action—can draw overly narrow boundaries around a group identity that impede collective action in several ways. We would like to focus on two ways in particular that challenge and complicate some of our earlier propositions about the construction of social identity in movements within organizations. Both pertain to how strong in-group identities create barriers to cross-group collaboration – ironically, in precisely the places where we might expect groups concerned about diversity and social justice to find common cause, link arms, build alliances, and strategize together. These two impediments posed by strong social identities are: i) they may diminish the prospects for cross-group understanding if activists are too busy proclaiming to listen, ii) they may thereby diminish the prospects for alliance-building among likely allies with shared concerns who get divided into narrow identity silos that make it difficult for people whose identities span or do not fit these groups to find a place for their claims.

*Strong social identities with narrow boundaries may diminish the prospects for cross-group understanding.* Politicizing the personal in a kind of narcissistic recitation of “songs of ourselves” might hinder activists from developing their own empathy, preventing them from developing the sort of appreciation of the struggles of others that they hope to trigger in others for their own cause (Scully, 2002). “All voice, all the time” puts social movement actors in constant “transmit mode” about identity, marginality, and oppression. What happens when social movement actors who share commitment to social justice and change but come at it from different angles, informed by different social identities, come together? Rarely is it a mellifluous rendition of “We are the World.”
Identity politics runs the risk of devolving into “me and my group first” – or the oft-cited “Oppression Olympics.”

The activist tactic of politicizing the personal through the telling stories requires an openly listening audience (or even a guardedly listening audience that gradually comes along on the journey). In the realm of identity politics, each party may become skilled in politicizing the personal with an audience of privileged people who might become empathetic. They can sing the songs for powerful potential allies, but the GLBT group may not do too well at hearing about race from GLBT people of color and the women’s group may not do too well at hearing from lesbians or poor women. Opportunities are lost to build a stronger social movement and to get to social change outcomes that reflect more interests.

If politicizing the personal in “songs of our selves” is a good set of tactics, how well does its application extrapolate across the social movement field? Is it a good tactic for any one group considered alone, but a limited tactic when we consider all groups at once? It seems to be good for any one group to speak of, reframe, legitimate, and lobby hard for their concerns. But as a collective phenomenon, it can create a cacophonous inability to identify shared agendas or to pursue joint wins. Instead of solidarity, there is a vulnerability to the “divide and conquer” techniques of the powerful. If we have any hope that there can be alliances among social movement actors, we need not only a theory of identity construction, which is in effect of theory of voice. We also need a theory of listening if we are to understand how identification can lead to solidarity.

A theory of listening might point to another dimension of institutional entrepreneurs’ ostensible ability to imaginatively identify: their capacity for enhanced empathy that Fligstein emphasized. Empathy could be a twofold project. The first project
is what Fligstein speaks to. In this first project, the institutional entrepreneur works to understand a crucial audience. Gay activists imaginatively locate what would be a meaningful way to connect to straight people such as human resource executives who could promote a policy change. For example, one GLBT group at a conservative utility company invited a nationally known speaker who discussed quite emotionally how she was barred from the hospital bedside of her critically ill partner, as she lacked legal rights and her partner’s family excluded her. A senior human resource executive reported having an “aha” experience as she considered the unimaginable scenario in which she could not be at her husband’s bedside. She immediately became a staunch ally and set some significant changes in motion. The GLBT group had imaginatively found a place to trigger empathy. In this portrait, activists are urged to find ways to gain empathy, and reciprocally, the privileged are called upon to be empathetic and to learn about their own privilege and its consequences, in this case to actively encounter their heterosexual privilege even as they learn about the disadvantages faced by GLBT people.

In the second empathy project, which has not been elaborated in the literature, social activists do more of the empathy homework for themselves. They do not just try to anticipate what will make “those” privileged people out there more empathetic and supportive (or to be empathetic to why a privileged person might feel awkward), and they do not just ask those privileged people to be empathetic. The agents of change might look at their own empathy as social movement actors – exploring their own capacity to hear from others how they contribute to the oppression of members of other social identity groups. It is a movement from voice to listening. The literature is ripe with treatments of voice (Harquail, 1996; Ashford, 1998), but a serious treatment of voice requires a
concommitant, but missing, treatment of listening and of silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Creed, 2002).

Strong social identities may create identity silos and impede alliance-building.

The second way that strong identities can impede collective action is that narrow group boundaries can exclude people who should number among the protagonists and potential allies in the mobilization for the full standing of diverse and/or marginalized people in organizations and society. One way this can happen it through the exclusion of people with “simultaneous” social identities (Holvinio, 2001). Simultaneity refers to the intersectionality and multiplicity of identity. This simultaneity of identity adds complexity to the concept of collective identity construction, pointing to the problem of identity construction based on simple oppositions such as black-white, worker-manager, men-women, etc. An overly narrow group boundary, for example, women, African Americans or GLBT employee groups in the workplace, can make it difficult for people whose identities span groups as they are traditionally defined (e.g., black women or gay black men). The concepts of collective identity and collective action might suggest to some that to mobilize against injustices, a movement needs to speak unequivocally from an “othered” or marginalized standpoint. Understanding the simultaneity of identities enables moving beyond a way of seeing the world from the standpoint of a single, well-defined identity. It raises the question, however, of how in practice to reconcile the tension between many voices and one strong voice?

If our work is partly about action as well as about theory, we also need to ask what concepts and developments in the literature might help us understand why we have not seen these alliances happen. In what ways have the theoretical and empirical foci of the literature failed to give guidance on making these alliances happen?
2. Let’s Have a Meeting: What Really Needs to Happen During Micromobilization

A second theoretical move deals with the creation and diffusion of new repertoires of action. Almost 15 years ago, DiMaggio argued that agents and agency were at best "smuggled into institutional arguments rather than theorized explicitly," leaving us with a picture of "disembodied forces" inexorably creating and maintaining institutions (1988:9). Attention to the creation and diffusion of repertoires of action is one way to probe the role that pro-active (not merely scripted or reactive) agents play in social and institutional change. This offers a corrective to earlier tendencies in institutional theory that posited a naïve automaton operating under the rubric of institutionalized logics of action.

In our research on GLBT employee advocates, we found that not only did agents innovate with new repertoires of action, they shared these strategies and tactics across settings, adapting them for the various settings that their allies in the movement inhabited. One class of tactics that diffused within and across organizations we labeled “stealth legitimation.” Stealth legitimation changes the language and dynamics of legitimation, combining the political and the personal in a form of “tempered radicalism” (Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Meyerson, 2001). Actors seemed to learn and refine stealth legitimation through the sorts of work place encounters we described above. GLBT employee advocates used these tactics as they attempted to make the cases for their proposals “just enough and in just the right quarters” so that changes could be put into practice without fanfare and without inviting resistance.

Advocates also tell stories of their efforts to make change through meetings of interorganizational networks and national organizations, such as the Minnesota WorkPlace Alliance and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Forces, in effect socially constructing the
“best practices” for the workplace initiatives of a larger social movement industry. As they do so, they also diffuse a pattern for nesting their legitimation projects. We found employee advocates situating their claims for inclusive HR policies and domestic partner benefits in encounters choreographed in such a way that they were simultaneously making the case for their own personal legitimacy in corporate contexts. These encounters revealed other stealth legitimation tactics, including demonstrating that one is a team player and an insider—willing to work in ways consistent with the corporate culture and able to make it safe for potential straight allies to ask questions. The core objective of stealth legitimation as a repertoire of action is staging the drama of micromobilization so as to minimize the risk of backlash that could undermine the adoption of controversial policies.

Again, we like this story for many reasons. Stealth legitimation is, at least in part, about overcoming opposition during a contested change effort. It is an embodied story of change because stealth legitimation tactics appeared to be not just about benefits but also about opening up pockets of safety in the workplace where conversation about peoples’ experiences could occur. When they worked, these tactics triggered reciprocal empathetic engagement. In this, stealth legitimation seems to add to existing theories of micromobilization, which focused on how bystanders came to adopt injustice frames and are transformed into challengers of unjust authorities (Gamson et al, 1982).

In the spirit of self-subversion, we propose two challenges to this storyline. In one, we will point to how the theoretical pendulum can swing too far toward an account of agents creating innovative and even emancipatory new repertoires of action. We found, in fact, that there was also a mundane scriptedness to their practices and ways of organizing that may actually constrain their action innovation. In the second, we will revisit some of
the key arguments about micromobilization in order to pose the possibility that our focus
on stealth legitimacy—and in particular on the role of personal story telling as a technique
for advocacy encounters and micromobilization—may have paradoxically obscured some
of the important work done by activists by making it sound too easy, as if everyone is
easily moved to great empathy by a personal story.

The mundane scriptedness of emancipatory actions? Regarding the first move of
self-subversion—the conjunction of institutionalized and new repertoires—a close look at
the strategies of change agents seeking to enhance inclusion and diversity in the workplace
reveals that they are patterned across settings, and specifically, they are strongly
influenced by the repertoires of action that govern business. GLBT employee advocates
hold meetings and networking sessions, use flip charts, convene roundtables, create email
distribution lists, write up a mission statement, pursue sub-goals, form subcommittees,
prepare power point presentations with bullet points, court allies, and name and frame
“best practices.” However passionate these employee activists’ commitment to their
social justice claims, they are highly businesslike in their actions. They exploit their
knowledge of corporate cultures. It is taken for granted that workplace activists are very
professional. This is not just any old mundane scriptedness.

It is helpful to recall some of the core insights of institutional theory and critical
notions of power here before we assume the efficacy of the bona fide innovations in
repertoires of action we do see. Institutionalized routines stabilize social arrangements
making some practices taken-for-granted and others unimaginable. From a constructionist
perspective, the enactment of established routines reproduces the existing arrangements
while departures from the routines—departures that Jepperson (1991) argues we should
reserve the term action for—can lead to the reconstruction of social arrangements. These countervailing impulses raise the question of under what conditions these combinations of new and institutionalized repertoires of action can be effective and ultimately emancipatory?

On the one hand, the very genius of what these activists do is that they make their efforts locally sensible. Their actions are entirely conformable to how things get done at work. It is business as usual. At the level of action, this comports with Czarniawska and Joerges’ arguments about translating organizational change; “idea merchants” enable change by framing new ideas, structures, or practices in terms of the higher-order cultural accounts that have provided the existing logics of action in the local setting (1996:36).

On the other hand, the hegemony of a business language, logic, and modus operandi clearly put limits on how strongly they can state a social justice agenda and how far they can push such change. This latter point—navigating between too tempered and too radical a strategy—has been considered in the work on tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Meyerson, 2001). It is an important lens for taking a critical view of new “repertoires of action.” What do they really enable agents to accomplish? From a movement perspective, GLBT employees need to mobilize support of their proposals without challenging the authority structure. They often expressly demonstrate loyalty to the system and eschew unauthorized collective action. In a sense, it is as if they are attempting laser surgery. In many cases, they succeeded in getting human resource policy changes like domestic partner benefits. We found that in some instances, GLBT advocacy waned with changes in benefits. What remained to a degree unimaginable or unimagined was a workplace free of homophobia and danger. Changes in benefits offerings became ends in themselves, rather than a stepping-stone in a larger movement. In some other
organizations, advocates saw themselves as having succeeded in making the corporate headquarters safe for “GUPPIES” (gay urban professionals), but as having done little to make more rural facilities or factory floors safe for GLBT employees. In effect, their actions had effected some changes, but it was unclear how much the larger system had changed and how useful their new best practices would be in settings other than urban work places.

Overall this aspect of our self-subversion emphasizes the role of power, particularly by pointing to where larger systems remain unchanged and thereby continue to redound to the benefit of the powerful. Thus, it is not just that agents’ tactics retain a certain scriptedness. We are making a finer point than saying that theorists should not over-endow agents with efficacy (a point that is beginning to come through in the literature). We are saying more strongly that what is interesting is that certain scripts are always the ones that prevail and that they serve particular interests. When we find that business language and logic dominate in activist tactics, that points to the fact that activists operate within the constraints of the everyday conduct of business and capitalism, even when they appear to be making radical moves. These broader constraints may mute their actions.

For example, we have focused on the diffusion across companies of domestic partner benefits (DPBs) – health benefits for the same sex partners of employees, equal to the health benefits provided to opposite sex spouses of employees. On the one hand, this change effort is quite radical for reshaping discourse about heterosexism and homophobia in the workplace. Even when few employees end up taking advantage of DPBs, the symbolic aspects of their adoption are powerful (Scully and Creed, 1999). On the other hand, such change efforts can be seen as merely letting off some steam and making safe
adjustments to the status quo. A more radical challenge to the underlying system of health benefits would ask why DPBs should even be relevant. The United States is the only industrial nation where health care is tied to an employer (and getting health care therefore requires being tied to an individual who is employed) rather than being a right of citizenship or residence. A national health care system would make DPBs a moot point. Thus, all the tactics deployed toward their adoption are in some ways distractions from another level of challenge to power in the entrenched system.

*Obscuring the relational work of micromobilization in the work place.* In our second move of self-subversion, we will challenge our depiction of micromobilization. Micromobilization refers to the social psychological processes by which people are transformed into agents able to challenge the status quo (Gamson, 1992). In our use of the concept we have drawn largely on Gamson and his colleagues and on the literature on collective action frames. Building on Collins’s (1981) arguments regarding the need for micro-translation of macro phenomena, Gamson and his colleagues (1982) explored how face-to-face encounters shape political consciousness and mediate the capacity for long-term mobilization, detailing many of the hurdles of micromobilization. They highlight several hurdles that are salient here.

First is the problem of mobilizing know-how. Challengers face many organizational hurdles in transforming movement members into agents, including choosing specific action agenda, exercising some level of social control over constituents, maintaining movement infrastructure, and fostering a sense of solidarity. Because participants vary in terms of the social and cognitive skills and material assets they bring to the movement, having enough mobilizers with know-how—knowledge of collective action
routines and skill in their application—is perhaps more critical than having mobilizers with tangible instrumental resources. In some cases there may a much greater need for know-how than for resources. This suggests, according to Gamson et al, that rather than a simple linear relationship—more assets, more success—there should be a threshold hypothesis: there needs to be a certain level of certain types of assets (know-how or resources) for successful micromobilization. For example, some routines or repertoires—group process skills, communication skills, a consciousness of social control techniques—might be needed before an collective action frame can be formed, persuasively presented, or acted upon. Given these challenges, organizational development – including such activities as building loyalty, managing action logistics, and dealing with internal conflict – become very important for challenger groups (Gamson et al, 1982). Much of these are accomplished behind the scenes, in meetings and informal interactions among members and sympathizers.

In our research, we found that many of the GLBT employee groups that were part of the Minnesota Workplace Alliance had organizational development needs. Many of the groups had problems determining if their purpose was primarily social or activist and with generating, maintaining, or regaining momentum. Some of the most successful groups have small, active leadership circles and larger more or less passive constituencies. The Gay and Lesbian Community Action Coalition and the Minnesota WorkPlace Alliance made organizational development part of their agendas, fostering the development of infrastructure and know-how through sponsoring off-site meetings, socials, and workshops that enhanced group identity and solidarity. Some groups were also able to leverage borrowed infrastructure and resources, gleaned from corporate-sponsored diversity councils, that made maintaining solidarity a bit easier. At the same time, the
broader GLBT civil rights movement played a role in creating norms of greater openness, political activism, and solidarity.

None of these organizational accomplishments can be taken for granted, however, because both the work of internal organizational development and broader mobilization takes place in the context of sedimented divisions in the society at large that can affect the internal solidarity of the potential challenger group and the potential identification between GLBT people and their potential allies and decision makers. We can think of these divisions as institutional legacies such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. For example, we found a Jewish lesbian socialist asking how she could remain committed to a cause like work place mobilization around domestic partner benefits, when the beneficiaries were for the most part gay white men and lesbians in partnerships, when the issues of homelessness, hunger, and the broader issues for the medically uninsured went unaddressed. Similarly, GLBT people of color often feel that the “gay rights” movement is a white male movement. These illustrations highlight that because GLBT people cross racial, gender, age, and class divides, solidarity is not automatic.

The realities of these divisions points to how our picture of micromobilization in organizations is perhaps too simple. Instead, micromobilization seems to require preparatory and ongoing work at organizational development, the creation of agents with the social skills needed to forge solidarity, and the management internal conflict within groups made of up people with simultaneous social identities (Foldy and Creed, 1999). The ongoing relational work of organizational development is an essential, but often

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1 Gamson et al refer (1982) to one such received division as cleavage pattern—the structural partitioning of the population into haves and have-nots. Encounters between mobilizers and participants can reflect a complex combination of cleavage patterns that hypothetically (and practically) can make mobilization easier or more difficult. For example, if some potential members of the challenger group are haves and
unobserved part of micromobilization. In fact, relational work seems for the most part invisible in the organizational discourse of strategic endeavor (Fletcher, 1999). A new research project at the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons Graduate School of Management is examining what is entailed in working across differences in organizations for change and equity. Preliminary findings suggest that a working across differences requires a particular repertoire of actions directed toward learning concretely about the others’ experiences, simultaneous identities, and emergent interests. This suggests a pattern action that melds inquiry, reflexivity, and instrumental action in a cycle of relationship building, strategizing, executing, and visioning.

3. Back to the Barricades Again: The Tough Issue of Redistribution

The recent emphasis on symbolic resources as critical tools in institutional change processes hinges on the idea that institutional reproduction is complex and uncertain because the social world is made up of multiple conflicting systems of meaning (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Agency involves exploiting these contradictions in the process of meaning-making (Sewall, 1991). The focus on meaning – and on the contest to control the meaning of broadly legitimated ideals like civil rights – becomes both a focal activity of social movement activists and a place where social scientists increasingly train their lens. For example, we found that both proponents and opponents of banning employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation tried to cast their approach as the one consistent with the American history and ideal of civil rights. While this focus on discourse – and how agents use it to name experiences, expose contradictions, and legitimate both

some have-nots -- a divided cleavage pattern -- then the difficulty of creating solidarity within the group is greater.
social identities and change projects – has been helpful, we question in this section whether it obscures the material basis of inequalities that prompt the drive to make changes, resources to contest inequality, and ultimately redistribution to redress inequality.

Resource dependence theory had reminded us of the importance of material resources, not just of ideological commitment, to get a social movement underway (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1988). More recent work has added symbolic resources to the mix, as their role and importance tended to be under-estimated. Methodological advances in areas like frame analysis has made it more possible to access and understand symbolic resources like discourse, social identity affinity, and legitimacy. Once again, we can look to our own work for places to advance this project by engaging in some self-subversion. We emphasized the importance of symbolic resources – such as discourses and frames – for advancing social change, and moreover, for creating and inspiring the actors who might advance social change.

We found that institutional entrepreneurs use multiple cultural accounts (Creed, Scully and Austin, 2002). However, they make contested claims about what available cultural accounts and institutional logics “really mean” and to whom they should or should not apply. In addition, they combine cultural accounts, selecting companion accounts both for their resonance with the target audience and for how they potentially interact to alter each other’s meanings in a manner designed to advance a frame-sponsor’s world view and problem definitions. What we did not assess – and what is not generally the emphasis of frame analysis – was whether in fact a particular world view gained ascendance or whether particular problems were addressed. In short, the focus on symbolic inputs to the process and the mobilization of new classes of agents left open the question, “So, has anything changed?” We closed our paper on frames with the observation that conditions in the
world are more malleable than institutional accounts initially held. Discourses can be challenged by appeal to the contradictions contained within them. In the spirit of self-subversion, we need to push harder on the questions about what actually changes, how we can know what changes, and whose definition and understanding of changes should be our gauge.

The focus on symbolic resources may have steered us away from these questions. Symbolic resources have a special property, which Hirschman (1995) ascribes to “moral resources:” They are increased through use, rather than depleted through use. In fact, they are depleted when not used, as in the examples of social capital or civic involvement. This property makes symbolic resources clearly of value to social movement activists. Not only are symbolic resources renewable for any given group, they are not scarce. Symbolic resources are thereby different from the resources that pose the sharpest distributive dilemmas – resources that are non-partitive and scarce, such as organs for transplant candidates, that require us to confront difficult allocative decisions (Scully and Lautsch, 1999). By focusing on symbolic resources, therefore, the current work in the social movements area might have been able to avoid confronting tough issues like contests for resources among social movement actors and redistribution as an outcome of social movements.

What should not be lost is the spirit of social movement theory and its central project: To explain large-scale, fundamental, system-level changes that often involve great courage and might be cataclysmic for the social systems involved. Researchers use the powerful and colorful language of social movements in describing social change, such as “to the barricades.” Interestingly, workplace activists also borrow such evocative phrases.
from the history of social movements (“the peasants are having an insurrection here,” “the grassroots,” “the raised fist in a black glove,” or “picketing the CEO’s office”) – but they do so explicitly by way of contrast to say what they are not able to do at work and how far they would like to go but dare not to (Scully and Segal, 2002). Perhaps researchers should use a similar caveat in invoking social movement language and concepts. The use of this literature and these concepts may reflect a wish to see large scale social changes happening and a hope that by looking through this lens what is big about social changes can be seen. But objects in the mirror may actually be smaller than they appear, in this case. We might be using social movement theory to celebrate changes that are not significant or fundamental. Instead, social movement theory may prove to be particularly useful, not just in the tools it gives us for excavating and explaining many types of social change, but in its call to hold up social change projects to a high standard of what is really large-scale and systemic about change.

As we have done in addressing the preceding dilemmas, we ask whether the pendulum has swung too far toward symbolic resources – at the expense of the original interest in material resources. Material resources figure in two ways – as inputs to social movement mobilization and as outputs of a social movement when material resources and the power to access them are redistributed.

Identity politics has been criticized for leading attention away from material resources and more concrete outcomes. Identity-based social movements are contrasted to movements that arise around shared interests or issues, such as peace, environmental, anti-nuclear, pro-choice or pro-life, welfare rights, or labor movements. These movements certainly use symbolic resources – indeed, the study of them has advanced the literature on discourses and frame analysis (e.g., Gamson and Lasch 1983; Creed,
Langstraat, and Scully, 2001). However, they also have concrete agendas about what is to be changed. Early identity politics movements also had concrete demands – such as voting rights, housing fairness, or equal pay for equal work. But there is a sense that there are fewer concrete agendas – perhaps ironically because some of the more tangible wins have been achieved. One workplace activist for racial equality in the workplace observed that it felt good for his group when they had some tangible agenda items, such as getting a black member for the Board of Directors, but once those were achieved, a vague sense of incompleteness took over. The workplace was still not friendly to blacks on an everyday basis. The nature of the next battle to pick was not clear. Saying that their interest was in something like “inclusion” or “climate” felt unsatisfying. Identity politics often focuses around goals such as inclusion, which are powerful rallying points for members who seek the full right to participate and sometimes the very legitimation of their identity (Creed, Scully and Austin, forthcoming). At the same time, these less tangible goals can shift the focus away from redistribution and the kind of deep, fundamental social change that we argue above must be a hallmark of a social movement and a concern of researchers who use theories and concepts from the study of social movements.

The call for inclusion can become an end, rather than a means to get into the debate and push for specific changes. The mobilization of “living wage” campaigns stands as a contrast, with its focus on a more radical redistribution agenda. The insight from identity politics is that such a campaign ignores identity politics at its peril (Holvino, 2002). Issue-based movements will have diverse memberships and must take the different perspectives of social identities into account. For example, the success of a labor effort at Columbia University that involved differences across race, class, and gender (Kurtz, forthcoming) was an example of the synthesis of issue-based and identity-based activism.
Holding onto redistribution as an important aim may appear at first look to be in tension with the call above for activist groups to enhance their empathy and capacity to listen through adopting a more open, reflexive, and inquiring stance toward one another and toward each other’s preferred change agendas. A project both for activists and researchers is to find and understand the ways that the diversity of aims can be respected while remaining steadfast about the importance of redressing fundamental inequalities.

Conclusion

The challenge for social movements is to find a way to have concerns about fundamental social change on which they are unyielding and cannot be distracted or coopted, but to do so in a way that listens to many voices and continually re-shapes the particulars of redistribution. The challenge for researchers using social movement theories is twofold. First, we need to widen our lenses to see different kinds of change movements and to continue to be critical about both the movements and about our ways of describing them. Second, and more subversively, we need to realize that we engage in praxis as well as theorizing when we study social movements. If our emerging story from the literature, as summarized in the introduction, is a paean to the social construction of identity, the circulation of micromobilization tactics, and the use of symbolic resources, we end up, intentionally or unintentionally, in an advocacy role for certain approaches to social movement activism. This paper has shown that these approaches might be limiting. We need to continue to be self-subverting in our stories of subversion so that we refine our concepts in ways that both explain – but also subtly direct – the ways that social movements lead to fundamental social change.
References


