Narrative Strategies and the Social Reconstruction of Target Populations

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In the Spring of 1977, a group of protesters gathered in San Francisco outside of a regional office of the Federal Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare. They consisted of people with disabilities and their supporters, seeking to force the Carter administration to finally and fully implement Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which stated, “No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States...shall, solely on the basis of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination in any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Though applying only to programs and activities receiving federal funding, effective implementation of Section 504 would put pressure on other firms and organizations to follow suit.

In his presidential campaign, President Jimmy Carter had promised to redress the lack of funding for and attention to the Act under the Ford administration. However, in the view of many Americans with disabilities, President Carter was backtracking. In particular, the protesters sought to put pressure on the Secretary of HEW, Joseph Califano, Jr., who had just recently proposed greater flexibility in making buildings accessible, suggested that segregation of students with disabilities would be acceptable, and also suggested that individuals who were disabled and battling substance abuse could be legitimately denied access and services.

On April 5th the individuals who would come to be known as the “Section 504 protesters” moved into the federal building and occupied it, having announced their intentions beforehand. On the eve of the sit-in, one local reporter commented, “Thousands of handicapped Americans may risk being wheel-chaired off to jail in a militant attempt to shut down government offices in 10 cities.”[1]

There were also sit-in protests at regional HEW offices in eight other cities as well as a sit-in protest in Washington, D.C. The takeovers were extremely taxing and often dangerous.

Protesters with significant physical disabilities and illnesses in particular risked their health, cut off from the medical support upon which they relied. In the nation's capital, the protesters were forced to give up after being denied food. Lack of supplies, strong and effective leadership, or community support all undermined the protest efforts, and the sit-ins ended. In San Francisco, however, the 504 protesters maintained their occupation for twenty-four days, finally securing Secretary Califano's signature on a new set of regulations banning many forms of discrimination against Americans with disabilities. Theirs was the longest takeover of a federal building in American history.

In addition to the occupation they held rallies, joined by activists from workers' and civil rights organizations. They issued a constant flow of press releases designed to gain support from the community and pressure local, state, and federal politicians to act to remove barriers to accessibility—in public spaces, transportation, and access to employment, educational and housing opportunities. They flew to Washington, D.C. to testify at committee hearings.

The 504 protesters undertook strategic political action in the service of claiming their civil rights. They were also, however, challenging the perception that people with disabilities were weak and in need of handouts, attempting to rewrite themselves from "handicapped" (implying begging with a cap in hand) to "people with disabilities." They sought to show Americans and political figures that they were strong. "We want our rights now," Judith Heumann, deputy director for the Council for Independent Living and a key leader of the San Francisco protests, stated in a press release. "We will wait no longer!! The Administration is forcing us to take to the streets and we will."

In this paper, I highlight the strategies of members of the 504 protests to rewrite their social narratives in order to challenge the dominant perception of their weakness. This specific case is

not introduced in order to establish claims, but in the service of exploring a theoretical contribution to the study of protest, action, and public policy. Considering the logics of narrative strategies within and across specific political and social contexts, I argue, provides researchers with greater purchase on the dynamics of interest group and social movement activity in policy spaces and processes. The key to this is to explore narrative's role in the intentionality of social reconstruction.

The Social Construction of Target Populations

In their foundational (1993) piece Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram posited the theory of social constructions— "the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy" (334). These constructions are consequential. They exert a powerful influence on the benefits or burdens that groups and their members receive from policy outcomes. They also serve as messages to the larger population about the identities of their members' lived experiences, shape the process of agenda-setting, provide incentive effects (positive and destructive) to those so constructed, and influence the behavior and self-conceptions of the targeted populations.

The authors defined four categories of target populations—Advantaged, Contenders, Dependents, and Deviants—placement in which depends upon the degree to which the targeted populations are viewed as powerful or weak along one dimension and the degree to which they are perceived positively or negatively along the other (Figure 1).

Figure 1

"Social Constructions and Political Power: Types of Target Populations"

		Constructions Positive	Negative
Power	**Strong**	**Advantaged** The elderly Business Veterans Scientists	**Contenders** The rich Big Unions Minorities Cultural elites Moral Majority
	Weak	**Dependents** Children Mothers Disabled	**Deviants** Criminals Drug Addicts Communists Flag burners Gangs

Schneider and Ingram (1993)

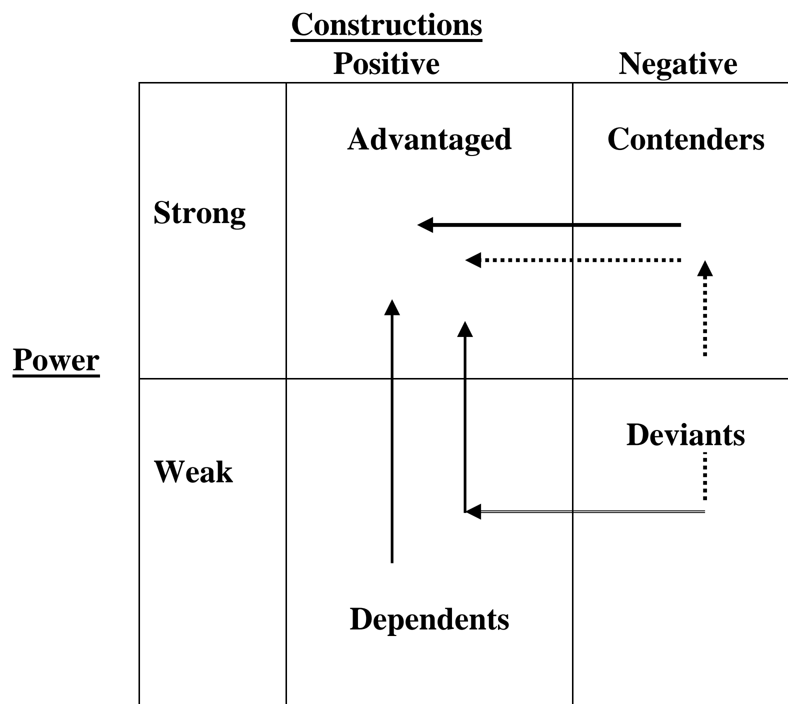
Those constructed as "advantaged" receive beneficial and meaningful policy benefits. "Contenders" are more likely to receive fake public punishment but out-of-the-public-eye policy benefits. The "deviants" receive punitive treatment in the policy arena. The "dependents"—a category in which the authors locate people with disabilities—have a more difficult time than the advantaged in securing beneficial policy, and when provided are often done so by state and local governments and in a way that keeps the recipients from exerting meaningful control over their provision.

Social constructions are neither fixed nor inevitable. They vary across time and space, their coalescence and widespread acceptance the result of contestation. Schneider and Ingram, along with other scholars working from the social construction framework, have explored efforts to challenge these constructions (see Schneider and Ingram, eds., 2005) and reconstruct their social

categorization. The central strategic challenge of social reconstruction is straightforward: to obtain a "advantaged" social construction, receiving the accompanying policy benefits. Members of different groups, however, face different context-specific challenges, based largely on the category in which they are placed (Figure 2). Less attention, however, has been paid to the specific mechanisms through which this might occur.

Figure 2

The Logic of Social Reconstruction 1: Strategic Movement



Modified from Schneider and Ingram (1993)

Members of the dependent and contender categories will seek to remove the dimension of disadvantage or exclusion that defines them while retaining those aspects which place them closer to the advantaged than the deviants, who are viewed to possess no redeeming qualities.

Contenders, while viewed as strong, must successfully challenge the perception of the negative valence of their construction, to be seen as positive and beneficial to society and the polity, rather than destructive to it as a result of their powerful pursuit of narrow self-interest.

Dependents are advantaged in that the dominant construction places them in a positive light; however, their perceived weakness acts as a barrier to robust, self-empowering policies. Therefore, they will challenge that perception in their efforts, challenges that might involve support from or coalitions with movements and groups perceived as strong. The 504 protesters, for example, received telegrammed support from Cesar Chavez, President of the United Farm Workers of America: “Greetings and best wishes in your struggle...Viva la Causa.”[2] The Reverend Jesse Jackson spoke in support; as did members of the Black Panthers

For those constructed as deviants, direct movement to the advantaged category seems a tall hurdle. They possess neither of the desired characteristics and would need to simultaneously challenge disempowering construction along both dimensions. Therefore, a more tractable strategy would be to first move horizontally or vertically and then, though enormously challenging, even highly unlikely, to successfully move to the advantaged category. While a move to the contender category might increase their group’s political power, a move to the dependent category might serve to correct “the excesses of punishment-oriented policy” (Ingram and Schneider 1995, 444).

Members of disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups do not possess a monopoly on construction, reconstruction, or the tools employed in the service of these objectives. Those who would wish to either inhibit the success of reconstruction efforts by members of disadvantaged groups or re-categorize an advantaged group as less deserving might act against the interests of targeted group members. For the dominant groups the strategic goal is to reinforce either the

conception that a particular group belongs in a disadvantaged category or, in the case of strategically disempowering reconstruction, to move a group to a less desired category.

The efforts of the 504 protesters sought to make policy change. They also sought to move Americans with disabilities from the "dependent" category (positively viewed but perceived as weak) to the "advantaged" category (positively viewed but perceived as politically strong). From the initial research that I have conducted, it is clear that many of the 504 protesters viewed their own actions as doing precisely that. One of their key tools was narrative, specifically the telling of stories of empowerment—even militancy—in speech, words, and protest. In doing so, I argue, they attempted to harness the ambiguous power of narrative to blur the lines between themselves and powerful groups in American society and politics.

Narrative Ambiguity

Narrative is essential to the dynamics of the policymaking process in many ways. Stories frame and shape self and collective understandings of members of political involvement and social movements. Stories are told in points of access to the policymaking process—whether through the media, to political decision-makers, or in congressional testimony, for example. Policy entrepreneurs employ narrative in their efforts of agenda setting and persuasion. Policies diffuse and spread across the boundaries of geography and federalism in part through the stories framed around their success and utility.

Social constructions are inherently narrative, in that they are created from and sustained by the resonance of stories that reinforce the particular placement of a group as appropriate and natural. Those who seek to challenge their constructions employ narrative in the service of persuading the other—especially the powerful other—that the dominant social construction of a

particular group is wrong. If one wishes to explore the potential role of narrative in social reconstruction, a useful point of departure begins with the story itself. What constitutes a politically and socially powerful story? What are its key elements?

Scholars of narrative and public policy have often emphasized traditional structural elements of narrative in their analyses. Those operating within the narrative policy framework (NPF), for example, highlight "context (policy domains and levels of government), characters (heroes, villains, and victims), and the moral of the story (policy problems and solutions)" (Pierce, et al 2015, 29). While structural components of policy narratives are certainly relevant elements—whose choice of emphasis can serve the political and social goals of their tellers—a sole emphasis on them in research does not fully capture aspects of narrative that are not defined by the structural elements but by the symbolic representation within the stories.

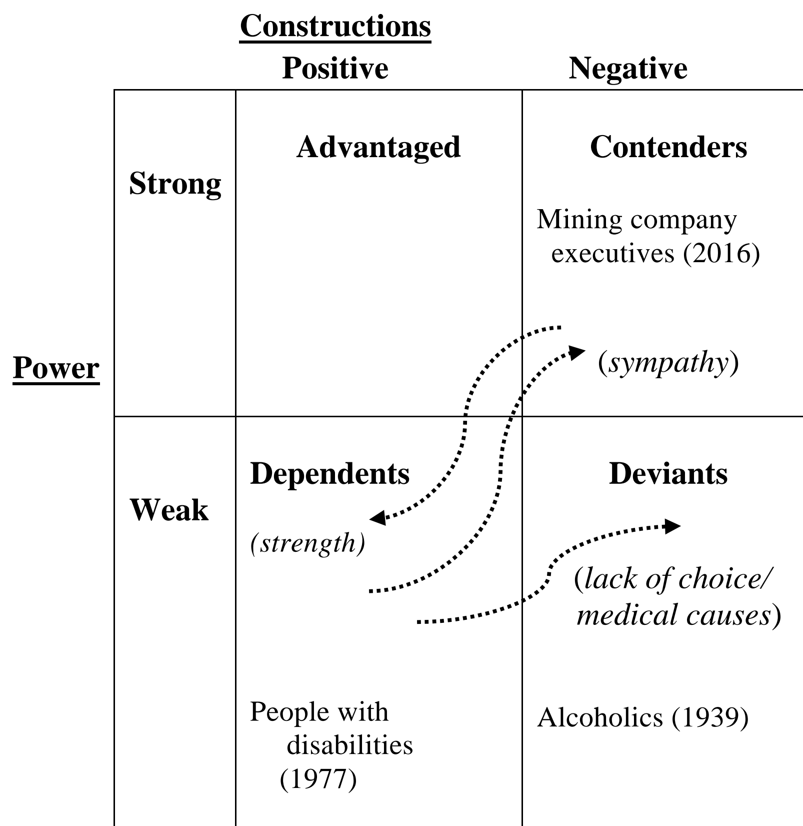
In *Policy Paradox*, Deborah Stone explored the ways in which the explanations of the world incorporated into policy stories, acting as symbols, "are often unspoken, widely shared, and so much taken for granted that we are not even aware of them" (2002, 137). To Stone, the most important characteristic of policy narratives is ambiguity, which "enables the transformation of individual intentions and actions into collective results and purposes" (157) and also facilitates the creation of political coalitions among those with otherwise disparate interests. As Francesca Polletta concluded in a study of narrative, protest, and politics, "Good stories are not necessarily simple ones, with unambiguous moral punch lines. Rather, narrative's power stems from its complexity, indeed, its ambiguity. More than other discursive forms, narrative demands an effort of interpretation" (2006, viii).

Storytelling is also an act of erasing. "Words," as Trinh Minh-ha observed, "empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meanings, and always equipped with a

second-hand memory" (Minh-ha, 5). "Translation is always a transformation," according to scholar Vicki Kirby (1993, 131). Central to the project of intentional social reconstruction is the harnessing of narrative ambiguity, specifically, to present counter-narratives that blur the lines of distinction between their own construction and that of members of the advantaged category, that cause the story receivers to fill in the blanks in such a way that challenges the naturalness of the original construction. In doing so, strategic storytellers borrow from other groups along the one dimension that they lack and from which another benefits (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The Logic of Social Reconstruction 2: Creating Narrative Ambiguity



Modified from Schneider and Ingram (1993)

For members of groups outside the advantaged category, one might reasonably assume that they would try to create ambiguity between their own members and those of the advantaged categorization. However, this is likely not the best strategy. It risks unintentionally also creating ambiguity along the beneficial and shared dimension of either power or valence, strong or negative. Rather, those in categories constructed beneficially along only one domain (dependent or contender) may be best served by highlighting ambiguity between their own group and the other along the beneficial dimension. To do so, they borrow from those aspects of construction that produce benefits in the policy space.

According to this strategy, members of the contender group seek to create perceptions of sympathy in order to challenge the perception that they are acting destructively in their own members' self-interest. In a video on the corporate website for AngloAmerican Corporation, "A child's eyes—Safety in the workplace," for example, a young student in a classroom—dressed in mining gear, safety goggles, and a helmet—is shown speaking to his mother working in the nickel operations in Brazil on a walkie-talkie. "Work safely," the student says, "And use your helmet, your gloves, your mask, so when we get home, we can play together."[3] Other media efforts, by AngloAmerican and other mining corporations, often tell the stories of workers, the challenges that they face economically, and the benefits of employment in the industry.

For those classified as dependent, the optimal narrative strategy is to tell stories about their own strength, even their own militancy, if not pushed so far as to risk losing their perception as positive and worthy of benefits. In testimony prepared for hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor in 1977, Steve Halpert M.D., recounted his own struggles against the many barriers that he faced as well as his determination to fight them: "In my residency, I had to be carried up a narrow, steep, high stairway for several seminars and my fear of being dropped was

so great that I just stopped going to those seminars. I don't think it would be arrogant for me to say that I am highly educated, aggressive, and outspoken...I can state quite clearly that I would not be where I am today if I wasn't willing to fight."[4]

Those constructed as deviants—in an attempt to create ambiguity between themselves and the dependents—might focus on the characteristic from which dependents try to distance themselves: the lack of control over their own situations. In doing so, members challenge the bases of the moral approbation associated with their own group. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, first published anonymously in 1939, consists mostly of stories told by alcoholics. They recount the tragic paths to the realization of the depths of alcoholism, their spiritual and social awakenings, and their own assertions that they were suffering from a disease, not a moral failure. "Anonymous Number Three," for example, recounted a meeting with the first two founders of A.A. and the realization that followed: "As far as I know that was the first time I had ever paid attention to that word [alcoholic]. I figured I was just a drunk. And they said, 'No, you have a disease, and it doesn't make any difference how long you do without it, after a drink or two you'll end up just like you are now.'"[5]

Whose Constructions?

To this point, the analysis has proceeded as if there is a necessary logic to the desire to move across constructive categories, and with good reason. Doing so facilitates a tractable research agenda, one in which the multiplicity of social and policy contexts across time and space acts, not as an obstacle to research, or as something to be "controlled for" in a quantitative study, but as the object of study itself. Strategic policy actors, in this framework, assess their social and

political placements and adjust their narrative strategies—and the tactics of speech and protest that animate them—accordingly.

However, there are risks to such an approach. Fundamentally, the acts of research and categorization involve the exercise of power on the part of scholars, especially the potential for an uncritical methodology, which is itself a constructive process, and possibly a destructive one as well.[6] By, for example, questioning whether or not a social group is in the "right" category, researchers may ignore the power dynamics behind marginalization and the contestation of marginalization. Questioning these assumptions offers the potential of a richer analysis. Four questions in particular are useful in questioning and reflecting upon assumptions underlying the study of narrative and social reconstruction:

- Is there a "dominant" social construction or competing ones?

By classifying one construction as dominant, researchers may risk the possibility of ignoring the processes of contestation underlying the construction.

- How do members of perceived marginalized groups perceive their own construction?

For certain groups, that perception itself may involve speaking for others, in the case of parents and guardians of, and caregivers for, children with disabilities, for example. Intersectionality may serve as part of the strategic calculi of members of disadvantaged groups as well as informing their own self and group identities.

- What are the within-group dynamics that shape the adoption and presentation of one or more primary narratives?

Adoption of one or more primary narratives does not guarantee that these will reflect the adopted self-conceptions or policy objectives of all individuals within a group or social movement. Work by scholars of interest groups has highlighted the potential of disenfranchisement for relatively disadvantaged members within groups that seek to represent the interests of a disadvantaged group (Strolovitch 2007). Storytelling by members of interest groups and social movements poses the same risk.

- Do members of socially constructed groups desire to reconstruct the dominant narrative of disadvantage?

Members of marginalized groups may choose not to pursue a strategy of social reconstruction in the service of directly obtaining policy benefits. Perhaps members accept the dominant construction. Institutional structures may serve to reinforce the “naturalness” of marginalization. For example, the American education system, according to Samuel Bowles (1977), serves to reinforce class structure by making it seem natural. The author’s legitimation hypothesis posits that disadvantaged students may come to see their placement as due to their own internal qualities rather than a broader system that perpetuates identity-based inequalities.

Other members of disadvantaged groups may seek, not to change their categorization, but to challenge the dominance inherent in the constructive process itself, rejecting accommodation into the advantaged category and calling attention to the structural bases of inequality and marginalization. They may seek to keep, but own, their otherness.

Conclusion

Stories are powerful things, and they are powerful in complicated ways. An analysis of the creation of narrative ambiguity in the intentional effort of social reconstruction offers the potential to contribute to the study of public policy, protest, and social movements.

One area of inquiry involves an examination of the role of ambiguity and narrative choices in causal relationships. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of speeches, statements to the media, press releases, and congressional testimony can serve to explore changes in patterns of the language in media coverage, the language of questioning in legislative hearings, that of judicial judicial opinions, changes in public opinion over time, or even the language that researchers employed in the construction of the survey questions themselves. A consideration of strategic narrative reconstruction in the policy space offers the possibility of gaining more traction on the question of why some social movements succeed and others fail.

Narrative choices, however, can serve not only as independent variables in examining the success or failure in securing policy outcomes but also as the object of inquiry. These studies can serve to illuminate the contested processes of narrative presentation on the part of disenfranchised and marginalized groups, changes and adjustments to these efforts over time, comparatively across group and movement action, as well as cross-adoption and learning by members of other groups similarly and otherly constructed. Studies might explore the role of contestation the the selection of reconstructing narratives, path dependence in narrative choices, and the role of intersectionality, in an individual or group self-construction of identity and also in the choice set of strategic storytelling. Finally, such an approach serves to facilitate a reflexive approach on the part of researchers as they conceptualize and operationalize social construction and the narrative strategies of social reconstruction.

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Notes

[1] Jack Anderson and Les Whitten, "Sit-Ins Planned by Handicapped," March 27, 1977.
[2] Cesar E. Chavez, Telegram to Judy Heuman [sic], April 2, 1977 (D'Lil, 16).
[3] "The Value of Staying Safe," October 4, 2016, *AngloAmerican*, http://www.angloamerican.com/about-us/our-stories/global-safety-day-2016-a-childs-perspective-safety. Accessed March 20, 2018.
[4] "Implementation of Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973," *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Select Education* of the *Committee on Education and Labor*, 95th Congress, September, 9, 13, and 16, 1977.
[5] "Anonymous Number Three," *Alcoholics Anonymous* (3rd Edition), (New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976, 187-88).
[6] My thanks to Professor Joan Tronto and members of the University of Minnesota Department of Political Science Colloquium on Power, Equity, and Diversity for their thoughts on this question.