

## “This isn’t Right!”: A Sociological Approach to Social Justice

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Determining what “social justice” is and is not is of crucial importance. How the term is defined will shape groups’ organizing strategies such as; whom to regard as potential allies, how to frame political actions and demands, and identifying potential leverage points with the opposition. In this paper, I will argue that there is no final, universal answer to this question of definition. Instead, social justice is best viewed as a situated narrative that takes on different meanings in different contexts of struggle. This paper will examine narrative analysis (Somers, 1998, 2004) as an alternative approach to understanding social justice struggles. It will make the case that we need to participate in the identification of narratives, and the collective action that they spawn, that have been generated by groups of people’s sense of injustice. A brief discussion of evolutionary psychology as a source of both social cooperation and intergroup conflict (Greene, 2013) will provide a foundation for exploring a new sociological approach to struggles for social justice. Rather than attempting to develop universal principles that can apply to society in general a narrative approach can illuminate the strengths and limitations of existing and potential social justice struggles that grow out of our evolved moral architecture. This shifts the position of the analyst from advising top down policies and programs, to providing assistance and participation in specific struggles (see Graeber, 2013). [*Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2014 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.*]

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It seems more than a little presumptuous to attempt to define “social justice” given all that has been written about the concept. To make such

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an attempt one will be treading in the land of giants from Aristotle through Hume, Kant and Mill to Rawls, Sen and many others. Rather than taking on these giants, I want to shift the focus of the discussion; arguing that the central question, “What is Right?” which has framed much of the work in this area leads us into a thicket, much like the one the fox faced in his attempt to capture Brer Rabbit. That thicket is a place that we cannot get out of, because its focus on abstract principles obscures the actual social processes that people use to ‘do justice.’ In this article I want to demonstrate the value of moving the discussion regarding social justice in the direction of sociology and ask, “How do actual, contingent, historical human actors understand and mobilize themselves around issues that they perceive to be ‘issues of justice?’” Since my answer revolves around the central role of narratives in constituting and organizing individual and collective identity, I will start off with a brief vignette of two grandfathers that will form the basis of the following discussion.

## **TWO GRANDFATHERS AND THEIR PROGENY**

The first grandfather was the son of immigrant Swedish farmers who had settled in a small rural town about 30 miles west of Boston at the end of the 19th century. His parents never learned to speak English, but they encouraged their five children to go to school and church and become part of the community. This grandfather dropped out of school at the end of the 8th grade so that the oldest son in the family could complete a two year degree at the local agricultural college. Since his older brother was going to take over the farm, the future grandfather started working in town, first in a series of odd jobs, then eventually starting a bank with two other men that began as a series of envelopes in a shoe box. The bank later grew into a full-time job that was augmented for several years by working as a soda jerk behind the counter of the local pharmacy during his lunch hour. After banking hours, he started an insurance company with another friend. Over the years he became the treasurer of the town, a deacon in the church and a well-respected member of the community.

The second grandfather was equally hard working, but faced a different set of circumstances. Also the son of farmers, this second grandfather grew up in Georgia at the same time as the first, in the Jim Crow South. His parents were children of former slaves, and he grew up sharecropping on land owned by a family that had formerly been slave owners. He did not have much education either, but the option of getting

a job or contacts with economic growth potential in town was closed to him, so he became a farmer. He was known as a proud hardworking man who was also respected in his community. One day he was in town to sell his crop. He got into an argument with the grain dealer over the price being offered and he refused to sell his harvest, returning home with his wagon still full. Later that night, a group of men on horseback with torches and dressed in robes rode up to his house. This second grandfather walked out onto his front porch and in full view of his family, who were huddled together at the front window, he exclaimed that no White man was going to string him up from a tree, and he shot himself in the head.

The grandsons of these two men met some 60 years later, after the event that night on the front porch. One, the son of the first grandfather, was finishing his second Master's degree in Urban Policy when they met. The grandson of the second had gone to college on a football scholarship and had dropped out of school before finishing his last semester. They met while working in a government-funded program for low-income urban youths, became friends and started their own business, partially financed by stock from the first grandfather's bank.

These two stories in one, contain several features and themes that will be developed in this paper. First, although the experiences of these two men who became grandfathers are separate in terms of geography they are related. They occur in the same country, at around the same time, to two men who started off in very similar circumstances. The fate of one might be connected in some way with the fate of the other beyond just the coincidence of their grandson's meeting. Second, there is a moral dimension to this story. The story of the first grandfather contains echoes of the Horatio Alger, rags to riches narrative. He seems to embody the Protestant Work Ethic. The moral dimension in the second grandfather's story is a little more complex. Hard working and proud, he did not accept what he perceived to be the unfair terms for his crop. His pride also prevented him from being a mere victim of violence and retribution. Knowing he was going to die, he took the situation into his own hands, thereby teaching his family one last lesson, about honor and personhood. Third, the juxtaposition of the two stories highlights a social dimension that neither man created or chose for himself – one man was White and the other Black. The fact that two men with similar characteristics and values could experience such drastically different outcomes is an important element of what we refer to as social justice.

Finally, neither man lived a life that was destined to be recorded in a history book. Yet, their stories live on in the family narratives handed

down from generation to generation. As such they still inform and animate the lives and choices of people long removed from the circumstances of each of their upbringings. And when the two stories were combined through friendship they became a resource that continues to inform the notions of social justice of both grandsons.

The central argument of this paper can be boiled down to four propositions:

1. The defining of an issue as one that involves, or is related to, “social justice” is a social achievement/accomplishment, that grows out of particular circumstances and experiences.
2. That we are predisposed through our evolutionary heritage to respond to certain situations and particular dilemmas using capacities and dispositions that are connected to notions that we now refer to as ‘social justice’.
3. That any framing of an issue or situation as involving “social justice” presupposes or is based on a narrative that establishes certain identities, positions those identities in a plot, mobilizes and makes possible a certain range of actions which lead to a limited number of potential conclusions.
4. That these narratives can be analyzed in terms of the networks of actors that might, or might not be, fostered, and strategies or proposals they might or might not present as plausible or reasonable.

## **PHILOSOPHICAL INTERLUDE**

Philosophers have long pondered the elements and features of a “just” society. From Plato’s Republic, to Aristotle’s telos through to Bentham’s utilitarianism and Kant’s moral reasoning on to Rawl’s principles of liberty and equality based on the “veil of ignorance” the question of “what is the right thing to do?”, both for individuals and governments has been a mainstay in Western thought (Sandel, 2009). I want to briefly review the philosophical approach to justice in order to identify its limitations and differences from the approach advanced here.

The primary distinction between theories of justice and the argument put forward here is one of perspective. The moral philosophers attempt to ground their discussions in examples from everyday life such as choices around reproduction or the care of a stranger. However, these examples are meant to illustrate abstract principles of moral reasoning with the aim of determining what the correct choice should be in every particular

instance of a situation. Greene (2013) describes this as the “*if all else is equal*” strategy (italics in original). This strategy essentially strips people of their agency by making them passive enactors of reasoning strategies that should always lead to the same outcome. It also focuses primarily on individuals and leaves out questions of social or economic power, or the influence of community, except as passing references.

Two brief examples will have to serve to make the point. Rawls (1971) grounds his set of principles for a just society on a thought experiment. Suppose that there really was a point in time where a group of people actually got together to form a social contract. Now further suppose that each person was stripped of any knowledge of their future circumstances i.e. whether they were going to be rich or poor, a member of a despised social group or a member of the elite, and therefore had particularistic interest that would warp their impartiality. Given that situation, what principles would they be likely to propose? This forms the basis for his theory of justice. The principles of liberty and equality are supposed to flow logically from this initial condition. The obvious problem is that in the actual world of real human beings, no one who is old enough to enter into a contract has those characteristics and the simple rational demonstration of a set of principles based on the ignorance of those characteristics has not proven to be persuasive to large groups of people.

A similar problem is inherent in the tradition of Utilitarianism. For Utilitarians, all satisfactions and preferences can be boiled down to one good – happiness. A just society is one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Greene (2013) refers to this as the “common denominator,” that he thinks can be used to transcend differences across seemingly intractable moral divides. Greene tries to ground his approach in how people actually think about moral issues and makes reference to much of the same work on evolutionary and cognitive psychology that will be discussed in more detail below. He observes that our more rational faculties have evolved relatively recently in the development of our brains and argues that we can override our tribal instincts through our use of what he refers to as “manual mode.” This manual mode will allow us to think like philosophers and make compromises in the diverse marketplace of ideas aimed at maximizing the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Although a much different approach than Rawls’, it also suffers from the same effort at trying to universalize an abstract set of principles that rational individuals will then use to make just decisions. This ignores the various sets of power relationships, definitions of truth and authority, and

narratively constructed identities that actual groups of people use to make sense of, and act on, the world around them.

Two thinkers whose origins' lie outside of the West have moved this philosophical discussion in new and interesting directions, both by posing questions that grow out of the awareness of acute injustice rooted in the experience of colonialism (Appiah, 2010; Sen, 1999). Sen (1999, 2009) makes a significant shift in the debate over inequality, by shifting the focus from the poor as passive "patients" who lack income, to active agents who have been deprived of the opportunity to develop their capacities. The primary focus of most post-colonial efforts at economic development in poor countries has been on the use of top-down strategies by government elites and outside "experts" at making these newly independent countries "modern" in ways that neglected recognizing people who are poor as independent human beings who deserve a voice in the direction and meaning of "development."

This focus on development as capacity has spawned a significant body of work aimed at re-orienting development efforts in ways that recognize the integrity and autonomy of individuals and communities (see Nussbaum, 2011; Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). Rather than a focus on equality of incomes, Sen and others advocate focusing attention on the entire range of political, cultural and economic institutions that serve to deprive currently disempowered people from pursuing their lives in self-directed ways. This approach has significant implications for social justice by its implicit questioning of the existing arrangements of power. It does this in an oddly abstract and almost bureaucratic way, however.

Partly inspired by Sen's work, the UN has for more than a decade published a Human Development Index (HDR, 2013) which attempts to capture the multitude of variables related to the development of capabilities of each country and then ranks them. While full of insights, this sophisticated analysis still operates at the level of macro-policy. Sen quite effectively describes the dynamics of the system that operates to keep people disenfranchised, or in his words possessing diminished capabilities, but he does not look at the collective possibilities of those people except in passing. Although his work is clearly motivated by a deep-rooted sense of injustice, (see in particular in his discussion of famines) that sense is watered down and even lost in the abstract discussion of capabilities. In his most recent book on justice (Sen, 2009), which he dedicates to the memory of John Rawls, Sen still operates within a rational universalizing approach as he argues for his comparative approach to justice with its focus on the capabilities of people to engage in the pursuit of the good life, but with a pragmatic

twist. “What is needed instead is an agreement, based on public reasoning, on rankings of alternatives that can be realized (17).”

Appiah, shares with Sen a deep grounding in the moral philosophy of the West, along with an astute understanding of the very different culture of Ghana in which he was born (1992). Rather than the development of a new theoretical framework, he explores the dynamics and history of three successful social justice movements; the elimination of dueling, the ending of the practice of foot binding in China, and the ending of the Atlantic Slave Trade (Appiah, 2010).

Appiah (2010) begins his discussion of the abolition movement in Great Britain with an important observation. “To understand the abolition movement we need to first grasp that it required more than the conviction that slavery was morally wrong. What we have to explain here ... is why, in the political life of the nation, people came to act on that conviction. For anti-slavery sentiments were widely diffused well before the abolitionist movement really took off (108).” According to Appiah, the catalyst that caused people to act was a sense of identity among the growing English middle class that their honor as free persons made it impossible for them to allow their country to condone the slave trade. As the battle over the liberty embodied in the colonial revolt against the Crown heated up on both sides of the Atlantic the movement to abolish the slave trade did as well. By the early 1790s between 300,000 and 400,000 people participated in boycotts of slave grown sugar. The argument that slave trade was a “national disgrace” that no self-respecting free-born Englishman should countenance developed such widespread support that Parliament was finally compelled to end the trade in 1807 (115).

Appiah comes the closest of the philosophers at recognizing the power of moral ideas held by groups of people in shaping and giving energy to movements for social justice. He observes at one point that, “working-class people needed, as we all do, to live with an image of themselves that allowed them self-respect (2010:134).” That insight holds a key to the experience of identity. We conceive of ourselves as a certain type of person who possesses a finite list of qualities and who engages in some actions and not others. Those conceptions are part of a larger narrative that makes sense of the social and economic relations around us in ways that are infused with moral meanings.

Although full of insights and possibilities, these philosophical interventions into the realm of social justice are ineffective. As will be argued below, they ignore the existence of our moral emotional-cognitive architecture that has evolved in our species during our time as hunter and

gatherers and the variety of cultural narrative structures that have been built by all human societies on that foundation. Only by understanding these two aspects of our capacities as a social species can we adequately understand what, how, and why different groups of people choose to act on issues that they perceive as related to “social justice”.

## EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

There have been two research efforts over the past 25 – 30 years which have been addressing many of the same topics, but which have operated largely independently of each other. During the same time that many researchers in sociology, history and anthropology were making the case for the social construction of categories such as race, gender and ethnicity, (Appiah, 1992; Smedley, 1998) researchers in the field of evolutionary psychology were identifying a biological basis for a set of cognitive predispositions which provide the basis for human social behavior (Pinker, 2002). Although there was little dialogue between the two efforts, the impetus for the former was partly a reaction to the crude essentialist formulations of race that emerged in the writings of authors such as Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and, in part, motivated by a reaction to the alleged implications of work in the emerging field of sociobiology such as E.O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology* (Pinker, 2002).

Almost 30 years after Wilson’s book produced a firestorm of criticism, the two research programs are ready to converge and inform a more unified picture of human social behavior. This can provide a basis for a clearer understanding of the evolutionary sources for our various understandings of justice and some of the dynamics and parameters within which those understandings develop and change in our contemporary world.

The work of evolutionary psychologists points to the presence of several cognitive capacities that form the precursors or preconditions for our experience of, and later, our understanding of, justice. The argument is that our emotions, and the cognitive structures that frame them, are the primary organizers for our sense of injustice. Although many individuals for at least the last seven thousand years (Sen, 2009) have tried to develop general principles for the just society, there is little evidence that actual ‘social justice’ movements have been primarily motivated by a reading of theorists such as Plato or even Marx, particularly among their grass-roots membership.

Interestingly, although largely absent from the contemporary discussion, Kropotkin (1914) foreshadowed much of this discussion in



his evolutionary analysis of mutual aid. He traced the development of cooperation, based on the evidence that was available at the time, from animals, through early human groups, the rise of “barbarian” tribes, the medieval period to the development of capitalist states. Throughout his analysis he describes the relationship between humans instinctual propensities and the social and material conditions which they find themselves in, in a particular period of time. “Man is a result of both his inherited instincts and his education. Among the miners and the seamen, their common occupations and their every-day contact with one another create a feeling of solidarity, while the surrounding dangers maintain courage and pluck” (1914, 277). This capacity for solidarity, which emerges in different forms in different circumstances, is based on inherited capacities that have more recently been described in more detail.

These cognitive capacities include; the identification of agency in others (Waytz et.al., 2010), the social strategies associated with the practice of reciprocal altruism (Trivers,1971), a sense of fairness in distribution of resources (Gintis, 2000; Ostrom et.al. 1992), and the capacity to organize the social world in terms of in-group and out-group members (Choi & Bowles, 2007, Waytz & Eoley, 2012). The basic argument is that these capacities evolved as our species adapted to their ancestral environment (AE) as hunters and gathers (Norenzayan, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Through all of these capacities one gets a picture of human actors as something other than rational, calculating individuals primarily focused on maximizing their self-interest as presented in the standard economic narrative which is taken as “common sense” by many in today’s society (Margolin, 2008).

### *Capacities*

One of the core capacities that make morality possible is the ability to understand the minds of others. This capacity involves being able to infer intentions, categorize behavior, and most importantly, perceive the Other as having a mind similar to one’s own (Waytz et.al., 2010). This capacity is essential to moral concern, because those entities or beings who are perceived to be like us are considered more deserving of our concern than those who are less like us. In a series of experiments using an instrument aimed at measuring the propensity of individuals to engage in anthropomorphism, Waytz, Cacoppa & Epley (2010) provide support for three general observations about the effects of human agents perceiving humanlike minds in others.

1. That agent's with minds are capable of conscious experience and therefore are deserving of moral care and concern.
2. That agent's with minds are capable of intentional actions and should therefore be responsible for their actions, and
3. That agent's with minds are, "capable of observing, evaluating, and judging a perceiver, thereby serving as a source of normative social influence on the perceiver." (222).

This capacity to perceive the intentions and make moral-like choices based on those perceptions has been observed in infants as young as three months old (Hamlin, Wynn & Bloom, 2010). In an experiment where infants were shown an entity climbing up a hill and either being helped or hindered in their efforts by another entity, the 3 month-olds expressed a clear preference for the helper entity. In another series of experiments with slightly older infants the same team found that by 8 months infants not only expressed a clear preference for the helper, or prosocial individuals, but also a preference for others who engaged in negative behaviors toward anti-social others (the hinderers) (Hamlin, et.al., 2011). This 'altruistic punishment' or punishing behavior that does not directly produce benefits for the punisher, we will see, is one of the constituent features of reciprocal altruism and "this capacity may serve as the foundation for moral thought and action, and its early developmental emergence supports the view that social evaluation is a biological adaptation" (Hamlin, Wynn & Bloom, 2007: 557)

This capacity to recognize an intentional mind in others provides the basis in humans for the development of reciprocal altruism. Trivers (1971) identifies a behavior as being altruistic when that behavior, "benefits another organism, not closely related, while being apparently detrimental to the organism performing the behavior (35)." The challenge for evolutionary theorists since Darwin has been to explain how such a behavioral trait could spread through a population through the process of natural selection. At the level of individual behaviors, altruists would appear to be selected against in a population because of the higher likelihood that the organism performing the altruistic behavior would have a lower probability of survival compared to their more selfish non-altruistic counterparts.

Trivers' (1971) offers a compelling model for explaining how altruism could have evolved that can be used to understand the observed behavior of a number of different species, including humans. His model is an interesting twist on the Hobbesian vision of selfish behavior. The key

feature of most, if not all, altruistic acts is that, “the benefit of the altruistic act to the recipient is greater than the cost of the act to the performer (36)”. The central idea is that altruistic behavior evolved in response to a specific set of conditions whereby potentially self-sacrificing behavior increased the survivability of the genes of the organism performing the altruistic act through the ongoing system of reciprocal exchange. Rather than considering a single altruistic act, such as diving into a pond to save the life of a stranger’s child, altruistic behavior can best be understood as part of a system of exchange between individuals in a small interdependent group that share in a dense set of relationships over time. The parameters of the system of reciprocal altruism in Trivers’ model describe the basic conditions of early hunter and gathering groups, which consisted of a relatively small group of interdependent individuals who shared a common area over a long period of time. To these conditions are added a long period of parental care that can serve as a basic model of altruistic behavior and the lack of a strict, rigidly enforced dominance hierarchy (37 – 38). He argues that “under these conditions one would expect selection to favor developmental plasticity of those traits regulating altruistic and cheating tendencies in others (53)”.

What makes altruism possible in humans is a) the repeated opportunity to provide a benefit to another group member at relatively less cost to oneself, and b) the ability to expect repayment over time from the recipient. These conditions led to the development, not only of altruistic behaviors, but to a set of psychological feelings like the emotion of guilt, and the creation of detection systems for dealing with cheaters (Trivers, 1971, 47-54). His model has gained further support since it was first proposed from experiments using variations on the Prisoners Dilemma Game and the addition of the concept of altruistic punishment (Gintis, 2000).

The challenge in any system of reciprocal altruism is how to guard against cheating. Cheating usually takes the form of not returning the favor of the altruist, thereby playing him for a dupe. If behavior is viewed in terms of single transactions, then there is little incentive for the person on the receiving end of the altruistic behavior to respond in kind, since they have already received the benefit and would be incurring an unnecessary risk in order to reciprocate. What allows the system to operate over time is the ability of the group, not just the altruist alone, to punish the potential cheater, thereby bringing them in conformity with group norms and expectations, and making cooperation possible.

In the classic version of the Ultimatum Game a proposer is given a sum of money and is told to offer any amount of that sum they wish to a second person who, under conditions of anonymity, can either accept the offer, in which case the money is shared as the first individual proposed, or reject the offer, in which case neither party receives anything. If people were purely self-interested the first person (the proposer) would offer only a token amount and the second (the responder) would always accept the offer, since anything is better than nothing. However, in multiple studies in a variety of cultures and varying situations this rarely occurs. As Gintis (2000) observes from his review of the literature, “under varying conditions and with varying amounts of money, proposers routinely offer respondents very substantial amounts (50% of the total being the modal offer), and respondents frequently reject low offers (e.g., offers below 30%). These results are obtained in experiments with stakes as high as three months’ earnings (4).”

The system of altruistic punishment is illuminated further in a variation of the Ultimatum referred to as the Public Goods Game. In this version, a group of subjects are told that in each round of the game they will receive a sum of, say \$1, for playing that round. During each round each participant can decide to move some or all of their money from their private account to a common pool. For each dollar that a participant deposits in the common pool, the experimenter will deposit \$.50 in each player’s private account (Gintis, 2000, 5-6). This is a clear test of cooperation, because the self-interested strategy would be to put nothing into the common pool and reap the benefits of others sharing. If only one round of the game is played, most participants will contribute about half of their share. If there are multiple rounds then a high level of sharing is evident in the early stages. The level of sharing begins to decrease in the middle stages and is at or near zero by the end of the game.

This decrease in cooperation is reversed, however, when the opportunity to punish non-cooperators is added to the game. Ostrom, Walker and Gardner (1992) added the ability to “punish” the non-cooperators by offering participants the opportunity to pay a fee that would allow them to “fine” or tax other subjects. Thus, these altruistic punishers would be hurting themselves in order to improve outcomes for the whole group in terms of increased cooperation in later rounds. “When the capacity to punish was combined with the opportunity, part way through the game, for the participants to talk about norms and strategy the outcome across many different trials was both a high degree of cooperation (93%) and low levels of punishment (4%) contrary to the expectations of game theory and economic approaches (414).”

All of this capacity to cooperate within a group comes with a dark side. Several theorists have argued that one of the main selective pressures that led to the development of within group cooperation was the competition with outside groups over scarce resources. This has led Choi and Bowles (2007) to use the term “parochial altruism.” Through the use of both mathematical models and agent-based computer simulations, they have demonstrated the theoretical possibility for the joint evolution of within group altruism and intergroup war-like behavior. This model helps explain both the ethnographic and archaeological evidence as well as the observed behavior of Papua New Guinea tribes. They note that, “parochial altruism could have emerged and proliferated among early humans because our ancestors lived in environments in which competition for resources favored groups with substantial numbers of parochial altruists willing to engage in hostile conflict with outsiders on behalf of their fellow group members (636).”

Choi and Bowles (2007) add two important qualifications to their model. First, no group needs to have all of its members behaving as parochial altruists in order to have a selective advantage over other groups, only more than the other group has. There are three other groups in their model with one, the tolerant non-altruists benefiting more from between group interaction, for example in the form of increased trade. In situations of group threat, parochial altruists proliferate and in times of peace the tolerant non-altruists come to the fore. Second, Choi and Bowles do not claim that they have found genetic causality, only the possibility of one. In conclusion they note that, “we have not shown that a warlike predisposition exists, only that should one exist, it might have coevolved with altruism and warfare in the way that we have described (640).”

In a series of experiments aimed at testing the implications of Choi and Bowles’ model, Waytz & Epley (2012) demonstrate how subjects might dehumanize or morally disengage from others when their sense of in-group solidarity was heightened. In four different experiments, subjects who were primed to feel a heightened sense of social connection with members of their group were significantly more likely to attribute diminished mental capacities to members of other groups such as warmth and competence (71). Subjects were also willing to endorse harsher punishments, failed to attribute human-like mental states and reported that it was acceptable to treat other members of an out-group like animals (74).

Waytz and Epley suggest that “people consider themselves to be exemplars of humanity, and as others become less similar to the self,

they are evaluated as less humanlike as well (71).” Thus, “increasing social connection diminishes the motivation to connect with the minds of *additional* others and increases the social distance between the self and more distant others (74).” The authors point out that the process of dehumanization or the ability to attribute diminished mental and emotional capacity to distant others, does not only make possible extreme forms of aggression or violence such as the African slave trade, or the Holocaust. It more commonly leads to simple indifference or the narrowing of the moral circle to those who are similar in some attribute of group connection.

We can see the manifestations of these constructs in our vignette of the two grandfathers. For the second grandfather, these constructs are evident in at least three ways. First, his sense of fairness had been violated when he took his crop to the market. As we will explore more deeply in the next section, his sense of himself, his identity as a human being of equal power and standing was challenged by the ‘take it or leave it’ low price. From the purely rational economic maximizing utility perspective he was quite possibly making the wrong economic choice (Marglin, 2008), but similar to the subjects in the Ultimatum Game, he would rather take nothing than be taken as someone unworthy of his fair share.

Although not commonly thought of in terms such as justice, the members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) were enacting a narrative that was also rooted in a millennium-old dynamic. These parochial altruists were protecting the sanctity, as well as the power, of their group. The KKK members could engage in unspeakable violence toward this grandfather and his family because they had dehumanized them. The second grandfather was considered a despised outsider by these men and could rightfully be treated in ways unimaginable for even those guilty of fairly heinous ‘crimes’ who were members of the KKK’s own group. This Black family was not viewed as fellow human beings working, hoping, and loving in the same ways as themselves, but instead were a threat to the power and prerogatives of the group that they themselves belonged to.

The third aspect of the story that involves injustice is the scene on the front porch. Why take his own life, in front of his family, if it was at least remotely possible that he could have survived with some lesser injury? The answer is that the form our death takes is a matter of honor and hence of justice as well. Taking his own life was the only way he could exercise his agency. Anything less and he would not be able to conceive of himself as a person worthy of respect. The ability to perceive agency

in ourselves and others is not something that we can turn off like a light switch. It forms a core aspect of our identity, even as the social meanings that are tied to that agency change over time and context. We will take up this idea of identity in more detail in the next section.

The discussion of evolutionary psychology sheds some light on an aspect of justice in the story of the first grandfather as well. This grandfather was not troubled by concerns about justice for several reasons that become clearer through an understanding of our core cognitive constructs. He lived in a fairly small New England town in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where most interactions were face to face, people had long-standing relationships of memory and interaction going back two or more generations, and individual actions had a fair amount of transparency through proximity and gossip. This setting probably more closely mirrored the structural features of our ancestral environment than any other setting that existed in the last century. The absence of major issues of injustice in this setting is its most interesting feature. People had a bounded set of commitments, were free to act within a defined set of practices and were judged based on their actions. This allowed the first grandfather to feel comfortable that he had earned his station in life through his own personal efforts and that he owed little to others outside of his community, except in the form of voluntary charity and reciprocal altruism.

These evolved cognitive constructs are probably less than half of the picture, regarding our practice of justice, but they form the basis upon which everything else is built. That evolved sociality is rooted in the practice of telling stories, upon which culture evolved.

## **NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

There are two theoretical consequences of this exploration of evolutionary psychology. First, one cannot look at our genes for the answer to the question, “what is social justice?” Although there seems to be little question that there is a biologically evolved basis for our moral capacity, it is clear that we are talking about traits and tendencies that can be activated or not, in a variety of ways under certain conditions. There is no set of genes that governs our sense of injustice over racism or economic inequality in the same way that there is a set of genes that code for the production of a kidney. Second, it puts to rest the idea of human beings as rational choice actors, such as the conception of *homo economicus* (Margolin, 2008). The prefrontal cortex of our brain is not the sole or even primary source for our moral judgments. It may be able

to override the moral propensities that emerge from our earlier evolved brain regions, but this realm of the philosophers is not where the real action is. In fact, there is evidence that the primary role of the pre-frontal cortex is to come up with the rationalizations for our behavior, and its primordial origins, in order to make it appear rational (Greene, 2013).

What emerges instead is a conception of human actors as possessing a substrate of cognitive-emotive capacities linked to cooperative strategies that proved adaptive for the survival of relatively small groups of hunters and gatherers. Developing from this foundation has been a diverse array of culturally evolved adaptations that have built upon and been shaped by these in-born capacities. One of the outgrowths of these capacities has been the emergence of story-telling as a key feature of human social life (Tomasello, 2003).

If we are a story-telling species then it follows that the stories or narratives that we tell ourselves and each other are not simply for entertainment. There are two possible arguments related to the nature or status of these narratives. The first, or what I refer to as the weak version, is that narratives are a reflection of the social dynamics of a group, community or collective and we can therefore use narratives as a window through which we can see those underlying processes (Elliott, 2005). This is the version used implicitly by much of the work that is referred to as Narrative Analysis. The second version I will call the strong version because it extends the first notion into the realm of identity and argues that narratives not only reflect, but also constitute the social life of groups through the creation of social identities which form parts in a larger narrative structure. This strong version has been referred to as “ontological narratives” (Somers, 1994). The argument is a social constructivist one growing out of the work of thinkers such as Wittgenstein, 1953/2009 (Whorf, 1964), and others that the language we use and the stories that we tell actually help constitute the social identities of both individuals and groups. Space does not allow for a full analysis of the limitations of the weak version and the merits of the strong, but it is the strong version of narrative, which I believe is supported by the earlier discussion of evolutionary psychology and the research cited below, which I will develop in what follows. My focus will be on the ways in which narratives facilitate the development of, and provide limits or parameters on, various forms of collective action organized around issues of social justice.

Bruner (1987/2004) examines the structure of autobiographical narratives in order to explore the ways in which the structure of the narrative itself shapes and organizes individuals’ experience of their



lives. He describes the stories that three members of a family tell about who they are and concludes from his case study that, “eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (694) (italics in original).

This small scale analysis, is extended to the group level in Polleta’s (1998) analysis of the narratives that generated, and were generated by, the student sit-in movement in the spring of 1960 which propelled the Civil Rights Movement to a new level of activism and mobilized a heretofore unorganized group of actors in the cause. Seemingly without organizational support or sponsorship, four Black students sat-in at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina and touched off a wave of non-violent transgressions of the racial status quo of Jim Crow. The protests were described by both the media and the activists themselves as ‘spontaneous.’ Prior to February 1960, students had been viewed as apathetic and marginal actors in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans. This changed dramatically in short order. After the sit-ins started, accounts described the spontaneity and seeming inevitability of the protests as the result of “centuries of accumulated anger (146)”, and students from colleges across the country were in competition to prove their activist credentials.

In her analysis of the contemporary accounts of the protests and the retrospective interviews with the actors involved, Polleta demonstrates that the narratives that emerged from these protests, not only described, but also constituted, the identities, moral position, and theory of action of the protestors, both making participation in the protests a prized social identity and providing strategic limits to the forms those protests could take. She identifies three elements making up the narrative of the sit-in movement: plot, personification, and repetition of a complex word (147).

The plot of this narrative consisted of turning an everyday act of Black humiliation under Jim Crow (refusal to be served at a lunch counter) into an act of heroism and triumph. Accounts of the sit-ins were replete with descriptions of the perplexed, then angry reactions of Whites to this transgression of the social order. Reactions across the country on campuses and in the mainstream press declared that the country would not be the same after these protests. “With respect to plot, the sit-ins reversed a situation of student apathy and a movement dominated by adult gradualism; they created a new, student-led, action-oriented movement (147)”.

Personification took the form of protagonists (the activists), antagonists (White police officers, citizens, and store employees), and witnesses (other students, Civil Rights organizations, and the larger public). Polleta argues that the activists were also witnesses as they, “realized their own capacity for transformative action ... and potential student activists who ... recogniz(ed) their potential selves in the sit-in story (148)”. Each group had particular roles to play in this morally rich drama.

The third element consisted of the repetition of the word “spontaneity.” The term contained several implications in the context of the movement. The notion of spontaneity indicated an irresistible force that could no longer be contained that had burst forth without overt instrumental planning. This contrasted sharply with the slow pace of change being produced by the mainstream civil rights organizations, and constituted a challenge to them. “The sit-ins were thus represented as signaling the death of an old movement and the birth of a new (149)”.

This narrative of spontaneity, in addition to creating a new set of identities and making a new set of actions possible, also established some limits on the types of subsequent organizing and institution building that was available to actors within the narrative. The narrative of spontaneity made the sit-ins compelling, but cast other activities such as planning in a more negative light. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which was created in response to the sit-ins was a very different organization compared to its more established Civil Rights counterparts:

A narrative of the sit-ins warranted SNCC as a kind of ‘anti-organization,’ as observers would later call it, an organization that sought not so much to guide the struggle as to go where people were ‘moving;’ that was less interested in executing a well-planned agenda than in enacting in its own operation the society it envisaged, and that privileged direct and moral action over political maneuvering (152).

Narratives obviously do not operate independent of the environmental, economic, and political conditions of which they are a part. They exist in a dynamic relationship with those external factors, both as a tool for individuals and groups to adapt to particular settings and as an intervention that can change the features of those settings over time. Holland, Fox and Daro (2008) provide two case studies that illustrate the influence of those relationships.

In their first case study, the authors' examined the Mi'kmaq campaign to gain legal fishing rights in waterways that had long been a source of sustenance for the tribe. Through a long campaign that mobilized a dormant sense of tribal identity, combined with a legal effort, the tribe finally won a Canadian court decision granting fishing rights. This victory proved to be a two-edged sword, however. The narrative of tribal identity centered on fish and the practice of fishing as one element in a constellation of practices and norms that constituted the Mi'kmaq was the foundation of the campaign that led to the ground-breaking court decision. The court, however, granted fishing rights to individual members of a particular group within the context of a market economy based on commercial high-yield, capital intensive fishing practices. Within ten years, a number of younger men of the tribe were operating commercial fishing vessels and struggling to pay off large debts as the fishing stocks began to decline. Holland et. al. (2008) conclude that:

The collective identity used to mobilize people during the *Marshall* trial was no longer relevant, as the meaning of fish had shifted from food to commodity. Mi'kmaq fishers' attitudes and practices were changing to reflect the individual, capitalist ethic of the commercial fishing industry where prestige is accorded based on high catches and monetary accumulation, rather than on the 'traditional' Mi'kmaq cultural ethic of taking only what you need and sharing with neighbors. (104)

The Mi'kmaq's social justice struggle centered on their identity as a particular group possessing a particular ancestry and tradition. This mismatch between the economic and institutional relations that existed in the time of their ancestors and the time of the court victory proved to be too great to sustain the identities that were embedded in the narrative that had made the victory possible.

Their second case study examines the anti-globalization movement and a particular action at the G8 summit in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2005. What their research makes clear is that there is not one single monolithic anti-globalization movement, but a number of diverse groups with different narratives struggling to enact different conceptions of social justice. Their ethnography of the protestors and the police show a complex set of moral identities within the sphere of protestors themselves as well as a concerted attempt on the part of law enforcement to create a moral wedge between the protestors and "the public" through the categorization of 'good' and 'bad' protestors. Groups within the

movement and those battling the movement were actively struggling to frame a convincing narrative that cast their actions and identities as ‘just’ in relation to the other elements of the story:

A fairly consistent set of divisions that activists use to draw distinctions among themselves: those who are willing or desire to be arrested versus those who are not; those who are targeted by police because they appear dangerous versus those who intentionally or unintentionally appear ‘harmless’; those who have endured various degrees of police brutality and/or incarceration versus those with less experience being criminalized (Holland, Fox and Daro, 2008:108).

A last example that captures the relationship between narratives that create particular identities and the institutional structures that they help to support and develop, comes from the work of Freund (2007). Examining the history of housing development and government policy in suburban United States from 1910 – 1970, augmented by a case study of Detroit from the 1940s onward, he details how changing conceptions of race and racial identity interacted with zoning regulations and other government policies to create a segregated housing market. He documents how racial identity and housing segregation were not two separate variables, but an integrated narrative that shaped the understandings, goals, and behavior of large groups of people as they went about creating homes and communities for their families. He observes that:

The question is not whether ‘race’ *or* ‘economics’ fueled segregation and segregationist politics or even how ‘race *and* class interact’ to do so. The question is how and why people of European descent became so deeply invested, both materially and ideologically, in a new market for residence that was racially constructed. After World War II, most whites assumed that black occupancy posed a categorical threat to white-owned property. They equated whiteness with homeownership and citizenship, and they understood residential segregation not primarily as a matter of ‘ideology’ or prejudice, but rather as a matter of development economics. By the 1960’s, countless whites had determined that private property, neighborhoods, and local government institutions had economic values that were racially specific (390-391). (*italics in original*).

These brief examples provide a picture of the variety and complexity of the struggles for social justice within particular groups. In each case, the narrative is not simply a story, but the mechanism by which networks of people understand themselves and their actions in the world. “Quite simply, narrative is the primary means that we have to make sense of the multiple events, actors, and ideas found in life, whether actual or fictional, personal or organizational. These elements are not simply random events, actors and ideas that appear together coincidentally – rather, they are linked together into a whole in a meaningful way, that way being the narrative.” (Lejana et. al.,2013:51)

We can see how the operation of narratives played out in the lives of our two grandfathers. The first did not experience any significant sense of injustice. Within the narrative that he used to make sense of himself and his world, people were primarily judged on the basis of their individual actions, their intentions and goals were fairly transparent, and the community as a whole functioned to keep deviant behavior within limits through the actions of a few, relatively benign altruistic punishers. There was no dominant group in power attempting to extract exorbitant benefits from others. The moral circle of this relatively egalitarian world was fairly small, however. This grandfather was not particularly moved by the struggles of those citizens of the same country, or even the same state who did not share in the same structural features as those that existed in his small town. He was aware of the events happening in the wider world, but they were beyond the bounds of the narrative that provided meaning for his actions and therefore those struggles did not provoke any action on his part.

The second grandfather occupied a subordinate narrative within a highly exploitative set of structural relationships. That subordination was enforced by a concrete set of economic and institutional practices that was supported and justified by a narrative of the inherent inferiority of the members of his group. He resisted that dominant narrative to the greatest extent possible, building and participating in a narrative of honor, respect and hard work.

At this point it is clear that the narratives of the two grandfathers were not connected. It is not enough to say that they inhabited two different worlds. They shared the same language and country, were integrated into the same political and economic system and were part of the same system of mass media and communication. Furthermore, the Civil War had potentially made Northerners and African Americans common allies around a common set of values related to liberty and citizenship, or at the very least a commitment to the institution of wage labor, which

dominated the North. The fact that this did not happen was partly the result of the power of the narrative of White in-group solidarity when faced with a perceived threat, and in part to the Southern elites' ability to retake the political and economic institutions of the South through force and violence (Budiansky, 2008; Lemann, 2006).

## ISSUE VS. MOVEMENT

“Social Movements can be viewed as collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new system of living.” (Blumer, quoted in Day, 2004:742)

If our sense of social justice is derived from our evolved moral architecture rather than abstract principles derived from a conception of ‘the good life,’ and our individual and collective identities are rooted in moral narratives that shape our relationships within shifting groups that we are members of and between those groups and others that we are not, then the focus of research and activism needs to be on the concrete and contingent struggles of people as they define situations as just and unjust. The delineation of abstract principles may be useful in the margins of discussions about particular policies and it may provide useful rationales for social movements whose source of energy is elsewhere. But the real action lies in the wellsprings of moral outrage and compassion. As intellectuals and activists our energy is better spent exploring the narratives and the underlying conditions that influence and are influenced by them as groups of people struggle over particular issues of “social justice.”

### *Two Examples*

New narratives cannot be constructed analytically and handed over, in a top-down fashion to groups of people. But analyses of existing narratives can help illuminate the strengths and limitations embedded in their structure and provide a contribution to the strategic discussion of particular groups that are wrestling with the challenges of organizing and development. Two brief examples will help illustrate what this process might look like.

There is a new narrative among politicians and others on the political left regarding the growing level of inequality that is struggling to gain traction. Bill DeBlasio was recently elected Mayor of New York partly on the basis of his ‘Tale of Two Cities’ (DeBlasio, 2014). President Obama has also emphasized the growing gap between rich and poor, although he has backed off a bit in recent months and instead focused on economic mobility and opportunity. The proper level of inequality that can be tolerated in a “just” society has been a much-discussed topic in political philosophy (Sandel, 2009), but there seems to be little consensus about what that level might be or what to do to achieve it.

From a narrative perspective, trying to fashion a social movement around the issue of income inequality appears to have a number of potential problems. First, the main actors in the narrative are by definition victims. Few people who are concerned about the issue of inequality view their status on the lower rungs of the income and wealth distribution as a result of their freely chosen actions. Second, in its crudest form the narrative places all people who are wealthy as the bad guys irrespective of the source of their wealth or how they have exercised the power that their wealth has provided them. Third, this leaves the possible resolutions to the narrative as essentially taking the form of some kind of redistribution, either through taxation or some other means and the only qualification for receiving a share of that redistributed income would be a simple lack of income. This resolution has the residual effect of strengthening the power of the government.

This narrative may help get a few politicians elected, but it appears fairly limited. It is rooted in our evolved sense of fairness, but it is unlikely to generate the passion or staying power of a movement, because it is not centered around the construction of a new identity or the protection of an old one. A more promising approach to the same problem would be to focus attention on the idea of something like “jobs with honor.” As more and more people are being downsized and deskilled and workers are spending “careers” of 20 or more years in low-level service industry jobs there is already evidence of an incipient social justice movement aimed at redefining “work”. Much like the English workers who spearheaded the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade through an assertion of their own status as “free laborers” (Appiah, 2010), the time may be ripe for a broader redefinition that builds on our ancient desire to be recognized as worthwhile contributors to our community. Critiques of consumerism, analyses of the increasing social isolation in the developed and developing worlds, and the new forms of workplace control made possible by technology are plentiful and can be

useful tools, but they need to find a place within a larger narrative that animates a social movement around redefining the nature of work and thereby questions its current distribution, remuneration, and control. This narrative could make allies out of a wide range of disparate groups who currently see themselves as having little in common, and could create allies among subgroups within the wealthy who might see their identities and interests more aligned with this new movement than with those whom they only share a particular economic status. As Graeber (2013) points out in the conclusion to his analysis of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, “we might be forced to conclude that the real business of life is not contributing toward something called ‘the economy’ (a concept that didn’t even exist three hundred years ago), but the fact that we are all, and have always been, projects of mutual creation (288).”

A second example is from the “anti-globalization” movement. The traditional narrative of the wide variety of groups that make up the anti-globalization movement is that it is a David vs. Goliath battle where David has no chance of winning. The demonstrators at the various WTO meetings and G8 summits are seen by the mainstream press as a set of disenchanted marginal groups who simply want to slow down the wheels of progress. Day (2004) argues that contrary to this perception, there is at least a subset of groups within the movement who are trying to organize around a narrative of disengagement from the structures of power. Rather than fighting the hegemonic power of global capitalism directly by trying to organize an alternative hegemonic power that could eventually defeat the bad guys in a final showdown, groups such as Reclaim the Streets (RTS) and the network of independent media centers (IMC’s) are aimed at reconstituting community outside the existing structures of power (731 – 733). Day identifies this approach as the anarchist-inspired politics of affinity. An early thinker in this tradition, Gustav Landauer, “did not rely upon the existing institutions of civil society as a source of raw material, nor did he rely upon state coercion to achieve hegemony. For him, new institutions had to be created ‘almost out of nothing, amid chaos’; that is *alongside*, rather than *inside*, the system of states and corporations (738) (*italics in original*).” The existence of groups organizing in this direction is increasingly evident as the work of Holland et.al (2008) and Graeber (2013) document.

Our two grandfathers were a product of the social and economic structures they found themselves in and the social narratives that they each participated in and made their own. Neither had the means to participate in a movement that had a vision of changing the particular arrangements of their societies in a more just direction. What they shared



was a strong sense of identity rooted in a moral code whose ancestry was much deeper than either could have imagined. That ancestry and particular interpretations of it form the basis for the social justice movements of the future.

Both grandfathers would have recognized the truth of their contemporary, Kropotkin when he pointed out that, “mutual aid is the real foundation of our ethical conceptions seems evident enough” (1914, 298). Kropotkin continued, “And man is appealed to be guided in his acts, not merely by love, which is always personal, or at the best tribal, but by the perception of his oneness with each human being. In the practice of mutual aid, which we can retrace to the earliest beginnings of evolution, we thus find the positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions; and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support – not mutual struggle – has had the leading part. In its wide extension, even at the present time, we also see the best guarantee of a still loftier evolution of our race” (299-300).

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