“Turning Private Pain Into Public Action”: Constructing Activist-Leader Identities in Faith-Based Community Organizing

Thesis

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Abstract

The importance of local leaders and experienced activists to the success of social movements has been established in the sociological literature. These activist-leaders do not spontaneously emerge out of nowhere, however, the process through which these activist-leaders emerge has not been explored. This study contends that these individuals have constructed an activist-leader identity through a process of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political. The role of identity in social movements has recently been emphasized as an area of interest, specifically collective identity. Scholars have been grappling with the question: what is the nature of the relationship between individual identity and collective identity in social movements? This case study of a faith-based community organizing group (FBCO), ELIJAH, draws upon 32 interviews, participant observation, and archival data to address these two issues through understanding the process by which an activist-leader identity comes about.

The findings indicate that activist-leaders go through a process of politicizing their personal experiences and personalizing their political beliefs and actions. This results in a politicized personal narrative that motivates sustained activism and makes the collective identity with the social movement an integral part of the activist-leader’s identity. This study provides an important contribution to the growing literature on identity in social movements and helps to address the question of how activist-leaders come about as well as the question of how individual and collective identities are related to one another.
Dedication

To organizers and leaders who work tirelessly to strengthen their communities
Acknowledgements

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ................................................................................................................. iii

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................... iv

Vita ............................................................................................................................ v

List of Tables ............................................................................................................. viii

List of Figures .......................................................................................................... vix

Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1

Social Movements, Identity, and Narrative ............................................................. 6

Overview of Faith-Based Community Organizing (FBCO) .................................... 16

Data and Analytical Strategy .................................................................................. 19

ELIJAH’s Leadership Development Process ......................................................... 28

Politicizing the Personal: “Turning Private Pain Into Public Action” .................. 40

Personalizing the Political: Integrating Emotion and Reason ............................. 48

Self-Interest: Beyond Selfish and Selfless ............................................................ 57

Engaging in Political Action ................................................................................... 65

Discussion and Conclusion ...................................................................................... 70

References ............................................................................................................... 76
List of Tables

Table 1: Interview Participant Demographics..................................................80
List of Figures

Figure 1: Activist-Leader Identity Development Process…………………………………….82

Figure 2: The Path to Power Training Diagram……………………………………….83
INTRODUCTION

“Taken as a whole, the literature on collective identity still leaves fuzzy the relations between identity and an individual’s calculus of self-interest. Is [collective] identity or [self] interest the bedrock of individual choice?”

- Francesca Polletta and James Jasper 2001

“How is it that various individuals come to acquire the shared feelings and cognitions indicative of a collective identity? How is this identity reconciled with other identities that individuals possess? And what is the relationship between this collective identity and action?”

-David Snow and Doug McAdam 2000

“Organizing teaches us as nothing else does the beauty and strength of everyday people. Through the songs of the church and the talk on the stoops, through the hundreds of individual stories coming up through the South and finding any job that would pay, of raising families on threadbare budgets... —it is through these stories and songs of dashed hopes and powers of endurance, of ugliness and strife, subtlety and laughter, that organizers can shape a sense of community not only for others but for themselves.”

– Barack Obama 1988

In his seminal work, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Aldon Morris (1984) argues convincingly that the success of the Civil Rights Movement was due to the organizing work of local leaders and the building of strong local movement centers wherein activists and leaders were trained and mobilized in a highly organized fashion. Other researchers have corroborated the finding that networks of local leaders provide an
effective base for social movements (e.g. Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olsen 1980). Morris points to the crucial importance of community activists and leaders in the Civil Rights movement. In this study, I use the term “activist-leader” to describe these individuals: local activists who demonstrate leadership in their communities over extended periods. These individuals often take great risks and make heavy sacrifices in terms of time and money to further social movement goals. Morris does not look in depth at the processes through which members of the black community became the activist-leaders who mobilized their communities for mass action. Social movement theorists have largely neglected this question of how activist-leaders come about, despite their demonstrated importance in social movements.

This study begins to fill this gap in the sociological literature by outlining the process through which an activist-leader identity is developed in a faith based community organization (FBCO), ELIJAH\(^1\). ELIJAH is an organization based in a Midwestern city that organizes church members and clergy to work on local issues such as affordable housing and educational inequality. ELIJAH is a good case to study because it cites leadership development as one of its main foci. ELIJAH leaders spend a lot of time and energy taking church members and clergy who have not been engaged in political action and transforming their outlook until a major part of their individual identity is tied to political activism and leadership. Like many other FBCOs across the US, ELIJAH attempts to create a strong local base of activist-leaders who are well-connected with activists from other local organizations and with public officials, similar to the local

\(^{1}\) All names and locations have been removed and pseudonyms are used.
movement centers Morris (1984) references. This study draws upon 32 interviews with ELIJAH staff, clergy and lay leaders as well as participant observation of a weeklong training workshop and two meetings. Hundreds of pages of archival data are also used, and these include documents produced by the organization pertaining to training and community leadership development throughout its 20-year history.

The data indicates that ELIJAH leads its members through parallel processes of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political to encourage the formation of activist-leader identities in clergy and lay leaders. Potential activist-leaders are encouraged to politicize their personal stories by understanding how political contexts have shaped their life experiences. They are also encouraged to personalize their political beliefs by framing their motivation for action in terms of what impact it has on them, rather than using a framework of “helping others.” ELIJAH leaders also personalize their political actions by holding activism as central to their personal identities. These two processes culminate in the creation of a politicized personal narrative, wherein activist-leaders articulate what activism they want to engage in and why, connecting their desire to engage in political action with their personal life experiences. ELIJAH leaders refer to this politicized personal narrative as “self-interest.” This ultimately results in the creation of an activist-leader identity, wherein ELIJAH leaders see activism as central to who they are and see their political activism as both resulting from and contributing to their personal life narrative. These processes will be outlined in more detail below and supported with examples from the data.
The focus of this study, the development of activist-leader identities, speaks to a growing literature on how identity processes inform participation in social movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Stryker, Owens and White 2000). The crucial unanswered questions in this literature are as follows: How do collective and individual identities influence participation in political action? What is the nature of the connection between individual and collective identities in social movements? Many accounts focus on either on how individuals’ identities define movement aims through identity politics (e.g. Bernstein 1997) or on how individuals internalize movement goals as their own and participate in collective identities (see Polletta and Jasper 2001), neither of which seems to fully address the nature of the connection between collective and individual identities. One of the most prominent approaches to this topic is that of frame alignment, which conceptualizes movement participation as the result of collectively formed frames aligning with individuals’ cognitive frames about themselves and the world (Snow et al 1986). This study is in part a critique of the frame alignment literature; I argue that frame alignment is necessary but not sufficient for explaining the connection between collective and individual identities in the formation of the activist-leader identity.

This ongoing conversation in the sociological literature juxtaposes individual identity with collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001, Snow and McAdam 2000, Loseke 2007), individual self-interest with altruism (Teske 1997), and rational motivation for action with emotional motivation for action (Jasper 2011). This creates a problem in that these phenomena are posited as both 1) mutually incompatible with one another and 2) present simultaneously in the identities of individuals who participate in social
movements. Frame alignment does not fully account for the development of activist-leader identities in this context.

This study instead uses a narrative identity framework to argue that the activist-leader identity in fact does integrate individual identity with collective identity, self-interest with altruism, and emotion with reason. ELIJAH accomplishes this by guiding its members through a process of *politicizing the personal* and *personalizing the political*. The result of this is the creation of a *politicized personal narrative*. This politicized personal narrative is what integrates individual self-interest and individual identities with community interest and collective identities.

This study thus aims to provide an account of how activist-leaders come about and how an organization can intentionally lead individuals through a process intended to cultivate an activist-leader identity. The sections that follow develop an argument that highlights inadequacy of the frame alignment approach to explain the development of activist-leader identities. A narrative identity framework is proposed as an alternative. I will also provide an overview of faith-based community organizing before moving to a discussion of the empirical data and analysis.
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, IDENTITY, AND NARRATIVE

Previous research indicates that individuals who engage in collective action, particularly high-risk activism, are more politically active in the short- and long-term than individuals who do not (McAdam 1989). Thus it seems likely that engaging in certain kinds of activism influences and transforms individuals’ identities and primes them for long-term involvement in social movements. There is some evidence to indicate that this occurs because of integration in activist social networks and identity transformation processes (McAdam 1989). The argument put forth in the current study is that results like these, where individuals maintain involvement in activism for long periods of time, are due to the formation of an activist-leader identity.

Activist-leaders are the key individuals that create “free spaces” that are crucial to movement emergence and success (Morris 1984, Polletta 1999). They help to provide continuity between social movements during periods where the political opportunities are not favorable for mass mobilization (Taylor 1989). The importance of activist-leaders to the success of social movements is belied by the lack of emphasis placed upon them in the sociological literature.

In the next section I outline the frame alignment perspective and its pertinence to this discussion of activist-leader identities in social movements. I will highlight both its
usefulness and its inadequacies. I then provide an alternative framework that is based on the narrative construction of identity.

Frame Alignment and the Activist-Leader Identity

Framing processes are argued to be an important component of identity construction for social movement participants (Snow and McAdam 2000; Hunt, Benford and Snow 1994). A frame is “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions” (Snow and Benford 1992) within the context of individuals’ lives and social worlds. Frames are thus discrete chunks of meaning that articulate values, interests, goals, and ideology for movements as well as for individuals. Indeed, collective identity can be defined as “the universe of frames” that “define what is good, real, important, possible and necessary” (Stoecker 1995). Frame alignment takes place when the frames put forth by a movement group line up with, or come to define, an individual’s frames. These aligned frames then “organize experience and guide action” in social movement contexts (Snow et al 1986). Frame alignment is a useful theory that has greatly advanced the sociological understanding of mass mobilization and social movement participation.

However, while frame alignment is necessary for broad-based mass movement participation, it does not fully account for all identity processes that encourage prolonged engagement in political activism. Even the architects of frame alignment theory agree. Benford and Snow (2000) state, “Framing processes are not the only mechanism that accounts for the correspondence between personal and collective identities.”
alignment does not seem to fully explain, for example, why activist-leaders stay involved in community politics and social movements for many years (decades in the case of some of respondents in this study). It does not account for why they remain invested in political activism even after the initial cause for their involvement has been addressed or why they make regular, significant financial and time sacrifices or why they continue to deeply identify with movement goals, in many cases on a permanent basis.

Several empirical studies, particularly those that draw on participant observation of and in-depth interviews with activists, support the assertion that there are other factors involved in the identity construction of activist-leaders that cannot be encapsulated in a frame alignment framework. Teske (1997) finds that activists trace the origins of their activism to personal crises, moral discoveries and/or a need to take political action in order to maintain identity continuity (51-57). Warren (2010) corroborates this observation when he notes that white activists for racial justice overwhelmingly refer to a seminal experience, usually a direct experience of racism, that redefines their relationship to race and racial issues when telling their stories. He argues, furthermore, that cognitive understandings of racial injustice play a secondary role to impactful life experiences in the development of commitment to working for racial justice. Interestingly, in Teske’s study, he finds in activists, “an eagerness to talk in a specifically storied way” (60). This is in contrast to his comparison group, business lobbyists, who did not account for their chosen profession in story form. Thus, these empirical studies indicate that for career activists it is not necessarily a frame that accounts for their prolonged movement involvement, but rather an event or series of events/life experiences that are given
particular emotionally charged meanings. These events are understood by activists not as
discrete chunks of meaning, but rather as stories that help them make sense of the world
and their place in it.

What these studies strongly suggest is that frame alignment theory is insufficient
for fully explaining the relationship between the individual and collective identities of
activist-leaders in social movements. Framing processes emphasize cognitive dimensions
of identity formation and social movement participation. However, life experiences and
the strong emotions associated with them play a strong role in these processes as well.
Frames can articulately emphasize either self-interest or altruism as the motivation for
collective identity and political action. However, frames cannot account for the
demonstrated integration of these two sources of motivation in lived experience (Teske
1997), which I discuss further below. Frames are, in general, simple and unambiguous,
which is part of what accounts for their mobilizing power. However, human individuals
are filled with complexity and ambiguity and the reasons they have for being engaged in
activism reflect this.

In short, the challenge with frame alignment theory is it cannot account for the
complexity inherent in the identities of activist-leaders in social movements. Despite the
widespread acknowledgment of the gaps in the literature on the relationship between
individual and collective identities in social movements, there has been little empirical
work to address it. Findings of the current study will demonstrate that a emphasis on the
construction of activist-leader identities and the individualized, yet collectively applicable
narratives that emerge out these processes provides a much more comprehensive and
appropriate framework for understanding sustained activism on the part of locally based political leaders. Narrative provides a much more comprehensive framework for identity construction processes that is more appropriate in this context.

Narrative Construction of an Activist-Leader Identity

In this study, I correct for the inadequacies of the frame alignment perspective by applying a narrative\(^2\) identity construction framework for activist-leaders. This section articulates and defends this framework.

Frames and narratives have some base similarities in that both contain a sequence of thoughts that are arranged to convey a particular moral or set of morals. Frames are, however, a truncated type of narrative, designed to be easily digested and unambiguous in order to have broad public appeal. In contrast, narratives are longer and can provide a fuller account of the complexity that is inherent in the multiple identities and varied life experiences of individuals. Polletta and Lee (2006) state that one of the defining characteristics of stories is that they integrate the general and the particular. A narrative conception of identity allows for unique sets of life experiences to be connected to a variety of political frameworks. The politicized personal narratives that form the basis of activist-leader identities can and do differ significantly among individuals, however what they have in common with one another (the “politicized” part) provides the basis for collective political action through social movement organizations.

There has been an increased interest in narrative in the social sciences in recent years as a framework for examining and explaining social phenomena (Polletta et al

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\(^2\) The words “narrative” and “story” are used interchangeably in this text.
There are multiple levels of narratives that are at play in the narrative construction of personal identities. Individuals must navigate society-wide cultural narratives and mid-level organizational and institutional narratives as they create meaningful identities for themselves based on their social statuses and life experiences (Somers 1994, Loseke 2007). Understanding the relationships between personal narrative identities and cultural, institutional and organizational narratives is therefore key to understanding the identity construction processes of activist-leaders.

Cultural narratives provide bases for identity that are based on widespread collective representations of ‘typical actors’ engaging in ‘typical behaviors.’ These cultural narratives are formula stories that “reference densely packed, complex, and interlocking visions of how the world works and how the world should work.” (Loseke 2007). Social movements often attempt to influence these cultural narratives in order to affect widespread cultural change (e.g. Taylor et al 2009). Movement leaders are therefore very aware of the existing cultural narratives and understand that they have to provide counter-narratives for movement members (i.e. Toch 1965).

Because of this need to provide an alternative narrative framework, social movement organizations have organizational narratives. Fine (1995) asserts that social movements can be conceived of as “bundles of stories” and that the stories that are consistently shared in social movement groups are informed by the ideology of the movement in question. Thus, social movement groups have organizational narratives that individuals accept and integrate into their personal narratives to varying degrees.
Personal narratives allow individuals to create coherent identities out of their multiple and evolving social statuses, roles, and life experiences. These individual narrative identities draw on cultural, institutional and organizational narratives in various ways. However, while effective cultural narratives “achieve their clarity by bracketing indeterminacy and complexity,” (Loseke 2007) similar to frames, personal narratives need to make sense of the complexity of the various roles, values and experiences of an individual. As Loseke (2007) aptly states, “individuals do not experience themselves as one-dimensional characters.” Stories do have a moral, though, and personal narratives are no exception, so individual narrative identities are constructed to frame individuals as particular kinds of moral actors.

Understanding a story is therefore primarily a matter of understanding its moral (Polletta and Lee 2006). However, many stories can be interpreted in multiple ways; multiple moral implications can be drawn and there is often a lack of clear resolution (in contrast to frames). It is for this reason that narrative is particularly useful for making sense of the individual identity/collective identity; self-interest/altruism and reason/emotion dichotomies that sociologists struggle with in accounting for social movement participation. Previous studies have demonstrated that thinking of these binaries in either/or, polarized terms does not make sense when confronted with activist-leaders’ articulations of their reasons for sustained activism (Teske 1997, Warren 2010). The ambiguity inherent in narrative accounts helps to blur the distinctions in binary oppositions by allowing for multiple interpretations. For instance, a story could illustrate that an activist-leader is engaged in the work both to help others and also to achieve
personal goals by drawing on varying personal stories and cultural/organizational narratives to support that point. Multiple conclusions can be drawn from the story, but the supposedly inherent contradiction between self-interest and altruism is nullified by the narrative structure. This will become clear in empirical examples found in this study. The creation of a politicized personal narrative through processes of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political are what allow for the coexistence of seemingly contradictory motivations and the integration of various levels of narrative in activist-leaders’ identities.

Teske (1997) makes a convincing case that construing rational self-interest as necessarily opposed to altruism is a mischaracterization of how activists construct their identity. He argues that for activists, political participation is an end in itself that “enables them to fulfill certain quite rational desires among them becoming the kind of person they want to be… ensuring that their lives as a whole leave behind a certain kind of story” (Teske 1997: 143). The deconstruction of the conceptual boundary between concern for self and concern for other is crucial to an activists’ identity in Teske’s model. Similarly, Lichterman (1996) argues that a framework that posits self-fulfillment as opposed to civic engagement fails to take into account the lived experience of environmental activists. These accounts are useful, but none of the empirical studies referenced thus far studies look at identity construction processes through a narrative identity framework. They also do not examine how social movement organizations intentionally cultivate activist-leader identities in their members. This research is therefore an important advance for sociological theory.
In conclusion, narrative allows for ambiguity and internal contradictions, and human individuals are full of both of these things. Seemingly contradictory ideas and sources of motivation can coexist within a narrative identity framework. Emotion and reason, self-interest and altruism, individual and collective identities; these seemingly incompatible or structurally different components of social movement participation can be integrated into a coherent whole with the use of narrative. Narrative shapes and is shaped by the context in which it occurs, and it has the capacity to allow for the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives (Bakhtin 1982, Loseke 2007). All of these qualities of narrative help explain the process of creating an activist-leader identity through the politicization of personal experiences and the personalization of political beliefs and actions.
OVERVIEW OF FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING (FBCO)

Given the paucity of literature on faith-based community organizing (FBCO) in the sociological literature, it will be useful to give a brief overview of the field before moving to discussion and analysis of the data.

FBCO groups like ELIJAH are found throughout the United States. These groups are locally-based interfaith coalitions consisting primarily of religious congregations. Individuals who participate in FBCO political activities do so through their affiliation with their religious institution. FBCOs focus on multiple political issues at one time and various issues throughout time. They define the issues they work on as “social justice” issues, and they are generally pro-equity, anti-poverty initiatives of various types. These issues can include affordable housing, access to transportation, domestic violence, racial equity in education, and others depending on the interests of the group. This focus on multiple issues can serve to distinguish FBCOs from other social movement organizations that are perhaps more easily defined and recognizable due to having more narrow issue foci.

FBCOs like ELIJAH are part of a tradition of community organizing that traces its origins back to Saul Alinsky in the 1930s. Alinsky created neighborhood organizations and advocated for nonideological, democratic groups that would challenge
the dominant power structures and empower people to make changes in their own localities. A survey of the FBCO field conducted in 2001 (Wood and Warren 2001) found that in the 18 months prior to the release of their report, a conservative estimate of the number of core leaders of these organizations was 24,000, supported by 460 professional organizers and engaging at least 100,000 people nationwide through community actions. Each year, about 1600 individuals attended multiday national training sessions similar to the one that was observed for this study (Wood and Warren 2001). These numbers represent a significant mobilization of individuals in political action and point to the development of local movement centers through the work of community organizing.

One political goal of FBCOs is to succeed in achieving victories on local political issues. They do this by creating seats for themselves at the decisionmaking tables in the community. FBCOs attempt to win on issues by “thoroughly researching issues, building alliances, developing strong relationships with leaders in the public and private sectors, and staging large, dramatic public meetings to demonstrate grassroots support to targeted decisionmakers” (Kleidman 2004). The data for this study indicates that ELIJAH employs these strategies. Another political goal of FBCOs is to develop a base of activist-leaders in local communities (Warren 2001). The field of FBCO is dedicated to creating powerful bases of activist-leaders like the local movement centers Morris (1984) emphasizes. The presence of local leaders and activists experienced in guiding political meetings has been shown to increase community capacity for public discourse and civic engagement (Baiocchi 2003). Indeed, community organizing techniques have gained a
more prominent role in labor unions (Voss and Sherman 2000) and the sociological literature points to their effectiveness in that context (Lopez 2004).

The literature on FBCOs in sociology focuses mostly on the resource mobilization capabilities of these organizations. Some studies argue that FBCOs gain political influence insofar as they are able to draw on the social capital, institutional capacity, and religious cultural framing of the church (Warren 2001, Wood 2002). These prior accounts see practices of intentional relationship building in FBCO as integral to building the social capital needed for effective collective participation in democratic institutions (Warren 2001, Wood 2002). However, this study posits that it is not only being able to draw on the institutional and cultural resources of the church, but also intentional identity construction processes that allow FBCO groups like ELIJAH to develop local movement centers and core bases of activist-leaders.

Although it is not the primary focus of his study, Warren (2001) discusses leadership development processes in FBCO and his account is a useful articulation for this study to build on. He provides a good discussion of the principles and content of a national weeklong training in Texas and my data corroborates much of what he reports about the content of the training. Warren argues that the leadership development processes in FBCO seek “to teach the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to conduct what it calls the ‘arts of politics’” (2001: 212). He emphasizes the acquisition of skills of political leadership and the importance of reflection and self-analysis. However, he does not directly look at identity construction processes in FBCO; he instead focuses
mainly on their resource mobilization capabilities. This study thus goes beyond his to more fully explain the identity development of activist-leaders.
DATA AND ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Case Description

This is a case study of leadership development processes in a faith-based community organizing (FBCO) group called ELIJAH that is based in a Midwestern city. In this section I will describe the case under study. The information in this section was obtained from a combination of interviews, observation and archival data.

ELIJAH is a FBCO that has been in existence since the early 2000’s, and it is the product of a merger of several organizations that were founded in the early to mid 1990’s. The organization is made up of about 100 institutional member churches that pay annual dues to be a part of the group. The clergy and lay leaders who are involved in the organization come from these member churches. The member institutions are overwhelmingly Christian, and of these, most of the churches are Lutheran and Catholic. Individuals who participate in ELIJAH activities are predominantly white, educated and middle class, although there are African American churches and leaders involved, and the organization is attempting to become more multiracial. ELIJAH has a staff of approximately 15, including professional organizers and other support staff. These organizational statistics indicate that ELIJAH is one of the largest FBCOs in the United States.

Official organizational literature states that the mission of ELIJAH is to promote racial and economic equity in local, regional and statewide contexts. ELIJAH focuses on
multiple issues at one time and the set of issues the organization works on changes over time. ELIJAH has achieved policy victories in multiple areas including transportation equity, domestic violence, affordable housing, and immigrant rights. ELIJAH leaders have relationships with public officials at multiple levels of government, from local city government to state government.

When developing activist-leader identities in its members, ELIJAH has several goals. The first goal is for the individual to be involved with the organization for the long-term and to define the organization’s political goals as his or her own. The second goal is for people to have the capacity to act in the public arena in multiple capacities. The third goal is for individuals to invite others into the organization and bring members of their congregation to public actions. Ultimately, the objective is for individuals to increase the level of difficulty and visibility of roles and increase the amount responsibility they take in implementing the political actions of the organization. It is important to note that these goals do not significantly differ according to whether a person is a lay leader, a member of the clergy or an ELIJAH staff member.

The data indicates that these goals have been achieved for a number of individuals involved in the organization. There is clearly sustained involvement on the part of most individuals in the interview sample, with 24 out of 32 citing five or more years of involvement with the organization. Interviewees describe acting in the public arena by planning and participating in public actions, speaking at public meetings, meeting with

3 Only three individuals in the interview sample reported that they were no longer involved with ELIJAH, all of which cited time constraints as their reason for suspending their involvement. All three of these indicated that they felt that the leadership development processes were impactful and continue to inform their professional and personal lives.
public officials, and inviting others to participate in political action for multiple issues over many years. Most interviewees articulated that ELIJAH was their primary organizational affiliation.

I chose the group ELIJAH for this study for several reasons. First, ELIJAH is a good case to study because it is a particularly successful organization in the FBCO field and has a rich 20-year history. As stated above, ELIJAH is one of the largest FBCOs in the United States and has achieved numerous policy victories at the local, regional and state level. The organization regularly turns out hundreds and occasionally thousands of individuals to public meetings and actions. Another indication of their clout is demonstrated in that the top leaders of the organization have developed a relationship with the governor of their state as well as the heads of several state departments and many state legislators in addition to local officials. Two leaders in the organization have recently been appointed to government posts with decision-making power because of their involvement with the organization. The organization has a large staff compared to other FBCO organizations and is overall financially stable. All of these factors point to ELIJAH as one of the top FBCO groups in the field.

ELIJAH was also chosen for reasons of access, feasibility, and convenience. I was a staff organizer with ELIJAH for 12 months in 2009 and 2010 and so I had already established connections with many individuals involved in the organization. This allowed me to have privileged levels of access to various proceedings that likely would not have been possible otherwise. Also, I knew enough about the organization from my time there that a prolonged field experience was not necessary to understand the basics of
the culture and functioning of the organization. My experience with the organization was particularly useful in understanding various aspects of the archival data. Although my status as a former insider in the organization could be cause for concerns of bias, I believe that it instead enhanced my ability to critically analyze the organization.

Data Description

Now I will turn to a discussion of the data collected for this study. All data was collected in Summer 2011. The data has 3 components: 1) semi-structured interviews; 2) participant observation; and 3) archival data.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted with ELIJAH staff as well as clergy and lay leaders affiliated with the organization. Personal connections and snowball sampling were used to obtain respondents. All of the people in the sample had attended and/or led a weeklong leadership training in a year prior to the study. The interviews focused on respondents’ experiences with ELIJAH’s training and leadership development processes and how they integrate their faith and political action. They also included respondents’ demographic information and brief life histories as well as histories of their involvement with the organization. In addition to these topics, staff and organizers were asked about the philosophy and processes that go into planning and executing weeklong training and leadership development in ELIJAH.

The interview sample is 65% female, 35% male, as well as predominantly (81.25%) white. The age range in the sample is 29 to over 70, with an average of 48.6. All but 2 of the interviewees are college-educated. Overall the sample reflects the
demographics of the organization. Of the 32 individuals interviewed, 12 are lay leaders, 8 are clergy, and 11 are staff, which is a fairly even distribution. The duration of involvement in the organization ranges from less than 1 year to over 20 years, with an average of 9 years. There was also a range of involvement level in that some individuals in the sample are no longer involved with the organization and some are extremely involved. The sample is more heavily weighted towards individuals who are more deeply involved and who have been involved for a longer time because those were the individuals more likely to respond to my request for an interview. See Table 1 for a detailed register of interview participants. Overall, the sample reflects a range of experiences within the organization, which was the goal of my sampling strategy.

**Participant Observation**

I also observed the weeklong training workshop offered by ELIJAH in the summer of 2011 and two meetings that were related to the training. I chose to observe the weeklong training workshop because it is a forum where the teachings and leadership development processes of the organization are distilled into an intensive format. I observed not only the training workshops but also the behind-the-scenes work by the trainers, which included premeetings and evaluations after every training workshop. I will describe the training in more detail in the data analysis.

There were roughly 100 individuals who attended the weeklong training as participants (97 according to the official roster), thus the raw counts that follow approximate percentages. Of the participants, 11 were from Service Employees International Union (SEIU), 10 from a local progressive organizing group, and 16 were
from other organizations, including a Jewish organizing group and neighborhood organizing groups. Nearly 40 percent of the participants in the training were thus from organizations other than ELIJAH. This is important to note because the strong presence of these groups demonstrates that ELIJAH is allied closely with other local organizations undertaking progressive political action. This supports the assertion that ELIJAH is an important site for creating a local movement center similar to what Morris (1984) describes. The significant participation by other organizations indicates that these groups respect and are interested in learning from ELIJAH’s leadership development processes. The remaining 60 training participants were from congregations affiliated with ELIJAH, 16 of these were clergy. 35 individuals at the training were persons of color, predominantly Asian-American and African-American.

Archival Data

A third source of data for this project is hundreds of pages of documents produced by ELIJAH. Many of the documents are related to training and leadership development. For instance, I have copies of training outlines and handouts from past weeklong trainings and a wide variety of local trainings. These documents span the full history of the organization. This allows me to have some historical perspective on the types of training and leadership development processes that ELIJAH has engaged in throughout its 20-year history.

I also obtained access to records, both documents and video recordings, of various ELIJAH public meetings and actions. In addition, there are a variety of documents pertinent to the history of the organization including evolving summaries of ideological
positions (i.e. organizational frames) and descriptions of issue campaigns that have taken place over the years. This data was extremely helpful in allowing me to get beyond the short window of time during which I observed the group and interviewed its members and gain a better understanding of ELIJAH’s activism.

My data therefore allows me to look at multiple levels of the process through which ELIJAH develops an activist-leader identity. In the interviews, I asked individuals to reflect on their experience at the weeklong training at which they were a participant. I observed a weeklong training similar to ones that have taken place throughout the organizations’ history so I could see the process in action. I asked staff organizers about their approach to training and what they view as important components of the leadership development process. The archival data provides some historical context, as I have obtained training documents that have been used and adapted throughout the 20-year history of the organization and its predecessors. Thus I was able to ‘fact-check’ and gain more details about events that interviewees discuss and also look at a wider range of organizational activities than my interview sample and participant observation alone allowed. The section that follows details an analysis of the data described above.
ELIJAH’S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

One key theme in the data is that ELIJAH often cultivates an activist-leader identity in individuals who, prior to their involvement with ELIJAH, did not engage in the public arena and did not see themselves as political actors. Helen, a reserved older white woman who is a lay leader in an ELIJAH member church is one example. In her interview, she describes the impact of attending weeklong training:

*I’m doing things that I would have never done. I would have never, in a million years, like um, making small presentations, standing up in front of a group talking about what I believe, I just didn’t do those things…They stretch you. (laughs) I don’t know how else to say it.*

Although she is unable to articulate exactly how, Helen attributes her confidence and ability to speak publicly about her values to ELIJAH’s training and development processes, and in particular weeklong training. Helen has engaged in activism with ELIJAH for ten years and continues her involvement even while struggling to organize in her congregation where many members are indifferent, even hostile, to the aims of ELIJAH. Thus, the identity work that took place through ELIJAH’s leadership development processes has been durable for Helen, even in the face of opposition.

The focus of this analysis is to understand the process by which ELIJAH develops an activist-leader identity in its members. Individuals who have an activist-leader identity see taking political action as integral to who they are. They see taking political action as
inextricably linked to their various identities, roles, life experiences and moral convictions. ELIJAH undergoes an intentional process, which they refer to as “leadership development,” in order to bring about an activist-leader identity in individuals. The activist-leader identity forms the basis for long-term involvement in political action through ELIJAH and other organizations.

In the following sections I will use the interviews, participant observation, and archival data to demonstrate how ELIJAH develops an activist-leader identity in its members. This process is outlined in Figure 1. ELIJAH uses storytelling and a practice called agitation to help individuals politicize their personal experiences and personalize their political beliefs. This results in the creation of a politicized personal narrative which is an integral part of the activist-leader identity. The activist-leader identity is also formed and reinforced through continual engagement in political actions with organizational support. All components of the process, including storytelling and agitation, politicizing personal experiences and personalizing political beliefs can be found in the experiences that ELIJAH leaders articulate regarding preparing for, executing and reflecting on public action. Engaging in political action is also necessary for the activist-leader identity because in order to integrate activism into one’s personal narrative, one needs to have experiences of activism as a part of that narrative.

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4 Although I focus primarily on ELIJAH members, it is worth noting that members of other organizations, including unions, neighborhood groups, and progressive political organizing groups attend ELIJAH trainings and work closely with ELIJAH on political issue campaigns. Also, several interviewees referenced individuals who started out as ELIJAH leaders and moved on to lead in other social movement organizations.
In ELIJAH, members are led through intentional processes of leadership development that are meant to encourage greater involvement in the organization and progressively larger roles in planning and executing ELIJAH’s political actions. ELIJAH’s base-building strategy goes beyond simply seeking alignment with and trying to influence political beliefs. Their leadership development process is fundamentally about individual identity reformation/transformation through construction of a new, politicized narrative. In this section I will describe the first 2 stages of this process as seen in Figure 1: (1) Identifying potential activist-leaders and (2) Storytelling and agitation.

Potential activist-leaders are identified and drawn into the organization by existing ELIJAH leaders through one-on-one meetings. One-on-one meetings are an organizing tool that is aimed at intentionally building relationships to create social networks that can be mobilized for political purposes. When a church first joins ELIJAH, often the pastor will give an ELIJAH organizer a list of individuals who he or she thinks may be interested in working on local issues and the organizer will set up one-on-one meetings with these individuals. In these meetings, the ELIJAH organizer asks questions of the potential activist-leader intended to elicit personal stories that might provide information about that person’s individual motivations, political interests, and leadership potential. The organizer will then determine if there is alignment between the individual’s and the organization’s interests or motivations, and if the person would be an asset to the organization because of skills, personal qualities, social networks or other factors. If so, then the organizer will ask the potential activist-leader to attend a meeting.
political action, or training and will continue to invite him or her to participate in ELIJAH activities if he or she maintains interest. Organizers and ELIJAH leaders will also attempt to get new members to attend weeklong trainings like the one I observed.

Storytelling is a crucial component of all stages of ELIJAH’s leadership development process from beginning to end. In the one-on-one meetings described above that draw people into the organization, the basis of the meeting is to get individuals to tell stories about their lives to get an understanding of their interests and motivations. Storytelling is a prevalent and crucial part of ELIJAH’s organizational culture, as members of the organization consistently tell stories about their lives in internal meetings as well as in public settings. The data clearly shows that ELIJAH operates using narrative to understand, reform and create activist-leader identities.

In ELIJAH’s leadership development process there are 2 key components that use storytelling to connect political action to individuals’ identities and experiences. These are: (1) Politicizing personal experiences and (2) Personalizing political beliefs. I will outline these processes in more detail in later sections, but a brief explanation is that over time, individuals refine how they tell their personal stories in a politicized way, often in consultation with an organizer or more experienced leader. ELIJAH also provides members with alternative political narratives that contest dominant political narratives to help them frame their stories. ELIJAH encourages its members to break down the boundaries between their personal life narratives and moral/political convictions. A practice that the organization refers to as “agitation” is utilized along with storytelling to accomplish this.
As seen in Figure 1, the practice of *agitation* is a key component of the activist-leader identity construction process in ELIJAH. Agitation is a practice in which an individual receives direct feedback and evaluation of their political leadership and suggestions for how to improve. Agitation is so named because it involves ‘shaking up’ a person, jolting them out of habitual ways of thinking and doing things. The idea is to disturb or “shake up” a person’s ideas about themselves and their behavior and to help them to define a new way of thinking and acting that is more effective in advancing their own and ELIJAH’s political goals. Clergy, lay leaders and staff all engage in this practice with one another and all are encouraged to be on both the giving and receiving ends of agitation, both to agitate and to be agitated. It is an interactive and often emotionally intense process wherein the person receiving the agitation is challenged to think about the reasons why they act in the ways that they do. It is a strategy that ELIJAH uses in conjunction with storytelling to push individuals to politicize their personal experiences and personalize their political beliefs. Agitation is also used to reaffirm and increase commitment to an activist-leader lifestyle and troubleshoot issues that leaders face in their activism. Nearly every training session and nearly every interview contains one or more examples of agitation.

During my interview with her, Pastor Nancy, an engaging white pastor in her late 40s, defines agitation as follows:

*When you see things in that person that might be getting in the way of them acting out of their powerful, God-given place, then you hold up a mirror and you say a judgment. And then they have an opportunity to say whether that judgment is true or not. And then you kind of get at why do you think you act this way? And what’s the cost for continuing this kind of behavior, this kind of way of thinking. And then hopefully help that person come*
to clarity and a declaration of a new way of thinking and behaving that will allow them to be more powerful.

One of the key parts of an agitation is that the person doing the agitation makes a judgment about why the person being agitated is not being as effective as they could be, which Pastor Nancy describes above as holding up a mirror. These judgments are often related to the agitator’s knowledge of the individual’s life story, for instance many agitations bring up family and personal history. An alternative course of action is then proposed and the person being agitated is encouraged to struggle with and ultimately change their current thinking and behavior. The purpose of agitation varies by the context in which it takes place, but in general agitation is intended to encourage individuals to advance their activist-leadership, whether by taking on greater responsibility, or by being more effective in a current leadership role. Many ELIJAH leaders I encountered connected agitation to concepts of love and religious faith, as Pastor Nancy does here, however not all take this perspective.

Agitation, when done effectively\(^5\) and with a receptive person, is a useful tool for identity work. By identifying behaviors and thought processes that are deemed incompatible with effective activist leadership, ELIJAH leaders can steer each other toward new thought processes, behaviors and ultimately new identity narratives.

\(^5\) Organizers, clergy and leaders remarked on the difficulty of agitating effectively. Several referred to it as an ‘art.’ There is widespread acknowledgment that certain individuals are more skilled at agitation than others and even the most skilled individuals, on occasion, do agitations that are ineffective and are even judged as offensive by the person receiving the agitation. Several factors that seem to influence the effectiveness of an agitation include: whether or not the judgment made by the agitator is correct, the quality of the relationship between the agitator and the person being agitated, whether or not the agitator asks questions that are helpful for the person being agitated to understand better the issue at hand, and how well the agitator communicates.
Agitation is used in many instances to challenge people to wrestle with the political implications of their personal stories and also to connect their personal struggles with their political aspirations. Agitation is a versatile tool, and it allows ELIJAH leaders and staff to push people to politicize their personal experiences and personalize their political beliefs in a variety of contexts. One of these is weeklong training, which is designed to incorporate agitation into most, if not all sessions. It will be useful to discuss the setting of weeklong training in more depth.

The 2011 weeklong training that I observed is part of a long tradition within the organization and in other FBCOS across the nation. The main goal of this training is to develop activist-leader identities within the individuals who attend using the process described in Figure 1. Each year, ELIJAH sends between 50 and 100 individuals to weeklong training and doing so is a major focus of the organizers, clergy and lay leaders who form the core of the organization. Participants are invited to attend the training by an organizer, clergy person or lay leader that they have developed a relationship with. Before participants go to weeklong training, the person that asked them to go is supposed to meet with them and prepare them for the week by getting them to think about their political agency and why it is important to them to engage in activism.

The training generally takes place in hotel conference rooms. Participants remain in a room with the same 20-30 people for the whole week. Various staff organizers conduct training sessions, each of which lasts an hour and a half to 2 hours. The agitation at weeklong training takes place in the context of these training sessions wherein there exists a power dynamic between the trainers and the trainees. Participants are seated at
rows of tables and trainers will single out individuals to agitate, walking up very close to them, standing over them and making prolonged eye contact. This results in a heightened level of tension intentionally created by the trainers and is an effective way for the trainers to ensure that people are listening to and struggling with the material. Indeed, during these interactions, rooms of over 30 people are full of tense silence, with all intently focused on the interactions unfolding between trainers and participants. The agitation at weeklong training is often tailored towards teaching particular lessons that the organization wants to impart about political action.

At the training I observed, there were 3 different rooms and I spent some time observing each room. There were 17 training sessions during the week that I observed. The topics of these training sessions range from theoretical discussions of political power in society, to practical trainings on fundraising and how to run effective meetings. Both interviews and observations indicated that the training sessions in weeklong are intentionally geared toward leading individuals through a process wherein they commit to a politicized personal narrative and increased involvement in ELIJAH, effectively either creating or solidifying their activist-leader identity. In my analysis, I focus in particular on 2 trainings that articulate central components of ELIJAH’s organizational narrative: Path to Power and Self-Interest. Path to Power is a key training because it leads trainees through a process of politicizing their personal experiences. Self-interest is important because it encourages participants to develop and declare publicly a politicized personal narrative.
Another crucial aspect of the setting of weeklong training is the “free space” created by ELIJAH for the formation of social ties among activist-leaders. During weeklong training, participants are taught to do one-on-one meetings, like the ones described above, with other activist-leaders or potential activist-leaders. The purpose of one-on-one meetings is to learn about the other person’s “story,” i.e. what their background is, what they care about, where they feel they are in life at the moment. ELIJAH leaders begin to learn these life narratives by asking targeted questions to learn about the other person. During weeklong training, trainees are encouraged to ask risky and deep questions (e.g. “Tell me more about how your mother’s death affected you?”). They are encouraged to do as many one-on-one meetings with other participants and trainers as possible during their time there. Thus, during the “free” periods of time and during meals, participants are generally engaged in these one-on-one conversations. It is not unusual to walk into the dining area during mealtimes and see an African American pastor in deep conversation with a Fransiscan nun, an Asian teenager asking an elderly white Lutheran about her life history, a labor organizer speaking with a member of a progressive electoral organizing group, a Somali immigrant recounting their childhood to a middle aged white Catholic. It is in this context of intense confrontational trainings, a culture where storytelling is emphasized, and intentional relationship building across age, racial, denominational and organizational lines that ELIJAH leads individuals through a process intended to cultivate an activist-leader identity.

Individuals are encouraged to articulate what the ELIJAH organization refers to as “self-interest.” It is not simply a rational calculus of what is most beneficial to the
individual as it is often conceptualized in the social science literature. It is rather a 
politicized personal narrative wherein the individual situates herself in a social context 
and articulates what she wants to accomplish with her life and in her community. Necessary components of declaring one’s self-interest include stating what personal 
motivations underlie political ambitions and how they wish for the community to benefit from their activism.

It is important to emphasize that these processes are very intentional; ELIJAH 
leaders and organizers are trying to lead people through a process of critically 
understanding their personal experiences in political terms. ELIJAH organizers and 
leaders point to storytelling and agitation as crucial to the success of the organization, 
both in terms of membership and growth as well as in terms of victories in the public arena. I did not see any evidence to indicate that it is at all a cynical process. Although 
their actions are directed toward serving organizational political interests, ELIJAH staff 
and leaders see this process as beneficial and empowering for individuals as well.

ELIJAH’s leadership development processes are thus based on the idea that it is necessary for individuals to undergo personal transformation in order for them to be agents of social and cultural transformation. Brynn is a very charismatic white woman in her mid-30s who is the executive director of ELIJAH. She describes why she thinks personal narratives have an impact on individuals’ capacity to take political action and why confronting this is a vital practice in ELIJAH:

*I think it’s a theory of change that we have that’s particular... Some people don’t believe this, right? Even some other people in the movement, they don’t believe this. They don’t believe that it’s essential. Not just that it would be nice, but essential for building a base.*
Which is that you actually have to move people, not only about their ideas about what’s happening in the world but that they themselves have to confront where they’ve internalized powerlessness in order to act powerfully... The belief is I, Brynn, have internalized a whole bunch of stories about the world and about myself. And they’re deep. About why I don’t deserve or shouldn’t have power. And you can say, well yeah, of course that’s how oppression works but then it has a particular Brynn nature to it. (laughs).

You can read that in a book and say, oh yeah, but until you actually say, “This is how it plays out for me...” then you have no mastery over it in yourself. And when you get into the fight... or into any kind of [political] confrontation and you don’t have any mastery over where you’ve internalized powerlessness, you won’t stay. You won’t stick it out. You will convince yourself you’re not important, you’ll convince yourself you shouldn’t be there... So, we actually prioritize spending time with people actually trying to unpack that. Like what stories they tell themselves that let them off the hook from acting powerfully and sometimes those stories run very very deep. And they’re connected to pain and experiences of powerlessness and sometimes it can be very deep. Those are things that have to be directly put on the table and dealt with in a public way.

Brynn makes several crucial points here. She argues that it is necessary for people to become aware of stories that they tell themselves both about the world and about themselves that discourage them from taking political action. These stories are highly individualized, and engaging with them can cause intense emotions. She states that it is not enough to be aware of them in an intellectually detached way, it is necessary to directly articulate and confront these stories. Brynn argues that this process is necessary for activists to be able to sustain themselves in political battles. If an individual builds their personal identity narrative on the assumption that who they are is incompatible with political agency, this will prevent them from engaging in sustained activist leadership. This is why ELIJAH intentionally goes through a process of individual identity exploration with members and provides to them a political narrative wherein their identity is compatible with and indeed tied to expressing political agency. Brynn argues
that people need to tell themselves new stories about themselves. Another way of putting
this is that individuals need to construct a politicized personal narrative and an activist-
leader identity to be effective, long-term political leaders in their communities.

Politicizing the personal and personalizing the political form the heart of the
process through which ELIJAH develops the activist-leader identity in its members. As
outlined in Figure 1, storytelling and agitation lead to both politicizing personal
experiences and personalizing political beliefs and actions, which both in turn lead to the
development of a politicized personal narrative which forms the basis of an activist-
leader identity.
POLITICIZING THE PERSONAL: “TURNING PRIVATE PAIN INTO PUBLIC ACTION”

Crucial to developing a politicized personal narrative and an activist leader identity is politicizing personal stories and personal experiences. Members of ELIJAH are led through a process of politicizing their personal narratives, which entails embedding their personal stories in political context, integrating a political analysis or a political narrative into their personal stories. ELIJAH trainers and leaders espouse a belief that every person has experience with powerlessness/oppression and tapping into that story and the anger that results is what motivates sustained political activism. One of the final sessions of weeklong training is called “Path to Power” and many of the organizers regard it as the most important training of the week. The purpose of the training is to get participants to articulate a story of powerlessness and connect their story to a political context and a course of action. I will provide an account of this training session to demonstrate how ELIJAH leads training participants through a process of politicizing their personal narratives.

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6 One interviewee critiqued this stance arguing that since her primary experience was a life of privilege, ELIJAH’s ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ did not resonate with her and was not what motivated her to participate in activist leadership. Therefore, ELIJAH’s particular framework focusing on experiences of systematic oppression might not work for individuals in relatively privileged groups (i.e. white, educated, upper class). However, coming to an understanding of one’s life experiences as situated in an oppressive context where one’s group is the oppressor is also a form of politicizing the personal. Having a personal narrative that incorporates this can also form the basis for an activist-leader identity, like the white activists for racial justice in Warren (2000).
In the room I observed for the Path to Power training, Brynn, who was introduced earlier, was the trainer. This training takes place on the last day of the week and so the roughly 30 people in the room had been getting to know each other together all week. Thus, before the training started, the participants were talking animatedly with one another and with Brynn. Brynn asked the trainees to move the rows of tables that had been in place all week and to instead arrange their chairs in a circle, with a small gap in front where she stood with a flip chart.

The training started with a discussion of the story of Nelson Mandela, which the participants were required to read about before the session. In this discussion, Brynn emphasized that Nelson Mandela was bombarded with oppressive messages from the racist society he lived in. She asserted that our society also provides us with oppressive messages, which we internalize and these messages act like tapes that play in our heads. She started to imitate what these inner voices of shame say: “this must be my fault” “I must be worthless.” She argued that the voices often coincide with social statuses, “I’m a woman, I’m black, I’m poor.” While she was speaking, she was creating a diagram on the flip chart at the front of the room, which I have recreated as Figure 2 below. She wrote at the top of the flip chart: Oppression. She said that oppression is experienced through institutions, although it comes out in relationships, like in families, and that oppression and experiences of powerlessness often result in shame. On the flip chart, she drew an arrow down from oppression and wrote shame and some of the oppressive messages she had articulated (e.g. “I am worthless”).
Next, she said that although we have those voices that are driven by shame in our heads, “some part of us knows deep down that they are wrong. That we are valuable.” She continued, “Nelson (Mandela) doesn’t go here,” and she pointed to the word shame on the flip chart (see Figure 2). “He goes somewhere else.” She said that there is a word for what he does to go to that other place and then she wrote off to the side: “politicize.” This (“politicize”) is the voice that says: “It isn’t my fault. I am valuable. I am made in God’s image.” She continued by saying that thinking about things this way leads to a question: “Something is telling me that I’m not good enough, what is it?” Answering that question entails naming one’s oppressor. Brynn said, “When we move to that place we can start to turn private pain into public action.” She characterized politicizing these painful personal experiences as a “transformative process where you move from shame and ‘it’s my fault’ to anger and empowerment to take action against the force that oppressed you.”

Brynn clearly identifies cultural narratives, particularly ones that are associated with certain social statuses, as one source of disempowerment and thus as an obstacle to political activism and an activist-leader identity. In pointing this out, in politicizing one’s own painful experiences, Brynn argues that people can feel empowered with the understanding that their oppression is not simply an individual problem for which they are at fault. She urges participants to identify their oppressor, which will help them to determine the societal force that they wish to take political action against. Instead of feeling shame, then, one should feel anger toward their oppressor and their oppressor’s manifestation in the wider community. If a person identifies their oppressor with a
collective problem in society, then they can use their anger as motivation to overcome that oppressor through political action. Then, instead of their personal narrative ending in shame and powerlessness, it can end in empowerment through anger leading to political action. This is a key part of the activist-leader identity that ELIJAH puts forth because individuals are encouraged to tie important and emotionally charged life events to their commitment to activism.

After she articulated this process, Brynn then said, “I am going to tell you my story.” I am going to recount this part of the training because it very clearly demonstrates how ELIJAH uses narrative in its activist-leader identity formation process. Brynn told the room about how her mother struggled with substance abuse throughout her childhood and the message she internalized from that experience: “What I made that mean was that I was not important, I’m invisible, I’m a burden, I’m not loved.” She then articulated that the root of her own oppression, her mother’s addiction, was not completely her mother’s fault as an individual. To illustrate this, Brynn told her mother’s story.

Brynn’s mother had been deeply hurt throughout her life due to her status as a woman and this fuelled the substance abuse that shaped Brynn’s childhood. She was sexually assaulted as a child and this was swept under the rug because of the Catholic Church. Brynn’s mother was one of four children, the only girl. Her family could only afford to pay for 3 of their children to go to college and so they decided to pay for her 3 brothers. Because of this, Brynn’s mother went to Vietnam and as a result of her experiences there suffered from PTSD. Therefore, her mother’s substance abuse was
caused in large part by things that had happened to her based on the wider political context.

As Brynn was telling the story, the room was silent and the atmosphere was very tense, there were a few people crying. Brynn was crying while telling it, but she was speaking in a strong voice. She said that when she reflected on her mother’s story and its effects on her own life she got angry and realized, “Was it my fault? No!” She said, “I made a decision. I have had enough of lies. I am tired of silence. I am going to tell the truth! We are going to tell the truth!” She said, “For me that is the path to power. It is about freedom. The sins that surrounded my family were about powerlessness and voicelessness. When people are silent, horrible things happen.” She said, “I started to learn through action. I started experiencing something different.” She said, “Political action is the most expressive thing we can do. We can say publicly, it’s not true! This crap! (pointing to the word shame on the flip chart)”

In telling her story and her mother’s story, Brynn demonstrates for the trainees the thought process and identity transformation she wants them to undergo. She models clearly articulating the negative messages that she had internalized from her family environment. She then articulates a causal connection between her family’s dysfunction, the dysfunction of institutions and the dysfunction of society as a whole, particularly in violence toward and unequal treatment of women. Interestingly, Brynn’s story could also be connected to class stratification (her mothers’ family not being able to afford college) or the horrors of war, but she chose in this context to emphasize the effects of gender. Indeed, the ambiguity and flexibility of narrative allows for multiple interpretations, which could be used to motivate various types of political action.
fault of an individual, it is instead due primarily to an unjust social structure and political context. Finally, she ends with a declaration that the way to resolve this and overcome personal trauma is through political action. One critical component of this is that she frames it in terms of making a decision to channel her anger into activism. By encouraging participants in the training to make this same decision, Brynn is pushing them down the path to forming an activist-leader identity. She argues that political action enables people to experience a new reality where they have a voice and are empowered instead of remaining voiceless and powerless.

At this point in the training, participants have been provided with two models for politicizing personal experiences, Brynn’s and Nelson Mandela’s. After telling her story, Brynn encouraged the trainees to share their own stories of oppression and powerlessness and to relate those stories to political action, which several did. One young white woman spoke tearfully about how her family does not fully accept her because she is a lesbian. She said that she had found healing in speaking out publicly for GLBT rights issues at her college, despite opposition from fundamentalist Christians, one of whom said hateful things about gay people during a campus event. She said that her experiences speaking out for GLBT rights, “made me silence that voice in my head, his voice.” This example demonstrates that participants in the training were beginning to internalize the way of thinking that had just been modeled by Brynn.

When trainees did not connect their personal pain to a political context, Brynn would attempt to coach them to do so. For instance, when an African American woman spoke about being abandoned by her mother, Brynn asked her, “was it your mom’s fault?
When you look at your story, do you see forces outside of your mother that caused her to be the way that she was? What was happening in the larger world?” This demonstrates how ELIJAH pushes members to connect their life stories to political contexts.

In this training, Brynn is therefore encouraging participants to take their experiences of oppression and use them as emotional fuel to engage in activism. She models this for the trainees by sharing her own story and articulating how the process of politicizing personal experiences plays out in her life. She also uses Nelson Mandela as a model for this transformation, arguing that he did not let his experiences of oppression paralyze him but instead they fueled his anger which drove him in his political activism and leadership. Also, by framing this discussion with the story of Nelson Mandela, training participants are encouraged to line up their personal narratives with the story of a famous activist-leader. Thus, through this narrative identity framework, participants can imagine their own story continuing the same way Mandela’s did; with a deep and long-lasting commitment to political activism and eventually overcoming his oppression by achieving justice for his people.

The Path to Power training demonstrates forcefully how central narrative is to ELIJAH’s method. Trainees are taught to draw connections between social structure, cultural narratives, institutions and personal stories from their own lives. Storytelling is the primary tool used to integrate the political with the personal. Because most long-time participants in ELIJAH have gone through this process in weeklong training, it is part of

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8 It is worth noting that most of the core elements of this path to power training are found in a weeklong training manual that dates back to the 1970s and has been used in many FBCO trainings nationwide.
the organizational narrative and forms one basis of collective identity in the organization. Participation in this training and politicizing one’s personal narrative is thus an important component of the activist-leader identity construction for ELIJAH members.

The examples above demonstrate how ELIJAH pushes people to politicize the personal by connecting their individual identity and personal narratives to the political context in which they take place. Now I will turn to a discussion of how ELIJAH pushes individuals to personalize their political beliefs.
PERSONALIZING THE POLITICAL: INTEGRATING EMOTION AND REASON

ELIJAH leads individuals through a process of personalizing their political beliefs through connecting those beliefs to their personal narratives. ELIJAH members are also encouraged to think about what the political action they undertake says about them as a person and how this can be integrated into their individual identities.

In the observation of weeklong training, there are several examples that indicate that when an individual articulates a political belief or concern, trainers challenge him or her to explore why they care about the issue on a personal level, preferably drawing on life experiences. During weeklong training, after every session the trainers have a meeting where they evaluate the performance of each trainer and assess the progress of each room through the week’s material. In these trainer-only meetings, organizers often speak with disapproval of ‘do-gooders’ who frame political action in terms of ‘helping other people’ rather than in terms of their own stake in political action. Being a ‘do-gooder’ is identified as a problem to fix; trainers notify each other when they believe that a participant has this issue. Trainers are encouraged to use agitation to push participants to personalize their political beliefs so that they do not frame their activism as ‘helping others’ but rather as connected to their own self-interest and their own personal narrative.

This theme of personalizing the political through agitation was found both in observations and in the interviews. Pastor Scott, a charismatic white Lutheran pastor in
his mid-40s who was President of ELIJAH when I interviewed him, reflects on an agitation that he received at weeklong when he attended 12 years prior:

*Martha (Latina trainer) comes up to me like halfway through the training and says, “So, pastor, on your form it said you were interested in homelessness,” ... She goes, “You’re from [small town]” and I said, “Yeah.” She said, “Well you know, I’ve been to [small town]. There are no homeless people there.” Which is probably true. And I said, “Yeah, maybe so.” And she said, “Here’s what I’ve been trying to figure out about you all week. Why does a white boy from [small town] care about homelessness?” And I said, “Well, Jesus said, I want you to do to the least of these what you have done to me.” I thought that was a pretty good answer. And she said, “You know, Scott, that, that’s actually the exact same line of crap I get from every pastor who comes through this place.”*

In this example, Pastor Scott is confronted by the trainer about his concern about homelessness; a political issue that she indicates he cannot authentically care about because of his relatively privileged background. She refuses to accept his intellectual, Biblically-based explanation because it is too abstract, and not tied to his background or identity. It is interesting that Pastor Scott clearly remembers this moment 12 years later.

He continues:

*I was really ticked off, like she was engaging me in a theological debate, that’s what I thought. I was really ticked and then she walks away and then she comes back and she goes, “Here’s the thing Scott, I’m not going to argue with you about this but, whenever a subject like this comes up and I look at you, you look to me like someone who understands something about homelessness and I don’t understand how to put that together with you being a white boy from [small town]. Am I right?” She was right. So, my attitude changed, I mean it was really different. I wasn’t mad anymore. I wasn’t mad, I just said, “Yeah, you’re right.” And she said, “What I want you to get clear on here at weeklong training is, until you get in touch with and figure out what I’m talking about, what you’re feeling, I would be willing to be you’ll never do a damn thing for anybody who actually is homeless.” She was right about that too.*

Pastor Scott is challenged to derive his motivation for political action not from political or moral ideals, but rather from personal experience, from his own life story. She senses that there is something in his background that allows him to truly understand the
experience of those who are homeless. The trainer places a standard upon him; if his political beliefs do not arise from personal experience, his basis for those political beliefs is not authentic and will not lead to action. Pastor Scott has internalized this framework and later in the interview describes how speaking from his own personal experiences allows him to speak more powerfully about political issues that he cares about. Indeed, there are many examples in the data where ELIJAH encourages individuals to use personal stories as a political tool and I will discuss this further in a later section.

ELIJAH encourages its members to personalize political experiences at least in part because motivation derived from personal experiences provides a solid basis for sustained engagement in political action. Dawn, an energetic white woman in her mid-30s who is the organizing director of ELIJAH, explicitly states this in her interview:

*The way we’re working on this is like getting the person really rooted in themselves and in their own experiences, in their own story, in their own interests and their own experiences and like you, you really don’t want people to lead out of something that somebody else invented. It’s important on a few levels. One is literally just motivation. Because if you’re going to ask somebody to be a stronger, more powerful person, it’s going to be hard, and there’s gotta be like some driving motivation for it. People don’t usually connect to... ideas are helpful frameworks for people, but they usually connect to, drive and motivation from experiences, emotions, stories.*

Thus, she is arguing here that this process of personalizing political beliefs, tying them to identity and life experiences provides a more durable basis for political action than abstract ‘ideas.’ ELIJAH does not simply connect with individuals on a cognitive, intellectual level through frame alignment of political beliefs, but also engages complex emotions through identity processes that are grounded in narrative. Dawn here acknowledges that ELIJAH employs strategies to connect individuals more deeply with
their own motivations for activism that are based in their own life experiences, their personal life narrative which is tied to strong emotions. The formation of an activist-leader identity is thus contingent on the embeddedness of political beliefs/ideas in life experiences and stories that are tied to emotions.

ELIJAH leaders are also pushed to understand the personal implications of their actions in the political arena. What does one’s actions in the political arena say about him or her as a person? During weeklong training, participants engage in several role-plays intended to simulate political action. After these role-plays, the trainers discuss the performance of some individuals. They agitate certain participants in front of the rest of the room by confronting them about their behavior and pointing out problematic aspects.

This next example is an excerpt from my field notes from a training session on the nature of political power, which takes place on the first full day of weeklong training. It takes place after a role-play in which the room was split into 2 sides to engage in a political negotiation and the trainer, John, interjected in various ways to manipulate the scenario. After the role-play is finished, John confronts several people in the room about how they behaved in the training:

*Then John (White male trainer, mid-50s) went to Pastor Carter (African-American male pastor) and asked him what he thought about the exercise. Pastor Carter started to give an intellectual argument about the nature of power and John said, “You’re overthinking it right now. What I mean is how did you do?” John then said to him, “You know you can organize people around yourself, but your instinct in this situation was to just be alone.” He told Pastor Carter that what undermines us (in the progressive movement) is having a strong person out front but everyone not being together behind him. Pastor Carter started to say that how the exercise was set up made it hard to organize people. As he was speaking, John walked over to the flip chart and pointed at it (“One rule: I can interrupt”) and Pastor Carter fell silent. John told him,*
“That’s how power works. It tries to set rules and you decide how or whether to follow the rules. You follow the rules you assume are there.”

In this example, John makes a judgment that Pastor Carter was not effective in the negotiation role-play because he acted alone, without organizing others. Pastor Carter is encouraged to think about himself and his identity as a pastor in terms of how he acts in political situations. John also uses this interaction to articulate several political lessons that the exercise is intended to convey, including that acting alone is not as effective as organizing people and that it is important to question unspoken rules in the political realm. Agitation, here, is an intentionally unsettling teaching tool that is intended to shake people up, to get them to start questioning how they think and behave. Agitation is used, in part, to destabilize identity so that ELIJAH can introduce new ways of thinking and acting and new ways to think about previously well-defined roles. In this instance, part of what John is doing is challenging the idea that the leadership role of the pastor is simply to stand up front and speak eloquently. He argues instead that the role of pastor should also include organizing others to speak together, instead of just relying on one strong voice. This example demonstrates one way in which ELIJAH personalizes the political through connecting political action to the transformation of identity.

Not only are clergy and lay leaders agitated to personalize their political experiences, but organizers as well. ELIJAH staff organizers consistently engage in the practice of agitation with one another to examine and analyze how their organizing and political work is connected to their individual identities. Below I discuss an example from my interview with John, who is the trainer from the example above and a former
executive director of ELIJAH. He discusses the sorts of questions he uses to train new organizers after they do a one-on-one meeting with church members they are trying to mobilize. Organizers are encouraged to ask deep questions to try to get at people’s core motivations, and these questions can be uncomfortable to ask. However, in ELIJAH it is seen as necessary to do this in order to build the type of relationships necessary to be able to mobilize a powerful political base. Thus, one-on-one meetings are widely viewed in the organization as one of the most core forms of political action that they engage in.

John gives examples of the sorts of questions he asks to help new organizers think about this aspect of their organizing work. There is an interesting process represented in the list of questions he articulates that I saw represented not only here, but in many other places in the data. This process demonstrates how ELIJAH integrates emotion and reason and how this is tied to their integration of personal identity and political action, which is in turn crucial to the formation of an activist-leader identity. John says:

*What risks did you take? What were you afraid of? What was going on in your guts when you were having that conversation with that person? What scares you about going back and having that second conversation?*

First, it is crucially important to reflect on how one is feeling while building political relationships and engaging in activism. ELIJAH leaders put great emphasis on emotions and “gut feelings.” The emotions are then held up and examined critically and rationally.

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9 Other interviewees articulated being guided through a similar process from the perspective of being on the receiving end of these sorts of questions. In agitations during weeklong training, trainers would often probe participants’ emotions and push them to analyze why they feel that way and what effect they think it has on their behavior. This also occurred in trainer-only meetings as trainers would regularly provide analyses of their own emotions and trainees’ emotions in the context of trying to figure out ways to better accomplish the main goal of the week—encouraging participants to form activist-leader identities.
to determine what, if anything, they reveal about the situation and what bearing they may have on future action. Emotions are viewed simultaneously as revealing useful insights and as potential obstacles to be overcome. Emotion is not necessarily opposed to reason but is rather employed along with reason to engage in more effective organizing and activism.

John continues to list questions that draw on analysis of emotions to form some ideas about personal identity in relation to the political work of organizing:

*What do you think that that person’s story tells you about what matters to that person? Do you think you are entitled to have that kind of relationship with people? Do you think you’re worthy of asking those questions? What fear do you have about yourself when you think about putting yourself into the position of that kind of relationship with other people?*

The emotions that are uncovered in the first set of questions are here tied to individual identity. Whether or not a person sees him or herself as capable of developing strong relationships with others. What are the sorts of things that they struggle with in themselves? In agitations, individuals are often encouraged to understand how these struggles arise from their story, their life experiences. They are then challenged to connect this to their activist work and their attempts to organize community members to participate in political action. I will discuss this further in an example below.

Finally, John ends his list with a set of questions that connect the above analysis of personal emotion and individual identity to the work of organizing:

*How would you define that person’s self-interest? What vision do you begin to have about what that person could do in the world? What do you want to proposition them to do?*
Here he begins to probe the new organizer on how he or she wants to organize. The primary job of community organizers is to entice people to engage in political action. They do this by first developing relationships in one-on-one meetings and then using the knowledge they gain about the person in that one-on-one meeting as a basis for asking people to do things, such as plan public events and bring others from their church to those events. But in ELIJAH’s process, it is only after knowing oneself and having a politicized personal narrative that a person can truly mobilize others in an authentic fashion.

How the processes outlined above play out in the work of organizing is perhaps best illustrated through another example. Brian, a white male organizer in his mid-30s, discusses how his experiences with politicizing the personal and personalizing the political help him in his organizing work:

I had had a set of experiences, some of them with [my father], he just had a really short temper, some of them with bullies in junior high that were experiences of powerlessness. And that really did shape me. So it means that I am very prone to people pleasing, which, as we know, is not a great trait to carry into community organizing... so wrestling with that... I think it allows me to more deeply understand what people are really up against when I’m organizing them... I feel like I know what I want to learn about that person when I walk into the room and I know the kinds of things to ask about in an initial conversation with them that will help me understand what experiences they’ve had with power and powerlessness.

Brian has thought through how his life experiences and the emotions that arise from them affect his organizing work in both positive and negative ways. He understands that his experiences with oppression lead him to have a people-pleasing disposition which he identifies as a weakness. However, he can also draw on these experiences to help him relate to the people he is trying to organize. He points to ELIJAH’s leadership
development processes as helping him to uncover these aspects of his personal story and relate them to his political work.

The questions that John asks new organizers are thus designed to integrate reflections about what it takes to build political power through relationships with an emphasis on overcoming personal fears and struggles around the work. These personal fears and struggles are often rooted in personal stories, and as Brian demonstrates, an awareness of this can help individuals to understand their weaknesses more fully while allowing them to relate to others through that weakness. ELIJAH is perhaps unlike other organizations in its willingness to directly confront the emotional dimensions of their work, for instance how engaging in political action can bring out insecurities that arise from individuals’ life experiences. This focus on the relationship of emotions and personal stories with activism is an integral part of personalizing political beliefs and actions in ELIJAH’s leadership development process.

Now I will move to a discussion of self-interest and the politicized personal narrative.
SELF-INTEREST: BEYOND SELFISH AND SELFLESS

The above two processes of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political culminate ultimately in the creation of a politicized personal narrative that forms the basis for an activist-leader identity, as outlined in Figure 1. ELIJAH refers to this politicized personal narrative as “self-interest” and it is one of the key concepts explored in weeklong training.

During weeklong training, individuals are encouraged throughout the week to identify and articulate their self-interest, which basically is what they want to do in the world and why. ELIJAH’s concept of self-interest is based on breaking down the binary between selfishness and selflessness, which the social science literature generally refers to as self-interest and altruism, respectively. The literature in general argues that selfishness and selflessness are 2 conflicting, mutually exclusive motivations to participate in social movements (Teske 1997). ELIJAH leaders, in contrast, argue that what people want, what motivates them, and what they view as beneficial and necessary is tied both to their individual interests and to the interests of the larger community. Their understanding of this is that through narrative a connection between the two can be drawn. The self-interest training session is dedicated primarily to conveying this point and getting training participants to apply the concept of self-interest to their own lives by articulating a politicized personal narrative. ELIJAH provides to its members a model in which self-interest integrates both selfishness and selflessness into a coherent narrative.
The self-interest training session at weeklong training has at its core this discussion of selfishness versus selflessness. In the room I observed for this session, the trainer was Thomas, a black South African pastor who speaks with quiet gravitas and has a long history in activism and organizing. Early in the training session, he sets up a binary of selflessness and selfishness. He started off by telling the group, “You have probably heard a lot about how the greatest merit is to be selfless and the greatest sin is to be selfish,” after which he elicited from the room some words that they associate with selflessness and selfishness. He wrote them up on 2 flip charts in the front of the room. Under selfless was: generous, giving, caring, humble, kind, saintly and under selfish was: cold, aggressive, egotistical, stingy, mean, uncaring, thoughtless. Thus, he sets up the binary of selfless and selfish, wherein selflessness comes out as the morally superior position.

Thomas then defined the concept of self-interest by showing how it integrates what they have described as selfishness and selflessness. He said, “Being selfish is to be all about me and denying other people. Being selfless is the opposite, it is all about others and you deny yourself.” He continued, “Self-interest is both I and you and acting out of self-interest does not deny what you want or what others want.” The origin of the word self-interest is used to illustrate his point. The Latin root of self-interest, he argued, is esse meaning “to be” and inter meaning “among.” He said that that is what self-interest is, “it is me amongst others.” The emphasis is on the fact that “self-interest is a relational concept.” The way that ELIJAH conceives of self-interest, therefore, encompasses both personal interests and community interests.
After the discussion of selfishness and selfishness, Thomas wrote on a flip chart the heading: “Self-Interest” and the question: “What makes me who I am?” He also wrote: Who am I? and said out loud, “I am the sum of my experience.” He then drew a stick figure on the flip chart and listed several things around it, including that he was a father and a husband and a pastor and asked for the group to say other things that were important for his stick figure based on personal stories he had told previously in the session. People listed: age, apartheid, friends, anger (what makes me angry), joy (what makes me happy), religion, higher education, parents, enemies, male, and South African culture. He argued, “When trying to work out what is important to me at this point in time, it helps to look at where I came from, my story.” This statement points to how ELIJAH uses narrative to integrate aspects of individuals’ identities and experiences with motivation for political action.

Later in the session, participants each completed their own stick figure chart, listing the identities and experiences they deemed most important. Thomas encouraged them to think about how these identities and experiences have shaped them and how each could be related to their interest in political activism. He spoke about how each identity and experience listed is a separate “window into who we are,” that leads down a different path. He pushed participants to pick one of the things they listed and reflect on it,

10 All the components of the self-interest training discussed in this passage, including the juxtaposition of selfish with selfless, the word origin of self-interest, the revised definition of self-interest, and the stick figure exercise are found in a weeklong training manual that dates back to the 1970s and have been used as the basis for many FBCO trainings nationwide. I am not sure if the word origin given for self-interest is factually accurate, however it has become a part of the conventional wisdom in FBCO groups.
exploring how it informs their self-interest. Later, they are encouraged to do this in their one-on-ones with others in order to understand the personal roots of others’ political motivations. The stick figure exercise encourages individuals to see themselves as shaped and defined by social factors in their past, present, and future. This provides a basis for bridging selfishness and selflessness and defining self-interest both in terms of individual-level interests and community-level interests.

There are many examples in both the observation and the interview data of individuals articulating their politicized personal narrative, or self-interest. For example, in the session following the self-interest training, trainees are encouraged to declare their self-interest by coming to the front of the room and articulating what their self-interest is. The trainer in the room I observed, Ruby, is a compelling African-American woman in her early 30s who speaks with great intensity. She started the training by saying, “I want to be known and responsible for being part of the handful of people that closes the achievement gap in the schools in the state.” She continued, “There is a silent genocide against African Americans in this country. African Americans lead in death and destruction. Why is it that people who look like me are more likely to go to prison?” The room was filled with tense silence as she spoke. She said that growing up she felt unwanted and stated, “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life feeling like that. That is why I am a part of a powerful organization.” Here, Ruby models for the participants a politicized personal narrative wherein her personal interests are connected to political goals and drive her actions. Her narrative contains personalization of her political beliefs as she connects her passion for racial justice to her own racial identity. It also includes
The politicization of her personal story in the reference to her childhood as part of the motivation for being a part of the political work of ELIJAH. Thus, we can see the process outlined in Figure 1 articulated here as informing Ruby’s activist-leader identity.

Training participants also articulated politicized personal narratives during this session, although they were less fully developed than Ruby’s. After she finished her story, Ruby invited participants to come to the front of the room and declare their self-interest. One white woman said, “I would like to make a declaration that I want to be a pastor.” She said that what motivates her to do so is that as a child she was seen as a behavioral problem that needed to be medicated. When she joined a church for the first time she finally felt that she was treated like a human being, thus tying her political ambitions to motivations deeply rooted in her life experiences. When she finished, Ruby encouraged her to commit to a time frame for becoming a pastor and told her that she needed to think about how what she was doing right now would get her to where she wanted to be. This woman’s politicized personal narrative is connected to a course of action in her public life.

There were also examples of self-interest articulated as a politicized personal narrative in the interviews. Robert is a lay leader in his mid-30s who has a doctoral degree and been involved in ELIJAH for 7 years. He says in his interview:

*So the motivation for getting involved [in ELIJAH] was two major things. One was a childhood dominated by peer abuse. Being bullied, being picked on… That really shaped me in a way that I think allows me to empathize with people that are oppressed. Even though certainly as a white male I have a privilege that others don't, I do have this taste of what it feels like.*

*The other motivating factor I think was experiences in grad school in Detroit seeing, you know, the poverty there and the disinvestment in the poor. It was something I*
had just never seen before because you don't see that kind of thing here, it just doesn't exist. And so that was quite shocking to me and um, really, really opened my eyes to there's something fundamentally wrong with the way our society is built.

Robert connects his motivation to engage in activism with ELIJAH to formative experiences in his childhood and young adulthood. He politicizes his experience with bullies and he argues that this allows him to understand at some level the perspective of individuals who are oppressed by the way society is built even though he is an affluent, educated white male. He does not use abstract ideas such as “concern for the poor” as reasons for his activism, instead he points to his childhood and experience in graduate school of being confronted with the realities of social inequality in Detroit. This politicized political narrative has pushed him to maintain involvement in ELIJAH, and he indicates throughout the interview that being an activist-leader is a major component of his identity.

Using politicized personal narratives as the basis for action provides an advantage to ELIJAH because these narratives are adaptable to multiple contexts and political issues. As opposed to many social movement groups that focus on one issue, (e.g. the pro-life movement), or one identity (e.g. the gay rights movement), ELIJAH focuses on multiple issues at one time and changes its issue focus over time. This is why intentional development of an activist-leader identity in its members is so important for the organization. ELIJAH leaders must tap into multiple identities and experiences of its members to motivate action. For instance, one leader might relate to a domestic violence issue through her gender identity, but to a healthcare issue through her social class position. As stated above, part of the way ELIJAH defines self-interest is that self-interest
is tied to one’s community and political context. Individuals are therefore encouraged to connect their self-interest to political issues that the organization is currently working on. Thus, the process of creating politicized personal narratives serves ELIJAH’s political interests by allowing for flexibility and adaptability in connecting individuals’ identities to the political work of the organization.

Given this, it is important to acknowledge that individuals do not emerge from weeklong training or one political action with all of their possible politicized personal narratives fully formed. It is instead an iterative process that takes place for many committed activist-leaders over the course of many years. Indeed, these activist-leaders develop multiple narratives that correspond to new personal and political issues that arise. In my interview with Charles, a grassroots strategy consultant who has worked closely with ELIJAH for many years, he observes:

*You don’t transform a leader to be a powerful person then you’re done, there’s that constant challenging. So right now, Amy (a prominent and influential lay leader in the organization) who I think had her world turned around regarding race over the last 5 or 6 years, as ELIJAH begins to move into getting more clear about a narrative around economic disparity and the role of corporations with that, she is having a visceral reaction and saying wait a minute, I work for a corporation, my corporation does good things, I have a good job. But she also recognizes through conversation that she’s situated differently than a lot of other people in that economy. And so now she’s going to have to grow again, right? Along with other people. So there’s that constant need to grow.*

When ELIJAH’s issue focus evolves difficulties arise for individuals whose established experiences and understandings are at odds with the new political perspective. The above example indicates that in order for established activist-leaders to continue in their
activism with the organization, they must create new politicized personal narratives that justify and motivate action.

There is thus no ‘end point’ to ELIJAH’s leadership development process, as the organization is constantly engaging with new issues and creating new political narratives. ELIJAH leaders therefore continually relate the work of the organization to their identities and life experiences and construct revised or new politicized personal narratives. This is represented in Figure 1 through the continuous feedback loop that hinges on engaging in political action and is formed in the middle of the diagram among storytelling and agitation, politicizing the personal and personalizing the political, the politicized personal narrative and engaging in public action with guidance and support from the organization. The order in which these things occur is not necessarily set in stone, for instance a politicized personal narrative can motivate political activism, and activism can lead to the formation of a politicized personal narrative. Storytelling and agitation can motivate activism, and experiences with activism create stories that become a part of both individual narratives and organizational narratives. In the next section, I will look at how storytelling and politicized personal narratives are very prominent in ELIJAH’s political activism. I will show how processes of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political are central to the organization’s political strategies.

The difficulty involved in getting a large and diverse base to be this adaptable is one of the major obstacles that ELIJAH faces in sustaining involvement and mobilizing. Several interviewees expressed frustration and commented that they and other members of their congregations felt alienated from the central organization of ELIJAH.
ENGAGING IN POLITICAL ACTION

An important part of the process of developing an activist-leader identity is pushing people into action in the political arena and thereby providing them with personal experiences of activism that they can integrate into their politicized personal narrative. There are many examples in the data that demonstrate the effectiveness of ELIJAH’s leadership development process for encouraging and supporting sustained activism. This corroborates prior research on social movement participation. It is well-documented that successful social movement organizations engage their members in political action and include structures and practices that provide activist-leaders with social support, guidance, and motivation (e.g. Morris 1984).

This study goes beyond previous research in 2 ways. First, the data demonstrates how engaging in political action helps to develop an activist-leader identity based in politicized personal narratives. Second, there is evidence to indicate that this focus on developing narrative identities creates an organizational political strategy that is based on articulating these politicized personal narratives publicly in order to change institutional and cultural narratives that influence policy. Thus, ELIJAH leaders’ politicized personal narratives shape the political actions that they take, and these actions in turn shape their narrative identities (Somers 1994).

ELIJAH incorporates all the processes described in the above sections into their approach to engaging in activism. Records of prior ELIJAH public actions as well as
accounts from weeklong participants and interviewees indicate that strategic public storytelling forms the basis of ELIJAH’s activism strategy. Also, (1) preparing for, (2) engaging in, and (3) reflecting on public action are each critically important sites in which ELIJAH activist-leaders engage in the process of personalizing their political beliefs and politicizing their personal beliefs through narrative. Preparation for ELIJAH activism includes agitation and entails the selection, telling, crafting, and perfecting of politicized personal narratives relevant to the issue at hand. Participants in ELIJAH public meetings, press conferences, and meetings with public officials often tell these personal stories that they have prepared to illustrate a political point. Then, after the action has taken place, organizers and leaders evaluate and intentionally reflect on their performance and whether or not they effectively communicated their story. All of this is necessary for the development of an activist-leader identity. This account would thus be incomplete without a discussion of ELIJAH leaders’ engagement in the public arena.

There are many examples in the data that point to engaging in public action as an important ingredient in cultivating activist-leader identities. Pastor Richard, who is a white pastor in his mid-50s and has a quiet, calm presence, articulates in his interview that his first experience with activism caused him to redefine the role of a pastor in the community:

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12 This process of preparing a story, telling a story, and reflecting on how effectively the story was told is applicable as well to how trainers approach weeklong training, which is for them a public performance. Preparing to train at weeklong training involves selecting and perfecting personal stories that illustrate political concepts. The effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of trainers’ personal stories in communicating political points was regularly addressed in trainers’ evaluation sessions.
I had never envisioned in my pastor call that I would be meeting with a mayor unless he’s a member in my congregation... But here we’re meeting with the mayor to try to move him [to support an ELIJAH issue campaign]... that was the change, seeing that one of my roles as a pastor could be up front.

Pastor Richard, in response to an experience of engaging in public action, revises his ideas about his own identity as a pastor to include participating in activism and taking leadership in the public arena. Pastor Richard has been involved with ELIJAH for over twenty years since this first action and has held many leadership positions in the organization. This example is one of many where interviewees attribute their current identities to past political action.

As the example above indicates, when individuals have an experience of political agency, this becomes incorporated into their politicized personal narrative and activist-leader identity. Engaging in activism forms part of the basis for future activism (McAdam 1989). ELIJAH organizers and leaders are aware of this. Therefore one strategy that ELIJAH pursues to develop and maintain an activist-leader identity in its members is to invite or push them into public action and support them during these experiences. Storytelling and agitation are both used as tools in this process. For instance, agitation is often employed to push individuals to engage in political action by challenging them to bring their political actions in line with their political beliefs.

ELIJAH provides support and guidance for its members by training and preparing them prior to taking action as well as evaluating and reflecting on the experience afterwards. In these pre- and post-action reflections, organizers and experienced leaders continually reinforce processes of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political.
One of my interview respondents, Linda (a Filipina lay leader in her early 60s), describes (1) the process that she went through in preparing for a public meeting on the issue of domestic violence, (2) what the experience of telling her story in this large public setting was like and (3) how it impacted her identity. She says,

*I would write down a narrative and then I would sit with one of the organizers who would go through it with me... So the organizer was able to help me and bring out that ‘So what?’ factor...*

The interview and observation data both indicate that this is a common practice in ELIJAH. A lay leader or clergy member will write out a personal narrative, that may or may not be politicized, and an organizer will work with him or her to crystallize the story so that it conveys a particular political point. In Linda’s case, her story was about her childhood experiences with domestic violence.

As the interview continues, Linda goes on to talk about what the experience of telling her story publicly was like:

*The first time I ever talked [publicly] about anything that had to do with what had oppressed me, it was domestic violence in my family as a child growing up... And I had not done that before. And what happens is, you know, it's amazing, it just feels like a weight's been lifted but it does feel very freeing...*

Here, Linda describes the experience of telling her painful story in public as “amazing” and “freeing.” This positive and empowering experience informs her activist-leader identity and likely accounts at least in part for her 8-year long involvement with ELIJAH. Finally, Linda discusses how the experience affected her and influenced her subsequent actions:

*I started wanting to tell [my story] more. I even talked to my sisters... I had never talked to my sisters about this....And what was interesting in the process of telling it, you really
learn more about yourself, I believe... There was this sense of strength and power to be able to tell a story and share a story with a large group of people.

This passage illustrates how publicly telling personal stories for political purpose can impact an individual’s identity. Sharing publicly a story of domestic violence in her childhood inspires in Linda a feeling of “strength and power.” This empowerment causes Linda to crave the experience of telling her story, even leading her to discuss a very sensitive topic with her sisters, an action she had never taken before. Others in my interview sample described how telling their personal stories and talking about their political beliefs publicly gave them a sense of empowerment and freedom. This corroborates what is taught in the Path to Power training about the benefits of politicizing painful personal experiences to motivate political action.

This case study of ELIJAH, a faith-based community organizing group, speaks to several important gaps in the social movements literature. The next and final section will summarize these contributions and provide directions for future research.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary factor that determined the success of the Civil Rights Movement was the existence of church-based local movement centers that were made up of and run by established local activist-leaders (Morris 1984). These local movement centers share many similarities with contemporary faith based community organizations like ELIJAH. As shown above, ELIJAH leaders are working to develop a base of activist-leaders through their leadership development processes.

At their core, the conundrums that social movement groups like ELIJAH face with regards to gaining and sustaining participation rest on the need to (1) Integrate individual identities and interests with collective identities and political aims and (2) Harness and continuously channel energy towards political action by maintaining participant involvement in movement organizations.

The 2 dilemmas described above imply 2 questions that this study attempts to address in terms of explaining the involvement and commitment of the activist-leaders who form the core of social movements. The first question is: How do collective identities incorporate and transform individual identities? This is referred to as the problem of identity correspondence by Snow and McAdam (2000). A growing emphasis on identity processes in social movements has revealed that sociologists do not understand the relationship of collective identity with individual identity in movement contexts. Frame alignment is proposed as one way to account for collective identity
formation. Although it has been well documented as crucial to mass mobilization (Benford and Snow 2000), frame alignment is less successful as an explanation for the deep and long-lasting investment of activist-leaders in base-building and political action.

The second question is: *How and why do some individuals remain motivated to participate in social movements?* The latter is particularly difficult given the time, money, and energy constraints of one individual and the competing interests of work, family, and leisure. I argue that the answer to these two questions is one and the same: the development of an activist-leader identity through the creation of a *politicized personal narrative*.

The process by which people come to assume and enact an activist-leader identity in ELIJAH proceeds in five main stages. (1) ELIJAH identifies people as potential movement participants by speaking to church members about their interests in the community. (2) The organization then intentionally cultivates an activist-leader identity, through very targeted, specific training techniques. These prominently feature storytelling and agitation as well as engaging in political action with organizational support. (3) These techniques encourage ELIJAH members to simultaneously politicize their personal stories and personalize their political beliefs and actions. (4) After this process, the activist-leader is expected to be able to articulate a *politicized political narrative*. That is, they ought to be able to and are indeed encouraged to tell their personal stories in political terms and connect their political views to personal stories. (5) Finally, participants in this process enact their activist-leader identities by investing
significant amounts of time and energy in advancing the organization’s political goals through engaging in activism and political action.

This study provides empirical support for the contention of theorists such as Somers (1994) and Loseke (2007) that narrative identity frameworks are useful for understanding how individual, organizational and cultural narratives are negotiated and integrated. The many examples articulated above demonstrate the powerful versatility of stories in identity processes. Stories help ELIJAH activist-leaders to make sense of personal experiences in terms of political contexts and political beliefs/actions in terms of personal experiences. Politicized personal narratives are a powerful motivational force because they allow individuals to define collective political goals in highly personal and individualized ways that are connected to their own identities and life experiences. It is this removal of the absolute separation between individual and collective identities through narrative that accounts for the heavy commitment of activist-leaders who maintain long-term involvement in social movements. The activist-leader identity integrates emotion and reason, self-interest and altruism and individual and collective identities through the politicized political narrative.

Although this study provides several important contributions to the sociological literature, there are several limitations that provide directions for future research. It is important to acknowledge that faith and religion play a very important role in the leadership development processes and political actions of ELIJAH and the identity narratives of ELIJAH activist-leaders. However, it was such a prominent theme in the data that there is not sufficient room in this paper to adequately address the topic.
Another major theme in the data that I am unable to fully discuss here are the complex racial dynamics in ELIJAH, which is a predominantly white organization working on racial equity issues.

There are many opportunities for future research on this topic. A limitation of this study is that there is no comparison group of non-activists. I only look at individuals for whom ELIJAH’s leadership development processes achieved some measure of success. Future research could explore further the social psychological factors that cause certain individuals to become activist-leaders and others to disengage from the political realm. Furthermore, the identity formation process outlined in this study is likely one of several possible paths by which individuals develop activist-leader identities.

Another limitation of this study is that it only looks at one organization. Thus there need to be studies that compare the leadership development processes of various FBCO groups to one another as well as to other social movement groups, including labor and issue-based groups as well as groups in countries other than the United States. One key question is to look at whether and how these and other techniques for leadership development are diffused across social movement groups in various arenas. This study provides some preliminary evidence that activist-leader identities could potentially form the basis for cross-movement collaboration among neighborhood, labor, faith, and progressive electoral groups. This would be a powerful institutional alignment, and so further study needs to be done.

The limitations of this study therefore provide many opportunities for future research on this topic. Despite these limitations, the current case study provides a first
attempt at articulating a process of activist-leader identity development that is grounded in a large empirical dataset.

The seasoned activist-leaders who form the core of successful movements do not emerge spontaneously out of nowhere. It is clear that activist-leaders operate with a keen sense of how their individual lives are shaped by political processes and how they in turn influence their political context. This mode of operation is familiar to many sociologists. Indeed, Saul Alinsky, whose legacy in community organizing forms the basis for the process articulated here, started his career as a graduate student in sociology at the University of Chicago. In his classic text, *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills states:

“We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of this living, he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.” (emphasis mine)

Mills points out that individual life stories take place within a larger historical story. He argues that individuals both shape and are shaped by their political context. These words communicate a basic sociological understanding about the relationship of the individual to society that closely mirrors the narrative process of activist-leader identity development put forth in this piece.

Perhaps the main distinction between developing the politicized personal narratives that motivate activism and developing the sociological imagination that lies at the core of sociology’s intellectual enterprise is the end goal. Mills states, “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations
between the two within society. That is its task and its promise.” The process of creating a politicized personal narrative for the purpose of motivating political activism is the same process that is crucial to the development of the sociological imagination. Those of us that teach struggle to develop the sociological imaginations of our students. Those of us that conduct research and write use our sociological imaginations at all stages of the research process and depend on the sociological imaginations of our readers to appreciate the relevance of our work. Sociologists are thus uniquely positioned to understand, at an intuitive level, the development of activist-leader identities and the relevance of politicized personal narratives for social activism.
REFERENCES


Stryker, Sheldon, Timothy J. Owens and Robert W. White, eds. 2000. *Self, Identity, and*


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Social Movements. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
APPENDIX: TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Interview Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>S/P/L</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
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<td>7 years</td>
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<td>Sandra</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Leader</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
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<td>10 years</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>education consultant</td>
<td>12 years</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>8 years</td>
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continued
Table 1: Continued

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<td>fundraising and communications director</td>
<td>20+</td>
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<td>pastor</td>
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<td>Staff</td>
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<td>organizer</td>
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<td>Rosemary</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>retired</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
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<td>John</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>20+</td>
</tr>
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<td>African American</td>
<td>organizer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Activist-Leader Identity Development Process
Figure 2: The Path to Power Training Diagram

Oppression

Politicize
"It isn't my fault"
"I am valuable"

Anger

Shame
"It is my fault"
"I am worthless"

Depression/
Despair

Action