Characters in Political Storytelling

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Much of the literature on narrative in politics focuses on stories that are told explicitly and focuses on the role of genre in shaping stories. But in politics, as in other spheres, stories are often alluded to rather than told explicitly. And the allusions often take the form of a reference to a character: the “welfare queen,” the “anchor baby,” the “litigious American.” Accordingly, this essay centers on characters in politics. I ask: Why do particular characters come to be resonant in political debates? How much power does a resonant character have to shape policies? And how much freedom do contending parties have to invent new characters? Can one style anyone a victim or a hero? Or do group stereotypes limit who can play particular roles? To answer these questions, I draw on research in sociology, political science, communication, and anthropology, as well as on cases from social movements, electoral politics, and policy making.

Introduction

Many of the stories that are most effective in politics are not told. Instead, they are alluded to. A politician might refer to “the Horatio Alger story,” assuming that his audience knows that his point is about the importance of pulling...
oneself up by one's bootstraps. His audience is already familiar with the story: A young man raises himself from humble beginnings by dint of his hard work and virtuous character. Or perhaps the audience is not familiar with the actual story. Perhaps they think that Horatio Alger is a fictional character, or even a real one, rather than the author of a series of rags-to-riches novels. But they know that there is a story and that the story’s moral is about self-help.

The fact that people often confuse the author Horatio Alger with the protagonist of the stories he wrote reflects the fact that we know many stories by their main characters. Conservatives who fought to cut welfare on the grounds that poor people were taking advantage of government handouts in the 1990s did not refer to the “Welfare Exploitation Story.” They referred to “welfare queens.” The 2011 Occupy movement did not tell a story about risky investments, collusive bank rating practices, and government austerity; it pitted the “99 percent” against the “1 percent.” Over the years, politicians have referred mordantly to “teenage mothers,” “anchor babies,” “climate-change deniers,” “the silent majority,” and “K Street lobbyists” (Loseke describes other characters in politics). Sometimes the story’s protagonist is us; sometimes it is them, but the line between us and them is clear. We are the silent majority or the 99 percent. We are threatened by teenage mothers, anchor babies, climate-change deniers, K Street lobbyists, and the 1 percent. The line between us may not be one of enmity: Teenage mothers, like “at-risk youth,” may be invoked to call for compassion and efforts to help. The politician who styles herself a “maverick” calls up images of a principled loner, willing to defy convention for the sake of principle and resolutely indifferent to “inside the Beltway” political strategists.

Why are characters so effective politically? Probably in part because, as they call up multiple stories, of people real and fictional, who are different in many ways but alike in their common heroism, villainy, or—as the example above suggests—political independence. Characters are surely effective also because they are so central to how we read stories. Recent research suggests not only that stories are more persuasive than arguments but also that the key mechanism is one of identification (de Graaf et al.; Hoeken and Fikkers). We adopt the views of the characters with whom we identify, and we identify with characters who are presented sympathetically. Politically, it is characters, rather than the events in which they appear, who win us over.

Yet we also have plenty of examples of political actors falling flat when they have tried to style themselves as heroes or martyrs or their opponents as villains
or frauds. Think of vice presidential candidate Lloyd Bentsen’s famous put-down of his counterpart Dan Quayle when the latter likened himself to a beloved former president: “I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy” (Clayman 120).

When are political groups and actors able to use characters to advance their cause? Surely, rhetorical skill counts for something, as well as luck. But we should also be able to identify features of the context and the actors in it that give some an advantage in creating compelling characters. We should be able to tell whether anyone can be turned into a hero and when victims elicit a desire to act rather than pity or blame. We should be able to assess just how “sticky” collective memories of particular historical figures are. We should be able to identify the hurdles that are involved in turning a villain into a hero or a hero into a fraud in the public imagination.

There is now a huge interdisciplinary literature on narrative, some of which addresses the political uses of storytelling. Scholars have shown that people use stories, variously, to recruit movement participants (Armstrong and Crage; Viterna), justify political violence (Fine), win policy victories (Stewart), make sense of defeat (Owens), evaluate policy options (Stone), decide whether to go to war (Smith; Gibson), deliberate with fellow citizens (Polletta and Lee), forge political identities (Kane; Somers), communicate across ideological divides (Braunstein), and commemorate the past (Khalili). Perhaps surprisingly, however, the literature on narrative has focused more on plot than on character.

Or perhaps it is not so surprising. The structuralist theories that came to dominate the study of narrative made the provocative claim that stories all hewed to the same form. The key components of stories were sequences of actions that appeared in all stories of a given genre. Characters were instantiations of plot structures. Characters were treated, as Chatman puts it, as “participants or actants rather than personages” (111, italics in original). Scholars who studied narratives in politics were less likely to see plot structures as universal and timeless. But they did see them as structures, that is, as durable, useable across different contexts, and as underpinning contemporary prejudices and stereotypes rather than as shaped by them (Polletta, Trigoso, et al., “The Limits of Plot”).

Characters were thus shaped by genre. But this perspective begs an important question. If generic plots and characters can be transposed from one set of events and people to another set—if one can tell a Romeo and Juliet story about twenty-first-century teenagers as well as those from the fifteenth century—then it
should be possible to use stories effectively to challenge the status quo. If audiences interpret the protagonist of a story as heroic simply because they recognize the story as a heroic one, then one should be able to change popular views of poor people by casting them narratively as heroes rather than victims. One should be able to tell a story about a poor person that captures the struggle to make do with insufficient income and that represents survival as heroism. Likewise, one should be able to tell stories of battered women who have struck back at their abusers along the lines of classic self-defense stories of men confronted with an attacker and forced to fight back to save their lives.

The fact that it is hard to imagine such stories being effective suggests that generic plots are not fully transposable. Audiences’ opinions about characters—about how believable and worthy they are—are not shaped entirely by the genre of plot they appear in. Rather, I argue, audiences rely on a different logic in assessing characters, a logic that comes from stereotypes about particular social groups. This poses an obstacle to political actors’ ability to use stories effectively and, in particular, to use stories to challenge the status quo.

In the rest of this article, I explore some of the ways in which actors such as congressional representatives, citizens, and political strategists have sought to use characters in politics. But I am especially interested in groups typically excluded from mainstream politics. We know that sympathetic characters are persuasive, but there are reasons that disadvantaged groups and groups challenging the status quo struggle to be seen as sympathetic characters.

**Why Stories Persuade**

Research shows that stories are better able than other kinds of messages to change people’s opinions (Slater and Rouner; Jones). This is especially true when audiences are not already invested in the issue in question. The latter is a situation that political actors confront routinely. Moreover, the attitudinal change brought about by stories tends to persist or even increase over time (Appel and Richter).

Scholars of narrative persuasion have identified two mechanisms that may explain how narratives lead to opinion change. One is that reading an absorbing story inhibits readers’ tendency to counterargue (Green and Brock). The reader suspends disbelief, which leads him or her to accept the opinions that are communicated by way of the story. Research findings on stories’ capacity to inhibit
counterarguing have been mixed, however (Hoeken and Fikkers). A second mechanism has been more fully supported by the research. It is that people tend to adopt the views of the character with whom they identify. Identification involves experiencing vicariously the emotions and perspectives of the character (de Graaf et al.). Some research suggests that people identify with characters who seem similar to them (Eyal and Rubin). But other research suggests that readers simply identify with the protagonist. For example, de Graaf et al. had subjects read a story about two sisters discussing the health care of their irreversibly comatose mother. One story was written from the point of view of the sister who favored euthanasia, and the other was written from the point of view of the sister who wanted to find a nursing home. The researchers found that subjects who read the first story expressed attitudes in support of euthanasia, whereas subjects who read the second story expressed attitudes against euthanasia but in favor of end-of-life nursing care (see also Hoeken and Fikkers).

Although the experimental research suggests that identification is fairly unconscious, in her ethnographic study of book clubs, Long describes readers engaging in a more self-conscious process. Book club members devoted most of their discussion to the characters in the book under discussion and to their feelings about the characters. They shifted from discussing the book to their own lives and then back again, using characters to evaluate their own relationships and using characters to imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

Contrary to the experimental research, Long found that book club members sometimes identified with less sympathetic characters or peripheral ones or only with aspects of main characters. Similarly contradictory findings appear elsewhere in the literature. In line with the experimental research, Shively found that Native American men identified with the protagonist of the film *The Searchers* (dir. John Ford, 1956), in spite of the fact that the protagonist expressed racist beliefs. They were much less likely to identify with one of the Native American characters in the film. In line with Long’s book club members, Fiske found that men watching *Die Hard* (dir. John McTiernan, 1988) in a homeless shelter cheered for the villains but turned off the film before the hero restored order. It is likely that readers sometimes identify with characters who are objectively like them, sometimes identify with characters who are presented favorably in the story, and sometimes identify with people who have status outside the story, but we do not yet have a clear understanding of the pattern of this variation.

Still, the main point for scholars of politics is clear. Characters are powerful
because we connect to them emotionally in relations of admiration, fear, anger, or disdain. We imagine who we are, who we want to be, and who we are not in and through our response to narrative characters. When we hear stories, we zero in on the characters involved, judging the believability of the story based on whether characters act in ways that make sense to us and judging the moral of the story based on the characters’ fate.

**Uses of Characterization in Politics**

None of this is likely news to political actors. Much of what political actors do is to represent themselves, their agendas, and their antagonists in terms of familiar characters. Let me describe briefly three common ways in which they do so.

**Heroes and Martyrs**

Political actors liken themselves to celebrated figures in order to claim authority. In a study of how congressional representatives told the story of the civil rights movement on the House and Senate floors, I found that black representatives connected their own careers to that of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Polletta, “Legacies and Liabilities”). They were humble in representing their own careers as made possible by the civil rights movement. But they also told King’s story in a way that made them—and pointedly not extrastitutional activists—the bearers of King’s legacy.

Political figures may also describe themselves as avenging a martyr. The Tunisian activists who launched the 2011 Arab Spring protests mobilized after the self-immolation of a fruit vendor who had been harassed by police, vowing to avenge his death (M. Fisher). Similarly, activists in Iran in 2009 rallied participants around the martyred Neda Agha-Soltan, shot and killed while protesting undemocratic elections (“I Am Neda,” countless Facebook pages read; see Fathi), and activists in Egypt in 2010 did so for Khaled Saeed, killed while in police custody (Preston).

Political figures may represent themselves alternatively as prophets or as converts, people who have gained access to the wisdom that is their responsibility to pass on. Those challenging the status quo often try to link themselves to heroes of the past. But they also align themselves with “ordinary” people who have stood
up to injustice. Such people are often, in fact, not so ordinary. Rosa Parks was described as a middle-aged seamstress who decided that she was too tired to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery one day. Her arrest led thousands of black Montgomery citizens to stay off the buses for months, until the Supreme Court ruled that segregated seating was illegal. In fact, Rosa Parks was the secretary of her local unit of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and had been trained in strategies of direct action at the Highlander Center, a social justice leadership training school in Tennessee. Activists in Montgomery had been planning a boycott for months. But characterizing Parks as an ordinary woman who was just too tired to defer to the segregated system had advantages. It deflected charges that the protest was planned by “outside agitators” (read: Communists). And it sent the message that standing up to segregation did not require substantial training or extraordinary courage—just a middle-aged person’s fatigue (Polletta, *It Was like a Fever*).

In stories that black college students told about the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters five years later, they described themselves as having been overcome by something “like a fever” that compelled them, suddenly and spontaneously, to protest (Polletta, *It Was like a Fever* 34). The protester, then, was not someone who was long schooled in protest tactics but, rather, a typical college student, the kind who, before the sit-ins began, would have been characterized as apathetic.

There is experimental support for the notion that styling oneself a hero makes good strategic sense. Jones found that stories about climate change that cast environmental organizations as heroes led respondents to express preferences for renewable energy rather than market or expert-driven policy solutions. As I show later, however, not everyone can credibly be a hero.

**Villains, Pawns, or False Idols**

In a second use of characters, political actors cast opponents as narrative antagonists. Opponents—rulers, countermovements, competing political candidates—may be malevolent or corrupt. But they may also be buffoons or pawns of the truly powerful. Casting an opponent as a familiar narrative character is a way to turn what may be a vague and abstract set of forces into someone who can be opposed. As Jacobs and Sobieraj describe it, “character funneling” involves transforming a diverse set of actors, actions, and circumstances into a central opposition between a protagonist and antagonist, between purity and pollution.
Alternative understandings and alternative considerations become peripheral. For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, Jacobs and Sobieraj write, U.S. congressional representatives sought to justify exempting nonprofit organizations from taxation by telling stories in which heroic “selfless charities” were threatened by government meddling. Orphanages, hospitals, cooperatives, and old-age homes were lumped together and simplified into a single unselfish benefactor of the downtrodden, with government the only antagonist.

Sometimes political actors, instead of trying to turn abstract forces into a character, try to turn a familiar character into a different character. The celebrated hero is not in fact a hero, they may claim. Or the victim is not really a victim. This is what congressional representatives began to do when it became clear that the selfish charity stories they had been telling gave themselves only a supportive role. Beginning in the 1940s, representatives told a different kind of story, one in which some charities were masquerading as helpmates to the disadvantaged as they pursued their own gain or, beginning in the 1950s, as they sought to advance a Communist agenda. Alongside these “false heroes,” the philanthropists who funded them were cast as buffoons. The legitimate charities that were losing out to the fraudulent ones were cast as the victims, and the congressional representatives who sought to root out this perfidy were the heroes (Jacobs and Sobieraj).

In another case of character work, the conservative writer David Horowitz launched a campaign to revoke the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchu on the grounds that she was not the victim she claimed to have been. Menchu’s best-selling autobiography detailed her family’s abuse at the hands of the Guatemalan military. Horowitz drew attention to inaccuracies in her account (for example, that she had witnessed her brother’s murder) in order to claim she was a “Marxist terrorist” who had perpetrated a hoax on the left. More generally, the character of the protester is an ambiguous one. Rhetorical battles between protesters and authorities often center on whether the protester is a hero (the kind of revolutionary who founded the nation) or a villain (a subversive who threatens the nation).

Victims

In a third use of character, political actors try to gain attention and support for their cause by telling compelling stories about ordinary people who have suffered. Homeowners discover that the gas wells dug on their land have contaminated their
water supply, rendering their homes worthless and endangering their health. A woman learns that her unborn child has debilitating fetal indications. She decides, with her husband and physician, that the fetus should be aborted, but the hospital board prevents her from doing so. Or a woman wrestles with whether to abort her fetus after it tests positive for Down syndrome. She decides not to have the abortion and raises a happy and loving child.

The central figure in many of these stories is the victim, the person who, through no fault of his or her own, suffers depredations for which more powerful people are responsible. As I discuss later, the victim is a complex, and in some ways, risky character. Some victims elicit empathy and a desire to help, others inspire pity and, still others, disdain.

For now, though, I want to draw attention to another feature of this use of character. The stories that are told by activists actually involve two kinds of stories: one about particular people, and one about what is responsible for their problems. What makes the combination of these two types of stories so effective is that the audience focuses more on the particular story than on the larger one. Indeed, the audience may accept the larger story by way of the particular one. Take the woman who sued McDonald’s for three million dollars after she burned her leg when she spilled the coffee she bought from a drive-through. As Haltom and McCann recount, this story was circulated widely by tort reform activists in the 1990s. It was told alongside other stories of litigation-happy Americans: the woman who claimed a hospital-administered test had caused her to lose her psychic powers, the burglar who sued his victim when he fell through the man’s skylight, the man who sued the manufacturer of his power mower when he strained his back pushing the machine. The stories were different, but the characters were the same: people who were blaming their problems on others but being rewarded with huge sums of money by pushover juries. Told and retold, the stories helped the tort reform movement win legislation limiting litigation in almost every American state.

The real stories were different from the ones that were told. The woman who sued McDonald’s, for example, did not just burn her leg: She suffered third-degree burns that left permanent scarring over 16 percent of her body and rendered her disabled for the next two years. McDonald’s, it was revealed, had received over seven hundred complaints about its scalding coffee over the previous decade. And the punitive damages the woman was awarded were later reduced to one-fifth of the original amount. But the particular story, told alongside stories about similarly litigious claimants, supported a general story about torts: that
Americans’ propensity for litigation was driving up the cost of medical malpractice insurance. This story, too, was not true. The reason that malpractice insurance was getting more expensive had nothing to do with litigation and everything to do with fluctuations in insurance companies’ investments. That this conflicting account was so rarely heard attests to the power, not only of the larger story that tort reform activists told, but, more importantly, of the many stories they told, stories peopled by different, but similarly self-pitying and grasping characters.

**Obstacles to Using Stories Effectively**

Sometimes political actors’ use of characters works; sometimes it does not. Certainly, characters may be more or less sharply rendered, with, as Schudson puts it, “vividness, drama, and splash” (167). Characters should be nuanced enough that they seem realistic but not so nuanced that they seem idiosyncratic. They should seem up to date, and their concerns and priorities should resemble those of audiences. The connection between the character and the moral message he or she conveys should be clear. At the same time, audiences resist being hit over the head with the moral of the story. The moral should be clear but not too obvious.

Each of these things takes rhetorical skill. In addition, however, some kinds of people are more effective in gaining a hearing for the characters they want; some settings allow storytellers more or less freedom in being the characters they want to be; and some kinds of characters are easier to fashion than others. Let me discuss the first two of these briefly and then the third at more length.

**The Availability of Narrative Materials**

Unsurprisingly, political entrepreneurs with deep financial resources and wide political connections are better able to secure a favorable hearing for their stories and the characters who people them. The writers who described the McDonald’s coffee suit and the other cases of greedy citizens and reckless lawyers were prodigiously funded by private donors and the tobacco industry. Their narrative strategy was rehearsed in conservative think tanks before it was publicly launched (Haltom and McCann). The trial lawyers who were pegged as the problem had nothing like those resources with which to fight back.
More interesting, perhaps, are the cultural obstacles that stand in the way of fashioning politically compelling characters. When it comes to using real people, storytellers must contend with the fact that there are already stories in circulation about those people. The existing stories make it difficult to grasp the familiar character in a new way. In his study of how activists in Nicaragua and Mexico sought to use the memory of Augusto Sandino and Emiliano Zapata, respectively, Jansen finds that Nicaraguan Sandinistas had an important advantage. They could claim the historical figure of Sandino as inspiration and guide because Sandino had largely dropped out of official memory. He was thus available for the taking. By contrast, since Zapata remained prominent in Mexican national memory, Zapatistas had to struggle with the state to claim his legacy.

Philip Smith theorizes about the kind of cultural baggage that public figures carry in terms of genre. There are different ways of talking about world leaders in the public sphere, he argues, and these ways of talking justify some kinds of political action and not others. As long as a tyrannical foreign ruler is discussed in news and public commentary in a low mimetic mode, with an emphasis on realistic expectations and the nitty gritty of practical problem solving, it is difficult for a government to justify military action against him. Routine diplomacy and sanctions are the kinds of actions that match up with a disliked foreign power rendered in low mimetic mode. War is possible—and indeed, inevitable—only when discussion has shifted to an apocalyptic mode. Characters are polarized, human motivations are rendered in the basest and the purest terms, and the contest becomes one between radical good and evil.

Is it possible to create new characters? In the case of the McDonald’s story and others like it, say Haltom and McCann, the characters had their intended effect because they had violated deeply held American values of individualism and self-sufficiency. Greedy citizens and reckless lawyers were familiar antagonists. But other studies suggest that new characters do emerge. The philanthropic false hero who appeared in congressmen’s stories was a new character, Jacobs and Sobieraj argue. In another example, Fraser and Gordon argue that conservative attacks on welfare in the 1990s drew on the character of the poor person dependent on welfare, with dependency newly understood as a lack of psychological autonomy akin to drug or alcohol dependency.

In each case, political actors fashioned the character and publicized it. But in each case, too, historical developments made for cultural receptiveness to the character. For example, the notion of philanthropic false heroes made sense in
the ideological climate of the Cold War, with its emphasis on exposing subversive organizations. The poor person who would become autonomous only by losing welfare benefits made sense in the wake of the wide circulation of stories about (chiefly women’s) dependency on drugs, alcohol, and destructive relationships (Fraser and Gordon). These cases suggest that while new characters do emerge, they owe as much to discourses circulating more widely as to the creativity of political strategists.

**Being the Character You Want to Be**

A second cultural obstacle to fashioning effective characters has to do with the settings in which political actors tell stories. The institutional rules around storytelling may make it difficult for political actors to present themselves as the characters they want to be.

Researchers have investigated the stories that people are required to tell in courts and doctors’ offices, self-help groups, and loan agencies. For example, members of self-help groups recount what brought them to therapy. Claimants in small claims court trace the series of interactions that led them to seek legal redress. Women who have been sexually assaulted tell and retell their story, to police, to medical personnel, to an attorney, to a jury, and so on. Not all institutions require people to tell their stories. For example, 911 emergency operators discourage callers from recounting how they came to be in the emergency they are in (Whalen). When one is audited by the Internal Revenue Service, one does not tell a story about one’s financial transactions over the last five years. Stories are often inefficient as a means of conveying information. But stories are typically required when institutional personnel seek to evaluate the worthiness of the teller: his or her honesty, degree of need, innocence, or competence (Holstein; Blommaert).

Storytellers in these situations thus need to present themselves as the right kind of character: innocent, in legitimate need, competent, and honest. The right kind of character is defined by the institution, however. Institutional personnel are often available to coach clients on how to tell the right kind of story. But clients are sometimes either unable or unwilling to present themselves convincingly as the characters they are required to be (Polletta, Chen, et al., “The Sociology of Storytelling”).

These requirements have political effects. Women who have been the victims
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of sexual assault have been heard as untrustworthy by judges and juries because their stories changed since they first called the police, even though it is common for victims of sexual assault initially to be able to recount only in fragmented form what happened to them (Schepple). Litigants in small claims court presented themselves as upstanding citizens who had been wronged by describing the moral injustice of what they had experienced. But judges wanted a clear, causal chain of legal cause and effects. Those who failed to provide that often lost their cases (Conley and O’Barr). In Belgian political asylum cases, African applicants’ fate depended on their presenting themselves as genuine victims. But as their stories were translated, reproduced, and evaluated in numerous materials through the application process, the applicant was held responsible for any inconsistencies in the story anywhere along the line (Blommaert). Those who testified about their experiences of brutal state repression in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings were supplied with a twenty-page protocol that, among other things, discouraged them from talking about the larger context of their experiences (Andrews). In each case, the institutional requirements of telling a credible story meant that people risked penalties for recounting their victimization as they experienced it. Being the right kind of victim was difficult.

Organized political actors also struggle with the challenge of fashioning compelling characters when they have little control over the institutional rules of storytelling. For example, feminist activists charging sex discrimination in hiring were pressed by judges to provide stories of individual episodes of discrimination, even when their claims rested on patterns of disparate treatment (Schultz). Judges wanted women to tell stories about employers who had “frustrated their childhood dreams” of holding jobs traditionally occupied by men (Schultz 1809). Such stories were meaningless, since the defendants could easily supply women testifying that they had never wanted those jobs. The point was about patterns of treatment, not isolated experiences of discrimination. But such stories were also hard to come by, since people generally don’t apply for jobs they don’t think they have a chance of getting. Women’s aspirations were shaped by the context they encountered. Judges required a character that did not exist.

Another example comes from activism by adult survivors of child abuse. When survivors gathered at conferences and workshops, they talked about their anger at their abusers and their pride in their own resiliency. But when they appeared in court seeking monetary damages, they were advised to emphasize the debilitating consequences of their past abuse (Whittier, The Politics of Child
Sexual Abuse). And on television talk shows, survivors cried and clutched stuffed animals as they described their abuse. Whittier (“Emotional Strategies”) wonders whether presenting themselves as weak and emotional victims may have alienated survivors who might otherwise have been drawn to the cause. Conforming to the institutional norms of narration may have come with strategic costs.

The news is yet another venue in which activists struggle to fashion winning characters. Gaining media coverage is critical to movements’ ability to get their issues on the public agenda, as well as to gain support from elected officials, many of whom rely on mainstream news sources (Ferree et al.). Some scholars have argued that reporters’ tendency to tell stories about people and events may make it difficult for activists to communicate the structural causes of the injustices they fight (J. Smith et al.). Others argue that the problem is more complicated. Reporters may be eager to hear activists’ stories, but only if the activists fit reporters’ ideas of what an “authentic” protester should be like. While the activists Sobieraj observed strove to come across as professional and focused on the movement’s message, reporters wanted them to be spontaneous, emotional, and talk only about their own experiences.

Like other cultural constraints, those imposed by the conventions of narrative’s use and evaluation are sometimes overcome. For example, savvy activists have produced the people directly affected by an issue that reporters want to interview, but coached them on how to link their experience to the movement’s goals (Salzman). Doing so is difficult, however, as well as risky. It is easier to conform to institutional standards, even when conformity comes with strategic costs.

Why Some People Cannot Be Heroes

Who can be a hero? I noted earlier research showing that styling environmental organizations as heroes led subjects to be more supportive of intervention on climate change (Jones). But Higgins and Brush argue that, when poor people represent themselves as heroic in the stories they tell, they are disbelieved. And in research on how people responded to stories of date rape told along different plotlines, my collaborators and I found that readers had mixed feelings about heroic protagonists (Polletta, Trigoso, et al., “The Limits of Plot”).

We began the study with the hunch that the tragic form in which stories of acquaintance rape are typically told in outreach efforts might backfire. The goal
of such stories is to convey the idea that rape is rape, even if the victim knew her attacker, was drunk or dressed provocatively, or did not show physical signs of violence. Getting women to accept this idea, advocates believe, may increase rates of reporting that, right now, are abysmally low: around 2 percent on college campus (B. Fisher et al.).

It makes sense that poignant first-person stories of rape told in a tragic genre would convey that message. But a tragic story is not just one in which something bad happens to the protagonist. Rather, the protagonist suffers from a fatal flaw that makes his or her fate disastrously inevitable. We wondered if readers of a tragic story would blame the victim instead of seeing her rape as an actionable offense. So we had 180 female college students read first-person stories of a date rape. In the tragic story, a young woman at a college party was swept off her feet by a handsome man. She ignored the initial warning signs of danger, and let herself be separated from her friends. She went to the young man’s room and after some kissing, told the young man that she did not want to go any further. He ignored her and, as she struggled, raped her.

Could one tell the same story in a heroic vein? In the story we wrote, the protagonist was assertive but overpowered by a hostile and aggressive man. The climax of the story was not the rape itself but the protagonist’s discovery that the young man had raped other women before her with impunity. Would readers of the heroic protagonist imagine her reporting her rape to authorities? And would they recommend her story for an outreach effort aimed at getting victims to report their rapes?

We found that readers of the tragic story did tend to view the protagonist negatively. They focused on her naivete. She was “always in her fantasy world,” participants wrote; “stupid,” “ignorant to what’s going on,” “can’t tell the difference between reality and fantasy.” Some participants did recommend the story for an outreach effort, but when they did, they gave a curious rationale: The story would prevent young women from being duped by men. As one respondent put it, “This story was probably the best because it will help tell girls that some guys are just trying to charm you and despite how good looking he is or the things he’s saying to you like how beautiful your smile is, sometimes things aren’t as they seem. Bad things can happen.” Given the fact that the question was about an outreach program aimed not at helping women to avoid being raped but at helping them to report a rape to authorities, responses like this one seem off point. But they are consistent with a tragic genre in which the disastrous ending
is inevitable from the moment of the protagonist’s initial act of poor judgment. The moral that participants extracted from the story was not about reporting the rape but about avoiding trusting certain kinds of men.

Readers of the heroic story, by contrast, imagined the protagonist reporting her rape to authorities—60 percent did, compared to only 26 percent of those who read the tragic story. This makes it seem as if putting the victim in a heroic story led participants to read her story in line with a heroic genre and to see her as acting bravely and responsibly in treating her rape as a crime. But here’s the rub: Readers of the heroic story did not like the protagonist. And they did not recommend her story for an outreach effort. In their explanations for why they would not be friends with this protagonist, they invoked stereotypical views of assertive women. The protagonist “like[d] attention”; she was “shallow,” “conceited,” “too much into the way she looks”; she was “bossing [people] around”; she was “too open,” “loose,” “move[d] too fast”; she “put [herself] in a position for this to happen”; she was a “party girl.” In these characterizations, an assertive woman was variously overconfident, domineering, or provocative. Set against comments that seemed admiring of the heroic protagonist’s bravura, these characterizations suggest that our respondents were ambivalent about assertiveness. Assertive women were viewed as at once admirable and at risk of being unfeminine.

These findings led us to theorize that people read along the lines of genre only when the main characters match stereotyped expectations: when men are properly manly in a heroic story, when women are appropriately expressive, when working-class people are down to earth and practical, and so on. When genre and character do not match, readers interpret the actions of the protagonist and derive a message from the story that is in line with stereotypes about that group. This creates a dilemma for those who would tell stories of sexual assault as part of outreach efforts. Tell a story of a young woman who is sheltered, shy, and insecure—and, unlike the tragic protagonist, blameless—and an audience of college women will like the woman in the story and identify with her but will find it hard to imagine her reporting her rape. Tell a story of a woman who is confident and assertive and the audience will imagine her reporting her rape to authorities but will not identify with her or like her. Since identifying with characters is essential to stories’ capacity to persuade, this presents a real problem.

The fact that the power of genre is contingent on characters matching stereotypes about the group may explain why men and political conservatives can tell victim stories successfully but women and progressives cannot. When women
appear in stories of victimization, their fates are attributed to features of their personality that are associated with women, namely, passivity and pathos. When men appear in stories of victimization, the emphasis is rather on their struggle and the odds against which they struggle. For example, battered women who have struck back at their abusers have often been unsuccessful in their efforts to claim that they acted reasonably to defend themselves (Schneider; Polletta, *It Was like a Fever*). Either they are seen as victims but hardly rational or as rational but hardly victims. Men, who claim self defense in crimes of violence, by contrast, are more likely to be seen as people who had to fight to save their lives. The stories are the same—a person is threatened by a more powerful adversary and must fight back—but they are profoundly altered by the gender of the protagonist. This suggests that one cannot simply insert a different person into a narrative genre and expect it to have the same effect.

**Conclusion**

Politics, contentious and routine, is peopled with characters. A real person, who has ambiguous motives, a complicated personality, and a checkered past, presents herself as the protagonist of a story of struggle and overcoming. If she is successful, audiences feel that they know her and understand her motives because the character is familiar. She reminds audiences of similar characters they have encountered in life and literature, characters who are superficially very different but have confronted the same challenges with the same resources. If the character she fashions is compelling, audiences give her their votes, their trust, their willingness to mobilize for the cause she is championing or to support the policy for which she is advocating.

Characters in politics must be authentic as well as familiar. The skill in fashioning oneself and others as characters is in avoiding caricature. Style an opponent as a teeth-gnashing villain, and one seems paranoid. Style oneself as an unblemished hero, and one seems manipulative. The tort reform activists I described were effective because they told very different stories, with very different people in them, but people whose litigiousness and greed made them a familiar character type. Characters can be new, but rarely are they created out of whole cloth. Rather, like the psychologically dependent poor person whom conservatives invoked to challenge welfare provisions or the philanthropic false hero whom congressional
representatives invoked to challenge tax exemptions for nonprofits, they draw on broader discourses that are circulating at the time.

Fashioning politically effective characters takes resources as well as skill. Those without the money and clout to secure a wide audience for their character work are much less likely to be successful. In this article, however, I have emphasized less obvious challenges. One set has to do with the institutional settings in which political actors tell stories. Such settings invite people to tell their own stories and, indeed, often require them to do so. But the tension between the demands for authentic stories and for institutionally familiar ones often disadvantages those without power. Petitioners in small claims court, in refugee hearings, and in interviews with reporters must present themselves as characters they are not. If they refuse to do so, or if they are unsuccessful in doing so, they suffer the consequences of a loss of credibility.

A second set of challenges has to do with competing logics of plot and character. Narrative scholars have seen readers’ interpretation of characters as governed by a logic of genre. So the protagonists of heroic stories are viewed as heroic. I have argued, to the contrary, that readers draw on common stereotypes to interpret and evaluate characters. They extract a genre-consistent moral from the story only when a stereotyped view of the protagonist fits with the genre. When that is not the case, readers instead derive a message from the story that is in line with the stereotype. The fact that one cannot simply put disadvantaged people in heroic stories and expect that readers will see them as heroes poses a real obstacle for those who would use stories to challenge the status quo.

Both sets of challenges sometimes have been overcome, but not easily. Like the distribution of financial resources or the structure of mainstream politics, the conventions of narrative’s performance and evaluation operate for the most part to support the status quo.

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