

4. PASSION WITH AN UMBRELLA: GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a “social movements” approach to employee activism regarding diversity and inequality in the workplace. The social context is often neglected in studies of organizational change, while the workplace as a locus of activism receives less attention from social movement theorists than other organizational settings. We do not seek to differentiate employee activists from quiescent employees but to understand the concerns, language, and tactics of small groups of employee activists when they mobilize. Our study is based on interviews with thirty-nine activists from nine grassroots employee groups in a 900-person division of a high technology firm. We learn how employee activists pursue changes that question power relations, draw links to broader societal issues, sustain their “passion” and collective efforts over cycles of involvement, manage risks to their careers and their mission, handle the protection and constraints offered by the “umbrella” of management, and make sense of

*Alphabetical authorship reflects a fully collaborative effort. *In memoriam*: Amy Segal, a Ph.D. candidate in Organization Studies at the MIT Sloan School of Management, passed away in July 1999. Her kindness and intelligence are fondly remembered by many.

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their accomplishments. We close by highlighting the significance of local, fragmented change efforts. Without being too sanguine about employee activism nor too cynical about its cooptive function, theorists should allow a place for piecemeal change.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how societal change agendas are advanced in workplace settings. We explore how change that is radical, in the sense of posing a challenge to power relations, can occur inside a business organization through bottom-up grassroots resistance and political activism. Taking a social movements approach to organizational change helps us to understand neglected aspects of change in organizations, and at the same time, workplace settings suggest new elements for social movements research. This two-way dialogue between societal and organizational settings follows two perspectives urged in Stinchcombe's (1965) important essay. First, we look at how societal forces impinge on organizations, in this case, giving organizational activists a set of civil rights based concerns and related language for pursuing their interests in equality at work. Second, we consider organizations as settings in which the stratification projects of a society are implemented and directly experienced. Some groups of employees resist aspects of stratification that they perceive to be unfair, making organizations also a site for local enactment of social movements to contest inequality. A social movements approach conditions researchers to look for and expect significant and large scale change. What we find instead is a piecemeal approach to change that can nonetheless destabilize, if not totally dismantle, power relations at work.

We use a social movements approach to help us locate and interpret the efforts of organizational activists, including how they invoke a broad social movement discourse, engage in micro-mobilization in the workplace, sustain their collective efforts over cycles of involvement, manage risks to their careers and their mission, and evaluate the accomplishment of local goals. We can also see how these projects are different in their tenor, framing, audience, and impact when undertaken within both the constraints and opportunities that a workplace setting offers in comparison to other civic settings where activism occurs.

The workplace simplifies one of the main problems addressed in accounts of social movements: how to recruit members. With employees gathered under one roof, the logistics of assembling are easier. However, there are constraints in the workplace setting as well. Activists in the societal arena have certain rights, such as the rights to assembly and free speech; they also face high risks such as imprisonment. Activists in the workplace arena have fewer rights as

employees than as citizens, and while not as dramatic as the risks of tear gas, they face the risks of a slowed career and even loss of employment and livelihood. Workplace activists seek to influence management and change organizational structures, practices, and culture. They are faced with “managing management,” which poses different challenges than the more familiar encounters with authorities (Gamson, 1982) such as lobbying legislatures, addressing the media, or handling the police and courts. They may be limited to incremental changes, but at the same time, our findings about the process, tactics, and cycles of incremental changes suggest that they can be significant in these local settings.

We take our title “passion with an umbrella” from the words of one of the activists we interviewed. It conveys twin aspects of workplace activism. On the one hand, employees have great passion for their issues based on their daily and firsthand experiences of workplace inequalities. They may need less persuasion to get involved than with social issues that are impactful but may feel more distant. On the other hand, their sense of passion and possibility is engaged under the umbrella of management, which provides both protection and constraint. Here we probe the passion with an umbrella metaphor, and what it reveals of importance for the study of social movements in organizations; we derive the phrase in the Results section. Passion is crucial for activists to make time to tackle workplace inequalities. “Passion” captures the rage and drive that employees bring to the issue. It also captures the idea of suffering and endurance, derived from the Latin “pati.” Workplace activists can suffer insults, subtle “micro-inequities” (Rowe, 1990), or greater injustices that fuel and sustain their commitment.

The umbrella is a protective device, symbolizing managers’ potential capacity to protect and encourage employees who work on issues of inequality. An umbrella is a shield, suggesting that managers might create a safe place for activists, particularly if activists frame their work as also good for the organization. Managers can give a range of support: they can simply acknowledge employees’ efforts verbally, endorse their work to other managers, buffer them from criticism and risks, provide time during the work day to pursue change-related projects, or sometimes even give rewards and recognition for their efforts and become champions of change themselves. While an umbrella provides protection, it can also be flimsy support in stormy winds. An umbrella is a “a collapsible canopy mounted on a central rod” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1976), a potent image for the centrality that management commands in the organization and the tenuousness of management support.

While grassroots efforts and resistance may be most striking for their rarity in organizations, nonetheless small committed bands of employees do take

actions to resist and change inequalities they face in their everyday working lives. Organizational studies may miss or underestimate these efforts. Mainstream work on change in organizations has focused on changes that do not fundamentally alter power relations or that are driven strategically from the top down or by outside influences. Critical approaches to organizational change largely explain the many forces that are arrayed to prevent radical change. Studies designed to explain variance in individuals' political activism relegate the few activists in organizations to the role of outliers from the central tendency of political passivity. We caution against approaches to change that ignore, critique, or make trivial the piecemeal and modest activism of employees, lest researchers and activists alike lose a sense of the possibilities present in fragmented and local actions.

Instead, we advocate the development of a picture of piecemeal change efforts. The sources of piecemeal change are opportunistic moments that employees can seize, sometimes with unexpected allies, in their everyday work. The process of change involves halting steps, shifting alliances, and an attuned relationship to power so that sufficient management protection can be secured without coopting the goal of changing power relations. The outcomes of piecemeal change are hard to judge, and the assessment and framing of how small or large a win has been achieved becomes endogenous to the study of piecemeal change, not an external judgment. We close with a discussion of "what actually changes" through piecemeal change efforts.

In the next section, we begin with an overview of what the social movements literature can offer to studies of organizational change, followed by an overview of what organizational settings may reveal for the social movements literature. We then draw from research on social movements to develop a set of questions that guide the exploration of activism in organizations. Our method section explains why we chose local ongoing efforts regarding diversity issues for studying activism to contest workplace stratification and inequality and describes how we located activists inside an organization. Our findings are based on an analysis of interviews with activists. We conclude with a discussion of the elements of a theory of piecemeal change efforts.

WHAT THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS LITERATURE OFFERS TO STUDIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Theories of social movements focus on how groups mobilize to challenge inequalities in resources and status that are systematically reinforced by power relations. While Zald and Berger (1978) argued provocatively for applying the metaphor of social movements to corporate hierarchical organizations, very little

empirical work has taken up their challenge and examined what a social movement might look like within an organization. McCarthy and Zald (1977, pp. 1217–1218) define a social movement as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.”

These social beliefs and forces are imported into the workplace by employees and should be accounted for in theories of organizations (Stern & Barley, 1996; Stinchcombe, 1965). A social movement approach allows us to go beyond the existing work on organizational change and shine a spotlight on attempts at more radical change, designed to alter power structures in a way that, in turn, may transform how work is done and how its rewards are distributed. The organizational literature often assumes that change is initiated by top management and is centered around strategic issues such as technological innovation, new ventures, new product development, or new mission statements; it takes the current power structure of the organization as a given (Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Schein, 1985; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Theory that explores upward influence for selling issues to top management adds a needed element of bottom-up change (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Yukl & Falbe, 1990), but must be extended to include issues raised to alter the very notion of bottom and top.

Studies of other organizational phenomena have used a social movements focus, but lose the flavor of contesting the power or reward structure. For instance, Davis and Thompson (1994) creatively cast shareholder activism as a social movement, emphasizing that shareholders have shared interests that they can define and upon which they can act collectively. Shareholder activism may ultimately change the landscape of capitalism, but its defining social movement character may best be found by directly examining how it shifts power relations; for example, investigating what employee-owned pension funds are doing in the interests of employees, rather than what is happening in the asserted interests of shareholders, which are so often used as a stick against labor to maintain power relations. Hackman and Wageman (1995) characterize total quality management as a social movement, declaring it a paradigm shift in how work gets done. However, this paradigm shift has not been accompanied by real changes in control or reward systems (Barker, 1994; Donnellon & Scully, 1994).

Our use of a social movements approach focuses attention on groups of employee activists who pose a threat to the current power structure in organizations. We will focus on employees whose change agendas are far more “radical” than what has been labeled “radical” and “revolutionary” in the mainstream change and innovation literature (e.g. Day, 1994; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Organizational change efforts centered around inequality

based on gender, race, class, or sexual orientation offer an example of potentially radical changes; they have the capacity to alter authority relationships profoundly because of their links to a political ideology of how power is transformed (MacKinnon, 1982). Historically, radical change has been pursued in organizations through unions. In today's environment, employees often attempt change without the guidance and safety net of a union. Nonetheless, they still seek some local form of voice to challenge authority in the workplace (Freeman & Rogers, 1993).

We draw upon recent advances in the social movements literature that integrate, transcend, or depart from the debate over ideological versus structural causes of revolutionary action (e.g. Sewell, 1985; Skocpol, 1979, 1985). A few radical organizational theorists stand out for engaging this debate (e.g. Martin, Brickman and Murray, 1984). However, organizational theorists have not yet drawn upon new approaches to social movements that emphasize political processes, cultural symbolism, local engagement, and social identities. Sociological studies of recruitment into movements, issue framing, micro-mobilization, public and private discourses, and everyday forms of resistance to local authorities (e.g. Gamson, 1988, 1992; McAdam, 1988; Scott, 1985, 1990; Snow et al., 1986) provide useful concepts for understanding activism in the context of organizations, which are elaborated further on when we derive our research questions.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS OFFER TO RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Sociologists have studied social movements that redress inequality on a societal level. They have focused their attention on large scale politicized efforts designed to alter the balance of power in society, such as the civil rights (e.g. McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984), women's rights (e.g. Mansbridge, 1986), labor (e.g. Conell & Voss, 1990; Klandermans, 1984), nuclear disarmament, (e.g. Kitschelt, 1988), or environmental (e.g. Dalton, 1994) movements. They explain who becomes involved in collective action, why, and what tactics they use to contest and change power relations.

Little attention has been given to the workplace as a site of social movement activism. When the social movements literature considers the organization, it is regarded as a form that provides mobilizing tools for activists or a local cell of a national level movement (e.g. Clemens, 1993). McCarthy and Zald (1977, pp. 1217–1218) define a *social movement organization* as a “complex or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals.” For example,

the Sierra Club and Greenpeace are organs of the environmental movement. This organizational tapestry has not included business organizations, devoted to other goals, but settings in which activism can occur. Business organizations reflect and shape larger social, cultural, and political settings (Stinchcombe, 1965). They are sites where societal issues are generated and societal changes can be advanced. Individuals in these organizations draw on their knowledge of broader settings and may be at once constrained by their organizational context but also prompted to change it (Granovetter, 1985).

We pose three reasons for examining the workplace as a site or an instantiation of these broader movements. First, much of the inequality that social movements address is created by organizations (Stinchcombe, 1965) and by their policies regarding hiring, occupational sorting, pay, and mobility (e.g. Baron, 1984). National policies that sprang from the civil rights movement, such as equal employment opportunity, recognize business organizations as the site where injustice may occur and where monitoring and enforcement are required. People experience injustices in a firsthand and non-abstract way in the workplace. Inequalities based on social identity may become salient and contestable in the workplace, because individuals come face-to-face with them on a daily basis. Second, at work, people may more easily develop an understanding of the local workings of the system and the potential resources that can be mobilized opportunistically, such as the use of an electronic bulletin board, a conference room for meetings, or a key to the copy machine for distributing information. Third, the problem of finding recruits and mobilizing them in one place is more easily resolved, particularly as people spend an increasing number of their waking hours assembled under the same roof at work (Schor, 1991). The workplace is therefore an important site where a movement can be actualized. Kennedy (1993) envisions the workplace as the primary future site for resistance in furthering the goals of a larger movement devoted to embracing diversity in society.

EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS FROM THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS LITERATURE

We pose five questions that arise in thinking about organizational change in this manner and ideas from social movement theory that may help address them. While the questions appear to track the movement chronologically, from formation to action, we present them this way for rhetorical purposes only. Because we are exploring change while it is in process, we do not think about the different moments of a movement in a linear sequence. Instead, we consider them part of an iterative process where they cycle back and forth. The

questions that guide our exploration are: First, do activists invoke a broad social movement discourse? Second, how do groups of activists mobilize in the workplace? Third, how do activists sustain their commitment? Fourth, how do activists manage the risks involved? Fifth, what do activist groups do? In this final question, we arrive at the issue of whether the groups are effective in their actions, singularly or cumulatively. Below, we draw on the literature that gives rise to these questions and suggests approaches to them.

First, we explore whether a larger body of societal ideas and beliefs propels organizational activism. Gamson (1988, 1992) has shown how the meaning system that is culturally available for thinking about issues impacts whether collective action is pursued, the extent of that action, and the form it takes. Donati (1992, p. 142) has identified discourse as the instrument used to create that meaning system and an important resource for social movements. He defines discourse as “the place where efforts at defining public reality are made, so that it can achieve a collective validity.” Our first question explores whether employees feel that their actions in the workplace are a part of a larger movement and whether they invoke the culturally available languages of resistance.

As an example, the recent coverage by the popular business press as well as the national media on diversity and multiculturalism testifies to the development of a new language that is being invoked around issues pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Anthony, 1992; Cox, 1991; Dreyfuss, 1990; Galen, 1994; Nelton, 1992; Wynter, 1994). This new cultural vocabulary can be seen as reflecting and propelling the development of a larger societal movement around diversity issues, locally evident in the rise of corporate diversity programs and consultants (Celis, 1993; Deutsch, 1993; Lynch, 1992; Sowell, 1994; Thomas, 1991). Additionally, researchers have noted the emergence of employee groups that have organized around diversity issues and social identities (e.g. Friedman, 1996; Proudford, 1997), although they have not probed how groups make links to this larger discourse.

Our second question focuses on how groups of activists mobilize in the workplace. Groups that form in workplace settings may be good examples of what McAdam (1988, pp. 134–135) has defined as *micro-mobilization contexts*: “small group setting[s] in which processes of attribution are combined with rudimentary forms of organization to produce mobilization for collective action.” These groups have been identified as being a critical component in the process of collective action in part because they heighten the shared sense of injustice. The smaller scope of action implied in the term “micro-mobilization” may be most appropriate for precisely the type of challenge workplace groups pose to management and the changes they hope to affect. These groups may avoid large-scale actions for fear of being censured or even expelled from the

corporation if their actions are seen as too radical or pose too great a threat to management. We examine how activists come together and how they make sense of their collective identity in the workplace.

Third, we probe how the groups sustain their activism. Piven and Cloward (1979) argue that collective action enables individuals to see greater possibilities for change. Working collectively allows individuals to define reality in a different way and make sense of their situation in new terms so that a problematic condition is no longer seen as an individual misfortune, but a systemic injustice. As a result, individuals will no longer attribute the problem to themselves but to some fault of the system. Hirsch (1990) also points to the importance of the group process as a “consciousness-raising” experience. However, the energy needed to continue to push for change is hard to sustain over long periods of time. Tarrow (1988) shows that activism can be sustained over long historical periods, but with cycles of greater and lesser involvement. We consider how activists may alternately lose energy and reinvigorate their efforts. We also address whether activists feel that their groups confer greater possibilities for effecting change and sustaining involvement in the movement.

Through our fourth question, we explore how activists manage the risks involved in their actions. Individuals involved in grassroots efforts may perceive risks to their livelihoods and careers and seek ways to manage these risks. Activists may have to balance delicately their burning sense of justice and desire for wholesale change with the needs to minimize risks to their careers and to secure management support in enacting their goals. Activists may have to garner some top management support to ensure their continued existence and to achieve their goals. Unlike the attempts at upward influence described by Dutton and Ashford (1993), these activists may differ in their motivation in trying to influence top management. Dutton and Ashford depict middle managers as driven almost exclusively by instrumental career reasons when they attempt to “sell” ideas upward. Activists may be motivated by concerns about equity, ethics, or “principled organizational dissent” (Graham, 1986). They may take actions that risk their own careers while trying to make career opportunities more widely available.

How activists present their issues to top management may be an important strategy in navigating the paths of resistance. Frame extension, whereby the boundaries of the primary framework of a social movement are expanded to encompass other points of view that may be incidental to the movement, is an important way in which adherents to a movement gain additional support and members (Snow et al., 1986). While activists may become involved in pushing for change primarily for reasons having to do with justice and fairness, they may instead frame the issues to top management in business terms that are

more likely to secure management support and yield changes. This strategy would be consonant with Scott's (1990) contention that subordinate groups have their own vested interest in colluding to preserve appearances. They act out what he calls "public transcripts," which allows them more latitude to pursue their own private agendas or "hidden transcripts." We examine the ways in which workplace activists present issues to management in order to procure management support and diminish the perceived threat their activism poses.

A fifth and obvious question demands attention: what do organizational activists do to effect change? We examine the concrete actions activists take. We will consider whether it is possible to assess the scope and efficacy of their actions for effecting change, given the ongoing and emergent nature of the movement inside an organization. We will specifically examine how activists themselves evaluate the scope and efficacy of their own actions as part of a broader change effort. Whether a small change is merely a trivial one that brings a problem prematurely to closure or a significant one that marks an incremental step on a longer journey can be gauged in part by activists' visions of what the broad change agenda looks like. We will explore whether workplace activists have blurry visions (Alinsky, 1972) or empty visions (Martin, Scully & Levitt, 1990), which characterize some movements, or whether being in a concrete setting with familiar problems permits somewhat richer and more specific visions.

METHOD

Local, Ongoing Change

Our research develops and analyzes a picture of what political activism looks like within an organization. We focus on the process of change and the mixed set of interim changes that can be captured while a change effort is ongoing. In paying attention to small and ongoing efforts, our approach is different from most accounts of revolutions, which focus retrospectively on grand and seemingly completed change projects. The social movements literature has developed in large part by studying movements that history remembers for their success, from the French Revolution to the United States civil rights movement. Comparative historical sociologists caution against concluding too much from history's successes without reference to similarly situated failures (e.g. Skocpol, 1979), but nonetheless certain salient movements dominate theory. We can learn different lessons by talking with contemporary activists about how they make sense of their collective activism before the textbooks relegate them, perhaps too simplistically, to the categories of successful or failed movements.

Social Movement Issue

Changes centered around inequalities on the basis of gender, race, class, or sexual orientation are particularly appropriate for probing social movement activism in organizations. Power imbalances based on social identity are imported into the workplace from society. Men and women of color and white women are often clustered at the bottom levels of the corporate organizational hierarchy where pay is lower and opportunities for advancement and influence over corporate direction are not as great. The top tiers of organizations are composed of a rather homogeneous set of individuals: primarily white heterosexual males from upper class backgrounds (Broderick & Milkovich, 1991; Kanter, 1977, 1987; Useem, 1984). Conflict results because individuals who are not well represented in this group seek access to the power and benefits bestowed by these top level positions or even seek a leveling of differences. Additionally, the organizational environment or culture that is created by the dominance of a homogeneous group is often not supportive and accepting of individuals whose perspectives and styles may diverge from this dominant group, resulting in sheer hostility toward these individuals in the worst case scenario, or a general feeling of not belonging in the absence of overt animosity (Cockburn, 1991; Jackall, 1988; Kanter, 1977; Morgan, 1986; Morrison et al., 1987). Thus, issues of injustice and inequality emerge in the workplace on the basis of social identity issues. These multiple dimensions of conflict in the workplace today are subsumed under the capacious term, "diversity." Activists engaged in diversity-related efforts contest inequalities in power, opportunities, inclusion, and comfort in the organization.

Organizational Setting

The research was conducted at a non-union, high technology organization that has openly expressed its commitment to cultivating a diverse workforce. It is often touted in the popular press for its progressive human resource policies. Employees tend to express that they like working there overall because of the positive image of the company in the community and the other bright and committed employees it tends to attract. The need to live up to the broader image – and the discouraging departures from that image in everyday work life – were salient to managers and employees.

We focused on the 900-person software development division, where the workforce is more predominantly white and male than in other areas of the company and where the diversity issue has received a great deal of attention and discussion. Occupational segregation by gender (Reskin & Cassirer, 1996)

takes the form of mostly male senior software architects and mostly female quality assurance testers. The small number of African American employees (fewer than 5%) meant that the departure of even one resulted in high turnover numbers, which were widely reported and discussed and the source of concern.

We refer to the company hereafter with the pseudonym, PineCo, to provide the anonymity promised. In addition, all proper names of the activist groups we identified have been changed to pseudonyms.

Identification of Activists and Activist Groups

We focus directly on the activists, as many sociological studies of social movements do. We do not try to differentiate activists from those who do not act, which diverts attention away from instances of action. Social psychological studies of employee grievances and outrage (e.g. Martin, 1986) emphasize individuals who either do not perceive injustices or who do but face resource constraints against acting. The literature offers an array of obstacles to worker mobilization, making inaction not just typical but overdetermined. More recent work has been done directly on employee activists (Creed & Scully, 2000; Harquail, 1996a, b; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Prasad & Prasad, 1996), but more work is needed to understand the collective aspects of their activism and their contextualization within broader social movements.

In using Zald and Berger's (1978) definition of a social movement in an organization as "unconventional politics," we sought to identify both individuals and groups that had taken actions outside the legitimated mechanisms for reaching decisions and allocating resources within an organization. In other words, we sought to uncover change efforts that were not explicitly initiated by senior management.

We began our research with members of the formally chartered diversity task force, as our gateway to learning about informal efforts and the individuals involved. We then developed a snowball sample from our initial interviews by asking participants if they could recommend other individuals who had been active in diversity initiatives. Snowball sampling is appropriate for settings where interviewees may perceive some risks to involvement (Croteau, 1996). In receiving referrals through this sampling procedure, we tapped into a broader cross-section of the company, which included individuals active in diversity initiatives on a corporate-wide basis. Individuals at all levels of the company were identified as activists, from administrative assistants to a senior vice president.

Through this sampling method we discovered more grassroots activities and groups that had formed that were not initiated, or necessarily sanctioned, by

top management. By continuing to ask the individuals we interviewed for referrals, we were able to obtain confirmation that we had been interviewing the most active individuals who were repeatedly nominated. We stopped interviewing when we got no new names, indicating we had saturated this sample or network of activists. Not all the members of each group were interviewed, because they were never nominated by other group members or individuals. Although the activists we spoke with initiated grassroots groups and voiced their belief that management should be doing more, many additionally sat on formally sanctioned, management-led diversity task forces and committees as another means of getting their voices heard. We limit this paper to only their grassroots efforts.

Data Collection

We inaugurated our study with several in-depth interviews with three key informants in the organization: two members of an officially mandated diversity task force and a human resources professional dedicated to diversity issues. These individuals gave us crucial background information and suggested people they knew from their informal networks who might be good for starting our snowball sampling of activists.

We then developed a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions to provide ample opportunities for interviewees to elaborate, based on our knowledge of the local setting and our research questions derived from the literature. Our interview questions had multiple probes and were designed to elicit how individuals made sense of their experiences and actions in the company.

Interviews with activists ranged from half an hour to two hours in length, with most interviews lasting about an hour and a half. Interviews were conducted by one or both of the researchers, and were held at company headquarters. Interviews were either conducted in private offices or in conference rooms that allowed for privacy. All interviews were taped with permission and subsequently transcribed.

Final Sample

In total, we conducted interviews with thirty-nine activists: twenty-two white women, seven men of color, five women of color, and five white men. In addition to interviews with activists, we interviewed five top managers in whose areas there were active diversity efforts in order to understand their reactions to the activists and any efforts to assist these groups.

Our sample of activists disproportionately represents men and women of color and white women, relative to their percentages of this workforce. We expected members of these groups to be more involved, because they may have familiarity with and frustration over issues of inequality.

Our final sample includes several informal groups that we discovered. Most activists were affiliated with one or more groups. The following table lists the groups we will discuss, distinguishing those that drew their membership corporate-wide versus from local work areas. The table also indicates whether the group is ongoing, defunct, or emerging. Most of our data come from ongoing groups. However, there were two recently defunct groups to which activists referred frequently to place their current efforts in context. There was one emerging effort on ageism, an issue on which one activist was beginning to stir interest.

Data Analysis

Both authors read the interview transcripts several times, meeting regularly to discuss the common stories and language we saw across the interviews. Using the five questions, we developed skeletal answers from the data. We used HyperResearch (Hesse-Biber, Kinder & Dupuis, 1994), an on-line qualitative data analysis system, to assist us in collecting and coding all of the references to each particular question. As part of our qualitative data analysis, we looked for recurring themes and also searched the data for examples of disconfirmation of our expected findings or common themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For

Table 1. Instances of Employee Activists Groups.

| Group | Status |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| <i>Corporate-Wide</i> | |
| Affirmative Action Task Force | defunct |
| Multicultural Network | defunct |
| African-American Caucus | ongoing |
| Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) | ongoing |
| Women Of PineCo | ongoing |
| Addressing Ageism | emerging |
| <i>Locally Based</i> | |
| Diversity Project | ongoing |
| Diversity Reps | ongoing |
| Women of Wonderland (WOW) | ongoing |

example, we looked to see whether there were individuals who felt that change occurred from the top down or who felt there were no risks entailed in affiliating with activist groups and getting involved in diversity. We treated the interviews as individual texts located in a social context; the social context is also revealed in re-reading of the texts (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987). This approach to moving between the parts and the whole (Barry & Elmes, 1997) is appropriate for an inquiry into local expressions and broader social forces. Iterative re-readings of the data also revealed paradoxes (O'Connor, 1995), such as how the use of familiar business tactics at once made the activists locally effective and vulnerable to cooptation of their radical goals. Our results section gives portraits and some preliminary analysis of the elements of a piecemeal change effort.

RESULTS

Our presentation of results addresses each of the questions that were posed in the introduction. Our findings indicate places where the concepts from the social movements literature are illustrated in organizational settings, and moreover, where organizational settings change the nature of the social movement phenomenon and pose some unexpected findings. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Do Activists Invoke a Broad Social Movement Discourse?

The imagery of social movements appeared in the words of organizational activists. They frequently referred to the “grassroots” nature of their initiatives. Indeed, they emphasized that, from their vantage point, the grassroots was the necessary and legitimate source of change efforts, even as they acknowledged management’s interest in diversity in response to external pressures such as maintaining a good corporate image and deterring lawsuits. They gave their activism its own stamp, distinct from business imperatives, by importing vivid images from civil rights struggles in the broader society. At the same time, we found they used this very imagery to explain the limits of their activism, indicating how they could not afford to seem too extreme or radical. We present the metaphor of “passion with an umbrella,” which portrays how their activism occurs within both protection and constraints.

Language and imagery of social movements. Many activists used images that were specifically evocative of revolutions to describe their activism in the organization:

Table 2. Social Movement Approach to Employee Activism.

This table shows, for each of our five guiding questions, a key concept from the social movements literature (italicized), its organizational enactment, and how considering an organizational setting extends the use of this concept in social movement theory.

| Organizational enactment | Extension of social movement theory |
|--|---|
| (1) Do activists invoke a broad social movement discourse? | |
| <i>Language and imagery of social movements</i> Raised fist in black glove; peasant insurgency; the picket line; the grassroots | But a second order usage as hyperbole to express limits to action as well as encourage action |
| <i>Encounters with unjust authorities</i> Galvanized to protest unfair Management practices | But authority is not distant – they work with management, bring them on board, seek “umbrella” of support |
| (2) How do groups of activists mobilize in the workplace? | |
| <i>Micro-mobilization efforts</i> Employee caucus groups form within and across social identities | The workplace as a fruitful site for micro-mobilization |
| <i>Recruitment</i> Employees under one roof, can gather at lunch | The challenge of gathering is eased; more focus on tactics and “so now what?” |
| (3) How do activists sustain commitment? | |
| <i>Cycles of engagement</i> Peaks and valleys in activists’ engagements | Over the shorter time span of a local movement |
| <i>Strength in numbers</i> Forming groups for power, support, and shifts in sense-making from individual to systemic | Enhances collective power, but raises a visible threat to nearby authorities and increases risks |
| (4) How do activists manage the risks involved? | |
| <i>Speak the language of power</i> Employees know how to work nimbly from inside | But may become coopted by insider language and logic |
| <i>Frame extension</i> Elastic frames encourage broader involvement | Frame extensions employed to recruit the privileged as well as others who are oppressed |
| <i>Public and private transcripts</i> Use both private (“civil rights”) and public (“good for business”) | Locally pulled toward public, but link to broader social movement sustains private |

Table 2. Continued.

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Employ familiar organizing techniques from business</i> | |
| Meetings, agendas, subcommittees, flip charts, mission statements, email, listservs | Business-as-usual tactics, while empowering as tools, can coopt the change effort – it becomes just another meeting |
| (5) What do activist groups do? | |
| <i>Small wins versus big wins</i> | |
| A range of wins is part of the menu of change efforts | Who’s to say what constitutes small versus big wins? Include activists’ sense-making as well as retrospective assessments of social movements |

Usually there’s some grassroots things going on. The people at the top have their heads in the clouds, and (their) awareness comes from, ‘Oh god, there’s an insurgency uprising out there. I mean we should listen to what the peasants are saying.’

In particular, they saw their activism on the hot topic of diversity as part of a larger societal change effort imported into the organization:

It’s the whole intellectual debate – and you know, cultural milieu – what’s going on in the rest of society. So there’s huge potential in that.

They portrayed their own roles in the movement in similar language. One African-American woman used her position as an administrative assistant to influence managers and characterized herself as “the little rebel over here” because of her outspokenness. Another African-American woman saw herself continuing her parents’ fight in the civil rights movement:

[My parents] . . . made a hell of a lot more progress than I would make on an issue like this. I mean now we vote . . . I want to be able to say at least my generation has made that type of mark someplace. I want to be able to say, OK all right, now we do have vice presidents in Fortune 500 companies.

Legitimation of the grassroots. Employees legitimated the grassroots by claiming it should rightly be credited with starting the diversity efforts and by emphasizing that it was crucial for sustaining the effort and avoiding complacency. Because senior management had officially stated that they supported diversity efforts, it is possible that these groups and individuals were merely carrying out a management initiated corporate edict, rather than initiating and shaping their own resistance. Many activists insisted nonetheless that the

company's diversity efforts were prompted by grassroots efforts, rather than by management, as two of them explained:

I see [the diversity effort] all as having come out of employee initiative, not senior management insight and benevolence That's what gives it life and keeps it alive.

I think the grassroots efforts have been instrumental even during the lower periods [of energy] in bringing it back up to a peak I don't think you can do without the grassroots efforts. I think the grassroots are necessary because this is what started [the diversity effort] anyway.

The grassroots efforts we identified were generally fueled by a belief that top management had not sufficiently or adequately addressed issues regarding diversity, rather than by employees' compliance with a managerial mandate promulgating employee involvement in diversity efforts. Employee activism became both a spur and a reaction to top management pronouncements and actions about diversity. Individuals voiced their sense of frustration about top-down initiatives and disbelief in management commitment. As one white woman remarked:

Well, the grassroots efforts that have happened are certainly all a result of people's frustration at things not happening sooner. They want to keep this whole idea out in front of people's faces.

A member of the African-American Caucus emphasized his group's role in holding management's feet to the fire:

I think it's easier for us now to just push, push to let ourselves be known We're here to help facilitate [the diversity effort], we're here to help support, but we're also going to start holding people accountable and to question the motives.

One top manager recognized this impetus and voiced concern that promises of diversity gave ammunition to employees and created a situation in which employees' expectations and frustrations escalated:

PineCo has an image of being a very diverse company in the outside world One of the problems we have now is we have raised [diversity] to an issue that we talk about. And that then frustrates the people who want to do something about it When we didn't talk about it, when it wasn't in front of our face, people were happier and they likely went along, and this is the way we were, and OK, they decided to stay and accept it. So now we say we're going to change this, and we don't make the changes, then all of a sudden there's more anger. So I have some questions about whether we're sort of, you know, shooting ourselves in the foot here.

The grassroots efforts acquired some legitimacy, and management was perceived as reluctantly realizing that there was no turning back once the wheels had been set in motion.

Imagery shows limits to activism. While employees appealed to images of social movements and painted their grassroots efforts in colorful language, they used the same imagery to illustrate that more militant activism would be too extreme in their organizational setting. Employees mentioned some symbolic actions of protest that would be far too risky to undertake, both for their careers and for the future credibility of the grassroots efforts. One white woman quipped that clearly she would not go so far as “forming a picket line around [the CEO’s] office.” A black employee similarly invoked the imagery of “the black glove on the raised fist,” by way of saying it would be far too radical an action. A white man painted a provocative vision of income distribution but acknowledged that it would be far too extreme to voice to anyone in the company:

You want a really subversive thought? I assert that if you took the entire [high tech] industry and . . . if you took starting at the very top, 50% of people’s salaries, maybe all the way down to 10% of the lowest rungs, people would still have great jobs and probably still work for that money. It’s completely an artifact of the economy and history that we can command these wages. . . . I’d never voice that. God, they’d push me over the balcony.

This social movement discourse appeared to have a dual symbolism. It evoked a kinship between these individuals’ actions and more dramatic and radical change efforts, demonstrating the radical significance of the activists’ charter. But at the same time, this language was used as hyperbole to show the distance between the modest efforts possible at work and the extreme actions of a revolution.

“Passion with an umbrella.” While discontent with management’s efforts fueled their activism, these activists needed and sought top management support to pursue their change efforts. The imagery used by one activist spoke colorfully and pragmatically about the delicate balance required for activism in organizational settings:

The critical thing that has to happen to give diversity some life here is that the rank and file, and I don’t mean to exclude managers, I include them, but . . . there has to be initiatives that sort of bring diversity to life in the organization. It can’t all be sort of top-down or HR-down. And for those initiatives to succeed you both need leadership from people who have some passion and understanding of the issues, and they exist. And then they need protection, they need like what I call an umbrella. They need space, the time to do it For the umbrella to exist, the V.P.s have to not squash [diversity] and even think it’s good and even start to at least allow there to be a diverse culture.

In speaking with the activists, we could hear the passion that led activists to form groups to amplify their message. Activists needed to enlist managers’ help, but also needed distance, independence, and freedom to experiment with local change efforts. Consequently, they often had to soften their message to garner top management support. Managing passion and salesmanship creates an uneasy

tension for groups of activists, whose collective social identity made it difficult to hide their project. The “passion with an umbrella” phrase emphasizes integrating the need for grassroots energy with a role for top management.

The next two questions that we address – about how groups form and about how they sustain their commitment – speak in particular to the importance of passion. The following two questions – about the tactics used to manage risks and about what the groups actually do – speak in particular to the importance of managing and holding onto the umbrella. At the same time, underlying all these issues is the tension between unbridled passion and the uncertainty caused by a flimsy umbrella.

How Do Groups of Activists Mobilize in the Workplace?

Activist groups fueled the passion that individuals shared. This section provides a fuller picture of the formation stories of the particular groups at PineCo. We explore how the activists made sense of both how and why the groups formed. The passions that drove them to create these groups were evident in their stories. We also discovered that there was not one formula or approach for how these groups formed. The following four accounts show the roles played by a core group, a founding individual, a chance coming together, and an electronic mail network. All illustrate the importance of opportunistic moments.

The African-American Caucus was formed by a small core group of individuals who had found each other across their predominantly white work groups and who felt there was a need to get together. Prior to initiating the Caucus, several of its members had been involved in another employee group called the Multicultural Network. Membership in the Multicultural Network had waned, because of people’s busy work schedules, because several of its focal members left the company, and because some participants felt the breadth of the multicultural label diluted issues pertaining to specific racial groups. A few of the remaining African-American employees decided to reinvigorate their organizing efforts and form a group specifically devoted to their interests. As one of the leaders of the African-American Caucus explained:

The previous effort was called The Multicultural Network, and a lot of people felt that well maybe it was too broad, that multicultural would then connect any ethnic background.

A number of members averred the important mission of the new caucus: to maintain a clear focus on the interests of black employees and the legacy of racism and historical oppression amidst the burgeoning agenda of diversity.

Women at PineCo was founded through the frustration and zeal of a lone white woman activist. She explained that she became motivated to start the

group because of her own sense of frustration and alienation in her job as an administrative assistant (AA):

It [was] an extremely isolating job, in an extremely isolated group, and they [were] very, very, very rigid and they want[ed] their AA to be, to do everything And I wasn't happy in that position.

Like several other administrative assistants, she had a bachelor's degree and had hoped that the entry level position of administrative assistant might lead to more interesting work. She saw the demands placed on her and the limits on her opportunities as symptomatic of a larger set of issues for women. Propelled by her own experiences, she formed Women at PineCo with the hope of providing a place where women in similar situations could meet and ultimately improve the situation for all women across the company.

In contrast, Women of Wonderland was born serendipitously when all the women on a specific development project happened to find themselves together in the kitchen one day and realized it was the first time they had noticed so many women in one room. As a senior woman on the project recalled:

All the women of Wonderland actually wound up being in the same spot at the same time. There was a realization that this was the first time that all the women of Wonderland had ever been together in a group before, and it actually felt kind of good . . . and [it] just felt like it would be a good opportunity to get [together.]

The decision to continue to meet on a monthly basis for lunch was spurred by a sense of frustration that several of the women felt about the culture on the project. Being together for the first time allowed the women to air some of their frustrations. The irony of initially meeting in the kitchen was relished by group members, many of whom told this shared story of their chance founding.

Mobilization posed particular challenges for gay and lesbian employees, because they needed to protect the privacy of those who did not want to be "out" at the workplace. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) grew out of its sponsorship of an electronic discussion bulletin board whose membership and postings were monitored. Members could contribute anonymously if they preferred. As their electronic participation increased, members realized that they had a potentially influential alliance. The group remained a loose coalition of individuals who did not tend to meet regularly, in part to protect members' privacy. However, there was the sense that they had a latent capacity to mobilize; an active member of GALA remarked that as a group they tended to:

coalesce around an issue when it comes up, and then kind of back off when it isn't an issue anymore.

In part because the membership and boundaries of the group were not well known and in part because of some salient successes, they were perceived by other activist groups as one of the most well-organized and effective groups.

It is tempting for theories of mobilization to look for common, definable, and linear paths to organizing. We learned of very different pathways to mobilization. Specific factors – the existence of a previous group as a springboard, the frustrations of a single individual, a fortuitous turning point, or the new role of technology – created different founding stories. The stories demonstrate the common feeling that group members had when they finally found each other and immediately recognized and shared certain disappointments, questions, or grievances. Despite the differences in their formation, all of these groups justified their formation and ongoing meetings by appeal to the top management's official statements in support of creating and honoring diversity. The founder of Women at PineCo shared the belief that the creation of these groups was expressly in the spirit of all of the talk about diversity around the company, which she felt allowed for the formation of these grassroots groups where change could be initiated through collective action:

I felt like diversity was meant to bring about this type of change with groups of minorities coming together saying, 'let's work together in a collective voice and make a difference.'

While the activists celebrated the grassroots as the source of diversity efforts, there was a dynamic relationship with the pronouncements of top management, which provided an umbrella under which grassroots groups affirmed the importance of their founding.

How Do Activists Sustain their Commitment?

This section explores how these activists were able to sustain their commitment to change. We first examine the cyclical nature of their activism. We then look at how opportunistic moments and issues re-ignited their passion. We also discuss how the collective nature of these groups conferred energy and possibilities for change.

Cycles of involvement. While these activists were motivated by their passion to form these various groups, almost all of the groups had fluctuations in sustaining the passion needed to fuel their change efforts. The social movements literature has noted the cycles of activity that characterize most movements if followed over long historical periods (e.g. Tarrow, 1988). We similarly discovered that activism in the local setting of organizations had cycles over shorter spans of time. Several activists spoke of cycles; as one of them explained:

[The diversity issue] tends to peak and valley. It's not consistent energy, even from the grassroots. I think it goes up and down.

The cyclical nature of activism arose partly for logistical reasons. The demands of work and deadlines in the fast-paced high technology industry distracted activists. Beyond the work demands, the sheer amount of personal energy required to sustain passion created cycles of activism. Activists spoke about how they were angry at injustices they saw, but were sometimes too tired at having to push hard to eradicate or resolve them. In talking about her outspokenness, one African-American woman declared, "I figure, well, somebody has to speak up," but went on to say that she can't "always be a rebel twenty four hours a day."

In speaking up to point out injustices, activists often had to expose themselves to explain what they meant when they saw or experienced racism, sexism or homophobia. One white male senior manager recognized that it was difficult to ask people who were struggling to fit in to take the risk of sharing the experience of difference:

To get to this point they've learned how to exist in a white-dominated, white-male dominated world, and it's fearsome to kind of open yourself up to say, 'this is my public life and I've learned to modify my behavior to be like you, that's what is successful.' So, it's a little threatening.

It was also difficult for activists to sustain their passions during periods of frustration at seeing too little change for all their work:

It's slow, hard slogging work. It's not easy work and it's not fast work, and so this kind of change just takes a long, long time.

We definitely need patience on the part of the group at large to understand this is a murky process. It's not going to feel good all the time. You have to understand the little wins.

While activists were often inspired to act when management efforts seemed inadequate, this same inadequacy could dampen their passion and hopes for changing the organization.

Opportunistic moments for enacting passion. Because activism was difficult to sustain on a continuous basis, activists worked sporadically and opportunistically. Specific issues would arise and spur groups to action and reignite their passions. If an injustice became apparent, they seized upon it, using the specific incident to voice general concerns about fairness. If they could point to apparent hypocrisy or inconsistency, they used this lever to facilitate change.

As mentioned above, members of GALA saw themselves as a fluid group, many of whose members knew each other mostly on-line. As one member pointed out, they could be mobilized fairly easily when an issue did arise:

If something comes up, by golly we can have fifty people [come] together on it in no time flat.

Such an issue arose when Colorado voters passed Amendment II, denying civil rights protections on the basis of sexual orientation, in the same year that PineCo was preparing to hold its annual sales meeting in Colorado. A number of national organizations launched a boycott of meetings and tourism in Colorado in protest of the new legislation. GALA's members moved quickly to encourage PineCo to honor the boycott and relocate the meeting. They argued that it was not appropriate for a company committed to diversity to provide financial resources to a state with exclusionary policies. They used their on-line network to send a flood of electronic mail messages to key top managers. They argued in their messages that the company's relocating its conference would be a significant gesture in communicating the importance of diversity issues. PineCo ultimately moved the meeting.

On another occasion, the members of Women of Wonderland seized a moment to rally around a pay issue. Their project group had recently shipped an important product, and group members were to receive bonuses to recognize their accomplishment. An administrative assistant in the group pointed out that administrative assistants were not eligible for a bonus. The group had been meeting to discuss gender issues, and this incident gave them a tangible incident for taking action. They discussed how the exclusion of administrative assistants, whose efforts were essential to the group's success, was emblematic of the devaluing of women's contributions. While most of the members of Women of Wonderland were developers and managers, they decided to take this issue to the general manager of human resources and more senior management, with the hope of changing policy. One woman explained their activism:

I think [we] all sort of felt this kinship there because as a woman and as – it just so happened that 95% of the people in the administrative assistant job are women and it's sort of that whole cycle of women being underpaid or taking jobs that were less well paid. We all kind of recognized how that occurs and we wanted to see that stopped and just women's work often not being valued I think we sort of recognized that a group with more power needs to help the ones with less power.

In this unusual instance of cross-class advocacy, the administrative assistants did receive a share of the bonus, and managers made some face-saving claims that they had intended for them to receive it all along.

In another example, the African-American Caucus coalesced when issues arose about running PineCo's operations in South Africa, a series of issues that came increasingly to the fore as apartheid was dismantled and companies from the United States began to plan their return. The African-American Caucus did some research that determined that the nascent operation in South Africa did not include any blacks in senior positions. They pointed out to top managers that this

staffing was contrary to management's espoused commitment to diversity. The exhortation of hypocrisy seemed to be a powerful way for activists to get attention. Linking the issue to the need for integration in South Africa, which received powerful moral attention from many quarters, gave them an opportunity to make a strong case, with implicit appeal to a broader international social movement. Their attempts at persuasion and change were ongoing.

While perceived hypocrisies and inconsistencies could be propitious for mobilizing, they could at the same time hobble a change effort if employees or others interpreted them to mean that real change was hopeless. One woman from the human resources department recognized this potential problem:

What we're doing is changing years of cultural standards, years of growing up in a society that's been one way and we're trying to change it and it's a five to ten year process to get to where we want to go. And on the route and on the journey we're going to see hypocrisy. We're going to see inconsistencies. We're going to see some managers really mean it, some managers mean it half and some managers not mean it. And if we allow ourselves to get frustrated with every hypocrisy and setback and use that to say, 'Look we really don't mean it,' we're never going to move.

If most opportunities for change become evident from the apparent inadequacy of efforts to date, it may be difficult to sustain a sense of progress and efficacy. At the same time, the exhortation to managers to "walk the talk" seemed to be a powerful way for activists to get attention. It was a tool for change that activists used.

Strength in numbers. The energy of the collectivity also helped members to sustain their passion. Individuals formed groups to exert more pressure on management by acting together or voicing their concerns as a group. They recognized that there was strength in numbers. Working in concert gave these activists a bigger and bolder sense of the possibility they had for actually effecting change. The leader of Women at PineCo said, "we wanted our voices to be heard, and we were angry." A member of WOW said, "I think we're more effective than we are as individuals." An activist in the African-American Caucus pointed to the power a collective signal could send:

Who knows, now that we're an organized group, you may even see more people just walk out all at once rather than you know one by one by one, because now we're communicating as a body.

The act of meeting as a group also helped to preserve employees' commitment to diversity. We found that group meetings provided a consciousness-raising experience and allowed activists to see the systemic cultural and structural barriers they faced, rather than attributing blame to themselves. Being in a group setting allowed these activists to share their frustrations and provided

a context which established the legitimacy of their grievances. This sense-making sustains collective action. A member of Women at PineCo said:

For the participants, it always made me feel that I was not alone because I could go to lunch or hang around with my friends who belonged and hear very similar stories to mine at all levels, . . . so it normalized and validated our experiences.

A member of WOW also confirmed the role the group had by providing “some clarity on the issues.” Through their lunch meetings, the women in WOW came to realize how the culture on the project spawned a set of norms that the women were not comfortable with. Being together for the first time allowed the women to air some of their frustrations. As another member of the group explained:

We suddenly realized out of a hundred developers in our organization, only I think, 15 or 16 were women. We realized also at the time, not incidentally, the culture in Wonderland was very aggressive, white-male oriented – meetings where like the one with the loudest voice won. It was very typical in meetings for women just totally not to be heard. The men who were there just happened to be this group of very aggressive men who all knew each other well enough to yell at each other. It was just very uncomfortable and we all sort of just got together and started talking about how we felt and how we didn’t like the culture within our little group and how we wished that that would change.

Because their own monthly meetings were so different from the meetings that took place on the project, it verified for these women that these meeting norms were cultural and systemic. There was some relief that it need not be the responsibility of individual women to develop more tough and aggressive styles in order to fit in better, but that women collectively could try to change the style that prevailed in the culture. Consequently, the women met with senior managers on the project to discuss their discomfort with the tenor of meetings and to press for specific changes. This shift from individual to systemic attributions is characteristic of micro-mobilization.

How Do Activists Manage the Risks Involved?

One of the things that most distinguishes activism in societal movements from activism in organizations is that individuals depend upon organizations for their livelihoods and careers; they have different rights as employees than as citizens and can be discharged. Two white administrative assistants who both work for senior managers explained the risks involved:

Who’s going to pay your bills if you don’t have anybody else? So, you kind of have to think twice, which really shouldn’t happen. You should be able to say, OK, I’ve been treated wrong, help me.

I think they’re afraid to get so involved, because their manager might think they didn’t care about their jobs, their real jobs, their daytime jobs, and that they would be penalized for it.

Some activists tried to make a playful sense of drama out of the risk. A member of GALA stated:

I'm certainly a defender of my own job . . . I mean I'm not Joan of Arc about this kind of thing . . . but on the other hand I want to raise awareness about issues.

The collective nature of the groups also crystallized the risk they posed. The same individual from WOW who perceived that they could be more effective as a group also realized that they could be seen as more of a threat, evoking the "fear of any minority group rising up, rebelling, [and] causing trouble." Another member of WOW commented on the reaction the women's group sparked when the men on the project noticed their meeting with a top manager to air concerns:

It's very funny, because we'll have lunch in one of those big conference rooms . . . with the big glass walls . . . So people are always coming in and out at lunch time and the look on these guys' faces when they see ten or fifteen women in a conference room together, with [a senior vice president] no less, they're floored, you know, like 'what's going on there?' It's so unusual to have more than two or three women in a meeting at the same time. So, I've gotten just the funniest calls from people, 'what were you guys doing in that meeting?' [They're] so paranoid.

The leader of the African-American Caucus discussed the threat that some people perceived in the formation of a group of blacks. He told us that after a group meeting in a glass-walled conference room, white employees approached Caucus members to ask, "What was going on in there? Are you planning an overthrow?"

In keeping with the shift in the social movements literature, from a focus on why and when people dissent to an exploration of how people dissent, we discovered a number of tactics that activists used to manage risks. They used tactics described in the literature, but in ways distinctive to organizational settings. Below, we present their approach to frame extension, specifically their use of the language of those in power to challenge power, and their use of strategic business techniques.

Frame extension to management. Activists used elastic frames to pitch issues, but not in order to enhance recruitment. The literature has focused on framing as a way to broaden the base of appeal of a movement to attract diverse followers. Because the activists in organizations are known to each other, share a context and set of grievances, and are already assembled in the convenient meeting place of their organization, recruitment is not their focus. Instead, they concentrate on gaining management support and diffusing risk. To attain this support, they employed frame extension in three interesting ways that extend our understanding

of this tactic: to find and handle management protectors, to persuade management with a business case for diversity, and to placate those in power who may feel threatened by diversity efforts. Each of these is illustrated below.

The passion with an umbrella image emphasizes the integral role of the umbrella. Employees worried that their managers would perceive their involvement with diversity issues as an indicator that they were not serious about their “day job” or their “real work.” To counter this problem, they tried to get their managers to see that diversity was part of the corporate mission and mandate. They made the case to their managers that allowing one of their employees to devote some time to diversity would reflect well on them. Managers were perceived as having some interest in signaling their commitment to diversity issues to look good to top executives, who were depicted variously by activists as genuinely concerned about the issue or deeply worried about lawsuits. In either case, activists tried to focus their own managers’ attention on top executive pronouncements and thereby create some legitimate space for their own involvement in these issues. One African-American male commented on managers’ discretion:

Even though [the CEO] and [the senior managers] will say this is the direction the company should take, I think given the business nature of the organization whereby [business] groups sort of have their own freedom to do what they want, . . . it’s something that each division has to decide if they want to buy into, managers decide if they want to buy into.

To gain the attention and support of managers, many activists felt it was important to make a business case for diversity, despite the fact that they were motivated to get involved in diversity efforts for civil rights or ethical reasons. They saw the business case as a secondary rationale and distinguished it from their private or hidden transcript (Scott, 1990), as one white man explained:

[Diversity] corresponds to my values and the world I want to live in is a diverse world. So, you know, if you could categorically prove to me tomorrow that the old boy team is more efficient, . . . I wouldn’t believe you. And I wouldn’t care. I’d push on.

Publicly, they extended their frame to the business case. Some saw this case as just pragmatic – a quicker way to get the attention of busy people:

Just getting through your e-mails in the course of the day means that you just blip out some things So finding a place for diversity information means making over and over again the business case for diversity Otherwise, people just hit the delete key and away they go.

Others made a more political case that the business framing was less strident and more likely to make a difference. They used the language and logic of the very system they wished to alter in order to push changes, a tactic employed by “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

Their activism, when it addressed power differentials, posed a potential threat to those in power. A checklist developed by a management-led task force on

diversity reflected management's fear of challenges to the current power structure. It included the following item: "encourage employees to form *non-political* support groups" [italics ours]. The founder of Women at PineCo recognized this diffuse fear of politicization:

[Top management] didn't know if we were going to be really political and militant and were afraid of the power we could possibly have.

Activists believed that white men would see diversity efforts as a potential erosion of their privileges. An African-American woman spoke about assuaging the fears of the privileged:

I don't think you're going to find white men ever being glad to see someone of color get a job that they have a divine right to – God ordained that they should have these things. But I think that these kinds of efforts have to be contextual, as within a broader issue of improving opportunity for everyone and putting more structure and formality in the way in which those decisions get made.

They placated management by extending the frame of their issues to show how it was also good for white men, not aimed at dispossessing them. Some activists argued that the correctives they advocated under the rubric of diversity were really just solid management practices, from tracking career advancement to improving quality of work life. A white man explained:

You're going to lose this if you don't put it within a broader context of issues about the quality of life in the workplace, . . . because of people's bad instincts about attacking special interest groups.

One woman felt strongly that upper management needed to place some people of color on the "fast track" for promotions, but explained that taking that action would become more acceptable for others if it was presented as improving career development for everyone in the company:

I think that doing that in a broader organizational context makes it a little more palatable when you do something additional for someone else.

These multiple uses of frame extension go well beyond the concern for recruiting new members to the movement. In organizational settings, the authorities with whom activists engage in their change efforts are known and present and have direct power over activists as employees, a situation different from the sometimes more distant and vague authorities contested in social movements. Frame extension is used to explain issues to management and to placate those in power, because the umbrella is a salient part of activism in the workplace.

Strategic business techniques. We found that activists in the workplace have a variety of organizing techniques readily at their disposal, of the type that

movement leaders (e.g. Alinsky, 1972) have instructed activists in community settings to learn and employ. The activists comfortably used mission statements, subcommittees, memos, and electronic bulletin boards. The founder of Women at PineCo described her group with a succinct mission statement, using the infinitives familiar in corporate missions statements:

to encourage the growth and support of women at PineCo and encourage the environment to improve for women at PineCo and people at PineCo.

Defining the mission statement was one of the first orders of business for the newly formed African-American Caucus, as one member pointed out:

We're at the stage where we're still trying to formulate our own mission statements, our own processes.

He went on to explain how they set up subcommittees to pursue particular issues – college recruiting, promotion, retention, corporate culture, community outreach – and modeled themselves as a business task force, for effectiveness when presenting issues to management:

On the first day we wrote down all the issues we felt we wanted addressed and put them into different categories. And the way we want to do [this] is to have committees kind of look at these types of things and come up with a large list – you know, one committee look(s) and they say how are we going to operate, as a group caucus. You know, we recognize that we have to be organized. We have to be considered a legitimate business in order to interact.

In another example, a white man convinced of the urgency of attending to diversity decided to write a memo and post it on the electronic bulletin board. He described this tactic as the same approach he would employ in advocating any kind of technical change. He explained:

I made sure that the people who were running diversity [training] saw it. And I posted it into a very public place. And supposedly a place which management was looking at. We have [software] databases. One of them was competitiveness – how can we be more competitive. That's in fact where I made sure it was.

These familiar business techniques assisted the activists in organizing themselves, gaining the support and attention of management, and dissipating the threat of their collective power. At the same time, these strategies could dilute the radicalness of their activism. For example, their group meetings could become just one of many task force meetings that they had to attend. Likewise, the mission statements both clarified and placed boundaries or limitations on their goals. As they became institutionalized, the groups were able to gain recognition from upper management to the point where representatives from each group were invited to quarterly meetings of the management run corporate

diversity group. At the same time, this sanctioned recognition diminished the original grassroots nature of the groups and their outsider status.

What Do Activist Groups Do?

We have painted a picture of groups that come together, use the language of social movements, draw on their passion to sustain their commitment through the cycles of activism, and work under an umbrella of management support that they take pains to manage. The stage is set to ask, “what do these groups actually do?” There are also lurking questions about whether anything ever changes. In this section, we present some of the accomplishments that the activists themselves cite, including their assessment that the very existence of these groups represents an accomplishment in its own right. We argue that it is difficult for an outsider to decide which are small versus large wins. Instead, we appeal to the activists’ own sense of the scope of their accomplishments, their alternate satisfaction and frustration with their progress, and their broader ultimate goals.

Activists’ accomplishments. Activists regarded an increase in awareness of diversity issues as a necessary first step toward change. As a human resources representative acknowledged:

I think little wins are just people having new understanding, people having conversations with people who are different. Having new understanding and putting that new understanding into practice.

Similarly, the founder of Women at PineCo commented on the change in climate:

[I] hope that there’s a certain amount of empowerment that I’ve built up, people feel a little bit safer, women feel a little bit safer being who they are and knowing when there is discrimination and trying to do something about it or at least [being able to] talk to someone about it.

Activists frequently emphasized that just the existence of their groups made a difference, for themselves as members and for other observers. The act of meeting as a group was itself extremely important in realizing change, because these groups provided the context for a shift in attributions by activists and other attendees who came to events. As a woman in WOW explained:

Primarily we’re a support group in that we just want to come and we want to talk and express issues and just have a forum where we can talk to each other, because there’s not many women here and we tend to be diluted and dispersed and it’s nice to sort of just get some clarity on issues. But then secondarily we did feel like if there were issues that we wanted to take up, or we wanted to vocalize some group sentiment, that we sort of had a forum in which we could do that.

Being in a group setting allowed these activists to share their frustrations and provided a context in which they mutually established the legitimacy of their grievances. As mentioned previously, the women in WOW came to realize during their lunch meetings how the culture on the project was not one with which they were comfortable. When we pushed them on issues and actions, they often insisted first on the importance of their group's very existence.

The groups had engaged in a number of actions. These reflected the opportunistic character of their activism, discussed above. The general concerns that each group embraced as part of their charter – making the workforce more representative, making the environment more comfortable for traditionally marginalized and less powerful employees, improving retention and promotion opportunities, changing the style of working and the allocation of power – guided their actions but were so broad that direct, incremental, and purposive steps were difficult to develop in advance and often emerged opportunistically. Table 3 summarizes the wide range of actions that were cited across our interviews.

Difficulty in imposing an external yardstick. It is difficult to arrange the list of actions in Table 3 in terms of their significance or impact. While the idea of small wins is helpful, it is difficult to array this list of accomplishments in terms of their smallness or largeness. For example, creating a T-shirt may seem simple and “merely” symbolic, but it represented a win to those who worked on it for a number of reasons. They explained that it took a sustained team effort to go from design to production to distribution of the T-shirts. They emphasized that their company was a place where people often wore T-shirts to work and where company-specific T-shirts abounded for specific products, conferences, or sports teams. Having a diversity T-shirt represented a good fit with the local culture and conveyed a reminder of diversity in a visible, familiar, and comfortable way.

At the same time, a seemingly big win like getting a person of color onto the Board left less enthusiasm in its wake. The absence of a person of color on the Board had been salient to many activists and was a clear-cut issue to address. It was raised in the spirit that top executives could best exhibit their commitment to diversity, if it was indeed genuine, by including diverse people in their own constellation. However, once such a person was selected, a few activists expressed concern that this change would not measurably change the day-to-day culture and the subtle instances of racism experienced by employees. They were left unsure about what issue to tackle next, because the overarching problem of everyday racism could not be easily decomposed into small next steps.

Activists' ambivalence and broader visions. The goals or specific action agendas of the diversity effort were difficult for many people to articulate in advance.

Table 3. Accomplishments Cited by Activist Groups.

African-American Caucus

- Pressing the company to appoint black managers in the emerging South African operation.
- Lobbying to have a person of color appointed to the Board of Directors.
- Designing events and speaker programs for black history month.

Gay and Lesbian Alliance

- Maintaining and monitoring a discussion bulletin board for members.
- Researching the costs and structure of gay partner benefits and working with human resources professionals to offer them to employees.
- Lobbying successfully to move the annual sales conference from Colorado to California, after Colorado passed an amendment denying civil rights protections on the basis of sexual orientation.
- Encouraging participation on their discussion database about community marches and letter campaigns to legislators.

Women at PineCo

- Hosting company-wide events for Daughters' Day.
- Designing events and speaker programs for women's history month.
- Lobbying top executives to release statistics on numbers of women considered, hired, and retained across all positions.
- Organizing a contingent of women to attend a pro-choice march in Washington, D.C. under the company banner.

Diversity Project

- Developing a more effective college recruiting program to attract more students of color.
- Conducting mandatory quarterly workshops on various diversity-related topics, including hiring, international marketing, and collusion.
- Hosting monthly lunchtime discussion groups on timely topics such as the Rodney King case and the Los Angeles riots.
- Creating an informal mentoring program for men and women of color and white women.
- Establishing an electronic diversity bulletin board and database.

Diversity Reps

- Stocking food in the refrigerator instead of providing after-hour sit-down dinners, to reduce "face time" pressures on working parents and people with outside obligations.
- Creating an informal mentoring program for men and women of color and white women.
- Showing movies with diversity-related themes and hosting discussion afterwards.
- Designing and distributing a PineCo T-shirt to symbolize multi-racial diversity.

Women of Wonderland

- Lobbying for the inclusion of administrative assistants' eligibility in a bonus plan.
 - Meeting with senior managers on their project to discuss and change the tenor of meetings.
-

Instead, the goals and actions appeared to be endogenous to the process of change. People discovered meaningful actions and outcomes along the way. In addition, the interpretation of the goals and actions was also emergent. Being immersed within the process of change, it was difficult for activists to know what ramifications their actions would have in the long term. Nor was it possible to assess what consequences these various actions taken together would have. They simultaneously described their actions as big wins in and of themselves and as small wins en route to bigger, if only vaguely envisioned changes.

Thus, activists wavered on how to gauge their own progress. They alternately expressed pride in their accomplishments and frustration that not enough had happened or that recent victories did not reap as much fundamental change as they hoped. As one activist noted:

The situation is so critical that there's this feeling of wanting to do everything at once, and yet also knowing that we have to take small steps.

They recognized the irony that their actions could create the appearance without the reality of change and leave top executives complacent and satisfied:

Three years later you've been suggesting yourself to the ends of the earth, but you're not making a hard commitment based on what you really want to get from this. You're not making a commitment to change the demographics, what you're making a commitment to do is talk about it and to come up with programs that talk about it . . . and in most cases it's literally a way of not doing anything.

Nonetheless, almost everyone with whom we spoke identified larger goals toward which they hoped they were progressing. A common vision was that the workforce at the company would come to look truly representative of the diversity in society at all levels of the company. As one woman stated, "I'd like to walk down the halls and see more minorities. I'd like to see more minorities at all levels and more women in the engineering division." Additionally, when asked about the future, several African-American individuals mused about the possibility of becoming the CEO of the company themselves. They speculated about whether "someone who looked like me" could occupy that office.

While almost everyone wanted a demographically more diverse workforce in terms of numbers, many individuals foresaw that change in terms of demographics could lead to an even greater transformation of the organization. As one African-American woman explained, "Diversity can't be on paper, it has to be day to day." Many activists spoke about how the culture would need to change and basic assumptions underlying that culture would have to shift. The following visions articulated by individuals addressed broader changes for

which they continued to hope. The visions they articulated were not blurry, but specific. Interestingly, these changes do not speak directly to diversity, but reflect the ways in which people think that business might be run differently if it were run by different people, if the power structure were more fundamentally altered, and if ways of working and producing reflected a broader conception of social welfare:

Thirty hour weeks. Personally I think forty hour weeks are like the max . . . So I always say definitely even more flexibility in terms of hours. Just more support for fewer hours and respect for that. More men taking advantage of paternity leave, taking their maximum amount. More men taking time off.

My wildest dream at the moment . . . is self-managing teams where there isn't a hierarchy, an organizational structure and there aren't managers who tell other people what to do. I would like to see people reviewed by their peers not by their boss, and the same for performance for raises and promotions. Maybe we don't have promotions in that kind of structure, people have new responsibilities.

It's an empowered organization, where there are infrastructures in place – mediation, arbitration boards – such that if there's an impasse and you know 'I feel like I'm getting screwed,' there's a neutral place that's truly neutral, where you can go and have it laid out You know management cannot just act with impunity.

DISCUSSION

The concepts anchored in social movements theory have a flavor of politics and radical resistance that are crucial for expanding the view of organizational change. These concepts helped us to locate and interpret activist efforts in the workplace. Our findings about the dynamic relationship between the “passion” and the “umbrella” reveal some distinctive qualities of workplace activism that add to the social movements literature. When activists are closer to the authorities they contest, have their livelihoods at stake, and are both enabled and constrained by insider knowledge and local change tactics, the concepts from social movement theory need to be extended. As Table 2 summarizes, activists' mobilization, framing, and outreach to both the oppressed and the privileged involved a balancing act between nimbly using their insider status versus having goals coopted or diminished by this insider language and logic. This dilemma is a classic one faced by “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), which we extend here from an individual stance to one engaged by groups of activists who are linked to a broader social movement. This link to a broader set of possibilities, frames, and aspirations carried by the social movement helps sustain workplace activists and retain the possibility that their commitments can yield radical change.

Paradoxes of Workplace Activism

Activists make halting steps forward and backward in the change process. Our data analysis involved re-readings to look for paradoxes in activists' narratives (O'Connor, 1995). We uncovered some paradoxes that capture the balancing act of activism in the workplace. The workplace enables activists to use some of the same tools they use in their everyday business life, which provide both opportunities and constraints. These are "organizational repertoires" that are at once familiar and amenable to new political uses (Clemens, 1993). Some paradoxes of their use include:

- (1) Using social movement language charges up activists' efforts – but lets them express how much more modest their efforts are than protests outside of work;
- (2) Joining forces helps activists find strength in numbers – but arouses suspicions;
- (3) Using the mechanics of business-like task forces (e-mail, mission statements, agendas) helps activists get organized and stay on track – but can turn diversity work into just another task force to fit into a busy schedule;
- (4) Courting top management in top management's own language helps activists garner support and manage risks – but raises the possibility that public transcripts mute more radical private or "hidden" transcripts;
- (5) Capitalizing on apparent hypocrisies and inconsistencies helps activists find opportunistic moments and terms for change – but can diminish activists' morale and sense of progress.

The simultaneity of opportunity and constraint is a useful way to think of the contextualized actions of activists working within powerful structures. Faced with this kind of "on the one hand, on the other hand" tabulation of approaches, it is difficult to assess the impact that activists have. We have identified activists who are in the midst of a change project, not yet sorted out and assessed by history. It is a good moment to observe their practices, but a difficult time to address the question of impact, toward which this discussion of change tactics invariably moves.

Toward a Theory of Piecemeal Change

Our results section closed with this question of whether anything has changed and an exhortation to avoid simple misjudgments of which actions are small wins versus big wins. We encourage navigating between a reading that says too optimistically that "much has changed" or too cynically that "nothing has

changed.” Mainstream organizational theories of change often over-state as “radical” changes that leave much of power relations intact. In contrast, critical theories often present an expose of how incremental changes are trivial relative to the severity of inequalities that must be addressed, or how they merely, if accidentally, reproduce the very inequalities they were trying to contest. Ironically, these concerns mean that critical theorists, who should be the most likely to look for more radical styles of change, are reluctant to do so. A critical view can under-state the role of change efforts and might be characterized by what Gouldner (1955) called the “metaphysical pathos” of the social sciences. Gouldner acknowledged that organizations can be autocratic and inertial, but championed the more interesting cause of finding and trying to understand modest instances where they could be made more participative and adaptive.

In a similar spirit, we feel we have located moments and instances where radical passions and local structures of resistance redressed inequalities in the workplace. Our alternative approach acknowledges that forces of disruption exist alongside forces of reproduction and may come unexpectedly from surprising quarters in ways that cannot be predicted. Activists capitalize on apparent hypocrisies to urge change. Blackler (1992, p. 282) urges organizational theorists to incorporate alternative approaches to change, drawing, for example, upon the work of critical legal theorists such as Unger (1987): “Anomalies and inconsistencies within an existing context help expose its general nature Changes in formative contexts [the arrangements and beliefs that people take for granted] can . . . be piecemeal.” Blackler goes on to say that, “Cumulatively such [piecemeal] changes can significantly change a formative context.”

If we take this view of social life, then the piecemeal actions we observed may shift power relations, sometimes haltingly and modestly, sometimes suddenly and more profoundly. We do not have to wait for a wildcat strike to be sure that radical change is happening. The menu of types of change can be expanded and more styles of radical action can be appreciated. We propose a theory of piecemeal change that relies on local, fragmented changes and opportunistic moments, cautioning against premature judgments of the efficacy or inadequacy of these change efforts.

We discuss the context and nature of piecemeal change. The context of piecemeal change includes closeness to watchful authorities on whom there is dependency. Management occupies a distinct position in the landscape of workplace activists. Management can simultaneously provide the policy pronouncements and support that embolden activists while also representing the privilege and resistance that activists work against. It is difficult for activists to gauge how safe it is to take

risks. The stakes – whether reputation, promotion, or paycheck – are high. If activists rely too much on management protection, they are vulnerable when that protection is retracted. It is also difficult to be critical of management – the climate managers create, the frustratingly slow steps taken toward greater workplace diversity, and the power structure from which managers derive authority – while trying to win and sustain managers' blessings. The parties to internal change efforts do not divide as neatly into "proponents" and "opponents" as in heated national level debates over diversity-related policies, such as affirmative action or gay rights (Creed, Scully & Austin, forthcoming). Managers are not simply opponents. Sometimes they are important allies for activists, using their position of power to leverage change.

Activism within a workplace context is therefore complex because of the very closeness of the power that is contested. Workplace activists sometimes distinguish between what "top management" espouses and what the manager down the hall might provide. Many of our activists were themselves middle or highly placed managers, whose social identity and/or commitment to social change left them feeling beleaguered and speaking from the vantage point of "bottom-up" change, despite their position. The passion and umbrella imagery, therefore, should not connote neatly the passion of the bottom and the umbrella of the top. At each level, there are people with passion and people who control important resources and represent the umbrella.

The nature of piecemeal change, and its prospects for sustainability and influence, is shaped by several elements: (1) activists' burrowing deeply into local dynamics while connecting to the energy provided by a broader social movement, (2) their balancing of aspirations for radical change with political constraints, and (3) their being able to bond with fellow activists nearby in this local context. We elaborate on each of these elements.

First, activists' local knowledge of the workplace gives them nuanced and nimble ways to mobilize resources and pick battles. Though the workplace poses constraints, they are also familiar settings in which activists can decompose broad social agendas into manageable steps with known players. While it can be difficult to make a stepwise plan for how to redress inequality, they are at the ready to seize battles that come their way, such as giving administrative assistants a fair share of a bonus, moving a sales conference out of a state that denies civil rights on the basis of sexual orientation, or recruiting black managers for a newly opening South African operation. These are battles that could not have been foreseen and could not have been engaged without activists "on the ground." At the same time, they do their activism in the demeanor and dress they bring to work and in the same conference rooms where their work takes place. Wearing suits and using flipcharts might constrain the passion of their

activism in favor of a more “businesslike” persona. However, their links to broader societal movements keeps them anchored in a cultural and historic tradition of civil rights, with its distinct symbols, language, and commitments.

Second, activists can keep their locally constrained action tethered to a more radical agenda. They can make sure that small wins are not trivialized. Celebrating their wins becomes a way to make them matter. Retelling stories, like the story of the founding of the women’s group in the kitchen or the story of getting a diversity T-shirt designed and distributed, cements group identity. Retelling stories also becomes part of the change effort itself (Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999) and expands the range of issues that is legitimate to discuss at work.

Third, activists meet and find succor in their collectivity. The groups they form, based in this study on shared social identities, validate grievances and provide opportunities for new sense-making about the systemic bases of inequality. The significance of forming groups to address the opportunity structure and the basis of stratification should not be under-estimated in a business culture that is staunchly individualistic. The legitimation of inequality is anchored in meritocratic ideology, which says that individuals determine their own fates; this ideology is a strong social force that organizations import. Collective attempts to contest this ideology and locate systemic factors at the root of stratification are rare. Indeed, any collective identification among employees is unusual. When we pushed activists about what kinds of things they were *doing* or what constituted an accomplishment, they often pushed back by telling stories about their founding, their very continued existence, and the experience of belonging to a group instead of struggling alone. For these activist groups, “to be is to do” (Scully & Segal, 1997).

Next Directions

In closing, we will mention three directions for further research on social movements in organizational contexts. First, social identity was the basis of the bonds in the nine groups that we identified (in Table 1). Shared social identity is the basis of “new social movements,” in contrast to those based on a shared ideology across social identities. It is a strong bond but also poses limits to what a social movement can accomplish if the various players who contest inequality and support civil rights are isolated into separate silos (Larana, Johnston & Gusfield, 1994). Prospects for building alliances across social identities to generate change, both in workplace and societal settings, must be explored (Scully, Proudford & Holvino, 2001).

Second, we have paid much attention to the passions, tactics, and dilemmas that animate social activism in the workplace. More direct attention needs to be paid to the content of the interests and claims that activists make (Piore, 2001). One basis of the claims made by activists is that their organization promises to be meritocratic but is not. Many of their specific proposals involve either better oversight of the opportunity structure (such as monitoring promotions) or dismantling a hierarchy where those in higher positions give orders because of their putatively greater merits. The significance of meritocratic ideology as both a buffer against activism and a spur to activism can be considered further (Scully, 1995).

Third, this paper has focused on how workplace activists look outward to social movements to find inspiration. As the workplace becomes recognized as a significant site for social movement activism, it will be interesting to see if social movement organizations in the broader society reach out to activists in workplaces as part of their mobilizing agenda. Much of the focus is on how local forces are shaped by broader social forces, but can broader social forces be shaped by importing ideas and approaches from local actors? This outreach is happening in the current gay rights movement, where national organizations have created groups to link workplace activists addressing employment discrimination. The two-way dialogue between social movements theory and theories of organizational change may be reflected and advanced in the two-way dialogue between workplace activists and national level social activists.

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