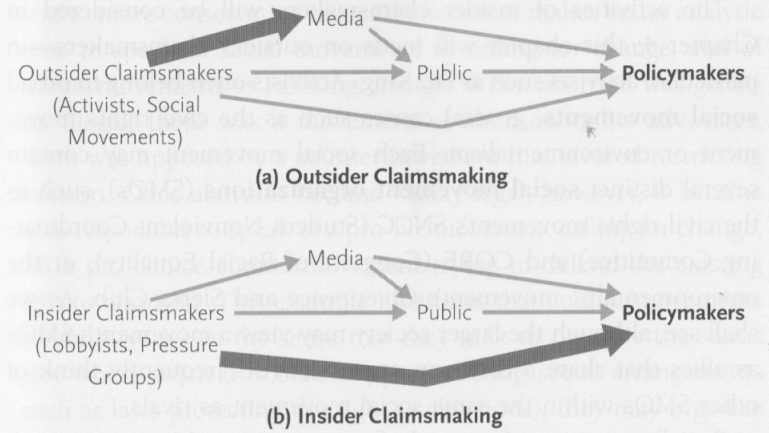
3

Activists as Claimsmakers

Claims cannot exist by themselves; people—claimsmakers—must advance them. It's tempting to equate claimsmakers with activists—people like Martin Luther King Jr.—who become passionately involved with an issue, dedicate their lives to a cause, and march and demonstrate until their claims receive attention. Indeed, this is part—but only part—of the story.

When we think of activists, we envision people who stand outside the halls of power. Because they do not hold powerful political offices or have strong ties with those who do, it is fairly difficult for these **outsider claimsmakers** to get others—the media, the general public, and particularly the officials who can make policies that might actually do something about the troubling social condition—to pay attention to their claims (J. Best, 1990). This is why activists so often resort to attention-grabbing tactics: demonstrations, sit-ins, and so on. Activists hope that these activities will lead to media coverage and that attracting publicity for their cause will bring their claims to the attention of the public so that, in turn, both the media and the public will press policymakers to take action. That is, activists envision the claimsmaking process as shown in Figure 3.1a, where the thicker arrow between the claimsmakers

Figure 3.1 Claimsmaking by Outsider and Insider Claimsmakers



and the media identifies the media as the most important audience for outsiders' claims.

However, there is an alternative, more direct route to successful claimsmaking. Some people already have contacts with policymakers. Such people include lobbyists, major political contributors, government officials, and well-established interest groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), which is concerned with protecting the rights of gun owners, or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which is concerned with advancing the rights of African Americans. Those who are already well connected to policymakers form what is sometimes called the **polity** (Useem & Zald, 1982); the polity consists of those groups whose interests are routinely taken into account by policymakers, so they are often able to influence policymaking. People with such connections can act as **insider claimsmakers**; often they pursue their claims outside the glare of the media spotlight, without arousing much public attention. The activities of insider claimsmakers

are depicted in Figure 3.1b, where the thicker arrow runs directly from claimsmakers to policymakers.

The activities of insider claimsmakers will be considered in Chapter 4; this chapter will focus on outsider claimsmakers—in particular, activists such as Dr. King. Activists often belong to broad **social movements**, general causes such as the civil rights movement or environmentalism. Each social movement may contain several distinct **social movement organizations** (SMOs), such as the civil rights movement's SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), or the environmentalist movement's Greenpeace and Sierra Club. As we shall see, although the larger society may view a movement's SMOs as allies that share a common cause, activists frequently think of other SMOs within the same social movement as rivals.

Social movements frequently face opposition. Movements seek to promote change, and the status quo inevitably has its defenders. The most vigorous defenses usually come from those who have vested interests in the status quo; these opponents benefit from existing social arrangements in ways that would be threatened if the changes promoted by the movement were to occur. For example, some white Southerners, who saw themselves as benefiting from legal segregation, opposed the civil rights movement. Moreover, it takes effort to change social arrangements, and even when people may not strongly oppose activists' claims, they may see no good reason to exert the effort that change requires; sociologists refer to such reluctance to alter existing social arrangements as **inertia** (Becker, 1995).

Chapter 2 described position issues—that is, topics that evoke controversy, inciting active disagreements about whether a particular condition should be considered troubling, or what that condition's causes might be, or what should be done to address the condition. In such position issues, claims inspire counterclaims, and **countermovements** may arise to promote these counterclaims.

Some sociologists associate the term *social movement* with liberal or progressive causes and prefer to restrict the term *countermovement* to more conservative causes. However, it makes better analytic sense to speak of social movements as calling for change, and of countermovements as resisting change. When abortion was generally illegal, there was a movement of abortion rights advocates, which was opposed by a countermovement that favored restricting abortion. Once abortion became widely legal, however, it became more reasonable to speak of a pro-life movement calling for change, and a pro-choice countermovement trying to defend the existing right to abortion. This example illustrates that countermovements are conservative in the sense that they seek to preserve the status quo; when political liberals support existing social arrangements (such as laws protecting the right to abortions), they may organize countermovements to oppose claimsmaking by political conservatives (such as the pro-life movement).

Because most social movements—and countermovements—promote claims about social problems, and because images of activists tend to come to mind when we think of claimsmakers, this chapter will focus on key aspects of social movements and the role of activists as claimsmakers. (Chapter 4 will consider other sorts of claimsmakers.) We will begin this chapter's discussion of activist claimsmakers by examining three recent approaches adopted by sociologists to study social movements: framing, resource mobilization, and opportunity structures.

FRAMING

Most social movements present claims; they identify a troubling condition and call for social changes to address the problem (Benford & Hunt, 2003). These claims can, of course, be studied in terms of their rhetoric—that is, by using the concepts developed

in Chapter 2. Social movement scholars, however, often adopt a slightly different vocabulary: they speak of **framing** to describe how activists construct their claims.

Like the frame around a picture, activists' frames place a social movement within a larger context; frames locate the key issues and set them off so that they are easily understood. Like the wooden frame of a house, activists' frames also provide a structure, a framework around which elaborate claims can be assembled.

The same issue might be framed in many different ways. Some frames emphasize morality, appealing to people's sense of right and wrong. Some frames elicit outrage or other powerful emotions that lead people to join and stick with a cause (Gould, 2009; Whittier, 2009). Other frames evoke particular ideologies or political philosophies, such as Marxism or libertarianism. Still other frames emphasize political struggles between groups with competing interests. What may seem to be a single social movement—the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and so on—can be composed of activists who frame the issue in very different ways.

Frames encourage viewing the world from a particular perspective; they give meaning to what might otherwise seem confusing, so that once someone adopts a given frame, everything seems to be clearer, to make sense. For example, the feminist movement calls attention to the various ways in which social arrangements disadvantage women; a feminist frame gives activists a particular vantage point from which they can view women's place in the world (see Box 3.1).

There are obvious parallels between constructionist scholars' examinations of claimsmaking rhetoric (as discussed in Chapter 2), and social movement analysts' discussions of frames. Frames have three components: **diagnostic frames** identify the nature of the problem (that is, *diagnostic frame* is another term for what constructionists call *grounds*); **motivational frames** explain why action needs to be taken (akin to the constructionists' *warrants*); and **prognostic frames** specify what needs to be done (similar to the constructionists'

Box 3.1 The Name Mirrors the Frame

The term *homosexual* originated among nineteenth-century sexologists who sought to make sexual behavior a topic for scientific research; they also spoke of *sexual inversion*. Both terms seemed clinical to the people they described. Some early activists described theirs as a *homophile* movement, favoring that term because it emphasized love rather than sex.

However, a new set of activists emerged in the 1970s, and they favored *gay*. The gay liberation movement encompassed both males and females, but women complained that their concerns were treated as less important, and demanded equal billing, so it began common to speak of *gay and lesbian* issues. Over time, other sexual identities made analogous calls for mention so that the inclusion of bisexuals led to the abbreviation *GLB*, and adding references to transsexuals (later transgender) produced *LGBT*. Some expand this to *LGBTQ* to encompass either queer (suggesting a more radical, edgy orientation) or questioning (for those who are exploring their sexual identities). Others call for adding an *I* to acknowledge intersex (people with ambiguous reproductive or sexual anatomy).

We tend to take the categories and names that we use to classify people and problems for granted. But all of these terms have histories, sometimes contentious histories in which claimsmakers struggle to get a particular term accepted. In this example, individuals with a variety of identities campaigned to gain recognition as part of a larger gender-nonconforming social movement.

Source: Wilcox, 2014.

conclusions) (Snow & Benford, 1988). For our purposes, these are essentially similar classification schemes, one favored by those who think of themselves as sociologists of social problems, the other by scholars of social movements.

One reason that social movement analysts favor the language of framing is their interest in how social movements recruit new

members. A key issue for most activists is enlisting supporters to their causes. Social movements need to attract new members, to convince people to share the activists' concerns and support the movement through donations and investments of time and energy. Because social movements typically promote unfamiliar ways of looking at society and its problems, they must frame issues in ways that will appeal to prospective members. In other words, activists need to align their frames with those of the people they hope to enlist in their movements.

Frame alignment refers to the ways in which social movements must address the existing frames or ways of looking at the world held by prospective members (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Movement participants—activists—have a particular frame, with its diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic elements, but the people they might like to recruit to the movement already have their own ways of understanding the world. The goal is to bring these frames into alignment so that others will come to adopt the activists' frame (and presumably join the movement). For example, the feminist movement seeks to introduce people to a feminist frame so that they can recognize how sexism affects their lives, and so that they will support feminist efforts to challenge sexual discrimination. Frame alignment usually takes one of four forms:

1. ***Bridging.*** In **frame bridging**, activists seek support from people thought to hold frames similar to their own. For example, liberal activists interested in a new issue are likely to seek supporters among those already known to be sympathetic with other liberal causes, just as conservative activists generally try to bring their new concerns to the attention of known conservatives. That is, activists seek to enlist people who have already supported other, similar causes because it should be easy to build a bridge between fundamentally similar frames.
2. ***Amplification.*** In **frame amplification**, activists call on values or beliefs that they presume many people hold in order to rally others to their cause. Although the prospective supporters may not have been active in other movements, they are presumed to hold basic assumptions that should make them sympathetic to the activists' cause. For instance, recent campaigns to register sex offenders and then restrict their rights have drawn on popular stereotypes about the predatory nature of sex offenses and people's sense that society ought to be protected from such predators. Frame amplification often seeks to arouse emotional reactions, such as compassion or outrage, so that people feel compelled to join the movement.
3. ***Extension.*** In **frame extension**, activists enlarge their frame to encompass concerns that prospective supporters are thought to have. In this case, the activists' core values or beliefs may not overlap those of their prospective supporters until they extend their frame. To return to an example raised in Chapter 2, vegetarian activists tend to be concerned with primarily ethical issues: they believe that it is morally wrong to eat meat (Maurer, 2002). However, relatively few Americans share that concern, and vegetarians have had more success gaining support by extending their frame to emphasize the health and ecological benefits of vegetarian eating—appeals that can attract supporters who worry about health or environmental issues more than the morality of eating meat.
4. ***Transformation.*** In **frame transformation**, activists call on prospective supporters to reject the familiar worldview that they take for granted and adopt a new and different frame. This transformation may be limited to how one thinks about a specific troubling condition (for example, the campaign to redefine drunk driving sought to persuade people to stop thinking of it as a somewhat amusing, minor offense, and start viewing it as a serious crime that all too often leads to terrible consequences). In other cases, activists may try to convert supporters to a completely different view of the world (think of efforts to recruit adherents to unfamiliar religions).

These four forms of frame alignment pose increasingly difficult challenges to activists. Frame bridging is the most straightforward

task: claims are made to prospective recruits who are thought to be ideologically predisposed to being sympathetic to the claims. Frame amplification depends on emphasizing values and beliefs that the activists already share with the audience for their claims, in order to mobilize them to action; and frame extension requires activists to modify their own frame to make it more attractive to potential recruits. Frame transformation presents the greatest challenge: recruits are asked to abandon their familiar view of the world in favor of the activists' frame.

Different SMOs within the same social movement may have distinct frames that appeal to different prospective members. Often, for instance, a movement may contain both moderate and radical SMOs, the former advocating limited reforms to the existing social system, while the latter call for more significant changes. Activists from a movement's moderate and radical wings usually frame the troubling condition and its solution differently, and they may clash in **frame disputes**, disagreements over how to think about the problem (Benford, 1993). In many cases, activists from different camps within the same social movement present their frames to different audiences: as a general rule, moderates seek to appeal to older people in the middle class (who have relatively secure places within the existing social system, and who therefore are likely to resist radical calls for dramatic social change); and radicals are more likely to seek supporters among those who are younger or poorer (who have far less invested in maintaining the status quo, and who therefore should be more open to pursuing fundamental changes).

Successful framing draws on cultural resources; it incorporates familiar values, beliefs, imagery, and other cultural elements that prospective members find persuasive and convincing. Feminists, for instance, invoke familiar notions of fairness and equality, and argue that women have a right to equal treatment. But framing cannot be a one-way process. When activists interact with prospective members, they usually discover that some appeals are more persuasive than others in convincing people to join the movement. After all,

prospective social movement members have many messages competing for their attention—television shows, news reports, advertisements, and on and on. Activists cannot simply present a frame and wait for the world to take notice; that would leave too much to chance because it would be too easy for the activists' frame to be overlooked. Rather, activists must seek out potential supporters, try to frame their message in ways that others will find interesting and convincing, and then pay close attention to what does and doesn't work. If activists find that their claims have generated counterclaims, they may need to reframe the issue to take this opposition into account. Similarly, when one version of a frame fails to elicit much response, it will need to be modified until it begins to be effective (see Box 3.2).

This need to devise frames that will attract supporters, counter opposition, and eventually influence social policy can raise issues of integrity for activists (Benford, 1993). Activists at the core of an SMO often have more ideologically coherent frames than many other movement supporters have, and they may view frame extension—altering their frame in order to make it more appealing—as a violation of their principles, as "selling out." Frame disputes within a movement often revolve around questions of compromise: should activists present what they believe to be a more correct, more principled view of the issue even if it risks rejection by many prospective supporters who will find it too difficult to understand, or even unpalatable; or should they frame the issue in weaker but more appealing terms so that prospective members will find it easier to digest? Frames inevitably reflect a combination of how activists view the world, and what they believe will be an effective message.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Adopting a frame that justifies belief in a cause is not enough to make a claim successful; activists cannot trade on outrage alone. Social movements also need to deal with a variety of mundane

Box 3.2 Competing Ecological Frames

A century ago, conservation was a social movement aimed at conserving American natural resources (early advocates called for establishing national parks and forests). Fifty years later, people spoke of environmentalism or ecology—a cause that combined concerns about pollution, resource depletion, and population growth. Activism related to these issues has continued, and it has adopted a variety of frames.

Pellow and Brehm (2015) describe the emergence of a new social movement frame—total liberation—that has four aspects:

- Total liberation calls for justice and anti-oppression for all—not just for all people, but for animal species and ecosystems.
- It favors anarchism; there is a distrust of governments and hierarchies.
- It is anticapitalist. It charges that capitalism is closely aligned with the state, and inevitably promotes inequalities and injustices.
- Total liberation calls for direct action, for individuals to confront injustice by taking direct action (for instance, destroying property) that, given the close alliances between corporations and governments, is likely to be treated as criminal.

Obviously, the total liberation frame is radical; it probably has relatively few adherents. It sets itself in opposition to other environmentalist/ecologist frames that it portrays as offering weak "reforms" that only allow things to get worse. While its advocates' direct actions are sometimes labeled terrorist acts, their response is to argue that the real terrorism is the continued damage humans are doing to the planet. Such competing frames force others to confront issues in new terms.

problems. Organizing a successful demonstration means picking a good time and place to maximize participation. People who might be willing to participate must be contacted and encouraged to come (demonstrations designed to attract a big crowd might require Internet postings, posters, telephone calling systems, and other ways of getting the word out); it might even be necessary to make arrangements to transport people to the event. Large demonstrations also require a lot of planning: tasks might include training people in dos and don'ts, scheduling speakers and other events, assigning monitors to supervise demonstrators, preparing first-aid stations, and possibly even arranging to post bail for people who get arrested. In addition, press releases need to be issued to inform the media that the demonstration will be taking place, and it may be a good idea to designate spokespeople to explain the demonstrators' purpose to the reporters covering the event (see Box 3.3).

In other words, one way to think about activists is in terms of the resources required by a social movement's activities. Movements need money, members, skills, and so on. These may seem like mundane considerations, especially if we think of social movements in romantic terms, consisting of plucky little guys struggling against powerful interests. But without sufficient resources, movements will have difficulty getting started, let alone enduring. Successful movements must assemble the resources they need. Sociologists refer to this gathering of resources as **resource mobilization** (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

The resources that activists need are almost always scarce: it is hard to raise enough money, because the people who give money have lots of other ways to spend it; it is hard to get people to devote time to the movement, because there are other things they could do; and so on. The struggle to assemble resources means that SMOs—even SMOs that are theoretically allies in the same social movement—find themselves in competition with one another for the same scarce resources. They compete for members, for donations, for media coverage, and so on. If one SMO is especially effective in mobilizing resources, rival organizations are likely to find resources harder to come by.

For example, the civil rights movement—now recalled as a grand, unified movement to end segregation—was characterized by

Box 3.3 Someone Has to Ask

Mobilizing large crowds for demonstrations is a challenge. While some people may hear a media report about a planned demonstration and decide to attend, most require more convincing. After all, attending a demonstration is inconvenient and possibly even risky, and people always have other things they could choose to do.

Many demonstrators agree to participate because someone they know asked them to attend, answering their practical questions (*Where and when will the event be held?*), but also convincing them that they really should attend (*It's important that we be there*). But it is not enough to agree to attend when asked. To mobilize a large crowd, people who have been asked need to take the next step, to contact others and ask them to attend as well.

Not everyone takes that next step. Walgrave and Wouters (2014) found that individuals who went on to recruit others tended to be committed to the cause, but they also belonged to "participation-friendly" social networks—that is, they knew other people who were likely to be sympathetic to the cause, and who could be persuaded to join the demonstration. In general, while it is easiest to convince people with whom one has close ties (such as family members), successfully asking people one isn't as close to is extremely important: even if they are harder to persuade, convincing some of them spreads the message more broadly so that there is now a larger, more diverse set of people planning to attend who have a broader range of contacts they can go on to ask. The broader the base of participants, the larger the number of participants who can be mobilized.

internal competition and disagreements (Haines, 1984). Different civil rights organizations had different frames that led them to favor different strategies. For many years the NAACP had pursued a legal strategy, mounting court challenges to the constitutionality of segregationist practices. Dr. King's SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) favored high-visibility protests in communities such as Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. More radical organizations, such as CORE and SNCC, adopted riskier, more confrontational tactics such as sit-ins and freedom rides. Because potential donors could choose which organizations they wanted to support, the various SMOs were rivals for those donors' dollars. The NAACP, for instance, believed that it made sense to invest in a long-term legal campaign, and it opposed spending donors' money to bail out SNCC's demonstrators who engaged in protests that were certain to lead to their arrests. SNCC, on the other hand, argued that the NAACP's approach was too slow, and tried to rally support for its riskier activities. Establishing and maintaining alliances with other movements takes work.

In contemporary America, much social movement activity revolves not around convincing individuals to dedicate their lives to activism, or even around organizing thousands of people to march in the streets, but around fundraising. Although activists do sometimes organize large demonstrations, much of their activity focuses on seeking media coverage for their cause, lobbying policymakers, and so on. These activities cost money, and activists spend considerable time soliciting contributions from people who support the movement's cause (but may not feel they have the time or energy to work directly on movement activities). Note that we can distinguish between **beneficiaries** (who stand to benefit directly if a movement is successful) and **constituents** (who support the movement) (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Some people belong to both categories, but many movement supporters are **conscience constituents**—that is, people who contribute money or even join demonstrations because they believe in the cause, although they do not expect to be direct beneficiaries (think of Northern whites who donated to civil rights SMOs).

The growing importance of contributions led to the emergence of sophisticated fundraising efforts using, for instance, direct-mail techniques. Mailing lists of people known to have contributed to previous fundraising campaigns were used to raise additional funds.

Fundraising efforts become more sophisticated as new technologies become available; in recent years, SMOs have begun raising funds via the Internet, using social media, websites, and e-mail to solicit donations. Of course, this emphasis on bringing in money means that SMOs become dependent on the support of constituents with whom the activists have no direct contact; most of an SMO's members act only as contributors, who may never actually encounter other members face to face. This poses a challenge: how to keep people emotionally committed to both the SMO and the larger cause and willing to continue their support when they have few direct connections to the movement. In response, SMOs maintain websites, send members frequent e-mail messages, and seek to convey a sense that their members constitute an electronic community (Eaton, 2010). Sending messages to current and prospective members turns into yet another occasion when troubling conditions must be reconstructed with compelling rhetoric—in this case, arguments that funds are needed urgently to respond to an important opportunity or, more often, to a looming threat. Both pro-life and pro-choice activists, for instance, raise money by warning that, unless supporters rally to their cause (by donating money to support their SMO's activities), their opponents are likely to win. Alternatively, SMOs may seek funding from other sources, such as foundations, but this support may come at a cost.

Increasingly, then, successful activism requires sophisticated skills—organizing, fundraising, media relations, lobbying, and the like. These skills tend to be portable: individuals who learn skills in one SMO can move on and apply what they've learned at another SMO, or even in another movement. Just as some veterans of the civil rights movement took what they had learned in that campaign and used their new skills to help organize antiwar protests, the women's liberation movement, and the gay liberation movement, people today pursue careers as activists, sometimes working for different causes over the course of their careers. Typically, these individuals do have ideological commitments, so they tend to move among social movements with which they are sympathetic: one individual may work for several liberal SMOs, while another becomes active in various conservative causes.

Resource mobilization is important because it reflects an SMO's ability to promote its claims. Organizations with more members and a bigger budget are better able to afford the services of skilled activists (who may in turn be attracted to working in campaigns that have plentiful resources and better chances of success). SMOs with money can afford further fundraising efforts, so they have better prospects for garnering future resources. Moreover, SMOs with greater resources find it easier to draw attention to their message: they are better able to gain coverage in the media; and, other things being equal, they are more likely to influence policymakers. Mobilizing resources is not glamorous, but it provides an essential base for would-be activist claimsmakers.

OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

Activists must worry about more than devising a persuasive frame and mobilizing necessary resources. Timing also matters. All too often, social movements face great obstacles. After all, movements seek to change existing social arrangements, and those arrangements work to the benefit of powerful people who can be expected to use their considerable resources to resist changes that might be to their disadvantage. On occasion, however, these obstacles to change are reduced, and activists must be alert for and ready to take advantage of such opportune moments. Various cultural and political circumstances can create opportunities to promote activists' claims.

Cultural Opportunities

Cultural opportunities arise when people become more willing to listen to the movement's claims (McAdam, 1994). Perhaps the most obvious cultural opportunity is the occurrence of a newsworthy event

that focuses attention on a troubling condition. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, for instance, suddenly moved terrorism from a peripheral concern to the central focus of national attention. Other, less dramatic events—a natural disaster, a brutal crime, and such—can have similar effects. They lead to a widespread sense that a particular troubling condition, previously neglected, must now be addressed. Activists who have been struggling to have their claims heard may suddenly find themselves in demand—reporters seek them out for interviews, legislators invite them to testify at hearings, and so on—because they are the ones who understand and have ideas for what to do about the troubling condition that is now the focus of concern (see Box 3.4).

Another sort of cultural opportunity emerges when a **master frame** becomes familiar (Snow & Benford, 1992). A master frame articulates a broad orientation that can be easily adapted for application to many issues. For instance, after the civil rights movement first drew national attention to blacks' struggle for equal rights and then succeeded in dismantling the system of institutionalized segregation in the South, the idea that demanding equal rights might be an effective way of framing social issues spread to other social movements. Within about ten years, activists were campaigning for women's rights, gay rights, children's rights, and the rights of the disabled, prisoners, and the elderly. This master frame remains influential: the abortion issue has been framed in terms of fetuses' *right to life* and women's *right to choose*; divorced men campaign for *fathers' rights*; an active *animal rights* movement has emerged; and so on. Like dramatic events, the availability of master frames creates cultural opportunities that can make it easier for activists to promote their claims.

Political Opportunities

Political opportunities to promote activists' claims arise when the distribution of power among different groups shifts so that changes that previously would have been successfully resisted can

Box 3.4 A Scandal Creates Opportunities

In 2007, it was revealed that NFL star quarterback Michael Vick had been involved in a large-scale dogfighting operation; he would be convicted on criminal charges and serve time in prison. As this scandal unfolded, it created a series of opportunities for animal-rights activists (Badano, Burgermeister, Henne, Murphy, & Cole, 2014):

- There were dozens of dogs found at the facility. Although it had been customary for animal-control officials to euthanize fighting dogs (on the grounds that they were too dangerous to rehabilitate), activists campaigned to rescue the dogs.
- In the two states that had not classified dogfighting as a felony, legislatures quickly passed tougher laws.
- Activists also kept the case in the news by demanding that Vick receive harsh punishments (he was suspended from the NFL, fined, and served time in prison).
- When Vick completed his sentence, he sought to ally himself with an animal-rights organization in an effort to demonstrate that he had been rehabilitated. Various SMOs considered working with Vick; most chose not to ally with him because they felt it would work to his advantage more than theirs.

This example reminds us that an event may create a series of opportunities for activists. The Vick scandal could be connected to a variety of animal-rights causes—opposition to euthanizing animals under any circumstances, the need for tougher laws, creating a memorable example of the consequences of violating anti-dogfighting laws, and even taking a stand on whether to align one's organization with a former offender. Opportunities can come in clusters.

now be implemented. Political opportunities may derive from shifting priorities, when formerly irrelevant concerns are redefined as relevant. One reason the civil rights movement gained momentum in the early 1960s was that former colonies—particularly the

African colonies of Britain and France—were gaining independence. The Cold War was at its height, and the United States wanted to minimize the Soviet Union's influence in these newly independent nations. The concern that African nations might be repelled by the treatment of African Americans in the United States created a new pressure to do something about the system of segregation found in the Southern states. In this case, shifting foreign policy concerns created new opportunities for civil rights activists trying to change domestic policies (Bloom, 2015).

Another form of political opportunity emerges when, for some reason, opposition to a movement becomes weaker. Those who might be expected to resist the activists' claims may be losing influence, or they may be distracted by other concerns. Perhaps more important for the social problems process is the fact that support for claimsmakers may become stronger. Successful claims lead to sympathetic media coverage, public opinion polls that reveal growing support, and political leaders' joining the cause. Support for "an idea whose time has come" can grow to the point that opponents may decide to drop their opposition. For instance, the basic principles of equal rights for African Americans and for both men and women advocated by the civil rights and the feminist movements, respectively—principles once considered quite controversial—have achieved broad acceptance.

Activists need to assess political opportunities and devise appropriate tactics for exploiting them. A tactic that is effective at one moment may be less effective at another. For instance, McAdam (1983) traces the history of tactical choices in the civil rights movement. The movement's activists devised a variety of protest tactics—sit-ins, large-scale demonstrations, and so on. Some of these tactics proved ineffective: they failed to attract media attention or to weaken the system of segregation. But others worked better, and news of these successes spread, leading activists in other communities to copy the effective tactics. Still, these successes were temporary; a tactic remained effective only for a time. News of the new tactic also inspired opposition; the movement's segregationist opponents

searched for tactics of their own—responses that could minimize the movement's impact—and news of these successful opposition tactics also spread. In addition, each time civil rights activists used a particular tactic, it became more familiar and less newsworthy, so the media coverage dwindled. These processes created a cycle of tactical innovation in which a novel tactic would emerge, work for a while, then grow less effective, causing the activists to invent a new form of protest to keep the movement advancing. Similarly, activists discover that their choice of targets matters: claims that don't attract much attention when directed at an unfamiliar target may become newsworthy when aimed at a prominent target (see Box 3.5).

Just as some circumstances can improve political opportunities, others create obstacles, occasions when claimsmaking probably can't succeed. Public attention is finite; if the media are devoting their attention to other newsworthy events, they aren't likely to cover a particular social movement's claims (see Chapter 5 for a more thorough discussion of how the media choose what they will cover). In the weeks immediately following September 11, 2001, media attention concentrated on terrorism, so there was almost no chance that claims about other issues could receive much attention. Similarly, when rival claimsmakers—activists for another social movement, or even for another SMO within the same movement—are occupying center stage and hogging the limelight, opportunities for promoting one's own claims are reduced. Rather than struggling to be heard under such adverse circumstances, it may be wiser to conserve resources and wait for a more promising opportunity.

Similarly, opportunities are unfavorable when opposition to a cause seems to be growing stronger, or when support for that cause seems to be growing weaker. Under such circumstances, activists need to consider what's wrong and make the necessary changes. Perhaps the existing frame is losing its appeal; perhaps more resources need to be assembled. At these times it is better to back off and wait for a better opportunity, rather than forcing the issue and facing certain defeat.

For example, Taylor (1989) traces the history of the National Women's Party (NWP), which long promoted an Equal Rights

Box 3.5 Choosing Corporate Targets

Many troubling conditions identified by activists are large and diffuse. To be effective, social movements need to focus their efforts more narrowly to select particular targets of protests that can typify the larger problem. It is easier to construct claims about specific targets, attract interest to those claims, and apply pressure to those targets, than to try and attack the whole problem all at once.

For example, the antisweatshop movement seeks to draw attention to working conditions in factories (particularly factories in developing countries) (Bartley & Child, 2014). Obviously, there is a vast number of such factories, and they produce all manner of products. Rather than trying to denounce working conditions generally, the movement selects particular brands of goods or stores, familiar names that will be recognized by a large share of the public. Making claims about inhumane working conditions in factories that produce, say, a popular brand of clothing makes the issue visible to shoppers, who may respond to the controversy by choosing to buy a competitor's brand. (There is, of course, an excellent chance that the competitor's goods are produced under very similar conditions.) In theory, enough bad publicity—and lost sales—may lead the targeted firm to make public efforts to improve conditions, and the competitors should then follow suit to avoid becoming targets themselves.

Which firms get targeted? Big firms with high-visibility brands and good reputations make easier targets and, once a firm's name has been associated with sweatshops, it is easier to mount further campaigns. Also, media coverage of events such as a terrible factory fire with a large loss of life can draw public attention to particular firms, creating opportunities for activists to turn what may have been a previously overlooked firm into a target.

Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution that would guarantee women full equality under the law. During much of its history, and particularly during the years following World War II, the NWP confronted poor political opportunities for success. This was a period

of **abeyance**; that is, the NWP maintained a modest organizational structure, continued monitoring political developments, and waited for brighter opportunities. A good opportunity arose in the late 1960s, after the civil rights movement had captured Americans' attention, making the equal rights master frame more familiar and more acceptable. In particular, new calls for women's liberation began to gain notice, and as a new wave of feminist activism began to emerge, the NWP joined the new feminists (such as the newly formed National Organization for Women, or NOW) and encouraged them to campaign for the ERA (although that particular campaign was again narrowly defeated). By tending the feminist flame during the decades of abeyance, the NWP had conserved its resources until more promising opportunities developed to use them.

Summary

Social movements can experience decades of frustration, periods when activists cannot seem to interest anyone in their cause—when they face indifference, ridicule, even repression. It helps to be patient, to wait until cultural and political opportunities develop that offer more favorable conditions for claimsmaking. For instance, the civil rights movement and the feminist movement have had long histories featuring both periods of frustration and periods of progress. These familiar examples teach other activists the importance of continuing the struggle, of hanging on until opportune moments arise.

THE ADVANTAGES OF OWNERSHIP

Activists whose efforts are particularly successful can gain **ownership** of a social problem (Gusfield, 1981). Ownership is established when particular claims or frames become generally recognized and acknowledged as the best way to understand a particular issue. It is

an ambiguous status; no one receives an official certificate of ownership, but some claimsmakers become the recognized, go-to authorities on a troubling condition. If a dramatic event brings that problem back into the news, it is the owners who are asked by reporters to provide commentary and who are consulted by policymakers.

Ownership relates to framing, resource mobilization, and political opportunities. The owners' frames become influential in shaping how others approach the problem and its solution; the owners' perspective may not be the only possible way of thinking about the troubling condition, but it becomes familiar, almost taken for granted by the press, the public, and policymakers. Precisely because they are well known, owners find it much easier to mobilize resources. People who want to contribute or otherwise become involved in a cause tend to know about and turn to a problem's owners, just as reporters looking for sources to comment on an issue are likely to think first of approaching the owners. And, of course, precisely because owners find it easier to garner resources, they have an easier time maintaining their ownership in the face of competing activists. As a result, owners are well placed to take advantage of opportunity structures. When, for instance, current events draw attention to a troubling condition, owners tend to be far better prepared to exploit whatever opportunities develop: they have contacts with the media and with policymakers; they are probably better placed to assess political opportunities; and they may even be integrated into the social problems process well enough to act as insider claimsmakers.

A social problem can have multiple owners. Position issues marked by intractable disagreements often feature SMOs that own the opposing sides in the debate. For example, the NRA long ago established itself as the leading SMO speaking on behalf of the rights of gun owners and in opposition to gun control. For a long time, proponents of gun control lacked a comparably influential SMO; in recent years, however, the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence and the Violence Policy Center have emerged as the most visible antigun SMOs—the owners of gun control advocacy. And, as

noted earlier, social movements often encompass a range of frames, from more moderate groups advocating modest reforms, to more radical SMOs pushing for more significant changes. Owners may emerge at different points along this spectrum. Within the 1960s civil rights movement, for example, the well-established NAACP favored deliberate pressure to gain favorable court decisions, while more radical SMOs, such as SNCC and CORE, became well known for organizing more confrontational activities, such as sit-ins and freedom rides. A few highly visible SMOs shared ownership of the large, broad-based civil rights movement (see Box 3.6).

Some SMOs own particular issues for extended periods. The NRA has led the fight against gun control for decades, and the NAACP has been a leading voice in the movement for African Americans' civil rights since its founding in 1909. Such owners must constantly strive to keep their issue—and their ownership—visible to the press, the public, and policymakers. Maintaining such a presence serves two purposes. First, of course, it keeps the owners' particular claims—their frame—for interpreting the issue visible and familiar so that others find it easy to continue to think about the topic in the owners' terms. Second, it helps preserve the owners' status *as owners*. Attention—and contributions—tend to go to the most familiar advocates. Although ownership is harder to achieve in the first place than it is to maintain after being gained, it must always be nurtured.

Long-term ownership requires flexibility. Narrowly focused, single-issue movements are at a long-term disadvantage; it is too easy for public attention to drift away from an issue, and once that happens, supporters, media coverage, and access to policymakers may also dwindle. It helps to develop a broader set of interrelated concerns. The NAACP, for instance, has addressed a wide array of issues related to racial discrimination during its long history. In its early years, for example, the NAACP devoted considerable attention to its campaign against lynching. But as lynching declined and then disappeared, the NAACP turned to constructing other race relations

Box 3.6 Consolidating a Cause

When the women's movement became active in the 1960s, abortion was not a central issue, either within the movement or in the larger society. At first, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was the leading feminist SMO, but some feminists saw NOW's positions as too radical, and they established more moderate SMOs (not unlike the ideological diversity among various civil rights SMOs).

By 1980, the Supreme Court had legalized first-trimester abortions, and there was a vocal antiabortion countermovement. NOW had come to redefine reproductive freedom (including abortion) as a central feminist issue, and opposition to feminism was now intertwined with opposition to abortion. Democrats were increasingly pro-choice, and Republicans increasingly pro-life.

Kretschmer (2014) explores how these developments forced two more moderate feminist SMOs to deal with abortion. The Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) began as a midwestern SMO that viewed NOW (dominated by East Coast activists) as too radical. They saw themselves as allied with NOW on what they thought of as the central feminist cause—promoting equality for women in the workplace—and they tried to avoid taking a stand on abortion, which they saw as a side issue. However, as abortion became more central to the feminist position, WEAL found it necessary to adopt a pro-choice stance to remain allied with NOW and other feminist SMOs. In contrast, Feminists for Life were by definition pro-life. They soon found themselves unwelcome at gatherings of other feminist SMOs, and they became part of the larger coalition of pro-life SMOs.

issues, such as campaigns against discrimination in education and employment, opposition to hate crimes, and so on. As political opportunities shift, it can become easier or harder to promote particular claims, but to the degree that the NAACP maintains ownership over the full spectrum of issues related to African Americans, it can remain actively involved in the social problems process.

In contrast, narrowly focused SMOs run the risk of succeeding—and thereby losing their reason for existing. Consider the March of Dimes, a charitable organization originally launched to fight the problem of polio, a disease that left children severely disabled. Once polio vaccines were developed, the threat of polio virtually disappeared, and the organization faced a crisis. It could, of course, declare victory and disband. But why dismantle a successful fundraising apparatus? Instead, the March of Dimes redefined its purpose, declaring that it would continue to operate but would now dedicate its efforts to fighting birth defects. This was not just a new but also a broader definition of the SMO's purpose: there are many different birth defects, so although further successes might result in eliminating some of these problems, the organization would continue to be needed to address the problems that remained.

When claimsmakers begin drawing attention to a troubling, previously neglected condition, there are three ways ownership of the issue might evolve:

1. ***No one assumes ownership.*** This situation is most likely when a newsworthy event, such as a dramatic crime, catapults an issue into the public eye. A variety of commentators may offer their takes on this troubling condition, perhaps suggesting different ways of thinking about the issue. However, it may be that none of these claimsmakers will assume ownership of the topic, work to keep the issue visible, manage a prolonged campaign to change public policy, and so on. Under these circumstances, even topics that receive a burst of intense publicity can shift away from public attention, forgotten as soon as the next dramatic event commands notice. Without owners to remind people of a problem's importance, issues can fade (this possibility is discussed further in Chapter 5).
2. ***Activists establish a new SMO that can assume ownership.*** A familiar example is the emergence of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Although drunk driving had a long history, MADD gave the issue not just new visibility, but a new frame as a threat to children menaced

by drunk drivers. MADD lobbied legislators, observed courtroom proceedings, established local chapters around the country, and generally took control over what had been an ownerless issue.

3. ***An existing SMO assumes ownership of the new issue.*** This can work well for the SMO, which can otherwise become a familiar part of the landscape and run the risk of being taken for granted. Assuming ownership of another issue, so long as it is at least tangentially related to the SMO's original program, is a way of making its claims seem fresh. At the same time, having an experienced SMO—which has already found ways to mobilize resources—assume ownership improves the prospects for keeping the issue in the public eye.

Ownership, then, affects the prospects of both an issue and the activists who promote it. Unless someone assumes ownership, it is hard for the social problems process to proceed; it is too easy for public attention to shift away as soon as the next new issue arrives on the scene. Owners are needed to tend the topic, to remind people of its importance, and to revise their claims so that the topic remains fresh and interesting. But ownership also benefits the owners: their claims seem better established; their authority seems more legitimate; and as they become familiar figures with a larger network of social contacts, they can begin to transform themselves from outsider to insider claimsmakers.

ACTIVISTS: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICALITIES

Discussions of social movements often emphasize their principled character. That is, they depict activists as individuals committed to a particular cause, seeking to promote a higher good. But sincerity is not enough. As claimsmakers who seek to influence the social problems process, activists need to convey their message to, and influence the behavior of, the media, the public, and policymakers.

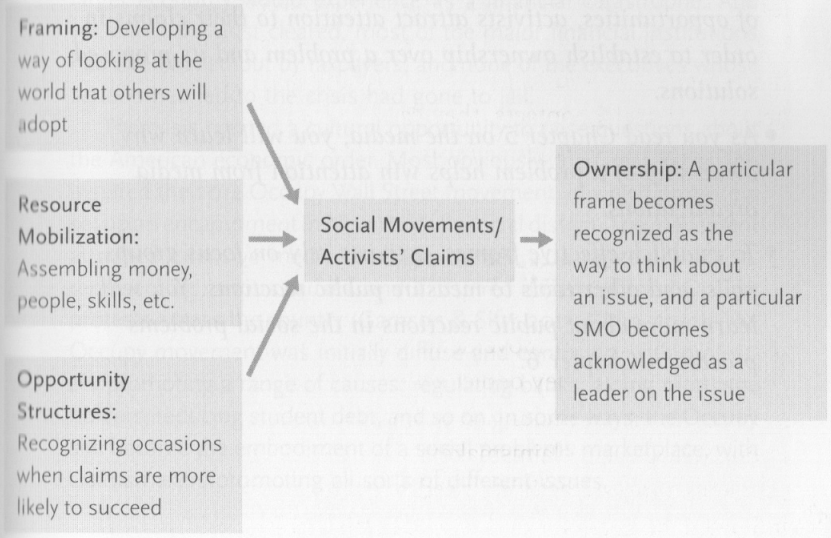
That is, they need to confront the practical problems posed by social movements.

This chapter has explored four such problems (see Figure 3.2). First, activists must develop effective frames; that is, they must construct their claims so that others will find them convincing, so that people will support the activists' SMOs. Principled statements that cannot persuade others threaten to stall the social problems process before it has really begun.

Second, activists must mobilize sufficient resources to promote their movement's goals. Activists who prove unable to attract and manage members, money, and other necessary resources probably will not be able to keep their SMOs functioning long enough for their cause to succeed.

Third, activists need to be able to recognize and figure out ways to take advantage of opportunities. Current events and the shifting political landscape can aid—or hinder—social movements. Activists

Figure 3.2 Activists' Concerns in Making Effective Claims



need to be careful not to miss promising opportunities, just as they should avoid expending their resources when they have no chance to advance their cause.

Finally, activists can acquire and maintain ownership over an issue. Owning a social problem allows enduring influence, a means of keeping an issue—and the activists' leadership—visible so that the activists' frames remain familiar and widely accepted, resources are easier to mobilize, and the activists stay in position to take advantage of whatever opportunities develop.

Although they are the most obvious examples of claimsmakers, activists are not the only people who promote social problems claims. They often acquire allies—claimsmakers who, in addition to their commitment to principles, bring special knowledge or expertise to the social problems process. These expert claimsmakers are discussed in Chapter 4.

Making Connections

- *Through framing, resource mobilization, and taking advantage of opportunities, activists attract attention to their claims in order to establish ownership over a problem and its proposed solutions.*
- *As you read Chapter 5 on the media, you will learn why ownership of a problem helps win attention from media organizations.*
- *To establish effective frames, activists rely on focus groups, polls, and other tools to measure public reactions. You will learn more about public reactions in the social problems process in Chapter 6.*

CASE STUDY
Mobilizing over Income Inequality

The Great Recession began at the end of 2007 and continued into mid-2009, when the economy began to grow again, although economic output and employment would remain sluggish for years. These aftereffects dragged on much longer than after a typical recession, and did more damage: millions of people lost their jobs and their savings, and millions of families lost their homes when they could not keep up their mortgage payments.

Most explanations for this crisis blamed banks and other financial institutions for irresponsible behavior. For instance, considerable attention focused on the adoption of policies that made larger numbers of home loans to high-risk borrowers, and then packaged those loans and sold them to investors as safe investments. When the borrowers could not repay their loans, it was the investors who took the losses; the lenders who had made the high-risk loans had already profited when they sold them. There were plenty of reports of investment firms making billions in the run-up to the collapse, even as their executives pocketed millions for arranging what the larger economy would experience as a financial catastrophe. And yet, when the dust cleared, most of the major financial institutions had been bailed out by taxpayers, and none of the executives whose actions had led to the crisis had gone to jail.

The crisis created a cultural opportunity to raise questions about the American economic order. Most obviously, the Great Recession inspired the 2012 Occupy Wall Street movement, in which protesters set up an encampment in New York's financial district. The movement attracted extensive media coverage, as well as a range of activists representing various causes, and it inspired dozens of local Occupy protests across the country (Gamson & Sifry, 2013; Gitlin, 2012). The Occupy movement was initially diffuse and confusing, with protesters promoting a range of causes: regulating banks, aiding mortgage holders, reducing student debt, and so on. In some ways, the Occupy site became the embodiment of a social problems marketplace, with claimsmakers promoting all sorts of different issues.

Over time, however, attention consolidated on rhetoric about "the 1 percent." These claims argued that Wall Street represented the interests of the wealthiest 1 percent of the population (a category that certainly included the various executives at the financial firms at the center of the crisis). There were various claims that the top 1 percent held a large share—between 35 and 43 percent—of the nation's total wealth.

Here, it may help to pause for a moment to consider just who belonged to that top 1 percent. In 2010, the U.S. population was over 308 million; this means that the top 1 percent included more than 3 million people. All of them would have been worth more than $1 million—something that could be said for about the top 3 percent (2015 estimates are that more than 10 million people have investable assets [not including the value of their homes] totaling at least $1 million), but only a few of these people—around 500—are worth $1 billion. If we consider only income, the cutoff for the top percentile is $350,000–$400,000. In other words, there is huge variation in wealth and income within the top 1 percent.

Focusing on the 1 percent provided a bit of rhetorical shorthand to draw attention to many policies that worked to the advantage of those with more money. For instance, people who earned less than $110,100 in 2012 paid Social Security tax on every dollar they earned, but those who earned more paid no Social Security taxes on income above that amount. The long-term capital gains tax (on income from investments) is 15 percent, which is lower than the income tax rates for many taxpayers; this means that someone whose income comes primarily from investments can wind up paying a lower tax rate than someone whose income comes primarily from paychecks received for working. Such arrangements help the rich get richer.

As the diffuse message of the Occupy movement became more tightly focused on the privileges enjoyed by the 1 percent, other issues fell out of discussion. Increasingly, concern concentrated on income inequality. This was not a new topic; many claimsmakers had tried to draw attention to income inequality, but the Great Recession created first a cultural, and then a political opportunity for their cause.

Social scientists think of equality as a situation where everyone has the same resources. (Imagine a group of children: if each has one cookie, they are in a situation of equality.) It is possible to measure the degree to which the distribution of resources differs from perfect equality. Of course, every society falls short of this ideal, but over the course of American history, the United States has been at various times more—and at other times less—equal. Since the 1970s, inequality has been increasing; the gap between the rich and the poor has grown. Incomes and wealth have been rising far less for those in the bottom quintile (that is, the poorest 20 percent of the population) than they have among the top 1 percent, or even the top quintile.

Such patterns raise fundamental issues. Americans like to think that theirs is an especially open society in which anyone who works hard can climb, even to the very top. This is an ideal that both political liberals and conservatives accept. But clearly, people who start out with more money have substantial advantages in life. To take just one example, higher education is widely considered to be the principal route to upward mobility, yet college costs have grown much faster than the cost of living, so greater income inequality means that low-income students find it ever harder to pay for college.

Activists with very different ideologies can agree that income inequality and restricted paths for upward mobility are a problem, although they are likely to promote different solutions. Liberals, for example, focused much of their energy on campaigns to increase the minimum wage as a direct way to raise incomes among low-income people and thereby help reduce income inequality. In contrast, conservatives argued that upward mobility could best be promoted by encouraging the poor to marry (poverty rates are much lower among married couples) and improving schools (poverty rates drop dramatically as education rises), which would in turn foster upward mobility.

The relatively severe shock of the Great Recession created an opportunity for a wide range of claimsmakers: lots of people believed that something was wrong, and they were willing to listen to claims by those who offered solutions. However, as time passed, many of

those claims fell by the wayside—their frames did not attract adherents. Activists who framed the issue in terms of income inequality and the 1 percent were more successful in rallying supporters to their cause, and particular issues, such as raising the minimum wage, became the focus for public attention.

Questions

1. Opportunity is a cultural resource that is available to claimsmakers. Does the word mean different things to different claimsmakers?
2. Economies have cycles—relatively prosperous times, and relatively hard times. It might be possible to address economic issues during good times (when more money is available). Why does economic claimsmaking tend to be more vigorous during hard times?
3. Imagine that, instead of the 1 percent and income inequality, attention had concentrated on some other topic related to the Great Recession. How might the social problems process have changed?

4

Experts as Claimsmakers

Colonial Massachusetts was established by Puritans, and ministers were key figures in that society. They saw evidence of God's hand everywhere in the world, and their sermons sometimes commented on current events, interpreting them in religious terms. A bad harvest might be evidence of God's wrath, and problems among people were caused by sin, by individuals breaking God's commandments. Virtually any event could be interpreted within this religious framework. Ministers, then, were colonial New England's principal experts; their theological training qualified them to explain and evaluate most aspects of life. Their religious frame was seen as authoritative because it was promoted by professionals representing the society's leading institution.

The ministers' religious perspective seems less authoritative today. In at least public discussions of social problems, modern Americans rarely speak of *sin* (and when politicians or even religious leaders do invoke such language, they often come under criticism). Rather, contemporary Americans are more comfortable with a kind of medical vocabulary; when talking about social problems, we are more likely to speak of *diseases*, *syndromes*, *disorders*, or *addictions*—words that seem grounded in medical, scientific