

PRO-LIFE ACTIVISTS  
IN AMERICA

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MEANING, MOTIVATION, AND  
DIRECT ACTION

CAROL J. C. MAXWELL



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CHOOSING INCIVILITY

*Let us never cease from thinking – what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? . . . Where in short is it leading us?*

— Woolf 1936:62–3

*You can’t possibly run a control group, can’t look at this like any other study. We’re more complicated than paramecium – and we lie!*

— An activist in my sample

In the mid 1970s, abortion clinics in the United States experienced their first sit-ins, orchestrated by activists who eventually came to call themselves “rescuers.” These activists added a new dimension to the anti-abortion movement generally termed “direct activism.” Since then, pro-life direct action has been either feared or dismissed as a manifestation of religious conservatism, the work of a relatively homogeneous group. My first encounter with these activists challenged both presumptions and suggested, instead, that an unexpected array of private motivations underlay a fairly uniform mode of public expression. Intrigued by the apparent complexity of this phenomenon, I embarked on two years of field observations to provide an anthropological account of this social movement. By taking this approach I found that, not only was individual motivation within the group I encountered diverse, but the movement’s sociological composition and the basis of members’ ideological commitment to direct action shifted over time. While mass anti-abortion sit-ins are not currently occurring, a close understanding of this movement offers valuable insight into both activism and motivation, more generally.

My first observation occurred early one frigid February morning in 1989, outside an abortion clinic in St. Louis. I set off to accompany two fellow graduate students, Miyako Inoue and Ma Qi, making field observations as part of a class assignment. We three linked our arms tightly – half against the cold, half to be sure we were safely together – and set off to observe Operation Rescue in action. This nationwide organization had arrived in St. Louis to lead local activists in a blockade and demonstration at the most prominent abortion clinic in our vicinity.

We found a crowd of about 100 men and women picketing in front of the clinic; most demonstrators were approximately 20 to 50 years of age, white, and perhaps best described as middle class. A wall of policemen stood baracading the clinic doors, silent as a queen's guard, as we three approached the slowly circulating mass of picketers. These activists, heavily bundled against the cold, eagerly responded to our inquiries and freely discussed their motivations. We first spoke with a small, elderly Jewish woman wearing a very large, bright yellow Star of David sewn to a band around her arm. (She was the only Jewish pro-life direct activist I ever encountered.) This woman explained that she attended the event in defiance of her rabbi because she felt a personal responsibility as a Jew to picket, equating legal abortion and the Holocaust. Clearly, other activists' motivations would differ. We moved among the picketers, listening to their stories one by one. Eventually a volunteer clinic escort kindly asked us if we intended to be arrested. When we assured her we did not, she directed us away from the driveway just as activists began to prostrate themselves in front of incoming traffic. Police began removing and arresting the demonstrators as we left. We must have looked uncertain and confused. As we turned to go, a tall woman acting as a "sidewalk counselor," took charge of us, mistaking our trepidation for concern over a problematic pregnancy of our own. After speaking with her until our feet grew numb, we withdrew to a warm restaurant and tried to sort out our observations. The one message that came through clearly was that these activists were diverse and their motivations were complex.

In this book, I will try to explain variation within the pro-life direct action movement by illustrating diverse motives for adopting direct action and explaining how such differences bore on individuals' persistence in the movement, their withdrawal from it, and the consequent redefinition of this activism. Pro-life direct action was conducted by successive waves of activists with relatively distinct demographic characteristics, tactical strategies, and objectives. Over time, the movement teetered between

two precipitous footings. On the one hand, direct activists' intensity and rigidity threatened to isolate them from other pro-lifers and stultify their movement. On the other hand, the expansion needed to sustain the movement required tactical and, so, ideological dilution that eviscerated the impulses underlying commitment to such radical measures as breaking the law and risking arrest. That is, people inclined to accommodate conflicting demands, weigh consequences against imperatives, and consider options outside their primary choice were unlikely to adopt direct action.

By the early 1990s, an estimated forty thousand individuals had participated in sit-ins at abortion facilities and related locations in the United States (Ginsburg 1993:564). Most had no previous experience with direct activism; this political involvement was a dramatic, portentous episode in their lives. These men and women described intense, wide-ranging motivations for their participation, motives not captured by analyses of conventional anti-abortion activism (which revolve around women's issues, such as "the felt contradiction between mothering and other kinds of labor in this society"; Ginsburg 1993:581). From their detailed quantitative analysis Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox (1992:64) concluded that,

Differences in education, region, and family structure all help explain some of the variation in abortion attitudes. However, the explanatory power of such demographic variables is rather weak . . . What is needed is a more detailed analysis of the reasons people have for their abortion attitudes.

In doing the research that underlies this book, I wanted most to understand the thought processes and circumstances that lead people to participate in direct action. Such personal experiences become both interesting and useful when they either voice the universal, or expand our understanding by articulating an unseen dimension of it. Accordingly, I interviewed people about their personal experiences of the decision to join direct action (as activists defined it) regardless of the number of times they had experienced this decision process. I spent two years (September 1989 to August 1991) making field observations in St. Louis, Missouri, Wichita, Kansas, and Washington, D.C. I began audiotaping long, semistructured interviews with activists during the second year. Altogether, I taped interviews with 80 direct activists. (Appendix 1 provides a detailed description of the sample.)

I began with field ethnography in order to learn how direct action had developed and to identify the range of activities and attitudes involved in this activism. After the first year of field observations I felt I had a good enough sense of what was being done, and what had been done in the past, to identify the groups I needed to sample and the outsiders I should include in order to represent the scope of direct activism in St. Louis. I verified individuals' participation through my own observations and the consensus of their peers. In identifying their own peers, activists directed me to essentially everyone currently sitting-in (or actively demonstrating), as well as many people who sat-in only once, and a few people who never sat-in, but were considered integral (or endemic) to local pro-life direct action by the activists themselves.

The definition of direct action not only was contested, it was chimerical. Activists debated its nature by recognizing or refuting its varied parts. For example, a given individual might laud picketing as an indispensable aspect of direct action one day, then later denigrate it and insist that only sitting-in qualified as direct action. I coped with this changeability by interviewing people who engaged in all the different activities described as direct action, while seeking out people who engaged in those activities most consistently defined as "rescue." Consequently, my sample cut across the activists' informal hierarchy of involvement to include a cross section of people who participated in pro-life direct action over time.

I relied on three sources to gather a snowball sample (a type of sample that builds outward in many directions as each member identifies more prospective interviewees). Those three sources were: referrals, publications, and personal observations. Since direct action organizations did not keep membership lists, I identified potential interviewees by networking through local pro-life organizations and asking individuals I encountered during field observations to name the direct activists they knew. I asked past and current direct action leaders to refer me to both active and former rescuers. To a one, leaders resorted to their personal telephone directories to supplement their memories. Periodically, I asked leaders for more referrals. This worked best when we were discussing past events; then leaders were able to recall activists they had not previously mentioned. To supplement leaders' lists, I contacted people named in a local rescue newsletter and asked them to interview. I also asked each interviewee to refer me to other people who had rescued. Interviews were open ended and allowed activists to reflect on their rescue experiences and the circumstances surrounding them. The interviewees appreciated this format, called the people they recommended to me, told them



I would be contacting them, and set aside their fears. Periodically, I compared my list of interviewees to people named in past injunctions to see how complete my sample was.

In this way I interviewed people associated with the three major pro-life direct action organizations that formed in St. Louis. To these I added most of the people regularly protesting at abortion clinics but not affiliated with a group, and a random sample of people who came to clinics intermittently to protest. I suspect that, numerically, the least well-represented organization was the first group organized in the area, which was composed of college-aged activists and seminarians. However, I did sample from among the various segments comprising this early group. That is, I interviewed people from this cohort who had been young when they sat-in and their middle-aged companions; liberals and conservatives; Catholic, Protestant, and seminarian; those who continued in direct action and those who returned to conventional activism, or left activism altogether; leaders and followers; male and female.

I stopped seeking new interviewees after leaders of both current groups said I had interviewed people even they had never heard of, and that I “must have talked to everyone,” including people they thought were essential to include, “If you want to talk about rescue.” In the end, the St. Louis sample included a cross section of the people who had initiated, altered, and sustained the movement, as well as those who were currently embodying it.<sup>1</sup>

Most people I asked to participate heard about the interviews from friends before I contacted them, and had already decided to interview. Many people told me this decision was difficult because they feared they did not have anything of value to say or that they were inarticulate (generally groundless fears). Most people said they decided to interview because they felt misrepresented and wanted a chance to accurately depict their activism, explaining that their cause was critically important and should be understood.

I interviewed most activists in their homes, mainly because many of them were no longer sitting-in, and so were not to be found at abortion clinics. Interviews often lasted many hours longer than anticipated,

<sup>1</sup> Seven people declined to interview. Two people refused because they felt their roles were insignificant; another two said they resented the idea of being studied. One man declined because he felt my affiliation with Washington University would force me to write a biased thesis, and another person declined because she was too busy. A seventh person declined before hearing what the study entailed.

sometimes continuing into the early hours of the morning. I began interviews by establishing basic demographic information, then proceeded to explore five topics through the following questions:

1. How did you become pro-life?
2. How did you come to act on your beliefs?
3. What have you done as an activist?
4. How did you come to do the particular things you did about your beliefs? (That is, Why did you chose the particular forms of activism you engaged in?)
5. Why do you consider abortion a significant problem and where do you see this (intentionally undefined) going in the future?

Interviews tended to flow naturally from topic to topic, often expanding from the first two questions across the other three without my prompting.<sup>2</sup> I did not interrupt or redirect interviewees when they appeared to digress. They usually brought their discursive excursions back to their activism, enlarging my understanding of their motivations by providing me a context for their decisions to sit-in (or stop sitting-in). In this way they described their activist experiences in the context of their whole lives, not as discrete phenomena.

I made sure interviewees understood that the purpose of the interviews was to gather data for my research. I explained to them that I was attempting to portray their movement accurately from an anthropological perspective, with an emphasis on the reasons underlying individuals' participation in direct action. I assured them that my analysis would not address the morality of abortion per se. When interviewees asked my position on abortion, I told them that I had trouble reconciling abortion with my personal values, but neither could I know what another woman would best do. As I recall, only one activist pushed me to take a stand on one side or the other of the pro-choice/pro-life divide, but I did not feel a need to define myself according to that dichotomy. The other interviewees appeared to accept, or at least tolerate, the neutrality created by the tension between my beliefs. I do not think interviewees considered me a potential advocate. Rather, they found the interviews cathartic, often thanking me for the opportunity to think through their experiences and to be heard.

<sup>2</sup> Several of the first interviewees reported paranormal experiences that reinforced their commitment to activism, so I probed this topic with subsequent interviewees, but very few described paranormal experiences.

The long-term observations and in-depth interviews incorporated in this book provide a contextualized description of the development of anti-abortion attitudes and allow me to relate individual reasoning to the practice of collective action. Maslow noted long ago that individual motivation and environmental forces (such as situational determinants) “both have their places in the larger structure” that accounts for behavior (1970:29). My approach in analyzing this instance of collective action attempts more to portray these two factors, the individuals’ motivations and the complex, multidimensional, “larger structure,” than to pursue a particular theoretical perspective. Consequently, I present a history of the pro-life direct action movement centered on the factors that most closely related to individual activists’ motivations. (This approach draws on numerous theories in a process termed *open-ended theory construction*.)

The moral and legal status of abortion is not, of course, solely a preoccupation of contemporary America. It has been debated and documented, if inconsistently, over the last 2,000 years, and around the world (Noonan 1970; Rodman, Sarvis, and Bonar 1987). This long history makes the meaning of any one point in this contentious dialogue contingent, and its use as a starting point dubious. Consider the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which halted a state-by-state revamping of abortion law in favor of a national standard that legalized abortion, with few limiting provisions. Depending on the point in history one chooses to hark back to, *Roe* could be considered: 1) the lawful reinstatement of a legal and at least tacitly accepted practice; or 2) the reversal of a long-standing legal position and legitimization of what was previously construed to be a crime. The first perspective privileges history prior to the nineteenth-century physicians’ campaign, which was conducted throughout the last half of the 1800s (as part of a larger national trend to centralize and rationalize society; cf. Ginsburg 1989). At the turn of that century, “no jurisdiction in the United States had enacted any statutes whatsoever on the subject of abortion” and “those American women who wished to practice abortion did so” (Mohr 1978:vii). The second perspective focuses on the legal context that the physicians’ campaign eventually created. By 1900 the physicians’ campaign had brought about laws circumscribing and criminalizing abortion in “virtually every jurisdiction in the United States” (Mohr 1978:vii). Such radical changes in the legal status of abortion indicate equally pervasive changes in popular attitudes toward abortion, and, consequently, in its moral status.

Each seemingly discrete phase, every significant turning point, and each set of opposing arguments and factions is framed by those preceding

it and by the larger social context within which it emerges, and is recorded and later remembered or reconstructed. In general, media reports (and even some scholarly work) regarding pro-life direct action present truncated or biased descriptions of this movement, usually emphasizing the brief but highly visible influx of evangelicals that swelled its ranks in the late 1980s and brought about its essential demise in the early 1990s. This was the period dominated by Operation Rescue. Many of the individuals I interviewed were direct activists years before Operation Rescue arose; some tutored its founder, Randall Terry. Understanding their personal experiences, and the movement as a whole, requires a framework that predates Operation Rescue. In Chapter 2, I have drawn an oral history of the movement from activists engaged in its various stages, beginning in the 1970s and lasting through the 1990s.

Chapter 2 begins with the personal experiences and ideology of the movement's founder and describes the strategy that generated activism throughout the continental United States, making forays into Canada, Great Britain, and Eastern and Western Europe. I focus, however, on events in the midwestern metropolitan area of St. Louis, Missouri. This approach allows me to consider the interaction of individual-level microprocesses (such as forming commitment and ascribing meaning), group-level dynamics (such as organizational life cycles), and environmental factors (such as community attitudes, changes in law, and historical contingencies) – all disparate, but important, influences on this movement.

The activists' oral histories illustrate diverse political and social science theories. For example, the movement's organizational infrastructure shaped its life course in interaction with environmental constraints, opportunities, and stimuli. Such factors included inter- and intra-group relationships, and police, court, and community responses to direct action as it arose and as it changed over time. New organizational forms emerged not only in response to such external pressures, but also as a consequence of innovative processes activists undertook. Changing levels of participation in the direct action movement had a powerful effect, not only on practical areas such as its potential for success (in preventing abortions) or punishment (of individuals who sat-in), but also on the social contexts activism offered participants and its consequent attraction to recruits. Sitting-in was personally costly, however, contrary to some political science theory, direct activists did not commonly succumb to "free-riding" (first described in Olson 1971).

That is, they did not tend to back away from participation when sit-ins were large, even though they knew their absence would probably not alter a sit-in's outcome. Yet, over time, shifts in the movement's demography altered its ideology, organization, tactics, and scope.

Rescuers' demographic profile alone suggests that models explaining *conventional* pro-life activism (that is, legal activism) are inadequate to explain participation in pro-life *direct action*. Direct activists were not the socioeconomic marginals some authors suggest. They would not be accurately described as downwardly mobile, disenfranchised, socially isolated, poor, undereducated, underemployed, and so forth. However, their opposition to abortion was radicalized to some extent by their own ideologically derived perceptions of marginalization. That is, many activists perceived themselves to be excluded from the mechanisms through which people control and change society. They spoke of their religious values as making them a targeted, disenfranchised minority vulnerable to the havoc wrought by a dominant "liberal," "humanist" majority.

The various groups comprising the pro-life direct action movement over time each went through a series of developmental stages, as did the movement as a whole (cf. Stewart, Smith, and Denton 1989). Identifying these stages helps explain divergent trends in the frequency of violent and nonviolent acts at abortion clinics. However, although helpful, stage theory only provides a partial explanation. A closer look at the way individuals reacted to their political environment illuminates the rise in violence that coincided with decreasing participation in sit-ins (cf. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956). Such considerations bear implications for future radical opposition to abortion (as discussed in Chapter 2).

Throughout this book I focus on individuals' interpretations of their activism – that is, what they considered their activism to have been, what they hoped to accomplish through it, and how they came to pursue those objectives. This approach draws on the cognitive theory of motivation (Maehr 1989). Contextualization is essential to this analysis. The activists' private symbolism, linked to personal quests, played a major role in their own definitions of the costs and benefits of participating in direct action. People flexibly interpreted pre-existing ethics when deciding whether or not to participate in sit-ins. Immediate personal circumstances, as well as social and political environments, influenced such choices by conditioning individuals' experiences. The ideology, rhetoric,

group dynamics, and tactics individuals encountered meant meaning to specific actions, and so entered into their decisions to join and to leave direct action.

The activists' narratives richly illustrated these dynamics. In Chapter 3, I follow Bailey's transition from pro-choice to pro-life ideology, tracing her path from conventional to radical activism.<sup>3</sup> I then illustrate the key social and psychological processes embedded in activists' narratives by recounting Rick's, Jan's, and Dylan's experiences of entering and leaving direct activism. Their motivations hinged on such processes as ascribing meaning, assessing costs, and interpreting (and reinterpreting) their own existing ethics. Their stories highlight the roles of such personal experiences as grief and salvation in activism. I use Loren's narrative to explore the nexus of grief and activism in more detail (Chapter 4), then turn to the narratives of women who had aborted prior to sitting-in, to illustrate the powerful role diverse concepts of God and salvation played in this activism, and conversely, the important role activism played in individual psychological processes (Chapter 5). The complexity underlying most activists' motivations could as quickly dissipate the impulse to sit-in as arouse it. This complexity undermined commitment to direct action at the individual level. Consequently, participation was often transient. The narratives in Chapter 5 illustrate the impact of this transience on the direct action movement.

Through these stories I examine the generation and collapse of commitment. Recruitment to even mainstream pro-life activism differed from recruitment to pro-choice activism. Kristin Luker noted that less than 10% of the pro-life activists she interviewed "were recruited in the way the typical pro-choice activist was" (1984:147–8). Although Luker attributed abortion attitudes and activism to individuals' life situations (their socioeconomic status, their peers, the values they learned as children, and especially their participation in paid labor), she noted that anti-abortion activism was often initiated by personal, idiosyncratic motives. She concluded that "almost all" people opposing abortion self-recruited (unlike people supporting legal access to abortion, who generally became politically active through formal activities of the pro-choice movement) (1984:146). Pro-lifers' self-recruitment often stemmed from a "personal experience that 'brought the issue home' to

<sup>3</sup> Organization and business (including abortion clinic) names that might identify interviewees have been changed. All names not given in full are pseudonyms, as well.

them” (Luker 1984:146). Faye Ginsburg (1989) also noted a conversion-like experience that precipitated anti-abortion activism. In Chapter 6, I explore such experiences, which direct activists referred to as becoming “convicted to pro-life.” Conviction radicalized activism.

I argue that “conviction” was a secular form of conversion, and that conversion is an intense instance of a creative, ongoing, and generally nonpathological process (cf. Cucchiari 1988; Heirich 1977; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Reflection on one’s own life history and identity, critical life events, distressing social changes, and exposure to other pro-life activists and their rhetoric all helped bring about “conviction.” These factors were couched within larger social dynamics such as the contest between egalitarian and hierarchical relational strategies (which I describe in Chapter 6), and national trends supporting the legal status of abortion. Conviction established consistent moral, social, and relational strategies, and this uniformity promoted participation in direct action.

When activists described their conviction experiences and the meanings they ascribed to their activism, they illustrated the relationship between their personal experiences, sources of their self-identity such as their regional backgrounds, and the development, interpretation, and application of their personal ethics. This nexus is an underdeveloped area in the study of moral reasoning (Berk 1989).

The literature on moral reasoning recognizes that moral discourse often differs from future behavior and that people may not apply ethics in a logically consistent manner from one situation to another. Direct activists’ narratives suggest one explanation for these tendencies. That is, they suggest that adults conduct an ongoing reinterpretation of relatively stable ethics. Personal circumstances and pressing psychological or emotional needs shaped individuals’ assessment of the practical implications of their ethics. Here, my findings build upon those of Oliner and Oliner (1988).

The Oliners closely examined the precedents, contexts, and correlates to moral decisions associated with altruistic behavior (in their case, saving Jews during Nazi occupation). Their study necessarily relied on recall many years after the events under consideration, given their emphasis on early childhood experiences and the social and political attitudes interviewees held at the time they chose to rescue Jews. My study also relies on recall, but examines moral decisions much closer to the time of the act in question. Amid the complex reality underlying moral decisions, the Oliners found a sense of inclusiveness, a “willingness to see different types of people as essentially similar to” oneself that

was crucial to altruistic action (1988:178). This attitude is called an “ethic of extensivity,” and it was prominent in pro-life direct activists’ narratives. Almost all of the activists adopted an extensive attitude toward the “unborn” (fetuses), but several activists developed extensive attitudes toward women contemplating abortion. This disposition guided behavior long before the “helping” act, and afterwards, as well. However, a precipitating event was necessary to lead most people to act upon their moral inclinations. As the Oliners note, “It took a catalyst to translate predisposition into action,” but the actions arose not from “objective external events” but rather from “the subjective meanings rescuers conferred on them” (1988:187). I have drawn together extensive excerpts from activists’ narratives, so that they might describe, in their own words, the dynamics that converged to bring about extraordinary responses. This approach provides a contextualized consideration of individual moral reasoning (following the example set by Coles and Coles 1978).

The activists’ situated interpretation of ethics made their approaches to moral dilemmas appear to spiral between “care” and “justice” orientations – two approaches to moral reasoning first described as a dichotomy (cf. Gilligan 1982). Pro-life activists thus presented a pattern somewhat different from the linear progression embodied in traditional developmental models of moral reasoning, and different still from Gilligan’s alternative to the linear model (cf. 1982). Furthermore, and again contrary to a dichotomized model, pro-life activists’ impartialist moral orientations appeared to be dependent on, or at least interactive with, particularistic approaches to moral reasoning. (Blum [1993] concisely describes these theories of moral reasoning, and I discuss them more fully as I consider specific activists’ narratives throughout this book.) The point to be taken here is that activists’ narratives suggest that an individual utilizes a broader range of moral reasoning approaches than either a dichotomized model or a model describing linear development would account for. Moreover, the connections activists’ narratives describe between one approach to moral reasoning and another suggest an interdependence between different types of moral reasoning.

The people interviewed for this study clearly undertook important psychological tasks through their activism. (I base the significance of the psychological events activists described on the work of Glick and Zigler [1985] and Harter [1985].) The activists’ narratives illustrated the potency of intellectual and emotional convergence (cf. Leahy 1985). They often sought or responded to such consistency through their



activism. For example, Loren's story of real, remembered, and imagined death (Chapter 4) illustrates the importance of both thinking and feeling in attaining self-realization (cf. Maslow 1970; cf. Wikan 1990). Again, women who had aborted and later joined the movement addressed the dissonance wrought by various traumatic life events (including their abortions) through their activism. Many activists' stories illustrated a struggle to balance diverse personal needs against the desire to form connections to others (including God). Such struggles varied the force of meaning, ideology, and material circumstances in shaping commitment to direct action.

The success of the pro-life direct action movement, that is, its ability to sustain collective action, depended on negotiating a balance between two potentially conflictive value orientations: instrumental rationality and value rationality (two concepts described by Weber [1978]). Activists whose reasoning was guided by instrumental rationality aimed to achieve immediate practical ends and encourage future political success. Activists who took value-rational approaches were satisfied by the sheer act of participating, even if abortion was neither prevented nor recriminalized. That is, instrumental rationalists sought objective goals external to their own acts, while value rationalists achieved their goals in activism itself. In Chapter 7, I turn from the personal voices of the individual narratives to a quantitative analysis in order to describe the effects of these two types of rationality, and the conviction experience, on levels of participation in direct action.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 8, I again examine the sample as an aggregate to explore the different themes men and women developed in their narratives and how these themes related to persistent participation in sit-ins.

What shaped the course of this collective action, both from within and from without? The activists' decisions to engage in and withdraw from direct action, and to adopt or reject specific tactics suggest answers to this question. As reflections upon actual lived experiences, (as opposed to hypothetical situations posed by researchers to assess moral reasoning processes) direct activists' narratives illustrate relationships between thought and action over time. They show how people interpreted their personal experiences, what their activism meant to them, how they understood the circumstances of their activism, and how these meanings affected their participation and, so, shaped a social movement. My focus on the activists' stories allows me to explore extrarational

<sup>4</sup> This analysis appears in more detail in Maxwell and Jelen 1994.

motivations to collective action while taking account of its environmental contexts.

### DEFINING DIRECT ACTION

The range of practices termed “direct action” by interviewees varied over time and differed somewhat from “direct action” practiced by other unconventional activists (such as those opposing war, nuclear power, or clear-cutting timber). Since I wanted to understand why activists chose to do what they did, and to learn what those actions meant to them, I asked them to define “direct action.”

Despite the evolving nature of “direct action” in St. Louis, the epitome of pro-life direct action was always “rescuing” – that is, attempting to stop specific, planned abortions from taking place. “Rescuers” directly attempted to stop abortions in three ways: intercepting and dissuading patients, blocking clinic entrances, or causing clinics to close for business. (Some activists stretched the meaning almost to the breaking point when, occasionally, they defined prayer as direct action.) The recurring theme in direct activists’ discourse was that the hallmark of rescue was risking arrest (for sitting-in or trespassing). Tactics that did not expose activists to arrest seemed complementary rather than focal.

Direct activists attempted to close clinics by contaminating or damaging doctors’ equipment, occupying or contaminating clinic premises, increasing legal regulations so that continued operations would not be profitable, or by dissuading landlords from renewing clinic’s leases. By blocking clinic entrances, activists intended to turn pregnant women away with their ruckus, hoping the women would later decide not to abort. Direct activists employed several rhetorical tactics to dissuade the women impeded by their sit-ins. They termed their key rhetorical strategies “sidewalk counseling” and “truth talks.”

“Sidewalk counseling,” which entailed speaking to “abortion-bound mothers,” potentially achieved the same end as sitting-in, and so was often classed as direct action and called “rescuing.” In fact, many saw it as the *sine qua non* of rescue. Like sitting-in, sidewalk counseling often entailed “risking arrest” (for trespassing on clinic property in violation of an injunction). “Truth talks” were conducted by two-person teams of activists. In one version, a male-female team entered a clinic waiting area posing as a couple and implying that the man was pressuring the woman to abort. The couple would start to argue and the woman would accuse the man of not caring about her or her baby. She would become angry

and leave, “deciding” not to abort. In the other version, two women would pose as mother and daughter. The older woman would ask the younger if she was sure she wanted to “go ahead with this,” and the younger woman would respond uncertainly, show her “mother” the pro-life literature she had picked up on her way into the clinic, then turn to the other women in the waiting areas, show them the literature and ask them what they thought. The pair would end their performance by “deciding” against the abortion and leaving the clinic.

Sometimes direct activists entered clinics and either quietly stuffed pro-life leaflets into the clinic’s magazines or openly handed out their literature and tried to talk women into leaving with them. Either activity might precede a sit-in, and would be considered an integral part of the direct action event.

The definition of direct action hinged on the private meanings people gave to particular practices. Some people limited the definition of direct action to sitting-in and sidewalk counseling. Other people extended the definition to include picketing outside abortion clinics, either because it contributed to the impression that “something is wrong here” (and so might dissuade incoming patients), or because the actions termed “picketing” by observers were understood differently by participants. For example, some people understood “picket lines” to be powerful, prayerful proclamations of God’s authority and injunctions against the “evil” abiding in clinics. Other people explained that “picketing” was showing one’s gratitude to God, fulfilling a Biblical enjoinder to “stand at the gates and give warning,” or “witnessing” to God’s will.

Direct activists closed clinics several times by vandalizing them. In addition to fouling entrance door locks, or padlocking them closed, which was done repeatedly, they employed several tactics that were never repeated despite their effectiveness in preventing clinic operations. For example, several interviewees recalled that in one instance, while occupying a clinic, they slipped a box of frozen fish above the drop ceiling of a procedure room. The fish spoiled quickly and the odor was so powerful that the clinic closed for several days to locate the problem. In another instance, they staged a “car sit-in” by abandoning many cars tightly packed in front of a clinic’s doors. In yet another instance, an activist obstructed a clinic entrance with massive cement blocks.

Such contamination and blockading tactics were effective, did not result in arrest, and entailed less emotional strain than the face-to-face confrontation most activists dreaded during sit-ins. This emotional stress was, perhaps, the most salient cost of sitting-in and sidewalk counseling.

Most direct activists said they would rather be arrested for sitting-in than endure the personal confrontation involved in sidewalk counseling, yet they also reported feeling nauseated before each sit-in due to anxiety over the thought of confronting police and clinic personnel. The relative infrequency with which contamination and object blockades were employed indicates the complex motivations behind other, more personally costly tactics such as sitting-in and sidewalk counseling.

### RESEARCH ON PRO-LIFE DIRECT ACTION

The contest between pro-life and pro-choice activists is not a microcosm of sentiment felt across the nation. Pro-life direct activists' adamant opposition to abortion (like pro-choicers' staunch support for it) diverges sharply from the nuanced attitudes expressed by the broader American public. General Social Survey data from 1987 through 1991, assessing the general public, show "considerable overlap between characteristics of pro-life and pro-choice citizens"; even people at either pole, that is, those who agree with either pro-life or pro-choice stances, "share many values with their ostensible opponents" (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992:155-6). Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox found among the broader citizenry "a narrow majority [of] . . . situationalists, who favor legal access to abortion in some circumstances, but not others" (1992:156). Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox note that, while different positions on abortion exist within the general public, and demographic differences do matter, "the image of two opposed camps, each questioning the integrity and morality of the other, does not describe the mass public in the United States" (1992:156). However, they point out that, at the activist level, the debate about abortion "seems concerned with such ultimate values that compromise is difficult to envision" (1992:11).

Abortion sets core American values in conflict, and public opinion on abortion reflects this contest (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992). Abortion sets Americans' belief in individualism in conflict with a general Judaeo-Christian tradition. These values give rise to more concrete issues: the importance and status of child bearing, gender roles, sexual morality, and the sanctity of human life. Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox found that "most Americans hold values that pull them in both pro-choice and pro-life directions" (1992:156). Balancing these opposite pulls, "a majority of Americans appears to believe that the status of the embryo and the prerogatives of the mother must be weighed and balanced in some fashion" (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1992:11). Accordingly, most Americans (76%)