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CHAPTER ONE

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.

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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 prominant 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

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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.)

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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

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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.[1]

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,

[1] 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.

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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.[2] 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.

[2] 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.

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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 choses 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

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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).

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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,

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group dynamics, and tactics individuals encountered leant 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.[3] 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

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

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