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Author

Graybeal, Pam M.

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Pam M. Graybeal

ABSTRACT

The debate over oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has attracted a great deal of attention nationally and internationally throughout the past decade. The Gwich'in Tribe played a very important role, and their campaign is of particular interest because of the introduction of the climate justice framework into the enduring campaign which weathered several shifts in political and popular sentiment. The framework's wide appeal to a diverse audience may increase campaign strength by attracting and uniting a range of actors, issues, perspectives, skills, tactics, and resources. A culture-oriented approach is used to examine the roles of framing and identity formation in the construction of community images, communities of interest, and social networks. This initial analysis is based solely on written material about the case. It is suggested that creation of a particular community image may be vital to bolstering the community members' self-identity while promoting individual and collective wellness as well as enhancing campaign sustainability; however, the role of intervening actors needs further examination. The role of this paper is to promote discussion of the role this case had in influencing the climate justice framework, and vice versa.

INTRODUCTION

Although the issues generally considered within the sphere of climate justice (CJ) had already begun to merge together by the late 1990s, the particular framing of issues as “climate justice” may be more readily recognized as coming into use following the 2000 Climate Justice Summit in The Hague. The summit followed the release of CorpWatch’s report “Greenhouse Gangsters vs. Climate Justice,” which outlined a “framework from which indigenous peoples, the environmental justice movement, fence line communities affected by oil refineries, students and anti-globalization activists can begin to assert leadership on the global warming issue.”¹ The report also pointed to the role the oil industry and global institutions play in furthering environmental destruction both locally and globally. The following year, CorpWatch organized a Climate Justice Tour. Sarah James of the Gwich’in Steering Committee in Alaska was one of two speakers, who, according to the tour’s organizers “passionately brought to life the connections between the local effects of oil and the global dynamic of climate change.”²

James’s early involvement with promoting climate justice makes it useful to examine the dynamics of the Gwich’in’s ongoing campaign against oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and CJ (with an emphasis on 1995-2001). The Gwich’in are Native Athabascans, and continue to depend (to varying degrees among the fifteen villages) on the Porcupine Caribou Herd to provide food, shelter, clothing, medicine, or tools.^{3, 4, 5, 6} In turn, the caribou depend on their habitat in the Arctic Refuge.⁷ Although the Gwich’in and various environmentalists have been fighting against exploration and drilling for oil in the Arctic Refuge for decades,⁸ the past two attempts at drilling since 1995 prompted a fresh frenzy of opposition. The case provided a cohesive forum for different segments of the environmental movement to work together on a single case. Although oil exploration and drilling has, to this day, been resisted, the area is still under constant pressure for development.

This case is of particular interest because of the entrance of the CJ framing into an enduring campaign which has weathered

several shifts in political and popular sentiment. The role of this paper is to promote discussion of the role this case had in influencing the CJ framework, and vice versa. From the perspective of a person who has never visited the Artic National Wildlife Refuge nor met any Gwich'in, I utilize a New Social Movement (NSM), or cultural approach to examine the role of identity formation and framing through the construction of community images, communities of interest, and networks as represented in the literature surrounding the case. The review of the literature was exploratory in nature, and a systematic sampling of documents was not used.

According to the Gwich'in Steering Committee (1997), although the debate around the Arctic Refuge was one of foremost environmental issues of 1990's, the story of the Gwich'in, who are most affected by the decision, was largely untold.⁹ The accuracy of this statement is difficult to discern, as the Gwich'in were mentioned with relative frequency in media reports and literature in general, although often only briefly. It is very likely, though, that, the story of the Gwich'in will be more central in future debates with an increasing utilization of the CJ framework, since it links threats to the environment with threats social and cultural in nature.

The Gwich'in and other CJ activists based their appeals on a variety of claims, which evolved throughout the campaign. The predominant claim was that the Gwich'in's subsistence livelihood would be threatened by the resulting decrease in caribou numbers in addition to the direct impact of environmental degradation and potential catastrophic accidents accompanying drilling.¹⁰ Also, supporters stated that indigenous peoples in Alaska face other immediate threats due to an increase in temperature which reduces their ability to fish (affecting their main dietary source) and travel safely.¹¹ Meanwhile, a report by Environmental Defense very quickly mentioned an increased rate of diabetes among natives living in areas of oil development.¹²

Perhaps it is the range of factors and thus actors involved in the debate that lends itself to be a useful case for CJ activists to utilize as an example of the broad appeal inherent in CJ campaigns. The Arctic Refuge case allowed members of climate change, wilderness conservation, environmental justice (EJ), and indigenous groups to

link their issues to this one opportunity. This case may be a particularly good example for CJ proponents because it involves negative impacts on a population that presumably has done little to contribute to the problem through light reliance on fossil fuels. The nature of the threat (i.e. oil extraction) also contributes to the strength of this case as a model for CJ, since opponents can cite the need to reduce consumption of fossil fuels in order to decrease the emissions that contribute to climate change. The Gwich'in expected to experience the full cycle of oil development's negative effects: They faced threats both immediately due to oil extraction, as well as in the future due to climate change brought on by fossil fuel combustion.

However, there are several aspects of these conclusions that should be more closely examined in the future for their potential implications for other indigenous and environmental campaigns. For example, does this illustration effectively promote the essence of the CJ agenda in the US, and its multiplicity of concerns? How may the specific framing of this case assist or hinder other CJ campaigns? What can we use from Gwich'in case to further other CJ struggles (being careful to consider the importance of the geographical, cultural, and temporal context of each specific case)?

FRAMING

The debate between proponents and opponents of oil development in the Arctic Refuge included a wide array of issues, of which these are only a limited few: the amount of recoverable oil, the extent of environmental and social harm, and the potential benefits. These debates provide excellent illustrations of the manipulation of science and the framing of scientific findings in political arguments.

Framing relies on identity construction (discussion following), and may be considered somewhat of a mnemonic, or a way to assist in recalling and conceptualizing specific occurrences, objects, situations, etc. David Snow's more narrow definition of framing is useful to consider.¹³ This narrow definition of framing examines the "conscious" and "strategic" methods used by groups to articulate their common viewpoints and self-perceptions in order to justify and stimulate collective action.

Collective action frames extend beyond “focusing and punctuating ‘reality’” to also “serve as modes of attribution and articulation”¹⁴ to draw interest to certain issues the movement identifies as needing attention. This is considered diagnostic framing. Examples in the Arctic Refuge case include reference to the expected decrease in wildlife and human viability in the area as a result of oil development. This included direct impacts (decreased caribou calving on coastal plain to be developed),¹⁵ concern for the impact of accidental oil spills, and climate change resulting from continued fossil fuel combustion.¹⁶ On the other side, drilling proponents pointed to the national independence and economic growth they expected drilling would allow.^{17, 18}

Prognostic and motivational are two other types of framing. Frames that propose alternatives that may include specific possible actions are prognostic, while those providing rationales for movement participants are motivational. The suggestion of increased fuel efficiency and overall reduced consumption of fossil fuels illustrates prognostic framing by environmentalists.¹⁹ Meanwhile, drilling proponents used motivational framing by portraying drilling as vital to decreasing the trade deficit, creating jobs, and boosting the national economy.^{20, 21}

Frames are also relevant to identity when actors utilize frame alignment tactics that attempt to make connections between the movement’s values and purpose with those of the prospective participants’ viewpoints and interests. For example, consider a quote by James and Peterson: “The wonders of Alaska belong to future generations of our families and yours.”²²

IDENTITY

One trait of the NSM approach is an interest in the role of identity in participation and movement formation. NSM groups often are formed around “cultural and symbolic” issues associated with identity, and thus, also work towards creating or strengthening a common and personal sense of identity. Also, members of NSMs often associate their individual identity with that of the group.²³ Yet, there may be risks associated with “identity-based politics,” in that they may lead to such strong feelings of individual identity that they lead to detrimental separation from others.²⁴ Also, while

differentiation may allow some to claim new rights, it may also force groups to surrender other rights.²⁵ For example, construction of an identity that appears to be wholly anti-oil development would limit the Gwich'in's options regarding future development and the potential economic benefits. Thus, the Gwich'in seem accepting of development in other regions, or future development utilizing improved technology.^{26, 27}

Collective identities

Groups establish collective identities through the process of defining the "movement's reference frame" and circumstances. This identity may consist of group norms including boundaries, the meaning of membership, and appropriate group actions. A social constructionist viewpoint indicates that collective identities vary depending on shifting individual identities and the stage of movement development. Meanwhile, others have argued that an identity may move beyond its constitution of individual contributions to have its own existence that may serve as a source of the movement's norms and values. Another way to view the creation of collective identity is as a "top-down" process, in which an identity is supplied by organizational leaders for members to accept and conform to.²⁸ In other words, organization representatives develop the narratives and terms that they wish to be adopted by movement participants and supporters so these members may adjust their personal identities to align with the collective identity. This serves to further enhance movement strength.²⁹ It should be considered, though, that rather than one approach over the other, there may be a combination of this top-down approach with the previously mentioned bottom-up one in creating collective identities.³⁰

Another component of collective identity formation is the presence of "oppositional culture," which contain frameworks that "provide the raw materials that help shape and crystallize the collective identities that are in large part externally imposed on oppressed communities by dominant groups," and may be the product of physical segregation and "distinct oppressive treatment of dominated groups."³¹ The presence of an oppositional culture may also contribute to oppositional consciousness, which "is an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed

group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination.”³² The presence of an oppositional consciousness in this case needs further examination beyond the scope of this paper.

An excellent example of a collective identity utilized by the Gwich'in is their group identification as “The Caribou People.” The identification with the caribou and the continued consumption of caribou bolstered the community members’ images of themselves and the community. Holding onto this aspect of the culture may be very important to the community because of the damaging effects severe epidemics and other historical factors had on cultural and traditional knowledge.³³ Adelson relates that “in this (so-called) post-colonial period, individuals and communities are grappling with the legacy of the colonization process.”³⁴ In the late 1940s, the Alaskan native population in general was suffering economically and physically.³⁵ First Nations communities continue to struggle with serious mental and physical health problems that can be considered individual expressions of physical and cultural harm inflicted on the society. In response, communities may be in the process of “recuperation” by attempting to regain land and cultural autonomy while also promoting individual and community health.³⁶

Individual identity

The individual identity is comprised of the personal characteristics of individuals that are formed by both their biological traits as well as the social environment in which they live. These traits are “internalized and imported to social movement participation as idiosyncratic biographies.”³⁷ From the perspective of sociologists and social psychologists, personal identity is created through the process of interpreting how others receive the individual as they act out different roles; thus, individual identities are continually changing in response to the reactions individuals receive.³⁸ The role of the individual identity is important in this case, because the individual identity is frequently equated with the collective identity i.e., individual identities may benefit members when a positive collective identity can be utilized. Again, consider the potential individual benefits resulting from voluntary adoption of a positive collective identity as the Caribou people. Gwich'in

spokespeople as well as researchers suggest that the younger generation and elders alike benefit.^{39, 40}

Public identity

A public identity reflects the way individual participants in movements view themselves in response to the way the public perceives and responds to them. It also influences the creation of both the individual and collective identities. A few of the very influential sources of public reflection include the media and nonmembers of the movement (which may include members of other movements).⁴¹ This reflects the importance of analyzing the written material regarding a case, since it influences public identity formation. The Gwich'in Steering Committee and its representatives were very active in creating a public identity for the tribe. A unified front allowed members of each of the fifteen villages to present a solid public collective identity that referenced a subsistence lifestyle. Although alcoholism, child neglect and abuse, and sexual abuse are social problems some Gwich'in communities face more than others, they appear to be omitted from most of the influential, popular, and early Refuge-related material. This could be because it was thought to be irrelevant to the argument, but it also could point to the creation of an intentional image. Exceptions to this include a 2001 editorial written by James and Manos in which the issue was framed as a human rights case.⁴² Another exception includes a report in the United Methodist News Service, which briefly mentions alcohol and suicide problems Gwich'in communities faced (with an exception for Arctic Village).⁴³

Identity fields

Socially constructed notions of identities may be considered "identity fields." These include the construction of other people or groups as supporters or opponents of the movement. Other identity fields can consist of the recipients of the movement's good intentions and the primarily "uncommitted" observers who are still considered possible future protagonists. This "audience identity field" helps establish which other frames will be well-received, what types of support will be necessary to bolster their assertions, and how to best integrate the audience's own cultural experiences

and values into a frame that will inspire empathy and action.⁴⁴ In the CJ framework, a variety of identity fields are used in an effort to appeal to several different audiences such as a spectrum of environmentalists and indigenous rights activists as well as the general public. Identity fields are also useful in the creation of communities of interest (see following discussion).

COMMUNITY IMAGES

According to Fellin, people create images of their community in judging how “good” it is. Considering the objective features, as well as subjective individual opinions, these images can influence how residents interact with each other and willingness to participate in formal and informal community organizations. Some examples of features that may be involved in the creation of a positive community image include the: 1) chance for “primary” group relationships, 2) feelings of attachment to the community, 3) lack of serious social problems, 4) existence of neighborhoods that are safe and reliable, 5) presence of job and educational opportunities, and 6) a constructive physical and cultural setting.⁴⁵ With these features in mind, particularly the first three, consider the construction of community images of the Gwich’in, both to the members and in their representation to the public.

Media sources frequently reported Gwich’in emphasizing the cultural and physical value of hunting and eating caribou. A young Gwich’in woman stated “Our elders need these traditional foods to stay healthy. They can’t eat the packaged foods.”⁴⁶ Faith Gemmill, a young Gwich’in provides an image of the Gwich’in which is also repeated in other literature: “We use every part of the caribou.”⁴⁷ Old Crow was reported to be one of the few Indian settlements in North America in which its residents are “still largely dependent on traditional hunting patterns.”⁴⁸ A second article related the story of a resident of Arctic Village, which is located on the southern rim of the refuge and is made up of mostly unemployed residents who “survive by hunting caribou.” Residents live in “one-story clapboard houses,” which often do not have running water and are heated with wood stoves.⁴⁹ Despite the promise of economic gains from development, the Gwich’in of Arctic Village prefer the preservation of their way of life. Yet, the

Gwich'in are not entirely against development, since they have leased parts of their land to oil companies and enjoy the resulting revenue that supports the villages' schools and other services.⁵⁰

According to Fast, the 1976 Arctic Refuge conflict prompted a "renewed partnership with environmental interest groups, and has given rise to a new language of ethnic identity for some Gwich'in."⁵¹ Also, involvement with environmental groups and the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 aided the Gwich'in in perceiving themselves as a separate nation in order to offset the negative effects of epidemics, traders who weakened the traditional and religious economy, exploitation of natural resources, and political upheavals.⁵² Yet, the benefits of the IRA (also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934 or the "Indian New Deal"), when extended to Alaska in 1936, calls for further scrutiny. The act promoted tribal self-government, which was linked to the federal bureaucracy with the intention of addressing the "ecological, social, and economic crises throughout Indian Country" at the time.⁵³ While the act may have succeeded in furthering tribal politics and economic development, it also assisted in creating divisions within tribes, between those who wished to maintain more "traditional" lifestyles, and those who supported development.

Thus, it appears that at least a vocal segment (Gwich'in Steering Committee and its designated representatives) drew on the tribe's use of caribou to create and strengthen a positive community image. They viewed and portrayed themselves as holding on to traditional practices, hence maintaining their cultural identity. However, some people have also warned against the use of stereotypes that portray indigenous peoples as the "ecological Indian," who hold a unique and inherent environmental/conservationist ethic. They stress the importance of acknowledging the environmentally-destructive activities indigenous peoples have practiced in the past, as well as the variation among individual and group behavior.^{54, 55}

COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST (IDENTIFICATION)

Communities of interest are comprised of individuals that share a common interest or trait, so they are not dependent on physical proximity. Also called non-place communities, psychological

identification and cultural bonds are two possible features of these communities. Often, membership in communities of interest serve to create activities that are social or educational, and can assist in integrating individuals into their physical community; however, non-place communities can also have the opposite effect, and cause a decrease in participation in place communities when non-place ties are substituted for the ties often formed by involvement in the physical community.⁵⁶

Involvement in the CJ movement can constitute participation in a community of interest, since members share a common desire to address the environmental and social inequity associated with climate change. The CJ framework is very suited to creating an expansive community of interest through the effective utilization of identity fields that appeal to a wide audience of environmentalists (conservation and EJ), anti-globalization and social rights activists, indigenous peoples, as well as the general public. One type of appeal to the public includes reference to the loss of migratory birds, pristine wilderness, and the ability to enjoy publicly-owned Alaska reserves. Another claim could appeal to an even wider audience: Straying from the argument restricted to oil development, James refers to the damaging effects of clear-cut logging in the area and the associated declining numbers of grizzly bears, salmon, and deer, and exportation of wood to other countries.⁵⁷

SOCIAL NETWORKS

This analysis is distinctly different from the intricate analysis frequently considered "social network analysis,"⁵⁸ but it shares an interest in the importance of social systems in influencing individual and group behavior. Also relevant to consider are "transnational advocacy networks," which Keck and Sikkink describe as partnerships among groups with common values in which extensive information and resources (services) are exchanged. Often, these transnational networks use information and pressure in a "boomerang pattern," in which domestic groups make use of international organizations and allies to pressure resistant states. Keck and Sikkink state that both indigenous rights and environmental campaigns frequently make use of this

approach.⁵⁹ There are several types of social networks to be considered in this case: those existing within the Gwich'in communities, those among the Gwich'in and environmentalists, as well as the networks among different interest groups. Although it is difficult to ascertain and evaluate the dynamics of these social networks without first-hand experience, the existence of these networks' influences on the campaign is useful in characterizing the campaign in general. Avenues for future deliberation are recommended.

In considering the role of social networks, it is also of value to investigate the amount of cohesion within the networks, or groups. Cohesiveness may be considered "the overall attraction of group members to each other and the way in which they 'stick together.'"⁶⁰ Cohesiveness may be indicative of group morale, teamwork or team spirit, and is influenced by the attraction group members have to the group, and how members value the group as fulfilling their needs. Finally, cohesiveness influences the amount of risk-taking the group accepts, with members of cohesive groups being more open to risks, such as personal disclosure. While a high level of cohesiveness should signal one to watch for groupthink, it may also enhance the group's effectiveness.⁶¹ I will not speculate about the cohesiveness of the relevant networks, but suggest that they be considered for future research, especially participatory research.

Regarding the social networks among Gwich'in, the printed material about the Arctic Refuge reviewed for this analysis pays little attention to the dynamics among Gwich'in leaders and community members. It also rarely distinguishes between the (potentially varying) opinions held among the villages. However, contradictory information regarding the memory of the Steering Committee formation suggests some discord. According to the committee's website, the elders' called for the meeting that produced the committee. This gathering (the first of its kind in over a century) provided a "rebirth" of the Gwich'in Nation from which a single voice emanated.⁶² Yet, according to Fast, an outside environmentalist named Bob Childers played an important role in organizing and collecting funds for the 1988 gathering. Fast acknowledges, however, that Childers appeared to have successfully facilitated the organization without necessarily

organizing it himself. Evidence of this lies in the fact that many Gwich'in do not recall his involvement. It is also suggested that many community members (employees of the oil companies and villages not dependent on the caribou) disagree with the premise of the Steering Committee for various reasons, but generally do not interfere with the committee's actions.⁶³

The relationships between environmentalists and the Gwich'in also create another social network that should be examined. Fast claims that the environmentalists' presence, beginning in 1976, altered the Gwich'in community image, although she does little explain this process.⁶⁴ Participation in this campaign has also led to continued involvement in other campaigns or movements. In a related situation, Brosius claims that environmentalists caused a transformation in the collective self-identity of Malaysia's indigenous Penan population who undertook a campaign against logging. The ways in which they presented themselves to other visiting environmentalists was therefore also altered.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the author does not address how perhaps some members of the group may have chosen to adopt this rhetoric more than others i.e. was there internal conflict regarding this supposed cultural shift? Thus, the influence new members have when entering a social network is an area for continued examination.

Finally, the CJ framework is designed to include a broad array of actors, and encourages growth of existing social networks as well as the creation of entirely new ones. Like the EJ movement, which drew on residual social networks from the Civil Rights Movement,⁶⁶ CJ campaigns may tend to rely heavily on the support of existing groups and networks such as Friends of the Earth International and Indigenous Environmental Network. The interconnection of global campaigns appears to be a popular trend, as the salience of environmental and social issues are increasingly seen as emanating from common sources (e.g. transnational organizations). To the benefit of the campaign, the utilization/involvement of several different types of groups contributed to the diversity of ideas, tactics, and resources available.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By associating the primary causes of a problem with its downstream effects, CJ activists can provide a more holistic approach to campaigns, reducing the likelihood of creating the additional and unintentional effects that frequently occur when one specific problem area is addressed. The CJ framework places locally undesirable land uses (LULU, a term borrowed from EJ in reference to polluting facilities, dirty resource extraction projects, etc.) in a global context while simultaneously increasing the value of both local and global struggles for a more inclusive audience.

This initial look into the role of framing and identity in the Gwich'in struggle against oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge reveals that the creation of a particular community image may be vital to bolstering the community members' ethnic- and self-identity while also promoting individual and collective wellness. These factors may also contribute to the sustainability of the campaign, which has proven vital to its continued resistance to oil development. This is illustrated by campaign leadership shifting to involve younger community members. However, the effects of using a particular community image as public representations are difficult to discern. Are the Gwich'in lending themselves to essentializing, in which their culture is simplified into a stereotype of difference based on a few traits? If so, do they not also have the right to create or select a public identity? How does a subsistence image affect future CJ cases where the community is urban, or whose social problems are commonly well-known? Because of the introduction of the CJ framework into a continuing struggle, does the Gwich'in case present a unique opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the framework in EJ campaigns? Do the actors involved share access to what Mansbridge and Morris term "oppositional consciousness," which aids them in continuing the campaign?⁶⁷ Additionally, this framework relies on the creation of extended communities of interest and social networks. Does the connection among different parties strengthen campaigns by introducing a diversity of actors, issues, perspectives, skills, tactics, and resources? Participatory research or participant observation may be helpful in exploring the cohesiveness and dynamics of these networks and communities of

interest. Finally, future research may seek to compare a case in which the CJ framework was used by an urban community with a history of continued resistance to oil development.

Pam Graybeal is a graduate student in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management's Division of Society and Environment Ph.D program at the University of California, Berkeley. pamg@nature.berkeley.edu.

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