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Race and Gender Discourse Strategies: Creating Solidarity and Framing the Civil Rights Movement*

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Using a sociolinguistic analysis of correspondence, this essay examines letters sent to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by supporters and participants in the Civil Rights movement. In the letters, writers employ discourse strategies to construct their experiences of the movement and formulate themselves as supporters and participants. They also formulate their solidarity and framings of the movement. Correspondents’ race, gender, and circumstances influence the ways they create solidarity with, and frame the movement. These findings indicate that Civil Rights movement supporters and participants held both private and shared conceptions of the movement. The implications of these findings for movement theory are discussed.

This is a study of supporters’ and participants’ experiences of the Civil Rights movement. These experiences are expressed in discourse strategies correspondents used in letters sent to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Studies of discourse in social movements have recently appeared in the literature, for example Gamson’s (1992) investigation of political attitudes and Ellingson’s (1995) archival research on abolitionism. Similar to Ellingson, we investigate discourse in written language; however, in contrast to his inquiry, we attempt to understand movement experiences from the point of view of ideological recipients rather than its producers. Unlike most other studies of social movements, we conceive of participants’ experiences as multiple rather than singular (Fraser 1996; Lilley and Platt 1994; Platt and Lilley 1994; Robnett 1997; Schutz 1962).

Sociolinguists use the term “discourse strategies” to refer to linguistic and socio-cultural interactive practices used by speakers to express and interpret meanings in conversation (Gumperz 1982). We employ a sociolinguistic analysis of the discourse strategies used by correspondents to convey to Dr. King their experiences of the movement in written texts. These strategies are observed in the letters’ overall content and within the socio-cultural circumstances in which the letters were written. Situated analyses of discourse strategies give us confidence that correspondents’ experiences of the movement are authentically revealed (Cicourel 1985, 1992).

Letter writers depict these experiences in the texts they wrote to King. In this paper, we focus on three types of participants’ experiences with the movement: those parts of their correspondence that express identifications with movement doctrine; descriptions of the networks that influenced their commitment to the movement; and messages they sent to King about the conduct of the movement. Correspondents’ racial and gender identities and their

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circumstances act as reference points from which they construct similar, yet distinct, movement experiences.

**Theoretical Orientation**

Smelser’s (1963) conception of a structurally grounded voluntarism influences our formulations of participants’ relations to the movement. Ellingson (1995) and Snow and Benford (1988, 1992) point to the vitality of the interactive relation between movement organizations, ideological discourse, and participants’ experiences. Ellingson notes that “Both speakers and their audiences engage in the work of interpreting events . . .” (1995:110). Snow and Benford supplement this with the observation that the “mobilization of potential constituents is highly dialectical . . . there is no such thing as *tabula rasa* . . . into which new and perhaps alien ideas can be poured” (1988:204, emphasis in original). Also relevant, Joan Scott (1988:53) adds that an analysis of language: “offers a way of thinking about how people construct meaning, about how difference . . . operates in the construction of meaning, and about how the complexities of contextual usages open the way to changes in meaning.”

Our sociolinguistic analysis works within the context of Smelser’s voluntarism and the constructionist approaches. The interactive relationship between participants and the movement centers our analysis. Consistent with Snow and Benford’s (1988, 1992) observation that movements are dialectical, we focus upon participants’ interpretations of the movement as these are expressed in their letters to Dr. King (see also Laraña, Johnston and Gusfield 1994; Marx and McAdam 1994; Turner and Killian 1987).

From a participant’s perspective, every aspect of the movement is interpreted in accord with his or her relevant personal and structural circumstances. Snow and Benford (1992) highlight this point by noting that movement doctrine must resonate with participants’ experiences and cultural backgrounds in order for them to employ it in frame alignment. Hunt and Benford (1994) also indicate that the discourse of personal identity must align itself with movement frames and they add that movement ideology requires no single identity that culminates in a consensual, homogeneous collective identity. Instead they point to the agency of participants noting that: “identity talk can rely on a universe of discourse that allows for multiple identity alignment interpretations and expressions . . . [a] diversity of discourse . . . and multiple articulations of collective identities within an SMO [Social Movement Organization]. . . .” They conclude, “future analyses could investigate the various attachments that are made within an SMO” (Hunt and Benford 1994:496, 511). This is such a “future” analysis. A sociolinguistic analysis of letters provides insights into correspondents’ interpretive processes, resulting in their “various attachments” to, and experiences of, the movement. In face to face conversational settings, meanings are inferentially achieved by interpreting a variety of cues. In written language the auditory and visual cues involved in interpretation are unavailable. Meaningful interpretation of written language therefore requires a modified sociolinguistics. Such an approach makes five assumptions about the creation of meaning in written discourse. The first of these is that among the many reasons for writing, correspondents are engaged in the construction of selves while simultaneously conveying to King their descriptions of the movement and their participation. Second, these meanings are explicitly and implicitly expressed in their correspondence. Third, these messages are embedded in, and are cues to, revealing correspondents’ constructed meanings. Fourth, discourse strategies are influenced by ideational, material, and structural circumstances that are relevant to correspondents.1 In this analysis the relevant aspects of their lives we will investigate are race and

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1. Our use of relevance is similar to Mills’ conception of “vocabularies of motive” (1940) and Snow and Benford’s (1992:140–41; 1998:207–211) conception of “resonance.”
gender identities: race and gender can be used as pragmatic (i.e., extra-linguistic) bases influencing the discourse strategies used by correspondents to depict the movement as meaningful and resonant to themselves.

Our final assumption is that the socio-cultural circumstances relevant to correspondents also affect their constructions of the movement. Socio-cultural, historical, and movement events that are relevant to correspondents affect the meanings they create. We do not assume to know these contexts a priori: instead they are discovered in letters’ texts. Thus, we ask how, and in what ways, do circumstances act as bases in the use of discourse strategies influencing the construction of meanings in authors’ letters?

We are engaged in discovering correspondents’ relevant personal and circumstantial contexts, and how these influence the use of discourse strategies in order to shape movement experiences (Schegloff 1991:49–57). In particular, we examine the ways in which participants frame the movement and create solidarity with it. Consistent with our theoretical orientation, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:3) suggest that: “ideology enters into face-to-face speaking practices to create an interactional space in which the subconscious and automatic socio-linguistic processes of interpretation and inference can generate a variety of outcomes . . . .”

Race, gender, and circumstances are formulated as correspondents’ potentially relevant bases from which they may employ pragmatic discourse strategies to construct their relations to the movement. It is the discourse strategies that shape the character of correspondents’ solidarity and framing of the movement. Race, gender, and circumstances also influence strategies used in letters to justify writing to King. We refer to this as the practice of “legitimating” writing to King. The practice of legitimation situates correspondents in relation to King and the movement. Legitimation is universally used because the correspondents were unknown to King. Thus, the substance of legitimation, framing, and solidarity are the results of the discourse strategies used by correspondents.

The Study: Selecting a Sample of Letters for Analysis

Our sample of letters are from the depository of correspondence to Dr. King held at the Library and Archive in the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. These letters are organized by the Center in two categories: the Martin Luther King, Jr. papers (MLK) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) papers. In both the MLK and SCLC papers a “primary” series is devoted to correspondence from notable figures (from persons whose names the archivist recognized) writing to Dr. King or to SCLC. The “secondary” series contains letters that the archivist considered from undistinguished persons (persons whose names were unrecognizable to the archivist) and materials of “lesser” importance to the conduct of the movement. It is from the MLK and SCLC secondary series that the correspondence analyzed in this paper were drawn.

When combined, the MLK and SCLC secondary series contain approximately fifty thousand pieces of correspondence and related materials. In these series there are letters concerning business, legal, and organizational matters. There are requests to speak, write, visit; there are requests for sermons and essays; and there are personal requests, such as correspondents asking for favors, help, or for information. The series hold brief notes sent with monetary contributions. They also maintain letters regarding outstanding expenses and requests for the payment of bills.

Among the correspondence are letters of support for King, frequently describing authors’ movement participation (these letters constitute about seven per cent of the secondary series).

2. In an interview the archivist explained that the MLK and the SCLC papers were indistinguishable except that the correspondence in each were addressed to King or to SCLC.
Many of these were marked by the SCLC’s staff as “kind” letters; meaning they are letters of support for Dr. King and the movement. Not all the letters expressing these sentiments and movement participation were so marked. We used the “kind” letter reference as a starting place from which to gather correspondence that was supportive of the movement and expressed correspondents’ movement activities.

As part of this research, 3,500 “kind” letters written to King between 1958 and 1968 were photocopied. It took two researchers six weeks to acquire the 3,500 letters. The researchers skimmed all the documents in the MLK and SCLC secondary series and copied every “kind” letter, post card, telegram, etc., that appeared potentially relevant to the research. This procedure was followed with the intention that a sample of letters would be selected for analysis which the researchers could later assess in detail for their appropriateness to the study.

Of the 3,500 pieces of correspondence, 1,800 were written during the five-year period between 1960 to 1965. It is from this important period of Civil Rights activism that the correspondence for this study was selected. Among the 1,800 letters, many are lengthy (several pages), others are brief letters, post-cards, and telegrams. In selecting letters for analysis we required that they be legible in order to be interpreted and coded, they be “kind,” explicitly expressing the author’s support for the movement, they contain attributional information about correspondents, such as their race, gender, place of residence, etc., and they provide substantive information about their participation in the movement, such as involvements in movement activities, conceptions of doctrine, depictions of King’s leadership, and so forth. These criteria resulted in a sample composed of a disproportionate number of lengthy letters with considerable information about each correspondent but not always comparable information for all correspondents. Using the above criteria we generated a study sample of 508 letters.

Our coding scheme was built to capture systematically basic information about the letters such as the date on the letter’s postmark, how it was written (e.g., typed, handwritten, telegram), the race, gender, and other demographic characteristics of the correspondent. Codes also were established for the substantive aspects of letters such as the sentence tokens about doctrine and networks, conceptions of King’s leadership, descriptions of movement participation offered by the correspondents, and so forth. When information was missing it was sometimes possible to code substance of interest to our analysis using inferential techniques. The ways in which these techniques applied to the coding of race and gender are described in the next section.

**Coding Race and Gender**

Correspondents’ self-identifying expressions provide the most direct information about race and gender. For example, one author wrote “As a Negro working for freedom in the South. . . .” Other examples of self-identifications include; “As the son of Negro sharecroppers,” and “I’m a young white girl from. . . .”

Race and gender self-identifications, however, were infrequent (see Tables 1 and 2). Therefore, we did not limit our coding to such expressions. We also inferred identities from indirect expressions of gender and race. Inferences were also made from more ambiguous statements such as, “Although I am not a colored person, I whole heartedly support your work in Birmingham.” The race of this letter writer was coded as “probably White.” References to “my Negro kin” were also coded inferentially, suggesting that persons using such phrases were “probably Black.”

Authors who used direct expressions of gender such as, “Women like me support you in all that you do Dr. King,” were coded “female.” The inclusion of Mr. or Mrs., common references to “my husband and I”, “as a daughter” or “as a son” also were used to code gender directly. Gendered occupations circa 1960 were used as clues to infer correspondents’ gender when it was not explicitly stated. Letters lacking direct or indirect reference to gender were coded using first names as proxies to gender identity, i.e., using typical female and male names as an
index to gender. In cases where a letter writer's name applied to both women and men, such as Pat, additional identifying information including occupation (when available) was combined with the name and used to code the correspondents’ gender. The categorical coding scheme used for race is “Black,” “probably Black,” “White,” “probably White,” “other race,” and “missing.” A similar six category coding scheme with one category for mixed-gender groups was developed for gender.

Insofar as was possible, we used self-identification to analyze sentence tokens because this form of identification is closest to our theoretical conception of relevance. It was not possible, however, to analyze sentence tokens solely by self-identified gender because too few correspondents identified themselves explicitly as such. That correspondents did not self-identify their gender in almost all the letters is inter-

3. When the race or gender identity of a correspondent was ambiguous, two coders read the letter together and discussed the coding issue until a consensus was reached. If the identity could not be determined, race or gender were coded as “missing.” If there was no direct or inferential textual reference to race or gender including gender appropriate names, occupations, or address titles, these were also coded as “missing.”
estig, especially in light of the fact that many self-identified their racial identity. Reading the letters with modern eyes, having witnessed and studied the rise of the modern women’s movement and salient gender consciousness-raising experiences in the late 1960s and early 1970s, our initial expectation was that women who wrote to King would make their gender identity salient in their correspondence to him. However, in reflecting on the finding that there were so few self-references to gender, it began to make sense to us that gender would not be a salient feature of the correspondent’s self—or at least not an aspect of their self that they would make known to King in their letters. Instead, the lack of gender identifications in the letters makes sense given that women’s organizing at the time was just emerging out of a “doldrum period” as a political and social force (Rupp and Taylor 1987). That women defined themselves most commonly in relation to their husbands or their status as wives and mothers is consistent with prevailing gender norms of the early 1960s. To expect that gender would be an expressed, salient feature of the correspondents self, as it most likely would be today, is to assume that correspondents had a late 1990s take on gender, instead of an early 1960s understanding of gender identity and gender oppression.

Thus, only 4 percent (n = 9) of women and only 1 percent (n = 3) of men, or 3 percent of all correspondents self-identified their gender. With regards to race, 21 percent (n = 22) of all Black correspondents and 36 percent (n = 120) of all White letter writers, or 28 percent of all correspondents self-identified their race. Self-identifications were infrequent and most likely to be made in terms of race, however, we focus our analysis on race self-identifications. Understanding these to be the most accurate method of coding for race as relevant to the correspondents. Likewise, we would have wished to focus on gender self-identifications for the same reason. However, because so few correspondents self-identified their gender identities, and because gender was easily coded using names and titles such as Mr. and Mrs. in the letters, we use inferentially determined gender in our analysis of networks.

Analyzing Correspondence for Discourse Strategies

In fundamental ways the letters’ rich texts incorporate authors’ experiences of the movement. The 508 letters in the database contain sentences, combinations of sentences, and phrases that clearly express these experiences. Complete sentences and sentence fragments expressing the same or similar content and appearing in a single letter, were combined and coded as sentence tokens. Sentence tokens are substantive units expressing a variety of issues. They form the units for coding and analyzing correspondents’ movement experiences. Our analysis is based on the coding of substantive portions of the letters’ texts and discerning the strategies correspondents used in these portions of their letters to King. Thus, we use the term “sentence token” to refer to text statements (including sentences and/or paragraphs) coded into the database. The sentence tokens under study in this analysis are the text segments in the correspondence in which: identifications with movement doctrine are made; descriptions of the networks that influence the authors’ commitment are described; and messages sent to King about the conduct of the movement are provided by correspondents.

Guidelines for coding the text were painstakingly developed after reading and re-reading the correspondence to King. After extensive discussions, a codebook was written to document coding decisions and standardize the coding process. Although a discussion of the specific ways in which sentence tokens were coded is beyond the scope of this article, a general description of the type of statements that were coded as doctrine, network, and message sentence tokens illustrates how the correspondence was analyzed. In sentence tokens about doctrine, writers employ discourse strategies influenced by the relevant pragmatic circumstances and these shape their solidarity and frames in relation to the movement. Descriptions of networks that influence commitment return the analysis to the personal experiences and sociocultural circumstances relevant to the correspondent; these personal experiences and circum-
stances are used to interpret their solidarity with the movement. Messages to King about the conduct of the movement provide insight into the ways in which correspondents formulate their circumstances in relation to the movement’s successes, failures, doctrine, and strategies. Ultimately, then, our analysis provides insights into correspondents’ conceptions and experiences of, and attachments to the movement; those they share with, and those that vary among other movement supporters and participants.

In the 508 letters, a total of 408 identification with doctrine sentence tokens were coded. Doctrinal sentence tokens include mentions of instrumental issues such as those discussing economic, political, and social progress for “Negroes,” as for example, equal voting rights or ending segregation. There are also cultural issues noted, such as identifications with the movement’s principles, e.g., equality, justice, liberty, freedom, or the creation of a more humane and harmonious society. For example, the following statement was coded as an identification with movement doctrine sentence token: the author writes of identification with a principled aspect of the movement’s doctrine—freedom:

Dr. King the Freedom Rally which was held here in Montgomery was wonderful you and Mrs. King both made a beautiful speech, yes, Dr. King, I was one out of those thousands and thousands of marchers that you led to the state capital of Alabama. Dr. King I was absent from school [that day] for one main reason and that reason was FREEDOM!

Other identifications with doctrine include references to religious doctrines undergirding the movement such as Christian beliefs in brotherhood, brotherly love, and peace. Finally, there are identifications with nonviolence such as those associated with Gandhi doctrine and tactics. Letters sometimes expressed more than one doctrinal sentence token; all were coded.

There are 142 network sentence tokens in the letters. Network sentence tokens include mentions of how respondents were introduced and recruited to participate in the movement. Network sentence tokens remark upon personal networks, such as family and friends influencing individuals to join the movement. The influence of external networks such as solicitations by mail, reading articles about the movement, and media broadcasts, was also noted as ways in which participants were recruited. Institutional networks were also influential in recruiting correspondents to the movement. These include influences from participation in religious organizations, churches, synagogues, and so forth. For example, an African-American minister indicates his ties to the movement by way of church:

Dr. King I am sure that you will agree with me that God has been a mighty shield around you through the past years that were filled with every description the devil shouted at you with every thing that was in his arsenal and the only reason that you are alive today is because you were in the center of the Divine. . . . Dr. King the church is being challenged today as any time in history. . . . God needs a man like you and the kind I am trying to become.

The 502 message sentence tokens included a variety of issues correspondents wanted Dr. King to know about or to address. Message sentence tokens include encouragement to King, such as “don’t give up!” or “keep strong.” There were also practical and strategic advice messages that gave specific advice to King such as “press for voter registration in the South,” “involve more blacks in the movement,” or “only patronize establishments that hire us.” Religious message sentence tokens include statements such as “God is on your side,” “I pray daily for you and for victory” or “I know God is watching over you.” There are message sentence

4. In the social movement literature much has been made of the influences of networks in committing persons to movements (Tilly 1978:62–69; Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1980; McAdam and Paulsen 1993). Analyzing the texts for influential networks provides us with correspondents’ constructions of the personal and structural circumstances that influence their creating solidarity with the movement.
tokens focused upon the agenda correspondents would like King to emphasize. One correspondent wrote this message of advice to King; it was coded as an advice sentence token:

... we are so uplifted in New York about the things you are doing in the South to help the Negro race and others in general. The people in New York are very proud of you and I am praying for an opportunity to meet you. Although we are living in New York there are many things that should be changed here. All the big stores in Harlem should be owned by us (the Negroes). A man cannot get very far with a job only, he need to have business enterprise. Nationally known figures like yourself are in our race and should especially encourage the young citizens as they earn money to put it into a business so that they will be able to give jobs to our people.

Assembling sentence tokens transforms letters into coded sets of substantive statements about the movement’s doctrine, messages to King, and networks that influenced correspondents’ relations to the movement. When we quote from our sample of 508 letters to illustrate correspondents’ formulations of issues and their variation, we draw from all coded sentence tokens, not just those aspects of a letter that serve our analytic intentions.

Discourse strategies are linguistic interpretive practices embedded in spoken sentences used by speakers to express and understand meanings in conversation. They also are extra-linguistic practices embedded in facial and tonal expressions, cultural, situational, and background information used to express and understand meanings in speech (Gumperz 1982). In our coding and analyses of written texts we interpret both forms of discourse strategies, however, we emphasize in our analysis extra-linguistic practices used to construct accounts of correspondents’ relations to the movement.

**Contextualizing and Interpreting Discourse Strategies in Correspondence**

In an extended illustration presented below we discuss the strategies used by one correspondent to legitimate writing, create solidarity, and frame the movement. We also illustrate how deciphering the letter’s meanings depend upon understanding its entire narrative and the relevant personal and socio-cultural circumstances expressed in it by the correspondent. This examination focuses upon a letter from an African-American minister who is actively involved in the movement as President of the Wilmington, Delaware NAACP. His race, position, and the circumstances he is facing, both locally and in relation to the movement’s actions in Birmingham, act as the basis for the discourse strategies he uses in his letter. The analysis begins by theoretically situating legitimating strategies.

Prompted by Williams’ (1995) description of organizational efforts to legitimate culturally sanctioned forms of commitment to the “public good,” we analogize correspondents’ efforts to construct such conceptions of commitments. These include commitments to public goods which the author suggests he and King share. Cultural, social, and personal attributes construct these commonalities. Correspondents who refer to culture emphasize shared religious, moral, and value commitments. Also, consistent with Williams’ conception of “contract” (1995:133-37) the movement’s goals, doctrine, and actions, are formulated as bases for shared commitments. Finally, shared personal histories and experiences are used as strategies by which the correspondent alludes to shared commitments and justifies writing.

These three domains are used by correspondents in ways similar to Swidler’s (1986) conception of the use of culture as a “tool kit.” Authors’ agentic wherewithal permits them to search their cultural, social, and personal worlds to find and employ strategies that construct common commitments to justifying writing. These efforts are not unlike creating solidarity and

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5. Our coding was influenced by Cicourel’s (1985; 1992) conception of contextualizing discourse strategies used by speakers to interpret intended meanings.
framing the movement, and indeed they will often segue over to the conduct of these other strategies. Legitimating writing, however, is focused upon gaining King's attention, accessing his time, and justifying a stranger's invasion into his privacy. Consistent with the construction of their movement experiences, authors offer a soliloquy about their relation to the movement and to King. They do not seek to initiate a dialogue with him.

The African-American minister begins his letter with a sentence token that embeds a discourse strategy which legitimates his writing. Following the salutation he writes: "Please continue to rest fully assured that millions of people of every nation and race are watching with deep interest the gallant fight which you and your valiant associates are waging against discrimination and its counterpart, segregation."

At first glance, this opening sentence token appears a non-sequitur in relation to the rest of the letter's substance. However, a more careful interpretation indicates that in this initial sentence token the minister signifies his, and others, moral support for the movement. The words gallant and valiant in the sentence are synonyms for brave to be sure. But unlike the word brave, which connotes mundane forms of courage, they imply courtly, chivalrous, or knightly bravery conjuring the image that movement activists are on a moral crusade or errand. The discourse strategy imputed to the sentence token given the minister's implied moral mission is that of "expressing and offering moral support."

Within the previous sentence token the minister establishes his cultural commitment to the movement. In another sentence token he further legitimates his writing by expressing shared social commitments to commonly held goals, tactics, and doctrine, simultaneously implying that he and King hold similar movement frames:

We here in Wilmington also have something to celebrate in the way of a victory against discrimination. The Rialto Theater, which continued to be the only theater in Wilmington refusing to admit Negroes, capitulated last week... The climax came two weeks ago when six African-American students at Lincoln University were among those who were arrested for "trespassing," [This] served to increase pressure on the owner to such a degree that he threw in the towel.

By the Spring of 1963, the date of the minister's letter, the described pattern of the campaign at the Rialto Theater had become routinized among SNCC and SCLC activists. It involved young African Americans, nonviolently invading segregated spaces, initiating what King called a "creative tension," seeking to force or negotiate desegregation by pressuring White business and government elites. We do not wish to trivialize the courage of the young people nor the potential violence against them in these circumstances. Instead we wish to underline that the minister's report is for him a relevant circumstance that he wants to share with King. In this sentence token he expresses to King their shared commitment to nonviolent doctrine and tactics. The legitimation strategy in this sentence token is in the minister's subtextual expression, "in this movement we share a social contract to nonviolence." The minister will more profoundly elaborate this expression when he aligns his movement frame with King's in a message sentence token conveying tactical advice.

However, at this point in the letter's text the minister goes on to elaborate related issues by describing his own involvement in the Wilmington integration campaign. In doing so he further equates himself with King by suggesting that King's successes in Birmingham, occurring at the same time, are similar to his own in Wilmington, even if his are on a smaller scale. The author continues by referring to King's Birmingham circumstances, and formulating the inevitable success of their struggle:

The massive demonstrations which are being carried out in Birmingham are bound to result in repercussions which Governor Wallace, "Bull" Connor, and the rest of that repugnant crowd will not be able to overcome. The tide is against them, they know it, because it is sounding the death knell of the iniquitous system which they have foisted upon a long suffering people.
We infer that the legitimation discourse strategies embedded in the sentence tokens cited may be summarized as: he and King are African-American minister-coworkers in a covenant for justice; they share commitments to a morality, goals, actions, and doctrine (Williams 1995: 130–38). Ultimately their efforts must result in an end to discrimination and segregation. Given their shared commitments to these “common goods,” he surely has the right to write, making a request and providing advice about the course of the movement.

In a message sentence token the minister further signifies his framing of, and his solidarity with, the movement. He offers King advice, the subtext of which identifies him with King’s and SCLC’s ideological version of the movement. His message counsels King to set up a bail fund for movement participants by appealing nation-wide for contributions as small as a dollar. The correspondent closes his letter by driving home their comparability, and the mutuality of their solidarity and frames by equating their personal experiences and circumstances. The minister writes: “I have served for eleven years as the President of the Wilmington Branch of the NAACP, and am now a member of its Executive Board. I am certain that we would be glad to promote this idea, which I trust you will consider favorably.”

The many different discourse strategies embedded in the letter may be understood, as we have attempted to illustrate, by situating them within the entire narrative the author conveys. However, the minister’s advice, especially his attempt to convince King to establish a nationally acquired bail fund, is interpretable by contextualizing it in relation to the socio-cultural events occurring in Birmingham, which for the Wilmington minister are relevant circumstances.

The Birmingham campaign of 1963, to which the author refers, was widely understood as crucial to the survival of SCLC and its ideological doctrine of nonviolent direct action. Morris (1993) demonstrated Birmingham’s pivotal position in the movement. Morris writes: “King and his colleagues wanted to set in motion mass movements throughout the South modeled after the Birmingham campaign to overthrow southern segregation” (1993:623).

The Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene (“Bull”) Connor, pursued a course of repressive violence against movement activists. Connor conducted massive arrests of African-American youth who attempted to desegregate “lunch counters and other public facilities in the downtown stores” (Morris 1993:623). Their arrests and jailing were part of Connor’s strategy to break the spirit of the youth involved and thus, to destroy the movement. The Wilmington leader was therefore calling for the establishment of a bail fund for those arrested in confrontations in order to sustain the movement’s momentum.

The Wilmington minister’s letter illustrates well that the meanings of the discourse strategies used by correspondents are contextually dependent upon relevant personal and socio-cultural circumstances expressed in letters. It is by contextualizing the minister’s advice as it fits to his letter’s total narrative, immediate events, and to SCLC’s doctrine of nonviolence, that his frame and solidarity with the movement become visible.

**Race, Gender and Correspondence to King**

In the remainder of the analysis we no longer discuss legitimation sentence tokens and the strategies used to justify writing to King: we are aware that these exist. Instead we focus the investigation on how race, gender, and circumstances influence the discourse strategies used in three types of sentence tokens, and in turn how the variations in creating solidarity and framing the movement are expressed.

**Doctrine**

Identification with doctrine sentence tokens are ways in which correspondents write of their interpretations of movement doctrine. African-Americans used their race to formulate a
discourse strategy relating them to the movement as if race and participation were inherently associated. Thus, Black correspondents stressed their solidarity with the instrumental aspects (e.g., voting, jobs, etc.) of the movement's doctrine more so than did White correspondents. Many correspondents who expressed this form of solidarity sympathetically but critically frame the movement; they indicate that although they are supporters and participants, the movement's doctrine, goals, or conduct require specific adjustments in order to be more effective and to achieve wider societal acceptance.

Black correspondents also identified with the principled aspects of movement doctrine, such as achieving equality, justice, and freedom. They encouraged King to work for racial integration. One use of race as the basis for a discourse strategy is depicted in the following: "I am a Christian colored woman. . . . I believe in full citizenship rights and integration of all public places for all Americans. I admire your intelligence, your bravery, and your stand on integration." This woman identifies her race and gender, and uses these to frame her support of the instrumental aspects of the movement (full citizenship rights) and of the movement's principles regarding integration and equality.

White correspondents used their race as the basis for discourse strategies to create relations to the movement but they did so indirectly; having identified themselves as White they then describe themselves in relation to the movement by way of mutually held sentiments, values, and beliefs. They separate themselves from other Whites who do not share their values and who oppose integration. Whites frequently identified with the principled tenets of the movement, and they also identified with its religious doctrine. Occasionally, these correspondents attempt to create an ascritive solidarity with the movement by depicting themselves as brothers and sisters in the struggle for justice. One such correspondent whose race and religion are relevant to his identity writes to King, "I am white and a Catholic priest. "He expresses his abhorrence of Southern Whites' resistance to desegregation. He identifies with religious movement doctrine such as Christian brotherhood as well as with principles of justice and he continues: "But we shall overcome in the end; justice always does, I shall continue to pray and work for you and our 19.2 million Negro brothers in the United States—that justice may be done to them."

White correspondents create solidarity with the movement by identifying with its principles and with its religious and nonviolent doctrine. Whites use slogans such as "freedom" and "equality now" or "we shall overcome." They write of moral and political principles such as, "universal brotherhood" and "universal suffrage." White supporters and participants writing to King during this period framed the movement in terms consistent with SCLC's integrationist doctrine. Table Three illustrates the identifications with movement doctrine by race.

Table 3 • Identifications with Movement Doctrine by Racial Self-Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doctrine</th>
<th>Identified Self as Black (%/n)</th>
<th>Identified Self as White (%/n)</th>
<th>Total (%/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>18% (3)</td>
<td>8% (3)</td>
<td>11% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles</td>
<td>65% (11)</td>
<td>45% (18)</td>
<td>51% (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>18% (3)</td>
<td>33% (13)</td>
<td>28% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-violence</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>15% (0)</td>
<td>11% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101% (17)</td>
<td>101% (40)</td>
<td>101% (57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Total percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.
Correspondents may have mentioned more than one identification with the movement's doctrine in their correspondence. Table total is less than total number of identifications with the movement in all correspondence (n = 408) because this analysis includes only those correspondents who self-identified as either white or black and expressed identification with movement doctrine (57 correspondents out of 143 correspondents who self-identified their race).
The strategic differences by race in creating solidarity with the movement are considerable; they are also substantial by gender. Women express commitments to the instrumental issues facing Black Americans and to the movement's religious doctrine; men stress the movement's principles and nonviolence. For example, 47 percent of women used religious doctrine in creating solidarity with the movement while 36 percent of men did so. However, 33 percent of women employed doctrinal principles such as freedom and equality strategies while 43 percent of the men did so.

Black women's concern with instrumental matters affecting all African-Americans was also expressed by noting their gender oppression which they associate with racial subjugation. In a rare statement of gender consciousness for the time, a Black female activist writing in 1962, explicitly embeds strategies in her letter that equate the two:

When we met in Chicago, at [name]'s affair, I asked [name] for an appointment to talk some things over, wherein I could be of service, particularly in my own city and state, where our voter registration is so low. I don't know whether [name] was reluctant to meet, many times men are, for fear of repercussions. I hope this is not true. I am sincere, and want to be of service. . . . I trust that the strength of the women of color, will not be minimized, and that we belong in the fight as well as the men. I say this because many women have been relegated to the background instead of being allowed to exercise their abilities to do, in this fight, for equal opportunities. I feel that I voice the sentiment of hundreds of women. . . .

Black and White correspondents created solidarity by aligning relevant aspects of their racial identities with different movement doctrine. Blacks noted instrumental and principled aspects of movement doctrine in their letters. Whites focused upon its religious and nonviolent doctrine. White correspondents also stressed democratic principles. It makes sense that these movement ideologies would be relevant to Whites who do not experience the effects of racism first hand; therefore, they use their race strategically to identify with more abstract movement issues. For Blacks, principles and to a lesser degree religious doctrine were foundational; these doctrines shaped their interpretation of the movement and moved them to act in the name of what was right, fair, and just. However, instrumental issues were also deeply embedded in Black activists' correspondence as they constructed frames and established solidarity with a movement reflecting their everyday encounters with inequality and oppression.

Networks

Network sentence tokens embed correspondents' accounts of constructing solidarity with the movement by way of personal and other connections. Three discourse strategies were used by correspondents to describe their networking with the movement: external connections, that are impersonal (mail solicitations for funds, newspaper, magazine, and journal articles that mobilized participation); institutional ties (church, business, school, affiliations etc.); and personal relations (friends, family, personal ties in church, workplace, etc.).

An examination of network sentence tokens by correspondents' gender indicates how strategies derived from gender identities were influential in mediating the way letter writers' constructed their ties to the movement. Women described their connection to the movement through personal relationships, and men describe their networking by way of institutional ties and external connections (see table 4). Men also wrote of leadership positions they held in institutions that had relations with the movement and how these became converted into mobilizing ties. Women wrote of personal relationships, such as friendships in groups sympathetic to the movement and of personal relationships in their churches and how these ties acted to mobilize them.

6. Because of space considerations this table is not presented here; it is available from the authors.
An African-American woman remarks upon her personal connection to the movement by way of her father who was a friend of Booker T. Washington. By contrast, a male executive working for a large insurance company praises King and notes that King's visit to a company dinner "awakened many people who heretofore were sleeping through the revolution." Another man, from Los Angeles, remarks to King upon the way he originally connected to the movement, "I know that you would not remember me but I met you here at Church, in 1947." A Black pastor from New York writes of his church's institutional participation. He remarks upon his church's network with the movement by declaring to King:

We here at [Baptist Church] heard of your program for helping destitute Negro families in the south. We joined in the day of fasting and raised the amount of the check sent to you...as a result of that effort...Please do not hesitate to call on me for anything we might...do to assist you in your program.

White male and female correspondents describe their networks similarly to Black correspondents—White women express networking with the movement by way of personal ties and men by way of external and institutional ties. A White woman wishes to raise her children with Christian values and writes of her family's ties to the movement; she is introduced to the movement through the work of her daughter. She describes her daughter's participation in Mississippi Freedom Summer in her letter to King:

We are Catholics involved in the work of the apostolate in our parish...[we are] trying to live with faith each day according to God's Will. Bringing up our five girls close to Our Lord, and we pray, not prejudiced...Our oldest girl has already done some work for the Mississippi Summer Project and has suffered a little martyrdom—a neighbor read her out in no uncertain terms about this being a communist scheme. But she kept silent and won her case.

A White male college chaplain notes his school's support (institutional network) for the movement and remarks about the networks among activist students, himself, faculty, the church, and the movement. Many male ministers and other clergy, both Black and White, wrote of the ways that they were drawn to the movement through religious conventions where King spoke, as well as through the movement's appeals in their own congregations. A rabbi whose given name is conventionally male writes of his connection to the movement through his congregation. He goes on to comment on his participation in the Selma to Montgomery March, thereby expressing his religiously grounded integrationist framing of the movement:

In more than thirty years in the rabbinate I have never been more deeply stirred by the pervading and overriding religious spirit you created and inculcated in everyone who marched with you and heard you speak last Thursday in Montgomery. To have been a part of that majestic assemblage, to have felt the throbbing, almost palpable, unity of purpose which bound us together—Christian and Jew, White and Negro, young and old—was one of the highest moments of my life. . . .

Gender related networks expressed in the correspondence reflect the relevant structural arrangements of the 1960s. Male correspondents in discourse stress institutional and imper-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network Type</th>
<th>All Women (%/n)</th>
<th>All Men (%/n)</th>
<th>Total (%/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External networks</td>
<td>11% (6)</td>
<td>21% (14)</td>
<td>17% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>23% (12)</td>
<td>55% (37)</td>
<td>41% (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal networks</td>
<td>66% (35)</td>
<td>24% (16)</td>
<td>43% (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (53)</td>
<td>100% (67)</td>
<td>101%* (120)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
*Does not add to 100% due to rounding.
sonal ties because these were their connections to the social world. Male correspondents also emphasize institutional networks because they held positions of power in institutions such as churches, businesses, and schools; these are the relevant circumstances from which they could interpret the forms of movement solidarity they created.

That women authors mention personal networks rather than institutional ones, especially personal networks in the church, is also the result of the gender constraints of the historical period. This should not imply that women were not active in the religious life of their churches. Such an observation would be contrary to the well recognized involvement of women, especially African-American women, in the churches. Rather, both Black and White women interpreted their relationships to King from their culturally and circumstantially relevant 1960s positions as wives, mothers, church helpers, volunteers, and members of church committees oriented to gender related tasks (e.g., the women’s “auxiliary”), rather than from positions of institutional power that they did not occupy.7

**Messages**

Correspondents sent messages to King about the movement. Message tokens provide insights into how correspondents framed the movement. Embedded in their messages they express how they would ideally formulate and pursue the movement. Race, more than gender, acts as a basis for interpreting strategies influencing messages to King. Table 5 depicts messages by self-referential racial identification.

Black correspondents offered King their advice, help, and assistance. An African-American woman writes:

> Today I was viewing television and I cried thinking of all the brutality happening in the South, and in Selma, Alabama, and dear Sir, I listened to your speech, which as always, I believe comes from the uttermost depths of your heart . . . [however] you let fall some words, although meant for the segregationists were not quite understood as such, by those of our white brethren, who are now fighting side by side with us. Some of them mistook your meaning when you uttered these words ‘when we are in the legislature they will be in the cotton patch.’ These are words meant for Governor Wallace and his kind . . . but let those of our white brethren know dear Reverend, that in our hearts we love them most dearly, and let not a reporter by the name of Eric Severeld or any other reporter, broadcast to the world these words again.

Her message frames the movement similarly to the rabbi quoted above; she conceives an integrated, holy community of Blacks and Whites working together for justice, however, she takes the liberty of advising King to adjust doctrinal expressions so that they may not be misunderstood by the public. This “holy community” message also demonstrates how Blacks were more likely to send religious messages to King. The strategies in religious messages were used by African-Americans to frame the movement as a Christian imperative, the point being stressed that true brotherhood could only be obtained when all were treated equally.

White authors also offered religious messages, but were more likely to convey messages of encouragement and thanks, and demonstrate that they shared common doctrinal ground with the movement. A White woman notes her movement solidarity through a message sentence token that strategically expresses her common ground:

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7. Carole Edelsky (1993:219-221) notes that when conversations are organized in "floors" that are "collaborative," rather than "singly" held, the playing field between women and men is leveled. Women participate in talk equally with men. "Collaborative floors" may personalize the organization of talk in a manner similar to personalized networks and thus women's participation, in movements and talk, is facilitated by such social organization. Recent publications focusing on the contributions of African-American women in the Civil Rights movement suggest the importance to the movement of women's personal ties, behind the scenes, grass roots, and collaborative activities. See Belinda Robnett (1996; 1997) and Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse and Barbara Woods (1990). See also Mary King's (1987) personal account of her movement participation. Review too Aldon Morris's (1984) characterization of the roles of Black women in the Civil Rights movement.
I am a white citizen from Detroit. I find it appalling that our society is such that one feels compelled to say that 'I am white' or 'I am black' rather than simply 'I am a citizen.' Somehow we have gotten mixed up and twisted to the point where we must make the distinction. I want so very much Dr. King to speak my heart felt thoughts to you and to congratulate you on the wonderful work you are doing for your people and for the nation to try and bring this nation to the realization that there is only one race—the human race!

That common ground was a frequent message in letters from Whites but less so from Blacks is not surprising. White correspondents employed strategies that related them to the movement and supported its goals by viewing the movement as occurring for the benefit of all races and not for Blacks alone. By demonstrating their common bond with the movement, Whites told King how the movement was relevant to them and their lives. The large number of Whites that offered their encouragement and thanks in sentence tokens delivered in their letters to King carried in them a similar strategy; through their encouragement and thanks they showed how they abhorred the segregationist status quo, and shared an interest in the movement’s success.

Messages sent to King reflect the ways correspondents frame the movement and themselves as supporters and participants. Black women and men involved themselves with the movement by offering advice and assistance, demonstrating their religiously grounded support of King. White correspondents portrayed themselves as activists in a moral crusade for justice and equality for all humankind based on a common understanding of these principles. They formulated their encouragement as important to show King that not all Whites were against the movement and they were not sitting idly by but rather were actively involved.

**Correspondents’ Experiences in Light of Discourse Strategies**

We have argued that correspondents construct their participation by employing gender, race, and circumstances to create conceptions of the movement and their relation to it. These do not exhaust the ways in which participants and supporters employ strategies to construct their movement experiences. However, the uses of these strategies do provide insights into ways in which letter writers construct the movement for themselves, how they attend to it, how they make it resonant to their relevant identities and circumstances, how they create solidarity and frame the movement, and how they depict themselves as supporters and participants.

People stimulated by specific movement doctrine and activities are moved to offer their services, advice, practical, and moral support. Correspondents attending to the movement see

**Table 5 • Message Type by Racial Self-Identification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Type</th>
<th>Identified Self as Black (%/n)</th>
<th>Identified Self as White (%/n)</th>
<th>Total (%/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>4% (2)</td>
<td>9% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement/thanks</td>
<td>28% (6)</td>
<td>41% (19)</td>
<td>36% (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>21% (10)</td>
<td>25% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common ground</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>34% (16)</td>
<td>30% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101%* (22)</td>
<td>100% (47)</td>
<td>100% (69)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Does not add to 100% due to rounding.
Correspondents may have mentioned more than one message type in their correspondence. Table total is less than total number of message statements all correspondence (n = 502) because this analysis includes only those correspondents who self-identified as either white or black and expressed identification with movement doctrine (57 correspondents out of 143 correspondents who self-identified their race).
aspects in it that are relevant to their identities and their circumstances: thus they formulate the movement in these terms. They are moved to contribute to the movement; their immediate response is to do so by writing a letter. In the letters they describe aspects of the movement they find relevant to their race, gender, and circumstances, and they employ these to formulate their solidarity with and framing of it. They use strategies based in personal attributes and socio-cultural circumstances relevant to them to construct for themselves, and for King their movement experiences.

This interpretive process constitutes the movement. From the perspectives of participants’ and supporters’ the movement is a vital shifting, developing, and evolving organizational and cultural object. It involves correspondents as active agents in creating it as such. Thus, the letter writers as participants and supporters create, recreate, and elaborate the movement as a multidimensional object by making different aspects of it salient and resonant to themselves.

This constructive process is recursive and inseparable for the correspondents and the movement. The multidimensional character of the movement and supporters’ and participants’ experiential frames are inseparable; they recursively create, recreate, and elaborate one another. The process is well described by Hunt, Benford and Snow when they note that framing:

...suggests a key recursive relationship: framing processes produce frames which then condition ensuing framing processes. Framing concepts thus underscore the dynamic quality of movement participants’ belief systems by fixing attention on the dialectical interplay between interpretive processes and cognitive structures. Personal and collective identities are, in part, a product or outcome of this dialectical interplay...framing and identity construction processes are interconnected in a dynamic, almost recursive fashion. (1994:192, 203–204)

We suggest that viewing movements as multidimensional mandates a focus on the interactive processes between supporters and participants and the aspects of movement organization and doctrine they find relevant to their identities and circumstances. This interaction creates solidarity as participants construct their own framing of the movement. As they do so they perpetuate, recreate, expand, and change the multidimensionality of the movement, making it ever so complex, including the splintering of organizations under an ideological umbrella.8

Persons who exist in common statuses and circumstances and share relevancies can exhibit interpretive commonalities. It is Black women and men, White women and men that exist in shared and yet separated social situations that have the potential for shared and separate relevancies. Ultimately, however, it is the existence of shared relevant personal and socio-cultural circumstances, and not the structures alone, that are employed by correspondents as the bases for the discourse strategies used to construct the movement and their relations to it.

Implications for Theory

Benford (1993b:210) points out that, “...interpretive scholars have tended to neglect the historical, cultural, and structural context in which movement constructions of reality occur.” Benford’s insight is similar to those of Geertz (1983), Rosaldo (1989), and Schutz (1962) who insist that social analysis be “situation specific” or fit to participants’ “local knowledge.” Citing C. Wright Mills, Benford continues, “...Mills (1940) contended that motives are ‘situated.’ That is they ‘vary in content and character with historical epochs and societal structures’” (1993b:210).

8. Benford describes how this splintering occurred in the nuclear disarmament movement and how it resulted in doctrinal conflict among social movement organizations in a SMI (Benford 1993a). A similar process caused the breach between SNCC and SCLC in 1966 which resulted in the withdrawal of public support when Dr. King spoke out against the Vietnam war and when he criticized the United States for Blacks’ and Whites’ conditions of poverty (King 1967).
Benford’s remarks implicitly refer to a dominant sociological formulation with which he and his co-workers are now struggling. This is an assumption that the explanation of coordinated action requires an ahistorical and universally shared unity of participants’ subjective perspectives and motivations. At their root, such explanations conceive coordinated action as dependent upon persons’ invariably shared interests, ideas, motivations, and outlooks. These approaches assume it is by way of such shared perspectives, either previously extant or situationally constructed, that individuals coordinate their actions and orient themselves to common goals.

We concur with Benford’s remarks, adding that our sociolinguistic analysis of the correspondence to Dr. King suggests that movement participants are multivocal. They are committed to, and they construct, variegated conceptions of movements. We conceive of activists as reflexively constructing the movement by aligning relevant features of their personal identities and socio-cultural circumstances with it. Their agency influences the construction of movement frames by fitting its structural and cultural features to their relevant personal and social circumstances, making the movement for themselves a resonant personal, social, and cultural object, simultaneously reproducing the movement as a collective and public object.

A movement therefore, is not a single entity; rather it is a layered object that is privatized and shared. Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield suggest that movement identity exists at several levels; for them it is individual, collective, and public (1994:12–20). Benford adds that what exists as shared in movement identities is the result of constructive “processes in a never-ending recursive chain” (1993b:210).

Consistent with these remarks we infer from our analysis that correspondents’ private identities are the outcome of two processes. Identities are historically developed, the result of the acquisition of the language of self in the Meadian sense, and in which, for portions of our sample, race and gender are centered. These selves are elaborated through interaction with the doctrine, events, and social circumstances of the movement; interactions that resonate with correspondents’ personal and socio-cultural circumstances (Mills 1940; Platt 1980:83–88; Smelser 1963:16, 79–130).

Collective identity is the agreed upon dimensions of this process; it is aspects of the movement that are shared (Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield 1994:15). This shared definition, however, is not entirely derived from organizational movement frames nor from preestablished ideological positions that movement leadership attempts to superimpose upon participants. Instead the shared aspects of movement identities are as Melucci proposes, the “outcome of self-reflection more than a given. . . .” (cited in Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield 1994:17).

The letters to Dr. King provide evidence to support such claims. The letters demonstrate that movement activists engage in defining the movement for themselves, simultaneously constructing private and collective movement frames. Correspondents created a private conception of their movement experiences while constructing a collective identity. The coordinated collective action occurring in these circumstances is only partially the result of shared interests or ideas imposed upon participants by a movement’s organization. Coordinated activities are the outcome of the interpretive processes based in discourse strategies situated in relevant personal and socio-cultural circumstances, and these are fashioned to activists’ private and collective identities. Within the context of these privatized and shared identities participants commit their personal energies to the movement and orient their activities to the movement on the basis of their own conceptions of it. Only insofar as their interpretations are influenced by similar relevant personal and social-cultural circumstances do they construct shared movement frames.

In their correspondence activists were multivocal, sometimes speaking as individuals and at other times in harmony with other movement participants. They were experientially diverse while simultaneously committed to a collective identity. They accomplish both by way of the discourse strategies we found in these letters. Their diverse and similar commitments are to a structurally and culturally multidimensional movement. Diverse and shared commit-
ments tie supporters and participants to the movement by way of separate and overlapping frames and conceptions of solidarity. Participants contribute to collective activities by simultaneously attending to their own and to shared interests and ideas, and while doing so they construct and reconstruct a multidimensional movement. And by engaging in movement activities they make its public identity visible.

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