The Process of Cognitive Liberation: Cultural Synapses, Links, and Frame Contradictions in the U.S.–Central America Peace Movement*

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Based upon qualitative interviews with thirty-two Central American peace activists, this article elaborates the process of "cognitive liberation" through the application of frame analysis. In addition, I seek to explain the diffusion of this social-psychological state from Central to North America. Attention is given to the role of the church as a common cultural link that functioned as a micro-mobilizing context, which provided missionaries who served as "meso-mobilizing actors." The term frame contradictions is introduced to specify the condition in which irreconcilable differences between a movement's frame and its opponent's frame are exposed, thereby facilitating frame adoption. I conclude that some type of cultural link is necessary for the development of a common frame that can integrate groups cross-nationally and that can provide agents of mobilization to serve as a synapse through which frames can be transmitted from one country to another.

Early accounts of collective behavior often took a social-psychological approach, viewing participants as irrational, deviant, or maladjusted (Arendt 1966; Hoffer 1951; Kornhauser 1959; Le Bon 1960; Lipset 1963). The movements of the 1960s, however, directly challenged these assumptions, and scholars—particularly in North America—responded by emphasizing a "structural approach" to the study of social movements. Heavily influenced by organizational theory and utilitarian economic models, such approaches accentuate political, economic, and social network variables over social-psychological factors. In recent years, however, there has been a renewed interest in social-psychological elements in movement activism (Gamson 1992). Increasing numbers of scholars are readressing this factor, recognizing that even ripe conditions cannot produce a movement unless individuals choose to act.

The political process model exemplifies one attempt to synthesize structural factors with social-psychological variables in the study of collective action. Its primary proponents (McAdam 1982; Tilly 1978) argue that there must be a confluence of three variables for movements to emerge. These variables include political opportunities, strong indigenous organizations, and the presence of a social-psychological state termed "cognitive liberation." This latter term denotes a three-stage shift in consciousness: first, individuals no longer perceive the system...
as legitimate or just; second, those who once saw the system as inevitable begin to demand change; and third, those who normally considered themselves powerless come to believe that they can alter their lot in life (Piven and Cloward 1977, pp. 3–4). When individuals have moved through all three stages, they are “cognitively liberated” and able to organize, act on political opportunities, and instigate change (McAdam 1982, p. 51).

While the concept of cognitive liberation is an important contribution to a field that has been dominated by structural approaches, it is not fully developed. Specifically, it portrays this “transformation of consciousness” as static rather than processual. It conveys what people believe, but not how they changed their beliefs. How does a person who has long considered the “system” legitimate come to denounce it as unjust? How do the disempowered begin to believe that they can alter their lot in life? How is resignation converted into insurgency? The stages of cognitive liberation are useful, but how this transformation of consciousness occurs is not sufficiently explained.

The aim of this article is to elaborate the process of cognitive liberation by employing “frame analysis.” Moreover, I seek to explain the diffusion of this social-psychological state cross-nationally through an examination of the U.S.–Central America peace movement. This was a movement of U.S. citizens who, during the 1980s, aimed to stand in solidarity with the poor in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and to constrain U.S. military influence and foreign policy toward the region. By 1987, the movement had expanded to include more than 1,500 local and regional Central America solidarity organizations within the U.S. (Smith 1996). In this study, I give particular attention to the role of the church as a common cultural link that facilitated the emergence of the Central America peace movement by providing an organizational structure and mobilizing agents who transmitted “injustice frames” from Latin America to the United States.

**Theoretical Context**

**Framing as the Facilitative Process of Cognitive Liberation**

In recent years, the notion of “frame alignment” has frequently been used as a conceptual bridge linking social-psychological and structural views of movement participation. Derived from Goffman (1974), the term framing has been employed by Snow, Benford, and their colleagues to denote the process whereby social movement organizations (SMOs) assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in a way that mobilizes potential activists and creates support within the population for movement goals (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986; Snow and Benford 1988). They argue that there are several “frame alignment processes” that link “individual and SMO interpretive orientations,
such that some set of individual interests, values, and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al. 1986, p. 464). This “alignment” between individual beliefs and movement goals is essential for movement participation.

Snow and his colleagues (1986) identify four distinct alignment processes: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation. Bridging is the process of linking “two or more structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (1986, p. 467) in order to bridge SMO views with an unmobilized sentiment pool. Frame amplification aims to identify and invigorate particular values or beliefs presumed central to prospective constituents and then use them to interpret an issue, problem, or set of events within a particular light. When the goals of an SMO are not found within the existing sentiment of mobilizing pools, then SMOs engage in frame extension to extend the boundaries of its frame to include the interests and views of its potential adherents. Finally, the most comprehensive frame alignment process is frame transformation. This occurs when the values and goals of an SMO are not congruent and perhaps even appear antithetical to the frames of the mobilizing pool. Thus, old meanings must be discarded and prospective activists persuaded of new values and beliefs. If this alignment process is successful, individuals experience “a change in the perceived seriousness of the condition such that what was previously seen as an unfortunate but tolerable situation is now defined as inexcusable, unjust, or immoral, thus connoting the adoption of an injustice frame or variation thereof” (Snow et al. 1986, p. 474).

While the goal of framing is to align the views of potential supporters with the movement’s views, it can simultaneously serve a number of tasks. Snow and Benford (1988, pp. 200–202) have noted three distinct tasks: (1) diagnostic framing, which identifies a problem and attributes blame and causality; (2) prognostic framing, which offers a solution to the problem and also proposes a target, strategy, and tactics for action; and (3) motivational framing which provides a “call to arms.” Each of these three tasks, I argue, can facilitate progression through the three stages of cognitive liberation. Diagnostic framing offers insight into the origin of an injustice. Prognosis framing provides a target and focus for demands of change. Motivational framing persuades prospective activists that change is plausible.

Yet who offers these interpretive frames that can lead to “cognitive liberation?” Snow and his colleagues propose that SMOs and movement leaders engage in frame alignment processes. However, this assumes the preexistence of an SMO that is intentionally creating and promoting a movement, rather than the organization emerging out of a movement or an aggrieved group. While they concede
that other nonmovement communal organizations can serve in a mobilizing capacity, they note that:

Precisely how these latent mobilizing structures and incidents of collective behavior affect frame alignment, and thereby facilitate consensus or action mobilization, is not clear, however. Thus... subsequent research ought to address concerns [regarding] the relationship between extramovement, micromobilizing agencies and the various types of frame alignment, focusing in particular on the processes and mechanisms through which frame alignment is effected in different contexts (1986, p. 478).

This article explores how the church functioned as an extramovement, mobilizing organization that not only provided interpretative frames that were necessary for cognitive liberation vis-à-vis Central American concerns but also commissioned individuals to spread these frames to North America. In short, the church served in both an organizational and framing capacity, and was vital to the diffusion of this cross-national movement.

The Church as a Micro-Mobilization Context

McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988) note that framing and the decision to act is frequently a collective endeavor. Preexisting, nonmovement groups—such as churches, unions, or informal friendship networks—can provide the context in which this collective process occurs. Terming these groups "micro-mobilizing contexts," McAdam et al. state that they serve two very important functions for instigating movement activity. First, they provide a setting in which issues can be identified, causes diagnosed, solutions proposed, and individuals motivated; in other words, it offers a context for framing (Gerhards and Rucht 1992). Second, these groups serve as the "organizational staging ground for the movement" (McAdam et al. 1988, p. 715) since they provide leaders, members, and communications networks.

Gerhards and Rucht (1992) have built upon this notion of micro-mobilizing contexts, but have called for a distinction between (1) mobilizing actors who seek to motivate individuals to participate in movement action and (2) the individuals, groups, and networks who are the targets of these mobilizing efforts. They also introduce the term "meso-mobilization actors," referring to those who motivate and mobilize groups and networks, while "micro-mobilizing actors" activate individuals within these groups (1992, p. 558). These meso-mobilization actors aim to develop a common frame of meaning which "culturally integrates" and connects various groups. In other words, these actors provide the framing that facilitates cognitive liberation among members and serve as links between networks.

In this study of the U.S.–Central America peace movement, I propose that the notion of framing can offer a processual understanding of cognitive liberation.
I argue that the micro-mobilization context of the church provided agents who could construct frames regarding the conflicts in Central America in a manner that culturally resonated with church-going North Americans, fostering the diffusion of these injustice frames cross-nationally. I illustrate and elaborate these ideas with data I collected on the Central America peace movement through qualitative, in-depth interviews with thirty-two activists. I conducted the interviews over a nine-month period in 1994–1995, and each lasted between one and three hours. A purposive, theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was employed to ensure a diverse representation of geographic regions, age range, gender, and levels of participation within the movement. Individual activists were interviewed in two large midwestern cities, one East Coast metropolitan area, a southern urban region, a Rocky Mountain area, and a large West Coast city. There were seventeen women and fifteen men in the sample, ranging from the ages of thirty-two to seventy-five years old. Finally, the sample included several leaders of various organizations in the Central America movement as well as rank-and-file activists.

The Process of Cognitive Liberation in the U.S.–Central America Peace Movement

To reveal the processual nature of consciousness transformation among Central American activists, I follow the three stages of cognitive liberation proposed by Piven and Cloward (1977). At each stage, I discuss how the various framing tasks successfully encouraged individuals to view the suffering of Central Americans as unjust, to begin demanding change, and finally to believe that change was possible.

Diagnostic Framing and Identification of the Injustice

Before a social movement can emerge, individuals must first determine that an injustice exists and that it is structurally based. But how did North Americans become aware of the injustices in Central America, which were occurring thousands of miles away? Moreover, how did they come to understand the structural bases, identify the causal agents, and “diagnose” the problem at such a distance? The cross-national nature of this movement suggests that actors served to “bridge” the frames in Central and North America, transmitting the diagnosis from one region to the other. But precisely how did this happen?

Cultural Link Between Nations. My data indicate that the cultural link of the church provided a common set of beliefs and values among people of Christian faith in the U.S. and in the countries of Central America. This cultural link—which I define as a shared faith, ideology, or cultural heritage between two or more nations—served as a foundation for the development of a “master frame”
(Snow and Benford 1992) that bridged each group's specific frame. In addition, the cultural link of Christianity provided missionaries who functioned as meso-mobilization actors, connecting the micro-mobilizing contexts in each region. In the Central American peace movement, then, it was not SMOs who were engaging in frame alignment. Rather it was North American missionaries, who themselves underwent a "transformation of consciousness" during their service in Latin America, who were instrumental to the transmission of "injustice frames" (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982) upon returning to the U.S.

The Cognitive Liberation of North American Missionaries. The roots of this missionary connection can be traced back to the increasing numbers of clergy who were being sent to Central America in the 1960s and 1970s. The Vatican II Council (1962–1965) had mandated that 6% of North American and European church workers be sent to Latin America. As a result, the number of missionaries in Central America expanded rapidly in the early 1960s, with more than 500 Catholic missionaries from various orders and approximately 800 Protestant missionaries. Those numbers continued to increase until 1979 when the total number had reached 2,234. Taking into consideration the missionary turn-over rate, Smith (1996, p. 141) has estimated that a total of approximately 3,900 North American church workers had served in Central America from 1959 to the beginning of the Reagan era.

More importantly, these missionaries had been working predominantly with the poor. While the clergy had traditionally served the upper classes in private schools and ceremonies, changes were occurring in the church that called Christians to take an "option for the poor." A variety of papal and theological documents were produced in this period that emphasized social justice and human dignity. These encyclicals stated that the poor have the right to be agents and not subjects of history, and that the religious faithful should engage in action to establish justice and cease the violence of poverty and political repression. Thus, a certain amount of "frame amplification" was initiated by church authorities, as they sought to reinvigorate Christian concerns for social justice and the poor. As a consequence, these North American missionaries were sent to live and work with the poor of Latin America, which profoundly influenced their theology and exposed them to the suffering of the least privileged sectors (Berryman 1984a; Dorr 1983; Prendes 1983; Smith 1991).

The arrival of massive numbers of church workers also coincided with growing political tensions, insurrection movements among the poor, and the emergence of liberation theology within the Latin American church. This theology argues that the Bible teaches liberation from oppression and that God takes a "preferential option for the poor" in their struggle against exploitation. As Gustavo Gutierrez (1973, p. 307) states,
The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors.

Therefore, the combination of exposure to this burgeoning religious call for liberation, abject poverty, and repression had a radicalizing effect on these missionaries, pushing them toward a new understanding of faith and politics. In short, they experienced a complete "frame transformation." One interview participant, a Franciscan priest who spent fifteen years in Latin America, described how liberation theologians facilitated this cognitive shift:

I was in Latin America for seven or eight years before I ran into the liberationists, and only then did I see what I had been looking at . . . the poverty and the structural reasons for it. One [liberation theologian] said to me "Most of you North Americans are just fooling around here." . . . He felt we were skirting the essentials of life and not really attending to the causes of poverty. So they really challenged me and it was very immediate that I turned around. After that I . . . [viewed everything] from the side of the poor.

Another missionary described her experience in Nicaragua and Guatemala during the 1960s as nothing short of radicalizing.

At eighteen I joined the Maryknoll Sisters and that brought me to Central America, just as Vatican II started. . . . I lived in a gold-mining town in Nicaragua. I worked with the miners and their children. The people who owned the mine, the Canadians and Americans, lived on a hill with palm trees and swimming pools, and the people who worked the mine lived in this pit below. I saw children die of measles, and malnutrition mostly, and I began to question what was going on. The miners tried to organize and the company called in the National Guard, so I knew something was really wrong. It was probably one of the worst cases of capitalism, a real stark case of capitalism and the exploitation of people that you could possibly see.

Not only was this missionary exposed to the suffering of the poor, but the church and the revolutionary movements provided an interpretive frame that diagnosed the situation as unjust. Her description illustrates the first stage of cognitive liberation: the shift from accepting the system as legitimate to denouncing it as unjust.

I later went to Guatemala and worked with university students . . . and I began to hear an analysis of the world that I had never heard before, being educated in the United States. I began to hear that they had a social revolution in Guatemala between '44 and '54, and the U.S. government, with the CIA, overthrew it because of the United Fruit Company. Then the cycle of violence began that continues to this day. . . . So I was working with these students, some of whom were guerrillas, and so I was aware of what was happening in the countryside. . . . In the past, the church had really blessed the status quo and it was beginning, because of Vatican II, to question everything. We began to read the scriptures with the poor, with the people we worked with, and applied it to what we saw. And we began to say, it's not God's will that people live this way.

These North American missionaries described their experiences as radical-
izing. In framing terms, their world views underwent a transformation such that “what is involved, in essence, is a kind of thoroughgoing conversion that has been depicted as a change in one’s sense of ultimate grounding” (Snow et al. 1986, p. 474). The missionaries defined the situation as unjust and began demanding changes to end this suffering; a few even joined revolutionary movements. Most, however, were asked to return to the U.S. and share their new understanding of faith and politics. In other words, they were asked to pass on this Christian frame of social justice and liberation to their congregations at home.

**Missionaries as Meso-Mobilization Actors and Cultural Synapses.** The role of these missionaries in the Central America movement was critical. Not only did they engage in diagnostic framing, discussing the problem in congregations and parishes throughout the U.S., but they also provided a prognosis for action. During their course of work in Latin America, many became convinced that the roots of these injustices lie in U.S. capitalism and military support. Attributing blame to the U.S. offered a target for action; however, such action required support from sympathizers in North America. Thus, these missionaries were sent home to draw attention to the problem, align the interpretive frames of U.S. churches to the concerns of Central American Christians, and to mobilize North Americans to act. In essence, the missionaries became conduits, transmitting these concerns and frames from one side of the cultural link to the other. I use the term *cultural synapses* to refer to those who served as the connecting points between countries, carrying the impulses of the liberation theology-oriented churches in Central America over to the churches in the U.S. The Franciscan priest recalls how he was intentionally given the mandate, from church people in both countries, to be this synapse, passing on this revolutionary religious frame:

> I came back [to the U.S.] intentionally because my own order asked me to come back and share here some of what I picked up overseas. . . . People there, also, were saying “You know our problems, the problems of the third world. Many of them begin where you come from; they begin in the United States and you could minister there.” . . . So a lot of us [missionaries] were coming back at that time and beginning to speak about the situation in these countries.

The Maryknoll missionary also realized that working for justice in Central America required disseminating these ideas and building a movement in the U.S. She observed:

> In 1968 I was thrown out of Guatemala and ended up in the States. I did not want to be here and fought real hard to be back in Latin America. But . . . I realized I had to stay here. Latin Americans tell you, “We love you, but go home and work to change your country because we can’t do anything until you change your country.”

> Upon their return to the U.S., both missionaries were immersed in solidarity work and became leaders in the Central America movement. The Maryknoll sister
initiated two national Central America organizations, and the priest worked for a group that helped establish a national emergency network to respond to acts of U.S. aggression toward El Salvador and Nicaragua. They were not initially SMO leaders who were engaging in “frame alignment” to persuade sympathetic bystanders to join their movement. They were people of faith who went to strengthen the cultural link of the church between their country and Latin America. Their encounters in Central America transformed their world views, resulting in “cognitive liberation.” They returned to the U.S. to pass on these new injustice frames, to act as meso-mobilization actors, offering information about the injustices they had seen and working within the micro-mobilizing context of the church.

Prognostic Framing and Demands for Change

The returning missionaries were able to offer a diagnostic frame insofar as they spoke of the suffering of Central Americans, thereby identifying the problem and making their North American congregations aware that an injustice existed. However, the second stage of cognitive liberation moves beyond the acknowledgment of an injustice; in the next step, people believe that the injustice is so morally reprehensible, that they begin demanding change. I argue that this second step was facilitated by two factors: (1) intensification of the injustice through the murders of several noted church workers and (2) the funding of Central American regimes through U.S. tax dollars, which provided a prognosis for change.

Religious Murders as a “Suddenly-Imposed Grievance.” The brutal killings of Oscar Romero and the four North American church women in El Salvador were pivotal in the emergence of the Central America peace movement. On March 24, 1980, a death squad assassin shot Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador, while he was celebrating mass. Romero had been an outspoken advocate of the poor in El Salvador and had confronted military and political leaders about the violent repression. In a homily a few days before his death, Romero implored Salvadoran soldiers to disobey orders to kill civilians. He had appealed to President Jimmy Carter to stop sending aid to a regime that had killed thousands, including many priests and lay workers. Fewer than nine months later, four North American church women were driving together from the San Salvador airport when they were abducted by government security forces, raped, and killed. Their bodies were found the next day in shallow graves by the roadside (Berryman 1984b; Montgomery 1982; Smith 1996).

These religious murders constituted a “sudden grievance” that was primarily felt by the church, the precise cultural link to North Americans. Walsh (1981) defines a “sudden grievance as a dramatic, highly publicized occurrence which expands and intensifies public awareness of and opposition to a situation.” These religious murders, and other acts of repression against the church in Central
America, moved North American Christians from the first stage of cognitive liberation to the second. While many had previously seen the suffering of Central Americans as unfortunate and unjust, the religious murders incited moral outrage and the belief that change was imperative.

The returning missionaries and church workers again served as cultural synapses, passing the stories of the murders in El Salvador to congregations in the U.S. Many of these churchgoers were receptive, and numerous activists pointed to these murders as the event that shook them from complacency to indignation. One recalled:

Romero was killed. The four church women were killed, and in such a brutal way. Such a deliberate, transparent way. And this reverberated shock waves throughout the faith community in this country. I remember it so vividly... And the fact is that... once that happens, the organizing happens and you have to do something. You have to take that next step. You cannot name the intolerable and then not do something. Actions follow on hearing the intolerable.

**U.S. Funding as a Focus for Action.** While these religious murders served to translate awareness of an injustice into moral outrage, they also provided a “prognosis frame,” pointing toward one source of the conflict that could be targeted. That source was the massive U.S. funding of military regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala and the Contra forces in Nicaragua. Again it was the clergy and church leaders who engaged in this prognosis framing, often from their pulpits. They appealed to the Christian values of justice and compassion and explicitly named the cessation of U.S. aid as a way to stop the suffering of the church in Central America. One Lutheran theologian described how he engaged in this framing task:

What I used to do in sermons was to go out and put a congregation in total turmoil with one sentence from the pulpit. I would simply start off saying that the Lutheran church in El Salvador is being persecuted by the U.S.-backed government there. They’re Lutheran, we’re Lutheran. The U.S. government? I thought the U.S. government... how can these things be together? And they couldn’t and people had to do something.

Another Catholic nun, who had worked in Nicaragua for many years, returned to the U.S. and began asking parishes to write their congressional representatives to stop Contra aid. She not only proposed an action, but she framed it within the context of Christian values and beliefs:

I remember coming back [from Nicaragua]... and preaching in some Catholic churches. I was just kind of pleading with people for some understanding. And some people walked out, but on the other hand, some people would come up and say, “I’ve always thought of that as some kind of communist, leftist position.” And I’d say that since the 1890s, the Catholic church has taken a stand for the poor, in some way or another. Now whether it’s been faithful especially is a different question. But the bottom line is that this is not foreign to us, to what we believe.

Therefore, these North American church workers served three important
functions in this second stage of cognitive liberation. First, they transmitted the stories of the religious murders and human rights violations in Central America, which facilitated demands for change. Second, the religious murders, as well as other acts of political violence, were carried out by military regimes that received substantial funding from the United States government. The persecution drew attention to the brutality of these regimes, bringing U.S. support for them into question. Church workers called for an end to U.S. aid to these countries, which provided a prognosis and a prescribed course of action for people to start demanding change, thereby moving into the second stage of cognitive liberation. Finally, clergy and lay leaders functioned as “meso-mobilizing actors” who engaged in “bloc recruitment” (Oberschall 1973). They did not just motivate individuals but entire congregations and parishes.

Motivational Framing and Belief in the Possibility of Change

Once the problem has been diagnosed and a focus for action has been offered, the last step in cognitive liberation is to motivate people to act based on the belief that change is possible. The North American missionaries were central to the first two steps, but motivation for action came mostly from personal encounters with Central Americans. This person-to-person contact had two influences: (1) it humanized the issues, transforming an abstract political debate into individual lives, and (2) it revealed what I call “frame contradictions” by exposing the irreconcilable differences between the Reagan administration’s frame and the peace movement’s frame.

Person-to-Person Contact as a Motivating Force. Personal encounters between Central and North Americans were facilitated by the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the region. In the early 1980s, when the political repression in Central America had intensified significantly, millions fled their countries, and hundreds of thousands sought asylum in the United States. Between 1979 and 1982, a half-million Salvadoreans fled political violence and came to North America. Approximately 10 percent of the entire Nicaraguan population had been driven by the revolution to the U.S. by 1982 (Pastor 1982, pp. 35–36). Guatemala also was in the midst of a counterinsurgency war that produced one million displaced people—around 14 percent of the Guatemalan population (Jonas 1991, p. 164). These refugees were present in the United States, telling their personal stories of imprisonment, rape, torture, disappearances, and massacres.

The injustice of Central America was suddenly embodied in these refugees. It was no longer an abstract and distant issue to be debated in Washington. Central America’s suffering now had a human face, a name, and a story. The Sanctuary movement, a network of churches and synagogues that transported these refugees
throughout the country, provided a nexus through which hundreds of faith communities came into direct contact with Central Americans. The personal stories were not easily forgettable, and the refugees became "micro-mobilizing actors," powerfully motivating people to act. One woman recalled the impact of these encounters with refugees:

There was a highly-publicized refugee caravan that went through Chicago to Vermont with a Guatemalan family. As it turned out... [I] transported the family. So here I am, driving this van as I'm hearing this family's story repeatedly for miles and miles and thousands of miles on this trip. It was those kinds of experiences that really cemented my conviction, hearing those stories on a very personal level and having faces that will never be erased from my memory. There's no substitute for that. So at that point, it was, okay, I need to respond to this in a bigger way.

As refugees brought their stories to the United States, person-to-person contact was also occurring through the delegations of U.S. citizens traveling to Central America. Throughout the 1980s various groups led tens of thousands of North Americans to Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Many of these delegations were led by former missionaries who organized trips to foster solidarity and to motivate participants to constrain U.S. foreign policy toward Central America. One of these delegation leaders observed:

The strategy was to send people from all over the country with the mission to go to learn, and then come back and be part of the resistance to U.S. policy. ... People from the States would go down [to Nicaragua] for short periods, were shown around, and lived with the poor. These were the people who were actually suffering the consequences of the U.S. Contra war. And then they went back and worked as advocates. It seemed to work. People were willing to go back and be active, particularly on Nicaragua. I felt like we were just turning out activists like crazy. It was phenomenal.

Most of those who participated in these delegations already had some knowledge and concern about the situation in Central America. In other words, many had moved from the first stage of cognitive liberation to the second. Yet the immersion into Central American life and first-hand observation of the brutal consequences of U.S. aid propelled many into the third stage. These experiences deepened the conviction that curtailing U.S. military and financial support would, in fact, improve the lives of the people they had met. One pastor described how his contact with a Nicaraguan gave him the motivation and conviction to act:

I dare say that no one [here]... has ever heard of Justo Herrera. That is the real name of a poor peasant in Nicaragua, a subsistence farmer with a wife and three children. I lived in his home for a week last November. Justo was a proud man, a quiet man. But on a Saturday his tongue was loosened with a few beers and he backed me in a corner with a volley of vociferous Spanish. I could understand enough to get the drift. Why was the U.S. government trying to kill him and his children? Why were they paying remnants of the Somoza guard to wage the war on his poor village? Why was it routine to find the mutilated bodies of school teachers,
health workers, agricultural experts—everyone who was trying to help him in his poverty? I learned that Justo was . . . killed by my tax dollars, killed by the order of the President with the approval of Congress. Justo’s death places on me an obligation, more urgent than ever, to deliver his message to my government. (quoted in Griffin-Nolan 1991, pp. 174–175)

Therefore, these delegations to Central America not only gave a human face to the issue but also confirmed the target for action: U.S. aid.

Frame Contradictions and the Feasibility of Change. The second consequence of such person-to-person contact was that it exposed the glaring contradictions between the frame offered by the Central American refugees and missionaries on the one hand and by the Reagan administration on the other hand. I employ the term “frame contradictions” to describe the perceived incompatibility of a movement’s frame and its opponent’s frame in interpreting a particular conflict. For Central America peace activists, there were ample opportunities for individuals to hear these competing explanations, since President Reagan had made Central America his top foreign policy concern. For instance, Reagan argued for ongoing U.S. support for the Contras and the military governments of El Salvador and Guatemala by “framing” it in terms of a battle between democracy and totalitarianism. Thus, as he called the Nicaraguan Contras the “moral equivalent of the founding fathers,” U.S. citizens were traveling to Nicaragua and witnessing the atrocities of the counterinsurgency warfare waged by the Contras. As the White House justified Contra aid by claiming that the Sandinista government was a “totalitarian dungeon” that allowed no democratic freedoms, North Americans were observing elections and relatively open political and religious expression.

The two frames were in direct contradiction, and the need to resolve this discrepancy had two important influences. First, it strengthened the conviction of activists’ interpretations of the conflicts in Central America by compelling them to seek confirmation of the “injustice frame” proposed by the movement and to find out “what was really going on” in these countries. North American missionaries again played an important role in legitimating the “injustice frame.”

One activist elaborated:

Nicaragua became the prime foreign policy obsession of the Reagan people and it was close enough that loads of people could go there and see for themselves. 99.44 percent of them came back disillusioned with the Reagan stance. Much of that was because there were long-term contacts. A lot of missionaries played an important role in the sense that people who went there for a week or two would test their perceptions with them. So eventually, by the tens of thousands they came back with a different analysis and truly believed that our government was lying. Especially in the aftermath of Vietnam, we knew our government was lying and exposing that became a noble task.

The second impact of this “frame contradiction” was an increased belief in the efficacy of action. Since the general population in the U.S. was still suffering
from the "Vietnam syndrome" (Klare 1992; Smith 1996) and was therefore reluctant to send troops into another foreign war, many activists became convinced that change was possible if they could reveal the misinformation and inaccuracies of Reagan’s frame. If North Americans could be persuaded that Central America did not pose a threat to U.S. national security, then popular opinion could be swayed away from Reagan’s foreign policy and toward the goals of the movement. Without citizen support, ongoing aid or military intervention in the region would be difficult to justify. Thus, discrediting Reagan’s cold war frame appeared to be a realistic and obtainable goal that could have a concrete impact. One activist explained:

Ronald Reagan made such a big deal about Nicaragua so the press picked up on it, and it wasn’t hard to prove him wrong. It wasn’t hard to go down there and see that he was lying outright. We didn’t even have to point it out to people. We just took them down there and they could look around and see it wasn’t a "totalitarian dungeon."

Therefore, the contradiction between Reagan’s frame of battling for democracy and the defeat of communism and the movement’s frame of ending violence, repression, and social inequality helped instigate a shift to the final stage of cognitive liberation. In this last stage, individuals believe they can bring about change and are motivated to do so. The "frame contradictions" increased the belief that popular opinion could be won over to the movement’s goal of stopping U.S. intervention in Central America. In addition, many activists were outraged by the misinformation of Reagan’s frame, which provided a strong motivation to expose it. As one movement leader stated:

I think Reagan generated a lot of his own opposition. He was such an onerous demagogue and a liar on issues of Nicaragua . . . We owe him a lot for the strength of the movement [because] his rhetoric was just so infuriating . . . it made you want to participate in action.

Conclusion

This examination of cognitive liberation within the U.S.-Central America peace movement reveals that individuals do not automatically move from one stage to the next. They need cues from micro- and meso-mobilizing actors who offer interpretive frames and inspire action. Particularly in a cross-national movement, when the injustices are occurring thousands of miles away, this framing process is necessary to help third parties identify the injustice, determine its causes, and offer a prognosis for action.

This movement also provides insight into how cognitive liberation and micro-mobilization can diffuse cross-nationally. My data suggest that the presence of a cultural link provided a basis for identification that facilitated frame bridging. The group-specific frames of the liberation theology-oriented church in Central Amer-
ica and the church in the U.S. were not closely aligned prior to mobilization efforts, but they had the potential to become so. If no cultural link had existed, it is likely that there would have been insufficient commonality between the two frames for successful alignment to occur. The cultural link ensured some shared set of beliefs or values that fostered the identification process. One activist summarized the role of this cultural link well: “The church transcends national boundaries. There are these natural connections between people in the same faith or denomination in one country or another. So there’s always that kind of channel that is open.”

This finding is consistent with many of the studies of cross-national movement diffusion which argue that the spread of a movement depends on at least a minimal identification between the originating movement and the adopting one through similar cultural and structural traits, and/or organizational networks (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Morris 1981; Tarrow 1994). However, Snow and Benford (1995) have critiqued the diffusion literature for failing to incorporate agency into their models. They argue that conditions of similarity between groups have been treated as structural phenomena or taken as a given without elaborating how this similarity is socially constructed. They argue that “The assertion of constructed similarity implies framing activity which, in turn, insinuates framing agents into the dynamic. To date, however, emphasis on channels and varieties of institutional similarity or equivalence have tended to ‘deagentify’ the diffusion process” (1995, pp. 3–4).

While the cultural link of the church provided an institutional similarity, it was insufficient by itself to build a solidarity movement. The church provided the basis for a preliminary identification between Christians in North and Central America; however, it was the returning missionaries who provided this agency. They built upon the foundation of the church, actively aligning frames and mobilizing their congregations. They were the synapses between the two regions, passing on the injustice frames to North Americans and constructing an identification with the liberation-oriented churches. This was particularly vital because there were many other dissimilarities between Christians in Central America and the United States. Unlike McAdam and Rucht’s (1993) study of the diffusion of the New Left from the U.S. to West Germany, Central Americans—for the most part—did not share the same racial, ethnic, and class background as activists in the United States. Therefore the missionaries had to socially construct the similarities by drawing upon their common cultural link and framing the issues in a manner that culturally resonated with U.S. Christians. They were the key agents who promoted and created this identification.

There were other factors that also facilitated the progression of Central America peace activists through the three stages of cognitive liberation and fostered movement diffusion. “Suddenly imposed grievances” against the church
intensified the issues and transformed concern into moral outrage. Person-to-person contact with Central Americans, and particularly the large numbers of U.S. citizens who went to Central America to gain first-hand experience, increased the likelihood of frame contradictions. Clearly, the geographic proximity and relative affordability of travel made this possible. The disparity between a government’s frame and a movement’s frame would not be as readily apparent in a solidarity movement with Angola or the Philippines, for instance. More research on cross-national movements is needed to explore the conditions which foster the transmission and diffusion of “injustice frames” and the emergence of cognitive liberation, with particular attention given to the agents who engage in framing tasks and the construction of mutual identification of people across national and geographic boundaries.

ENDNOTES

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2 As I draw upon respondents’ retrospectively told narratives, it is important to acknowledge that the reliability of taking such accounts at face value has been questioned. Individuals may reconstruct their “transformation of consciousness” differently from the vantage point of the present than they might have at the time at which it was occurring. This is an inherent and unavoidable problem in any in-depth interview data based on past experience. Biases may exist, and it is possible that interview participants believe that they were “cognitively liberated” from the events that they describe, while there may actually be other experiences and factors that contributed to these cognitive shifts. Nevertheless, while acknowledging this as an inevitable limitation, I believe their narratives still offer insight and are the best means of understanding the process of developing an “insurgent consciousness.”

2 I employ the concept “frame contradictions” as a first order construct; that is, the discrepancy between interpretive frames is based within an individual’s perspective. I am not implying an external measurement for assessing the relative consistency of frames. This discrepancy is in the eyes of the beholder, not necessarily an empirical condition that can be determined by an observer.

REFERENCES


