

## **ABSTRACT**

RUSCHE, SARAH NELL. *Crafting Authentic, Moral Selves: Biography and Identity among Women Social Justice Activists*. (Under the direction of Michael L. Schwalbe).

This study examines how women construct “activist” as a moral-political identity that is not associated with a particular social movement or movement organization. Three main processes of identity construction are examined: (1) the use of biographical anchor points to construct authentic selves; (2) the creation of identity codes and (3) the use of social comparisons to claim moral-political identities. This study contributes to our understanding of identity construction in three ways. First, people often subjectively and retrospectively interpret events in ways that help them feel secure with themselves (Garrett-Peters 2009; Lewin and Williams 2009) and/or to craft narratives that suggest the continuity and authenticity of self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Mason-Schrock 1996). Second, people often develop identity codes—criteria by which they evaluate their own and others’ worthiness of claiming a particular identity. Third, people use social comparisons to make favorable self-conceptions, aligning themselves with those they deem of higher status, and distancing from those with perceived lower status. This study also contributes to the literature on women activists and describes the gendered nature of their political behaviors and beliefs. Finally, this study explains how moral-political identity work helps activists stay motivated in a depoliticized culture (Eliasoph 1998).

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Crafting Authentic, Moral Selves: Biography and Identity among Women Social Justice  
Activists

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

For Magnolia, who asked me every day, “Did you get a lot of work done on your dissertation today, Mommy?” Her interest and encouragement were remarkable for a 7-year old who delighted in accompanying me to coffee shops to write (maybe it was the cookies). I am forever grateful for and inspired by her patience, her praise, her cheering, and her unconditional and exuberant love. Thanks, kiddo. I love you.

## BIOGRAPHY

Sarah was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, the youngest of four children. Her parents always stressed the importance of education and being well-rounded. After a self-described curvy road of schooling, Sarah earned a liberal arts degree (BA) from Thomas More College and her MA in Sociology from Ohio University in 2003. She is the first person on both sides of her family to earn a PhD.

Sarah often refers to herself as an “accidental sociologist.” After years of waiting tables and bartending with a college degree, she decided to pursue graduate school to increase her odds of doing something more for a career. But she chose sociology somewhat arbitrarily because she was more sure of what she did not want to do (wait tables) than what she did want to do. Sociology was not yet something she was passionate about, simply interested in. The eager and engaged faculty at Ohio University quickly highlighted all the reasons Sarah came to love sociology; she soon knew that pursuing a PhD and becoming a college professor was the path she wanted. Thanks to the supportive people at OU—namely Ann Tickamyler, Tom VanderVen, Mary Beth Krouse, Leon Anderson, and Christine Mattley—Sarah grew as a scholar and teacher, and found a good home for her doctoral work at NC State.

Teaching is Sarah’s passion in life. To her, it is the best job in the world. The excitement of seeing students realize the sociological aspects of their lives is motivating and inspiring. She still gets the first day jitters and sees these not as nervousness, but as anticipation for all the good things that can come from a new semester. Sarah puts her

all into her teaching, the payoff for which has been the growth of an engaging, enthusiastic, relevant, and intellectually challenging teacher who continues to learn and grow as a teacher, scholar, and human being.

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allowed the project to become what it did and I am grateful for that. Doug Schrock also offered crucial advice during an early point of conceptualization. Lastly, although she played a minimal role in my dissertation work, I want to extend a big thanks to Maxine Atkinson for all of the support and mentoring she's offered over the years.

The old saying, "to have a friend, be one," makes me feel like I do a pretty good job as a friend, because I have many, many friendships that I cherish deeply.

Specifically, my friendships with Dustin Avent-Holt, Pam Calci Baroody, Joslyn Brenton, Amanda Gengler, Alexis Colangelo Habas, Kendra Jason, Kris Macomber, RV Rikard, and Gretchen Thompson have been critical to my growth as a person, teacher, and scholar.

Very few people who have not written a dissertation are capable of giving the kind of emotional support that is often needed. Most just want to know why you aren't finished yet and why you don't just write the darn thing. For his unwavering support and cheerleading, I am grateful for my big brother Marc Luckey, whose encouragement and boundless pride was unending, especially when I needed it the most. I appreciate his bragging on me. Marc's tearful pride reminds me of our beloved Grandma, who if she were alive to see this accomplishment, would surely hug me so tight my head just might pop right off. I love the bright smile that grows on his face when he calls me Dr. Sister. Being the curious thinker and lover of learning, I know he'll read this dissertation. He is truly a gift! I cannot imagine life without him.

Similarly, my longtime best friend Alexis Colangelo Habas rooted for me, and will root for me, all the way. Since our first semester of college, we knew we'd be together

forever, regardless of the paths we took in life. The level of my love, respect, and appreciation for her are indescribable. She is everything a person could want and need in a best friend, and then some. She scatters joy wherever she goes, and her good humor is welcomed by everyone she meets (especially me). Neither Marc nor Alexis ever bugged me about how long it was taking or how many days I worked instead of relaxing—they have only offered extreme encouragement and were waiting in the proverbial wings to share in my success! Thank you! I love you!

Kris Macomber is my intellectual soul-mate. We often joke that we share two brains. We've each got one, but there are so many similarities in how we think and write and feel that it often seems as if we are the same. We are definitely cut from the same cloth. As one of the first feminists I knew, I was and continue to be inspired by her. She taught me so much, and allowed me to follow her through a sometimes tangled, knotty path that she cleared, making it easier for the rest of us behind her. Kris and I shared an office for five years and have taken equal turns bouncing in from teaching or dragging in from a frustrating analytic experience. Kris and I are co-authors, colleagues, friends, sisters. She read drafts—both polished and shabby—of most of this dissertation and gave vital feedback with sharp points and gentle words. I can always count on Kris to remind me why I do this.

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world in a way that would not be possible without her firm understanding of it herself and her trust and faith in me to “get it.” Our friendship is deep and true. I cherish it.

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contrary to their beliefs. This skill has served me well, time and time again, in my chosen profession and in life.

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## CHAPTER 1

### IDENTITY PROCESSES AMONG WOMEN SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS

When I was coming of age, I admired famous activists like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. I was intrigued that their passionate beliefs in justice not only led them to sacrifice their own lives and families, but that they also got scores of other people to join them. Having no understanding of inequality or oppression in my insulated white middle-class upbringing, I could not fathom anything that would lead me or anyone I knew to such committed involvement. Like many of my class and race peers, I learned about inequality and oppression in school, not from everyday life (Naples 1998; McAdam 1988).

My fascination with activists who fought for social justice initially lacked any real socio-political knowledge or understanding. When I became a sociologist, I began to grasp intellectually the value of social justice activists. As I learned about critical sociology, and how different this perspective is from its sociological kin, I became interested in Leftist politics, both personally and academically. I wanted to understand how people become politicized, how people become committed to fighting for justice. My interest in social movements and activists became more focused during a course titled Transformational Education, in which I learned about radical approaches to education and alternative learning environments such as the Highlander Center (Horton 1990) and Citizenship Schools (Clark 1990; Moses 2001; see also Friere 1970,

hooks 1994; Shor 1980). My interest burgeoned as I wrote one of my qualifying exams on the social psychology of social movements.

As a symbolic interactionist, I am intrigued by the complexities of the self and identity, and how we become who we are. Given that most people are not activists, exploring how people become activists is of particular interest. Although the concepts *self* and *identity* are ubiquitous in the social movements literature, they are often used casually, with little attention paid to spelling out their “complex meanings” (Stryker, Owens, and White 2000:5). The literature on social movements could benefit from more insight into the experiences of participants, especially with more precise use of social-psychological concepts. This is both a criticism of scholars for misusing important theoretical concepts, and an urging to “take advantage of the full range of intellectual resources” that social-psychological conceptions of self and identity offer (2000:5).

The problem is mainly that social-psychological concepts, like identity, are used by scholars who do not address, or perhaps even understand, the complex meanings of the concepts to which they refer. Many scholars have recognized these tendencies in the literature on social movements as well as in other fields of sociology (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Fine 1994; House 1977). As Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock put it, “social psychologists are losing their grip on identity” (1996:113).

Snow and McAdam (2000:41) describe how scholars muddy the literature on the identity/social movement nexus with four “troublesome tendencies: (1) to conceptualize identity at a cultural or group level; (2) to ignore the relationship

between group-level collective identities and personal identities; (3) to overlook the literature on social psychology; (4) to gloss over the processes through which identities are constructed and maintained at both the individual and collective level.”

From my review of the literature on identity and social movements, the most troublesome tendencies are the lack of attention to literature on social psychology and the conceptualizations of identity at the group level. For instance, social movements scholars have said a lot about collective identity, but their conceptions are often *unsocial-psychological* (e.g., Meyer 2002; Bernstein 2002, 2005; Robnett 2002; Klatch 2002; Reger 2002). These scholars see identity as “embedded in elements of social structure” (e.g. roles) and thus fail to see that identities are contextual, vary in salience, and have different meanings for those who embrace them (Snow and McAdam 2000:44-45). A group’s collective identity can be studied by examining a group’s symbols, rituals, beliefs, and values (Klandermans and DeWeerd 2000:76), but many scholars tend to treat collective identity as a synonym for solidarity. Upon discovering the needed clarification of the literature on identity and social movements, I hoped to contribute social-psychological clarity to understanding how activists—as individuals rather than members of groups or organizations—craft activist identities. I made a point to improve the empirical literature on identities in social movements by avoiding the “troublesome tendencies” Snow and McAdam (2000) point out.

To better understand how people become activists, I drew on studies that used interviews and autobiographies to examine identity construction. As social

performances, interviews and autobiographies are intriguing because the actor/author assumes that the audience has particular identity expectations to be met; the activists I interviewed, for instance, knew I wanted to interview activists. The women knew that their identity performances needed to satisfy this expectation. In my effort to focus on identity processes among activists, rather than identity processes in social movements, I became wary of modeling my study after interview projects and ethnographies that focus on a particular social movement. I felt better able to examine the identity processes of activists, and avoid the tendency to mistake solidarity for identity, without the boundary of one movement.

Klatch's (1999; 2001) study of 1960s activists of the New Left and the New Right examines several aspects of activists' lives and expands Klein's (1984) discussion of how group consciousness is formed. Klatch (2001) describes a three-stage process for the formation of a feminist consciousness. The three stages are: early encounters with injustice and socialization; framing, or learning to interpret injustice; and collective identity formation. People develop political consciousness and adopt political identities through these stages, with some variation depending on their social location and experiences (cf. Krauss 1993; Naples 1998).

As Klatch found, many activists experience encounters that thrust them into political participation. Trigger events or "turning points" are events or experiences that mark significant changes in political consciousness or understanding of reality. Research suggests that trigger events vary across social class, racial, and gender lines.

For example, in Naples's (1998) study of women community organizers during the War on Poverty, she found a clear contrast in motivations to do community work between resident community workers (who were mostly racial minorities) and nonresident community workers (who were mostly white). Residents' narratives were "highly personal" and emphasized early exposure to racism and/or class oppression. In contrast, nonresident community workers cited social movement activity or education as important trigger events for their motivation to do the work (Naples 1998: 12). These findings corroborate McAdam's archival and interview study of Freedom Summer volunteers—the majority of whom were either poor and working-class black Southerners, or white, class-privileged college students, 40% of whom hailed from elite private universities such as Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Stanford (McAdam 1988: 42).

I wanted to know what early encounters and trigger events women activists deem significant and what these mean to them. I also wanted to see how women used these events to craft activist identities. My research design followed these primary research questions: What type of experiences do women activists identify as critical to the development of their political consciousness? How do women adopt an activist identity and what does this mean to them? How do women's activist identities shape their relationships and experiences in social life? I focused on women social justice activists for reasons I explain shortly.

As I was developing my research design, I read Anne Moody's 1968 autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. It was the most penetrating account of the

Civil Rights Movement I had read. It was also the most graphic story I had read about someone's life in this era and place—the 1940s through 1960s in the rural South. I knew the history, but Moody described it in a more moving way than I had ever encountered. Her account suggested analytic and methodological paths I had not previously considered. Autobiographical data proved to be a compelling form of identity work as well as an interpretive commentary on historical realities.

Moody chronicles her life in a way that makes her participation in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) seem perfectly logical and understandable. Many of the childhood events she retells fit into the larger story about her civil rights activism. Like the transsexuals Mason-Schrock (1996) studied, Moody recounts events and memories that support her activist identity. Stories about sweeping porches and making beds for whites are opportunities to comment on race relations. In fact, most of her stories are astutely race-conscious and seem to lead naturally to her becoming a civil rights activist. She could have called her book “my life journey into activism.” I realized, in reading Moody's book, that the narratives crafted in autobiographies are fascinating forms of identity work.

Moody's accounts of the race relations in her town and county justify her anger. By recounting horrific details, she creates tension and fear in her story and legitimates her activism. She captures the horrors of whites' treatment of blacks and some blacks' frustrating ambivalence. She does this in a way that elicits readers' sympathy with her willingness to risk death, ostracism, and conflict with family members. Moody tells how

she had to choose between her mission and her mother, who did not want her to make waves. Moody's story showed me how activists construct a legitimating rationale for dissident behavior.

Until reading Moody's book, I had fantasized throughout my life about being involved in the Civil Rights Movement. I'm now ashamed to admit that. I have always been intrigued by social movements, particularly the Civil Rights Movement, yet I have become aware of the privilege of my fantasies. I can daydream about how rebellious and subversive it would be to go to jail, stand up for what is just, and break the law in the name of equality—but I never had to actually live these realities. I never had to fear being murdered. I never had to sleep with a gun under my pillow and one eye open. I never had to worry that losing this fight would secure my oppression, and that of my people. My fantasies are simply privileged imaginations—glory without guts, victory without fear.

Moody's autobiography stimulated my interest in SNCC as a citizen and as a sociologist. As I read more about the organization, I became more interested in how people got involved and how their experiences in SNCC shaped their lives. I am fortunate to live in the city where SNCC was founded and was able to attend its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference. Still toward the beginning of my project as I was still ironing out ideas, I walked into a living history book. I attended a session called "Women Leaders and Organizers" in which the panelists described their experiences in SNCC as *women* and often referred to SNCC women as "sheroes." The women emphasized the

significance of having a woman, Ella Baker, as the “political visionary” for the movement. One panelist noted that, in SNCC, women “did tasks that were not done by women in society or in other civil rights organizations,” thus giving SNCC a “special quality” that the women celebrated. In their view, SNCC offered women a unique way to do social justice work—what panelist Maria Varela called a “very female approach to organizing, because it was about building relationships.”

At the same time SNCC women were empowered to organize for racial and economic justice, they also learned how to resist the oppression they faced as women. Mary King, a panelist and signatory of the 1964 SNCC position paper “Women in the Movement” that challenged the status of women in the organization, described how her budding feminism grew out of SNCC:

For me, this is a story of awakening. Most of all, the audacity of SNCC that gave permission and allowed women in SNCC to raise and ask questions about unspoken issues in the same way we raised and asked questions related to all sorts of other forms of oppression. I suppose the most important thing I learned is that I did not have to participate in my oppression, my being oppressed as a woman.

Because at the heart of non-violent struggle is the ability to withdraw cooperation . . . I learned not to cooperate in the oppression of women.

As King explained, participation in SNCC led many women to develop a feminist consciousness. Like the women in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that Klatch studied, they grasped the available “language of discontent” to express their growing outrage against sexism (Klatch 1999:178).

In some ways, what I learned about SNCC women, specifically from Moody’s autobiography, is a microcosm of the larger analytic story I tell in my dissertation. My research analyzes the stories of women who believe that injustice is wrong and that justice is worth fighting for. I show how people made sense of their lives as activists, remained true to themselves, made great sacrifices and took risks with pride and humility, believing deeply that they did the right thing.

#### METHOD AND SAMPLE

The data for this project come from 40 women social justice activists. I conducted 17 in-depth interviews and examined six autobiographies and 17 personal essays (see Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). To understand the life trajectories of political activists, I sought the narratives of women who could reflect on a lifetime of experiences. I recruited many of my interviewees through a women’s political organization that consists primarily of middle-aged and older women engaged in pro-labor, anti-war, and pro-health care work. I also attended public vigils and rallies as well as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); there I met additional contacts. I relied heavily on snowball

sampling. I selected autobiographies of women activists whose work was similar to those whom I interviewed. I selected personal essays from *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, a collection of essays written by women in SNCC.

#### TABLES 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 ABOUT HERE

The activists in my study worked on a range of issues: labor, war and foreign policy, racism, and institutional discrimination. Many of the activists worked for reforms; a few helped people by delivering goods and services such as food and shelter from violence. Although most of the women I interviewed held jobs through which they could do activism (e.g., paid organizers, social workers, organizational consultants), much of the political work in which they engaged was for little or no pay.

Although I did not limit my sample to older women, about two thirds were 60 or older; seven were over 70. I began the project expecting that older women may have had key formative experiences during the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I wanted to learn about their life trajectories of activism, and I figured that women who were well into adulthood would have developed stable narratives of self. I also maintained my interest in older women because they had perspectives and experiences unavailable to younger generations (Sanjek 2009), mainly because they experienced the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

In-depth interviews were appropriate because, although I asked the questions, I allowed the interviewee to largely shape the interview (Esterberg 2002:87). While I expected my questions to elicit data consistent with patterns identified in the literature, taking an open-ended approach allowed for discovery of new patterns and for mid-course adjustment of my interviews. My interview guide evolved alongside my emerging analysis. Rather than taking women's stories as objective accounts, I treated them as evidence of subjective experiences and of what mattered to them in their lives. These narratives showed how women activists constructed their identities, made sense of their lives as activists, and understood activism more generally.

In the interest of examining women's life trajectories as activists, my interviewing strategy was loosely based on life history methods. Life histories are infrequent in sociology but this method has been used dating back to W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's 1919 *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Critiques of such an approach abound, citing problems with reliability, practicality, and generalizability (Faraday and Plummer 1979:774). However, as Faraday and Plummer (1979) point out, life history provides three important contributions that mainstream social science typically fails to address properly, if at all.

First, individuals' subjective reality is an important aspect of social life to understand; we are hard pressed to acquire this using other methods. As Faraday and Plummer put it, this technique is in line with Weber's notion of *Verstehen* because it "documents the inner experiences of individuals, how they interpret, understand and

define the world around them” (1979: 776). In this way, life histories collected by researchers and compiled and presented by autobiographers capture and express individuals’ subjective experiences. In using this method, my aim was to understand how identities are formed and meanings constructed (Klatch 1999:13), which not only offer clues to identity construction, but also to social movement processes.

Second, life history captures processes of social life better than quantitative methods. Our “lives are flooded with moments of indecision, turning points, confusions, contradictions and ironies” (Faraday and Plummer 1979:776). These intimate details of ambiguous self-interpretation are best captured through observation or life history interviews, which urge the teller to *reflect* in ways a survey cannot. As Klatch (1999) puts it, “if the aim is to understand and compare constructions of meaning, life history. . . is really the only means to accurately and fully understand the pathways of individual lives” (p. 14).

Third, life history allows us to focus on the totality of human experience without “amputating” from it the larger context (Faraday and Plummer 1979:777). By capturing a life story, analysts are better equipped to place individuals in socio-historical context. This is consistent with Mills’s (1959) admonition that to understand ourselves (and therefore others) we must also understand the broader context of our lives (see Bjorklund 1998).

Thanks to Diane Bjorklund’s (1998) analysis of over 100 autobiographies spanning two centuries, I had a methodological model. Bjorklund analyzed 110

autobiographies published between 1800 and 1980 to explore how ideas about and interpretations of the self have evolved over time. The autobiography—as a self-interpreted and explained life history—is an exceptional illustration of identity work. Autobiographers strive to persuade readers that they are worthy of dignity and respect, and of course, worthy of having their life story read by others. To do this, Bjorklund (1998:8) argues, autobiographers must “develop an overarching perspective on their lives to a greater extent than most of us have the inclination to do.” Thus, autobiographers are simultaneously engaged in self-interpretation and performance; they must take seriously the question, “Who Am I?” if they are to tell a coherent story (p. xi). Autobiographies thus answer many of the questions sociologists ask, such as: What part do others play in people’s lives? How do individuals come to know themselves? How does society shape who people are and how they behave? (Bjorklund 1998:xi). We might also consider how publishers shape these accounts as well. Ultimately, we can use autobiographies to trace the connection between socio-historical context and individual biographies.

## ANALYSIS

My project was guided by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006), but was quasi-inductive. A considerable amount of background work went into creating a focused project. I began the project with some expectations about what I would find. For example, I derived my research and interview questions in

part from what I found in the literature and in autobiographies of women activists. Upon further analysis, I recognized the value of using autobiographies as data to answer my research questions. Stories—spoken or written—recounting the past are a kind of identity work. As a cognitive device, people use memory to interpret and make sense of their lives by creating a web of meaning (Klatch 1999:13). These meanings evolve depending upon subsequent life events (Riessman 2002:705). Therefore, I was careful to examine people’s stories as accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) and as identity talk (Snow and Anderson 1987), not as factual revelations of their lives. As the women told me about their journeys to activism, they identified and interpreted details of their biographies to do identity work. Given the political culture in which they do this, I argue that crafting authentic moral selves serves as a shield against criticism and a justification for engaging in oppositional behavior.

Authors of written and verbal accounts imagine an audience (Goffman 1959; Bjorklund 1998; Presser 2004). This audience shapes the performance given because the author must anticipate not only what the audience will want to read or hear, but also what impression the accounts given will make. In any case, “they are attempting to persuade readers [or other interactants] that they are, in some crucial way, admirable persons” (Bjorklund 1998:17; see also Presser 2004). As social performances, interviews can create an interesting identity dilemma for activists. For instance, to satisfy my desire to interview activists, I forced the women to prove to me that they are real activists. Just as autobiographers face “the issue of being interesting” (Bjorklund

1998:31), interviewees must find a balance between interestingness and modesty. As I will illustrate, most of the women activists exhibited modesty as an important quality, not just as activists but also as women.

## IDENTITY IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

We know that activists make movement-based identity claims and that these often help activists interpret the world they encounter (e.g., Valocchi 2010; Goodwin et al. 2001; Klatch 1999, 2004; Hunt and Benford 1994; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). The social environments activists inhabit shape how they think and what they think about. Movement-based identities can motivate people's behavior; it is important that their behavior is consistent with their identity claims. Therefore, activists are encouraged—by others and themselves—to align their behavior with their moral-political beliefs.

Social justice activists hold a particular set of values on which their identities are staked; these identities have strong moral implications. A moral presentation of self can “signify one's ideological grounding” (Gecas 2000). Likewise, people typically join social movements that reflect their identities (Pinel and Swann 2000; Snow and McAdam 2000; Kiecolt 2000). By “living out virtues” as one interviewee, Karen, remarked, activists not only perform their moral-political beliefs for others, they construct their self-feelings and self-conceptions.

I use Snow and McAdam's (2000) conception of identity construction as it relates to social movement participation—the process “through which personal and collective identities are aligned, such that individuals regard engagement in movement activity as being consistent with their self-conception and interests” (Snow and McAdam 2000: 49). Snow and McAdam (2000) are interested in the processes through which personal identities and collective identities correspond with each other, “such that a movement's identity comes to function among individuals associated with the movement as a significant point of orientation and as motivational springboard to action” (p. 47).

Collective identity work, as Schwalbe (1996) defines it, is “all the acts of signification and interpretation used to shape the meanings of an identity shared by members of a group; [when members] collaborate to preserve or change the meaning of that identity” (p. 105). In Schwalbe's study of the mythopoetic men's movement, men actively worked to redefine the identity “man” as a moral identity after it had been skewered by feminism. Similarly, Mason-Schrock's (1996) study of transsexuals shows that individuals reconstruct their biographies—with the help of the group—to construct a collective identity. Through telling their reconstructed stories, they help construct meaningful identities for transsexuals as a group. They do this by encouraging stories about finding their “true selves,” which makes this stigmatized identity seem less deviant (Mason-Schrock 1996).

The editors (Stryker, Owens and White 2000) of the book *Self, Identity and Social Movements* urge social movements scholars to take a more conceptually precise approach to matters of self and identity, in relation to social movements. My research aims to further clarify the relationship between the self and social movements by bringing the social-psychological literature to bear on conceptions of identity construction among activists. By focusing on activists apart from a particular movement, I was able to examine the identity processes of activists more generally, without the limitation of previous studies that have treated activism identities as movement-specific (Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker et al. 2000).

#### BEING POLITICAL IN A DEPOLITICIZED CULTURE

In the broader political context, most people are depoliticized; apathy, not political activism, is the norm. As Eliasoph notes, “We often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs” (1998:6). Apathy is a “mysterious shrinking circle of concern” such that Americans find the political sphere irrelevant to their everyday lives (Eliasoph 1998:6). Those who are engaged are often ridiculed, undermined, or made to look foolish or dangerous.

Despite this politically disengaged, repressive culture, leftist movements have been present in the United States since the American Revolution in the 1700s (McCarthy and McMillian 2003). Consistently, leftist movements have appealed to the deepest American values, such as freedom, equality, and democracy, despite castigation

as “enemies of American institutions” (Foner 2003). Asking political activists to account for their involvement helps us understand how people respond to and manage the political apathy and repression that unfortunately characterizes U.S. culture (Archer 2007; Eliasoph 1998; Fantasia 1988). It also helps us understand what distinguishes people who develop political consciousness and undertake political action, from those who remain apathetic or otherwise disengaged from social justice work.

How do social justice activists—those on the political left—develop a political consciousness and become politically engaged in a depoliticized culture? How do they maintain positive views of themselves in the face of public disapproval? Activists must account for their oppositional behavior; they need a counter rhetoric to justify their actions. Often, this counter rhetoric echoes mainstream American values—self-determination and community—and takes narrative form. What activists are doing, as I will show, is telling stories that justify their oppositional behavior by anchoring it in an authentic, moral self.

## WHY WOMEN?

I chose to study women activists with three things in mind: women’s different political socialization experiences, the marginalization of women’s contributions to social movements, and the gendered nature of women’s political work. First, women’s experiences with political socialization and within social movements are different from men’s because of sexism, family responsibilities, and labor market experiences (Gordon

2008; Klatch 1999; Mullaney 1990; Payne 1990; Roy 1998). For instance, Rosa Parks's husband "initially discouraged [her] from joining the NAACP in the early 1940s because he believed it was far too dangerous for her *as a woman*" (Sartain 2007:10, emphasis mine). Upon her subsequent involvement, Parks learned that nearly all clerical tasks of the organization were relegated to women, while leadership roles were filled by men, not unlike the roles women and men played in society (Sartain 2007).

Parents of young activists offer another example of how family expectations can create barriers to young women's sociopolitical development and activism. For the teen activists Gordon studied, parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to participate in political activism, while sons did not face these parental barriers nearly as often (cf. McAdam 1988; Klatch 1998). Another study (Fahs 2007) suggests that women may experience delayed politicization because of their obligations as wives and mothers. Fahs identified a gap in our understanding of political socialization, noting that many women are politically awakened in midlife (cf. Apter 1996), especially after a major life event such as divorce. Thus, middle-aged women's political consciousness and involvement may be shaped by a political *reawakening* (Fahs 2007:61). I found these different politicization experiences interesting, initially, as I wanted to examine how women's activism intersected with their family lives and intimate relationships.

Second, despite women's widespread and deep involvement, women's contributions to social movements have been marginalized—by movement leaders and

scholars alike<sup>1</sup> (Clark 1990; Davis 1998; Payne 1990; West and Blumberg 1990). This is especially true for women of color, about whom “obligatory references” are made to acknowledge their “special contribution to the liberation of the ‘Black man’” (Marable 1983; cf. Davis 1998; Sartain 2007). Angela Davis wrote that the Million Man March of 1995 “was predicated on the fact that women will stay at home in support of ‘their men’” (1998:309). Although women did much more than “support their men,” women’s efforts have been relatively diminished by male leaders, scholars, and agents of mass media.

For instance, the late Dorothy Height, who made significant contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and the women’s movement, was well known and respected among activists for decades, but was lesser known in the public eye. Height’s death in 2010 prompted one *Washington Post* writer to imply that Height’s lack of fame was a choice, not a product of men’s marginalization of women activists:

Although she never drew the media attention that conferred celebrity and instant recognition on some of the other civil rights leaders of her time, Ms. Height was often described as the “glue” that held the family of black civil rights leaders together. She did much of her work out of the public spotlight, in quiet meetings and conversations . . . . (Barnes 2010, April 21).

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions include Blee (1998), Naples (1998), and West and Blumberg (1990). Since the turn of the century, women’s contributions to social movements have been given more attention by scholars (e.g., Bobel 2007; Klatch 2001; Reger 2002).

Barnes failed to question the sexist nature of Height's lack of media attention, implying that she—like wives and mothers—simply preferred to hold the family together out of necessity and habit without acknowledgment or recognition (see Lorber 1994).

Rectifying these oversights is important not only for documenting women's history, but also because some scholars and activists believe that women have a different perspective on social justice work than men. Mullaney (1990), for instance, argues that "women's specifically gender-based experiences not only propel[s] them to political consciousness but affect[s] the character and content of their protest politics" (p. 106). The idea that gender shapes the "character and content" of women's activism is not Mullaney's alone. Literature on motherhood and activism (e.g., Blee 1998; Blumberg 1990; Krauss 1993; Naples 1998; Strange 1990; Wrigley 1998), for instance, suggests that activist mothers often view their activism as related to family responsibilities, living out the identity "mother."

If women care about babies, children, and the preservation of human life, as an essentialist view suggests, their political work may involve demanding rights associated with these responsibilities and/or working against things that threaten their ability to perform these responsibilities. Krauss's (1993) study of toxic waste protestors is instructive:

By and large, it is women, in their traditional roles as mothers, who make the link between toxic-related hazards and their children's ill health. They discover toxic-related hazards: multiple miscarriages,

birth defects, cancer deaths, and so on. This is not surprising, as the gender-based division of labor in a capitalist society gives working-class women the responsibility for the health of their children. As one participant put it, “if we don’t [get involved] then we’re not doing our work as mothers.” (Krauss 1993:252)

The value of examining the subjective experiences of “ordinary women,” Krauss argues, lies in making visible the “complex relationship between everyday life and larger structures of power” (Krauss 1993:250). While I initially set out to add “ordinary” women’s voices to the larger narrative of social movement participation, wanting to merely fill a gap, over time I learned the value of understanding the gendered nature of women’s activism. Although I expected many of the women in my study to focus on gender issues, identify as feminist, and to care about “women’s issues,” few did.

With some exceptions, the women’s accounts of their activism were shaped by an essentialist feminist frame. An essentialist view suggests that there are “natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological nature of women and men” (Bem 1993:2), and that females are “primarily oriented toward life-giving, cooperative, nurturing activities” (Groenhout 2002: 60). A key aspect of an essentialist feminist view is an emphasis on maternalism. For instance, Naples (1998) found that even women who were not mothers did “mothering” work in the community. This position suggests that because women care about babies, children, and the preservation of human life, their political work is likely to be driven by these concerns. The toxic waste protesters

Krauss (1993) studied are a clear example; their activism was a direct response to miscarriages and sick children.

Essentialist feminists do not typically problematize patriarchy but rather tend to accept the gender order (Kaplan 1982), thus reproducing the patriarchal patterns of social life (Schwalbe 1991:296). Groenhout (2002: 59) claims essentialist feminism is appealing to women because it is a more concrete reflection of the realities they experience, however much they may overlook the significance of patriarchy in shaping those realities. Radical feminists, on the contrary, have criticized this approach, challenging presumptions about women's natural abilities (Moore 2008).

Panelists in a session at the SNCC 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference offered their take on how gender influenced their organizing efforts. Maria Varela suggested that the typical organizing model [in the Civil Rights Movement] was male-dominated, in that it was "militaristic [and] sports-like—and we're *women!* We don't relate to that," she said. Like Varela, the women in SNCC celebrated having a woman, Ella Baker, as the "political visionary" for the movement. Some suggested SNCC had a "special quality" about it because, as one panelist noted, women in SNCC "did tasks that were not done by women in society or in other civil rights organizations." In their view, SNCC offered women a unique way to do social justice work. Others focused more on the special qualities women brought to the movement—what Varela called a "very female approach to organizing, because it was about building relationships." These differences in approach were cause for some tensions in the movement.

As in society in general, there is a long history of women dealing with sexist men on the Left. Many leaders and participants of the Women's Movement were involved in civil rights and anti-Vietnam war politics, yet became disenchanted by the sexism they faced in those efforts (Klatch 2001). One of the reasons I wanted to focus on women was to see how sexism within their activist communities had shaped their experiences. As it turned out, I found that women constructed a collective identity that spanned the boundaries of particular organizations and movements. This more general, less movement-specific identity, "social justice activist," appealed to women because claiming it did not require the approval of men within a particular social movement organization. Embracing this identity, though it was not explicitly feminist, was a feminist solution to a patriarchal problem.

## DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This study examines how women activists use their biographies to do identity work. Each chapter examines one aspect of identity construction, engaging discussions about authenticity, identity codes, and moral identities. I briefly explore the broader political culture in which these identities are constructed, developing ideas about why it is important for women activists to claim authentic, moral selves. Finally, this study also improves the conceptual precision of empirical examinations of social movement-related identities.

In chapter two, I describe how the women look to their pasts—often going back to childhood—to identify biographical anchor points on which to stake their identity claims as authentic activists. Stories of how the women became activists present a logical series of events that led them to adopt activist identities. Authenticity is the goal of these stories; the details construct a self that is real, continuous, and coherent. The women used four strategies to construct themselves as authentic activists: (1) re-interpreting and signifying past experiences; (2) claiming moral intuition; (3) representing lifestyle choices as commitment to activism; and (4) telling stories of enlightenment. I also examine the value of the concept authenticity for analyzing the meanings people give to their lives. My analysis in this chapter raises the question about the power of authenticity as a source of motivation.

In chapter three I explain how the women, through identity talk, performed the identity “activist” for me, showing their worthiness of being included in my study. In doing so, the identity work they did for themselves revealed what the women considered to be important markers of the identity “activist.” By implication, they were showing me that they too were real activists. My analysis shows how the women valorized rigor and humility as key elements of the activist identity code. Through these individual identity work strategies, the women told me what they thought real activists ought to do. Striving to meet these standards is what solidified their own claims to being authentic activists.

In chapter four I explain how the activists in my study used social comparisons to create a self-locating device in the form of a moral-political hierarchy. By making strategic comparisons to referent others (activist exemplars, dedicated others, community volunteers, the politically inert, and/or their political enemies), the women carved out a space for themselves in the middle of the moral-political hierarchy as empowered difference makers. I show how this hierarchy helped the women construct “social justice activist” as a collective moral identity.

In chapter five, the conclusion, I discuss the implications of my research for understanding the relationship between identity construction and social movements. I also discuss how, given the broader political context in which activists engage in political work, crafting authentic, moral identities serves as a shield against criticism from both the politically apathetic and the politically repressive. In other words, claiming authentic, moral selves justifies social justice activism in a culture where such political engagement is considered oppositional behavior. Lastly, I will discuss how my research contributes to the growing literature on the unique contributions and experiences of women activists.

## CHAPTER 2

### “THIS IS THE REAL ME”: CRAFTING AUTHENTIC ACTIVIST SELVES

#### INTRODUCTION

In giving meaning to their lives, people often strive for consistency in their interpretations and presentations of self. Crafting stories from their pasts, they aim to make sense of who they are today. In short, people “rework and reimagine the past” (Berger and Quinney 2005:5) to create continuity between past and present selves. Following Snow and McAdam (2000), I analyze women’s narratives to understand a key aspect of identity construction in social movements—“the process through which personal and collective identities are aligned, such that individuals regard engagement in movement activities as being consistent with their self-conception” (p. 49). The narratives the women shared demonstrate how people reach back into their personal biographies, strategically emphasizing or omitting features of past experiences that support their current claim to the identity “social justice activist.”

Activists, like many others, “scan their biographies for evidence” of an authentic self (Mason-Schrock 1996:176) and use that “evidence” in their presentations *and* interpretations of self. In modern society, the desire to be “existentially authentic—that is, to feel true to one’s self” is perhaps contradictory (Franzese 2009:87). Because people have become alienated from social life, and themselves, many have sought out opportunities for self-discovery, self-exploration, and self-help in a quest to know and

honor their “true” self, in spite of its illusory existence (Fine 2003; Ferrara 2009; Franzese 2009; Lamla 2009; Lewin and Williams 2009). In many respects, people cannot *be* their true selves, but instead, have to manufacture them through identity work—to convince others and themselves that they are the real deal.

Although scholars have debated the concrete existence of an authentic self, it remains a “powerful fiction” for people because the desire to feel authentic can be motivating (see Mason-Schrock 1996). In other words, if activists feel their activism arises from who they “really are,” they will continue to do activist work to maintain feelings of authenticity as well as to avoid feeling inauthentic. Just as this commitment and motivation to continue activist work minimizes people’s inauthentic feelings, this commitment also upholds activists’ sense of ontological security (Lewin and Williams 2009). These “contemporary lifestyle projects” (Vannini and Williams 2009) or “identity projects” (Wilkins 2008) illustrate the modern preoccupation with self-centered individualism where “resistance may be more symbolic and expressive than material and political” (Valocchi 2010:31).

In this chapter, I describe how women activists used biographical anchor events to craft authentic selves. The women cited these events to connect their past selves to their current activist work, thus implying a long-running concern with overcoming injustice. The women took this continuity as evidence of an authentic activist self. Following Gubrium and Holstein (2009), the fashioning of these narratives can be called “authenticity work.”

Authenticity work, like identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987), refers to those “purposeful” (however subconscious) activities in which people “skillfully engage the task of interpreting authenticity”—that is, determining whether or not “something or someone is authentic, genuine, or real” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:123; cf. Gecas 2000). In terms of identity,

Authenticity refers to the individual’s strivings for meaning, coherence, and significance. [It] suggests that individuals are motivated to experience themselves as meaningful and real. It also implies that individuals strive for congruence between their self-values and their behavior, since lack of congruence leads to feelings of inauthenticity (Gecas 2000:101).

This passage describes what the women activists were trying to do. Most of all, they tried to show—through their self-narratives—how their behavior over the long haul was consistent with the value they placed on social justice.

The women’s construction of authenticity is noteworthy in that they offered their self-narratives in response to my interest in them as social justice activists. Their stories did more than show me that they were *real*, authentic activists; they also substantiated their belief in themselves as authentic. For instance, many of the women I interviewed, whom I met at rallies or vigils, were at first reluctant to be interviewed. They insisted that other, “better activists” could tell me more. They initially hedged

their claim to an authentic activist self, yet after agreeing to be interviewed they had little difficulty sharing stories that provided “evidence” of their authenticity as activists.

Certain concepts are particularly useful. As Gecas (2000) argues, “authenticity is the least visible self-motive” yet “it has great potential in helping us to understand the social psychology of social movements and the basis of members’ commitment” (p.104). In order to develop feelings of authenticity whereby people live with a sense of significance and moral purpose, Gecas implies, people will participate in activities that confirm their self-concepts; in this case, activism. Thus, for the women in my study, activism is a means to crafting an authentic self. I will argue that the desire to feel and appear authentic not only motivated the women’s activities, but also their accounts. From these identity performances, I inferred the qualities they associate with the activist identity. Linking personal biography and activist history, the women revealed clues about what is significant to them, and how their self-interpretations were shaped by their identities as activists (Valocchi 2010:142). The activists in my study used four identity *talk* strategies—a form of identity work (Hunt and Benford 1994:492)—to craft authentic selves. The women reinterpreted past experiences, claimed moral intuition, represented lifestyle choices as commitment to activism, and told stories of enlightenment.

## RE-INTERPRETING AND SIGNIFYING PAST EXPERIENCES

People's sociobiographical memories (Zerubavel 1997)—what we remember, how we remember it, and what these memories contribute to our identities—are shaped by membership in social groups. By attaching special significance to biographical anchor events, women activists provided meaningful memories to uphold their current identities. Recalling anchor events helped women draw an imaginary line from their past to their current selves. This line suggests a continuity of self, which is key for crafting an authentic self (Lewin and Williams; Berger and Quinney 2005; Mason-Schrock 1996). For example, Amelia, an 85-year-old anti-war activist recalled:

On Saturdays . . . my mother and I would walk down Main Street, mainly window shopping. And there would always be a man who had one or two legs missing sitting in front of the movie theater in town with his cap full of pencils. He was begging. And he was a veteran of, I believe World War I. And my mother said, "You must always put something in his cap." This was during, just before the Depression and all and she would put in a nickel as we walked by. And that was sort of a ritual every Saturday. And I guess it wasn't until I was a little older until I pondered how come this man was sitting there begging. Well, he was selling pencils.

Amelia's recollection of this experience was an important part of her narrative because it suggests nascent notions of the consequences of war, which she later interprets as a

significant experience on the way to becoming an activist. A fictional counterpoint may help to further illustrate this point. Imagine that Amelia was a big military supporter. She might recall a time she saw a soldier on the street looking heroic and proud. She may have shared those feelings of pride in her country and honor for this soldier, and remembered this as a significant moment in her biography. Or, she might recall the amputee veteran with pride in and gratitude for the sacrifices this patriotic American made for her freedom. Instead, in recalling the destitution and amputation of a soldier who is abandoned by his government, she signifies her long-running concern for the horrid consequences of war. For Amelia, this memory fuels her identity as an anti-war activist, while anchoring the authenticity of this identity in childhood.

Like Amelia, Meghan, a multi-issue civil rights activist and director of a social justice non-profit organization, recalled a childhood experience that functions as a biographical anchor. She described, in a way that linked her to civil rights struggles, what she saw while growing up on a U.S. military base in Germany:

During the '80s, between '80 and '86, there were a lot of car bombings in Germany. So we would drive by and cars had been blown up right outside the base, because they really wanted us to leave. And so we came outside and the Germans were holding hands all around the base and they were singing, sort of, freedom songs. I didn't know what they were singing—*now I know what they were singing*—but at the time I was like, “Why, what’s that all about?”

And my mom was like, “Oh, they don’t want us to be here.” And I’m like, “Well, why?” “Well they don’t want our base to be here.” And as I got older I started thinking about um, there are no military bases of any other country in our country. So where’s the German military base in America? What does that mean?

Meghan’s recollection of the Germans singing “freedom songs” is consistent with her identity as a civil rights activist. Although too young to have participated in the Civil Rights Movement, she saw her activism (fighting against school resegregation and the school-to-prison pipeline) as part of the ongoing struggle for civil rights. Calling the Germans’ songs “freedom songs” helped Meghan legitimate her claim to a position in the civil rights tradition.

The experiences that Amelia and Meghan cited reveal significant moments in their personal biographies, which serve to highlight the authenticity of their political beliefs and actions. Examples of identity-anchoring experiences can be found in other activists’ autobiographies. Civil rights activist Anne Moody wrote about her friendship with the white children of her mother’s employer, a friendship that she claimed sensitized her to the racial animosity she would eventually fight. At age seven, Moody innocently ran into the white lobby of the movie theater with her best (white) friend Katie, both of them excited to be at the movies together:

When we saw each other, we ran and met. Katie walked straight into the downstairs lobby and [my siblings] and I followed.

Mama...didn't notice that we had walked into the white lobby [but when she did] she yelled, "Essie Mae<sup>2</sup>, um gonna try my best to kill you when I get you home. I told you 'bout running up in these stores and things like you own 'em!" she shouted, dragging me through the door. When we got outside, we stood there, crying, and we could hear the white children crying inside the white lobby. After that, Mama didn't even let us stay at the movies. She carried us right home. All the way back to our house, Mama kept telling us that we couldn't sit downstairs, [that] we couldn't do this or that with white children. Up until that time I had never really thought about it. . . .

(Moody 1968:33-34).

Her mother's response to this transgression alerted Moody to her position in the U.S. racial hierarchy, and also prompted her to examine race relations more deeply:

After the movie incident . . . for about two weeks we didn't see them at all. Then one day we started playing, but things were not the same. I had never really thought of them as white before. Now all of a sudden they were white, and their whiteness made them better than me. I now realized that not only were they better than me because they were white, but everything they owned and everything connected with them was better than what was available to me. . . it really bothered me that they had all these nice things and

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<sup>2</sup> Moody's birth name

we had nothing. “There is a secret to it besides being white,” I thought. Then my mind got all wrapped up in trying to uncover that secret (Moody 1968:33-34).

What Moody did with this memory is instructive. Many children have stories of such unfair experiences, but Moody’s retrospective interpretation of this event as the beginning of her mission to “uncover the secret of whiteness” bodes well for her ability to construct an authentic self. This story helped Moody make the case that she has cared about, and worked against, the racial hierarchy since the tender age of seven. She wrote, “Every time I tried to talk to Mama about white people she got mad. Now I was more confused than before. If it wasn’t the straight hair and the white skin that made you white, then what was it?” (p. 35) Comparing her own race-consciousness to her mother’s frustrating lack of it—a common theme throughout the book—Moody showed how her “real” activist self emerged despite her mother’s attempts to suffocate it. By describing the childhood roots of her racial consciousness and desire to understand and improve race relations, she implied that the activism in which she engaged was a product of her authentic self.

If a childhood experience triggered her capacity to embark on a complex investigation of the racial hierarchy, she could more easily view herself as authentic. As I have said, *feeling* authentic through self-interpretation is just as important as *appearing* authentic through self-presentation; it helps people make sense of themselves and motivates them to be true to themselves (Vannini and Franzese 2008),

even if this “true self” is illusory (Fine 2003; Ferrara 2009; Franzese 2009; Lamla 2009; Lewin and Williams 2009; Mason-Schrock 1996).

Amelia, Meghan, and Anne Moody each re-interpreted an experience prior to their activist engagement in a way that anchored their claim to an authentic activist self. By rooting these claims in experiences prior to political awareness or engagement, the activists showed the “real” qualities of self that “naturally” progressed into an activist lifestyle. That is, given their current identities as activists, these anchor events fit with their larger narrative of self; the line from then until now is presented as clear and logical. What we see here is selective remembering and strategic interpretation for the sake of upholding a desired self-conception.

#### CLAIMING MORAL INTUITION

If the biographical anchor events discussed above are the seeds of consciousness formation, moral intuition is the root of such consciousness. Although intuition is, by definition, a sort of instinctual sensitivity, some women in my study described the ways such sensitivity was taught to them by others, yet minimized the impact these lessons had on their awareness of injustice. The women who claimed moral intuition described being sensitized to injustice at a young age.

Religious socialization is often thought to be a precursor to political awakening because it sensitizes people to see the social world through a moral lens (Klatch 2001). In Bjorklund’s (1998) in-depth analysis of U.S. autobiographies, she found that religious

autobiographers experimented with “the idea of a ‘moral sense’ or an ‘innate moral faculty’ . . . that served as an internal guide to moral behavior” (p. 49). Although the women described moral intuition as a natural quality of the self, religion was considered by many to be a significant agent of moral-political socialization. All three of the Jewish women—Amelia, Levona, and Winnie—referred to childhood stories of Jewish oppression as early seeds of political awareness. Christian women, particularly Catholics, noted that they were raised with an ethic that included ideas of social justice and equality. Although no women I interviewed were Quakers, several of the women said their involvement with Quakers was highly influential for the development of their political consciousness, beliefs, and forms of action, particularly non-violence.

Despite acknowledging how these moral lessons about social injustice shaped their thinking, some women activists still attached intuitive significance to this consciousness. I will call this *learned moral intuition*. Other women implicitly claimed *true moral intuition*, which they defined as an innate “sense” or “hunch” about the unfairness of injustice.

### Learned Moral Intuition

Political and religious socialization provide “sensitizing pathways” and help make people’s transition to activism smoother because they provide people with interpretive frames as well as social ties and opportunities for activism or community work (McAdam 1988; Payne 1990; Naples 1998). Many people cite religious upbringing

as important for shaping their political beliefs and their desire to engage in social justice work. Although some women described how their awareness of injustice was shaped by political and/or religious socialization, they often relied on naturalistic interpretations of their understandings of injustice. In other words, while they identified the roots of this “intuition,” they often used language that minimized the role of socialization in developing their concern for justice; hence the oxymoronic term, *learned intuition*. Annie, for example, told me that her religious upbringing and current faith provided the “spiritual underpinnings of [her] hunger and thirst for justice.”

Some women recalled childhood experiences that sensitized them to the realization that justice had to be struggled for. For example, Levona said she learned about justice through family stories about the oppression of Jews, yet constructing an authentic activist self required her to minimize the importance of socialization, and instead emphasize a more intuitive view of the world. Similarly, Annie, a 76-year-old child of coal miners, straddled the line between a learned and an “innate” sense of justice:

My core values in terms of a passion for social justice, that goes directly back to my family . . . the coal mine owners were absolutely unfettered, were really brutal in how they treated the workers, so I grew up with a strong sense that there was a lot of power differential and that workers had to struggle for any kind of justice. So I grew up with that innate knowledge.

Annie directly linked her “passion for social justice” to childhood stories about the “callous” treatment of her coal miner family members, yet she framed this knowledge as *innate*.

Symone also blurred the line between a learned and natural sense of justice.

When Symone described growing up in a union family, she said:

As a little girl, I remember my mother talking about how important it was for workers to be organized. I actually did not understand what she meant . . . but it was a very basic value that was instilled in me from a very young age. But standing up, speaking up for what’s right and what you felt was fair for you was something that . . . I guess even when I didn’t know it, it was being instilled in me.

Symone described the importance of her family’s lessons for her view of the world, yet quickly attributed her frustration with politicians to “a sense”: “I don’t know why, but I always had a sense that politicians were very out of touch with people in the community.” Again, contrary to the admitted role of socialization, many of the activists suggested that their proclivity for social justice work was “innate” or based on a “feeling.” Describing these inclinations as innate bolstered the impression that activism was an expression of a true self.

## True Moral Intuition

Some of the women's accounts suggest that women experienced anchor events that they innately interpreted as wrong—what I call *true moral intuition*. For example, Agnes, a former nun, recalled the time she sang at Sing Sing prison at Christmastime with the sisters in her religious order.

And here I am, this young [white] person, and I look up and I see who's in prison. And it's basically Blacks and Hispanics in front of me, and right then I knew something was wrong. I said, "This is not right. Something's wrong if this is the case." You know?

Claiming to know immediately that something was wrong with the disproportionate incarceration of minorities suggests Agnes's belief in her moral intuition. The self she constructs here is one that can quickly and naturally recognize injustice. Possessing such a self, how could she *not* be an activist?

Similarly, Susan had a feeling about the moral status of the Equal Rights Amendment. She recalled being an "indignant little girl" when the ERA was being debated and not understanding "why folks everywhere didn't want women to have equal rights . . . I just remember thinking that *this doesn't seem right*." Again, not having a concrete reason to back her up, Susan relied on a feeling of injustice—an intuitive sense of moral truths. Like Susan, the people around Karen lacked awareness of social injustice: "I think I always thought differently . . . I didn't have any way to know what was different, I just thought, 'something's off here. Something's not right.'" These

activists emphasized their seemingly intuitive knowledge that something was “off” or “just not right.” Others were not credited as the sources of this knowledge. Credit was instead given to a natural, unique quality of self.

Recalling things they “always” did, thought, or believed was another way activists in my study claimed a true moral intuition. Imara, who grew up in 1950s South Carolina, recalled questioning the practices of Jim Crow segregation:

I always questioned the colored water, riding in the back of the bus, [and] the colored bathroom, you know? I laugh when people talk about Rosa Parks and other people—not to take anything away from them—[but] there were thousands of kids who played Rosa. We didn’t know who Rosa Parks was, but we played Rosa Parks.

Imara suggested that questioning and resisting Jim Crow practices was intuitive to her and “thousands of kids.” Her claims of a natural inclination toward questioning unjust realities continued:

I always questioned [segregation]. I couldn’t understand why we had raggy books. I mean ripped—pages missing . . . I took chemistry and it was “Where’s your chemistry book?” I say, “chemistry book?” [laughs] I didn’t have a chemistry book. I passed chemistry because the nuns would just copy stuff . . . But then we would go to [the white Catholic school] and they would have different, nice books. And I kept asking my parents, you know, “If God is for everybody,

[laughs] how come my books look like this and their books look like that?" . . . I raise a lot of questions . . . my dad said I always had a mouth and sometimes didn't know when to be quiet. And he was exactly right. I still have it [laughs].

Imara linked her childhood curiosity with her adult tendencies to challenge injustices, ask a lot of questions, and generally speak out. By suggesting the existence of an innate quality of self—true moral intuition—that is congruent with her current identity, she bolstered the claim to authenticity.

Intuition is commonly thought to be a quality women possess. "Women's intuition" is assumed to grant women insights into others' behavior. Such an essentialist view suggests that there are "natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological nature of women and men" (Bem 1993:2), such that females are "primarily oriented toward life-giving, cooperative, nurturing activities" (Groenhout 2002: 60). Given women's psychological internalization of such notions (Bartky 1990), it is unsurprising that the women in my study saw their concern for humanity and justice as intuitive, even to the point that some saw women as the only hope for the planet. Symone articulated this well:

I believe that women are *central* to the salvation of this planet.

[Sarah: What do you mean by that?] I think that because women, at their healthiest, are nurturers. They are creative. They are visionary. Because women pay attention to the things that nurture

our spirit, that has concern for the things that keep us human and whole, at our healthiest. 'Cause I mean at our most damaged, we just as bad as men. And I don't think men are necessarily bad, it's just that there are things that men just don't pay attention to. And as I say, nurturing, the humanity, the creative spirit of us, paying attention to the planet, you know, and those things . . . I've heard people say that women are the salvation of the planet, but before I heard somebody say it, I think I've always felt it in my spirit.

If women are naturally inclined to nurture, as Symone says, then activism is, for women, an authentic expression of selfhood. It thus seems that the ideology of gender essentialism is a resource for deriving feelings of authenticity from activism, and for feeling like an authentic activist.

#### REPRESENTING LIFESTYLE CHOICES AS COMMITMENT TO ACTIVISM

The women in my study saw the personal as political. Living out their political beliefs in everyday life was, as they saw it, further evidence of an authentic activist self. Ramira, for example, described how her lifestyle choices are also political choices. Although most of the women I interviewed represented lifestyle choices as activism, Ramira and Jane articulated these points with the most sophistication and purpose. Ramira connected her movement work in the struggle to her day-to-day activities:

To be able to do that movement work . . . it has to, at some point, translate into your day-to-day. So then it starts becoming like, what do you eat? Where do you buy your clothes? What do you choose to watch for entertainment and what do you *not* [do] out of solidarity? Right? So it just becomes a culture. [Sarah: And maybe a way of life? Would you say that? ] Oh yeah. Mm-hmm.

Ramira's concern that she will inadvertently engage in hypocrisy was implicitly a concern for avoiding inauthenticity. By citing her concern with the politics of her lifestyle choices, Ramira presented herself as a wholly committed activist.

While the activists in my study described the variety of things they do in their day-to-day lives to "put their bodies where their words are," as Jane put it, they also maintain an image of congruence between their political identities and their everyday actions, much like the congruence many crafted between past experiences and current selves. The strategies the women activists used to represent lifestyle choices as activism include: (1) examining and changing consumption habits; (2) forming diverse friendships; and (3) raising children in an activist lifestyle.

### Examining and Changing Consumption Habits

Most of the activists I interviewed saw consumption habits as indicators of political authenticity. Ramira was acutely attuned to this matter, as reflected in her critique of "resistance" gear:

They want us to continue consuming. If we're afraid, as long as we deal with our fear by continuing to consume, then no problem. If we express our resistance through consumption, then, well, "Go resist away! Go buy your dharma cloak and your resistance t-shirts" and you're like [sarcastically] "awesome!" Right?

Ramira rejected the idea that her legitimacy as an activist depended on wearing "resistance gear." In fact, wearing such gear is, in her opinion, suspect because it indicates an inability to break away from unnecessary consumption. Similar comments about consumption as an indicator of progressive values were common.

In her autobiography, Cheri Register, a union organizer raised in a blue-collar, meat-packing industry town, criticizes vegetarians' propensity for claiming "moral high ground in abstaining from meat," and challenged them to take another view:

Who, I want to know, will answer for the fate of towns that depend on the productivity of the packinghouse? [Food processing] is necessary labor, worth greater rewards than it earns . . . . I will respect your challenge to my carnivorous habits if you agree to honor the people who process your food. Please ask a few silent questions before you raise your fork: Who "walked" these soybeans in the hot sun? Whose back hunched to hoe these onions? Who picked these tomatoes, as the leaves prickled and stung his

forearms? Who packed them for shipping, her elbows and finger joints steadily wearing away? (2000:45-47).

Register's "nod to vegetarians" illustrates her authentic commitment to her identity as a "packinghouse daughter." By asserting the importance of workers' rights over those of animals, Register shows that she is the "real deal"—and that vegetarians who are so quick to wrinkle their noses at the meat industry are less than authentic because they don't see, she suggests, the human needs and work behind their food—meat or vegetable.

Like Register, others admitted that it was hard to live up to their principles.

Meghan, for example, said she often asks herself:

"Am I socialist with capitalist tendencies or a capitalist with socialist tendencies?" It's a good question, isn't it? 'Cause I like new stuff. And I want new shoes and all that. I think I've decided that I'm a capitalist with socialist tendencies though. [whispers] I'm ashamed though. Don't tell anyone. [Points to recorder and says sarcastically:] Can you shut that off? [laughs loudly].

Meghan was critical of her own consumption habits, feeling ashamed of her desire to have "new stuff." By whispering and joking about the recorder, she implied this desire was a threat to her authenticity. Ramira, too, struggled to live according to her values. She tried to resist consumption altogether:

I just bought a pair of shoes from the mall. I read gossip crap on my computer. All of those are choices that I don't see being completely radical or politicized. They are blatantly *not*. For a little over a year I went on a clothing consumption fast where I decided that I was not going to buy any new clothing. Period. So I only went to consignment stores and I only did swap-a-ramas with friends. And it was awesome, and I got a lot of clothes with rips in them or didn't quite fit correctly . . . . I wish [I knew] how to sew and I would be able to tailor and repair clothing that I've bought used. I would never step foot in a mall . . . . There's a lot of places where I can grow and live more fully and authentically into what I believe. And again, I'm limited. I'm trying.

Ramira's efforts to resist excess consumption attest to her authenticity as an activist. Yet by acknowledging that she is still striving to "live more authentically," Ramira forgives her own transgressions. Claiming concern over inauthentic feelings suggests a commitment and desire to *be* real and authentic—not just to *appear* real, as those resistance consumers inadvertently do.

The motivation to avoid inauthentic behaviors or feelings requires identity work to both be *seen* as authentic and *feel* authentic. Like surface acting and deep acting as forms of emotion work (Hochschild 1979), actors must do things that will create certain identity markers both internally and externally. A key way to develop and maintain

feelings of authenticity is to be validated by others for supposedly authentic choices and behaviors. For example, in the passage below, Jane describes two practices that uphold the belief in herself as a wholly committed, authentic activist:

I guess another vision of mine is that we would really move away from fossil fuels to clean energy [and] that we would have smaller vehicles [and] we would drive them less. My new rule is that I'm gonna drive this car until I die instead of getting a fuel efficient one. My hybrid is, when I want to use the car, I ask myself, "Can you walk? Can you ride the bus? It's across the street and it's free. Can you ride your bike? Do you need to go? Can you do it tomorrow with two other things?" And then I don't take the car until I've answered all those other questions. And that's like having a hybrid. That's the closest I can become to a hybrid. I would like us to become conscious like that. To challenge in stores, is this furniture [made of] legal wood? Ask the questions. If 15 or 20 consumers came in and asked those questions, they'd have to think about it. That's not hostility; it's asking for—just being careful with resources.

By telling me about confronting retailers and her "hybrid" car, Jane provided "evidence" of her authentic self. This account demonstrated how she has deeply integrated her political beliefs into everyday life.

Some activists implied that changing food consumption habits is also an expression of commitment to larger ideas of justice. Karen, Margo, Jane, and Ramira mentioned the importance of food choices, including supporting community gardens and buying local and/or organic foods. Ramira suggested that forming relationships with people who could teach each other about sustainable foods was key to changing one's food consumption habits:

I [practice] the political action of each one teach one. So having friends that will be willing to go with me to the grocery store and teach me how to cook whole foods, you know? So that I'm not so afraid to cook quinoa. I mean what's quinoa [laughs]? I have friends that will teach me how to eat sustainable, or seasonal organic, local, environmentally sustainable foods that are whole foods—that aren't processed. Friends that will come to my kitchen and share that with me. Building those kinds of communities of support. I think it has to be really personal.

Ramira portrayed her food choices as important political action; she emphasized her small, everyday acts of resistance. She went on to diminish the power of legislation and formal politics to impact real change:

I don't know that I believe in a policy based redemption, you know? Anymore? What does it mean to turn to one of the heads of the system of oppression and ask it for justice? What does that mean?

What does that look like? I haven't seen justice really come back. I've seen agendas come back cloaked as justice. It's reform. It's a piece.

Ramira cast her everyday approach as not only more effective than formal politics, but also more authentic. Living more authentically produced more genuine feelings and appearance of authenticity. Emphasizing their efforts, admitting their limitations, and avoiding inauthentic behaviors the women implicitly accounted for real or perceived threats to their authenticity.

### Forming Diverse Friendships

In line with the idea that lifestyle choices can be considered activism, many of the activists interpreted their friendships as expressly political. It should be noted, however, that only whites in my study considered forming diverse friendships to be a political act. Citing the importance of these friendships was part of how white women claimed authenticity. For example, when I asked Amelia to tell me about her first activist experience, she described her childhood friendship with a Black girl:

Well, you know, I think it was unconscious. I believe in the unconscious. In elementary school [in the 1930's]—this was a very wealthy suburb of New York City and there was racial prejudice. And I befriended a Black girl in elementary school and I brought her home to play. And this just wasn't done . . . I was attracted to Black

children and I think it was because they were the loners. They were the isolated kids in the class. And we kept in touch for many years, [Dorothy] and I. She became a social worker and went to the same graduate school I went to.

In her interpretation of friendship-as-activism, Amelia exuded a paternalistic, white savior quality, yet she believed this was a testament to her authentically progressive self—that she was unconsciously progressive as a child. Amelia’s account of befriending a Black child in a time when “this just wasn’t done” demonstrated her lifelong attraction to progressive and oppositional choices and actions. Similarly, Margo described her flexibility with racial norms in 1960s North Carolina when her children played with Black children:

I know I shocked the neighbor across the street who was a teacher in the schools . . . My daughters brought home African American friends from school. And I know this one time, my middle daughter brought home this, to play, a Black *boy*. And they were tumbling around in the front yard and this was *appalling* to the neighbor across the street [laughs]. So you know, times have changed so people can’t get the impression of what it was like back then, Blacks as well as whites.

This is a testament to Margo’s authenticity not only because it was presented as normal and acceptable for her white children to play with Black children in 1960s North

Carolina, but also because of the slight pleasure she seemed to take in appalling her neighbor with such oppositional behavior.

Joy, a white Catholic midwesterner, moved to New Orleans in 1960 to teach in a Black school and subsequently developed friendships with local Blacks. She began to see these friendships as evidence of her commitment to racial justice and civil rights:

I think for me, the experience was just moving into the culture . . . I think maybe teaching in a Black school [was my first activist experience] . . . just being out there was part of what we did. Now when we were in Alabama, *just living* was [a political act] . . . you didn't really have to be in the street. It was just so—the prejudice and the segregation and the power struggle was just so engrained in *life* that if you did *anything* [differently] you kind of were in it.

From Joy's perspective, the mere act of having friends and comrades who were Black was political. She suggested that living "differently" was a form of political, anti-racist action that was necessary not only to get the work of civil rights and Black liberation done, but also to enrich her personal life and identity. In a similar vein, Karen, a white anti-racist activist, claimed a natural affinity for diversity, stressing the significance of diverse friendships in her life:

I think always, even as a kid, I was assertively seeking out people who were culturally different and wanting to be with them, so I think that even as a little child I would be finding the kid in the

room who was from a different country or a different color or whatever and making *friends*. So that was different from anybody else, my other three siblings, they certainly didn't do that nor did my parents. So I don't know if that would fit your description of activist. But it was certainly a wish to be a in a bigger circle. Even as a little person. For instance in high school, the girl that everybody mocked because she was poor, I ended up hanging out at her house a lot because she was brilliant and her dad was a journalist and you know I just kinda veered toward things of more substance than the official popular stuff. . . .

Here, Karen provides a backdrop against which she can display her authentic commitment to forming relationships with those who are different from her. Karen went on to link her childhood affinity for diverse friendships to her adult life, especially her relationship with Janelle, a Black woman activist who mentored her:

And through [Janelle] I learned more about the quiet, long-haul relationship building, listening, and the wisdom of the people, which changed my life. Because often I'm one of the few white people in the room. [Sarah: Have you spent much time in the Black church?] Lots. I think more than most white people. I've spent a lot of time in Black culture and Black church. Because with [our non-profit] we

were with that a lot and with the Council of Churches. And for years I would go to a little neighborhood Black church and I would be the only white person there for a long time. Yeah, I'm very comfortable in the Black church. I mean I don't like the theology generally, often the theology's real conservative, but the social ethic is not.

Karen repeatedly cited her comfort with Black people. Such comfort, one is perhaps supposed to infer, can come only from a deeply authentic activist self.

Minority women were less likely to mention friendships with whites. When they mentioned working with whites and forming friendships, they did so as if it was a given, or noted something about the racial dynamics from the white person's perspective. For example, Imara, a Black labor organizer, told me about a white comrade who worked with Black Workers for Justice, despite angering her racist husband and daughter:

I can't never forget [Louise]. She died because we realized that [at] Schlage Lock plant, quite a few of the women got cancer. [Louise] would be there with Black Workers for Justice and [she] said, "My daughter and my husband, they mad at me because I'm down with y'all Black people, but I told them that y'all looking out for me and helping me (laughs) and I'm going to be down here." Next thing we know her husband is there with his confederate flag hat helping us fix the porch. He done fixed the porch (laughter). And we was like, "Oh my God." And we did not say, "Take off your hat" neither!

(laughter) Go ahead. You're fixing the porch, you know? So, I mean, that was a lesson for us to learn but . . . when you've got unity around what's happening with you at the workplace, racism takes a back step and [Louise] was there 'til the end. She traveled with us and everything. She died of cancer but she hung in there.

Imara's friendship with Louise was important for Imara's claim to authenticity because the solidarity they shared as workers trumped their racial differences, even in the face of racist significant others. For whites, it seemed the mere act of forming diverse friendships was political in and of itself, while for Imara, and presumably other non-whites, the friendship was politicized because of the shared goal—not their differences.

In her autobiography *Bridging the Class Divide*, Linda Stout describes how she learned to form relationships across class lines. For Stout, this involved connecting with middle-class people whom she felt were condescending, even if they were well-meaning. Like Imara, Stout saw this sometimes difficult relationship building as a step toward the goal of economic justice, not a political end in itself. For Imara and Stout, accounts of these friendships reflected their desire to feel and be seen as authentic activists for economic justice, despite the challenges they faced working across differences.

## Raising Children According to Political Beliefs

Literature on motherhood and activism (Krauss 1993; Naples 1998) suggests that activist mothers often view their activism as a way to live out the identity “mother.” This was true of some of the women in my study. However, Naples (1998) found that even women who were not mothers did “mothering” work in the community, perhaps suggesting belief in women’s innate capacity to nurture others. In my study, some of the women—particularly the African American and Latina women—said raising their children “in the streets” was very important to them and was seen as valuable family time as well as commitment to the movement. The white women were less similar in their commitment to politicizing their childrearing and some noted that their adult children’s politics were wildly different from theirs. For some women, political mothering not only testified to their authenticity as activists but also to their authenticity as women, particularly those who “succeeded” in raising their children politically. Jane is one such success story.

Jane’s ability to live out her politics and rear her children accordingly was facilitated by her privileged class position. She and her husband were both college teachers and would take simultaneous sabbaticals to move their families to other communities to do volunteer work:

We said, “we have to put our bodies where our words are.” So [Dave] started looking for volunteer opportunities in the summer because he had a sabbatical coming up. And we planned to spend a

year doing volunteer work. But we'd never done it. So we said, let's do a dress rehearsal during the summer. [We] worked in the migrant ministry for a summer. We were assigned to live in a rectory in [rural] North Carolina with a very old priest, huge rectory, in a Black neighborhood, to go out and work in the migrant camps with the Spanish. And we dragged [our] two kids down there and I went around with the director of schools to see if these huts they were living in, these little cement houses, if it looked like someone was living there, we'd go sign the kids up to go to school.

Jane also told me that she and her husband served as "house parents for six boys from abusive and dysfunctional families" and did at least one other sabbatical excursion to work in a Texas school on the U.S.-Mexico border.

By "putting [their] bodies where [their] words are," she and her husband—they believed—modeled political living for their children, one of whom has become a prolific global activist and author. Jane's description of her son's political views and success as an activist was, to her, a testament to her authenticity. She expressed pride in her son's political writing and seemed to define his political vision as an extension of her own.

Wanda, too, invested a lot in the political education of her children. When I asked her if her children participated alongside her, she pointed out that her grandchild is literally a poster child for the movement:

Oh yes! Look behind you there [pointing to a poster on the wall from a local annual march and rally]. The young girl on the far right, you can barely see her head, that's my granddaughter [Brandy]. She's 8 years old. Ever since before she was born, we talked to her in her mama's stomach. She's been out campaigning in mama's stomach, [and] she's been out in the street in strollers. She marched when she was 6 years old in the [annual rally]. She's one of the poster children. So yes, all our kids—we have 2 kids and 6 grandkids—all of them are very educated with what it's all about. You have to. You lose it. [Sarah: What do you mean you lose it?] You lose your history. If you don't sit down and educate them, a lot of kids now they take things for granted, that it's a given, it's a given what we have, it's a given to be sitting in air condition, it's a given to have a bathroom. I came from a generation where we didn't have bathrooms, we had outhouses, okay? We didn't have running water inside your house.

Wanda was proud that her children and grandchildren are politically active in part as a result of the lessons she taught them. Her family's politically educated action was cast as a positive reflection of her authenticity because it extended into her family life and childrearing. Another activist, Kendra, also noted the importance of teaching children about history as a part of their political rearing. Kendra expressed pride in her

children's community theater project. Kendra's favorite part about the work she does reflected the value she places on nurturing young people (what Naples [1998] called "mothering work"):

[My favorite part] I think [is] just seeing the growth of the young people and the things that they choose to do later on, their activism, their commitments, their visions, their missions and stuff. You can't beat it. You really can't. And I get a lot of that from the young people that go through our program. And actually the children caught the bus going to Cincinnati right down here in the parking lot [of the law firm] and I came over, because I just wanted to see the enthusiasm, the excitement, of them getting on that bus and going to have this adventure after having gone through a year of learning about the Underground Railroad experience. I mean, just that! I just had that last month, and it was just awesome to see them.

In showing up to send the children off, Kendra displayed commitment to the movement. Her feelings of joy and pride were evidence of the authenticity of her activism.

Not all of the women had positive things to say about their activism and their children, yet how they described aspects of their parenting revealed a commitment to activism that in some cases seemed to take precedence over their children. Levona, for instance, admitted that activists' children sometimes suffer because of their mother's political work:

If you romanticize the political mom and great respect and so on that [activists'] children have, you don't recognize that there are serious sacrifices that the kids make. Both of [my children] have been very tolerant. I mean, I don't think they ate the best meals, or at least cooked meals. [Sarah: Because you were on the go?] Yeah, yeah.

Levona admitted that the quality of her mothering (if only in the form of cooking) suffered when she was absorbed in an organizing project. Ironically, she got involved with the children's rights group because of the perspective she gained when her children started school: "I would have been in another [different] campaign if it weren't for my kids." In describing the ways they raise their children according to their political beliefs, the women showed how their lifestyle choices embody a deep commitment to activism. Furthermore, some of the women described how their political work interfered with parenting. Given their desire to claim authentic activist selves—and not authentic mother selves—it is unsurprising that women like Levona presented this fact in a casual manner.

Living politically was an important part of activists' accounts because it showed the audience (me) the ways their lives are shaped by their politics, and solidified their claim to an authentic activist self. In other words, true, wholly committed activists do not leave their politics in the street; they bring them home and into every aspect of their lives including their consumption, relationships, and parenting. The women embodied

the principle that “the personal is political,” which suggests “that personal identity and collective identity cannot be neatly bifurcated and compartmentalized and that the persona and collective must be merged, or at least one must be enlarged to embrace the other” (Snow and McAdam 2000:51).

#### TELLING STORIES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

A fourth way that activists constructed authentic selves was through telling stories of political enlightenment. According to Snow and McAdam (2000), identity transformation involves a dramatic shift in self-conception that fractures the continuity of previous identities (p.52). When people are transformed through such a process, they often perform a “biographical reconstruction” in which the stories of their lives become congruent with or contingent upon their transformed identity (see Mason-Schrock 1996). In that sense, the women who described experiencing shifts in consciousness—and subsequently transformed identities—used the stories of enlightenment to suggest that their authentic self emerged or was discovered as a result. It was as if to say: “I wasn’t always this way, but after this experience, I was changed deeply.”

For instance, both Annie and Wanda presented their experiences coming to consciousness as turning points that allowed them to develop into the people they are today. Wanda’s upbringing was not conducive to developing an awareness of injustice, much less how to fight it; in her family, she said, it was “taboo” to be political. She

especially recalled their opposition to Martin Luther King Jr. “[My family was] programmed, I guess to say, that that man was trouble. So not knowing better myself, I veered from that ‘til I became an adult and I was like, ‘wow!’” Wanda credited participation in her labor union for the development of her political consciousness and interest in working for social justice:

The union is my basis of getting more knowledge about what’s right for working people and what’s right for females and what’s right for society as a whole. Because when you’re in school, your history classes, you don’t learn that kinda stuff. I mean, the books are based on what? [bangs hand on table with each category] Certain kinda heterosexual [bang] white [bang] men [bang] want you to know. I’m being frank, okay? But that’s the way it’s geared. The top 10 percent—this is what we want them to know. You probably know this, but in Texas they’re trying to rewrite the *history books! Okay?! Hello?! Look at how many years we were taught that Abraham, uh not Abraham, Christopher Columbus discovered America, okay? But we know that’s a farce!*

Wanda and Annie both cited barriers to learning about injustice. For Wanda it was her family and the education system; for Annie it was the Catholic Church. Both accounts noted the important role others play in the development of political consciousness, particularly as that consciousness leads to personal transformation and political action. Annie credited the Women’s Movement for awakening her consciousness:

I was Roman Catholic working class, so I had totally distorted information about birth control and so I had 5 children, and had my first 3 children by the time I was 20. . . . The Women's Movement had a huge, wonderful, liberating effect for me. And it helped me make changes in my life that I'm just still grateful for the women's movement for coming along at the time that it did. While I was still young enough that I could take advantage of these newfound understandings, so to speak.

Annie implied that if the women's movement hadn't come along when it did, she would not have made important changes in her life. Wanda's and Annie's accounts of enlightenment support their claims to authenticity because they emphasize how they have replaced their former ignorance with more intelligent understandings of the world. Enlightenment stories are thus helpful devices for explaining prior behavior that is incongruent with a current political identity.

While Annie and Wanda described being unaware, some of the women used stories of political enlightenment to cover up prior inaction, despite their awareness of certain problems. Accounting for events in their pasts (prior to enlightenment) that may threaten their claim to authenticity helped activists like Karen and Symone justify their lack of engagement. Karen felt ashamed that she was not involved with her peers in the fight against the Vietnam War or any other movements:

I was shamefully not in leadership around this stuff during college years which was the big time. I mean, it was '67-'70 when all the assassinations were going on and Kent State [shootings]. In fact, I'm sitting at my friend's house who was part of the Kent State massacre. She was in the middle of the shooting. So all that stuff was going on and I was not actively involved. I was just not educating myself around it that much. And I was looking at it kind of personally, like the guy who's heading up the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] at our school is such a little asshole. And you know, like one of those kids who was never popular and this is his groove and he's being the man right now, you know? So I would look at things more personally instead of systemically at that point.

Karen admitted to being aware of the political goings on of the time, yet did not participate for personal reasons and because she lacked a broader understanding of the issues. When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by "shamefully" not involved, she blamed her upbringing and her self-centeredness for clouding her otherwise right-spirited mind:

Well, this is a time when a lot of people my age were becoming quite conscious and active, and I was not. And I look back on it thinking that I had come from a more of a chamber of commerce philosophy household, so I just didn't have any props or encouragement such

that I was slow, you know? I mean, those were years that I could've been contributing more, but I was just coming out of my own little wackiness, I guess, at the time. Just falling in love and paying attention to kissing and reading poems more than the outside world. It was part of that pretty selfish, self-centered kinda stage that I was in. Which I think was all about my own woundedness or something. I don't know.

Karen ultimately justified her minimal involvement by suggesting that her "woundedness" prevented her from focusing exclusively on the issues. Describing this as "shameful" allowed her to admit her former wrongs without threatening her authenticity. She implied that being self-centered was a phase, after which her authentic activist self emerged.

Likewise, Symone was in college in Greensboro when the Greensboro Massacre took place in 1979, but was not involved at the time, despite wishing she could claim this as a turning point:

I wish I could say that back then that that was something that spurred me on to being an activist, but to be honest with you, it was as a graduate student when I was a volunteer in a shelter for battered women and children that I got a greater sense of being an activist. And that was because as a volunteer and then as an assistant director of a shelter and then as a shelter director, I helped

form the State Coalition Against Domestic Violence and I ended up representing North Carolina in the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. And it was through that experience that I really got a sense of what it means to be organized, what it means to actually advocate for the things that are important to you. And I was very actively involved in advocating around battered women's and domestic violence issues. So I would say in a real organized structured kind of way that that's really where my orientation comes from.

Although Symone regretted her lack of involvement in the labor organizing campaigns that led up to the Greensboro Massacre, she implied that she became enlightened through different means. In a sense, Symone justified her lack of involvement fighting for workers' rights because her "true self" emerged later, while doing anti-violence against women work.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explained how women activists used biographical narratives to craft authentic selves. My analysis of these narratives revealed four authenticity work strategies. By re-interpreting and signifying past events, the women drew an imaginary line from their past to their current selves, presenting this line as evidence of a continuous and authentic activist self. In claiming moral intuition, the

women suggested that their concerns for social justice arose naturally from their identities as women. As women, relying on claims of intuition was effective because women are commonly thought to have intuitive capabilities (see Bem 1993).

When the women represented their lifestyle choices as commitment to activism, they identified the ways they have integrated their political beliefs into their everyday lives. The women described how examining and changing consumption habits, forming diverse friendships, and raising children according to their beliefs implied evidence of their deep commitment to social justice and the authenticity of their activist identities. Lastly, telling stories of enlightenment allowed the women to define the points at which they experienced a shift in consciousness that they believe forever changed them. Having been awakened, they began to devote themselves to working for social justice. They presented this enlightenment as evidence of a true self, however belatedly conceived.

The true self is a “powerful fiction” (Mason-Schrock 1996). It is an idea that can motivate people to behave in ways that best reflect who they think they “really are.” But reflected appraisals are also important (Cooley 1902); if people want to see themselves as authentic, they must behave in ways that lead others to see them as authentic. In the case of social justice activists, the desire to feel and be seen as authentic—as well as the desire to avoid feeling and being seen as inauthentic—shaped their self-presentations and self-interpretations. To affirm their authenticity as activists, they used the strategies described here.

This chapter has explored the “great potential” (Gecas 2000:104) of the concept of authenticity for understanding people’s motivation to do social justice work. A key question that guided my exploration of this potential was: What does the subjective sense of authenticity have to do with motivation to engage in social justice activism? In other words, how does the desire to feel authentic motivate action? People’s quest to feel and be seen as authentic is arguably an important motivation for behavior (Gecas 2000). Despite the blurred distinction between the real and the concocted (Gubruim and Holstein 2009:136), individuals will behave in ways that produce feelings and the appearance of authenticity. People do not want to feel or appear phony. Franzese (2009) argues that *feeling* authentic matters more than whether or not one *is* authentic.

When people’s identities are based on strong beliefs, the stakes are higher for enacting an authentic, convincing performance because the potential for hypocrisy is great. Someone who has a sharp critique of capitalism, for instance, risks threatening the authenticity of their critique and corresponding identity if their behavior is contrary to these beliefs (e.g., spending extravagantly at a shopping mall). Activists’ identities as activists were indeed based on strong beliefs, and thus they had strong motivations for acting in ways consistent with their beliefs. To act contrary to their beliefs—in the political realm—would have induced uncomfortable feelings of inauthenticity.

In addition to the fear of being seen as or feeling inauthentic, social justice activists also face criticism and judgment from inactive others. Social justice activism is typically defined in the culture as oppositional behavior (Mansbridge 2001), so

accounting for such behavior in the face of criticism is important. If people attribute their beliefs and behaviors to innate qualities of self, there is little critics can do to resist them. In that view, activism—for people with deep beliefs in social justice—is a means to crafting an authentic self. But what is unique about activism in this quest for authenticity, if anything? Why do some people choose activism rather than bowling or gardening?

People choose certain activities to affirm cherished self-conceptions. When they're able to do this, the quest for authenticity is satisfied. The women in my study saw themselves as good, moral people who care deeply about righting the wrongs of society. In that respect, activism was a way to affirm views of themselves as good people. Activism was thus a self-authenticating behavior that gave rise to feelings of authenticity. Ferrara (2009) calls this “reflective authenticity,” which he defines as

“the cognitive moment” when the actor realizes the self as an object, and relates to it; and “the practical moment” when the actor is “oriented toward committing oneself to something” (Ferrara 2009:27).

In other words, thinking of oneself as an object and deciding how to express one’s “true self” helps individuals construct and perform who they “really are.”

The quest for authenticity, then, may be more about people committing themselves to something that will affirm positive self-conceptions (Ferrara 2009). People who are invested in their religious identities, for instance, will likely engage in

activities that reflect that, be it worship services, serving the community, voting based on a candidate's stance on an issue of importance, or spreading the word of the God they worship. When people engage in these religious activities, it reflects their self-concept and their moral and/or political belief structure.

Take an activity like bowling. People who bowl may embrace the identity "bowler," but this identity—at least in U.S. culture—is generally not seen as a sign of a person's essential character. Embracing the identity "bowler" might motivate bowling, but the depth of commitment to the identity is likely to be less deep than commitment to the view of oneself as good and moral. Activism, in contrast, affirms these deeper self-conceptions and may thus be a more powerful source of motivation. For the women in my study, "activist" was a central, powerfully motivating identity because they wanted, above all, to see themselves as moral actors committed to social justice.

This helps explain how and why activists are motivated to do the work—despite objectors, failures, and burn out. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009: 136) put it, "authenticity is constantly at stake throughout the course of interaction." Thus, through authenticity work—both self- and other-directed—activists can stand up to criticism, overcome failures, and avoid, or at least minimize, burnout because they believe and behave as if their political work is an expression of their true self. When activists believe that their political work is a means to craft and express an authentic self, they will find it comes more naturally to them. Authenticity work is thus not only self-presentational, but also self-reflective. "Self motives emerge from our past but toward a

desirable future and link self-interests with a common good, which renders self an authentic moral actor” (Weigert 2009:48). Striving for authenticity can thus be a powerful source of motivation for those who desire to be and to be seen as moral actors.

## CHAPTER 3

### “PEOPLE WHO DON’T SPARE THEMSELVES”: DISCERNING THE ACTIVIST

#### IDENTITY CODE

#### IDENTITY CODES

Following Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) theorizing about subcultural identity work, my analysis will describe how the women activists’ identity talk implicitly revealed the identity codes for social justice activists. Identity codes serve as rules for determining who is the “real deal” and who is not (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996); only people who abide by the code can effectively claim the identity. I will show how activists used practical knowledge of the code to make successful claims as real activists. Identity codes for social justice activists are similar to what Klatch (2004) called “radical credentials” in her study of former members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In creating the activist identity code, activists in my study identified behaviors and beliefs that were unique or significant to their activist groups. The women’s identity talk revealed the criteria that they believe defines a real and legitimate activist. In specifying criteria for who constitutes the “real deal,” actors also show that they are the real deal. Knowledge of the identity codes for real activists facilitated their claim to the identity.

The activists in my study did not explicitly construct the activist identity codes; however, through identity talk they revealed the criteria they deem important in their

conception of this identity. Activists' identity talk is, according to Valocchi (2010), "a creative accomplishment" whereby activists:

bring together personal biography and activist history to say something about the ideas, ideologies, and activities activists see as important; the emotions, interests, and desires that move them; and the galvanizing or inspirational moments that mark their commitments . . . in a word, their identities (Valocchi 2010:142).

This passage describes the identity talk in which the women in my study engaged. As the women told me about themselves and their own experiences as activists, they also revealed the ideas and behaviors that they believe are important indicators of what real activists do.

My analysis of women social justice activists' accounts led me to explore the following questions about how people construct activist identity codes: How do women activists define the meanings of their shared identity? How do people use knowledge of identity codes to facilitate identity claims? How are the identity codes for women activists gendered? Following Bobel's (2007) research on menstrual activists' "perfect standard of politics and activism," I identified a similar standard through analysis of interview transcripts, autobiographies, and personal essays. Bobel found that activists' core values were rigor and humility; their political actions and their evaluation of other activists reflected these values. Like Bobel's activists, rigor and humility were also core values for the women in my study.

Bobel's activists believed people have a legitimate claim to the label activist if they "live the issue,' demonstrate relentless dedication, and contribute a sustained effort to duly merit the label" (p. 147). Bobel's activists defined rigor as one's "unyielding sacrifice s/he brings to her social change efforts . . . a willingness to go to extremes in the service of the cause—no hardship, no trial is too much" (p. 153). For the activists in my study, the value of rigor was reflected in the intense activities and circumstances the women described. Real activists, according to my analysis, express the value of rigor by taking risks and making sacrifices.

Bobel referred to humility as one's "freedom from conceit or vanity" (p. 153). Her analysis demonstrated activists' reluctance to claim an activist identity, which reflected the "special status" most of them granted the label. Those who too proudly claimed it were considered arrogant. If some activists distanced themselves from the identity, it was not because it was too low in status, but because it was too high (Bobel: 2007:156). Bobel's activists either did not consider themselves worthy or, in the interest of humility, did not want to appear self-important.

The women in my study likewise wanted to appear humble. I made this difficult by asking them to talk at length about their activist activities. By doing so, I forced them to prove to me that they were worthy of the "activist" identity, yet to be worthy of this identity the women also had to appear humble. Ironically, the interview situation created an identity dilemma for the women.

For instance, during my interview with Jane, she told me about the work she did in the late 1970s helping immigrants “get legal and get health care.” Seconds after she described being “chased off with a gun” by a farmer on whose land the immigrants were living and working, she interrupted herself to ask me, “Am I talking too much?” Her brief concern for violating the standard of humility dissipated with my encouragement and she continued with ease. These expressions of humility are not just disclaimers; they seemed to be part of the activist identity code itself (cf. Bobel 2007). Autobiographers and memoirists faced a similar dilemma; they undertook to write about themselves, but had to do so without implying that they were more important than the social justice struggles in which they engaged.

In this chapter, I will explain how the women performed the identity “activist” for me, showing their worthiness of being included in my study. In doing so, the identity work they did for themselves revealed what the women considered to be important markers of the identity—or the identity codes for—“real” activists. According to my analysis, real activists reflect the values of rigor and humility by taking risks and making sacrifices; they reflect the value of humility by demonstrating steadfast, yet humble, dedication. Through these individual identity work strategies, the women in my study revealed clues about what they think real, dedicated activists ought to do. This chapter relies heavily on my analysis of activists’ autobiographies and personal essays from *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010).

## TAKING RISKS

Political activism often entails an element of risk. Activists who take risks earn respect and credibility as legitimate activists who are dedicated to the cause, movement, and/or group. Women's accounts identified three specific risk-taking behaviors: (1) getting out of one's comfort zone; (2) risking arrest and jail; and (3) risking violence and death.

### Getting Out of One's Comfort Zone

Agnes stressed the importance of risk-taking for bringing about real change, starting with getting out of one's comfort zone. She simultaneously claimed knowledge of and allegiance to the risk-taking behaviors involved in the code:

I don't think change happens unless you're willing to risk. Period. It doesn't happen because you sit home and watch TV or get on the Internet and do Facebook all night long. It changes because you're willing to do something. And for me, the challenge is how do you get people, comfortable people, out of their comfort, security zone?

Their safe, what they're used to, comfort zone. It's a challenge.

For Agnes, taking risks began with getting out of one's comfort zone, but she insisted that risk was necessary for making change, a claim that validated the risks she took; these risks were not in vain, but were for the goal of making social change.

In essays about their involvement in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), activists described their risk-taking in more concrete terms. The passages below showed how these risks—taken when participating in sit-ins and other nonviolent actions—involved physical, psychological, and institutional dangers. They also showed the activists’ deliberate risk-taking, given their awareness of the consequences:

We paid some very, very high prices for our gains—lives lost, mental and physical damage, economic and social destabilization, governmental enmity and invasion—but I think without a doubt most of us would do it again without hesitation (Muriel Tillinghast 2010:256).

We had to think about the repercussions for our parents and for ourselves. We would sure face expulsion from school, our only avenue to a decent living. We might have a criminal records, and we might be beaten or worse once inside the jail (Angeline Butler 2010:42).

Many people paid a dear price for the cause of human justice. There were some students who got so involved that they never finished college and gave up possible lifetime careers for the Movement.

Some were not mentally, emotionally, or physically able to return. Some have since suffered mental breakdowns and nervous disorders. There were people who lost their jobs because their children or other family members were involved. . . . In some ways I was not ready for everything that happened to me—jail, being expelled, canvassing. I don't think anyone was, but it was time and there was no turning back. The call was a compelling force (Janie Culbreth Rambeau 2010:97-98).

As these passages suggest, the concrete risks involved being arrested, jailed, beaten, killed, ridiculed, fired from jobs, and expelled from school. Consider the well-known risk-taking behaviors of famous activists like Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King Jr. Many activists from the Civil Rights Movement—both women and men—viewed freedom and justice as worth the risk of violence or death. In the introduction to *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, the author-editors described the reality of the situation in which risk-taking was normalized and considered necessary:

When you open this book you will enter a different world, a world where danger is ever present. Beatings, shootings, bombings, and church burnings happen all too frequently. The issue of the day is always: how to make social and political change, how to press forward, how to keep going – in short, how to make a movement. In this world, freedom and justice are real, solid, and tangible.

Freedom and justice are the reasons for being and doing, and the reasons for dying (2010:5).

Urging the reader to enter a “different world where danger is ever present” is also an opportunity for activists to construct the code of a real activist. The women in these pages, they suggested, were dedicated to the movement—the real deal. The women in this book—it is implied—are authentic not only because of the risks they took and the dangers they faced, but also because they were *women* doing it. Voluntarily facing danger is not typically expected from women, and often discouraged.

Despite the shouts of women’s empowerment by many of the women authors in this book, many others were unenthusiastic about the intense risks required by the work. SNCC activist Jeannette King, for instance, described the discomfort she felt participating in risk-taking actions. Yet she showed her dedication despite thinking of herself as a “coward”:

Because I believed in our goals, I pushed myself far beyond my personal comfort level when it was required, though I felt more comfortable being the person who cooked the meals and housed people. Internally, I often labeled myself as a coward, because I could not be enthusiastic about demonstrations and being in the middle of sometimes dangerous situations” (King 2010:229).

King’s lack of enthusiasm about risking danger led her to question her complete devotion to the cause, policing her own feelings and behaviors with regard to the code.

Yet this internal reflection also prevented her from violating too seriously a gender code that would discourage her from taking such risky actions. In calling herself a coward, she simultaneously avoided gender inappropriate behavior for herself and highlighted the bravery of her comrades who put themselves in harm's way for the cause. In this view, King laid claim to the courageousness of a genuine activist without defeminizing herself.

As women activists followed the codes for real, devoted activists by engaging in dangerous actions, they also deviated from prescribed gender codes that are intended to keep them out of the public sphere, and out of harm's way. "Women's activism always challenges domestic as well as public power relations because by the very act of taking a position in the public domain, women violate their patriarchal assignment to domesticity" (Roy 1998:115). However, the following passage suggests that women used this patriarchal assumption to their advantage when dealing with whites. SNCC activist Victoria Gray Adams described the gendered nature of risk-taking during the Civil Rights Movement:

Women were out front [of the MFDP<sup>3</sup>] as a survival tactic. Men could not function in high-visibility, high-profile roles where we come from, because they would be plucked off. . . . Think about how many of them were killed simply because they went down and tried to register to vote. . . . The women had to do it (Adams 2010:237).

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<sup>3</sup> Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

At first, Adams suggested that putting women out front was merely a survival tactic of the movement—a necessary strategy. Yet she continued with a more existential argument about the power of black women:

Dying isn't so bad, but dying and nothing is ever going to be done about it, that's foolish. That's very foolish. You don't sacrifice your life just for the heck of courageousness when you know nothing is going to come of it. Nobody's going to pay the price of having taken your life. . . . That's why the women were out front. The white folks didn't see the women as that much of a threat. White thinking has always been, 'if you controlled the men, you got the rest of them covered.' They didn't know the power of women, especially black women (Adams 2010:237-238).

Ultimately, Adams turned the survival tactic of the MFDP into an example of the strength and power of black women. By putting themselves in situations where black men would be “plucked off,” the women in MFDP, according to Adams, demonstrated their commitment to the cause. One specific action women activists deemed code-worthy was risking arrest.

#### Risking Arrest: Have you Been to Jail for Justice?

A willingness to face arrest and be jailed is an important aspect of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. In Martin Luther King's famous “Letter from

Birmingham Jail,” he described his interpretation of unjust laws and urged the morally-inclined to disobey them. He wrote, “One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’” In that way, going to jail was a politically significant act because it not only highlighted the unjust laws and the moral fortitude to break them, but it also strained state resources. The frequent practice of “jail no bail” created a situation where activists were arrested and instead of providing the state with money from bail fees, they crowded jails and strained state resources as acts of resistance.

Like many other important movement ideas, the political significance of jail was communicated through song. For example, Anne Feeney’s “Have you Been to Jail for Justice?” suggests, “folks with guts” go to jail for justice:

You law abiding citizens  
Come listen to this song  
Laws are made by people  
And people can be wrong  
Once unions were against the law  
But slavery was fine  
Women were denied the vote  
While children worked the mine  
The more you study history  
The less you can deny it  
A rotten law stays on the books  
'til folks with guts defy it!  
Have you been to jail for justice?  
I want to shake your hand  
'Cause sitting in and laying down  
Are ways to take a stand  
Have you sung a song for freedom  
Or marched that picket line?  
Have you been to jail for justice?  
Then you're a friend of mine

This song captures the essence of nonviolent civil disobedience. By praising and encouraging righteous defiance, the song also promises friendship and a sense of purpose for taking such a risk. Going to jail for justice signifies true devotion to the cause. The acknowledgment of righteous risk-taking is important. In the activist code, the meaning of being arrested and jailed is reinterpreted as an honorable consequence of nonviolent resistance. For instance, SNCC activist Joann Christian Mants described her family's shift in what jail meant to them. It was once considered "degrading," she said, but became a "badge of honor" because of what the action represented:

[Daddy] called all of our family about my being in jail. It was the talk of the family. It was degrading for anyone to go to jail during my early life, and every effort was made to avoid this, but this time, *jail became almost a badge of honor*, because it was related to something that, hopefully, would be for the betterment of all (Mants 2010:131; my emphasis).

Transforming the meaning of being jailed from shameful into honorable reflected the movement belief that unjust laws are worth breaking—a sentiment frequently expressed in social justice movements as justification for orchestrated civil disobedience and mass arrests. Accounts of jail in women's narratives offered the women a chance to illustrate their intense devotion to the movement by noting what genuine activists were willing to endure. However, since one aspect of the code is to practice humility, activists must not sound overly proud of those experiences.

Although most of the women remained humble in their accounts, a few women felt compelled to non-humbly emphasize their sacrifices. For example, SNCC activist Annette Jones White—former Miss Albany State, she reminded the reader repeatedly—claimed to be so devoted that she cut ahead in line to ensure her arrest so that she could make her statement of commitment and claim her identity as a real activist by following this crucial aspect of the code:

As the first mass arrests in Albany began, I felt as though my whole life had been geared toward that moment. Fearing that the cells would fill before I could be booked, I kept moving toward the beginning of the line, asking person after person if I could get in front of them, because I wanted to be certain I would be arrested. I wanted to make my personal statement (White 2010:111).

White's account of the filthy and overcrowded conditions of the jail, plus her reminding the reader of her beauty, seemed to exaggerate her suffering. Her account thus borders on violating the norm for humility. SNCC activist Diane Nash's narrative about deliberately enduring jail under difficult circumstances suggests that activists who are truly and deeply devoted put the movement first—above personal comfort and condition. Diane Nash, who ran "workshops encouraging young people to desegregate the buses," went to jail pregnant. After a warrant for her arrest for "contributing to the delinquency of minors" was issued, she turned herself in to the authorities in part because her conscience demanded it, but also as an act of moral resistance:

It would have been wrong to encourage [local] people to make such tremendous sacrifices, to put themselves in such jeopardy and then leave them before we reached the goal of getting the right to vote. . . . After I made that decision . . . I was invincible. There was really nothing anybody could do to hurt me. If they had killed me, I was ready. I knew I could handle it. . . . When I entered that Mississippi jail, not the least accommodation was made for my advanced pregnancy, and it was clear that the jail administrators intended to make my stay as difficult as possible (Nash 2010:79-80).

Nash's account implied that her devotion to the movement was so deep that she was willing to accept minimal standards of care for her and her unborn child. It was risky for any civil rights worker to go into a Mississippi jail in 1962, but Nash's pregnancy added a level of risk, and in doing so, she could claim a higher level of devotion. In highlighting the risks they took, White and Nash were perhaps less than exemplars of humility.

In other cases, jail was preferable to facing violence. For example, Anne Moody's account of her experience in a demonstration—a "pray-in"—at a Mississippi post office revealed the relative risks civil rights workers faced:

We stood and bowed our heads as the ministers began to pray. We were immediately interrupted by the appearance of Captain Ray. "We are asking you people to disperse. If you don't, you are under arrest," he said. Most of us were not prepared to go to jail. [Some of

us] had to take over a workshop the following day. Some of the ministers were in charge of leading a mass rally that night. But if we had dispersed, we would have been torn to bits by the mob. The whites standing out there had murder in their eyes. They were ready to do us in and all fourteen of us knew that. We had no other choice but to be arrested (Moody 1968:295).

Moody's account demonstrated the difficult choices activists had to make, while signifying the activist code. Only dedicated activists, she implied, would put themselves in situations where their only choices were jail or violence.

### Risking Violence and Death

Accounts of risking violence and death were frequent in the published material I analyzed, and less so in the interviews. SNCC activist Muriel Tillinghast and others described the "warlike conditions" (2010:253, 256) under which SNCC workers lived and worked. In her essay "If we Must Die," Janet Jemmott Moses pointed out the ever-presence of death, and the value of risking it: "I decided that I would risk my life to stay alive, to walk in the sun without shame or guilt for not doing what in my heart I knew I should do" (2010:266).

In *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody describes a night spent hiding out in the tall grass behind the SNCC Freedom House after she and her comrades received a tip that the Klan was going to pay them a visit. Her account illustrates not only the great

pains they took to protect themselves, but also her commitment to the cause. Only a dedicated activist would endure such experiences:

I was wrapped in [a bedspread] and after lying still [in the tall grass] for what seemed like hours, I began to get very cold and stiff. I couldn't hear a sound and I began to feel like I was all alone out there. . . . I wondered if the others were feeling as alone and scared as I was. . . . I kept thinking about what might happen to us if they found us out there. I tried hard not to think about it. But I couldn't help it. I could see them stomping us in the face and shooting us (Moody 1968:328).

As Moody's account suggests, courage became an important part of the activist identity code. Another SNCC activist spoke to this:

The courage I witnessed in the communities where I worked was beyond reason, beyond the level of the rational! Fueled by their freedom-faith, Southwest Georgia residents were willing to walk face-to-face with the forces of death in the struggle for life (Prathia Hall 2010:180).

Living under the threat of violence is psychologically taxing. Anne Moody's account of having a gun in the freedom house signified the psychological struggles that accompany facing such risks:

Now that we had a gun around the house, my fear seemed to get worse. . . . I actually wondered sometimes whether [another SNCC worker] had been placed in the Freedom House by the whites. . . . I knew that kind of thinking could eventually destroy us. . . . In order to sleep at night, I finally had to resort to sleeping pills. . . . At the sound of the anything, [the other SNCC workers] were up peeping out of their window with the guns in their hands. It had gotten to the point we had to wake each other up when one of us needed to use the bathroom. I was scared that if I had gone to the bathroom and stumbled over something that they would have shot the hell out of me (Moody 1968:259-261).

Including this account in her autobiography helped Moody accomplish a couple of things. First, it showed the intensity of the risks activists faced, which many readers may want in such a book. Second, she identified willingness to risk violence and death as the mark of a real activist.

Agnes also used a story about putting herself in harm's way for the cause during the 1980s Iran-Contra Affair to describe risk-taking as a part of what real activists do. Outraged by U.S. foreign policy, especially the illegal funding of the Contras in Nicaragua, Agnes led a delegation of people in protest:

We helped stop Contra Aid. But it meant that I was in the midst of what was happening in Nicaragua. We went into the villages where

there was fighting going on. The way it all started was, we went to a village that was under attack when we arrived. We were within a few hundred yards of the Honduran border and you could see the Contra Command Center. And they said, “They’ve stopped shooting because they can see you.” One of the Peace Corps volunteers said, “All it takes to stop the killings is to have U.S. people in the [way]. Let’s call for a vigil.” [One of the revolution’s commandants supported the idea]. So here’s this little group from North Carolina has clearance to be in a warzone. So, in April we . . . put out a call through the Inter-religious Task Forces across the country and through the American Services Committee, for people to come back to Nicaragua. By July 3rd we brought enough people to fill an airplane back to Nicaragua....In August they would get clearance that they could be in a warzone, without military—that we would be nonviolent.

Agnes’s story about her “little group from North Carolina” being allowed in a war zone and facilitating a cease-fire implied that risk-taking was an important part of the activist identity code. Risk-taking was a way to demonstrate commitment to the movement; accounts of risk-taking bolstered claims to the activist identity.

## MAKING SACRIFICES

The women activists described the sacrifices they have made individually, as well as the sacrifices they had known others to make for the cause. Praiseworthy sacrifices included health sacrifices, lifestyle and economic sacrifices, and relationship sacrifices. According to this aspect of the activist identity code, sacrificing for the cause is both vital and honorable (see Hirsch 1990). For example, Meghan lamented the constant strain her body, relationships, and other obligations endure as a result of her political work:

[I try] to make sure I'm present for [my son's] wrestling and track that's in a 100-mile radius anyways. And let's say by chance I don't really have anything this one weekend [gasps!]. Can I lay in my bed or do my laundry or clean up!? The things that other normal people do all the time!? Can I spend some time doing that? So I may not even want to go [to a meeting for something else] even if I am available. So it's a real struggle. It also shows your level of commitment to something because there are [some] things that I will be sure I'm there for.

In describing the challenges of meeting her family obligations, as well as the rare occasion when she could do "the things that other normal people do," Meghan implied that real activists understand that activism prohibits a normal life. Sacrificing time and energy is par for the course.

The importance of making sacrifices was emphasized by those who described their own sacrifices as well as those made by others. The power of sacrifices for elevating the status of activists was made clear by Audre, who lamented the apathy she encountered when speaking to young people about the importance of political engagement:

I speak a lot at historically black colleges, and we'll start talking about why I got involved and what I do. And the Civil Rights Movement will come up and you'll get some kids rolling their eyes like, "That is so long ago," you know? "Look where we are now", and every time someone does that I think, "when you wave your hand like that you better thank the people who came before you. You wouldn't even be sitting here." It's just sort of dismissive . . . . If it hadn't been for the sacrifices of some of these folks in the past we wouldn't have it.

Audre's frustration at young people's lack of understanding and connection to "the people who came before" them provided the opportunity to stress that a willingness to make sacrifices was a quality that deserved respect.

Unlike the protestors Hirsch (1990) studied, whose commitment to the movement required a *temporary* "disconnection from comfortable daily routines" (p. 244) which they deemed sacrificial, the women in my study claimed to incorporate sacrifices as a part of their long-term daily routine. Karen, for instance, said that the

greatest challenge she faces as a professional activist is the “cost and sacrifice” it requires:

You know, there’s a lot of costs and sacrifice. Like, financially? I don’t have any retirement plan. I had to buy my own health insurance. I mean, fiscally you just give up a lot.

Activists like Karen showed how making sacrifices reflects their deep commitment and their knowledge of the code. Karen, who is white and highly educated, would probably otherwise be employed with a decent salary and benefits. She is forthright about the personal sacrifices she makes for the cause. Although she admitted that the sacrifice is the greatest challenge, her account suggested that her devotion is so deep that she was willing to “give up a lot.” Sacrifice is thus an expression of an activists’ rigor and a sign of being a real activist.

Financial and lifestyle sacrifices were not the only ones willingly endured by activists. Many of them also reported making health and wellness sacrifices. From Jane’s brief and minor sacrifice facing the cold when she “spent four days freezing with Code Pink” [protesting the Iraq War], to others who contracted serious illnesses, sacrificing one’s health helped them illustrate the criteria of the activist identity code, putting the movement before themselves. For some, health sacrifices were consequences of serious actions, such as being jailed in unsanitary, overcrowded establishments, and for many, fasting in jail. Other times, activists neglected their health and became ill as a result of stress and poor health habits that come with overworking.

A theme in lesbian anti-racist activist Mab Segrest's autobiography is how her devotion to her political work literally made her sick. On more than one occasion, Segrest noted "puking her guts out" as a response to the violence and turmoil she experienced organizing against white supremacy groups in North Carolina. "Four years of full-time anti-Klan organizing and I began to get sick. First it hit my stomach, and I was up all night puking" (p. 183). Explaining the intense stress she experienced as she devoted herself completely to the movement, she said, "I felt like I had crawled out to the end of a long limb in a high tree, and somebody was sawing it off" (1994:123). Segrest's accounts suggested the toll on one's health that activism can take.

Faith Holsaert, a white SNCC activist, described how her personal health sacrifices were not just a consequence of the work, but also the inability to get proper treatment as a northern, white civil rights worker in the South:

When I left jail, I felt weak. I thought this was the result of our hunger strike, but I did not recover for weeks. . . . I woke on hot mornings and struggled up from sopping, fever-soaked sheets. [I went to see] a local black doctor. . . . Seeing me as a patient, the doctor was breaking Southern prohibitions. During the exam he could not look me in the eye, much less touch me. I believe he didn't send my specimens out. He could have suffered reprisals for sending the specimens of a white female to the state lab. He was

trapped and so was I. I left his office without a diagnosis and with only his advice to rest (Holsaert 2010:190-91).

Holsaert's account illustrates how she put the movement before herself by seeing a Black doctor who gave her no real medical assistance, rather than leaving the South and returning home to see a doctor who could treat her. Her worsening illness did not stifle her commitment to the movement:

I was failing physically, sleeping feverishly. Worse, none of us knew what was the matter with me. . . . I went to see a doctor while I was up north before joining my co-workers for the March on Washington. In New York, my family doctor saw my yellowed eyeballs and ordered lab work. Hepatitis. "Junkie's hepatitis" he called it. Knowing I had never taken drugs, the doctor and I assumed I had contracted this illness in jail. . . . The hepatitis drained me for the next year. . . . I was told the virus had altered my blood. Even if I had a son or daughter who needed a transfusion, my blood was so compromised that no one, including my child, should receive it (Holsaert 2010:194).

Holsaert's account of contracting a disease in jail helped her demonstrate the deep risks and sacrifices real activists—like her—are willing to endure. Another act of sacrificial resistance and commitment is hunger striking.

Sacrifices do not need to be life threatening to signify authenticity as an activist. In the passage below, Levona offers her overflowing email inbox, interrupted sleep patterns, and wage-less work as evidence of her commitment to organizing:

We don't sleep. If you're really an organizer, it's never quiet. And then if you are that means you're not an organizer anymore, I think . . . I mean, I wake up organizing. As a matter of fact, sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night organizing. There's always something to organize. I'm sure that this is not unusual, but you just look at my 2000 emails or something or my newspaper digest, I mean, my God, it's just never ending. It doesn't pay, [laughs] but you can always find work as an organizer.

Levona's account implies that her devotion was so deep that she sometimes sacrificed a good night's sleep over it—as a good organizer might do. Also, by emphasizing the importance and amount of the work over the financial rewards, Levona hinted at the financial sacrifice activism often requires. By suggesting that financial compensation for their work is less important and that they will do the work whether they are paid or not, activists like Levona demonstrated their worthiness of the activist identity.

Constantly thinking about organizing was commonly cited as evidence of devotion. Here, Meghan describes how she sacrificed herself for the movement:

This is a way of being. It's not a job. I'm lucky. I'm *blessed* that I get paid to do infrastructure work. But my passion, it's not a job to me.

That means it never ends. I wake up thinking about it; I go to sleep thinking about it. It is how I define myself. It is very important to me. It *is* me.

Meghan emphasizes her commitment to the work and its intrinsic rewards. But this devotion was not without cost. Her ex-husband, she said, did not sympathize, and they eventually split up:

[Sarah: Are you and your children's father together?] Not any longer. I think this work had a lot to do with that. My passion and my not being home every weekend to clean and cook and say "Yes, sir." You know, I think that had a lot to do with why we aren't together now. [He] felt like I worked too hard. And he felt like, "Well you get paid for your 9-5 job, and you get paid for 40 hours a week and I feel like you're working 60 every week. And you're not getting paid and so you're giving away our money to these causes." And what I think he understands now is that I don't really have a choice.

As Meghan's account suggests, intense devotion to something sometimes requires sacrifices in other areas of life. Meghan elevated the importance of her dedication to "a way of being" relative to her marriage. In other words, she implied that she was willing to sacrifice an intimate relationship with her children's father to pursue her passion and work.

Karen's account revealed a similar sacrifice she endured because of her deep commitment to anti-racist work:

You know [a big challenge is] the alienation from my family and a lot of white people. I mean they all say they love me and think I'm fabulous, but it's just a—it's a loneliness when you see the structural reality differently than the majority of people. You're living in a different understanding of reality and that can be lonely.

Karen's willingness to accept loneliness as the price of anti-racist work solidified her claim to an activist identity.

Margo tripped over the very meaning of the word sacrifice. On the one hand, she defined sacrifice in financial terms. On the other hand, she defined it in terms of comfort-level and lifestyle:

[Sarah: Do you think that sacrifice is an important part of doing political activism?] Sacrifice is another word that needs to be defined. . . .The word sacrifice to me means . . . that a person, like Doctors without Borders and people that go into places to give up a lucrative vocation to go help other people. To me that's more of a quote "sacrifice," but even those people can do good work in the Third World but they come back and they have something here. So sacrifice is really, I don't know if I like that word or not.

Margo's critique of Doctors without Borders, for instance, is that they have "too much." Instead, she suggested that "living simply" is a better way to sacrifice for the cause, and that most people—including herself—have too much to call their contributions a real sacrifice:

There are people who live simply. What I would say, is if a person can live simply to do what, to me, would be considered good in the world. I have so much here [pointing around her spacious yet bare living room] that I just feel that shouldn't be considered a sacrifice. I just think that I have so much more than so many people in the world. If people saw the Palestinians—I mean, it's amazing. Going places, um [choking back tears] in Palestine or Latin America [poor] people open their homes and feed visitors, and they have nothing! I don't like the word sacrifice, really.

Ultimately, Margo decided that the financial sacrifices made by those with "lucrative vocations" are less admirable than the sacrifices of those who have nothing. Despite what she said about not liking the word sacrifice, Margo praised people like Amy Goodman and Ann Wright for "giving up everything":

I admire [Amy Goodman] and Naomi Klein and Medea Benjamin, all these people, Ann Wright, I could down the list. There are many, many people that are doing so much more than *I'm* doing. I mean, they're just fantastic, and *they give up everything*.

Although Margo's admiration for the sacrifices made by some of her celebrity activist role models contradicts her dislike for the word sacrifice, this contradiction was not uncommon. It was a consequence, as I will explain later, of the importance activists placed on humility.

Like Margo, when Kendra described an activist she admired, she emphasized the sacrifices he had made for the cause:

The gentleman who had the jewelry store [was] very, very, very committed to the community. And he took a risk, at that time, to even let us meet in his jewelry store. He was not making a fortune selling the jewelry, because whites were not inclined to come and buy from him. And he had a family. So I just admired the sacrifice that he made. I just thought that was tremendous. [Sarah: Do you think it was his sacrifice that was a big influence on you?] Yeah, for him to put himself out there like that. I don't know that consciously I thought about that, but my circumstances were not what his were, ever, actually. And if he could do that, I don't know how I could not. I just don't know that I had any option.

Kendra acknowledged the influence the jewelry store owner had on her development as an activist, including her understanding of the importance of sacrifices. However, when I asked her to elaborate, she denied the sacrifices she made:

I don't think I feel like anything was a sacrifice. Well, one of the things, before our son was born in '70, I became a stay-at-home mom, so we didn't have my income, but I always found ways to just put a little money aside. . . . I've always found a way to take whatever little money I had and put it in there. I never thought about it as being a sacrifice. I thought about it as being that—I don't like the word obligated to do, but I can't think of another word now, but it was just what I was supposed to do. . . . So I found the money to pay for [things] and then when we ran out of money I begged some other people. . . . No thoughts about sacrifice, it's just what needed to be done.

Like Margo, Kendra struggled to find the right word. Wavering between sacrifice and obligation, she ultimately said it was “just what needed to be done.” Despite describing very similar practices as the jewelry store owner she so admired, Kendra denied that she made sacrifices.

Amelia revealed a similar attitude when she described how she defined herself politically, explaining how being a leftist is rooted in humanistic values. Instead of describing the sacrifices she made, she emphasized the sacrifices she *would* make:

I believe everyone is entitled to a good life, and I would certainly be willing to pay taxes to the hilt if I was sure it was going to facilitate the quality of life for everyone to improve, especially those who

have been suffering. That doesn't bother me, lowering my own standard of living to enable others to rise up. Yeah.

Amelia here connects her political identity with the practice of making sacrifices for the greater good. In so doing, she also minimizes her own self-interest and alludes to another quality of real activists: humility. Statements like this were common; with a few exceptions, the women avoided arrogance and conceit in their accounts.

#### "I DO WHAT I CAN": DEMONSTRATING STEADFAST, YET HUMBLE, DEDICATION

Several of the women were hesitant to label their political work as activism because they were convinced that other activists were better, more dedicated, or more serious, or they felt that they were, as Annie said, "not really all that active" (cf. Bobel 2007; Blackstone 2004). Statements like these suggest that when women's involvement does not live up to their own expectations of real activist behavior, as specified by the code, they are reluctant to claim activist identities. In their hesitation, they revealed the importance of demonstrating steadfast, yet humble, dedication. Coming off as a martyr or a braggart can raise doubts about one's devotion to social justice (Bobel 2007). Arrogance also violates gender norms that oblige women to be modest.

In interviews and recruitment observations, women activists were hesitant to claim the political label "activist." For example, at a vigil protesting the Israeli blockade of Gaza, a few women whom I tried to recruit for interviews insisted that I should talk to someone else because, as Jane told me, "there are people more interesting or

dedicated than me.” When I interviewed Jane a few weeks later, she continued: “I’m honored that you picked me out of that incredible group of women out there.” This expression of humility allowed Jane to acknowledge the dedication of her peers, yet implied her own dedication.

Although Margo admitted that she did a lot, she minimized her contributions by saying, “There are many, many people that are doing so much more than I’m doing.” Margo humbled herself by suggesting that she was less worthy of the identity because she did not do as much as others. Similarly, Winnie minimized her contributions when she said her approach to political work was more like “freelance activism—of doing some of this and some of that, and going to events.” Rather than focusing deeply on one issue or another, she said she focused on providing support and solidarity. She admitted that others were better at this:

There are people who don’t spare themselves. Who don’t think, “I would just rather stay home and watch TV tonight or go out to dinner with a friend.” You know, there [are] people who, I don’t know how they go to *everything*, and are involved in all the causes and all the organizations. [Margo] is everywhere. She’s everywhere.

Like Margo, Winnie minimized her own contributions and praised those of others, thereby displaying both humility and generosity. This portrayal of “activist”—dedicated yet humble—was common. Many of the women were reluctant to claim the identity for themselves, despite doing the things they associated with being an activist. Whatever

they were doing never seemed to be enough; there was always someone thought to be doing much more. For instance, SNCC activist Janet Jemmott Moses diminished the importance of her steadfast protest activity:

Two years of picketing of Woolworth's stores in support of the campaign against segregated lunch counters didn't seem to be enough when others were putting their lives on the line (Moses 2010:266).

When activists like Moses policed themselves in this way, they revealed a tentativeness about the value of their contributions and devotion, relative to others. In the passage above, Moses questions her two years of picketing—what many would consider deep commitment—as not being committed enough because she was not risking death. I expand the discussion of such social comparisons in the next chapter.

Although there was the tendency to minimize one's contributions, some women managed to accept that there were limitations on what they could contribute. These women avoided guilt or self-doubt by taking an "I do what I can" attitude, as Karen did:

I mean, I do what I can. For instance, I've been a refugee sponsor.

You know, I do what I can in my little pieces against injustice. Part of it is just humility and knowing that you can't end it all by yourself.

So you do what you can.

Karen did not minimize her contributions as Margo, Winnie, and Moses did, yet she still identified humility as part of the code by citing her efforts as "little pieces." On one

hand, activists saw themselves as not doing enough; on the other, they acknowledged that they cannot do everything. Both are modest summations of their work because they neither claim to be “doing it all” nor take credit for accomplishing major things.

The importance of modest contributions to social movements was not understated; this allowed the activists to celebrate the small jobs they did without bragging. After all, campaigns for social justice require hundreds of small tasks and the commitment of many people. Having a physical and visible presence is often crucial for the strength and sustenance of political movements. Because of the importance of sheer numbers, “solidarity activists”—people who believe in the cause and show up to protests and rallies, but who are otherwise uninvolved in organizing campaigns—are granted access to the activist identity. In this respect, although there are activists who are considerably more dedicated to the cause and thus more worthy of claiming a real activist identity, people who show up in solidarity are also appreciated. These ancillary supporters allow the major players to do more. Without the presence of solidarity activists, all the work the “good soldiers” like Levona do would be in vain:

Smithfield was my first union work, and you know [I was] just developing. I was like the good soldier. I was getting people to demonstrations. I was getting people [involved], bringing the struggle into the church, raising money for the strikers, and so on, always looking at how I can better organize.

As Levona described the importance of showing up in solidarity and how doing the small jobs makes a movement tick, she also reiterated an important part of the real activist code: doing what one can for the cause, however small that something may be.

Jane echoed this:

It's like a mosaic. You feel like you're part of a mosaic because there are different people doing different things, and you are part of it. You don't have to be doing it all. . . . Whatever your skills are, they can fit it. Like, I make good signs. I'm not as good at articulating issues, some of them are just incredible at articulating issues, and others are right out there with labor, and right out there at the beginning of issues. I kind of take notes, and I march, and I vigil, and I'm the treasurer, and I'm on the steering committee, but I've never been the person who—I might get ideas, but I'm not the person who [is] going out and sitting down with labor unions. There's hardcore people—those are the kind of people I was trying to sic you on.

Because they are far more hardcore activist than I am.

Despite listing at least six ways she contributes to her political organization, Jane minimized the importance of her work because she does not see herself as “hardcore.” Jane's insistence that others make more valuable contributions also implies humility. Jane lists her contributions, then immediately downplays them, much like many women

do when they speak apologetically and with disclaimers (Lakoff 1973). Again, this aspect of the activist identity code overlaps with norms for feminine self-expression.

Emphasizing the importance of the little things activists do allowed the women to celebrate the “unknowns”—the people who do a significant amount of activist work behind and on the scene, but who get little or no credit or recognition for their efforts. The Civil Rights Movement, for example, would not have been possible without the efforts of countless unknown women and men. In particular, women’s contributions to social movements have been widely marginalized—by movement leaders and scholars alike—despite women’s widespread and deep involvement (Payne 1990; Clark 1990; Blee 1998).

Since most of the women I interviewed are also “unknowns,” this admiration allowed them to describe their significance, without boasting about their accomplishments. Audre, for instance, described the importance of activists who devote themselves to the cause with no name recognition. Here, she implicitly elevates her own status (as an unknown) by stressing the point that unknowns make change happen:

[In] *Eyes on the Prize* there’s this really dramatic scene where there’s a young black woman who’s trying to integrate into one of the schools—one of the colleges down south. Don’t even remember her name but she’s sitting there on this bench and she’s surrounded by these contorted angry white people screaming and yelling at her and spitting on her. And I’m thinking, if this is the image of what it

means to be involved in trying to make change, this is what we need. Not because you're well known, not because everyone is familiar, like Rosa Parks. It's the unknowns who are out every day trying to make change, and look what this woman endured. When I saw that I thought, yeah, it's all about integrity, commitment, probably no guarantee whatever you do might make a difference or not. [These are] qualities I find in people in movements that have just been so powerful for me. [It's] what keeps me going and sustains me. Maybe it's not about names, not about how high profile you are.

Audre thus demonstrated her own humble dedication by valuing others whose contributions often go unrecognized. This kind of thoughtful and subtle reverence for the "unknowns" was common in the women's accounts. By giving credit in this way, the women implicitly credited themselves. They too were worthy of the identity activist, despite their lack of fame.

## CONCLUSION

I opened this chapter noting that identity work is a collective process. However, unlike the groups Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) studied, I did not observe the *collective* construction of activist identity codes. Rather, I observed activists' individual identity work as they performed their activist identity, a performance from which an

activist identity code could be inferred (see Presser 2004). Through activists' identity talk I learned "something about the ideas, ideologies, and activities activists see as important" (Valocchi 2010:142). Although the activists did not do this collectively, the patterns in their accounts are compelling.

The identity work strategies the women activists used to describe their personal activism revealed what the women consider to be important markers of the identity—or the identity codes for—"real" activists. Not only are these patterns consistent across sources (interviews, personal essays, autobiographies), these patterns are also substantiated by other studies (e.g., Bobel 2007; Blackstone 2004). According to my analysis, real activists are both rigorous and humble. These important values, the women suggest, were expressed in three ways. First, taking risks was an important way activists could show their rigorous dedication. The activists in my study found risk-taking behavior to be a solid indicator of commitment to social justice, and thus an important sign of being a real activist. Only real activists would put themselves in harm's way for the cause.

Second, the women identified a willingness to make sacrifices as a significant way activists demonstrate commitment. This is especially true when these sacrifices seep into activists' everyday lives, including relationships, finances, and health. Those who take risks and sacrifice for the cause are considered serious, genuine, and therefore worthy of the identity activist. The women saw engaging in these behaviors as

evidence of an activist's true and deep commitment. People who are willing to engage in rigorous activism for the movement are the real deal.

A third essential quality of a real activist was steadfast, yet humble, dedication. Because social justice activism is about uplifting others and solving social problems, arrogance and self-centeredness are contrary to these goals. Therefore, the women viewed those who are modest about their devotion as the real deal. They also described the ways they are both rigorous *and* humble—a combination that is considered the “perfect standard” of activism (Bobel 2007).

Describing one's accomplishments without boasting was a balancing act. Some were more successful at it than others. For example, SNCC activists Diane Nash (who went to jail pregnant) and Annette Jones White (the former beauty queen) straddled the line as they fashioned their activist accounts in self-important ways. Agnes too violated the code by seeming to take credit for making big things happen—like stopping the “Iran Contra thing.” The problem, of course, is that it is difficult to describe one's rigor in a modest way. If one chooses to emphasize the rigor, the concrete actions, the norm of humility may be broken. Conversely, emphasizing humility downplays rigor. This is why many of the women followed or introduced expressions of rigor with self-deprecating disclaimers.

With the exception of taking risks, the pieces of the activist identity code revealed here are all gendered. According to conventional gender expectations, women ought to be humble and modest (Johnson 2005) and willing to make sacrifices, mainly

for the “greater good,” usually defined as the good of her husband and children (Lorber 1994). In other ways, however, the activist identity code could yield challenges to gender norms. The women were dissident and trying to make a difference. Yet, their expressions of humility allowed them to tout their activist credentials without seeming arrogant or unwomanly.

This chapter has illustrated how women social justice activists’ individual identity work reflected an activist identity code. To signify their membership in the group “social justice activists,” the women gave accounts of taking risks, making sacrifices, and demonstrating steadfast, yet humble dedication to the cause. In one sense, then, the activist identity code was constraining—it prescribed necessary signifying behaviors. But like other symbolic resources it was also enabling (Giddens 1984). It not only allowed the women to signify that they were real activists, it allowed them to generate feelings of authenticity in doing so. We thus see here how elements of symbolic culture—in this case, identity codes—make possible not only sensible presentations of self, but the generation of emotional experience through those presentations.

In the next chapter, I will examine how women activists constructed a moral-political hierarchy of political actors based on the values that motivated them. The women used knowledge of the activist identity code to determine where to place other political actors and themselves in this hierarchy. As I will show, their use of the code in

making these comparisons allowed the women to claim authentic, moral-political identities.

## CHAPTER 4

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE FROM THE MIDDLE:

#### CONSTRUCTING “ACTIVIST” AS A MORAL-POLITICAL IDENTITY

The fluidity of political identities that the activists in my study described is captured by Roy’s statement that “political activism is not a category; [but] a range” (1998:111). This range is exemplified by the women’s creation of a self-locating device in the form of a moral-political hierarchy. A moral-political hierarchy is a representation of the perceived moral status of political actors, including the activists themselves. They constructed the hierarchy by making social comparisons—a common strategy people use to understand themselves. Using reference groups—real or imaginary—as a point of reference, people compare themselves to others in the process of interpreting and positioning themselves in social life (Shibutani 1961). The women in my study compared themselves to five reference groups: activist exemplars; dedicated others; community volunteers; the politically inert; and political enemies. In doing so, they constructed a moral-political hierarchy in which they located themselves as political actors. The women in my study located themselves in the middle of the hierarchy as “empowered difference makers.”

Locating themselves in the hierarchy was accomplished in six ways: (1) spiritually and/or ideologically aligning themselves with activists whom they saw as moral-political exemplars; (2) couching their beliefs in religious doctrine; (3)

describing how they “make a difference”; (4) distinguishing themselves from mere “volunteers”; (5) criticizing the politically inert; and (6) identifying political enemies and casting their policies, beliefs, and actions as immoral, crazy, and/or ignorant. Unlike some identity theorists (e.g., Stets and Carter 2011), I refer to a *hierarchy* of moral-political meanings—rather than a continuum—because when people claim moral-political identities, they are also trying to claim moral *superiority* vis-à-vis *less* moral others. It is not just a matter of being different, it is a matter of being better. Thus, the hierarchy is a more fitting concept.

#### FIGURE 3.1 ABOUT HERE

The women constructed a moral-political hierarchy in ways that allowed them to align themselves with highly dedicated and highly moral actors but without an equally high level of commitment. These strategies also allowed the women to elevate their moral-political status relative to those below them in the hierarchy. By making strategic comparisons to referent others the women located themselves in the middle as empowered difference makers. These referent others included activists and non-activists. Although most of the women are in the lowest tier of activists, they attached themselves ideologically to activists above them, and distanced themselves from those below. In doing this, they symbolically elevated their own moral-political status.

## CREATING FANTASTICAL MORAL-POLITICAL EXEMPLARS

*“Being like Christ means that you are advocating for the least of these” – Symone*

In the moral-political hierarchy as the women constructed it, some activists were considered archetypes. These folks embody social justice values, beliefs, and actions. Most exemplars are famous historical or contemporary activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Howard Zinn, Ella Baker, and Jesus Christ. In addition to achieving celebrity status as an activist, activist exemplars also advocate for disadvantaged others without fear of reprisal, use blessings of privilege for the greater good (are dutiful), take risks, make sacrifices, and otherwise show intense dedication (as I showed in the previous chapter). According to the women, these actions are admirable and characteristic of a high-ranking activist.

Some women thought that exemplars were “called” to the work by divine beings. According to Margolis (1998), people who are “called” believe they receive “gifts from cosmic or spiritual sources [with the expectation that they will] seek selflessness” (p. 123). Mother Teresa, for example—an icon in the fight against global poverty—often references the time she was called by God to leave her convent and live among the world’s poorest people (Margolis 1998:122). Like Mother Teresa, those who are believed to be called to the work are imbued with divine characteristics themselves, often considered saints whose sacrifices are deep and their devotion admirable.

The women I interviewed embraced a range of religious views. Five of them were deeply religious (Agnes, Annie, Jane, Joy, and Karen), others were spiritual but not

religious (Symone, Wanda, Meghan, Ramira, Levona), atheist (Margo, Amelia), or otherwise disenchanted with and/or not involved with organized religion (Kendra, Winnie, Imara, Audre, Susan). All but a few were raised Christian, and those who were religious were Christian. Many of the women revered Jesus as an important moral-political model, even some who were not all that religious. The women who felt they were “called” to the work saw Jesus as the epitome of a social justice activist. Jesus occupies the highest position in this moral-political hierarchy; many of the women revered and modeled his intense dedication. The image screen-printed on the back of an activist’s T-shirt literally puts Jesus at the center of many famous political actors—some of whom are not even Christians.

FIGURE 3.2 ABOUT HERE

The power of Christianity as a legitimating rationale is apparent, but this image also reflects the divine characteristics imputed to the moral-political heavyweights who many of my activists sought to emulate. By modeling the ideas and behaviors of Jesus (and other moral-political exemplars), many of my activists elevated their own moral status by describing the ways they were “like Jesus.” Karen was perhaps the most serious and articulate about this view of Jesus, but she was not alone in the sentiment. Karen grounded her political work in the “ancient radical economic wisdom” taught by Jesus, whom she portrayed as a “radical activist”:

Jesus, you know, he's hanging out with the poor people . . . we all eat at each other's table and it's not the people of status who sit at the top of the table. Everybody counts. Women count. So the social reorganization he did was quite threatening to the powers that be. You know, the temple shouldn't be the bank.

Karen's emphasis on Christ's supposed restructuring of society and community is revealing when paired with the forms of political action she finds most effective: community building rather than an "action alerts" strategy. Her insistence on forming an alternate community—one that rejects "cozying up to the powers" is, in her view, *more* Christ-like. After studying the prophetic tradition of the Bible, Karen, a theological scholar, said she changed her approach to activism. She referred to her former activist self as a "policy wonk," but became critical of this approach:

One of the things I'm learning from studying this ancient tradition is building the alternate model in the midst of the hellacious structure [rather than trying to change it first]. [These] 10,000 action alerts—you know, 'They're about to vote on this', 'tell your congressman this'—all that is needed . . . but that's not where I find the hope. That's more like finger in the dike operation. I find new life and energy comes from building the alternate community.

This alternate community, she insisted, revolves around a grassroots model that is hyper-critical of top-down policy-making by so-called experts who do not engage with

the people. Karen compared her approach to social justice work to her conception of Jesus' approach. Like Jesus, she said, she asks, "Who's not at the table?" and gets them to the table to state their concerns and offer solutions that would best meet their needs. From her point of view, Jesus was not just "hanging out with poor people" because he was loving and kind; he was listening to them so he could understand their needs and work to meet them. In this way, she constructed a fantastical Jesus to suit her needs. By subtly comparing her approach to Jesus Christ's, she situated herself higher on the moral-political hierarchy than those who focus more on policy.

Annie also portrayed Jesus as an activist. Like several others, she said she strives to be oriented toward justice and activism in her life, as she believed Jesus was. Living up to the example set by Jesus is challenging, but Annie found a way to feel closer to Jesus, and to assure herself (and me) that she was on the moral end of the political spectrum:

Essentially when you feed somebody, it's like you're feeding Jesus. So it's clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the prisoner, the whole thing of compassion. And who did he hang out with? Not the big wheels! He hung out with the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors! I think Jesus is just really, really wonderful [grinning]. So that has had a huge influence on the spiritual underpinnings of my hunger and thirst for justice.

Many others have fed the hungry and cared for the afflicted, but identifying this work with Jesus elevated its moral status.

Symone, despite her criticism on the church as an institution, explained what it means to be Christ-like:

[I] love God, love Jesus, and will always, always live in a way that I feel is Christ-like . . . but the institution itself has become very disturbing to me. [Sarah: What does being Christ-like mean to you?]. What that means to me is that if in fact the life of Christ is one where you are working for the least of these, doing the work that lifts them up, and ensures that the least of these has a decent quality of life, that's what I'ma be about. The rest of my days. And if I'm not being about that, I have become mentally ill. Because I see that the interest of all of us is tied to the conditions of those at the bottom . . . If you consider yourself a Christian, being like Christ, means that you are advocating for the least of these.

Beyond her desire to follow the teachings of Jesus in her advocacy work for the disadvantaged, Symone also revealed her feelings of duty as a relatively privileged person. She continued:

One of my favorite scriptures says that 'to those who are given much, much is required.' I've been mighty blessed in my life. And so there's no way in the world I could be as blessed as I've been and

not feel as part of my requirement is to advocate and do what is in the interest of those who are less privileged than I.

Symone's admission of duty suggested that she acknowledges her privilege and that her devotion to the cause is about *others*, not herself. This strategy is important for maintaining feelings of humility and keeping self-importance at bay. Describing how she is Christ-like helped her claim a higher place in the hierarchy because she attached herself to a key exemplar—Jesus Christ himself.

Many of the women expressed the importance of, as Karen put it, “living out virtues” learned through religious socialization. Meghan did not claim a religious affiliation, but said her faith is a mix of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Her spiritual ideals included advocating for others, and seeking personal redemption:

My core value would be my faith and this idea that at the end of my days, I have to account for everything I've done. And on that accounting I really want for the Creator to tell me that I did a good job. And the idea that you treat people the way you want to be treated is probably my central way of being. My central tenet . . . . So that's sort of how I walk in the world. Like, if I have clean air, then why wouldn't you? It informs everything else.

Here, Meghan was telling me not only about her religious beliefs but about the kind of activist she was. About a third of the women I interviewed described the spiritual underpinnings of their political beliefs and actions by relating them to the teachings and

practices of Jesus. Linking oneself to Jesus was a frequently used strategy for crafting a moral-political identity.

Jesus was not alone at the top of the moral-political hierarchy. Several Black civil rights activists celebrated their slave ancestors as inspiration and for the great risks they took. Prathia Hall, SNCC activist and author of the essay “Freedom-Faith,” recounted that she had learned a crucial lesson from the illiterate “black sages” whom she met during her civil rights work in the rural South about the “faith of living in life-threatening circumstances.” She went on:

It was a faith first made manifest by our slave fore-parents who defied the teachings of slaveocracy, which distorted the Bible and declared that their slavery had been ordained by God. These profoundly spiritual women and men developed their own moral critique of the slaveholders’ oppressive brand of religion and expressed the slaves’ absolute conviction that slavery was contrary to the will of God and that God definitely intended them to be free . . . . The freedom-faith fired and fueled the fight” (Hall 2010:176).

Slave narratives—crafted in ways to “make the audience feel about slavery as the slave did”—have been effective tools for moral education; slave narrators became “moral guides”; victims yet heroes (Polletta 2006: 115). For example, in her essay about her experiences in SNCC, activist Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely (a descendent of William and Ellen Craft, who famously escaped slavery) reflected on her first sit-in: “I

felt a bond with my fellow sit-inners, and I imagined I felt something of the way slaves must have felt when they planned their daring escapes from plantations” (Preacely 2010:167).

Beyond the bonds of collective identity, the comparison to moral-political exemplars was motivating: “No matter how dire the circumstances, history can be changed by people like the abolitionists, people like us” (Holsaert 2010:182). Feeling a bond with escaping slaves and connecting themselves to abolitionists helped these activists construct a moral-political hierarchy in which they claimed a relatively high place. Like Jesus and the abolitionists, another moral-political guide who is often imbued with saintly, prophet-like characteristics is Martin Luther King Jr. King’s time in the spotlight as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement led him to gain celebrity status, which seemed to make his divine qualities more potent and exemplary.

Not all moral-political exemplars are bestowed with divine characteristics, yet many were granted high moral-political status as profound and influential leaders and mentors, and sometimes as parental figures for the “children” of the movement. Many of these moral-political exemplars were prominent and famous, such as Nelson Mandela, whose activism garnered him celebrity-activist status. When Kendra had the opportunity to meet Mandela through the work her husband’s law firm did in South Africa, she was thrilled. She bashfully admitted asking for his autograph:

I went to South Africa with my husband in ’90 and that’s when  
Mandela was released. One of our good friends in South Africa was

Mandela's law partner, and the only autograph I've ever gotten was Mandela's. 'Cause you know I feel like all of us are significant. But he did a little more than most of us [laughs]. So this one, maybe I should get . . . . That is the only one I have ever, ever asked for.

Although Kendra confessed to her celebrity treatment of Mandela, she was sure to point out that "all of us (i.e., activists) are significant." But the fact that Mandela went to such great lengths and sacrificed so much gave him exemplar status; he was granted exceptional prestige. Having suffered brutal violence and extensive imprisonment for the cause he believed in and fought for, Mandela was an exemplar of true and deep political commitment and dedication.

While the activists exalted exemplars like King, Mandela, and Rosa Parks, they also consistently carved out a space of significance for themselves and their less well-known peers. When Kendra squeezed in the comment "all of us are significant," she claimed a connection to this exemplar, thus elevating not only her own moral-political status, but that of "all of us." These sentiments of reverence were common not just in historical reflections, but also in contemporary local politics. Levona lamented the focus on the "very charismatic and prophetic minister" who was also a state leader for the NAACP, and insisted that "the people who are really helping keep [the movement] alive are some of the women."

Agnes seemed frustrated about the amount of attention these famous activists get at the expense of the recognition of the unknowns. "I mean, we always talk about

Martin Luther King Jr. and he was important, but it was the *students*, young people that did it.” As I explained in the previous chapter, emphasizing the importance of the unknowns is implicitly a nod to their own importance. By recognizing the significance of the unknowns of social movements, especially under-acknowledged women, the women compared themselves to “dedicated others” who are their peers, not the famously virtuous saints of political action. These comparisons were much more direct and explicit than comparisons to exemplars. In their comparisons, they indicate concrete ways dedicated others are better, more committed activists.

#### ADMIRING PEERS: COMPARISONS TO DEDICATED OTHERS

*“I have some friends who only take trains or buses or whatever. But I don’t. I haven’t.”*

*- Margo*

The women also compared themselves to other activists whom they know and work alongside. They admired their peers’ activism and their outlook on social problems. Compared to themselves, the women thought dedicated others were doing more, were more firm in their beliefs and actions, and embodied other admirable activist qualities, such as leadership, tenacity, analysis, etc. Unlike historical or celebrity exemplars, dedicated others were tangible and local champions of justice who could be looked up to and emulated. Dedicated others were “stars” in the local activist community, or people who embodied ideal-type versions of abstract categories, such as

radical. These were also sometimes the overly dedicated whose energies seemed unlimited.

### Comparisons to Local Stars

Activists often compared themselves to local leaders, some of whom were mentors to them and others who merely exhibited admirable moral-political qualities. Jane looked up to a fellow nun who she said was “really brave and progressive.” Jane, who was also a nun and a teacher, admired Sister Margaret for teaching 8th graders about resisting the Vietnam War.

I would just listen to her and I wish that I could—I wished I was as articulate as her . . . . I wrote her a letter a couple of years ago and told her. You know, you never know what kind of impression you’re making on others. And I said, “You have made a profound impression on my life in terms of finding my voice and being able to stand up for what I believe in.”

These mentors’ influence was often so profound that the women perceived it as life changing. While Jane’s mentor was a nun with whom she lived and worked, Audre was inspired by a visit from the American Friends Service Committee to her school:

What I heard about them and what they believed in, the power of one, [that] we all had the ability to impact change. It so profoundly impacted me . . . . As an activist looking at my 43 years of activist

organizing all because of this one person who came to my high school for a 40-minute class.

Jane and Audre place significance on the life changing impact of the dedicated others who taught them, suggesting that these dedicated others put them on the path to activism and different ways of being. Similarly, Karen appreciated the values and virtues dedicated others practiced:

I felt like this is the real me and these are the people I want to be with. They were grappling with what I thought were the serious, real issues about life, instead of just entertainment or making money or just cruising along in their own bubble. I thought they were people of courage that were dealing with knotty issues or social order and living out virtues.

These dedicated others were influential for Karen, offering her a model for living out her personal politics. Karen also claimed to have found her true self through connections to dedicated others. Dedicated others thus offer tangible, admirable, and local inspiration and mentorship, and apparently, help people feel authentic.

Dominant group allies are also likely to be identified as important dedicated others in part because they are seen as special for being involved at all, but also valued because they get heard. Meghan shared two stories about dominant group supporters getting the ear of an audience. First, she described how at a union meeting, a man facilitated the discussion by having two women talk before one man did. Meghan

admitted that some people were frustrated by this, but that she “just loved him more” for doing that. In another example, she praised the ability of a white woman organizer to talk to whites about race and racism.

Emphasizing the admirable qualities of local activists offered a comparison opportunity that allowed the women to reach up in the status ranks by attaching themselves to these stars through mentorships or collective identities. Some dedicated others, in part because of their high degree of commitment, were thought to embody ideal types of political actors, such as “radical” or “feminist.” We see here the women creating a symbolic resource—ideal activist types—to aid their own identity construction project.

### Embodiments of Ideal-Types

Struggling with political identity labels was common because of women’s reluctance to claim a certain identity or a difficulty defining it. When I asked her if she identified as a radical, Ramira said no, but that she aspired to be. She compared her behaviors and choices to others who she felt could legitimately claim a radical identity.

[Sarah: Do you identify as a radical?]: Mmmmm. I wish. No. Because I know radicals (laughs), I know I’m not one. For example, I’m legally married. There’s nothing radical about that. There’s nothing I did that was like not refusing to get married in solidarity with my LGBT brothers and sisters who can’t marry. That’s radical. To have

said to my partner, “We can’t get married right now because there’s all these people who can’t get married,” that would have been radical, but I got married. I have a son and I call him a boy. I have another friend who has a baby that nobody knows the gender. Because she wants [Jamie] to be able to share what [Jamie] decides what [Jamie] is when [Jamie’s] ready. That’s radical. My son has dinosaurs and trucks in his room. You know what I mean? So, like, I get that I’m not radical, and I totally respect radicals who have pushed me to consider the ways I’ve made decisions. At least to raise my consciousness—that’s what they do! And so I’m not a radical, but I respect radicals. I think I’m a progressive. I think I’m, gosh, I don’t know. Am I just another boring liberal Dem? I don’t even identify as a Democrat, right? I don’t know. I don’t even know what you call it.

By listing all the so-called radical things others do, Ramira points to all the ways she is not worthy of this identity label. However, her respect for radicals and their choices, and her desire to be more like them, reveals her attempt to align herself with the higher moral-political position. Ramira embraced a radical analysis yet admitted being unable to live out those ideals. However, she quickly minimized these limitations by contrasting her non-radical purchase of “shoes from the mall” (as discussed in chapter 2) with other apparently radical approaches to consumption:

For a little over a year, I did a clothing consumption fast where I decided that I was not going to buy any new clothing. Period. So I only went to consignment stores and I only did swap-a-ramas with friend, and it was awesome. I got a lot of clothes with rips in them or didn't quite fit correctly. If I were to [live out this] vision, I would know how to sew and I would be able to tailor and repair clothing that I've bought used. I would never step foot in mall.

For Ramira, there were strict criteria that determined whether or not someone could claim a radical identity. She described several things that she could do in her life—changes she could make—that would make her *more* radical, such as throwing out all processed foods and buying “only seasonal, organic, local, and[/or] environmentally sustainable foods,” or using alternative transportation such as a bicycle or the bus. She seemed to promote her radical analysis by noting all the things she could or should do to be living a more committed radical lifestyle.

It is possible that the women were being self-effacing because they were uncomfortable with the idea that I saw them as activist exemplars. The women never claimed exemplar status, always citing others who were better. Symone focused on the tiers of feminism that led her to see herself as less of a feminist than others. In this excerpt, Symone compares her herself as a feminist to someone she saw as having a better developed feminism:

I do identify as a feminist and it's interesting to *name it* as such, because there's a—like, I've met [a local professor], I would say that [Judith] is much more of a—I want to say, more of a feminist. I think she has more of a feminist consciousness based on her academic background and her study of feminism, but I consider myself a feminist, a womanist, in the sense that I know that women, I believe are very much oppressed, that they as a community have to be organized to advocate for their own interests.

In distinguishing her version of feminism from a more scholarly feminism, Symone maintained her sense of self and protected her identity as a feminist. She might not have grasped feminism in a sophisticated academic way, but she knew what was important: women are oppressed and liberation depends on organization.

### Comparisons to the Overly Dedicated

Some of the women were frustrated by those they deemed “overly dedicated.” While some lauded their peers as highly dedicated others, they also described some who spread themselves too thin or exhibited annoying behaviors as a result. “You talk about dedicating your life,” Annie said. “[Margo and Levona] can drive you crazy because they are *so* hyper. But they are very, very hard working.” Margo, for example, is known in the local activist community as being kind of over-the-top and living a very dedicated life. Part of her activist uniform is a floppy fishing-style hat that is covered

with buttons showing support for a variety of causes. Margo acknowledged that she spreads herself too thin: “One of my problems [is that] I’m concerned about too many things [smiles and laughs]. They’re interrelated though.” By emphasizing the interlocking nature of issues, Margo rationalized her over-commitment and sought to minimize the criticism of her peers who saw her as ineffective and annoying.

Although Margo was aware of her over-the-top dedication, she also humbled herself when she pointed out the shortcomings in her own behavior. By acknowledging these shortcomings, the social comparisons she made cast her as less dedicated than those more dedicated exemplars:

And I fly on airplanes! So my [carbon] footprint on airplanes! The amount of gasoline an airplane uses to go from one place to another, so . . . . I have some friends who only take trains or buses or whatever. But I don’t. I haven’t. That’s what I’m saying.

On the one hand, Margo saw herself as less dedicated than others because she used airplanes. On the other hand, Margo was frequently referred to as “truly dedicated” by several of her peers. The pattern, as noted in the previous chapter, is that activists often point to someone who is doing more or doing it better, or with more conviction.

Amelia, on the other hand, argued that her more focused concentration on ending the wars was more effective than her overly dedicated peers who “try to solve the world’s problems.” She compared her approach to solving problems to those activists who she thinks are ineffectively over-dedicated:

I had been very active in Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and I became much, much less active because I have a love/hate relationship with WILPF. I don't believe that one group should try to solve the world's problems. I believe you have to prioritize. First of all, we're not millions in number. Locally, it's just a handful of activists. I felt we should prioritize to choose 2 or 3 problems—anti-war, anti-poverty, anti-nuclear weapons—and concentrate on those, focus on those. Sure, the unions need our help. Sure, there's gonna be a big problem; there already is, about water in the world. Sure, a few other areas that they're active in. I couldn't see myself dispersing our energy, of which we had so little to begin with, you know? . . . Elders for Peace [the organization that grew out of these frustrations] is concentrating on ending these wars, and I believe that's the issue.

Although Amelia's frustration with other activists in WILPF appeared to be based on their inability to home in on a problem, it was actually based more on the organization not taking her ideas seriously. She said this numerous times in the interview. The organization she co-founded (Elders for Peace) would prioritize the things she found most important. Amelia thus used the social comparison to not only create a new organization, but also to feel that she was doing a better job because she was more

focused. In this case, those highly dedicated others were, in her opinion, dedicated to too many causes, and thus ineffective.

#### DEFINING THEMSELVES: EMPOWERED DIFFERENCE MAKERS

*“I want to do something that makes a difference” – Susan*

The women I interviewed placed themselves in the middle of the hierarchy of moral-political status they constructed. The other categories discussed in this chapter were developed from the women’s descriptions of *other* activists and groups; this section shows how they described themselves vis-à-vis those others on both ends of the spectrum. They aligned themselves with other activists whom they imbued with moral-political status, and distinguished themselves from a variety of non-activists. I call them “empowered difference makers” because the women used some derivative of the phrase “make a difference” to describe their own goals and strivings.

These empowered difference-makers fit well the pattern of the “empowered personality” described by Hillary Rettig in her activist handbook *The Lifelong Activist: How to Change the World without Losing Your Way*. According to Rettig, activists who want to have longevity should try to become positive, action- and solution-oriented people who take responsibility, help others, and commit to self-actualization (2006: 228-229). Amelia described the historian Howard Zinn as the perfect embodiment of an empowered personality. His example, she said, inspired her to make small difference every day:

One of my heroes is Howard Zinn. He was an extremely upbeat, optimistic person. He doesn't guarantee that all of these efforts will bring about what we would like it to bring about. . . . [But it's] a ripple effect. Zinn kept saying, "little things done by millions of people. . . ." [She points to and holds the button on her sweater that reads "War is Not the Answer." This Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) pin matched the poster on her front door]. I wear this pin as the little thing that I'm doing every day.

Amelia connected herself to Zinn not by claiming to be like him but by practicing what he preached. She could be a Zinn-like difference-maker by doing little things. But little though those things might be, they were more than many others were doing. Amelia thus associated herself with an exemplar, while differentiating herself from the inactive masses.

The women deemed knowledge a key characteristic of empowered difference-makers, especially as it distinguishes them from those lower on the hierarchy who are presumed to know less. Ramira alluded to this distinction when she described how she changed after learning about the maquiladoras on the U.S.-Mexico border:

I became more activist in my mind and less service. So my activist mind was very much clear in that whatever was happening with globalization and with immigration and capitalism and consumption and all of that.

As Ramira gained knowledge, she saw the importance of going beyond social service and striving for social change, an important shift toward becoming an empowered difference maker. This revealed how knowledge and awareness were necessary qualities to distinguish activists from mere service providers. Susan, a sociology major turned labor organizer, described a similar experience; a more sophisticated knowledge base shifted her approach:

I wanted to be a social worker when I first got into sociology. I, you know, I want to help people. I want to do something that makes a difference. And once I got into sociology and really got into it and understood more about society, then I realized, “No, the way to really make a difference is really this other way, this kind of activist, public policy arena.”

Empowered difference-makers saw themselves as being committed to making *real* change in society. As Susan noted, her heightened understanding of society led her to want to “make a difference” as opposed to “helping people.” This distinction was important for constructing “activist” as a moral-political identity with more value than “community volunteer.” Helping people who are oppressed and treated unfairly was not dismissed as unimportant, but the mark of a real activist was striving to correct injustice.

Wanda combined “helping people” with grassroots education and labor organizing; she was a labor organizer, community educator, and volunteer coordinator

for a small but busy food pantry. She said it gave her a “warm fuzzy feeling” to “see the light bulb” when educating and empowering others to make a difference in their workplaces and communities. Yet she also shed tears when describing the joy she felt when she was able to buy and deliver Christmas presents to a family that had fallen on hard times. Her helping role was apparent, yet she continually referred to things to reflect her work beyond this. Wanda wanted to make a difference on a local scale and used her food pantry as a place to build alliances with workers and help them organize. By emphasizing the organizing opportunities provided by the food pantry/service, Wanda prioritized her goals, and put organizing above service.

Like the women above, Kendra’s interest in making a difference was central to her life, yet she emphasized the importance of selflessness in this process:

The people [around here], they know if I’m trying to do something, they know that it’s from my heart. It’s not going to—I’m not going to try to get anything for myself from it, except the satisfaction that I did something to make the difference.

Kendra suggested that the personal benefits of trying to make a difference do not go beyond the satisfaction of working for change. By noting that she does not need to “get anything from it” Kendra implied a selfless, humble devotion. Not all activists stressed their selflessness. In fact, Rettig (2006) encourages young activists to tend to their individual identity needs (such as self-actualization) to be effective as activists and to avoid “losing their way.” The women I interviewed echoed this, as many of them

suggested that activism was sometimes a way to meet their own emotional or psychological needs.

Karen, for instance, said her early activism “helped me to see how broken I was.” The skills and confidence she gained as an organizer helped heal her spirit, she said. Similarly, Ramira admitted that she was “struggling with identity all throughout college” because she had run away from the inner-city community in which she grew up and was trying to find herself. “My political has always been very personal,” she said. She went on to explain the relationship between political work and self-healing.

It’s always been a path towards my own healing. Like the work I did in the hospice [caring for babies born with HIV/AIDS] was about mothering my wounded child, so I was trying to mother other wounded children . . . . I was trying to empower my own survivor, you know?

Ramira’s suggestion that her activism grew out of her own self-healing illustrates Rettig’s concept of an “empowered personality,” in that empowered people learn to deal with fear and anxiety, anticipate and welcome challenges, reprogram their thoughts for success, and deal quickly and decidedly with their obstacles (Rettig 2006:232).

Empowered difference makers distinguished themselves from those who do nothing about the injustices of the world, and also from those who do no more than community volunteer work. They also distinguished themselves from political enemies, including conservative politicians, right-wing community leaders, and those who

maintain oppressive systems such as slavery and the school-to-prison pipeline. From the standpoint of empowered difference-maker activists, these people are part of the problem, hence their morality is suspect. Community volunteers are an interesting case, because while they are not political enemies, they are not activists, and thus are relegated to a lower level on the moral-political hierarchy.

#### DISTANCING FROM COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

*"I mean, the world doesn't change because you hand out food" - Agnes*

Many of the women thought charity work and volunteering were easier and less effective than activism and that these activities do more to make the volunteers feel good about themselves than to make real change. In an article recently published in *Foreign Policy*, Charles Kenny argues that the West's charitable contributions of *stuff* are often unhelpful and undermine local economies. Kenny suggests that Westerners' habit of donating items like old yoga mats to Earthquake stricken Haiti, for example, is misguided and self-satisfying—people feel good about themselves for donating to a worthy cause and then go about their lives unscathed. As Eliasoph notes, people often try to "care about people but not politics" which "limit[s] their concerns to issues about which they felt they could 'realistically' make a difference in people's lives—issues that they defined as small, local, and unpolitical" (1998: 13).

In her autobiography, economic justice organizer Linda Stout shared a parable that describes people's—particularly women's—tendency to treat the symptoms of problems rather than their causes:

The women are so busy trying to pull the babies that are drowning out of the river that they never stop to go to the head of the river to see who's throwing them in (1996:106).

Stout continued her explanation of the contrary meanings of social service and social change work:

Many people think that giving money to social service organizations is the same as giving money to social change organizations. It's not. In fact, it's the difference between helping poor people by giving them money or giving poor people the power to help themselves and believing that they are capable of helping themselves (1996:106).

The parable about the babies in the river, followed by the point about financial donations, helped Stout distance herself from less effective service providers. Stout saw herself as working upstream, trying to deal with the problem at its source.

Sometimes the activists acknowledged a shift, as Ramira did above, from a “service-type mindset” to an activist mindset. When I asked her if she considered working in the hospice caring for babies with HIV/AIDS as her first activist experience,

she quickly disagreed: “No, I was only giving service. That had nothing to do with social change yet.”

Another way that activists distinguished themselves from volunteers and social service providers was to make social comparisons to their parents. Several of the women described how they were different politically from their parents, pointing to their parents’—especially mothers’—involvement in community volunteer work, such as voter registration, election monitoring, and raising money for charities. Many women saw their work as more important than volunteering. Joy, for example, acknowledged her mother’s engagement but questioned her mother’s lack of political savvy:

[My parents] voted. My mother was fairly active in the community with the drive for this and the drive for that. But politics weren’t talked about. As far as being involved in the community, like the school stuff, and the church stuff, my mother would do the cancer drive and she went out, when they thought everybody needed a bomb shelter? She said, “I don’t really believe in this, but they need help going door to door.”

Joy was critical of her mother’s efforts on behalf of causes in which her mother did not believe. The activists I interviewed thought that political action, even service action, should be authentic.

Doing what one believes in was important for activists seeking to maintain their place in the moral hierarchy. To sacrifice authenticity, is to diminish one’s own moral-

political status. Karen, like Joy, pointed to contradictions in her mother's political engagement:

I think I learned a lot of political interest from [my mother] because she was always firing off letters to the congressmen and she had opinions. And I remember during high school she would wear a piece of jewelry, a square gold little thing on a chain. There was a group called Another Mother for Peace, but then it was not really that well thought-out because she was a big supporter of Nixon. So, she had these sentiments, but no real policy understanding to go with it. So it's like, yes, she wanted peace, but she was all for loving Nixon and Reagan and everything. It didn't match to me.

Karen and Joy pointed to an important difference between genuine activists, service-minded volunteers, and the politically inert: *political understanding*. The activists believed that this understanding set them apart from both groups.

Meghan described a similar experience but minimized the focus on change in her mother's political work. She said her mother, who was a social worker for the U.S. Army, "sued the military and won because of [racial] discrimination." Meghan made the clearest distinction between service and activism:

And from [my mother] I always got a sense of outrage, I guess. But she wasn't active outside of her job. She wasn't part of an organization. My father was Knights of Columbus, and he was a

Mason, so he was always civically involved, but not politically involved either. So they were both active in the community but more direct service, or like raise money for children. Not necessarily fighting for education or reforms or things like that.

Meghan, a paid community organizer and activist, did not criticize her parents, but felt that her work was more effective and important because it was not just “charity and volunteerism.” Agnes echoed these remarks, but with more bite:

I belong to [a local] Catholic church and they’re really nice people. They do a lot of charity, and that’s good. It’s a good thing to do charity. I mean, people are hungry . . . . But I mean, the world doesn’t change because you hand out food and you know, the Catholic parish outreach or whatever. That is not how the world changes. There’s one teen that’s coming with me from [my church] this year [on a delegation to Latin America]. But there’s a bunch more going to Guatemala sister parish which is a lot easier to do ‘cause they’re not gonna teach them how to change the world . . . . I hope the next step is for them to come on a trip or something. Or walk with me in the pilgrimage. Do something that’s difficult. It’s fun! How boring would life be if I’d stayed in North Dakota and played bridge and played golf and Lord knows. It’d be boring. I think it’d be boring.

Agnes acknowledged the importance of helping people in need. But she criticized the safety and comfort of this approach. Agnes also suggested that if she weren't an activist, her life would be boring and full of elitist games. In emphasizing her commitment to doing difficult, world-changing work, she distanced herself from charity workers. The moral-political high road is more treacherous, and for that she can claim a higher position in the moral hierarchy.

The women saw themselves as more committed, more dedicated, more knowledgeable, and more moral than those whose limited political understandings led them to do only charity work or social service work. In describing how their complex understanding of power in social life shaped their political choices and actions, they claimed moral-political superiority over the less- and/or mis-informed. By showing how their political beliefs and actions aligned with the knowledgeable and committed, they claimed a higher position in the moral-political hierarchy in which their activist identities were anchored.

#### DISPARAGING THE POLITICALLY INERT

*"I hope you don't represent the youth of America" - Jane*

Political inertia is a frustrating reality for many activists. This is especially true given that we live in a culture where "we often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs" (Eliasoph 1998:6). While they criticize volunteers for being self-serving or ineffective, activists are baffled by the

number of people who *do* sit idly by doing nothing. In Doug McAdam's study of Freedom Summer volunteers, one participant quoted Edmund Burke to explain his motivation to get involved: "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing'. . . . I cannot sit by idly, knowing that there is discrimination and injustice, knowing that there is terror and fear, while I do nothing" (McAdam 1988:45).

The comparisons the women made to the politically inert characterize these women activists as both knowledgeable and committed to doing something to address social problems; they can easily claim superiority relative to these political slackers. The importance of "awareness" and "doing what is right" cannot be overstated. The lack of awareness many people have is frustrating, especially when activists try to educate them about the injustices against which they are fighting. Margo rebuked people who do not get engaged in politics:

Being alive on Earth, being an activist is just doing what is right. And if you don't respond to something, and you're just being unaware or apathetic, is not really living.

Ironically, Margo justified her non-activism earlier in life because of her intense educational endeavors:

I was taking physics and math and chemistry and biology. I didn't participate. I wasn't an activist because I was in science, and that took all my time and energy.

In admonishing others for their lack of involvement, and forgiving herself, Margo was committing the fundamental attribution error—the tendency to attribute others’ failings to personality and one’s own to situational factors (Jones and Harris 1967). Margo’s essential activist self was thus preserved intact, safe from discrepant data.

Another justification for non-participation that was offered by activists from the Civil Rights Movement was *fear*. These activists recognized the very real fear of violence as a reasonable justification why others did not get involved, and why their family members tried to dissuade them. However, willingness to get involved despite the threat of violence elevates activists’ moral-political status. For example, Anne Moody made frequent references to the tarnished relationship with her mother who had received threats for Moody’s civil rights activities:

I got a letter from Mama with dried-up tears on it, forbidding me to go to the [NAACP] convention . . . . She said if I didn’t stop that shit she would come to Tougaloo and kill me herself . . . . She ended the letter by saying that she had burned the leaflet I sent her.

Moody was often angered by her mother’s lack of understanding and failure to support the civil rights cause, but she understood her mother’s fear. Moody’s persistence, despite the risks, demonstrated her higher moral-political status and her authenticity as activist.

Many people are unaware of the complex problems of our society, or, if they are aware, believe nothing can be done. Sometimes the activist women attributed this lack

of awareness to the education system or the media; sometimes they attributed it to a stubborn refusal to become aware. This privilege to remain oblivious angered Jane:

The unwillingness to even *think* about the need to change our lives. To save the world. To save the planet. I guess that's the main thing for me. We're still getting the big cars and the big houses and the Wal-Marts and there doesn't seem to be a real willingness to slow down and think of the larger—no man is an island. We're not conscious of that anymore.

Jane was especially irritated by politically inert youth who are increasingly attached to iPods and cell phones. She recounted a time when she and others were trying to get people to sign a petition:

She [a student] was walking along with the shorts and the telephone and we were trying to get people to sign to not go into Iraq and she was like, "Oh, I can't do that now. I can't do that." And I said, "It'll only take a minute if you just, I'll read this paper to you, and—" . . . . "Oh, no, no, no, no." [As she was walking away] I said [loudly], "I hope you don't represent the youth of America!!" Can you believe I said that? [laughs] I gotta get off the street.

Jane was embarrassed at what she said but admitted that those were her true feelings. And given the high level of political disengagement among young people, the concern seems reasonable. Imara tried to cut the politically inert some slack by saying, "They

just don't understand." By actively cultivating awareness about injustice in the world, Jane and Imara feel justified in their claim to a higher position, relative to the inert, in the moral-political hierarchy.

Even people who support the ideals and goals of activists often are not involved in social justice activism themselves. People who have some level of awareness yet are mired by apathy were frustrating to the activists in my study. The activists I interviewed could not imagine *knowing* about an injustice and not *caring* enough to take action. Audre, who got mobilized after attending a seminar given by Quakers, was baffled by some young Black people's shoulder shrugging and eye rolling response to her discussion about how she got involved in the Civil Rights Movement:

You know, you just hope some people care. You hope that some people keep doing the great work. And maybe it's not having to do the same things the way we did it, Sarah, but certainly having a sense of history. And if it hadn't been for the sacrifices of some of these folks in the past we wouldn't have it. But I don't know how you can tell that to someone who's like, "Who gives a shit? I don't care. I've got it. I'm good."

Audre's frustration with youth was not uncommon. Winnie seemed concerned that such political inertia of young people will make 1960s-style activism a thing of the past:

You know, the '60s activists are still going, going, going, and other generations have mostly not risen to take their place . . . . I'm concerned about it because we're dying out maybe.

Citing '60s activists as a dying breed within the context of these social comparisons is revealing. In many ways, the '60s activists are the quintessential embodiment of the label "activist." It makes sense that they are concerned that their hard work will not be carried on by the next generation.

When the women compared themselves to people who do not work on changing and saving the world—who don't try to make a difference—they used feelings of moral righteousness to claim a higher position in the moral-political hierarchy. While community volunteers and the politically inert may frustratingly undermine the work social justice activists do, they are less threatening than political enemies. Political enemies not only work in active opposition to the activists' goals by engaging in counter-campaigns, but they also threaten activists' moral-political identities by trying to delegitimize activists' political beliefs and actions.

#### FIGHTING POLITICAL ENEMIES

*"The Klan could be sitting right next to you, but he just don't have his sheet on" – Imara*

Another way that activists secured their place in the moral-political hierarchy was by citing the immoral, irrational, or hateful beliefs and actions of their political enemies. These enemies threatened to subvert or impede the changes the women were

trying to make. However, by comparing themselves to these enemies, the women used them as a resource for claiming superior moral-political identities. Through constructing the political enemy as immoral or illogical—a process called othering—the women crafted moral-political virtual selves (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Knowing the wrongness of a system or social practice, the women suggested, is a first step toward challenging it. Kendra described the necessity of white allies identifying the wrongness of slavery for the Underground Railroad to function:

The Underground Railroad could not have succeeded with African Americans doing it, because we didn't *have* the resources to support it. We had to rely on white people who understand how *wrong* slavery was, who would hide the Africans in the bottomless wagons and in their basements and their attics and so forth along the way.

Kendra implied that whites' participation in the abolitionist movement—and later, other anti-racist movements—was predicated on their moral-political awareness and consciousness. While her claim is not overtly about enemies, she suggested that those who maintained slavery were wrong and those who fought it were morally right. In a similar vein, SNCC activist Casey Hayden, a white southerner, described in her essay how she implicated the enemy—Jim Crow—as she made a moral appeal to the 1960 U.S. National Student Association Congress:

I find the sit-in question to be essentially an ethical question, not a question of expediency or emotion. . . .When an individual human

being is not allowed by the legal system and the social mores of his community to be a human being, does he have the right to peaceably protest? Yes. No “buts,” just “yes.” Perhaps in this situation, protest is the only way to maintain his humanity . . . . I do feel some pity for the segregationists and realize it will be difficult to accept the changes that *must come*. But I am not free as long as he keeps me from going where I please with whom I please, and I do not think that fear of him should keep me and others from trying to right the wrong for which he stands (Hayden 2010:50-51).

The moral wrongness of segregation was evident, as Hayden argued, in the theft of human dignity and freedom. Emphasizing the moral wrongness of and vehemently opposing segregation, despite her pity for the segregationists, allowed Hayden to claim a higher place on the moral-political hierarchy.

Kendra and Casey Hayden saw slavery and Jim Crow segregation as larger systems of oppression whose agents were political enemies to be fought. Likewise, Wanda’s account below criticizes the elite-controlled mass media as a compelling negative force against activists:

[What] troubles me the most? That the top 10% are controlling everything. They keep people scared ‘cause most Americans do not want to know the truth. They have blinders on . . . . [And] television? I call it the one-eyed monster. You have a *lot* of talking heads up

there [talking about] health care reform, stuff that scares our seniors to death. It's like back in the day, "If you give African Americans freedom, they just going to kill you, they nothing but a bunch a monkeys and horses and dogs" like that. *Ignorance* [bangs table]!

Wanda identified several interconnected political enemies—specifically the media and the top 10%—who shape both the reality and the consciousness of the people, often through fear-mongering and ignorance. Wanda had been active in the campaign to educate senior citizens about health care reform, organizing transportation drives, and informational meetings on the topic. Wanda's outrage was directed at the ruling class, and she managed this by mocking them:

You know, but it goes back to the money and the power of the top 10%—the heterosexual white men that get in their board rooms and say, [mocking] "This is what we going do to the economy: you know what John (smoking a stogie, drinking they scotch or whatever) [she leans back in her chair and feigns smoking a cigar]. You know, I need a couple more million dollars. What can we do to bring the economy down?" [bangs table]. And this is where we are right now. This is not—what's going on in society right now, my opinion? It was manmade. They said, "Hey, we want to see how they going [to] flounder. How do they fall, okay? We want to see how

they scramble. We, we going [to] get ours”—because every month, every quarter, these corporations, these pharmaceutical people, these oil companies—what do they advertise? Major, major profits.

Off of whose backs though?

By casting the hypothetical, cigar-smoking, ten-percenters as greedy, inconsiderate, and downright mean, Wanda implicitly elevated herself above them. Being none of these things, she can claim a higher place in the moral-political hierarchy.

The accounts in this study reveal outrage at injustice and the people who perpetuate it. Like Wanda, Black Panther Assata Shakur (1987) expressed in her autobiography a similar outrage and suspicion toward the powerful:

I had learned, through experience, that [stereotypes of people of African descent] were all lies told by stupid people, but i never thought i could be so easily tricked into being against something i didn't understand. It's got to be one of the most basic principles of living: always decide who your enemies are for yourself, and never let your enemies choose your enemies for you (1987:152; lower case i's in original).

Shakur points to the frequency with which enemies can be where you least expect them. Imara also said she was wary of people. She questioned the norm that going to church is a sign of being a good person:

My parents, you know, they talk about “Why you don’t go to church?” I say, “Check out my practice. Tell me about a better person than the person sitting next to you in your pew. What you think? Do you know what I do?” Right? And they say “Yeah.” I said, “So y’all tell me if that makes me a good person or a bad person. ‘Cause you know the Klan could be sitting right next to you but he just don’t have his sheet on” [laughs].

Imara thus asserted her credentials as a moral-political being without having to participate in organized religion. This shows how moral-political status differs from religious status. For Imara, a person can be religious and highly immoral, just as she can be non-religious and highly moral.

Margo and Agnes were fierce in their anger at political leaders, yet this anger painted them as morally righteous. In fact, Agnes said that at one point she was so angry at the United States government and their foreign policy that she began to *hate* the U.S.

I’m aware of U.S. imperialism, and U.S. as an empire. And we are like Rome, or Great Britain or whoever and that’s who we are right now. And it’s *wrong* . . . . The School of the Americas in Panama was training [guerrillas] and it just blew my *mind!* Any connection between so many “Christians” [does air quotes with her fingers], people see the connection between their nationalism and their Christianity. That totally broke apart for me. There was no

connection. And I became so anti-American, so *angry* at what I saw the U.S. government doing, that I ceased to speak English. I mean, I wanted *never* to come back to the States.

Agnes's political act of not speaking English and being willing to voluntarily extricate herself was, to her, a moral-high-road form of resistance that allowed her to dissociate the all too frequent connection between U.S. nationalism and Christianity. Her allegiance to justice for the people in Latin America trumped her identity as a U.S. citizen. Margo was no less angry about her state's participation in torture:

Since 2005 we've been trying to educate the people in [a nearby] county that we want the state legislature . . . that we want an investigation—why is [my state] hosting this facility which is involved in illegal activities, which we consider torture and extraordinary rendition from this facility. So we've been involved with visiting the county commissioners, protesting with signs outside the airport and banners, trying to get the state legislators to *investigate!* . . . And what we're trying to work on now is accountability under the Nuremberg principles no matter who you are in the chain of command. If you do something illegal you are just as responsible as if your boss told you to do something. And so your boss is responsible as well as you and that came out in the Nuremberg Trials. And this is internationally known that it's illegal,

as well as immoral, to torture people and capture them without habeas corpus.

These experiences of anger—these moral indictments of the U.S.—showed how far the women were willing to go in distancing themselves, morally and politically, from the mass of U.S. citizens who embrace a mindless, destructive version of patriotism.

Meghan drew on the principles of non-violence to soften a joke she made about kicking an enemy school board member. In the county where Megan lives and works, the local school board dismantled a socio-economic diversity policy that had successfully diversified the county's school system. This move by the school board generated a great deal of controversy as well as collective action by supporters of the diversity policy:

I preach non-violence always. But when people are like, “Oh, what happened to your foot?” I’m like, “Oh, I kicked a school board member and messed up my toe and now I gotta wear this shoe” and “Oh, I’m just kidding.” But I do, I really do believe in non-violence, but I really think what they’re doing is terribly wrong.

Meghan's commitment to non-violence was tested by the “terribly wrong” actions the local school board took. Her joke about kicking a school board member (she didn't) was nonetheless a serious bit of identity work. The joke pointed to the kind of passionate feeling characteristic of real activists. Real activists, the job also implied, abide by their principles, even when they are provoked.

## CONCLUSION

The women situated themselves in the middle of several reference groups by constructing a hierarchy of moral-political actors. On the one hand, activist exemplars and dedicated others, whose commitment to the struggle is revered, were given high moral-political status. Those in the middle, like many of the women I interviewed, valued the moral-political hierarchy they constructed because of the identity rewards it provided. On the other hand, non-activist others were characterized as morally and politically inferior because of ignorance, apathy, or malevolence. By situating themselves between these groups, the women in this study crafted an identity superior to many, without requiring the tenacious dedication of activist exemplars.

Previous research has treated collective identity as movement-specific. Often treating collective identity as a synonym for solidarity, scholars have shown the importance of collective identity for social movement success, noting, “a strong identification with a collectivity makes participation on behalf of that collectivity more likely” (Hunt and Benford 2004, p. 437; see also Klatch 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Stryker et al. 2000). But this collectivity need not be a single social movement organization. As my analysis shows, can share a collective identity as *activists*. While I accept Polletta and Jasper’s (2001:284) claim that collective identity implies a shared worldview and “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution,” it seems clear that this shared worldview is not necessarily movement-specific.

In this study, I observed women sharing beliefs and behaviors associated with the identity non-movement-specific “social justice activist.” Melucci (1989) suggests that individuals’ identity needs may be met by social movement participation. But sometimes specific movements don’t do this very well, which was perhaps why women gravitated to a more general social justice activist identity. The activists in my study cared about myriad issues, often engaging in numerous campaigns with different organizations. Given their broad approach to activism, the women interacted with many like-minded people, thus creating an expansive community of social justice activists. The moral-political hierarchy encompassed this entire community and allowed the women to locate themselves within it, and to do so independently of judgments made by the leaders of any particular group or organization.

One problem, however, is that sometimes the personal satisfaction of embracing an identity comes to substitute for the harder-won satisfaction of making real change. Although the women activists believed they were making a difference, they also knew that some of their acts of resistance were more symbolic than instrumental (Valocchi 2010:31-2; cf. Melucci 1989). The value in this kind of expressive action is that it can sustain motivation and commitment. Yet if people become too deeply invested in their moral identities, they can become blind to how some of their behaviors may be reproducing inequalities (Kleinman 1996:11). The problem is not one of trying to satisfy identity needs in the context of a social movement. The problem is allowing satisfaction of those needs to create blind spots and to impede practical action.

By anchoring their identities in the moral-political hierarchy instead of within a movement, the women could maintain motivation and a belief that they were doing as much as possible to work for social justice. The frustrations that people face within organizations (e.g., not having their ideas listened to, not feeling connected, experiencing sexism) may lead people to burn out, drop out, or even sabotage the organization (see Klatch 2004). This is bad for social movements. A more general activist identity, as documented in this study, enables people to invest themselves in the larger project of working for social justice, without the constraints and frustrations endemic to organizations.

The moral-political hierarchy the women constructed allowed them to take control of their identity fates. Considering the fragility of authenticity, developing a more general set of activist criteria allowed them to determine their own eligibility for an identity they so deeply cared about. They did not need leaders of a social movement organization—leaders who were often men—to determine whether or not they were genuine activists. The moral-political hierarchy secured the women's conceptions of themselves as good people and good activists, without reliance on the judgments of men. I do not have the data needed to answer the question, but it is worth asking whether men are indeed more likely to tie their activist identities to specific movements and organizations.

This chapter examined women activists' use of a moral-political hierarchy as a self-locating device. By comparing themselves to exemplars, dedicated others,

community volunteers, the politically inert, and/or their political enemies, the women in my study secured their identities as activists apart from specific movements or organizations. I argued that this was a response to the identity threat posed by sexism on the part of Left men. Even though the women did not foreground a feminist identity, the construction of a moral-political hierarchy was nonetheless a feminist solution to a patriarchal problem. The women activists in my study thus succeeded in constructing and sustaining an identity that helped to keep them motivated to try to make the world a better place.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS RESEARCH

When I started this project I wanted to understand how women activists explained and interpreted their political journeys. The women in my study offered narratives describing who they are, how they got there, what they had to do to become this type of person, who is like them, who is unlike them, and what it means to them to be this type of person. In doing this, they also implied what others would have to do to be this type of person—a real activist. The data I gathered and the analysis presented in the preceding pages illustrate how social justice activists do identity work to provide a legitimating rationale for their activism and craft social justice activist as a moral identity. It also illuminates how these rationales are gendered.

As my project progressed, I realized that autobiographies reveal similar identity work processes. And so I sought out writings by women activists. As others have noted, autobiographies and memoirs provide compelling illustrations of identity making processes, especially how people reinterpret their biographies to craft particular kinds of selves (Bjorklund 1998; Sousa 2011; Strauss 1995). Moreover, in constructing an activist identity, autobiographers often draw on shared group history, knowledge, and experiences, which indicate key happenings for activists like them (Bjorklund 1998:149). Much of what I found in autobiographical work corroborated what I learned from interviews.

In this concluding chapter, I provide a brief overview of the previous chapters before discussing the broader implications and contributions of my research. First, I will show how the accounts I analyzed are gendered, and how this contributes to our understanding of women's activism. Second, I will show how my research contributes to our understanding of identity processes, specifically how people use their biographies to do identity work and how self-knowledge is shaped by our relationships with others. Finally, my research suggests that the moral-political identity work activists do helps to legitimate oppositional behavior in an apathetic and sometimes repressive political culture. Throughout the chapter, I will draw on social-psychological theory to address unresolved issues concerning the relationship between social movements and identities.

#### OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In chapter two, I explained how women activists used biographical narratives to craft authentic selves. My analysis of these narratives revealed four authenticity work strategies: (1) re-interpreting and signifying past events; (2) claiming moral intuition; (3) representing lifestyle choices as commitment to activism; and (4) telling stories of enlightenment. The women drew on "biographical particulars" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) to connect their past selves to their current selves, presenting continuity as evidence of an enduring and authentic activist self. In claiming moral intuition, the women suggested that their concerns for social justice arose naturally from their

identities as women. The women described how examining and changing consumption habits, forming diverse friendships, and raising children according to their beliefs implied evidence of their deep commitment to social justice—and thus the authenticity of their activist identities. Lastly, defining the points at which they experienced political awakening helped them show when and how they began to devote themselves to working for social justice. The women’s authenticity work strategies were presented as evidence of a true self, which although illusory, is an idea that can motivate people to behave in ways that best reflect who they “really are.”

In chapter three, I explained how activists’ individual identity work implied an activist identity code (see Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; see also Bobel 2007; Presser 2004). Through activists’ identity talk I learned “something about the ideas, ideologies, and activities activists see as important” (Valocchi 2010:142; cf. Hunt and Benford 1994). According to my analysis, real activists are both rigorous and humble—a combination of values that some consider the “perfect standard” of activism (Bobel 2007). These important values were expressed in three ways: taking risks, making sacrifices, and demonstrating steadfast, yet humble, dedication. The women saw engaging in these behaviors as evidence of an activist’s true and deep commitment to a cause. People who were willing to engage in rigorous activism, yet remain humble, were considered the real deal.

In chapter four, I explained how the women constructed a hierarchy of moral-political actors, which helped the women construct “social justice activist” as a *collective*

identity. The women made social comparisons to activist exemplars, dedicated others, community volunteers, the politically inert, and their political enemies, claiming for themselves a place in the middle as “empowered difference makers.” By situating themselves between these groups, the women in this study crafted an identity superior to many, without requiring the tenacious dedication of activist exemplars.

My analysis in chapter four also examined the women activists’ relational self-definitions and how they used a moral-political hierarchy as a self-locating device. As relational human beings, activists can only know, interpret, and express their moral-political selves in relation to others. Who they are, politically, depends on to whom they are compared; who they are depends on who they are not, who they are like, and who they are unlike. By documenting how women activists describe themselves and other activists as good, moral people who “do the right thing.” I also showed how they imbued the identity “activist” with moral significance. In this way, they claimed authentic moral identities for themselves, but also provided shared meanings of social justice activist as a collective identity.

#### ANALYZING WOMEN’S ACTIVISM

The women activists in my study leaned heavily on essentialist notions of gender, even when they identified as feminist. Groenhout (2002:59) claims that since few alternatives to gender constructs have been offered, essentialist feminism appeals to women because it concretely reflects the realities they experience, especially when

faced with the "division of labor by sex, which assigns women the responsibility of preserving life" (Kaplan 1982:545). Given the ubiquity of essentialism, emphasizing women activists' experiences and contributions may soften the criticism of the Left by focusing on the so-called "female approach" that involves relationship-building, peace building, and providing care and support for children (Kaplan 1982; Krauss 1993; Naples 1998). Even scholarship on women in radical protest has discerned a connection between maternalism and activism (see Blee 1998a).

Maternalists believe that their "familial role as nurturers and caretakers prepare[s] them for similar social responsibilities," including an obligation to use their "distinctive, motherly abilities" to improve society (Strange 1990:211). Since women's participation in the political realm has historically been discouraged, women have learned to use maternalist ideas to justify their political involvement. For instance, Strange (1990) notes that Nazi women held the "conviction that women's maternal role extends beyond the family to society" (p. 209; see also Blee 1998; Blumberg 1990; Naples 1998; Wrigley 1998). The same idea can be seen in the women's peace movement, whose participants declare: "You can't hug kids with nuclear arms" (Strange 1990:209). Women's activism against segregation (Blumberg 1990), toxic waste (Krauss 1993), poverty (Naples 1998), and busing (Wrigley 1998), has been said to grow "out of [women's] concrete immediate experiences . . . and identities as housewives, mothers, and members of communities" (Krauss 1993:248).

The women in my study embraced similar notions of essentialist feminism. Many of them can be characterized as “maternalists,” regardless of their status as “biological mothers or social mothers” (see Strange 1990). There is an underlying paradox, however, because while essentialism and maternalism in women’s activism typically contributes to women’s acceptance of the gender order and failure to reject its patriarchal roots, some women seem to be using maternalism as an unlikely tool in the fight to be taken seriously as agents of political change.

In a patriarchal culture, relying on dominant assumptions about gender has been an effective strategy for many women activists. Maternal pacifists, for example, “garner social approval because they operate within the prescribed boundaries of femininity” (Strange 1990:210). Women may be thrust into activism because of their maternal duties: “Our children need us to fight!” But women activists also know that invoking their identities as mothers can facilitate their work because mothers are less likely to be discredited than uppity women.

As I showed in chapter three, the activist identity code the women drew upon sometimes controverted femininity (e.g., by encouraging risk taking), while other times it bolstered femininity (e.g., by encouraging sacrifice and humility). Enacting the activist identity code could challenge gender norms—the women were dissident and unruly, hence not conventionally feminine. Yet, their expressions of humility allowed them to tout their activist credentials without seeming arrogant or unwomanly. The women were unwilling to forgo their primary identities as women for identities as activists.

Their constructions of women activists, then, embody so-called masculine characteristics, such as rigor and risk-taking, yet not at the expense of so-called feminine traits, such as humility and caring. More focused attention to the uses of maternalism and essentialist feminism as justifications for Leftist political activity is needed. Is this approach effective in making changes in the world? Does this approach reinforce inequalities? Under what conditions are the women willing to sacrifice gender equality for gains in other areas of social life? More research is needed on this subject.

#### IDENTITY PROCESSES

Cooley's (1902) notion of the looking-glass self suggests that self-knowledge comes from imagining how others evaluate us. Imagining that others appraised them negatively because of their activism led the women to offer legitimating rationales for their political beliefs and activism. These rationales not only deflected negative judgments; they became resources for fashioning positive self-conceptions. When the women justified their activism by rooting it in a true self concerned with justice, they were saying, in effect, "I am a good person, as is reflected in the good deeds I can't help but do."

The women thus show how reality is constructed internally. In trying to explain and justify their activism, they constructed a sensible picture of themselves in relation to the world. One of the most compelling ways people make sense of their lives is to reinterpret past events to help make sense of their current reality, status, activities,

and/or current self-conceptions. For example, Garrett-Peters (2009) found that unemployed professionals reinterpreted the meaning of their joblessness in positive ways. These unemployed professionals assumed a natural order of things, interpreting their job loss as a positive opportunity, sometimes scripted by God. Professionals who lost their jobs needed to redefine the experience as positive not only to feel better about their personal status as an unemployed worker, but also to deflect stigma associated with being jobless. Like the activists I interviewed, Garrett-Peters found that people subjectively interpret events in ways that will help them feel secure with themselves (see also Lewin and Williams 2009). This is especially true when the identity is stigmatized or otherwise subject to criticism.

### Collective Identity

Examining the meanings people attach to their activist identities is important for understanding how social movements function. A movement group's collective identity can be studied by examining the group's symbols, rituals, beliefs, and values (Klandermans and DeWeerd 2000: 76), but many scholars tend to treat collective identity as a synonym for solidarity. Hunt and Benford (2004) compare solidarity to Blumer's notion of *esprit de corps*—"feelings of devotion and enthusiasm for a group that is shared by its members" (Hunt and Benford p. 439). Devotion and enthusiasm for a group is not the same thing as collective identity.

In chapter three, I showed how individual identity work strategies implied an identity code for “social justice activist.” This implicit code was known to the women who embraced the activist identity. The women also used similar social comparisons to construct a hierarchy of moral-political actors, again suggesting a shared understanding of what it meant to be an activist. Among the women I interviewed, “activist” was the collective, motivating identity, not an identity derived from any particular movement organization. What this suggests is that motivating identities can be general and “diffuse.” They can also feel a part of the collective even among those who are not comrades in the same group. Because of their identities as activists, the women were ready recruits for just about any movement or effort. Most of the women were multi-issue activists who not only saw the connections between social problems, but also believed that they could contribute to a variety of organizations, causes, or campaigns. In other words, very few of the women belonged to only one movement. This is important for considering the relationship between social movement participation and identity. Most research on the subject examines identities *within* movements. What these studies may be missing is the sometimes intense involvement of some participants in a range of other political activities. These studies may also miss activists’ construction of a more general activist identity like the one I identified here.

## Authenticity and Biography

Chapter two explored the “great potential” (Gecas 2000:104) of the concept of authenticity for understanding people’s motivation to do social justice work. A key question that guided my exploration of this potential was: What does the subjective sense of authenticity have to do with motivation to engage in social justice activism? In addition to wanting to feel and appear authentic (and avoid being seen as or feeling inauthentic), social justice activists also face criticism and judgment from inactive others—criticism that they hope to minimize through authenticity work. If people attribute their beliefs and behaviors to innate qualities of self, critics can do little to resist them. Social justice activism is typically defined in the culture as oppositional behavior (Mansbridge 2001), so accounting for such behavior in the face of criticism is important. Through authenticity work—both self- and other-directed—activists can stand up to criticism, overcome failures, and avoid or at least minimize burnout because they believe that, and behave as if, their political work is a quality of their true self. “Self motives emerge from our past but toward a desirable future and link self-interests with a common good, which renders self an authentic moral actor” (Weigert 2009:48). Striving for authenticity can thus be a powerful source of motivation for those who desire to be and to be seen as moral actors; it can also serve as a moral shield.

Hutson’s (2010) study showed how gay and lesbian individuals “use appearance to attain a sense of authenticity after ‘coming out,’” even in the face of criticism or

ridicule by others (p. 221). The people Hutson interviewed identified several aspects of appearance that signified their gay and lesbian identities, including hairstyles, piercings, and clothing (2010:219). Their focus on physical presentation of self was also aimed at achieving a sense of authenticity—the freedom to “be more expressive . . . allowed [them] to be [themselves] completely” (Hutson 2010:220).

Like the activists in my study, Hutson’s participants embraced an implicit identity code, and drew upon it to fashion themselves as authentically gay. An activist’s willingness to make sacrifices for the cause is analogous to a young lesbian’s transformed sense of style that includes a “butchy” haircut and men’s boots (Hutson 2010:219). It may seem odd, Hutson explains, to derive feelings of authenticity through such blatant impression management (see Vannini and Franzese 2008), but the underlying values and self-perceptions are displayed through alterations to one’s appearance (2010:227). As Wilkins (2008) argues, the meanings assigned to identities—and the display of those meanings—determine what performances are considered authentic; “authentic membership cannot be superficially achieved” (p. 244). Through debates about “posers,” the goths Wilkins studied revealed the fragility of authentic performances; “authenticity requires an alignment of inner selves with outer performances” (2008:244). By embracing the definition of an identity, and then using this definition to guide enactment of the identity—be it gay, goth, or activist—people construct a sense of having become their “true self.”

My analysis demonstrates how people come to understand themselves, and sheds light on the necessity of “the other” in the process of self-knowing. Other people’s insights, actions, and criticisms are significant sources of self-knowledge. In the journey toward knowing one’s self, other people—in the past and the present—are as vital as a road map and fuel tank. As I will argue, moral identity and authenticity work are strategies to justify oppositional behavior.

### MORAL-POLITICAL IDENTITY WORK

Women activists claim the identity “activist” in a culture that monitors, shuns, and imprisons the outwardly Left (Davis 1998; Fantasia 1988; Nocella, Best, and McLaren 2010). I found that most of the women were aware of mainstream culture’s negative opinions of the Left. In response, they sometimes distanced themselves from radicalism. They also drew on mainstream ideas to justify their Leftist politics.

According to the *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (1990), the Left is “that segment of society which has sought fundamental changes in the economic, political, and cultural systems; the subject *does not include* reformers who believe that change can be accommodated to existing capitalist structures, or who believe that an egalitarian society can be attained ultimately within national borders” (p. xi, emphasis in original). In other words, the political aim of the Left is fundamental structural change across the globe; these goals are thought to be best reached by revolutionary means rather than policy reformation. These changes involve a “thoroughgoing

democratic transformation of society” for which “the prize is economic democracy, not simply a softening of capitalism’s hard edges” (Schwalbe 2009).

When the structure of society is challenged, campaigns of repression and backlash aim to stop changes that would undermine the power and wealth of elites. These reactionary campaigns include formal policies like the Taft-Hartley Act, and less formal propagandizing facilitated by elite’s control of media. National news circuits almost always portray social justice activists as flaky, ill-informed hippies at best, and villains at worst. Rarely are they shown in a serious light, as important political actors with an honest message. For instance, at the outset of Occupy Wall Street, the burgeoning movement received surprisingly little media coverage despite attracting thousands of participants and spurring protest marches in cities across the nation. When Occupy Wall Street was finally covered by the national news, movement participants were often portrayed as immature troublemakers with too much time and too little information on their hands. Approximately four weeks after the movement began, television’s *The Daily Show*—a satirical political news program—featured a segment that criticized the media’s coverage of the growing movement:

The Occupy Wall Street movement . . . has spread to cities all around the country, causing the media to turn its coverage dial from *blackout* to *circus*. It’s too bad, but those are the only two settings it has.

Jon Stewart, the show's host and a comedic political commentator, captured the media's contradictory portrayals of activism—it is often either disregarded or shamed. This is the media environment in which the activists in my study lived and worked. Civil rights and textile union activist Mary Robinson cites another example of the media's power to distort:

. . . the Ku Klux Klan shot dead this white lady, Viola Liuzzo . . . . The local news covered it in a very negative manner. It wasn't like she was this hero for being down here trying to help blacks get equal rights. It was like she was a person who shouldn't have been there . . . . That day the people called in and voiced their opinions about Viola, and they belied her so bad. They said she was a "nigger lover" and that she should have been home in Chicago with her childrens [sic]. They said, "She got what she deserved" . . . . Their viciousness took the focus away from what the civil rights movement was really like (2009:127-128).

Considering the abundance of portrayals of social justice activists like this, it is understandable that many activists in my study distanced themselves from fully claiming identities aligning them with radical politics, despite their ideological agreement.

To navigate such political terrain, activists must justify their political involvement. One way the women in my study did this was by crafting self-narratives

that attested to the women's deep-rooted and enduring concerns for social justice. To the extent that these self-narratives worked, it was because of the cultural belief in the value of being true to one's self and one's convictions. The women's accounts appealed not only to the value of pursuing justice, but to American individualism.

The women's justifying accounts also drew on Christian philosophy and beliefs in American democracy. Most of the women cited Christian values as underlying their political beliefs and actions. The activists felt that by fighting for the rights of the poor, they were doing what Jesus would have done. By appealing to a widely shared body of moral teachings, activists sought to validate their efforts and maintain solidarity and motivation. The diffusion of Christian doctrine throughout U.S. culture lent force to this strategy. Invoking Buddhist philosophy would have been less effective.

Another way that Leftists have justified their actions and beliefs is by arguing that the fundamental nature and purpose of democracy is intellectual freedom and dissent. In a recent essay "The Right to Think," Bill Ayers (2010) recalled the irony being uninvited to give a talk at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during the controversy that erupted surrounding his relationship with then-presidential candidate Barack Obama. The university president, Ayers wrote, said the decision to have Ayers on the program "represent[ed] remarkably poor judgment" (p. 492). Ayers used the principles of democracy—a key American value—to illustrate the contradiction of the situation:

Had I spoken . . . I would have focused on the unique characteristics of education in a democracy, an enterprise that rests on the twin pillars of enlightenment and liberation, knowledge and freedom . . . . I would have argued that to deny students the right to question the circumstances of their lives, and to wonder how those conditions might be altered or changed, is to deny democracy itself. Banning me from campus was an act of denying democracy itself (Ayers 2010: 494).

Like activists who use Christian doctrine to appeal to mainstream culture, Ayers invoked democracy to legitimate his position and message. Dana Cloud's (2010) experience illustrates a double bind that women activists may face: "to be an outspoken radical woman is to be a double traitor—by ideology and sex (p. 348). After receiving hate mail calling her a "bitter," "a scary woman," and a "dumbass cunt," she realized that sexism amplified the attacks on her politics: "Denigration to my gender . . . became interchangeable with condemnation of my beliefs" (Cloud 2010: 357).

In this kind of political climate, it is understandable that many of the women I interviewed were reluctant to claim identities such as feminist, Marxist, and radical. When the women activists did claim these identities, they often did so with caveats, justifications, or qualifiers (i.e., "Radical Democrat"; "progressive with radical fringe"). For instance, when I asked Symone how she identified politically, she distanced herself from a radical identity by linking radical politics with violence:

I would love to say that I'm a radical, but I think that I'm a progressive with radical fringe . . . . I don't think of radical as bad, although other people do. I don't see it as productive to go and blow stuff up or even mass violence is just not my way. So I think my tendency, without some academic analysis of what these terms mean, that for me, I think that I am a progressive radical.

Although Symone wanted to claim a radical identity, and elsewhere employed a radical analysis, she distanced herself from the label "radical," illuminating her internalized demonization of the radical Left. It thus makes sense that the women sought ways to justify their oppositional political behavior.

Agnes shed more light on this when she described herself as a "radical Democrat":

I'm a democrat but I'm a radical Democrat. I mean, I'm glad Obama is president, but I know that it's a government and that you only change things if you are willing to take risks. I don't define myself as Marxist, even though I probably am. I just don't think it's helpful, politically. [Sarah: Why not?] People, you don't have a lot of credibility. People are afraid. The Cold War exists still in people's heads. So I don't. If they listen to me, they know [I'm a Marxist]. I'm aware of U.S. imperialism, and U.S. as an empire. And we are like Rome, or Great Britain, or whoever, and that's who we are right

now. And it's *wrong*. And I do everything I can to help change that, by raising consciousness and getting people to organize, you know.

Between the depoliticization of culture and the castigation of the Left, activists have many forces working against them. By couching their activist work in a moral framework, activists hoped to be seen as acceptable and thus escape repression. In this way, religious rhetoric and rhetoric grounded in American ideals of democracy worked as a moral shield against critics of their oppositional beliefs and actions.

#### EVALUATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

My research examined the accounts of an often marginalized group: older women. I also examined autobiographical data and focused on a range of social justice activists rather than those in one movement or organization. My social-psychological analysis of activists' movement-related identities also adds to our understanding of identity processes in social movements. I showed how these identity processes involve the construction of a moral-political framework to facilitate self-defining social comparisons. Future researchers will, I hope, use this conceptualization to study political identities and how those identities motivate political action.

One limitation of my study is size and scope. More interviews and ethnographic observations might compel development of a more complex analysis. My research could also be strengthened by more deeply examining the use of Christian rhetoric by the Left more broadly. Recently, an organization called The Christian Left formed using a

passage from the Bible for inspiration: “I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy” (Psalms 140:12). The group declares its mission to be: “To follow Jesus by taking actions on behalf of the oppressed, the sick, the hungry, the poor, the incarcerated, the lonely, the disabled, the mentally ill, the mistreated, the war-torn, and the weak.” A group such as this could be studied as an active constructor of Christian rhetoric for use by activists on the Left. How is this being done, we might ask, in a culture where the Right has been far more successful using Christian doctrine to pursue its agenda?

Future research might also fruitfully explore similarities between activists on the Right and on the Left. I suspect that some aspects of the process of identity construction would be similar, but the philosophies and legitimating rationales would be different. A comparative study could reveal how particular experiences shape individuals’ development of political consciousness. Does a leftward consciousness develop in the same way as a rightward consciousness? How do identity desires and identity commitments shape these processes? Answers to these questions would be valuable contributions to our understanding of identity construction, politicization, and social change.

Table 1.1. Interviewee Demographics

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Activist Work/Issues</b>
Amelia	85	White	Anti-War; Anti-Nuclear
Margo	80	White	Anti-Torture, Anti-War; Palestine; Civil Rights
Annie	76	White	Anti-War; Labor Unions
Joy	72	White	Civil Rights; Anti-Racism; Education
Levona	72	White	Labor Unions, Anti-War; Education
Jane	72	White	Anti-War; Palestine; Economic Justice; Anti-Globalization; Environmental Justice
Agnes	70	White	Anti-Globalization; US Foreign Policy; Anti-War; Immigrant Justice
Kendra	66	Black	Civil Rights; Anti-Racism; Education
Imara	66	Black	Labor; Economic Justice; Education; School-to-Prison Pipeline
Audre	62	Black	LGBT Rights; Anti-War; Civil Rights
Karen	60	White	Anti-Racism; Economic Justice
Wanda	57	Black	Economic Justice; Labor Unions; Anti-Racism
Symone	51	Black	Economic Justice; Anti-Racism; Labor
Winnie	50	White	Anti-War; Palestine
Susan	39	White	Labor Unions; Economic Justice
Meghan	36	Black	Economic Justice; Labor; Education; School-to-Prison Pipeline; Anti-Racism
Ramira	34	Latina/ White	Anti-Oppression, Immigrant Justice, Environmental Justice; Anti-Globalization

Table 1.2. Autobiographical Data

<b>Author</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Year Published</b>	<b>Title of Book</b>	<b>Movement/Work</b>
Anne Moody	Black	1968	<i>Coming of Age in Mississippi: An Autobiography</i>	Civil Rights; SNCC Field Secretary
Assata Shakur	Black	1987	<i>Assata: An Autobiography</i>	Civil Rights; Black Panther Party; Political Prisoner
Mab Segret	White	1994	<i>Memoir of a Race Traitor</i>	Anti-Racism, LGBT Rights
Linda Stout	White	1996	<i>Bridging the Class Divide and Other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing</i>	Economic Justice
Cheri Register	White	2000	<i>Packinghouse Daughter: A Memoir</i>	Labor Unions
Mary Robinson (with Fran Leeper Buss)	Black	2009	<i>Moisture of the Earth: Mary Robinson, Civil Rights, and Textile Union Activist</i>	Civil Rights; Labor Unions

Table 1.3. Personal Memoir Data\*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Title of Memoir</b>
Victoria Gray Adams	Black	<i>They Didn't Know the Power of Women</i>
Angeline Butler	Black	<i>What We Were Talking about was our Future</i>
Cathy Cade	White	<i>Caught in the Middle</i>
Carolyn Daniels	Black	<i>We Just Kept Going</i>
Prathia Hall	Black	<i>Freedom-Faith</i>
Casey Hayden	White	<i>Onto Open Ground</i>
Faith Holsaert	White	<i>Resistance U</i>
Jeannette King	White	<i>Inside and Outside of Two Worlds</i>
Joann Christian Mants	Black	<i>We Turned this Upside-Down Country Right Side Up</i>
Janet Jemmott Moses	Black	<i>If We Must Die</i>
Diane Nash	Black	<i>They Are the Ones Who Got Scared</i>
Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely	Black	<i>It Was Simply in my Blood</i>
Janie Culbreth Rambeau	Black	<i>Ripe for the Picking</i>
Bernice Johnson Reagon	Black	<i>Uncovered and Without Shelter, I Joined this Movement for Freedom; Since I Laid My Burden Down</i>
Muriel Tillinghast	Black	<i>Depending on Ourselves</i>
Annette Jones White	Black	<i>Finding Form for the Expression of My Discontent</i>
Jean Smith Young	Black	<i>Do Whatever You Are Big Enough to Do</i>

\*All essays from *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010)

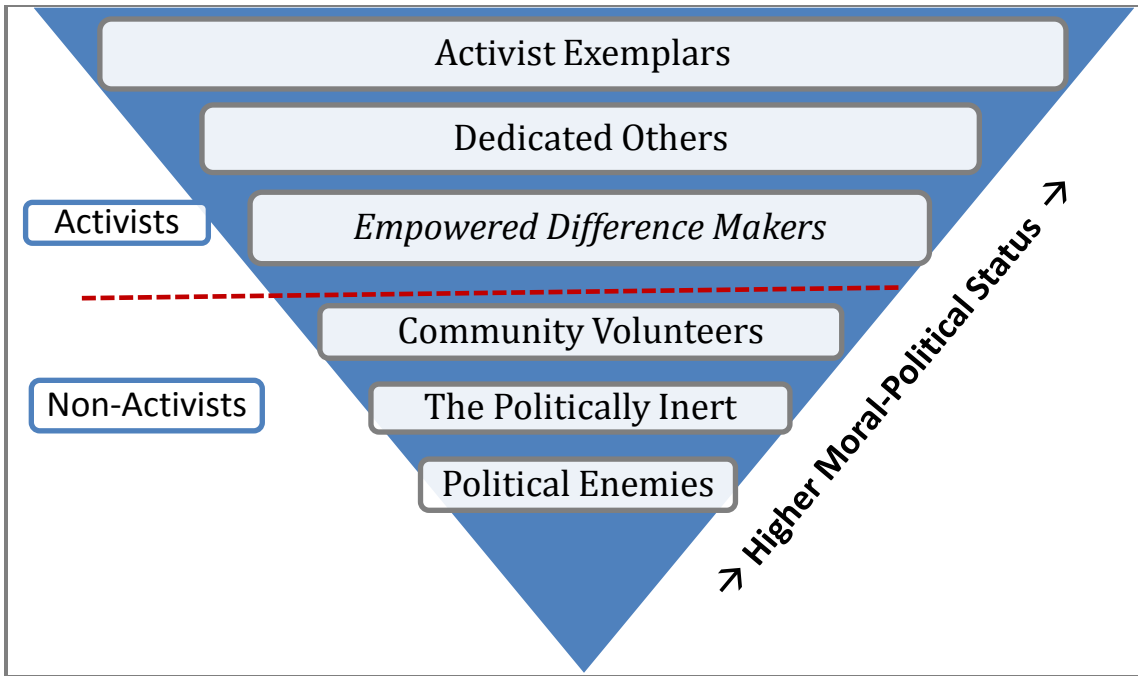


Figure 3.1. Moral Hierarchy of Political Actors



Figure 3.2. Jesus as Epitome Moral-Political Exemplar

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