

# Lifetime Activism, Marginality, and Psychology: Narratives of Lifelong Feminist Activists Committed to Social Change

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In the present study we seek to examine how and why some individuals commit their lives to creating social change in their communities. We specifically explore the lives and experiences of lifetime feminist activists by assessing the role of various social psychological mechanisms in growing and sustaining commitment to social change in diverse social contexts. We utilize 3 social-psychological concepts: positive marginality, *conscientización*, and social identity theory in order to focus on the inherent intersecting mechanisms and influences that contribute to a lifetime of social activism. Using idiographic narrative analysis we employ an interpretive methodology to analyze the oral histories of 3 women: Grace Lee Boggs of the United States, Matilde Lindo of Nicaragua, and D. Sharifa of India. Our findings suggest that although the women's lives and experiences vary considerably, concepts from within social psychology can aid in our understanding of how and why individuals become increasingly committed to creating change. We discuss how these findings may contribute to theory development on understanding the experiences and efforts of individuals who contribute to social change.

*Keywords:* activism, marginality, feminism, narrative, life history

We've got to think that we have choices. We can produce something different. Maybe it won't change your life for all time. Maybe it won't change society for all time. But each of us can choose to do something different, because we recognize that for our own humanity we have to.

—Grace Lee Boggs

When it comes to conceptualizing the causes of significant social change, the committed work of specific individuals often comes to the forefront of conversation both in lay and academic discourses. For example, discussion of efforts to end apartheid in South Africa may seem incomplete without mention of Nelson Mandela, and many connect women gaining the right to vote in the United States to the work of Susan B. Anthony. Although it is not uncommon for ordinary individuals to participate in

specific actions to address particular grievances (e.g., attending a protest or signing a petition), dedicating one's life to activism requires a level of commitment only few achieve (Andrews, 1991). Often those who commit their lives to progressive social change must overcome significant barriers in order to sustain and grow their efforts and encourage social progress (Andrews, 1991, 2007; Moghaddam & Lvina, 2002; Morris, 2000). Given the potential role of lifetime activists in influencing society, understanding what enables and encourages particular individuals to commit their lives to activism may be beneficial for understanding how societies change and progress.

In the current study we seek to deepen our understanding of the lives and experiences of lifetime activists by exploring the role of various social psychological mechanisms in growing and sustaining commitment to social change in diverse social contexts. Although many have explored what compels individuals to participate in particular activist activities (Ferree & Miller, 1985; Kim & Bearman, 1997; Klandermans, 2004; Melucci, 1992), few have studied the processes and mechanisms that contribute to sustained, lifelong commitment to change. Such insight, however, is valuable because lifelong

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activists hold the potential to extensively influence their communities both through the direct work they perform, and by serving as models and mentors to others who join the efforts (Andrews, 1991; Morris, 2000). For example, assessment of individuals responsible for producing social change has often centered on leaders of states and/or political parties (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress, and John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labor Party in Ireland who was awarded the Nobel Prize). This tendency, however, holds the potential to limit who receives commendation for this work, and in particular may hinder appraisal of feminist activists who are often overlooked in the political sphere (Shapiro, 1995; Stewart, Settles, & Winter, 1998). Following the recommendation of scholars who urge researchers to focus on the resistance of those who are oppressed (Lugones, 2010), we center our analyses on the psychological mechanisms employed when marginalized feminist activists seek to address injustices occurring within their own communities. The aim of the current study is to use psychosocial theory to better understand how social change agents become lifetime activists, committed to increasing their involvement and dedicating their lives to improving their communities.

### Activist Engagement and Marginality

Although the literature on lifetime social activism is limited, researchers across the social sciences have provided rich empirical and theoretical insight into the study of social movements, of which many activists are members. In seeking to understand what motivates groups and individuals to become involved in movements, several scholars have suggested that understanding a particular group's inequitable access to resources and opportunities can facilitate an ideological obligation to seek more just structures (Brodsky et al., 2012; Ferree & Miller, 1985; Kim & Bearman, 1997; Klandermans, 2004; Moane & Quilty, 2012; White, 2006). For example, Moane and Quilty (2012) revealed how women who participated in a feminist education program became more knowledgeable of gender-based inequity and thus were more likely to participate in various forms of feminist activism. Additionally, researchers focusing on identity processes have demon-

strated that participation in movement activities can facilitate a collective identity among members leading to a shared commitment to improve their situation (Duncan, 1999; Melucci, 1992; Vindhya, 2012). Similarly, involvement in a movement can heighten desire to make changes in one's life consistent with the values of the movement, and in turn, increase commitment to particular causes (Herzog, 1993; Kaysen & Stake, 2001). A large body of research also exists demonstrating that individuals' social and political identities, as well as the sociohistorical context of their lived experiences, are significant predictors of willingness to participate in political action (Andrews, 1991, 2007; Cole & Stewart, 1996; Duncan & Stewart, 2000; Grabe, *in press*; Hammack, 2010a; White & Rastogi, 2009; Wiley, Deaux, & Hagelskamp, 2012). Thus, although there is considerable research suggesting that an individual's knowledge of, and ability to relate personally to injustice may lead a person to participate in activism, what remains unclear is what leads some individuals to remain committed and increase their involvement throughout their lives.

In one of the only studies conducted on lifetime activism, Andrews (1991) notes that as individuals direct their life's focus to activism, various aspects of their lives become intertwined in multidimensional efforts to create change. Thus, when examining how activism is developed and sustained, attention to the inherent intersecting mechanisms and influences that contribute to this particular life course is essential (Klandermans, 2004). For example, forming a commitment to lifetime activism requires being aware of areas in need of change, and a belief that one can contribute to bringing about such changes (Mayo, 1982; Unger, 2000). Additionally, enhancing one's commitment over time likely involves increasing the depth with which one understands the relation between the particular issues and the surrounding sociopolitical context (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Freire, 1972). Furthermore, feeling a sense of connection to others who are similarly affected by the issues may support one's desire and willingness to remain committed in the face of obstacles (Reicher, 2004; Tajfel, 1978; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Given the multiple and likely intersecting foundations through which activist commitment is fostered and sustained, comprehensive analysis of lifetime ac-

tivism requires incorporation of multiple theories related to activist involvement. In what follows we examine how three social-psychological concepts—positive marginality, *conscientización*, and social identity theory—may contribute to our understanding of various aspects of activist involvement as we examine how individuals from marginalized backgrounds commit to creating justice in their communities.

The theory of positive marginality, first proposed by Mayo (1982), may help to explain how some individuals experience marginalization as a source of psychological strength that supports both critical awareness of injustice and action. Although prior scholars have noted the mixture of benefits and costs associated with experiencing marginalization (e.g., DuBois, 1954; Park, 1928), Mayo theorized positive marginality in response to the wellspring of scholarship that characterized marginality solely through lenses of oppression and disempowerment (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994). In particular, Mayo's theory articulates how the experience of being marginalized may equip individuals with a wider lens and unique knowledge of where and how to create equitable change in society. For example, experiencing marginalization often entails being exposed to and navigating both supportive and dismissive or disparaging messages about one's group (Hammack, 2010a; Unger, 2000). Through this experience, marginalized individuals may gain critical insight into how inequality is substantiated in societies, thereby facilitating a deeper psychological investment in transforming social obstacles into opportunities for change (Hall & Fine, 2005; Mayo, 1982; Unger, 2000). Furthermore, the experience of having both insider and outsider status as a member of a marginalized group living and/or working in a dominant culture may create a vantage point from which individuals can better understand and serve the needs of their community (Mayo, 1982). Although limited, empirical support suggests that positive marginality can be used to understand the perceptions and actions of activists in diverse settings (Hall & Fine, 2005; Smith, 1986; Unger, 2000). For example, Unger (2000) demonstrated a significant link between experiencing marginalization and avowing a commitment to social justice among select psychologists (i.e., leaders of the Society for the Psychologi-

cal Study of Social Issues). She posited that experiencing the consequences of inequity equipped individuals with the belief that they could use their experienced knowledge to reveal and eradicate injustice. Similarly, Smith (1986) found that positive marginality helped to explain why Black female leaders in the United States strategically sought to change the institutions they worked within by making them more inclusive of diverse voices. In sum, positive marginality may function to support lifetime activist involvement to the extent that a marginalized social position helps facilitate the foundational tools and motivation to express beliefs and convictions regarding how society should be structured.

Although understanding how one's social location may contribute to an involvement in activism on its own, it does not explain the process by which individuals sustain a commitment to change over time. In addition to the vantage point that may come with experiences of marginalization, a focus on how political structures create and support systems of inequality is also required. Freire's (1972) concept of *conscientización* refers to a process in which individuals work to create bottom-up social change, and can be used to examine individuals' responses and actions as they learn more of the political situations in their community. Through the process of *conscientización* individuals develop a critical consciousness surrounding their social and political realities and through multiple iterations, invoke both analysis and action to seek more just realities (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Freire, 1972; Martín-Baro, 1994). Whereas the critical insight associated with positive marginality affords a vantage point as an insider-outsider who can leverage knowledge for outsider purposes, the critical consciousness gained through *conscientización* involves an evolving understanding through educational experiences of how injustice is supported through sociopolitical structures. Researchers have demonstrated how the process of *conscientización* is associated with increasing an awareness and intolerance of injustice and engaging in efforts to see such injustices rectified (Brodsky et al., 2012; Grabe, Dutt, & Dworkin, in press; Hammack, 2010b; Moane, 2010). Because *conscientización* addresses the iterative process through which individuals form and use their ideology to influence their surroundings, it may help elu-

cidate the mechanisms involved in sustaining commitment by highlighting how involvement can grow as individuals participate in creating social change. By pairing positive marginality with *conscientización* we may better understand the psychological and political locations from which individuals launch their efforts at change and the dynamic processes that grow and support their activism.

In addition to individuals' critical perceptions of their social position and their engagement in iterative processes to address inequity, a lifetime of committed activism likely requires a sense of connection to others from which to draw encouragement, support, motivation, and meaning in their efforts. Social identity theory suggests that a person's social identity is formed through membership in particular groups, as well as how one's groups are valued within society (Tajfel, 1978; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Individuals are therefore motivated to enhance or sustain their groups' status and wellbeing (Tajfel, 1978; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). More recently, scholars have used social identity theory to highlight "a point of pivot between the social and the individual" where understanding of relations to one another can facilitate action to address social and political inequities (Reicher, 2004, p. 928; Hopkins, Kahani-Hopkins, & Reicher, 2006). In other words, viewing one's potential as connected to the wellbeing and status of others can encourage participation in collective action (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Wiley & Bikmen, 2012). Because such efforts involve making the positive views one holds about one's group more widely acknowledged, the relationships built when collectively working for these changes can facilitate a sense of empowerment and encourage continued involvement to increasingly actualize these goals (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Reicher, 2004). Qualitative research assessing experiences in collective action suggests that the extent to which one feels empowered and seeks to continue working collectively relates to how much one feels their involvement is an expression of their social identity (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Although most people do not remain actively committed to activism throughout the entirety of their lives, for some, efforts at change may continue over their life span and deepen as their understanding of political real-

ities, as well as their own and their groups' capabilities extend.

Each of the concepts discussed above can independently assess dimensions of a development of and commitment to activism. However, through uniting multiple theories we can gain a more complex and complete picture of what is required to grow and sustain a commitment to activism over one's lifetime. By examining how experiences of positive marginality, *conscientización*, and social identity intersect we aim to further our understanding of how individuals impact, and are impacted by, the systems of power they seek to change and become increasingly committed to doing so throughout their lives.

### Understanding Social Change Through Narrative

Hammack and Pilecki (2012) offer narrative as an ideal method for understanding how individuals interact with the political sphere. Narratives circulate at multiple levels and are transferred through a number of mediums including political rhetoric, popular media, textbooks, and personal communications. Through these narratives individuals are granted insight into the cultural and individual ideologies attached to whom or what is described (Somers, 1994). One of the ways individuals form an understanding of their identity, collective or individual, and its relationship with society is through interaction with various societal narratives (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Sarbin, 1986). Furthermore, narrative theorists suggest that our sense of who we are and how we develop particular identities is recounted in narrative form (Josselson, 2011; McAdams, 1989). In other words, we share our understanding of who we are and what has influenced us through the stories we tell (Crossley, 2000; Sarbin, 1986). Focused attention on the personal narratives of activists may provide pointed insight into the psychological experiences involved in overcoming the unique and overarching barriers required in maintaining an active commitment to creating social change. Additionally, by focusing attention on narratives of individuals whose perspectives are frequently overlooked in the political sphere, one engages in a justice-oriented process of diversifying the realities that are circulated and con-

sidered (Andrews, 2002; Bamberg, 2004; Rapaport, 1995).

Incorporating narrative analysis into the study of social activism offers considerable opportunity to understand multiple and varied efforts at social change with more depth (McGuire, Stewart, & Curtin, 2010). To date, much of the existing psychological research on activism is focused on exploring attitudes and behaviors of the broader public, measuring topics such as political beliefs, and assessing behaviors and willingness to perform particular activist oriented activities (e.g., writing to state representatives; Corning & Myers, 2002). There is a difference, however, between expressing one's desire for change through specific actions directed at a particular grievance, and committing one's life and work to seeking societal change. While the former may involve the development of a critical consciousness about inequity, the latter requires consistently confronting and seeking to change exclusive and oppressive barriers. This distinction is not meant to devalue the contributions that come from more isolated efforts toward societal progress, nor neglect the fact that certain forms of political engagement (e.g., that which occurs in the home, or neighborhood) have been overlooked as a result of patriarchal definitions of what is considered valuable work (Stewart, Settles, & Winter, 1998). Rather, it is to suggest that there is different and valuable psychological knowledge to be gained from a more focused look at the life histories of activists who have demonstrated the depth of their commitment over multiple decades.

Given the scarcity of research available on lifetime social activists, idiographic narrative analysis is ideally situated to assess the complexity of feminist activists' experiences with depth and attention to nuance (Hammack, 2008; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Mishler, 1990; Tappan, 1997). Through this form of analysis we engage in a hermeneutic, or interpretive, process where we seek to understand individuals' subjective lived experience with considerable attention given to social context (Laverty, 2008; Tappan, 1997; Thorne & Nam, 2007). Additionally, through narrative analysis we can simultaneously assess the presence and manifestations of multiple psychological components and processes that

may impact the lived experiences of lifelong activists.

## The Present Study

To contribute to our understanding of how marginalized individuals commit their lives to activism and create societal change, the present study seeks to examine the lives and experiences of three activists living in three distinct sociopolitical and geographic contexts. The overall intention is to understand the psychological mechanisms and experiences that are involved in sustaining and growing each woman's commitment to social change. In particular, we ask the following questions: why does one choose to commit her life to social change; how does one sustain and grow her commitment when confronting new barriers; and what role does activism play in developing each woman's sense of identity and personal ideology?

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

The data analyzed were interviews archived in the Global Feminisms Project (GFP; Lal, McGuire, Stewart, Zaborowska, & Pas, 2010). The GFP is a collaborative international project, housed at the University of Michigan, supporting contributors to conduct, examine, and archive interviews with women involved in feminist activism, social movements, and academic women's studies departments in various countries.<sup>1</sup> Currently the archive consists of interviews with women from China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States. The coordinators from each geographic site independently selected a list of women to be interviewed, aiming to reflect the issues of historical and societal significance most pertinent to the particular region. The interviews were semi-structured oral histories prompting women to speak about their familial background, career and academic experiences, and engagement with activism and movements. All of the interviews conducted for the GFP were completed in

<sup>1</sup> Transcripts and videos of the interviews in both the native languages of the interviewee and in English are available through the Global Feminisms Project Web site ([www.umich.edu/~glbfem/en](http://www.umich.edu/~glbfem/en)).

the native language of the interviewee, transcribed, and translated into English, and took place between the years 2003 and 2011. All interviewees granted permission for their names and interviews to be publicized.

For the current project, five interviews were initially selected, one from each country, to examine how lifetime activist experiences would manifest in different geographic locations with different sociopolitical histories and present climates. All of the women had been involved with activism for at least two decades, and had expressed in their interview the intention to continue involvement. Given that we were particularly interested in how activist identities formed in relation to different experiences of marginalization, these initial five women were selected because they each described multiple and unique ways in which they experienced marginalization (e.g., on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality). However, due to the abundance of time and word space required of idiographic narrative analysis, we opted to focus our attention on three women, therefore allowing us to approach our analyses with more depth. The three women were selected from the five original because they specifically discussed their activism in connection with social movements occurring in their home country for the greatest number of years, and thus were viewed as prime candidates for understanding how experiences with activism developed and shifted over time. These women are Grace Lee Boggs of the United States, Matilde Lindo of Nicaragua, and D. Sharifa of India.

### Narrative Analysis

Each interview was analyzed to identify how the women constructed, maintained, and performed their identities as activists, and how this shifted and changed over time. Specifically, we used an idiographic analytic approach to provide a more focused analysis of each woman's experiences and their relation to the diverse social contexts. This approach enables a holistic understanding of the women's narratives by centering attention on each individual life history (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Following Josselson's (2011) guidelines for conducting narrative analysis, the authors read, reread, and discussed each of the narra-

tives until an overarching understanding of guiding frameworks within each woman's story was formed that accounted for contradictions and nuances. During this process the two authors met regularly to discuss factors that contributed to each woman's development as an activist, and how this contributed to their ability to sustain and deepen their commitment to different causes.

Our analysis was guided by the social psychological concepts of positive marginality, *consientización*, and social identity theory as we sought to understand how the three women organized their own experiences in the formation of a lifetime commitment to activism. In particular, specific attention was afforded to understanding if and how these concepts manifested in the women's lives and how this impacted the women's experiences. However, rather than objectively coding for the presence or absence of each concept, we employed an interpretive analytic procedure both to maintain a focus on the varied expressions of lived experience, and to avoid oversimplification or reduction of the influence of surrounding sociopolitical context (Tappan, 1997). Validity was thus assessed, following the example of inquiry-guided methodologists, through ongoing conversation regarding the fit of the interpretation to the phenomena under study (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Mishler, 1990). Conversations aimed at assuring validity were initially held between the two authors and later included conversations between the first author and members of a narrative analysis research group.

Additionally, although not exempt from influence in any method of research, attention was given to our own (the authors') subjectivity, and how our own social locations influenced our interpretation and analysis (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Tappan, 1997). As two women from the United States committed to seeing the world structured more equitably, we are aware of the biases we bring to this research. In particular, we each have experienced marginalization on the basis of our gender and racial or social class backgrounds. Through education and the influence of feminist activists in our own lives, we each have come to understand the structural nature of injustice and have iteratively worked for change, aware of our own insider-outsider positions. Although the analysis of

three women's life histories neither can nor intends to reveal a universal experience held by all marginalized individuals, it can provide an in-depth understanding of how individual women across continents construct their realities in the midst of widespread inequity.

## Results

### Grace Lee Boggs: "Going Beyond Opposition"

Born in 1915, Grace Lee Boggs has been actively involved in a number of the most prominent social movements in the United States during the 20th century including the Black power, Asian American, civil rights, labor, women's, and environmental movements. The daughter of Chinese immigrants, with a father who was particularly adamant about ensuring his daughters' education, values of justice and education long played a substantial role in determining her life's path. Furthermore, Boggs's description of her life is marked with ideas of dialogical thinking and praxical engagement, wherein theories of justice are both enacted and questioned with the aim of transcending existing notions of what is possible. These ideas both define her approach to activism and help to explain how she is able to sustain and grow her commitment over multiple decades.

Boggs's description of her childhood and adolescence focuses on an awareness of social inequities, and an explanation of how this shaped her motivation to seek better alternatives in the future. She playfully begins the interview with the following anecdote:

The waiters in the restaurant [that her father owned], whenever I cried, they would say, "Leave her on the hillside, she's only a girl child." And so I got some idea of the kind of changes that we needed to make in this world, and I think that was my first indication [of] my women's consciousness . . . as a baby.

Although undoubtedly a post hoc interpretation of what she remembers or was told about her childhood, that Boggs chooses to open her life history with such an example underscores a long held critical awareness of her social position. Furthermore, this reflection highlights Boggs's use of her awareness as motivation to create change. Boggs understood how others with more power in her community perceived her worth. Yet, rather than internalizing their

perspective, she demonstrates that her intimate understanding of inequity provides her with knowledge of where change was in need. Consistent with the framework of positive marginality, Boggs was not merely burdened by her identity, but rather saw the utility that arises from the knowledge she was afforded. As the interview continues, the value Boggs finds within her identity (as both an Asian American and a woman) expands. For example, her understanding of the discrimination her parents faced, her father as an Asian business owner and her mother having no formal education, fed Boggs's determination not to succumb to society's expected roles of her gender and race. In particular this drive encouraged her to attend college and eventually obtain a PhD in philosophy. Despite consistently confronting barriers, Boggs's sense of personal efficacy is not hindered, but rather grows by overcoming them.

Although Boggs's awareness of, and faith in her ability to transcend structural constraints were established early on, it was not until she completed graduate school that she began to participate in more critical and strategic attempts to change oppressive structures. She received her PhD in 1940, a time of particularly heightened and vocal anti-Asian discrimination practices in the United States, largely stemming from the country's hostile relationship with Japan during World War II. Although finding employment was difficult, Boggs's academic status enabled her to obtain a job working in the philosophy library at the University of Chicago that provided a small salary. Having a limited income brought Boggs, "into contact with other people who were sort of fighting rat-infested housing," specifically in the Black community on the South Side of Chicago, an experience Boggs refers to as playing a pivotal role in her activist development. Boggs's unique convergence of identities and experiences as a highly educated woman, who understood race as an Asian American living in a Black community provided her with a particular insider-outsider vantage point from which she could leverage change. Additionally, Boggs's description of her early days in Chicago living with this community unveils how she developed a deeper critical consciousness regarding how opportunities are limited by sociopolitical realities. She had long been aware of the existence of inequality in society. However, through observing and

understanding her shared relative powerlessness with others who did not fit the dominant culture, she comes to understand inequality as deeply rooted in structural injustice. Through the connections she makes between the opportunities available to those living in substandard conditions and the broader political context, Boggs demonstrates an entrance into a process of *conscientización* that influences her desire to create structural change. Having others with whom to reflect and strategize, Boggs, “got a glimpse of what a movement was like, and decided [she] would become a movement activist in the Black community.”

Highlighting the iterative nature of *conscientización*, Boggs became increasingly involved in efforts to learn more about the realities of her sociopolitical environment and participated in actions that challenge what she finds unjust. She began by taking part in protests and moves to Detroit, Michigan to focus more concerted energy on addressing injustices experienced by the Black community. Boggs’s reflection on her initial experiences organizing in Detroit further demonstrates how she was drawn deeper into efforts to create systemic change:

I think that one of the most important things I learned in that period was that . . . how you struggle must depend very much upon the concrete circumstances where you are. And the concrete circumstances in Detroit were that . . . Whites were fleeing the city and Blacks were becoming the majority. But all the offices all the officials, all the politicians in the city were still White . . . So we began to say to ourselves, in the history of the United States, when a city becomes almost ethnically one group, what happens is the political offices are taken over by that particular group. So we began to create a Black Power Movement that would begin to address this situation, that when a certain group of people becomes the majority in the city, they should run the city.

These experiences demonstrate Boggs’s concerted effort to learn from the past, and form a contextually appropriate movement in the effort to create effective change. Through consistently seeking more knowledge about the sociopolitical context and ways to address injustice, Boggs becomes increasingly focused on creating pathways to improve her community.

In addition to engaging in an iterative process of awareness and action, Boggs’s experiences also highlight how social identity theory operated in deepening her commitment to activism. Boggs described the Black community as the

“first community [she] ever felt a part of,” which was partly developed through the collective commitment to seek improved treatment and opportunities for those with less structural power. Because Boggs viewed herself as a member of this community, each success or defeat is intimately connected to her own well-being. Traditional conceptualizations of social identity that theorize connectivity on the basis of categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality do not easily apply to Boggs’s story. In fact she seems to express less interest in such forms of activist division within her interview, and instead shares that she prefers to focus on “each section of our society that has been denied their humanity.” However, the sense of community and shared ideological conviction Boggs felt with other activists who had experienced different forms of marginality created an encouraging community that contributed to her sustained commitment to activism. Although social identity theory may be the least pronounced concept in Boggs’s oral history, it is still evident that her connection to other activists in the movements increased Boggs’s drive to work in partnership with, and in support of marginalized communities, transcending what she alone could accomplish.

For Boggs, positive marginality, *conscientización*, and social identity are all intimately connected to her personal values around praxis, or the enactment of theory and knowledge. Rather than viewing education and action as two separate steps toward creating change, Boggs described them as two inherently linked practices embedded within efforts that lead to effective change. She consistently learned from existing theory and her own experiences, put this knowledge into practice, and learned from the processes and outcomes. Thus, her belief that her experiences and social position equipped her with a vantage point to create change, ideological and structural response to sociopolitical realities, and sense of connection to others are constantly transformed and expanded as she seeks to understand and experience a better society. The constant exchange of learning and acting, by its very nature, brought Boggs deeper and deeper into the issues she worked to address. This creates a deep sense of purpose in her life, one that only grows with time. Her activism is sustained by this ever-increasing commitment to praxical activism.



Barriers, as well as successes, are a way to learn, thus nothing becomes too difficult to overcome.

### **Matilde Lindo: “The World Is Not the Way We Thought”**

Born in 1954, Matilde Lindo<sup>2</sup> was a Black feminist leader of the Autonomous Women’s Movement in Nicaragua (Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres; MAM) who was particularly focused on eradicating violence against women. Lindo was born in Bilwi, the capital city of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) of Nicaragua. Due to its unique colonial history<sup>3</sup> and geographic distance from the other highly populated regions in Nicaragua, RAAN has maintained high levels of racial and ethnic diversity. However, it is also the economically poorest region of the country, and has long been a site of political mobilization aimed at achieving political autonomy and dignity for individuals in the region. Given this context it is not surprising that Lindo opens the interview with an explanation of her ethnic identity:

I will start by saying that my ethnicity is, ah, I’m a Black person. You know in Nicaragua, we have this thing, some of the Black people prefer us to be called Creole and some us say, “No we’re just plain Black.” Well, I’m just plain Black.

Throughout the interview Lindo is clear that her ethnic identity is a source of significant pride. When discussing her experience working in different activist-oriented organizations, Lindo shares how she liked to make it known that: “I am Black and then woman!,” despite the fact that some of the activists she worked with would have preferred her identification and commitments to be presented in the opposite order. Aware that she possessed unique knowledge as one of only very few Black women actively involved in MAM, Lindo prioritized and gained encouragement through her ability to work for the rights of Black women in the RAAN. Lindo’s sense of positive marginality in regards to her ethnic identity had long influenced her desire to challenge exclusion from justice.

Although her ethnic consciousness and pride seemed to have played a significant, enduring role in her life stemming early on, Lindo’s awareness of gender inequality and feminist consciousness did not develop until much later

in life. According to Lindo, in her family “women always [had a] voice, and that voice was heard and had to be obeyed . . . just as much as the men in the family.” Even as societal expectations regarding her gender became more salient, Lindo’s family provided a context that assured her opportunities would not be limited simply because she was born female. For example, upon giving birth to her first child at age 16 many assumed she would leave behind her formal education. However, Lindo’s family supported her in finishing high school and obtaining a teaching degree. In contrast to Boggs, Lindo’s demonstration of positive marginality did not stem from a reaction to inequitable language or treatment, rather it was fostered through the perspectives shared and lived within her family. The affirmation and experienced knowledge of the capabilities of marginalized individuals positioned Lindo with the motivation and insight to support her activism later in life.

Lindo’s intolerance of unfair treatment was evident early on, even before developing a deeper political consciousness. During time in her adulthood working as an analyst she left her position to obtain more training. Upon returning to work her employer wanted her to take on more responsibility, but refused to increase her pay. Not wanting “to make some political issue with [her] job,” but unwilling to accept their conditions, Lindo quit. Despite not viewing this situation as worthy of publicizing nor connecting to systems of inequality, Lindo demonstrated a refusal to participate in institutions that did not equitably value her capabilities. The perspective fostered during her youth of being aware of one’s position but refusing to see her worth devalued encouraged Lindo to reject unfairness and seek opportunities where her capabilities would be better valued.

However, a few years later, Lindo became more engrossed in the political narratives circulating in her community, those related to feminist politics in particular, catalyzing an aware-

<sup>2</sup> Matilde Lindo passed away on January 20, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Although the rest of the country was colonized by Spain, these regions were initially colonized by Great Britain, and later invaded by the United States in 1894. As a result the ethnic identities of those living within the region are significantly more diverse from the rest of the country, with many identifying as indigenous, Black, and/or Creole.

ness of the structural route of inequity and a process of *conscientización*. Through teaching and then working as a social analyst, Lindo found herself in conversations with women who had experienced domestic violence. She therefore came to realize that the equitable narratives regarding the value of women and men she encountered in her home were not everyone's reality, and rather that sociopolitical structures contributed to inequity. These experiences for Lindo coincided with the formation of the MAM in Nicaragua. The movement had formed in response to the silencing of women's concerns in the Sandinista party<sup>4</sup> and was responsible for raising awareness of the realities and consequences of gender inequality throughout the country. Lindo had a friend involved in the movement who provided encouragement for her to join as well:

I have a friend . . . she, you know, was looking for women and she said, "Strong women, we need strong women here because we're about to lose our space." Because the men from the Sandinistas party . . . wanted to take over the House [government] . . . as women, we need to make our voice be heard.

Lindo's friend encouraged her to take on a more structural interpretation of why women's opportunities were limited in Nicaraguan society. Thus Lindo came to make connections between women's susceptibility to violence in their homes, and women's exclusion from national politics. Knowing firsthand that more equitable perceptions and valuing of women were possible, and having experience with confronting injustice, Lindo was compelled to become involved in the movement. She quit her job as a government analyst to dedicate herself fulltime to women's rights. Demonstrating the progression of *conscientización*, this experience facilitated a more direct ideological commitment to justice through increased involvement in the movement.

Additionally, the decision to become involved in the movement also highlights how Lindo began to view her own fate as connected to the opportunities and wellbeing of women more broadly in Nicaragua. As such her desire to work on behalf of change for women, and her own social identity as a woman become increasingly prominent. Furthermore, one of the first roles Lindo assumed within MAM was starting a radio program aimed at addressing violence

against women. On the show they "start[ed] telling people, 'Women should not be living violence. There is a possibility of another kind of relationship.'" Lindo's ideals of gender equality that existed within her own home had evolved into her goal for Nicaraguan society. Additionally, midway through the interview, upon describing her induction into the movement, Lindo shifts from mentioning macropolitical issues in passing to actively describing her involvement in them. Lindo's identification with MAM, and concerted effort to see her group supported, further highlights the role of social identity theory in influencing her continued commitment to women's rights activism. She had taken on an identity as a member of MAM, and viewed their collective successes as integral to her own wellbeing. Working unto this end became personally fulfilling and empowering.

The experiences described above all highlight the interconnectivity of social identity theory and *conscientización* in influencing Lindo's activism throughout her life. As she increased her involvement with MAM, Lindo came to understand more deeply how embedded injustices were within particular social structures. The experiences simultaneously caused her to increasingly view her opportunities and wellbeing as intimately tethered to the members of MAM and women in Nicaragua more broadly. Importantly, Lindo did not seem to lose herself within this identity, nor see the movement as infallible; in fact, Lindo used her insider status as a Black woman in MAM to see that the needs and desires of women from her community were addressed. As her involvement in MAM grew, Lindo's ability to actualize the rights of those who were marginalized received increasing opportunity and audibility, thus sustaining and growing her commitment for decades.

#### **D. Sharifa: "I Realized if the Cause Was Right You Can Fight for It"**

D. Sharifa is an activist working primarily on women's rights and more recently Muslim women's rights in particular, throughout India. In the early 2000's she gained significant national and international attention for her work to

<sup>4</sup> Revolutionary party responsible for the overthrow of the dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979.

build the first Mosque exclusively for women in India. Sharifa was born in 1966 in Kulithalai, a highly industrialized region in the southernmost tip of India. Although Muslim by birth, the region Sharifa grew up in was predominantly Hindu, but she stated that her religion did not play a significant role in her own identity. Her focus on Muslim women's rights, rather, came through an evolved understanding of how rights were inhibited, and her desire to support the wellbeing of those she perceived as most marginalized.

In direct contrast to Matilde Lindo, Sharifa's upbringing was defined by strict adherence to prescribed gender roles with men having unquestioned dominance over the women:

There was no stage when I was comfortable with either my father or brother . . . They would do what they wanted. Not allow us to do what we wanted. So I could not evolve. With no outside exposure I could not evolve.

Sharifa's understanding that men were entitled to control women's lives had been ingrained in her worldview. Although she did not find this relationship equitable or ideal, with no other examples of how women and men could relate to one another, she could not expect an alternative.

During her early 20's Sharifa was hired to be a translator of Hindi at an Indian women's conference, and for the first time she was exposed to new ideas of how women could be treated:

I knew nothing about feminism, and other issues of women. [At the conference] there were 1,000 women gathered . . . talking about what happens inside homes . . . violence and domestic violence and about sexual abuse. Our lives at home was different, a woman's role was defined. Once I attain puberty, I can't go out. If my brother beats me, I should accept it . . . from what they spoke [at the conference] it seemed that the lives of all women were like that.

The conference was Sharifa's first opportunity to examine her gender through the perspective and examples of women eager to assert their own worth and ability, rather than through the expectations and control of men. Although Boggs and Lindo developed a strong, positive sense of their identity and capabilities before becoming more deeply engrossed in political context, for Sharifa a sense of positive marginality seemed to coincide with the ideological shift that catalyzed a process of *conscientización*. The issues discussed and actions un-

dertaken at the conference caused Sharifa to view the unfairness she faced in her home as a structural injustice affecting all women. Sharifa's descriptions of her reactions while at the conference highlight multiple iterations of increasing awareness regarding the sources and consequences of gender inequity. Additionally, at the conference, Sharifa was exposed to women who modeled for her a new way of conceiving women's capabilities and worth, who would not accept societal barriers that inhibited their opportunities. This facilitated an affirming shift in Sharifa's sense of value as a woman and supported a positive appraisal of her marginalized identity. Although Sharifa's use of her vantage point as an educated woman, and later as a woman from a Muslim family does expand over time and manifests through refusals to allow obstacles to impede her goals, positive marginality was the least pronounced of the three concepts in her story. Nevertheless, Sharifa's evolving understanding of how groups and individuals were subordinated on the basis of their identity supported her entrance into feminist activism by underscoring the pressing need for change in society.

After attending the conference, Sharifa's description of her life events focuses on the many changes she made as a result of attending, demonstrating her increasing involvement in a process of *conscientización*. She left her brother's home, convinced her mother and sister to move with her, and funded their lives through tutoring Hindi. While tutoring girls in the area she would, "casually tell them about the workshop [she] had attended, about women, about education and so on." She also found opportunities to talk with the girl's families, encouraged them to send their daughters to college, and helped them in the application process. Through each iteration Sharifa was putting the knowledge she gained from the conference into action, learning more and gaining encouragement, and consistently becoming more deeply engaged. Additionally, in these examples Sharifa was actualizing her sense of positive marginality by using her insider status to open up opportunities for girls and women in her community and eliminate barriers she once faced.

Although it was at the conference that Sharifa first began to view her potential as connected to the status of women, it is not until later in the interview that she seems to conceptualize her-

self as a member of the activist community. Along with a group of women who shared her passion, Sharifa created the organization STEPS to address the struggles women faced in their homes and communities. Through STEPS Sharifa described efforts where they supported families of girls who had been raped, assisted women in obtaining titles to land, and offered women protection from husbands attempting to force them from their homes. The barriers she describes during this time grew in frequency and intensity. When seeking to build a center to house their organization, they first experienced difficulty obtaining a plot because of questions surrounding the worth of their endeavors. Then, upon obtaining a plot, night after night local men would sabotage their progress in building the center, leaving the location littered with condoms. Although discouraged, Sharifa, describes how they were able to overcome the barriers:

We had nothing. Only commitment and that drive in us that we have to do something. So again we sat and consulted one another . . . they wanted to stop us . . . We would clean up the whole place the next morning and start work all over.

Consistent with social identity theory, because Sharifa saw herself as working on this cause, both on behalf of women, and as a member of a group of activists. Her connection to this group provided a supportive network and encouraged her to continue to work for their collective wellbeing, regardless of the obstacle.

Years later, while continuing to work with STEPS, Sharifa became more engrossed in the compounded marginalization of Muslim women who were suffering excessively during communal riots in Tamilnadu.<sup>5</sup> Although Muslim herself, the focus of Sharifa's efforts to enhance justice previously centered predominantly on gender, despite living in a region where relations between Muslims and Hindu's had been hostile. However, as she became more informed of the riots and surrounding social context, Sharifa develop a more intersectional understanding of marginalization through the compounded restrictive barriers many Muslim women faced. Not only did she see how the rights and wellbeing of Muslim women were at heightened risk for denial, through an evolving sense of social identity Sharifa begins to view her own rights and wellbeing as connected to

those most marginalized. More recently, building upon her growing knowledge of structural injustice and the iterative nature of *conscientización* Sharifa began working in partnership with Muslim women to build the first Mosque solely for women in India. Supported by a faith in her own and her groups' capabilities and ideological objection to inhibiting rights and opportunities, Sharifa is working to make inclusive spaces where those who hold less structural power can build supportive communities, strategize, and prosper.

## Discussion

In the analyses above we demonstrate how the convergence of three concepts from within social psychology—positive marginality, *conscientización*, and social identity theory—can contribute to our understanding of what supports, grows, and sustains lifelong commitment to social activism. In each of the narratives we observed how the women became increasingly involved in specific movements to create social change in their communities. In their own varied ways, the women's narratives shatter traditional characterizations of marginality by showcasing their agency and thoughtful efforts to identify and subvert sources of inequity as they sought to eradicate various forms of oppression. Furthermore, all of the women describe multiple barriers, both explicit societal constraints, as well as interpersonal and individual limitations they had to overcome in order to maintain their involvement in efforts to produce social change. The experiences and processes revealed in the women's narratives are thus rich for analysis in seeking to identify how some individuals are able to grow and sustain their commitment to social activism throughout their lifetime.

Ultimately the culmination of what sustains and grows the women's dedication to social change, although guided by similar psychological experiences and processes, is quite different.

Grace Lee Boggs's growing connection seems to stem from her long held commitment

<sup>5</sup> Tamilnadu is a state in the southernmost region of India. This region has been historically associated with tension and conflict between Muslims and Hindus. The riots Sharifa refers to occurred in 1994 where the homes and businesses owned by Muslims were being targeted and burned down.

to education, and her ability to live out the value of praxis by enacting and spreading theories of equality. Matilde Lindo became more deeply connected to feminist activism, and the feminist movement in Nicaragua, because she found it to be an opportunity to spread the values of equality that she knew of from her upbringing, and provided her with a community that shared and supported these values. For D. Sharifa developing and sustaining an activist identity came through an evolutionary process in which she became exposed to more egalitarian ways of living and thus sought to both live this example and make it accessible to more women. Yet, despite the differences, the women's shared process of becoming increasingly engaged and committed to activism has much to offer theorization of those who contribute to social change.

Although none of the concepts appear identically in each of the women's narratives, each concept was able to guide our interpretation of the life histories as we sought to understand how commitment to change was sustained. Indeed this ability to unfold differently, while simultaneously revealing a similar experience or process reflects an important strength in each of the constructs. Beginning with positive marginality, across all three narratives we can see how the women found value within their marginality that provided insight regarding how to create a more just world (Unger, 2000). For Grace Lee Boggs growing up female and a Chinese immigrant, in a region that favored Whiteness and men, enabled her to identify inconsistencies and injustice in societal narratives from a young age and influenced her actions to seek improvements in her life. Matilde Lindo grew up surrounded by positive and affirming narratives in her home regarding her ethnic and gender identity. When confronted with more explicitly inequitable narratives later in life, Lindo could draw upon her lived alternative perspective of viewing individuals with less structural power when seeking to create change. In contrast, D. Sharifa grew up not knowing she could expect better treatment as a woman, and it was not until her 20's that she was introduced to feminists who modeled a different way of understanding her identity and supported her desire to see better opportunities for women. Although emerging at different points and through different sources, all three

women used their lived experience as a member of a marginalized group as a foundation for identifying reasons and sources for creating change.

Additionally, within the narratives we can see how each of the women developed a critical consciousness about the existing political circumstances, catalyzing a process of *conscientización* that involved learning about the roots of inequity and partaking in multiple iterations to address injustice (Freire, 1972). Given the varied sociopolitical contexts and particular issues the women sought to address, it is unsurprising that the process of *conscientización* would unfold differently for each woman. However, it is also important to note that although the experience that catalyzed these events differed, each woman was exposed to a new lens through which to view the world (for Boggs when living with the Black community in substandard housing; for Lindo when assessing the consequences of patriarchal control of the government; and for Sharifa attending the women's conference and learning of feminism). Lastly, in alignment with social identity theory we can see how each of the women formed relationships and communities based upon a shared aspect of their identity and commitment that enhanced their ability to bring about change (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Once again, the differences in manifestations of social identity theory are unsurprising given the varied contexts. A particularly interesting similarity to note is that all the women formed a supportive and encouraging community based on a shared ideology, rather than solely through an aspect of identity such as ethnicity or race. Indeed each of their communities consisted of a myriad of identities, united by a shared commitment to change, and a sense of shared fate connected to status of their activist community. In sum, within each woman's life we can see each of the concepts differently intersect and ebb and flow, yet simultaneously provide an overarching framework to understand their sustained commitment.

The choice to focus our analyses on these three specific concepts, however, is a limitation when considering that additional factors that contributed to each woman's sense of activism may not have received adequate attention in our analyses. Stories of redemption and points where one may have forfeited an opportunity to turn back to an earlier lifestyle are both present in the women's narra-

tives and undeniably influenced their development as activists. However, we chose to focus on positive marginality, *conscientización*, and social identity theory because each is a concept associated with an evolving and deepening identity over time, thus likely sustaining and increasing commitment to change. Furthermore, each was conceived as addressing a necessary component required for sustaining activist involvement, in general, in contrast to factors that might be unique to different individuals. Nevertheless, future research should continue to explore additional aspects that contribute to sustained activist commitment.

Despite the focus on the positive potential associated with marginality, the study aim is not to suggest that the social and political structures that foster exclusion are acceptable or inevitable. Although all of the interviews analyzed demonstrate how women's marginalized social identities contributed to their development as feminist activists, the study does not aim to suggest that all who are marginalized become activists. As Unger (2000) describes, "Although demographics may predict marginality, consciousness determines whether marginality becomes activism" (p. 163). Consequently, future research should examine the social barriers that inhibit the development of a critical consciousness as well as the related desire and ability to take part in transformative change.

Lastly, the findings also underscore the reality that feminist activists do not experience and fight against identical forms of oppression around the world, nor share the same perspectives on how to rectify inequality, or how society should be structured (Mohanty, 1988; Naples & Desai, 2002). Paralleling the diversity of women's experiences, the motivations for, methods utilized, and overall outcomes related to creating social change varied considerably across each culture and context. Nevertheless, in an era where dominant narratives that overlook agency enhance perceptions of threat and insecurity, the present study suggests that the experience of marginality—across borders—may equip individuals with psychological tools that can facilitate social change.

Researchers have suggested that one way to raise consciousness, foster a deeper understanding of one's political surroundings, and support social change is to circulate alternative narratives (Andrews, 1991; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). Indeed activists throughout the globe have committed their lives to participating in this work. In addition

to affirming the importance of understanding the experiences of marginalized individuals through their own narratives, the present study aims to serve as an alternative narrative and theoretical framework that can support such consciousness and create needed change.

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