

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

TRANSITIONING FROM EGO TO ECO-FOCUSED COGNITION: ALTRUISTIC INTELLIGENCE AND THE MOMENTUM OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ENGAGEMENT

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Celia W. Ringstrom

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Advisor: Lisa Rofel, Anthropology

Abstract: In a world increasingly in need of strong community networks and intersectional social support groups, engagement in activism and the motivations behind doing so continue to be something not fully understood in academia. Why are certain individuals involved in activism and creating these community networks while so many more are not motivated to do so? This ethnographic study seeks to answer this question by looking closely at the lives of several activists and the circumstances that led to their eventual involvement in activism. Based on various patterns repeated throughout these interviews, specific social relations and educational contexts appear to have had an important influence on their choice to engage in activism. Rather than accrediting these individuals with some sort of altruistic nature, this study seeks to show how these activists have high levels of “altruistic intelligence”, the type of cognitive and empathic capacity to understand systems of oppression and know how to create ecological harmony and achieve social justice. This study also seeks to provide a framework through which we can begin to imagine what teaching this kind of intelligence would look like. Based on the testimonies of these activists, focus should go towards increasing knowledge on the intersectionality of various oppressive systems as well as building empathy skills in social relations.

Keywords: Activism, Radical, Altruistic Intelligence, Education, Social Psychology

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Introduction

Emerging into the world of activism is a turbulent but beautiful experience that confronts you with living your humanity to its fullest extent. From my personal experiences with activism, I feel that to be fully human is to not only be capable of witnessing and criticizing the injustices embedded in our social systems, but of intentionally committing one's self to actively fight and resist such paradigms of oppression through creative and energetic solutions. When I first started integrating myself into the broad and far-reaching network of various activists and activist communities, I saw this articulation of what it means to be fully human. The deeper I became enmeshed in these extensive activist communities, I more clearly saw the basic negligence of others refusing this responsibility of what I view to be our human privilege, and I began to feel a rupture within these other non-activist networks. Throughout my personal experiences of activist involvement, it became clearer that I felt more and more disconnected from communities and friend groups that were very obviously not engaged with the world through activism. These people I had been so connected with before shared my values and articulated the same frustrations and disillusionments I so passionately expressed. In the face of so much perceived injustice, why then were they not putting their thought and emotion into explicit action like I and so many others were doing?

I found it interesting that a lot of the people within these activist networks often use the word "comrade" to speak to or about each other, yet I rarely hear the word "friend". After comparing the dictionary definitions of these two words, I found that the critical distinction between "comrade" and "friend" is that the former specifically articulates a social bond founded on activity whereas the latter focuses more broadly on a general social bond based on familiarity.

Therefore, “comrade” precisely encapsulates the deeper meaning of what I perceive to be the deepest expression of humanity, that of using our creative and aware minds to *act* upon injustice. Perhaps this is the reason I felt so disconnected from my old social relations. I was coming to understand what it means to be human and what it means to be social in an entirely different framework. My old social bonds were not exactly deteriorating but rather disappearing because I was in the process of developing a completely new paradigm concerning human connection. Yet my older “friends” and much of the broader community fail to understand this deeper paradigmatic reality of human connection and thus live out their lives and their actions according to a very different social framework, one that involves little to no activism.

This thesis seeks to understand this dilemma through a semi-auto ethnographic approach, using the experiences and reflections of fellow activists, as well as non-engaged friends, alongside my own in the attempt to understand the underlying social and psychological influences that thread our experiences together or at least along similar patterns. I utilized snowball sampling to conduct sixteen interviews with a variety of activists, some of whom I have known personally for a long time and others that were recommended to me. I also conducted four interviews with friends of mine who are not engaged in activism. Although I would have preferred to get more a random sample for the non-engaged individuals, it was difficult and uncomfortable to ask to interview those who I did not have a personal relationship with. I specifically chose the individuals in the activist group based on their lack of direct social connection to their causes. Therefore, the majority of those I interviewed were white Americans, with the exception of a Mexican American woman involved in several Palestinian organizations and a Lebanese woman involved in social justice movements in Oakland. I felt that interviewing this population would make it easier to more clearly focus on reasons for activist engagement

that do not involve the more obvious reason of being directly affected by social justice issues. Because most of the activists I interviewed are white and because I am also white, the study is evidently influenced by and reflective of white, American culture.

Though I find academia incredibly useful, particularly concerning my growing awareness of the intersectionality of various social justice issues, I find the theories and empiricism of academia to fall into two interrelated traps. What I have found in academia, specifically in the social sciences, is a mindless obsession with empirical legitimacy and disciplinary boundaries. Within my academic upbringing in the social sciences, I have found some of my professors and fellow scholars to be absolutely brilliant, but at some point there is often an abrupt and awkward end to this genius. To me, brilliance seems to have a certain momentum, but as soon as the subject matter becomes incredibly abstract or “tangential”, the speaker snaps out of their brilliance and scrambles to find more empirical footing for fear of being scientifically illegitimate. Not to say that this happens on every occasion, but more often than not, it feels as though this incredible momentum is intimidated into resignation, going the route of quantitative submission or disciplinary singularity. Perhaps trying to venture out of a discipline, especially if it is not deemed a hard science, is dangerous because it runs the risk of being less than scientific and therefore less than valid. Even the attempt to become “multi-disciplinary” is giving in to this fear of empirical illegitimacy because the obsession with categorizing what you do or what you study is still about trying to feel legitimate in a scientifically constructed world. As Eric Wolf so argues, “It is not enough to become multidisciplinary in the hope that an addition of all the disciplines will lead to a new vision. A major obstacle to the development of a new perspective lies in the very fact of specialization itself” (2010). In his brilliant work, *Europe and the People Without History*, Wolf makes the bold attempt to construct a holistic and thus incredibly natural

perspective of human kind throughout history, showing how utterly arbitrary and simply incorrect is to focus on just one discipline or even several disciplines through the multi-disciplinary framework.

Coming upon this crucial revelation, I have decided to construct my own “ethnography” with little regard for what theoretical pieces fall under which scientific category. I also strongly believe that “as social scientists, we need to acknowledge this rich terrain of emotions, consciousness, and thought located in the interior, if we wish to grasp the breadth, depth, and dynamic nature of political activism” (Pulido, 2003). I understand that my original aim was to construct an anthropological work with the underpinnings of psychological theories, but I have found that I want to write about activism in the most natural way possible, which does not involve labeling this, anthropology, and that, psychology. This ethnography will draw on components from anthropology, psychology, and philosophy in a creative yet concise way in order to give this academic substance productivity, which does not mean that this work is not anthropological. As the study of what makes us human, what is more anthropological than taking the stories of various people and human focused disciplines, and transforming it into something that isn’t just observing the human but actually breathing life into the human. I would like to not only offer a new perspective, but also show how my theoretical work can be used for concrete application and change, rather than falling into the trap of academic separation and stagnation.

I lay out this study in four chapters. The first chapter focuses on creating a definition of activism that draws on the opinions and experiences of the various activists I interviewed. This aims to clearly establish what I mean when I use the word activism and thus to avoid any sort of confusion or misunderstanding with the use of such a broad term. The second chapter delves into the meat of the interviews, focusing on the lives of the activists and their experiences engaging in

activism. In this chapter I aim to show the various parallels and patterns that came up in the personal recollections of these activists, paying particular attention to the role that education and social relationships played in their activism. The third chapter focuses on my central argument, which is that activism correlates to a very specific kind of intelligence that I refer to as “altruistic intelligence”. I use Gardner’s theories on intelligence and material from the previous chapter to show the relevance of “altruistic intelligence” in activism. The fourth and final chapter looks at how “altruistic intelligence” can be imagined and developed in an educational context, drawing specifically on the importance of radical social justice knowledge and empathic social skills.

Chapter 1: Defining Activism

Before my proper argument can be more fully addressed, it is of the utmost importance to understand that mistranslations do not just occur from translating words from one language to another, but in specifically assuming that words have a universal meaning within one language or even within one academic field. What I refer to as “culture” will be similar but not the exact same thing another theorist might be referring to when they write about “culture”. Ignoring the task of specifically defining such important words like “culture” or “activism” often leads to inconsistency and/or a lazy sort of generalization in theoretical arguments. Therefore, I will define activism and radical, seeing as these terms are crucial to my thesis and have this sort of vague-ness and variability within their socially accepted meanings. I will partially do so by incorporating various definitions and conceptualizations given to me by the participants I interviewed, and partially by drawing on various theoretical frameworks in both anthropological and psychological theory and reworking these theories to include a more holistic understanding of these terms.

When one thinks “activism”, a stereotype of a hippie, free-loving activist engaging in a rowdy protest often comes to mind. From the various discussions I’ve had with my participants, it’s important to understand that at the root of activism lies not only the actor which produces “activism” (the activist), but that the dedication to engage in activism does not necessitate a left-leaning mindset of such an actor. Activism does necessitate an individual committing to engaging in concrete acts that are in line with their personal beliefs and values. One of my participants, Herb, highlights this crucial point, stating that, “Activism means any way that you respond to your values of social justice and peace. Those are the two words that are the most

important to me. . . .Anything that's consistent with your basic value system and your understanding of the situation that you face." Other participants resounded similar views, specifically drawing on the fact that activism does not correlate to a specific ideological mindset. Sophia explains activism as something, "hard to define, I mean yeah there's very conservative activism. . . activism gets thrown out as this term that describes protests. . . people conflate activists and hippies all the time, and that's just really a very skewed thought, it's not really in touch with what the word itself means." Another participant, Phyllis, furthers this explanation, stating, "An activist can be also conservative, a person who feels very strongly on the right or the left or the middle." Taking these perspectives into consideration, I find it important to distinguish activism as something that can only be determined truly by an individual's closely held beliefs and values that usually fall under the scope of justice and/or peace and how they choose to enact these values. This involves moving past the stereotype of the hippie activist to encompass a wide range of actors that are ultimately engaging in action and making goals to achieve what they view as valuable goals usually related to justice and/or peace.

The second crucial characteristic that I would like to focus on is the overt implication that activism requires some sort of intentional and concrete act. This characteristic repeated itself almost unanimously across the varying definitions given by the participants, as would be expected from a term with "activ-" literally within the term itself. The "active" component of activism was described in a variety of ways from simply, "getting off your ass" and "getting involved with whatever", to getting fed up or letting injustice consume you to the point of wanting to change the situation. Maureen and Melissa describe activism as just this, with Maureen arguing that "activism is when you decide that it's not enough talking about something that's bothering you but to make that decision that you're going to take steps to do something

about what's bothering you", and along similar lines, Melissa arguing that activism is when "you see something so you act upon it however you can, whether it's going out in the streets or signing a petition or educating other people about it, just doing something besides letting it eat you alive." Taking these last two definitions into mind, it is important to see that the intention to act, which often but does not always involve physical movement (such as is the case with boycotting), is central to activism, as well as the strong feelings preceding these acts, which Melissa alludes to in the phrase "letting it eat you alive".

Although it is the act itself that distinguishes activism from other socially conscious or empathic reactions to injustice, it's important to note these feelings, emotions, and almost compulsions that precede activism. I use the word compulsion here based on Sophia's definition of activism, which she articulately notes "has to do with obviously taking action based on being compelled..." Phyllis goes even further, stating how these feelings are impossible to ignore, relating activism to something that is "just as important as my health, my well-being. My family comes first of course but I live and breathe activism because it feeds me." Therefore I argue that activism is not just action but reaction, which I will later delve into in more detail.

Many of the participants expressed activism as centering around community and the importance of connecting or bonding with others. Audrey conveyed this simply, stating that "a big part of activism involves community and working together with other people." Maureen expressed social engagement as necessary to activism, in that trying "to make change, you need lots of other people... So activists try to organize people to make change." It is important to understand that activism not only requires people to come together to organize, but that social movements glide on the mass mobilization of people through the protest, the iconic symbol of activism. In her personal explanation of activism, Sophia briefly draws on the importance of

protests in activism, stating, “people are usually like what’s the point of those, are marches activism? Well you know obviously if you get together in the street with a bunch of people there’s not going to be massive change overnight but the point of it is you’re building a mass movement...” As Sophia indirectly draws on here, there’s almost always an association between activism and mass movements, which occur through the mobilization of many people coming together with like-minded goals. Another participant, Joe, directly highlights leadership as playing a significant role in activism, explaining that “leadership has something to do with [activism]. Taking something that you know and do and running with it, you know caring enough about stuff to try to get other people interested, fired up, and inspired, mad, motivated, mobilized.” Therefore, not only is coming together with similarly inspired individuals a central characteristic of activism, but also spreading your influence and provoking others so that you can mobilize them in a productive manner. I personally resonate with this last point. Although I wouldn’t say it’s necessary, I think part of the experience of being an activist is taking on this unofficial role of leadership where you are constantly trying to get everyone around you as motivated and compelled as you are. Therefore, I would argue that an important component of being an activist involves exactly what Joe describes and what I can attest to, that of being an unofficial or rather, invisible leader.

Setting goals in accordance with deeply held values, conscious action, compulsions and/or strong feelings to act, and community are all central characteristics that have come to define and ingrain meaning in the term, “activism”. However, understanding and thus defining activism cannot be left at a simple compilation of a few central characteristics. Before my participants began to even reflect on their paths to activism, they made subtle allusions to activism not being a static thing, but a process characterized by a growing momentum. Though

these processes varied, many of these experiences held in common the process of moving from educational contexts to direct action, and then sometimes, to radical action. Audrey and Maureen make a similarly indirect observation concerning the nature of activism as a process. Audrey explains that “activism starts with learning about an issue or cause and then taking action towards it.” When asked to define activism, Maureen first elaborated that “talking about it is only the very first thing that happens, or thinking about it, you don’t even need to talk to someone about it, if you’ve been thinking about it, well that ends with you.” Melissa speaks on behalf of her personal experience in academia and how becoming active “was more than just like okay well like I’m going to write this paper, it’s how, like what can I do...you know trying to do these different strategies so you’re acting upon sort of an issue or an injustice that you see...I think it definitely snowballed there. Or as my mom says, that’s when I was radicalized.” Though many of the participants did not speak of becoming “radicalized” or even use the word “radical”, I observed a procession through many of their personal accounts into something akin to radical action, similar to what Melissa speaks of.

It is necessary then, I believe, to define radical if I want to more fully comprehend the true essence of “activism”. Continuing Melissa’s narrative of activist engagement and what her mom labels as her becoming “radicalized”, she explains:

It’s so funny, when she says that I get kind of, I’m like I don’t know what that means? I mean I’ve always been interested in social justice issues. I guess radicalized could be I gained a little bit more knowledge about how to articulate it and sort of got the strategies to act upon what I learned... It’s almost like I’ve sort of been able to put into words the problems I see and then also how to engage with them. So I guess that’s radical.

Melissa's confusion in being unexpectedly labeled radical is very similar to my own experience in hearing someone else describe me as such. I remember one of my professors very casually describing me to another professor as "radical" and I had absolutely no idea what that meant because that label felt so sudden to me. In my mind, I thought being radicalized would entail a drastic shift, which perhaps has something to do with my subconscious association of "radicalization" as something being extreme. Yet in this analytical context and from reflecting on the various stories of activist engagement including my own, I realize that becoming radical is the final stage in becoming a fully engaged activist. As Melissa points out, becoming radical is about building on knowledge, not just through acquisition but also through articulation. By arguing that becoming radical is the final stage in becoming fully engaged in activism, I am not arguing that every activist eventually reaches this point. I believe that one can truly be considered an activist once they reach the point of consciously engaging in action that is meant to uphold deeply held values. Yet I do believe that engaging in radical action is the truest expression of being a socially conscious individual. Another participant, Aida, brought a very unique understanding to the word radical, expressing that:

Radical just means different to some extent. It's kind of taking pride in that difference. It means like a really active positioning of yourself in opposition to something you see as wrong, or to something that you see as oppressive or dominating... It means like, for me it goes beyond the reformist thing, going beyond the thought that you know this one little thing that I'm going to do, this one little struggle that I'm in is enough to change something and I've done something, and good for me, pat on the back, now I can go on with my life. It means a whole life of putting yourself in the position of struggling. It means that

you are that kind of person that is going to be a part of the struggle and in a way that you want to see some sort of complete change in the world, not just, you don't just want to fix a little thing in the education system, or get a little more healthcare and then it's okay. It means, no, we want to take it as far as possible. It means, yeah, radical means having an imagination that is super expansive and that takes into account possibilities for transformation and liberation so it's not just being content with the means and goals that are accessible to you but rather radically imagining something different and then actively works toward achieving that in your life.

Aida takes “radical” and fully fleshes it out in a very articulate and thorough explanation of what it truly means to be radical. Not only is radical about a certain continuation in activist engagement and maturation in understanding paradigms of oppression, it involves complete and total mind expansion. To be radical is to stretch your ability to see and imagine not only more ingrained paradigms of oppression but more pertinently, liberation, for what is activism without attempting to achieve the ultimate goal of what you view to be total liberation. I, like Aida, believe that by seeing that we have been completely dominated by interconnected webs of oppression, engaging in true activism requires an even larger imagination to be able to courageously and creatively outwit these oppressive bonds that hold our imaginations captive and stagnant. To be radical is to hold the key to undermining oppressive paradigms and liberating ourselves, which involves a gradual but total destruction of our own paradigmatic realities.

Above all, activism is an experience and process of meaning making and empowerment. It challenges you to step outside of a cautiously constructed paradigm of stability and take action

that will prove to not always be directly rewarding in the short term and will perhaps put you at significant risk. I would like to address what Aida directly defines as activism because I feel like it broadly but succinctly incorporates the various aforementioned qualities, characteristics, and stages of activism, as well as directly incorporating meaning as a crucial component of activism:

I would define activism as being, or as meaning, I don't know, the state of being, hm, it means that you see there's something wrong with the world and that you want to actively do something to combat it, and that you want to empower yourself and others to be able to struggle against conditions that you see as oppressive and genocidal. So yeah it's basically taking that responsibility to actually do something meaningful in the world, to not just see yourself as a passive actor but rather as somebody who wants to struggle and continue the fight and to recognize the history of that struggle as not being something new and not just something you're starting but it's like an active historical process. We've all been in it together and it's still a lot of people involved in doing something different.

I want to conclude by drawing on the various ideas and experiences presented in these conversations to construct the definition of activism that I will be utilizing for the remainder of my thesis. I define activism as the process in which individuals experience a feeling or reaction to some injustice that then compels them to take the necessary action to address and change circumstances and/or paradigms that they view as undermining communal well-being and universal justice, usually alongside other like-minded individuals.

Chapter 2: Process of Becoming Socially Engaged

As I previously articulated, I believe that activism should be viewed as a process rather than an abstract entity. From the various discussions I've had with fellow activists, it appears that engagement with activism follows a particular path, albeit with several variations. I want to make it clear that not all of the activists I interviewed experienced all of these events nor did they all follow the same temporal trajectory. Nevertheless, there arose some strikingly similar characteristics that are worth delving into in greater analytical detail. Most of the activists that I spoke to had healthy and/or inspiring relationships with specific individuals early in their lives, and due to personal attributes and/or particular educational climates, many of these people lived in an environment of constant learning. From these circumstances, many of these activists faced a process comprised of three central experiences. The first experience involved a moral shock or an intense educational process, which then led to a second experience involving a deep reflection on ideologies, values, and personal meaning, after which an experience involving a powerful moment of communal bonding and social connection often took place.

Before understanding this more detailed explanation of the process I mentioned above, I find it crucial to first understand the circumstances from which these experiences of activism engagement were shown to emerge. From a desire to engage with others in a compassionate and meaningful manner, it only makes sense that many of these individuals reported having healthy and nurturing experiences with guardian figures growing up. In a study conducted on "altruistic" individuals who had helped Jewish people during WWII, researchers found that many of these individuals had a uniquely egalitarian relationship with their parents growing up. In fact, the parents of these individuals, "were significantly less likely to emphasize obedience", which the

theorists argue, “is the hallmark of nonequals...parental emphasis on obedience was critically important in preparing Germans for the success of the Nazi regime” (Oliner, 1988). Like these “altruistic” individuals, some of the activists I spoke to remembered their parents as very kind and encouraging people who treated them with a respect not often valued in parent-child relations. Instead of viewing their children as static or untamed half-humans with little cognitive agency, these parents engaged their children in meaningful dialogue, thus engaging the logic of the child and encouraging them to understand their actions. As explained in the text, “Induction focuses children’s attention on the consequences of their behaviors for others, drawing attention to others’ feelings, thoughts, and welfare. Children are thus led to understand others cognitively—a skill known as perspective or role-taking—and are thus more inclined to develop empathy toward others” (Oliner, 1988). Therefore, in the case of a misbehaving child, instead of distributing a punishment with little explanation as to why the action was considered immoral, the parents engage in a two-sided dialogue meant to give the child a logical reason for the negative meaning behind the transgression. Thomas explains a process akin to this in his childhood, explaining, “I would say a lot of the time that did happen, especially with my dad, just taking the time and having the patience to explain and talk with me, you know why he doesn’t think that’s the right thing to do and discussed it with me instead of just yelling at me...” Lisa gives an account detailing her own upbringing, stating, “I was almost never punished. My parents would get upset sometimes but my mother basically taught me that I should be mature enough to think about taking responsible action, and being a responsible, mature person. So that’s how she felt, like oh you do the right thing.” In this recollection, it is clear that her mother treated her as a morally conscious and cognitively able individual. Audrey describes a similar account with her upbringing, stating, “I didn’t get a lot of discipline like at all, I had a lot of

independence, like a surprising amount of independence. I really didn't get in trouble but I also communicated with my family... I was definitely allowed to explore the world on my own and explore my own opinions." Though it is impossible to make any total correlations, it appears as though some of these activists grew up in an environment through which they could come to understand the world in a rational way because of the way they were treated by their parental figures. As was stated in the afore-mentioned text, obedience is "the hallmark of nonequals". Perhaps being able to see a world in which one is regarded as an equal and encouraged to understand immoral acts can lead one to pursue future goals revolving around egalitarianism and fighting against perceived injustice.

Though not everyone spoke about their upbringing, almost everyone talked about an incredibly important and influential individual that inspired them to become more educated and involved in activism. These individuals guided these activists into becoming generally more informed about the world, and served as inspirational teachers that prompted or encouraged them to engage in activism, or at least to engage with the world in a critical and compassionate way. Kathleen describes having this kind of relationship with her chaplain. She recalls a specific memory when she first became involved in activism in which "the chaplain announced that there were some programs about nuclear weapons... I really loved and respected our chaplain and I thought oh well this might be one way to learn about the world other than reading newspapers. Curiosity initially. So I became much more aware of the issues about militarism and the dangers of nuclear weapons." Though she doesn't outright say it, she alludes to the fact that her love and respect for this individual prompted her to become engaged and learn about something new. The trust and respect felt towards these individuals seems to be crucial in these relationships. For example, Joe refers to his dorm mate in college as the first person who truly opened his eyes to

the horrors of the Vietnam War, which coming from a conservative family, was perhaps a difficult fact to come to terms with. Joe says, “One afternoon I spent 3 hours with one of my hall mates and he told me the whole story behind the Vietnam War...well I knew this guy, he was very intelligent and caring so he had a sort of pre-qualified credibility with me.” Like Kathleen, he doesn’t outright say it but he alludes to the fact that his respect for the individual was crucial in prompting him to challenge his pre-conceived notions of the world.

Other activists explain how these individuals served as important role-models in their lives. Lisa identifies this individual as her friend’s mother, who showed her what it was like to be a feminist in a time that demonized women for divorce. Phyl explains that her mother was a supreme role model that showed her to act like an activist, not a victim. When anti-Semitism barred her from being in the brownie troupe, her mother showed her that “the way you react to that kind of thing is to do something about it, not just to curl up and walk away.” Herb credits his father with showing him “the determination to stand up for what was right and to challenge authority” in his attempts to fight the KKK in Missouri. Though not directly related to challenging injustice, Jessica speaks about a friend of hers who changed the way she views life. Jessica recounts:

It’s so interesting I keep referring to this woman, she’s such a catalyst in my life and when I met her I was very shut down and I felt artistically constipated, I couldn’t access it. And she is so good at getting you to dive into your subconscious thought and start really thinking about some of the things you’ve been suppressing... Another thing about her is that most people that I’ve worked for, there will come a moment where somebody is patronizing or they criticize you for making a mistake. When you make a mistake with her, she goes right to

the solution, so she doesn't hang out in blame mode at all, she's like how do we fix it.

Although this isn't about someone showing Jessica how to stand up to injustice, this person helped her to understand the world and herself in a new way, including a new way to take action and fix problems. It is quite clear that the influence these various individuals had on the activists I interviewed definitively shaped their conceptions of the world by showing them injustice and guiding them down a path of action.

In addition to the influential roles of parental figures and inspiring individuals, educational settings and personal interests also seemed to play a significant role in moving many of these people towards activism. Both Kathleen and Mary described themselves as being "bookish" or "bookie" children, and Sophia describes herself as just generally being very interested in people, political situations, and reading. These interests in learning and reading about the world were likely crucial factors in determining the activism oriented directions that many of these activists followed.

The educational climate at various schools and universities introduced many of the activists to different causes, or continued the educational experiences of others. Herb describes his experience in high school, "I was on the debate team during high school...so I think that was very helpful for immersing me in thinking about social and political issues...I also started reading the Catholic Worker, a throw away magazine that talked about concern for the poor and I think it was that what really helped shaped my consciousness during prep school." Here, both the educational environment as well as a personal interest in reading helped Herb in beginning to recognize the social inequalities around him. Mary explains how her experience at UCLA played a major part in opening her once very closed mind:

Through education in college, I had young radical professors and I took classes that showed me that people were actually taking action...and intent on opening people's minds...why do we need to learn history, because people keep doing this stuff so let's learn how we can stop doing this...utter eye opener, I was raised in a privileged community where it was very clear...none of them were to be trusted, they were alien, and I went to college and all of that was turned over.

It's clear that university environments are often a very crucial stepping stone in the careers of many activists. Melissa speaks on this, stating, "I think the university is a great place because it gives you the resources to learn about these different issues and I think at UCSC, or at least in the anthro department, we're pretty lucky that professors and grad students encourage you to go outside of the classroom and engage with the issues, it's not just learn about it, write your paper, cool. No, what can you do." Sometimes, it's not even particularly about the classes but rather the other like-minded individuals who are swept up in this momentum of learning and discovering the deeper root of injustices. Lisa talks about her experience in college, stating, "we took our education in our own hands. We didn't think professors had the knowledge we wanted so we started our own reading groups. So I learned all about Marxist theory from reading groups." As is evident by these various recollections, educational environments, particularly at universities, were paramount in exposing many of these activists to the knowledge required to begin to take action.

While all of these factors, including upbringing, inspiring individuals, personal interests, and educational environments, appear to be crucial components that underlie the choices these activists took to follow a path in activism, it's important to understand that it wasn't merely factors that prompted these people to become activists but rather a movement of various events

that involved some of these factors. This movement usually began with an inciting incident or a moral shock that then caused a deep self-reflection of ideologies, values, and personal meaning, and later a feeling of total amazement and social connection.

In various studies conducted on activism, particular attention is paid to what is referred to as “moral shock”, which occurs when “some events are so emotionally moving or morally reprehensible that they force people both to articulate their moral intuitions and to seek solutions” (Wisneki, 2016). Often times this event is shocking because issues that seem so distant suddenly become personal. Kathleen speaks about a catalyzing moment where she faced the possibility of being drafted. She says, “Suddenly it brought issues of war and peace very much home to me. Personally I thought, I don’t want to kill anybody...the more I thought about it the more I thought well I have the right to object to this and men have a right to object to this...from that point on I became very involved in anti-war movements.” Mary talks about seeing the civil rights movement unfold on TV, and how seeing white people becoming involved in the movement really took her out of her sheltered world. She explains, “Oh, now it’s not just those minority people that aren’t me but now white privileged kids from ivy league universities are getting murdered. Now it’s about me, now my people are involved too and they’re getting hurt and this is definitely not right...So all of these things in rapid succession opened the doors to me.” In both the cases of Kathleen and Mary, an event that made these social justice issues personal catalyzed their activism.

Based on my discussions with fellow activists, it appears that a particular moment stands out in their memory when they became extremely aware of certain realities, thus pushing them into action. Yet I would like to argue that it is not just the emotional reaction or shock experienced that acts as the catalyst for activism, but rather that an intense social connection with

a particular individual is equally important in pushing one towards action. As previously discussed, most of the people I spoke with had a relationship with an individual that guided them down the path of activism, often through some of these inciting incidents. Phyl discusses her “turning point” as involving the guidance of a mother’s friend, who gave her books about racism. Phyl elaborates, “I learned about racism from those two books and I think that really got me to understand what it feels like from a black perspective.” Though the catalyzing event could be considered the reading of these two novels, her great admiration and respect for this woman were undoubtedly important in getting Phyl to read the novels in the first place. Through this example, the guidance of an influential individual seems to be fairly important in what Phyl labels as a “psychological turning point”.

I would also argue that there is usually not a singular inciting incident but rather a series of multiple inciting incidents usually mediated through relationships with the inspiring individual. Aida highlights her experiences with her dad, who seemed to play a large role in her life as an activist. Aida says, “I traveled with my dad sometimes so I would see, I came to America and saw homelessness and all these things. I feel like it was part of a process of things that I saw were messed up with the world.” She doesn’t believe that there was one critical moment that pushed her towards activism but rather that the motivation arose from a general process of seeing injustice multiple times throughout the world. Though I highlighted various critical moments that these activists describe as turning points, they also spoke about several other inciting incidents. Whether or not they were as important is hard to discern but based on these various conversations it appears that becoming involved in activism follows a certain path that muddles together various factors, events, and individuals.

Following many of these inciting incidents, some of the activists spoke of a period of reflection centered on ideological beliefs and values. After the shock of finding out that she might be drafted, Kathleen says she went through a period of deep spiritual reflection:

Once I started asking those deeper questions about myself, like what your purpose is, what your values are, it became very personal for me, and what sort of difference I should be making in the world. That was part of my Christian exploration of what is my call as a Christian of how it's important to treat people, not only individuals, but live your values in the world and object when you see that the world is unjust. And the scripture calls for not just love but justice, and justice is very much a larger issue than interpersonal interaction.

This experience of deep ideological reflection was crucial for Kathleen committing to fighting perceived injustice. Whereas a moral shock in essence would produce some sort of action, it appears that personal reflection and the establishment of personal values sets the grounding for a more long-term and stable commitment to activism. Phyl elaborates on a similar period of spiritual reflection, stating, "I was Jewish and I really grew up thinking that what it meant to be a Jew was to be active in social justice... we were all about peace and social justice, I grew up with that. So that way my activism was really rooted in my childhood and in our family and in the Jewish community as well as the Unitarian Church in LA." In this case, Phyl has spent most of her life reflecting on her values as a Jew and she continues to do so through an activist framework. Though not blatantly religious, Maureen underwent a moment of critical reflection after she was almost beaten to death in her home:

The thing I came out with is well you can be asleep in your bed at home not doing anything activist related and get killed! Well then there goes that, I shouldn't be

afraid to do that. It's a statement that if you're going to live in fear of opposing, or not be active because you're afraid, you're just missing the point because you could die from lots of stuff. That was an encouragement to activism because who wants to be killed for no reason!

In this moment, Maureen re-evaluates herself and her position in the world, coming to the conclusion that she shouldn't be afraid of standing up to injustice because violence can occur randomly. This re-evaluation of her life was a critical point in not just being involved in activism but choosing activism as a sort of life style.

Others activists spoke of a moment of feeling totally connected and amazed by the community. Jessica highlights this experience while recalling her first protest, stating, "My experience was wow, this is really cool, I don't know any of these people and we all have come together in the single consciousness of things have to change or else." Aida also speaks about a similar moment occurring on the day of her first protest:

I went to my first protest in Copenhagen for COP 15 ...and later on we went to this place, after all the protests, and they had free soup and it was a really collaborative atmosphere and it was a really beautiful day and the feeling of all these people coming together and then the food, and also seeing the repression kind of got me more interested in it and then started going to different activist stops in Copenhagen and was just super inspired by it...

I find Aida's experience not only helpful in showing this feeling of communal connection but also in partially portraying what I believe to be the momentum of activism. All of these experiences, from inciting incidents, to self-reflection and communal bonding, seem to be a part of a great process of movement through which an individual becomes more and more involved

and engaged in the world around them. Jessica articulates her personal experience through a type of psychological momentum, stating, “The momentum thing, it also has to do with a change in consciousness. It’s not just me against the world, it’s all of us coming together and thinking together and really listening and trying to build one another up and building up the highest potential of what it means to be a human being.” I argue that the process I define activism to be requires this momentum in order to foster and sustain its energy. Activism is not something that just happens overnight or through a single catalyzing event. Activism requires a deep psychological and physical engagement that can only be sustained through constant self-reflection, social engagement, and education.

Chapter 3: Conceptualizing Altruism as a Type of Intelligence

In thoroughly analyzing the various components of activist engagement and the process that I define as activism, I have come to see these individuals as possessing a sort of capability that is difficult to define. Though I don't contend that these individuals have certain personal attributes that likely helped them in engaging in activism, it also appears that their decisions were largely influenced by educational environments and specific individuals. The concept of "altruism" is often used to explain the exceptional behavior of individuals who choose to engage in the kind of "selfless" work that helps others at the expense of the self. This conceptualization connotes "altruism" as something mystical or magical which cannot be understood in logical ways. I strongly condemn this type of thinking, believing that it causes us to accept the commonality of self-centered individuals and prevents us from more critically understanding the exceptional behavior of the people we consider to be altruistic. I believe that we should come to understand this behavior as arising from what I term, "altruistic intelligence", which I define as the type of cognitive and empathic capacity to understand systems of oppression and know how to actively work to create ecological harmony and to achieve social justice.

Though I dislike the term "altruistic", I believe it is an important word to utilize for this concept because of its connotation in American society. It is not a term that I hope will forever define this type of intelligence. However, behavior that benefits the welfare of others is thought of as altruistic. I hope that by conceptualizing altruism as a type of intelligence I will begin to shift the paradigmatic thinking of both altruism and intelligence. My theoretical reasoning behind doing so lies in Viveiros de Castro's theory of controlled equivocation, which acknowledges the inevitability of equivocation, or the inability to accurately translate a concept

across different paradigms. In essence, my attempt to create a new imagining of altruism is my attempt to communicate a different paradigmatic reality through the language of an old paradigmatic reality. I agree with Viveiros de Castro when he argues that “A good translation is one that allows the alien concepts to deform and subvert the translator’s conceptual toolbox so that the intention of the original language can be expressed within the new one” (2004). Therefore, I understand that defining this type of cognitive capacity as “altruistic intelligence” is flawed in itself but that the terminology will change once we can better conceptualize the paradigm I am trying to convey.

Within the framework of “altruistic intelligence”, I am drawing from Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. Yet I am also attempting to reconfigure what intelligence should encompass. I believe that the individual has multiple capacities to address and solve a wide spectrum of goals, which is what we understand intelligence to be. Gardner argues that the term intelligence should be used to convey what is “a property of all human beings, a dimension on which human beings differ (No two people possess exactly the same profile of intelligence)”, and “the way in which one carries out a task in virtue of one’s goals” (1983). Though it isn’t explicitly stated, there is an underlying assumption that intelligence is for the use of personal and egocentric goals. Gardner’s definition of interpersonal intelligence is a little more vague, stating that interpersonal intelligence is “the ability to notice and make distinctions among other individuals, and in particular, among their moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions” (1983). Though I agree that many types of intelligences, including interpersonal intelligence, do center on benefitting the individual, I believe viewing intelligence as only benefitting the individual is a narrow-minded view of human purpose. My conceptualization of altruistic intelligence places the goal as what best benefits the individual and both human and non-human

beings. Whereas altruism mistakenly connotes behavior that is detrimental towards the self, I argue that what we understand altruistic behavior to be is actually beneficial for both the individual and the greater social environment. I believe that in so imagining this type of human cognitive capability, we can more easily blur the boundaries between the self and the larger world, which neither diminishes the importance of the self nor the importance of other living beings. I argue that the Western dichotomy between particle society, where the locus of power is in the self, and field society, where the locus of power is in the community, is inherently flawed because there is no possibility of a society in which both the importance of self and the community can co-exist. Perhaps the Western, ethno-centric views of collectivist societies distort the fact that some collectivist societies do not ignore the self but rather integrate the self within the greater ecological context. I believe that changing the individualistic paradigm in white, American society would have an incredible effect on how we relate to each other and thus how we treat each other. I believe that some of us have a more natural ability to use our altruistic intelligence, but that the majority of us find difficulty in articulating and realizing our potential in regards to this type of intelligence. I believe that by inculcating and developing our altruistic intelligence in academic settings, the ability to engage in radical activism can become a reality for most.

Chapter 4: What Would Teaching Altruism Look Like?

By understanding activist involvement through the framework of altruistic intelligence, activism becomes a matter of proper education. Though I strongly believe that everyone should have a much more in depth and critical understanding of networks of oppression, the key lies more so in teaching how to relate to one another, and in developing the social bonds necessary to sustain empathy and activist involvement. By developing minds that think not in terms of me and you, but rather me with you, activism will become a much more natural and attainable process.

When asked the general question, how do we get people involved in activism, many of the activists I interviewed resoundingly answered that we can do so with more thorough social justice education. The people I interviewed that were not involved in activism all said that one of the reasons they don't engage in activism is because they don't feel comfortable becoming involved in something that they don't know that much about. Ben speaks of this, admitting, "I never had a full grasp on what was going on, I never truly understood the issues. It felt wrong to jump to conclusions. I had trouble justifying actions if I didn't understand where is this all coming from, where is this all going, what are my end goals, I didn't really know exactly. I didn't feel like I was educated enough." CJ elaborates on similar feelings:

I would say that maybe just insecurity that I don't know enough about the causes that I am worthy of giving support of them. I don't know it's just a stigma in my mind, it's not really a fact but I feel like a lot of times I think like, oh, well sounds like a good cause but I haven't really researched it, I don't know a lot about it so I feel weird supporting one end or the other. Or I feel like people who are there and into it and for that cause have more of a right to be protesting and if I go in there,

I'm just like piggy backing a cause that I don't know a lot about. Yeah I feel like a lot of the times it's insecurity about not feeling knowledgeable about the topic...I don't want to be one of the ignorant numbers out there that's just getting behind something because of the mob mentality. I'd rather be behind it because I'm seriously about it.

Based on what Ben and CJ said, being regularly educated about social justice issues would seem like a good start for trying to get more people involved in activism. Yet many of us are decently educated about various social justice issues and still don't really participate in any sort of concrete activism. I feel that simply educating people about oppression does not actually create enough motivational momentum to get people to want to engage in something that feels relatively distant from the personal sphere.

Aida thinks that learning about various social struggles is important but that we need a more radical approach, one that emphasizes the connections between these issues. She believes that we need to educate ourselves and each other "through teaching and learning from a historical view of how struggles haven't brought us far enough. To really recognize the conditions of our oppression would mean that you were put in a position where you have to decide how far you want to take it for yourself and others." For Aida, learning about social justice means learning about the foundations of oppression and coming to imagine everyone connected in this mass web of social inequality. I agree with Aida and believe that we need to show that everyone is entrenched in these mass webs and thus that we are all personally connected.

I argue that cultivating true altruistic intelligence requires learning how to create and sustain meaningful social relationships that will help us to better empathically connect with each

other. Education should not be merely about educating but also motivating, and this kind of motivating should be focused on knowing how to create and sustain healthy one on one relationships. Learning about people and their struggles in history rather than connecting with people in the present who continue to live out the historical realities of oppression defeats the entire purpose of engaging in true activism. Being able to develop deep and sincere empathic bonds with as many people as possible is crucial towards wanting to change the system that hurts these people. When the system screws your friend over, the system screws you over because you both are connected through these deep empathic bonds that don't distinguish between you and me.

Various scholars and academics argue that strong social connections are crucial in activism. In a study conducted on white people involved in racial justice activism, sociologist Mark Warren discovers that one of the most important factors in their choice to become activists was the social connections they had with people affected by racism. He states, "I found that white activists came to care about racism, and not just understand it, through these relationships. Moreover, as whites worked together with people of color, they began to develop a sense of common identity and shared fate" (2010). One of the activists I interviewed explicitly stated the importance of what Warren found in his study. Herb confided in me, "I think what fuels you and gives you the hope is being constantly in touch with the people who are suffering, otherwise you'll lose the motivational fire." Regardless of what the other interviewees explicitly stated, they all talked about having a relationship with a very inspiring individual that opened them up to a new reality. Even if these individuals weren't directly affected by a specific social justice issue, they had enough influence over these people to get them to question their reality. If some random acquaintance or stranger had tried to influence them in such a way, I highly doubt these

people would have taken them seriously or risked losing their comfortable world of ignorance. The trust and respect that many of these activists had for these inspiring individuals undoubtedly came from a strong social relationship. Out of all the information I gathered on these activists, I believe that the fact that all of these people had at least one inspiring individual that helped them become activists, is incredibly important in beginning to understand how certain people become involved in activism and others don't.

Because sustaining momentum is crucial in activism, it's important to both create and sustain healthy social bonds with people you are working for and working with. In Warren's study, the activists believe that "there is no one magic strategy that will work in all cases. Rather, [activists] need to listen to each individual and try to move them a step forward, particularly by connecting to people's core values and identity" (Warren, 2010). According to another study conducted by Goodwin et al., when people have an "affective attachment to the group", activism proves to be the most successful, thus highlighting the importance of "the pleasures of being with people one likes" in order to have successful activism (2001). Based on these and various other studies, grounded social attachments seem to be crucial in sustaining activist movements themselves and should therefore be a critical focus in developing altruistic intelligence.

Conclusion

By looking at the lives of various activists as well as my own, I came to a much more solidified understanding of what activism is and how certain people become involved in it. I found that supportive and inspiring social relationships as well as conducive learning environments were significant factors that appeared to have connections with later activist involvement. The actual process of becoming engaged in activism often involved a series of events, including inciting incidents, moments of serious self-reflection, and instances of feeling deep social connection, that spurred a sort of momentous energy. This momentum would originate in smaller amounts, but eventually acquire significant energy once these activists engaged in meaningful relationships with inspiring and influential individuals, who then led them down a path of serious activism. Without the trust and respect these activists had for these individuals, I believe that many of these activists would have had a much slower path to activism or perhaps might not have become engaged at all.

It's apparent that these activists have a particularly keen awareness of oppression and suffering, something I argue is not random nor solely intrinsic but due to altruistic intelligence. Rather than solely benefiting the self, this type of intelligence centers on the cognitive and empathic capacity to understand systems of oppression and actively work to create ecological harmony and achieve social justice. I argue that developing altruistic intelligence is critical towards motivating people to become involved in activism. Not only should we educate each other on social justice issues and the underlying foundations of oppression, we also need to focus on education that teaches us how to empathize and care for one another. I am aware that there are various college courses that do some of this work already, but I think in order for altruistic

intelligence to be developed to its truest capacity, this type of education needs to be life-long. We don't educate youth through a single math course or a single English course and expect them to understand the entire subject, so why should we do so with education centered on altruistic intelligence?

There are several social institutions which could carry out such an education and some already do to a certain extent. Some of the activists I interviewed mentioned that much of their empathy and deep concern for social justice came from their ideological beliefs and religious education. Unfortunately, secular education falls a little short on building empathic social skills. Lisa echoes this concern, expressing how important her Jewish values have been in her activism. She says, "I plugged into that whole tradition of Jewish liberal thought and activism, so I do think it's the religions that teach people to be active or at least have a moral critique of the way the world is. Secular education needs to have some kind of more robust discussion about social justice and equality than it does." There are undoubtedly other such social institutions like religion that play a role in developing this kind of keen social awareness. However, I strongly believe that this kind of education should be much more widespread and encouraged than it currently is, particularly in public school education. How we could implement such an education would require further analyses and research, and is something I would like to pursue studying in the future.

I believe that our scope for thinking about the human capacity to empathize and care about others is unfortunately very limited. It is difficult to imagine a different reality where we all have the capacity to engage in true activism when we continue to see activists as having some sort of mystical, altruistic nature. I strongly believe that breaking out of this narrow-minded thinking will lead us to consider different realities, ones in which we can begin to heal those

crucial bonds that give us a deeper understanding of human suffering and systemic oppression.

By focusing on our capacity to generate what I have termed, altruistic intelligence, I believe that activism can become a much more natural and attainable process for everyone.

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