Social Justice Activism: Feminism and Strategies for Action

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Success in social justice activism often hinges on judging when to employ the most effective strategy for action. Strategies for action include militancy, peaceful protest, and sometimes, engaging in a longer term program of "marginal gains." The militant feminism of many 19th century suffragettes, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, is a good example of the successful use of militancy. Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. are clear instantiations of successfully leading peaceful protests to bring about reforms. While militancy and peaceful protest are arguably well-known and well-defined, a developed concept of a marginal gain strategy in the context of social justice activism is not. I argue that since the 1990s, feminists in higher education and more broadly have largely taken a marginal gains approach to improving the circumstances in which women and girls work and learn. In addition, there have been developments in feminist activism and scholarship that have resulted in marginal decay, thereby setting the movement back. Finally, regardless of the strategy an activist employs, an additional component that is critical to activist success is emotional intelligence. The expression of emotions such as anger, care, and feelings of self-righteousness can all be appropriate and help to achieve success for an activist. However, they do so only when one knows when to be measured, when to be vulnerable, and when to be strident. I argue that by making explicit to ourselves our habitual emotional responses to, and expressions of, anger can be part of making an intentional change that can aggregate, with other comparable marginal changes related to emotional intelligence, to bring about significant results. In sum, I argue that there are two main things feminism today could benefit from: an intentional focus on a marginal gains approach and a greater emphasis on emotional intelligence.

A marginal gains approach is an intentional but stealth approach. Popular "life coaches", such as James Clear,[1] argue that the marginal gains approach is applicable to accomplishing any goal. In academia we would typically not turn to popular life strategists for insight into successful social justice activist strategies, but in the case of marginal gains and marginal decay, it is fitting. As a strategy for training athletes, the aggregation of marginal gains gets its conceptual origin from British cycling coach David Brailsford, who in 2012 described his coaching method as the "aggregation of marginal gains." Before 2012, no British cyclist had won the Tour de France, but that year, Sir Bradley Wiggens did, and in 2013, Chris Froome won the race. The coaching method that took them to success involves making minor improvements in an athlete's performance that together result in an overall significant improvement in his or her competition performance. Brailsford studied his athletes' habits and determined what changes he could make so that they were improving continuously by 1% with each effort. The habits Brailsford studied included athletes' diets, hygiene, bike ergonomics, and their performance tendencies. The aggregation of the improvements elevated the athletes' performances so dramatically that within two years of being coached using this approach, British cyclists started to win their races. Every change Brailsford had his athletes make to minor, habitual aspects of performance resulted from explicit decisions and discussions about what to change and how to improve. Thus, by carefully selecting a cluster of tacit habits and widely held assumptions about equipment, and making intentional but comparatively minor changes, Brailsford managed to improve the performance of the British Cycling Team significantly. Brailsford achieved impressive results by neither the analogue of a political revolution nor a regime change (or even a "paradigm shift"). It was instead by working within the existing paradigm and having an exceptionally clear-sighted view of the relevance and weight of a cluster of changes any one of which alone would not suffice that Brailsford fostered dramatic change.

The contrary development to that fostered by Brailsford is the aggregation of marginal decay in performance. Just as a collection of seemingly minor habits and assumptions can bring about improvement

[1] http://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains

as they gradually aggregate, as seemingly minor poor habits develop, they become sedimented in our performance over time and adversely affect results. These small changes, which are typically not intentional, can lead to substantial decline that can impede progress and success. As life strategist Jim Rohn says, "Success is a few simple disciplines, practiced every day; while failure is simply a few errors in judgment, repeated every day."[2]

Feminism, particularly since the mid-1990s, appears to have become less of a visible, vocal force in social and political discourse and action than it was since the 1960s to the 1980s. However, some think that it is as strong a movement as it ever was, and that what feminists today are doing is *practicing* feminism in their daily lives. Debra Michals argues that women today often engage in stealth feminism, in their careers, in their relationships, and in the way they raise children. It has become normal to set aside many gender boundaries we previously honored, such as whether our girls should play sports or be as educated as boys are.[3] Michals believes that the gradual growth of the number of women's and gender studies departments in higher education, the increase in the number of conferences on women and education, rights, and business, and the increase in the number of courses students in higher education can take in which they learn about a subject from the perspectives of women all point to a stealth feminism. She argues that the ordinary educated woman of today is a stealth feminist who is ready to take to the streets in protest if basic rights and privileges gained by feminists of the first and second waves of feminism were to be denied to them.[4]

The stealth feminism Michals describes is the result of the aggregation of feminist marginal gains and it certainly benefits many individual women and girls everyday. However, while it is a form of social justice activism, it is too narrow in scope to be broadly effective for girls and women of all races and classes. The narrowness of this approach to feminist social justice activism is reflective of a marginal decay within the feminist movement, in that it has had the net result of continuing the long tradition within feminism that it benefits primarily white middle class women. In order to support this claim, defining "feminism" and its goal is critical.

African American feminist bell hooks argues that without a definition of feminism to which we can agree, feminists do not have the foundation they need to theorize, which is important to achieving feminist goals. She thinks that as a result of the lack of agreement, "feminism" has come to mean "anything goes."[5] This "anything goes" is, I argue, a form of marginal decay within feminist scholarship due to definitions of feminism that hinge primarily on equality and individual freedom.

Historically "feminism" is broadly defined as the women's liberation movement, which is "a movement that aims to make women the social equals of men."[6] It is this broad definition that we find in the media, in magazines, and in popular literature. hooks shows, however, that there are many problems with this definition. For example, we know that men are not equal to each other in a variety of important ways that matter to discussions of social justice. So the definition leaves open the following question: to which men should women want to be equal?[7] The definition also raises questions about what we mean by "equal." Do we mean legal equality? If we do, then the definition is inadequate to address all of the issues that feminists

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[2] http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/jim_rohn.html

[3] Debra Michals, "Stealth Feminists: The Thirtysomething Revolution," in *Sisterhood is Forever: The Woman's Anthology for a New Millennium*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), 141.

[4] Ibid., 143.

[5] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000) 25

[6] Ibid., 19.

[7] Ibid.

need to address. For example, sexual assault victims are overwhelmingly children or women, and while we do need laws that prohibit these assaults and that punish offenders, we need also to address the gender based issues inherent in sexual assault incidences. Some of those issues can be addressed through education, some through programming, and in other ways that do not necessarily involve legal issues. In addition to the challenges already set out, hooks argues that a definition based on equality can make it easy for women and men to put on their feminist hats when they feel they need to and take them off when they are playing other roles.[8] Equality based definitions fail to establish feminism as a movement we need to be actively engaging in within the realm of political action, until feminism is no longer needed.

Many white middle class women and men either unconsciously or consciously embraced the definition of feminism as "a movement that aims to make women the social equals of men," seeing race and class as either incorporated into the definition or not relevant, thereby placing all women in the same group. However, hooks argues that poor women would not define feminism in the same way, because they know that women are oppressed in degrees, depending on class and race. They also know that many men in poorer classes are exploited and oppressed. Since men in their class are exploited and oppressed as they are, they do not desire equality with them. A movement that defines feminism as having the goal of making women the social equals of men will likely affect middle class educated women in a positive way, but it will not do much more than this. hooks says:

> What is meant by 'anything goes' is usually that any woman who wants social equality with men regardless of her political perspective (she can be a conservative right winger or a nationalist communist) can label herself feminist.[9]

When feminists attempt to define feminism, they are often definitions that fall squarely in the liberal framework and emphasize equality, freedom, and self-determination. Michels, for example, quotes an unnamed academic skills specialist's definition of feminism, which is "I define feminism as 1) the understanding that there is inequality between men and women, and 2) the responsibility of acting upon that knowledge."[10] Such definitions tend to be appealing because they romanticize individual freedom as opposed to political action. Of concern in definitions that emphasize individual freedom is that they belie the reality that women are not as free to move about the world as men are, anywhere. Women need constantly to assess the potential risks to the personal safety. We teach our daughters to make good decisions about where to be in every moment of their day. We teach them the thinking pattern, "if I move there, will I be safe, or will I be sexually assaulted?" This thinking pattern is so ingrained in women that they often move through it without even realizing it. As we age many of us tend not to be in the high risk environments that we can be in when we are young, but we all know that we have been in those environments and that we warn our daughters about them. As radical feminist Andrea Dworkin argues, to be meaningful feminism has to be about social and political freedom, not merely individual freedom for some. Dworkin argues that the most basic form of freedom is freedom of movement and that it is best captured by Hannah Arendt: [11]

> "of all the specific liberties which may come into our minds when we hear the word 'freedom', freedom of movement is historically the oldest and also the most elementary. Being able to depart for where we will is the prototypal gesture of being free, as limitation of freedom of movement has from time immemorial been the precondition for enslavement. Freedom of movement is also the

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[8] Ibid., 25.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Debra Michels, "Stealth Feminism," 140-141.

[11] Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone*, (London: E.P. Dutton, 1989) 16.

> indispensable condition for action, and it is in action that men primarily experience freedom in the world."[12]

Our definition of feminism needs to be broad enough to empower and motivate feminists to engage in social justice activism, whether stealth or not, in such a way that they increase freedom of movement for women and girls of all races and classes. hooks' definition of feminism is especially promising. She argues that a strong working definition is that "feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression."[13] In her view, we need a definition like this because it is well known that when we focus on equality of opportunity, we find that we have done little to affect the societal roots of sexism and to make change for women of color and poor women. It is not that equality of opportunity is unimportant. It is important, but it is not enough for feminism, which has to touch the lives of women of all races and classes to be successful. By thinking of feminism as a struggle to end sexist oppression, we can see feminism not as a personal identity we invoke when needed. Instead, feminism becomes a verb, a way that we move through life, but not just for our own personal gain or that of primarily white middle class educated women.

If we view feminism as a verb aimed at increasing freedom of movement in the social and political sphere by ending sexual oppression, success from an aggregate of marginal gains approach would be measured by the degree to which women and girls of color and poor women and girls are free to act. Success would also be measured by the degree to which white middle class educated women experience greater social and political freedom. However, contrary to Michel's conception of stealth feminism, feminism that is a struggle to end sexist oppression cannot be carried out piecemeal by an aggregate of individuals who *happen* to have similar practices in their personal lives. The struggle to end sexist oppression needs leaders who, like David Brailsford, can make what is tacitly habitual for some more overtly and publically intentional.

Just as it is important that social justice activists understand the strategy they employ to achieve their goals, it is important that they strive continuously and self-reflectively toward an improved "emotional intelligence." It is probably a truism that our ability to understand and manage our emotions, and to respond appropriately and compassionately to others' emotions, correlates with success. The challenge with social justice activism is that the activist perceives an injustice that needs to be remedied. However, when we perceive injustices we are inevitably self-righteous and often angry. As Marylin Frye shows, a mature emotional intellect allows one to recognize that she could be wrong about the injustice occurring. Upon acknowledgement of being wrong, she can adjust her awareness of herself and others and feel something else, such as relief.[14] An immature emotional intellect can result in being strident in spite of the new information about the perceived injustice, which can preclude success. The expression of emotions such as anger, care, and feelings of self-righteousness can all be appropriate and help to achieve success for an activist. However, they are appropriate when one knows when to be measured, when to be vulnerable, and when to be strident.

Frye argues that a significant challenge is that the cultivation of anger in girls is different than in boys, and that consequently, women often express anger differently from the way many men express anger. For many men, what they are angry about in expressions of anger is acknowledged, which can lead to resolution. However, Frye argues that women are taught that anger is the opposite of feminine for three main reasons: first, it involves standing up for oneself or others; second, it requires confidence; and third, it draws all of the attention to the angry person in a way that could potentially be negative. As a coping mechanism, many women learn to suppress their anger, which can then either leak out in "catty" ways or be suddenly let out

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[12] Hannah Arendt, Men in Dark Times, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) 9.

[13] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 33.

[14] Marilyn Frye, "A Note on Anger," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1983) 86.

in a "burst of expression"[15] that really can, as Frye argues, appear "crazy and bizarre."[16] Consequently, when women get angry they are often treated as though they are irrational or "crazy" and what they are angry about does not get addressed. Instead, all of the energy from others goes into stopping the irrational person from being irrational.

Frye does think that people can learn to use anger in a way that is conducive to making progress against social injustices. It is this learning that I think constitutes the development of our "emotional intelligence". When we are angry at someone and he or she pays attention to our anger, but not to what we are angry about, we learn something valuable about our relationship with that person. We learn that he or she will not make the effort to get past the expression of anger to focus on the content. In a social justice activist setting, there are times when the loud, explosive version of anger is appropriate to the goal, but there are times when it is not, and in those times, one needs to have the emotional intelligence to use anger strategically.

As Eric Luis Uhlmann and Victoria Brescoll's research has shown, men who express anger suddenly and without explanation in the workplace do often benefit financially and in terms of status, but most women who express anger in the workplace do not. Their empirical studies suggest that we perceive men's anger as resulting from objectivity, but we perceive expressions of anger from women as incompetency and losing control. They recommend that women temper their emotions and show them as little as possible or, if they do express anger, that they be sure to provide an external situation-based reason for the anger to demonstrate competency.[17]

I would not argue that women should show their emotions as little as possible. However, I do think that in the context of a marginal gains approach to the struggle to end sexist oppression, a measured expression of anger, especially in contexts in which one's competence is clearly evident, is most likely to be taken seriously. Successful social justice activism requires an emotional intelligence that is appropriate to the goal. If women are less likely to have their concerns addressed when they express anger than men are, their use of it needs to be strategic. Ironically, this places an additional emotional burden on women. Women have to do more "emotional work" than men (again).

In closing, the feminist movement has a long history of improving the lives of men and women, primarily the lives of white, middle class men and women. It can continue to make progress by employing strategies for political action with intentionality. There will be times that militancy is necessary, at other times peaceful protest will be effective, and there will be many times when an intentional aggregate of marginal gains approach will achieve the best result. It is time, though, that the feminist movement is more inclusive in its goals and strategies. It can become so by defining itself in the way hooks proposes, as a movement to end sexist oppression. This definition crosses all class and race boundaries and allows the feminist to see herself or himself as an actor, not as merely having an identity. Finally, the feminist needs to cultivate a strategic use of emotion in social and political action. Experience is critical to this cultivation, but only if one learns from ones experiences. Failure to do so impedes one's ability to use our emotions strategically as one more vehicle for demonstrating competency.

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[15] Ibid., 89.

[16] Ibid., 85.

[17] Eric Luis Uhlmann and Victoria Brescoll, "Anger in the Workplace: Unequal Rage?", http://www.hec.edu/Knowledge/Strategy-Management/Leadership-Management/Anger-in-the-Workplace-Men-vs.-Women-Unequal-rage