

The Image of the Activist in Psychological Research:
Toward a Quaker Model of Human Development

Mary Watkins, Ph.D.

124 Spectacle Pond Road

Littleton, MA 01460

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In reviewing psychology's research on political activism, it seems that Quakers have more to contribute to re-envisioning the theory of human development that lays beneath this research than they have to learn from the research itself. To understand why this is so, let us look briefly at research on moral development, altruistic behavior, and activists, and try to discern some of the basic values and limitations in the theories of development from which it comes, willy-nilly.

While extensive work has been done on interviewing individuals of different ages about their moral positions, and from this ascertaining the ways in which moral reasoning unfolds, very little of this can inform us regarding how individuals come

to weld their awareness of social problems together with the way they live their lives, the actions pursued in honor of their awareness. This is so because what one thinks or says one should do in a situation of moral choice turns out often to be significantly different from what one actually does when confronted with the real life dilemma.

Let me give you two related examples from the psychological literature on activists. For instance, Rosenhan (1970) studied partially committed civil rights supporters--those who had taken a single freedom ride or made a financial contribution which did not jeopardize their standard of living-- and found they were far more brilliant and compelling in their discussion of civil rights than those who actually risked their lives in sustained non-violence actions. Intensity of belief discourse was not a predictor regarding their actions. Along similar lines, Keniston's (1968) study of alienated and committed youth showed that liberal and radical opinions need not result in social action. They are just as likely to result in alienation, where the individual turns away from the world of action to pursue his/her own world of intrapsychic and aesthetic experience. Research on altruistic behavior also can not help us understand the development of a commitment to sustained social action. For within psychology, many studies on "altruistic behavior" have been confined to experimentally contrived situations where single instances of helpful behavior have been stimulated.

Longer term commitments to social action have been studied primarily through research on civil rights workers and Vietnam peace workers. Here, however, because most of the activists studied were college aged adults--and most of the researchers seem strongly influenced by a psychoanalytic model of human development--activism was seen in the context of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. That is, the researchers focused more on the variable of youth than on commitment to action per se. Thus social action was seen as an attempt to solve a variety of adolescent developmental issues: strivings for purity, identity, self-assertion, differentiation from family. At times such activist behavior in college age students was seen as a negative avoidance of issues concerning family and career. Solomon and Fishman (1964, p.66) described it as "an avoidance of or inability to assume some of the features of adulthood in our society." Although this may be so in some cases, such an interpretation reduces the issues surrounding commitment to social action to those of adolescent development--as seen by the researchers to have to do with entering the mainstream of productive work society and family commitment. Rather than seeing tensions between the worlds of work, family, and political activism as often intrinsic to the nature of social action, deviations from the norm in assuming work and beginning adult family life were seen as the fault of the activists' psychological makeup.

In most psychological research the activist is described as though a passive conglomerate of traits resulting from a certain constellation of familial and socio-economic factors or

statistically as a conglomerate of demographic variables: father is professional or in the higher echelons of business; mother is employed, a "career woman"; one parent (usually the mother) provides a model for altruistic behavior; both parents usually hold liberal opinions, even if they do not consistently act on them; they treat their children more leniently than the parents of non-activists; the family is upper-middle class; the child studies liberal arts, and is more prone to interest in abstract rather than practical subjects. The activist's behavior is described more as the consequence of a historically determined disposition rather than of an active striving toward goals and intentions. When seen as a striving it is most often seen as an attempt to both conserve and surpass the liberal tradition at home, thus maintaining a bond with the parents, while differentiating from or rebelling against them. Many of these findings were generated from a hypothesis testing format or surveys, rather than a more-open ended exploration of interviewees' experiences regarding the development of their activism. An account of the introspective experience of a development toward social commitment, its genesis and unfolding, is absent in most studies.

Because of the way psychological research has approached activism, activism as a psychological phenomenon has become seen as a time-limited commitment most often seen in early adulthood, which expresses adolescent strivings and issues. The successful resolution of these issues would result, it would seem, in a

departure from activism, and an assumption of the usual, nearer-range and less abstract and ideal ridden, responsibilities of employment and family life--importantly, responsibilities closer to most psychological researchers'. Correlatively, those who persist with their activism into adulthood are seen as suspect.

This progression from youthful activism to adult work and family life is certainly consistent with a kind of psychology that deals with the development of empathy, but within a close range of immediate family and friends. It is consistent with a psychology that is highly individualistic, personalistic; when studying groups, it's subject is primarily the near-range group of the family--hardly ever a local community as a whole, let alone a global community. It is consistent with a psychoanalytically effected model, which sees action more negatively than reflection, i.e., activism then becomes seen as the "acting out" of adolescence. It is a psychology which is suspicious of involvement in social issues, ready to interpret this involvement as the externalization of intrapsychic dilemmas (i.e., a preoccupation with nuclear war interpreted as a difficulty dealing with personal aggression). It is a psychoanalytical psychology which accuses activists of evading their own darkness and eventual death, of projecting their shadow. Such research is consistent with a psychology which itself must feel threatened by activism, in its own attempt to be value free, in its constant feeling of inferiority to the other natural sciences. It is a psychology which is suspicious of its own members taking positions in their research. It is a profession itself within the mainstream,

dependent on it in countless ways. It is the same psychology which creates a psychotherapy where almost no one--patient or therapist--ever thinks of bringing up within a costly therapy hour problems of social conscience and actions pertaining to social injustice; a psychotherapy which affirms the personalistic, intrapsychic, and individualistic, as though the reality of the larger world did not exist or certainly was not a force impinging on private life. It is a psychology, which in both theory and practice, has largely not questioned the split which most of us suffer between an awareness of social problems and our daily action, and which certainly has not seen this as a pathology of our time which needs healing.

Our current psychologies do not deal with gaining the experience of being able to cross the boundaries (be they racial, religious, socio-economic, cultural) between the known and familiar and the unfamiliar, so that lives become less parochial in their concerns. They do not deal with the shapes of lives that try to adhere to an inner light, rather than conform to the usual strictures of our society, even when this means sacrifices of security, career, money, prestige. They do not deal with the honing of a different sense of success, a success that has to do with the lack of discrepancy between one's ideals and one's strivings, regardless of failure.

Leaping out of a conflation of activism with early adulthood, Fendrick (1977) did a set of follow-up studies on civil rights workers and found that those who "kept the faith" rather than pursue "the good life" had been further to the left ideologically

from the beginning of their participation; their participation had always been motivated by strong ideological and abstract principles that extended beyond interest group politics. Their own personal gain did not terminate their involvement. Indeed, their ideological commitment to social change resulted in their not pursuing career objectives for the sake of extrinsic reward of more money, prestige and security. "Thus," Fendrich explains "three conditions were discovered that help explain adult involvement in left-wing political movements. Adults who are active developed a high level of political consciousness and participation in their youth. They were motivated by ideological rather than pragmatic values. They need to remain free of both objective and subjective constraints that can inhibit their adult politics." In this description we begin to hear something that reminds us of our experience as Quakers and as activists: Quakers' awareness of political realities from youth; their strong ideological mindedness; their attempt to live their lives as close to the inner light and its directions for action as they can, even if this leads them astray of certain professional and monetary forms of success.

Quakers have an implicit model of human development which results in activism being seen not as a developmental stage to be lived through on the way to adulthood and its many adjustments. The development and sustaining of activism, that is the movement to more and more deeply honoring one's beliefs and social awareness with the way one lives one's day to day life, is a central goal of human development for Quakers. From this follow

many aspects of a Quaker psychology of human development that differ from the normative models in current use. For instance, the development of identity in a Quaker psychology does not have to do only with the integration of those one knows at close range and one's experiences into a stable, somewhat fixed, configuration known as "I." Identity is stretched as far as possible, so that one feels an identification not just with one's local affiliations but with humanity and nature at large. Central to identity, as in the early Romantics, is the practicing of a fluidity to our boundaries, such that experiences that belong to others may enter into us and move us. Indeed, the development of a capacity for compassion--a feeling with others--is central to a Quaker vision of development.

A Quaker psychology has to be knowledgeable about movement in two depths--inward and outward--as individuals are seen as needing to move as deeply as possible in both the inward direction of reflection and prayer, and the outer direction of committed action in the world, in both familiar and unfamiliar terrains. Each kind of psychology chooses its topics of relevance concerning childhood development based on its guiding telos. Thus a Quaker psychology--valuing the integration of inward searching with outer action--would choose topics of child development such as the following: how do children enter into, learn about, encounter and understand silence; how is diversity (racial, religious, sexual) encountered by young children and what are the forces which allow it to be seen neutrally or positively, rather than as a threat which leads eventually to the formation of prejudice and distance from others;

how can children imaginatively participate in experiences very distant from those familiar to them (such as enacting daily life in other cultures, in other socio-economic conditions); how can children gain a relative ease at crossing over the boundaries which separate one group of people from another, such that identity can transcend local identifications. The Quakers have as a value an internationalization of identity, the attaining of a sense of global citizenship. A prerequisite for this would be an increased ability to identify oneself with others from outside of one's local group memberships, and the ability to maintain these identifications in a potent enough way such that they influence one's actions. The potency of this ability would largely have to do with both the development of a compassion that is far flung, not local, and a strong sense of the necessity and often efficacy of action.

The developmental theories which inform research on activists are not about facts gleaned from observing children or adults as ontogenesis proceeds. As Kaplan (1974, 1981) argues, development cannot simply be read from the 'facts' of growing up; it is not pristinely dealing with what actually occurs in human ontogenesis. Development is a perspective through which observations can be ordered. "Development is a norm or standard for interpreting and assessing actualities, and cannot itself be derived from empirical observations or experimental analyses" (Kaplan, 1981, p.8). The 'facts' which theories claim are to be found in reality are, from this perspective, produced by the given theory. Different

theories produce different sets of facts, depending on the values, the views of the nature of mind and reality, that inform them.

Kaplan proposes that development be seen as a movement toward perfection. A developmentalist's task then is to describe not simply what is, but what should be, what is preferred (1981, p.5). When one looks in this way at theories of development, one sees what the given theorist specifies, implicitly or explicitly as the primary goals of human development, and how phenomena are then selectively gathered or discarded based on their ability to explain or exemplify the primary problem or value. For instance, Piaget's studies of children did not prove that cognition goes through certain fixed stages. Rather, before listening to his children, he held a strong set of principles regarding the ideal kind of thought (abstract, logical, scientific thought) that should develop in children and then chose exemplars from his interviews with children. Different developmental theories orient us toward different 'facts' (Kaplan, 1983). Indeed, theorists chose examples to illustrate their prior ontological commitments, rather than building their theory by an accumulation of pristine factualities (Watkins, 1986).

To illustrate this I want to take one example of research on activism more akin to a Quaker model of human development, Kenneth Keniston's work on radicals, and show how looking at the same phenomenon as Solomon and Fishman (1964), he saw it much differently. In his thoughtful study of young radicals, Keniston (1968) succeeded in keeping his focus on commitment, despite the youth of his subjects. Probably some of the same behaviors

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Solomon and Fishman saw as avoidance of adulthood, Keniston (1968) could describe positively in the context of the goals of the activists, rather than psychology and society's normative goals for young people:

Facing a problematic and indeterminate future, members of a small, fragmented and often confused movement, tempted by, but determined not to succumb to, the lures of conventional middle-class or academic life, these radicals stand on their own feelings of inner rightness, and in the last analysis identify themselves with that process of social and historical change that their movement seeks to effect. (p.43)

Keniston begins to set up a different standard than the one used in Solomon and Fishman. Here what is valued is the determining and then living by an inner sense of rightness; to Quakers, "being guided by the light."

Each developmental psychology, with its values and teloi, chose exemplars of what its form of ideal development would be. For those who value abstract, logical thought as the pinnacle of human development, as does Piaget, it is the scientist who is idealized. For those valuing the dramatic qualities of mind, it is the poet and playwright, commonly Shakespeare who is lauded. I am proposing that Quakers, in their implicit psychology of human development, hold the nonviolent, spiritually minded social activist as the one to learn from. Rather than a contemporary

psychology trying to illumine activism, well lived activism--its determinants, dynamisms, conditions--would create a developmental psychology that is distinctly Quaker. What I am arguing is that a Quaker based approach to research on activism would yield nothing less than an articulation of a different view of human development; one where interconnectedness is found alongside a modified individualism; where an interest in the intrapsychic is balanced by a valuing of action in the world; where the success of adulthood is not measured only by successes in "work and love" but also by the degree of congruence between awareness and action, between what one loves and how one works on its behalf; where identity is built not just from the internalization of family and local group interests but from experience, actual and imaginal, of the lifestyle and values of people across the globe; where an appreciation of an abstract ethic of justice would be wedded to an ethic and action of care (Gilligan, 1982, p. 147).

Certainly there are areas of psychological research that are relevant to these concerns--the literatures on prejudice and tolerance, on psychic numbing (Lifton, 1979), on the development of prosocial behavior, the critiques of the overemphasis on individualism and narcissism in our culture. What seems lacking in developmental psychology is a vision of being human where one's eyes turn both inward and outward, where one's experience of one's identity is largely one of interconnectedness, and thus that one's daily life is called upon to address the imperfections of human life, which cause such suffering, as well as to celebrate life's

joys and beauty.

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