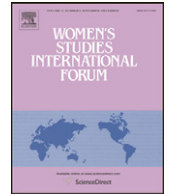


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Women of a certain age: “Second wave” feminists reflect back on 50 years of struggle in the United States



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SYNOPSIS

Using social movement theory, this study explores the lives of 31 women in the U.S. who were activists in the “second wave” feminist movement in order to understand how aging activists currently make sense of the victories and setbacks in the struggle for gender justice. Findings from in-depth interviews show that veteran feminists possess a profound ambivalence about the impact of the modern feminist movement. Along with feelings of empowerment and pride, many older women activists carry feelings of outrage at movement backlash; anger at the loss of systemic analyses among younger generations; grief around interpersonal trauma experienced as activists; and a sense of marginalization. These findings give voice to a cohort whose unique perspectives are critical for our understanding of the social history of American feminisms, and contribute to knowledge of how freedom fighters think and feel about social movement participation once the period of mass mobilization has ended.

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Given the recent 50th anniversary of the passage of the U.S. Equal Pay Act, the historic civil rights March on Washington, the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and the passage of Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act, not to mention the current ascendancy of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as a viable U.S. presidential candidate eight years after the historic Obama presidency, there is cause to pause and reflect on the enormity of the social transformations brought about by the unprecedented mass mobilization of American women from the 1960s until the mid-1980s in the contemporary or “second wave” women's movement.¹ Moreover, given the recent deaths of major powerhouses of the U.S. second wave, such as Maya Angelou, Shulamith Firestone and Karen DeCrow, as well as the widely publicized 80th birthday of feminist icon, Gloria Steinman, it seems timely to turn focus and energy to understanding the perspectives and reflections of the older generations of women that, collectively, reorganized and reconstituted American culture, institutional arrangements, and the interpersonal lives of women and men alike in ways that are too numerous and consequential to recount here. For these older women activists, what must it feel

like now to have devoted a significant portion of your life to the fight for women's freedom, and to have seen first-hand the victories and defeats of one of the most impactful social movements in U.S. history? What must these women feel now, as we see so many of those gains stalled, or dismantled in what many have called a “War on Women” waged by neo-liberals, Tea Party extremists, and religious fundamentalists? Is there some shared sentiment of continued optimism, or is it hot anger, cold rage, or something else? Perhaps some combination? What does the state of feminist movements look like from the vantage point of women who can take the longest view?

As a feminist sociologist, it is questions like these that drew me to the study of veterans of the U.S. second wave. Given that the women who would have been at the forefront of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s are approaching their later years, it behooves those of us committed to centering the voices and experiences of women to capture their stories and perspectives on current gender politics and the trajectory of feminist movement successes and setbacks before the insights and experiences of this unique cohort are lost to

history. While previous researchers from a range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives have examined the many dimensions of the contemporary American women's movement, very little is known about the ways in which everyday activist women in the second wave currently make sense of themselves as women who were movement participants in this particular time in history, and how they feel today about the current political landscape as feminist women in a time when the structural and cultural opportunities for mass mobilization have waned for them. As such, in this article, I argue that many veteran feminist women in the U.S. are experiencing, among other states yet to be fully explored, a kind of crisis of meaning evidenced by a pattern of paradoxical emotions: On the one hand, activists express great pride in their role in the historic successes of the second wave, a sense of real triumph in what they perceive as monumental changes in the life chances of today's generation of women and girls compared to their own, a sustained joy in their memories of comradeship of shared struggle, and a persistent optimism for a progressive future; On the other hand, veteran feminist activists express explicit outrage at the enormity of feminist movement backlash in the U.S.; anger at the loss of systemic political analyses among younger Americans; sustained grief and confusion over the emotional violence they experienced from other women in the movement; and an undercurrent of resentment about the contemporary cultural failure to recognize the political impact that veteran feminist activists have had on American society overall. In the end, I discuss the ways in which we might consider this paradoxical constellation of emotions characteristic not only of a particular group of veteran feminist activists at the U.S. in the beginning of the 21st century, but indicative of a larger cultural crisis around the meanings of feminism, one that is situated in the broader political and discursive challenges facing the left in the U.S. more generally with the advent of extreme neo-liberalism. Finally, I conclude with the suggestion that this kind of post-movement paradox in political consciousness may, indeed, be characteristic for veteran activists across a wide range of movements in the decades after mass mobilization has ended, particularly in political contexts where there has been some considerable social movement success.

Theoretical orientation

At its most macro, this study is analytically orientated by the sociological insights of classical theorist, Max Weber (*Gerth & Mills, 1958*), most notably his famous call for an interpretative lens on social life that seeks to understand the meanings that individuals, themselves, give to their actions as people situated within distinct socio-historical contexts. This project is also oriented by the basic assumptions of multiracial feminist theory (*Collins, 1990; Zinn & Dill, 1996*) that the lived experiences of women, and the meaning they assign to these experiences, including experiences of oppression and resistance, are legitimate areas of scholarly inquiry; that women's – and men's – lives are constituted by and in conflict with interlocking systems of inequality, not simply gender, and that any valid attempt to document and explain women's experiences, as well as the operations of gender inequality, must take as its starting point this foundational notion that gender as a system of power is inextricably linked to race, class, sexuality,

age, nation as distinct but interlocking systems of domination and subordination. In the context of this larger multiracial feminist interpretive theoretical framework, this work sits within a social movement analytical framework that recognizes the importance of protestors' mental and emotional lives in understanding social movement phenomena.

More specifically, within social movement theory's larger theoretical focus on the role of cultural symbols, issue framing, discursive claims-makings, identity politics, there has been "an explosion of research on the mental worlds of protestors" (*Goodwin & Jasper, 2009: p. 144*). Since the late 1990s, in particular, scholars in large numbers have returned their attention to what, surprisingly, has been one of the most understudied aspects of social movements, namely the role of emotions (*Flam & King, 2005; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2000; Jasper, 1998*). This revival of focus on the emotions of protest is what we might expect given that it is the very emotions of outrage, anger, and indignation about injustice, as well as emotions of longing for solidarity, hope for a better world, and a love for oneself and humanity that fundamentally motivate people to take collective and sustained action. Today, a hardy body of sociological research on emotion and social movements takes as axiomatic that emotions are integral at every stage of the social movement process – at institutional and organizational levels, and in the lives of social movement actors and their opposition – just as they are in all other parts of human life (*Goodwin et al., 2000*). For example, activists make strategic use of emotions to frame issues in ways that will mobilize movement actors and also resources, as in the most famous case of the civil rights movement's strategy of evoking feelings of moral outrage among white Christians (*Morris, 1995, 2005*), and so can their opponents, as in the case of the anti-hunting movement where the outrage of animal rights activists was reframed and de-legitimated by hunters as "overly emotional" (*Einwohner, 1999*). Beyond framing and recruitment, emotions are central in creating social solidarity and "emotion cultures" (*Jasper, 1998*) within social movement organizations that work to sustain participation. Scholars have further theorized that the very work of mobilizing people to take collection action involves the extensive and on-going emotional labor to strategize and navigate the transformation of individual emotion into a collective, and viable, force for social movement action (*Guenther, 2009*). At times, emotion can even be the desired outcome of a movement itself, as in the Gross National Happiness movement (*Noy, 2008*).

Most relevant for this project, in the same way we can conceptualize emotion as at the core of what propels and sustains social movement activity, we can also understand how emotions play a significant role in a movement's decline, such as when feelings of disillusionment with movement leaders lead to organizational implosion, love relationships emerge that change political group dynamics, despair leads to collective burnout, or perhaps even when a sense of triumph that leads to a movement's wane (*Jasper, 1998*). However, as I will show below, only a small portion of the theoretical and empirical research on the decline of social movements focuses on the emotional experiences of movement participants after the period of mass mobilization is over, and, to date, there is no sociological research that looks at the set of meanings and emotions that constitute the current political consciousness of veteran feminists from the U.S. second wave.

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