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An Unexpected Benefit of Outlaw Emotions

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An Unexpected Benefit to Outlaw Emotions

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Claire B

“Our worlds have been destroyed in many ways, and we’re trying to rebuild them, reclaim them, and reestablish correct relations. The severity of the situation shouldn’t undermine the willingness to act” (Estes). During his interview about Indigenous Resistance, Nick Estes of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe mentioned that marginalized groups often have a more persistent and powerful perspective on rebuilding from hardship. Without a positive outlook on repairing the ties broken throughout history, the present can not become a new story, rather history repeats itself. When marginalized groups flip their perspective on a hardship they experienced, it can create progress. “That’s the job of revolutionaries in history; we’re cheerleaders of the movement, and we have a backward- and forward-facing perspective” (Estes). Estes mentions that revolutionary optimism is needed to make progress. Taking a widely different emotion to oppression is a method for marginalized communities to recover and progress, despite societal expectations that reject their actions. Emotions can help or hinder the impact that your actions have on the world around you. In response to everpresent oppressive systems, marginalized groups can reject their societal boxes through the “outlaw emotions” they develop, which assist in uprooting the stereotypes and oppressions experienced by said groups.

In oppressive societies, there is a constant strain on minority groups for a variety of reasons. In these societies, the oppressed get labeled with socially constructed stereotypes that are exhausting to combat. For disabled folks, one of the constructs that they constantly battle is feeling as though they have to explain how they live happily and *do* have a normal life. As Harriet McBryde Johnson states “the presence or absence of

a disability doesn't predict quality of life” and you can not measure two people on the same scale (4). The need to explain this seems to exhaust her and many other people that are disabled for she mentions that “God didn't put me on this street to provide disability awareness training to the likes of them. In fact, no God put anyone anywhere for any reason, if you want to know. But they don't want to know. They think they know everything there is to know, just by looking at me” (Johnson 3). This need to prove to people she has a life worth living and trying to educate them on how to respect those with disabilities is exhausting and after a certain point warrants giving up. This exhaustion is explained in the book *The Minority Body*, where Elizabeth Barnes mentions that the “mismatch between expectation and lived experience isn't just a surprise or a curiosity. It's a deep-set epistemic burden” (172). The mismatch between personal and societal understandings of group identities are overarching and present in a variety of marginalized communities.

The LGBTQA+ community is another example of a group that experiences the contrast between individual understandings of one's self and the societal judgments and critiques placed upon them. “For gay people who grew up in a context where repressive or prejudicial conceptions of gayness were the norm, making sense of their own experiences of sexuality could be extremely difficult” (Barnes 172). Barnes recounts Edmund White's memoir *A Boy's Own Story* and mentions that White was constantly drilled with the stereotypes of 'the homosexual' that consisted of “the outcast, the deviant, the psychiatric patient, the sinner” (Barnes 172). Once he was able to love himself *because* of his sexuality, he realized the “deep-set tensions [he] encountered trying to understand his own experience of sexuality. To White, the idea of a positive,

fulfilling self-identity as a gay man was so in tension with dominant stereotypes of 'the homosexual' that it simply didn't make sense" (Barnes 172). This analysis of the contrasting feelings that White noticed in his everyday life, demonstrates that people can reject the stereotypes and judgments from other people and be able to feel pride in their identity. Barnes mentions that to 'overcome' the constructed hurdles of any marginalization is a way to improve your life as a member of a minority group. The reclamation of one's identity and feeling pride for being in a marginalized and oppressed group is a prominent example of an outlaw emotion that allows minorities to thrive.

As mentioned above, when marginalized groups get placed into boxes, every part of their being becomes a societally constructed stereotype. These stereotypes come in many forms whether it is appearance-based, personality-based, or even income-based. The outward expression of the concept of these stereotypes can come in many forms as well; blatant hate speech, racial profiling, implicit biases, or daily microaggressions. When individuals are faced with these stereotypes and experience marginalization, there are instances when their emotions do not correlate with the expectations or environments placed on them by others. In Alison Jaggar's work, she explains these "outlaw emotions" as a moment or continuous time where "people do not always experience the conventionally acceptable emotions" (159-160). These outlaw emotions can help marginalized groups perceive the world differently and challenge the standard expectations society has placed on them. Outlaw emotions have the potential for carrying political power and changing the perceptions of others. "Outlaw emotions are distinguished by their incompatibility with the dominant perceptions and values, and some, though certainly not all, of these outlaw emotions are potentially or actually

feminist emotions. Emotions become feminist when they incorporate feminist perceptions and values, just as emotions are sexist or racist when they incorporate sexist or racist perceptions and values” (Jaggar 160). As mentioned by Jaggar, these outlaw emotions can present themselves in helpful and harmful ways, for a variety of groups that range in opinions and feelings. This paper will focus on the positive side of said outlaw emotions and the part that these emotions play in dismantling stereotypes of disabilities, sexualities, gender roles, or other oppressions of marginalized groups.

There are examples of outlaw emotions and there are also what I interpret as emotion-based actions that stem from outlaw emotions. This is proven by Jaggar when she says there are “many examples demonstrating that even extreme and apparently totally involving displays of emotion in fact are functional for the individual and/or the society” but she also notes that there are ranges in the interpretation and effectiveness of taking emotions and turning them into passions (152). “We could never experience our emotions entirely as deliberate actions, for then they would appear nongenuine and inauthentic, but neither should emotions be seen as nonintentional, primal, physical forces with which our rational selves are forever at war” (Jaggar 152). The positive and effective side of this scale is demonstrated when individuals in minority groups take a positive spin on situations that frustrate them, which allows them to find communicative and helpful methods of rewriting the stereotypes. A real-life example of a beneficial outlaw-emotion-based action is when Harriet McBryde Johnson felt pride in her disability which led her to take an unconventional method of writing about disabled people. She wrote about a conversation she had in a reversed way where *she* was the main narrator and the able-bodied view was othered (as disabled people often are in

popular culture). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson addressed this narration tactic explaining that Johnson's choices meant that "readers perceive her life and the world through her embodiment as if it were our own, Singer's awkwardness and outsider status become apparent to us. We come to understand him not as the voice of objective truth but rather as a situated person limited in his own knowing by his isolation from disabled people" (Thomson 302). This is a tangible action that stemmed from Johnson feeling an outlaw emotion about her disability and the stereotypes that faced her. Because of her unlikely feeling toward disability, Johnson was able to turn the stereotypes she faces into a positive spin that promoted learning about people with disabilities. The way that people interpret and understand their emotions determines whether or not the outlaw emotions people experience will be turned into purposeful actions.

To understand why only some people can turn their frustrations into positive progress, it is important to realize that emotions are constructed by different environments and cultures. This connection is explained by Jaggar through the way that kids interact with the world around them. "Emotions are most obviously socially constructed in that children are taught deliberately what their culture defines as appropriate responses to certain situations: to fear strangers, to enjoy spicy food, or to like swimming in cold water. On a less conscious level, children also learn what their culture defines as the appropriate ways to express the emotions that it recognizes" (Jaggar 150). The environmental-based way that people learn about why and how to experience emotions demonstrates that outlaw emotions can be engrained into a person by their family, friends, culture, etc. Since emotions are a social construct they

can also be changed, relearned, and explored more thoroughly (Jaggar 152). This societally-based look into emotions shows that the way you are raised plays a big part in how you do or don't use outlaw emotions to benefit yourself and others.

The understanding that your parents play a part in the way you interpret emotions feels very present in what emotions I experience, and how they do or don't help me interact with the world around me. An example of an outlaw emotion I have been raised to feel is pride in the fact that I am a loud, conversational, and upfront person, despite my environment telling me that I am too aggressive or too powerful. There is a lot of research that women are faced with the words "bossy" and "aggressive" more often than men. The numbers shown in *Women in the Workplace 2016* are that "women who negotiate are 67% more likely than women who don't to receive feedback that their personal style is "intimidating," "too aggressive," or "bossy," and they are more likely to receive that kind of feedback than men who negotiate" (Sandburg). This disparity of judgment is based on the socially constructed categories of differing gender leadership styles. "We expect men to be assertive, look out for themselves, and lobby for more—so there's little downside when they do it. But women must be communal and collaborative, nurturing and giving, focused on the team and not themselves, lest they be viewed as self-absorbed. So when a woman advocates for herself, people often see her unfavorably" (Sandburg). The difference between these genders and the "roles" they are supposed to play in the workplace is even embedded into children. My parents realized this universal stereotype of women being soft-spoken and not advocating and they recognized that it is even more prominent in the passive-aggressive state I grew up in. This environment led them to purposefully raise my sister and me to not be

“Minnesota Mousy”. The diligent environment that my parents created for us meant that we turned out to be outgoing and decisive, while still being respectful and communicative. This personality trait is the one I have grown to have the most pride in and appreciate the most about myself, despite many nights when the younger me cried because my peers would tell me I was too loud, bossy, or talkative.

Although my peers often made fun of my chattiness, it has become a part of my personality that I love and one that immediately shines through to those that appreciate it. Some comments on my loudness have hurt me, but have also helped me grow and learn how to listen better, understand my peers, and advocate for those that speak up less than me. Before this growth could happen though, I had to push through the emotions that surfaced from teachers, friends, and peers teasing my personality and accept the fact that I was loud - and it was okay. Now that I have learned the pros and cons of my outgoing personality, it is something I feel proud of and I have experienced the outlaw emotion of loving and accepting that chatty part of me. This acceptance occurred despite some peers addressing that I was “over-the-top, bossy, annoying, and loud”. The ability to overcome those judgments has allowed me the space to learn how to put my talkative side to good use. I like to think that in leadership roles, I advocate for everyone around me. I hope that in friendships and interactions with others, I communicate effectively. I know I love telling stories but I also think that I am able to shut it off when friends need help and need someone to listen. I can always find room for improvement and keep trying to find the balance between talking and making people laugh and simply listening and respecting others, but I feel as though I have grown a lot in this department. I credit my parents for helping me learn to balance the part of me

that loves to talk with being able to listen. I believe that they helped my sister and me feel the outlaw emotion of being proud and loving the outgoing, powerful parts of ourselves that society sometimes shut us down for. Despite the fact that I was able to overcome the judgments placed on me by others and use my “outlaw emotions” to feel pride, there are examples where it can be more beneficial to ignore an uncontrollable issue that has the potential of being harmful.

It is often quite challenging to distinguish what is the best perspective to take if you are faced with adversity. A very slight difference in hardship could warrant you to ignore the situation instead of changing the emotions you feel from said situation. There are moments when it is beneficial to adopt an “it is what it is” mindset to create space from whatever is bothering you, and live your life as you please. This is a version of Stoicism that James Stockdale appreciated. In *Courage Under Fire* - Stockdale uses Epictetus's approach of Stoicism with the perspective that “Each individual brings about his own good and his own evil, his good fortune, his ill fortune, his happiness, and his wretchedness” (Stockdale 5). Although this is true in average moments of hardship where the individual can make things out to be worse than they are, there are instances in which struggle and pain can not be avoided, ignored, or lessened. A good example of extreme hardship that can't be accepted and left alone is oppression, marginalization, and stereotypes. If Stoicism is preached to be the solution for all problems, it can negate the severity of the struggles that minority groups often face, similar to those mentioned in this paper. If Stoicism was the approach society took to oppression it would create blindness to the issues minority groups face. This situation is similar to when white people say that they “don't see color”, which acts as if the extreme daily

struggles BIPOC people face every day are just an afterthought of the impacts of racism. If racism, homophobia, patriarchy, and other oppressive systems are left alone because they are “uncontrollable” as Stoicism talks about, these systems would run rampant and create even more deeply rooted oppression. This negative side of Stoicism demonstrates the need to feel your feelings to the fullest in the face of oppression. This acknowledgment of emotions allows individuals to reclaim the stereotypes and expectations society has placed upon them and flip the script to make progressive action.

When minority groups are faced with the struggles of our oppressive society, it can be challenging to find a way out. These systems are deeply rooted in the U.S. government and have lots of history behind them. Even though there is so much past in these systems, they are not “uncontrollable” and despite the challenge, they need to be dismantled. Minority groups face various forms of stereotypes, racial profiling, and microaggressions yet they still find a way to look at the situations in a new light. Groups are able to feel proud of their marginalized sexuality, individuals can rewrite the narratives around disability, and folks can claim their personality regardless of societal judgments. These examples and more prove that when individuals or groups are faced with judgments, stereotypes, or marginalization, the ability to perceive and react to the situation in a way that is unexpected creates room for progress. Without taking a new look at things, we become complacent to struggles from the past and can not create a new future. The unexpected emotions and reactions of marginalized groups are proof that “in times of great turmoil and destruction, people didn’t just stop being humans. They didn’t just give up” (Estes).

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