

## **Safety pin solidarity: a lesson in tactics**

**Chandra Russo**

A few days after this year's US presidential election, I was invited to wear a safety pin at a student organized speak-out at my university. The students had convened this space to process their confusion, grief, anger and fear. A campaign waged on explicit white supremacy and sexual violence seemed a harbinger of events to come. In the ten days after the election, the Southern Poverty Leadership Center had counted 867 hate-based incidents. Those handing out safety pins were predominately students of color and queer identified folks, although the university I teach at has a majority white student body. They explained that in choosing to wear the safety pin we would be signaling ourselves as allies to those whose vulnerability had been highlighted or targeted throughout the campaign. These include folks of color, immigrants, Muslims, and those who are queer identified. Attentive to the students' testimonies, I did not think much before attaching the pin to my sweater. Wearing a pin "as a sign of solidarity" seemed a reasonable request. Within a day or two, however, it was clear to me that the safety pin tactic was a deeply contested one.

The safety pin is a symbolic statement, akin to other forms of bystander tactics intended to display solidarity with an aggrieved community. Ribbons worn on one's person are one of the most common iterations of this kind of tactic. For instance, celebrities, most of whom were not themselves HIV positive or gay-identified, debuted the red AIDS awareness ribbon when attending the 1991 Tony Awards. The safety pin is akin to this ribbon in that it is meant to signal the wearer's ideological commitment to a cause and solidarity with the most directly affected.

Like the AIDS ribbon, the safety pin might be also be seen as what I think of as entry-level activism, a tactic that seems broadly approachable to people from different walks of life and varying experience with social movement involvement. Putting on a safety pin seems a simple act. I put one on without fully considering the ramifications of doing so. Yet the safety pin is not quite entry level activism in that it is intended to identify the wearer as capable of a literal intervention on behalf of another's "safety," hence the "safety" of the pin. By wearing the safety pin, one self-designates as willing to be called upon to intervene, de-escalate or otherwise provide bodily defense if another person is being harassed or victimized.

The critiques of the safety pin come from multiple directions: from Trump supporters, from those scared they will be used by the hateful to trick vulnerable populations, from those concerned by the dynamics of privilege perpetuated by this tactic, and by those who worry at the lack of preparedness among those wearing them with good intentions (Koopman 2016). While I take up the latter two (and not the former), I am less interested in adjudicating the sanctity of the

safety pin than in considering what its highly contested adoption might tell us about the multi-edged nature of tactics, especially in the age of social media.

I have organized these into the three principles that have crystalized for me through observing various activists engage with the safety pin tactic.

## **1. Tactics travel**

David Meyer and Nancy Whittier (1994) suggest that social movements “spillover.” Across different movements in different times and places, there is often an overlap in collective action frames, organizational structure, leadership and, of course, tactics. Similar dynamics have been called “diffusion” (McAdam and Rucht 1993, Wood 2012). Meyer and Whittier observe how non-violent sit-ins made popular in the civil rights movement were then taken up by students and anti-war mobilizations in the years to come. Similarly, the 1980s anti-nuclear movement borrowed heavily from feminist tactical innovations of the 1960s, the latter seeing the advent of “peace camps,” many of which were women’s only collective living situations. Social movement diffusion is also often cross-national, and can be direct or indirect, with activists either sharing tactical innovations person to person, or movements learning about other group’s tactics through the media.

The safety pin is evidently an instance of this phenomenon. Most sources place the origins of the safety pin tactic with UK residents in the June 2016 aftermath of the Brexit vote and an accompanying upsurge in threats and hateful assaults towards immigrants. The safety pin was understood to be a visible symbol that would demonstrate a stance of solidarity, and many began to tweet images of themselves wearing the pin. The adoption of the safety pin in the UK was itself said to be inspired by Australia’s #illrideiwithyou campaign begun a year and a half earlier (Cresci 2016). After a hostage situation in Sydney in 2014, Australians who feared an Islamophobic backlash tweeted and wore stickers emblazoned with “#illridewithyou” to signal that they would accompany Muslims fearing harassment on public transport (BBC News 2014).

The centrality of Twitter to these tactics takes the concept of movement spillover to another level. In an age of “digitally enabled social change” (Earl and Kimport 2013), activists’ ideas, strategies, and tactics can “go viral” on social media. Our new digital tools eliminate many of the once significant obstacles to tactical diffusion, such as time and space. Beyond the fact of technological advance, however, the travelling nature of these tactics seems to testify to the congruity of certain struggles on the global stage. Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, racist and other xenophobic attacks are on the rise. Many members of dominant publics in these spaces (white, straight, cis gender, etc.) are seeking to respond, to enact solidarity. In many instances, they might fumble in these efforts, and so...

## 2. Activists argue

Amin Ghaziani (2008) has made this truism into a rich scholarly contribution, turning common sense on its head. Rather than view infighting as threatening to movements' well-being, Ghaziani theorizes it as a key process whereby activists clarify their vision, strategy and sense of "we." Of course, Ghaziani is looking at activists within and across established movement organizations, those who already hold a provisional commitment to their struggle. Although there may not be a unified *movement* debating the safety pin tactic, important and insightful clarifications have emerged through these discussions. These include ideas about the nature of anti-oppression work and the promises and pitfalls of solidarity across power differentials. I'll discuss three critiques of the tactic.

The most salient critique of the safety pin argues that this tactic is a form of white savior slacktivism. This critique has come from white folks and people of color. The central complaint is that by donning a safety pin solely as a symbolic act without further political engagement, folks with privilege get to absolve themselves of responsibility for Trump's win, and perform as if morally righteous while doing little in meaningful deeds to counter systemic racism and hate crimes.

The marketing factor that has accompanied the safety pin has also left many cynical. Safety pins are getting play in some fashion reviews as the new accessory du jour (Perez 2016). They have been turned into a trending item on Etsy, generating sometimes outlandish sums of money for their generally white (and female) purveyors. The safety pin turned consumer good for the profit interests of already privileged individuals seems deeply antagonistic to the safety pin's original intention of solidarity.

Tahirah Hairston (2016) goes even further in her critique of this tactic, suggesting that the safety pin is not only flawed as a movement tool but has also engendered a debate that reaffirms white privilege.

The safety pin is ultimately a bystander form of activism entirely on white people's terms. There are white people telling other white people why it doesn't work. There are white people arguing that it works. There are white people telling people of color they are wrong for questioning the pin's intentions.

Hairston points out that the safety pin, along with the discussion it has generated, centers white people rather than people of color. This is indicative of a larger pitfall that movements often face when conversations about racial justice across racial lines come to buttress, rather than resist, some of the dynamics of white supremacy, such as centering the thoughts, feelings and interest of white people at the expense of everyone else. Nevertheless, the kinds of conversations— and often arguments—ignited by the safety pin seem to have led to more than just the sedimentation of white privilege, or the acrimony of blame and shame. These debates have grown awareness and seeded some useful

tactical innovations. Ghazaini's observation, that when activists argue, their movements might become more strategic, seems to be borne out with the safety pin, at least provisionally.

### **3. Flawed tactics can be reworked**

The safety pin is both like entry-level activism as well as a bit different. It appears broadly accessible but is meant to signal the wearer's willingness to take real risks. The promise in all entry-level activism is its potential to broaden a movement's reach, recruiting new and sometimes unlikely allies. The pitfall is that when tactics become too limited in scale or scope, they can short circuit more meaningful action, becoming a form of slacktivism. The safety pin can be used by those with relative privilege to feel and perform their supposed solidarity while doing little to alter relations of power. Worse yet, as the safety pin is not quite entry-level in the same way as, say, the AIDS ribbon, those with good intentions but limited forethought can put already vulnerable populations in greater danger. I treat these in turn, with an eye to helpful interventions.

Some have sought to combat the pitfalls of safety pin slacktivism by repurposing the safety pin symbol in ways that direct sympathizers towards more useful solidarity work. Self-described Black Femme organizers Marissa Jenae Johnson and Leslie Mac have developed a racial justice business model called the [safetypinbox.com](http://safetypinbox.com) that you are likely to find if you type "safety pin" into any search engine. Declaring that the "safety pin show of solidarity was a failure," and enumerating a sound set of arguments for why they believe this to be the case, Johnson and Mac have instead created a way for white people to give monies to Black women organizers while getting educated and organized around racial justice. Paid subscription includes a monthly package, "the safety pin box," a literal box filled with racial justice tasks, ranging from personal education to group level organizing endeavors. [Safetypinbox.com](http://Safetypinbox.com) connects its subscribers to each other in order to do the bread and butter of movement building: amass power and effect change. Johnson and Mac understand the profits they generate as "reparations monies," allocating some to keep their business running and giving the rest to Black women applicants that do movement work.

Other productive approaches to the safety pin tactic seek to deepen the practice of solidarity, highlighting the fact that the safety pin might not best be considered entry-level activism at all. The safety pin, after all, is not just a nice gesture. It is supposed to signal to vulnerable individuals, often those facing moments of crisis, that you are an ally and that you will intervene to ensure their safety. In this sense, wearing a safety pin as mere symbolism, without a plan of action and knowledge of the incumbent risks, actually endangers you and others. Unlike the many legitimate arguments against the safety pin, blogger Isobel Debrujah is enthusiastic towards those who want to wear the pin. But she is clear that wearing the safety pin requires its wearer be thoughtful about the risks and ramifications of this choice:

If you don't make a plan, you will get yourself or the person you are trying to defend very killed. Let's avoid that. So make a plan.

As Debrujah helps us think through this plan, she is pragmatic. Similar to Johnson and Mac, she invites well-intentioned folks into the fray while asking them to consider what real solidarity requires. She gives folks permission to consider other ways they might want to be allies that do not require the same embodied, legal, social and financial risk. Both of these interventions welcome, rather than shame, potential allies, those who are interested in the safety pin as a symbol of solidarity. Both do so with a good dose of reality and clear steps forward. Both demonstrate that alliance, solidarity, and social justice require commitment, work, and material contribution.

The safety pin is instructive to scholars and activists alike in considering the life course of tactics generally and the prospects for contemporary solidarity movements specifically. Tactics move across movement locations and contexts, evolving as they do. The adoption of certain tactics can be hotly contested, but through argument, even when rancorous, activists may better clarify their aims. In the best of circumstances, the diffusion of tactics along with the debates that ensue, help activists to refine their tools of change. The safety pin tactic is certainly a fraught one. Here is to hoping it can be a beginning in forging the multiple solidarities necessary to challenge current threats to collective safety, justice and well-being.

## References

- BBC News. 2014. "Sydney Cafe: Australians Say to Muslims 'I'll Ride with You,'" December 15. Trending. <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-30479306>. (Accessed December 15, 2016).
- Cresci, Elena. 2016. "Britons Urged to Wear Safety Pins in Solidarity with Immigrants." *The Guardian*, June 29, sec. Politics <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/29/britons-urged-to-wear-safety-pins-in-solidarity-with-immigrants-safetypin> (Accessed December 15, 2016).
- Debrujah, Isobel. 2016. "So You Want to Wear a Safety Pin." *What a Witch*. November 12. <https://isobeldebrujah.wordpress.com/2016/11/12/so-you-want-to-wear-a-safety-pin/>. (Accessed November 14, 2016).
- Earl, Jennifer, and Katrina Kimport. 2013. *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*. Reprint edition. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Ghaziani, Amin. 2008. *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Hairston, Tahirah. 2016. "Fashion Can Be a Powerful Form of Protest. The Safety Pin Isn't That." *Fusion*. <http://fusion.net/story/371752/safety-pin-fashion-activism/>. (Accessed December 1, 2016).

Koopman, Sara. 2016. "Decolonizing Solidarity: Ways to Make Safety Pin Solidarity Actually Safer." *Decolonizing Solidarity*. December 11. <http://decolonizingsolidarity.blogspot.com/2016/12/ways-to-make-safety-pin-solidarity.html>. (Accessed December 11, 2016).

Mac, Leslie and Marissa Jenae Johnson. 2017. *Safety Pin Box*. <https://www.safetypinbox.com/>. (Accessed December 15, 2016).

McAdam, Doug, and Rucht, Dieter. 1993. The cross-national diffusion of movement ideas. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 528, 56–74.

Meyer, David S., and Nancy Whittier. 1994. "Social Movement Spillover." *Social Problems* 41 (2): 277–98.

Perez, Christina. 2016. "13 Safety Pin Brooches To Wear Now And For The Next Four Years." *Fashionista*. <http://fashionista.com/2016/11/safety-pin-brooch>. (Accessed December 1, 2016).

Southern Poverty Law Center. 2016. "Ten Days After: Harrasmment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election." <https://www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election>. (Accessed January 25, 2017).

Wood, Lesley J. 2012. *Direct Action, Deliberation, and Diffusion: Collective Action after the WTO Protests in Seattle*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

### **About the author:**

Chandra Russo is Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Colgate University. She studies US-based grassroots activism for peace, racial justice, and transnational solidarity. Her current research is a comparative ethnography of three activist communities, broadly from the Christian Left, that seek to imagine and enact solidarity with the targets of US National Security Policy. Contact: crusso AT colgate.edu