

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Establishing a sense of identity is a central task in human development (Erikson, 1959/1980). Who we are, how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how we connect or align with others are all aspects of identity. Erikson (1959/1980;1968), the primary theorist of identity development, defined identity as a process of defining oneself relative to shared characteristics with others. Identity, then, is a bimodal phenomenon, linking internal self-perceptions with the perception of self as part of a social environment (Josselson, 1987).

Erikson (1959/1980) looked at identity as a developmental task along a continuum of tasks over the life course. Each of the eight stages of development in Erikson's model is characterized by a developmental issue that must be resolved in order to progress to the next stage in a healthy, fully functioning manner. Failure to resolve the crisis successfully during a stage results in maladaptive responses in later life. Erikson's stages are chronologically linked, with specific tasks salient at particular ages. The eight stages are: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity diffusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair (Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978).

Identity versus identity diffusion, the fifth stage in Erikson's model, is a task of the adolescent years. It is during this time that young people form a sense of what kind of person they will be and what kind of life they will lead. Some do this by adopting the values and beliefs of their parents as their own, some reject their parents' beliefs and forge their own way, some explore multiple selves and have difficulty choosing one self-definition, and some do not resolve this task and stay in a state of identity diffusion, drifting among different paths without ever solidifying an identity.

Erikson (1959/1980) theorized that identity resides in occupational choices and ideological beliefs. In operationalizing Erikson's theory, Marcia (1966) separated the ideological area into politics and religion. Later research on women added the area of sexual attitudes to women's identity (Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Schenkel & Marcia, 1972). Through the negotiation of crisis and commitment in each of these areas, the individual arrives at one of four identity statuses: Foreclosure, Identity Achievement, Moratorium, or Identity Diffusion. Seeking to clarify the identity process in women, Josselson (1987, 1996) conducted interviews with women over three years and again after ten and twenty years to seek explanations about how they negotiated crisis and commitment to arrive at an identity status. She identified competence and connection as core issues for all of the statuses (Josselson, 1996). Issues of competence and connection arise in all arenas, including occupation, politics/activism, religion/spirituality, and relationships.

Although identity is conceptualized as an adolescent task, the process of forming an identity is not static. As new challenges or situations arise, belief systems are reexamined to cope with the new information. This is done through a process of assimilation or accommodation. Assimilation occurs when new information is interpreted in a manner that fits with the individual's current knowledge and beliefs; accommodation occurs when the individual makes changes in the self to account for new experiences (Whitbourne, 1986).

Many elements contribute to identity formation; a person is not defined by any one characteristic, but rather by the combination of several factors. An examination of the elements that contribute to identity formation provides insight into the characteristics of identity as a whole. Some of these elements include race and ethnicity (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1993; Phinney, 1990), sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994), gender (Jones, 1997; Josselson, 1987), and feminism (Downing & Roush, 1985). How individuals define themselves on these factors will influence their overall sense of identity. It is the cumulative effect of the different elements of the self that determines identity.

### **Women's Identity Development**

A significant body of research indicates that women's identity development differs from men's development (Bardwick, 1980; Hulbert & Schuster, 1993; Josselson, 1973; Lachman & James, 1997; Rossi, 1980; Stewart, 1980). Whereas most models describing men's development focus on career or occupational achievement as the core element of identity, women's identity models focus on relationships and affiliation. Individuating and becoming independent are primary developmental tasks for men; women are assumed to require the development of intimacy before individual identity can be established (Erikson, 1968).

Early identity research was conducted with men; when women were added to the research later, they were compared to the male models as the norm and frequently came up short (Marcia & Friedman, 1970). Women were often seen as less fully developed based on the standards established with men. Josselson's (1973, 1987, 1996) research redefined the norms of identity for women, establishing healthy patterns of identity development for women on their own terms.

There has been very little research, however, on the relationship between feminism and identity. What other researchers have called feminist identity is more appropriately called feminist consciousness or ideology, indicating agreement with particular political or social beliefs. The relation of holding feminist beliefs and values to how individuals define their identity has not received adequate attention.

## Feminism

Feminism is a social, political ideology with a broad purpose of advancing the status of women. Mainstream feminism as a social movement has its origins in the woman suffrage campaigns of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The modern women's movement is based largely on the civil rights struggles of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Feminism as a political stance has a goal of gender equality, but there are multiple approaches within feminism, expressing different philosophical or theoretical explanations for the source of inequality and different paths toward abolishing it (Tong, 1989). Liberal feminism, for example, focuses on social and economic structures such as the difference in men's and women's earnings, the absence of women in particular careers or social roles, and the differential treatment of boys and girls in the educational system. Radical feminism centers the oppression of women in the body, through sexuality, reproduction, and representation in pornography or other media. Other feminisms locate the source of oppression in other social or political structures. Some of these include socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, eco-feminism, multicultural feminism, and womanism (Delmar, 1994; Hughes, 1998).

In addition to multiple approaches to feminism, there are different ways of expressing feminist beliefs. Activist feminists work publicly to effect political and social change. Activists work in political action groups, provide services for survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse, hold public protests and demonstrations, or engage in other visible woman-centered work. Academic feminists are concerned with exploring and understanding the theoretical underpinnings of oppression and advancing knowledge about sources and solutions. These feminists use research and teaching as tools of dismantling the dominant paradigms and envisioning new ways of making meaning. The categories of activist and academic are not mutually exclusive, but rather can be seen as overlapping. Each feminist expresses her or his beliefs in unique ways and has a different level of activist or academic commitment.

The belief in feminist goals is fairly widespread. Buschman and Lenart (1996) found that 59% of the undergraduate women they surveyed had some degree of feminist orientation. College women surveyed by Williams and Wittig (1997) showed a 63% rate of support for feminist goals. Another sample of college and non-college women indicated that 52% had some level of feminist identification (Cowan, Mestlin, & Masek, 1992). For many women, however, the adoption of feminist beliefs and a feminist identity comes later in life (Astin & Leland, 1991). It might be expected that the proportion of women espousing feminism would increase with age.

Belief in feminist goals does not necessarily indicate a willingness to adopt a feminist label, however. Several studies have revealed a reluctance to accept the label of "feminist" (Astin & Leland, 1991; Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Renzetti, 1987; Williams & Wittig, 1997). Some explanations for this include (a) holding negative views of feminists based on stereotypical images presented by the media (Buschman & Lenart, 1996), (b) a perception that women do not need collective

effort for success but can rely on individual achievement (Renzetti, 1987), or (c) fear of association as a radical or lesbian (Williams & Wittig, 1997). Additionally, women of color may resist the label because mainstream feminism does not address the specific needs and issues of diverse communities of women (Williams & Wittig, 1997). African American women, for example, may be more likely to identify as womanists rather than as feminists.

“Womanist” is a term coined by Alice Walker (1983) to refer to Black feminists or other feminists of color. To many, the women’s movement and feminism have been seen as a middle-class white women’s movement, promoting a liberal feminist agenda aimed at providing equal opportunity for white women. This, too, has contributed to disillusionment with the feminist label. African-American women and other women of color have felt disenfranchised by the liberal feminist agenda which did not apply to their experiences of multiple oppressions based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Baker & Kline, 1996). The womanist movement offers some parallels to feminism in the goals of equality and empowerment, but also differs significantly from the agenda of liberal feminism. Womanism is another of the diverse ways that feminism can be expressed. To refer to both womanists and feminists in the discussion of identity is one way to be inclusive of a diverse group of women committed to advancing the status of women.

The interaction of feminism and sexual orientation is another important area of inquiry. Many women have resisted becoming involved in the women’s movement or calling themselves feminists due to homophobia and fear of being assumed to be lesbians (Ireland, 1996). Similarly, many lesbians rejected the liberal feminist agenda as focusing on heterosexual women’s concerns and ignoring issues of sexual orientation. For women who identify as feminists and as lesbians, it is important to consider if and how these identities complement or contradict each other.

Regardless of the theoretical or philosophical approach that may be implicit in the perspective, the identity element enters when a person says, “I am a feminist” or “I am a womanist.” This affirmative claiming of a feminist identity is clearly linked to the definition of identity offered above: an internal self-perception (feminist/womanist) combined with a connection to a social environment (woman’s movement/womanist movement). The particular stance in feminism may vary; what is important to identity is that the label be claimed as part of who the person is. It is in this way that the ideology of feminism separates from the identity as feminist. It is my argument that a belief in feminist political or social agendas is evidence of holding a feminist ideology. Incorporating ideological belief into a self-definition that guides how people make sense of their experiences transforms the ideology into identity.

### **The Study of Feminist Identity**

feminist identity (Downing & Roush, 1985) is based on a theory of Black identity development (Cross, 1971). The Downing and Roush model proposes five stages of

synthesis, and active commitment. This model is described in more detail in Chapter Two. Coming to a feminist identity, according to Downing and Roush (1985), is presumed to be a developmental process, following predictable stages. Subsequent research based on the Downing and Roush model has provided support that different attitudes toward feminism exist in feminist identity (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1997; Rickard, 1989), but only minimal support for the developmental nature of the model (Gerstmann & Kramer, 1997). Differences in level of feminist beliefs may reflect stances in feminism rather than steps along a continuum of identity.

The Downing and Roush model may be classified as a social identity theory rather than as ego identity. Ego identity refers to the internal psychosocial processes associated with Erikson's theory. Other research on feminist identity has largely taken a social identity approach (Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Rhodebeck, 1996; Williams & Wittig, 1997). Social identity refers to "one's knowledge of his or her membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997, p. 862). Whether someone feels closely aligned with other feminist women or has a positive evaluation of the women's movement (Rhodebeck, 1996) may indicate an identification with a social group, which may be an element of identity.

### **Identity in Adulthood**

Ego identity as conceptualized by Erikson (1959/1980) is largely formed in the adolescent years. In her study of women's identity development, Josselson (1996) retained the classification of identity status determined at the college interviews for her participants because there is no existing way to measure identity in adulthood. She acknowledged that the women at ages 33 and 43 revised their identities and emphasized that identity is never fully formed. The process of assimilation and accommodation continue as new experiences are encountered (Whitbourne, 1986).

Feminism may account for significant changes in identity development. Many women come to feminism after adolescence (Astin & Leland, 1991; Baker & Kline, 1998). Significant events or experiences may provoke a process of accommodation whereby a new self-concept as a feminist is adopted. This study examined the role that feminism has in defining women's sense of self. In addition, it examined the intersections of race and sexual orientation with feminist identity in women.

### **Research Questions**

The questions to be answered by this research are:

1. What role does feminism have in adult self-identified feminist women's identity?
2. How do adult self-identified feminist women perceive that race/ethnicity or sexual orientation impact their identity as feminists?

Qualitative research methods are appropriate when studying the perceptions of participants and trying to understand how people make meaning of their personal situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research primarily is used to build theory rather than test existing theory (Merriam, 1998). This study employed a qualitative research method because I was interested in learning about the participants' perceptions of their own experiences with feminism. I wanted to understand how the participants made sense of feminism within their identities.

I specifically avoided a quantitative methodology such as a survey for three primary reasons. First, construction or adoption of a survey instrument would impose assumptions about feminism and identity on the study through the questions included. I preferred to focus on the participants' experiences rather than testing my own or other researchers' assumptions. Second, a quantitative method would have necessitated building on other theory or research that I was not confident applied. In particular, I had enough doubts about the Downing and Roush (1985) model of feminist identity to want to do an exploratory study rather than a confirmatory one.

### *Need for the Research*

The study of feminist identity contributes to the theoretical understanding of adult women's identity and its components. Discovering the diversity of the feminist experience and how feminists perceive their environment enriches understanding of feminism as it applies to different groups. Women of color have criticized the feminist movement as being concerned only with white women's issues. Looking at feminism and womanism from the perspective of many different groups allows a response to these critiques. In addition, examining the intersections of race, sexual orientation, and feminism and how they affect identity adds depth to knowledge about the components of identity.

The social and political context is important to consider. Identity cannot be separated from the conditions in which it develops (Josselson, 1996). During the second wave of the women's movement, from the 1960s through the 1970s, significant change occurred in American society relating to social roles and opportunity for women. Women who came of age during this time grew up as children with one set of societal rules about who women could be and entered adulthood with a different script (McLaughlin et al., 1988). It is likely that these changes resulted in shifts in identity as new ways of being became possible.

Identity development is an important topic in the study of human development. How people define themselves in relation to their environment is influenced by several factors. For some women, one of those factors is feminism. Understanding the nature of feminist identity adds insight into the overall process of identity development, as one piece of the

larger identity picture. Downing and Roush (1985) offer one model of feminist identity development; further research is needed to bridge the gaps in that model and provide a fuller understanding of feminist identity.

In the male-normed environment of higher education, women's ways of knowing, leading, and communicating are often devalued (Bensimon, 1991/1993; Sandler, 1986/1993). Feminism has experienced a backlash in recent years (Faludi, 1991), with a predominant post-feminist attitude that the fight for women's equality has been won. Women who advance feminist causes or pursue feminist scholarship may be further discounted as radicals or reactionaries. Seeing feminism primarily as an ideology trivializes the view of its role in women's lives. If feminism is an identity for some women—if it influences their choices of occupation, their relationships with partners or colleagues, and their political and religious beliefs—then it is imperative that it be understood and valued as a legitimate arena for discourse.