

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The women I interviewed told rich, varied stories of how feminism is manifested in their lives. Each woman's particular circumstances provided a context for shaping her identity. To understand the role that feminism plays in identity, I first had to understand the way that these women conceptualize identity for themselves. My initial research question—what role does feminism have in adult self-identified feminist women's identity?—assumed that all participants would have a common definition of identity or a common way of defining themselves. In fact, the women I interviewed construct or understand their identities in different ways. The second research question—how do adult self-identified feminist women perceive that race/ethnicity or sexual orientation impact their identity as feminist?—holds an assumption of a direction of influence. By asking how race/ethnicity and sexual orientation *impact* feminist identity, I was ruling out the possibility that feminism might influence how the women see their identities in those areas. I found, rather, that feminism and racial or sexual orientation identity influence each other. These findings led to revising the research questions to (a) add a question about how the women in this sample conceptualize identity before examining feminism in identity and (b) revise the final question to eliminate its directionality. Chapter Three describes in more detail the complete analysis process leading to the adoption of the following research questions:

1. How do adult self-identified feminist women conceptualize identity for themselves?
2. How does feminism fit into that conceptualization?
3. How do race/ethnicity and sexual orientation interact with feminist identity?

This chapter presents the findings from my interviews with 40 self-identified feminist women. Interviews were semi-structured, following the protocol in Appendix B. Questions in the interviews asked about the importance of feminism, occupation, relationships, religion, politics, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation in the women's identities. These categories were based on previous research (Cass, 1979; Cross, 1971; Downing & Roush, 1985; Erikson, 1959/1980; Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966) that identified them as central elements of identity. I also asked about the connection of feminism to each of the other identity areas.

Although the interviews were structured around the identity areas listed above, my final analysis did not follow those areas as categories. As explained in Chapter Three, I found that the identity areas themselves were not meaningful ways to distinguish patterns of identity or feminism in identity. All of the women in this study described their sense of

identity as being composed of multiple parts. For some their occupation was the primary way they defined themselves; for others it was their religion or their relationships with family members that provided the most important element in their self-definition. None of the identity areas was able to be ruled out because it was universally unimportant in the participants' identities, nor did any of the areas emerge as being important to every person. Indeed, several additional identity elements were added by participants that were not found in previous literature, such as age, class, and avocational interests.

The important factor in determining the answer to the first research question, how the women in this study conceptualize identity for themselves, was to look at how each woman talked about identity across categories. I could not understand identity by looking at any one area individually. I had to look at each woman as a whole to determine how she understood her own identity and what she considered most central to her. Similarly, to answer the second research question, the way that feminism fits into the conceptualization of identity, I had to look at feminism as it related to identity as a whole rather than by individual areas that may or may not have been salient for a particular woman.

From the interview transcripts, I extracted statements that demonstrated how the women conceptualize identity for themselves across identity areas and how they view feminism in their identity. Because the participants' comments about identity were interwoven throughout the interview, I drew together statements about identity in particular and disregarded statements that did not indicate how the participants viewed themselves. The resultant "identity summary" was the basis for subsequent analysis. The identity summaries for the first three groups of interviews (Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest) averaged one-and-one-half pages. The summaries for the final two groups (Northwest and Southwest) averaged three pages. The difference is due to the addition of a specific question for the last two groups about how the participants viewed their overall sense of identity. I coded each identity summary looking for general themes of identity and feminism in identity.

To illustrate the findings, I draw heavily on quotes from the women in the study, using their assigned pseudonyms. Other than the case when a participant chose her own pseudonym, I used names that I felt represented some of the important qualities of the women. A complete list of all participants in alphabetical order by pseudonym with demographic information appears in Appendix D. I refer to the participants by name so that they are viewed as whole persons rather than disembodied voices. Just as it is necessary to consider all elements of the individual to know her identity, it is also necessary to think of her as a whole person to understand her voice.

I have tried to maintain as much of each woman's voice as possible, altering her language only to improve readability by imposing punctuation and removing filler words such as "um" and "you know." I have not corrected grammatical errors, nor have I noted them with *sic*. To do so would interrupt the flow of the comment and impose an external, hierarchical value that is counter to the feminist nature of the research.

Defining Elements

From the identity summaries, I developed three defining elements by which to group the participants: the conception of identity, the conception of feminism, and how conflict between feminism and other identities is resolved. The following sections explore more fully each of these elements.

Conception of Identity

During the interviews, I defined identity for the participants as “how you see yourself as a person and who you believe you are.” In the interviews in the last two locations, I added a question at the beginning of the interview, asking the participants to describe how they see their identities based on that definition. Based on my review of interviews in the first three locations, I wondered whether I was foreclosing the participants’ thinking about the full range of areas they use to define their identity by presenting the six predetermined identity areas. To test this, I asked the Northwest and Southwest participants first to offer me their own definition of their identities before I gave them the list of identity areas from the research. Subsequent questions for all participants asked about the importance of feminism, occupation, relationships, religion, politics, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation to their identity. I then asked about the connection of feminism to each of the identity areas, including areas the women added to the predetermined list.

Examination of the participants’ identity summaries revealed that all of the women saw themselves as having multiple identities; for none of them is identity a singular phenomenon. The degree to which each identity area was important varied for each woman. Some consider their careers to be the dominant factor in their identities. Others reported that they identify themselves most strongly by their relational affiliations, such as mother, wife, sister, or friend. Some women believe their religious practice is an important aspect of their identities while others do not consider religion to have any connection at all to how they define themselves.

In addition to the identity areas of feminism, occupation, relationships, religion, politics, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, other areas emerged in these women’s identities. Some of these included class, age, geographic location, body size, and avocational interests. Again, these identities were more present for some than for others. Each woman described a unique combination of identities that make up her view of herself as a person. These multiple identities exist simultaneously within the individual and are connected to each other in one of two ways: as a whole with multiple parts and as a collection of multiple parts.

A Whole with Multiple Parts

This is an identity of connection. The multiple factors that constitute identity are integrated into a unified whole. Each of the identity areas overlaps with and influences each of the other areas. The women describe their identities as inseparable.

When I would ever be confronted with those issues, I would always be more comfortable saying I was African American first, then woman second.... 'Who are you more of?' I reject that as a legitimate question now, because I think who I am is both a woman and a woman of color. (Dee)

A Collection of Multiple Parts

In this view of identity, multiple identity areas coexist within the individual; some identities are interconnected and some are separate. How salient each identity is may vary depending on situation or context.

If I thought of describing myself or the roles that I play, I think the ones that would come to mind first would be things like myself as a member of my family, as a scholar, a professor, and then feminism I guess would come after that. (Emily)

Some of the women also described the ways that external elements such as environment or other people's perceptions influence how they view themselves. For some participants, the institutional and/or local community was an important context in which they defined themselves. For others, relationships with significant others was part of this definition.

Oh, within the context of this campus, within [this university] and I think just given the size of [this town, my identity] seems to be the dominant factor in my life these days. Being a small town and everyone I know, even off campus, socialize with are from [the university] so predominately I would say [I identify myself] in terms of Asian American identity.... I've lived in a number of different places, this is definitely the smallest place.... I'm much more self-conscious of being Asian. (Irene)

I think relationships are probably the biggest part of my identity. Who you spend your time with sure makes up a lot of who you are, who I am.... I think certainly my friends and people I choose to associate have probably had a bigger impact on how I see myself than I'm able to articulate right now. (Shelley)

Conception of Feminism

In response to my interview questions, participants described the way they view feminism as an identity and the interaction of feminism with the other identity areas. By examining the ways that these women talked about feminism across all the questions, I

identified four categories of how feminism is perceived to be part of their identities. These categories are (a) a set of values, (b) a process to make meaning, (c) a contextual identity, and (d) an underlying construct. Women who view feminism as a set of values speak of it as a set of beliefs or an ideology that may or may not influence other identity areas. The participants who view feminism as a process to make meaning have either an integrated or contextual view of feminism, with the added element of seeing feminism as a way to understand, interpret, and make decisions about experiences. Feminism as a contextual identity is connected with some parts of identity but not with all elements. For those whose view of feminism is as an underlying construct, feminism is interconnected and interactive with all of the other identity elements.

Because all of the research participants were self-identified feminists, all of them considered feminism an important element in who they are. The way that they conceptualize feminism and the degree to which it is an integrated identity varies by category. For women who consider feminism to be a set of values, these guide these feminists in ethical or congruent behaviors. Women who talk about feminism as a process to make meaning use their feminist identity to help them construct or understand the other areas of their identities. Feminism as a contextual identity is connected to some of the multiple identities within an individual, but not to all of her identities. Finally, for those women whose feminism is viewed as an underlying construct, feminism is interconnected and inseparable from other identity areas. These categories are explained in detail in a later section of the chapter.

Resolving Conflict between Feminism and Other Identities

For women, feminism as a set of beliefs has inherent ideological conflicts with several identity areas, particularly those representing social institutions such as religious organizations, family structure, and cultural norms. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition, for example, is based on a hierarchical structure that superordinates men and subordinates women in positions of spiritual guidance or leadership. Similarly, the social construction of the family in Western and Asian cultures prescribes specific gender roles to men and women, with men traditionally seen as the head of the family and women assigned to caretaking roles for the home and the children. Feminism's agenda of gender equality challenges these traditions and provides a source of conflict for many women in negotiating identity in these areas.

Although I did not ask a specific question about the sources of conflict between feminism and other identities, many of the participants raised it as an issue. Subsequent probes revealed three general ways that the women interviewed for this study resolve such conflicts: integration, separation, and disregard. These methods are linked to the four categories of feminism. Women who view feminism as an underlying construct and a contextual identity are most likely to find ways to integrate areas of conflicting identity within a unified whole. Women whose view of feminism is as a process to make meaning tend to separate themselves from religious organizations or relationships that conflict with their feminism. Those women who see feminism as a set of values do not attempt

either to integrate or separate areas of conflict, rather they disregard the conflicts and maintain the nonfeminist activities. Each of these methods of dealing with identity conflicts is discussed more fully in the descriptions of the four categories of feminism.

Table 2 serves as a framework for the discussion of the findings from analyzing identity summaries. Within each of the four categories of feminism, I describe the similarities and differences in the group members' conception of identity, their conception of feminism, and the ways they resolve conflict between their feminism and other aspects of their identities. Finally, I discuss the interaction of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation with feminist identity, focusing on the notion of being seen as "other," the interaction of feminism with racial and sexual orientation identity, and the role of privilege in identity.

Table 2
Categories of Feminism

Category of Feminism			
Defining Elements for Categories	A Set of Values <i>n</i> = 3	A Process to Make Meaning <i>n</i> = 8	A Contextual Identity <i>n</i> = 10
Participants	Barbara, Sandra, Nancy	Cathy, Liza, Liz, Naomi, Laura, Diane, Chris, Madeline	Emily, Muriel, Lucy, Daphne, Judith, Shelley, Sally, Millie, Irene, Louise
Conception of Identity	Varies. Identity is multiple, but those identities can be either holistic or contextual.	Varies. Identity is multiple, but the interconnection of those identities can be either holistic or contextual.	Multiple parts. I have many identities. Some identities are interconnected, some are separate.
Conception of Feminism	A value system. Feminist values are ingrained and consistent.	A way to understand myself and my world. Shapes how I view the world, how I behave, how I interpret things, how I make decisions.	Contextual. How I see myself as a feminist is driven by the situation.
Resolving Conflict between Feminism and Other Identity Areas	I disregard conflicting values in different identity areas.	I separate myself from social institutions where feminism is in conflict, such as religious organizations or family/friend relationships.	An underlying construct. An underlying construct. “Part of who I am.” Not contextual, although it may vary in salience depending on a particular situation.

Dorothy, Lucinda, Gloria, Lynn, Julie, Susan, Betsy, Renee, Ruth, Heather, Esther, Dee, Karen, Audrey, Andy, Isabella, Sharon, Dana, Lisa

A whole with multiple parts. The whole can be seen as a center or as a unified group.

An underlying construct. Contextual, although it may vary in salience depending on a particular situation.

I integrate the aspects where there is agreement and let go of those where there is no hope for change. I still maintain a base of feminism, but can downplay that if necessary. I try to change institutions from the inside.

Categories of Feminism

A Set of Values

The primary distinction between this group and the other groups is the members' description of feminism as a value system. For these women, whose characteristics are noted in Table 3, feminism is a set of beliefs that guides their behavior.

Table 3

Demographic Information for Group 1: A Set of Values

Pseudonym	Location	Position	Race	Age	Sexual Orientation
Barbara	NE	Administrator	White	52	Heterosexual
Nancy	SW	Administrator	White	48	Heterosexual
Sandra	NW	Faculty	White	49	Heterosexual

This is a small, homogeneous group, composed of three heterosexual, White women. Their ages differ by a range of only four years, from 48 to 52 years old.

Conception of Identity

The definition of this group is not based on difference in their conception of identity, but on the way that they view their feminism. This group of women views their identity as being constructed of a collection of multiple parts. As with the contextual identity group, these women see some of their identities as interconnected and some as separate.

I see myself as somebody who is made up of extremes. I have a work persona, I have a personal persona, clearly there is overlap, but there are some extreme differences as well. I would characterize myself as either an idealistic pragmatist or a pragmatic idealist.... My identity is not based on my job, although my job is clearly a significant portion of my life. I don't know what else to say in terms of my identity.... My identity is a combination of personal values, professional ethics, a sense of world view and sort of where I see my place in that world view or in the world.
(Nancy)

I like to think of myself as a reasonably competent professional person. Other roles I see myself in particularly strongly right now are being a good daughter, since I just moved my mother out [from the Midwest], so I've spent a lot of times doing things in support of her. I see myself as being a good friend to people. I am a wife—I'm married—but I see myself as being more a partner in that relationship. I guess "wife" to me carries some negative connotations and I see it as being a pretty equitable relationship. (Sandra)

Conception of Feminism

The view of feminism as a set of values distinguishes this group. All three women used the word "values" explicitly in describing their feminism, although their definitions of that seemed to vary slightly. Nancy defined values as an ethical standpoint; Barbara's view of values was tied to social justice concerns; Sandra explained values as what she holds important to her identity.

I chose this occupation because it was a way for me to express those values.... I see the feminism as sort of defining a lot of those values.... I'm pretty independent and won't accept certain behaviors, included in the behaviors that I won't accept are based on those values associated with feminism.... To me the values that I associate with feminism are just too ingrained, this is not a cloak that I put on from eight to five, this is who I am. (Nancy)

I don't have this concept of a feminist identity so much, so it's hard for me to answer that question. To me it's all part of the same thing, that I hold certain values about race, about sex, and so on, about sexism and gender. But to me it's all part of the same umbrella.... So to me, it's just, feminism and all these other things are all just sort of part of the total package. (Barbara)

I'm not sure how I would characterized the way that I think about feminism. I think of it as my viewpoint and my set of values.... It's more one of those foundational pieces rather than a superstructure piece, if you would. I use the house analogy a lot when I think of self-identity structure. So it feels like one of the founding pieces of my set of values.... I certainly see my political values connected to my feminism and my political values are fairly central to who I am as a person.... I think it's a valuable part of who I am, having feminist values. (Sandra)

Resolving Conflict between Feminism and Other Identity Areas

All three women in the group who see feminism as a set of values describe religion as having absolutely no part in their identities. For all of them, however, the break with religious organizations occurred before their feminist identity developed, so they do not see either a conflict or a causal relationship.

Even though these group members all describe their feminist values as ingrained, consistent, and congruent in how they see themselves, each has at least one activity that she does not consider feminist. This is a key distinguishing component of this group. Nancy watches soap operas and reads romance novels for entertainment; Barbara advocates for gifted education in her local school system; Sandra describes her feminism as “moved to the back burner” because it is no longer central to her work. The response to these conflicts is to disregard them. Although aware of the conflict, they do not attempt to integrate the conflict into their feminism. Although not a member of this group, Laura has a similar approach to conflicting identities. She sees herself as simultaneously holding two belief systems that don’t have to be identical.

I grew up Catholic and still consider myself a Catholic and a practicing Catholic. And I guess my notions of spirituality stem from that.... I know there is all these other questions or conflicts with what I guess I would say are the feminist part of my identity. And sometimes they will come up in my head and I just kind of don't deal with it.... They both exist. And I can be a Catholic and I can believe this too.... That's been the easiest way to deal with them. Is just say they're both in me. They're both beliefs that I have. And they don't quite fit together at least in any way that I've found. But you know, I still believe in both but they don't quite fit together. And I'm not going to think about that right now. That's just how I get past it. (Laura)

A Process to Make Meaning

This group is defined by the way that its members describe their feminism as a process by which they make meaning of themselves and their experiences. Feminism is described not only as a part of their identity, but also as a way that they interpret the world or make decisions. Eight women comprise this group; their demographic characteristics are noted in Table 4.

Table 4

Demographic Information for Group 2: A Process to Make Meaning

Pseudonym	Location	Position	Race	Age	Sexual Orientation
Cathy	SE	Administrator	White	50	Heterosexual
Chris	NW	Faculty	White	50	Bisexual
Diane	MW	Faculty	White	44	Heterosexual
Laura	MW	Grad/TA	Chicana/Latina	41	Heterosexual
Liz	MW	Administrator	White	49	Lesbian
Liza	SE	Faculty	White	42	Bisexual
Madeline	SW	Administrator	White	39	Lesbian
Naomi	MW	Administrator	Multiracial	35	Heterosexual

The members of this group are not very diverse in race/ethnicity, with the majority being White women. Heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women are all represented in the group. The age of the members ranges from 35 to 50 years old.

Conception of Identity

Women who see feminism as a process to make meaning describe themselves as having multiple identities—many different roles, relationships, and groups combine to form how they see themselves. There is no consistent pattern within the group of whether the multiple identities are holistic and integrated, as with the group who sees feminism as an underlying construct, or separate and contextual, like the group whose view of feminism is as a contextual identity. Both conceptions of identity are present in this group's members. What distinguishes them from those two groups is not their view of identity, but the way they view feminism within that identity.

One participant describes herself as a whole with multiple parts that are intersecting.

I kind of view myself with multiple identities and I think they are all interconnected. And because of that, that's how I shape my world. And I have learned over time how the world sees me or understands me. Not necessarily all my

identities are visible—well people probably can see that I'm maybe older than a mainstream or traditional college student, so she may appear around 40, which I am, will be. White, work in a university, they probably figure there's some level of class tied to that or some kind of educational level, so I think that that information is given. What they don't see is that I'm Protestant, I'm lesbian, they don't see some of the other identities, that I have a disability, a hearing loss. And I think all those identities really play out in how I have experienced the world and how that has matured into me gaining my overall feminist identity. (Madeline)

Another participant sees herself as the multiple roles that she plays. She struggles to define herself separate from those roles.

I'm a professor and I'm a mother and I'm a daughter and I'm a wife and I'm a— All of those things. And it's hard for me—this is a struggle, still—it's hard for me to think about myself outside of those contexts, which I think is a problem for a lot of women. It is for me. (Diane)

A third member of this group combines both personal attributes and identity areas in her self-definition.

I see myself as a strong and independent woman. Woman is high on my list—I think I see myself as a woman before I see myself as a person, which is kind of interesting. A little bit of an iconoclast. People-oriented, empathetic... I've done the Myers-Briggs thing over the years and I always come out with the high empathy, high creativity, spontaneity—those kinds of things. And those are things that are important to my identity.... When people ask you, they don't usually ask, "who are you?" they ask, "what do you do?" I don't like that question. What do I do? I survive, I live. But if someone asks me, "Who are you?" or "Tell me about yourself, describe yourself," feminism is going to be one of the words that's going to be in there somewhere. It may not be the first one, but sometimes it may, depending.... A strong part of me is an artist. As a political being. I don't really fall neatly into the categories that politics comes with; I suppose I would call myself a liberal, but I think that liberals are a little wishy-washy sometimes. As a sister, I have siblings I adore. My parents are both dead, but I still think of myself as my mother's daughter

and I still think a lot about her even though she's been dead for ten years now.... It's been a long time since I did much navel-gazing. Who am I? I know who I am, I'm solid in who I am. (Chris)

Conception of Feminism

The view of feminism is the defining characteristic for this group. Feminism is seen as a process by which they make meaning of themselves and their experiences. As Liz says, feminism is a way to see and understand the other aspects of life.

I think [feminism is] the lens on how I see the world—on how I behave, how I interpret things, how I try to conduct myself. I'm not saying I'm always successful to achieving what I have as a model in my mind, but it is the lens. It's how I order the world or how I, as I'm taking in information, it's how I process it. (Liz)

Women in this group describe feminism as shaping their world view, their behavior, and their decision making. Feminism is, for most of these women, connected with all of their multiple identities, but is most important in making meaning about their experiences.

I think that feminism really helped me look at the ways that who I was influenced how I viewed the world. What areas of privilege that I have, what areas of enculturation that I have.... I think that, again, feminism is what gave me the spectacles to look at life through. That really helped me challenge the assumptions that society makes us live through.... Being White and being a woman and being someone who's not heterosexual, all did things, they all brought things to my life—ways of looking at things to my life—but it was feminism that really helped me see how to make changes, how to view my life as a positive, to take those different parts of me and go in a really positive empowered way. (Liza)

[Feminism] is a way that I think about the world in terms of how it operates and that I think about my mission in the world and what I value in the world. So it's a pretty big organizer for me.... And, like I said, sort of what is my purpose and my mission is very much tied up with that. So definitely a way I think about myself in the world. (Cathy)

Resolving Conflict between Feminism and Other Identity Areas

The majority of women in this group have used separation as a means of resolving conflicts between feminism and other identity areas. By separation I mean that they have chosen to withdraw from activities or relationships that seem too conflicting with their feminism. The areas that separation is most likely to occur are religion and relationships.

Eight of the nine women in the meaning group do not participate in organized religion. This is not always a result of their feminism; several women reported that their separation from church occurred before they had claimed a feminist identity. However, for all of them, their feminism has provided support for that decision.

One participant described her decision to disengage from organized religion while still holding on to her spirituality.

Religion has always been an important part of my identity and it has changed dramatically over time partly because of my feminist value system. I have had some great difficulties with the organized religious structures in which I was raised and have worked very hard to hang on to what I see as the spiritual underpinnings and to move out of the organizational structures that no longer fit or are comfortable. (Cathy)

Another participant sees no connection between her rejection of religion and her feminism, but finds it hard to imagine how other feminists could be part of traditional religion.

And so for a while I went through a really rebellious stage of "I'm an atheist." And then I realized that I just didn't care. That's not to say I don't think religion is a very important presence in our culture, I do. But in terms of everyday stuff with me, I feel no connection at all.... After the fact I'm sure I could construct [a connection to feminism], but I threw away the stuff around the church long before I woke up to the fact that I was a feminist. It's true, I find it hard to imagine how people do coexist with both of those, like traditional religion—not just Catholic—but traditional religion and being a strong feminist. To me it would pose certain challenges. And I guess people somehow figure it out in their heads, how the two work together. But it seems like that would be hard. (Liz)

A third participant separated herself from church because she was not willing to hide her lesbian identity.

At this point in my life, while I attended church a lot growing up, I think I struggled with the whole idea of where does church fit in my life, just as probably most young people are going through that. But I think it's more spiritual for me now. It's really looking at different parts of who I am and what makes up who I am and trying to find a balance.... Probably with the church thing is that we've got a lot of that don't ask, don't tell policies with certain identities.... Certainly a lot with the gay/lesbian people and I'm sure other identities as well. So right now I'm not looking for something that asks for part of me to stay home. (Madeline)

Separation as a means of dealing with conflict arises in personal relationships for some of the women in this group as well. Naomi framed it as a hypothetical scenario in a conversation with her husband where she decided she could not stay with him if he did not support abortion. For Liz the scenario was real in that she felt feminism gave her the strength to walk away from an abusive family.

I said, "You know, if all of a sudden you decided that you didn't believe in abortion and you were going to start to go picketing abortion clinics, I think I'd have to divorce you." But never did I think about that until it was a discussion over a meal. And I said, "I really don't know if I could be married with someone who had those types of thoughts." So, sure, I think about it. I wouldn't, that would just be somebody that I would never even... I mean, if we went out and they told me that, I'd be like, okay it would be fine to have a discussion with them, but as far as being romantically involved and living with them, no way. No way. (Naomi)

My blood family, for 30 years I've chosen not to have any contact with anybody. And that's been my choice and that's everyone.... In evaluating the behavior and the attitudes of my family, particularly my father and my brothers, I think feminism let me decide, "I don't want any part of this. This is really bad stuff, I want to get away from it." But I think a lot of people can get to that, you know, okay, you're in an abusive family and it's like, this is bad. But to have the, I think, incredible will to decide and to do it. To walk away. Because it wasn't just them, it was this huge family that I grew up with. Like 3000 aunts and uncles and cousins. To decide that I will be a happier, healthier person on this planet if I just go, just walk. And I think there is something

about feminism giving me the strength to be able to do that. It's like a corollary—for me it's always been interesting that what people have reacted to over the years with me is I'm not odd because I'm a feminist, I'm not even all that odd because I'm a lesbian, but man I am really weird because of the family thing. And that's what people seem to have the hardest reaction to. It's like they don't know what to do with it. But for me it's always been the right decision. But again, the resolve to carry it out I really think comes from something feminism has given me. (Liz)

A Contextual Identity

In this category, feminism is viewed by the group members as a contextual identity. They see their identities as a collection of multiple parts that are not always interconnected. Feminism is sometimes connected to individual identity areas, depending on contextual or situational variables. The group contains 10 members, whose demographic characteristics are described in Table 5.

Table 5

Demographic Information for Group 3: A Contextual Identity

Pseudonym	Location	Position	Race	Age	Sexual Orientation
Daphne	SE	Administrator	Black/African American	35	Heterosexual
Emily	NE	Faculty	White	35	Heterosexual
Irene	NW	Faculty	Asian/Asian American	33	Heterosexual
Judith	SE	Faculty	White	57	Heterosexual
Louise	NW	Administrator	White	48	Heterosexual
Lucy	NE	Faculty	White	49	Heterosexual
Millie	NW	Classified Staff	Chicana/Latina	30	Heterosexual
Muriel	NE	Faculty	White	63	Heterosexual
Sally	NW	Administrator	White	46	Heterosexual
Shelley	MW	Administrator	Multiracial	30	Heterosexual

The group members are diverse in racial/ethnic composition, with both White women and women of color represented. There is no range of sexual orientation in the group, with all members identifying themselves as heterosexual. The age of the members ranges from 30 to 63 years old.

Conception of Identity

The women for whom feminism is a contextual identity see their identities as consisting of multiple parts. The difference between this group and the group who sees feminism as an underlying construct is in the degree to which those identities are interconnected or separate. Rather than describing their identities as a whole with multiple parts, these women are more likely to see themselves as a collection of multiple parts that may or may not overlap.

For Millie, the evidence of her feminism seems to vary by who she is with.

I claim the roles artist, although that's not my focus in life right now but something I've recently claimed in the last two years that I hadn't before, is a creative person. I'm a partner, a wife, a daughter, an aunt, and a great-aunt. A great member of a very large extended family, so I have a lot of family connectedness although not as much now because I've moved away from that family physically. Also I, depending on whom I'm speaking with, will choose to identify myself as an ex- or recovering Catholic, no longer in the Catholic church but was raised in that environment and certainly still have a great number of family in that environment, but I've chosen to distance myself from that, sometimes at difficulty in relationships with family. (Millie)

Louise speaks directly to the struggle to make all the parts of her identity fit. Sometimes she is able to do that and sometimes it just does not seem to work.

Being a woman is a huge part of how I see myself and I think I also think of myself in terms of class and coming from a middle class, White family background. And I define myself in terms of my education—I have a doctorate, and I've worked in higher ed for 25 years, so that's a big part of who I am. And I suppose I also identify myself in terms of the things that really hit home for me, the things I love to do. And I do enjoy work so that's a part of it, but also I'm very much a person tuned into nature so hiking and being in the woods and living in [the Northwest] is a big part of who I am. Then I guess I would just say my relationships are important to who I am as the oldest sibling in my immediate family, partnered, the wife of my husband,

stepmother to my stepdaughter, and then my relationship with friends, mainly women friends.... I think part of who I am is somebody trying to make them all fit and sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. (Louise)

These women speak of the salience of different identity elements, with some parts of them being more important to them at different times. The context is most strongly present in this group in determining the salience level of different identity areas. The most important element of the context is relationships for these women.

Conception of Feminism

In the same way that identity is seen as multiple parts, feminism is seen as one of those parts. These women generally talk about their identities in terms of the feminist parts and the other parts. Some of the parts are interconnected with or influenced by the feminist parts, but there are also some identity areas that are not connected to their feminism.

So, to me feminism is part of who I am, it doesn't define me. I'm defined by many, many components. And there's not one Lucy, too. There's the Lucy that can peacefully coexist, chatting with my kids, with the other mothers of my children at a soccer game. I mean I'm not happy doing that. There's another part of me that I don't like to acknowledge very often that would oftentimes rather be doing my work than anything else. So I have always struggled with that issue. But [feminism is] clearly a part of who I am. It's not my person, but it's part of me and my life. (Lucy)

Muriel also illustrates how some women view their feminism as connected to some aspects of their identity but not all.

I think of it as part of my identity but not my total identity. Because I think I'm made up of all different parts, but feminism helps me to live out those parts in a way that I have equal opportunities that one part will not outweigh or suppress another.... I wouldn't say [religion and feminism are] connected, no. No, I think there are other women who have carried it, who have integrated the two and so have, have done their work within the religious community to advance some things.... I enjoy nature, or music, or going to museums, or going to restaurants, or seeing friends, or reading a book... you know, just relaxing, digging in the garden, and going for walks. But again that's part of who I am too. I couldn't be one of these people who, quote, is a workaholic, sixteen hours a day. That wouldn't be me,

either. I need some goof-off time or whatever, free time or time for myself. Yeah, I don't think you could, I could link that to feminism in any way. (Muriel)

Another participant describes how feminism is very strongly connected to her professional identity, but not as strongly to other parts of how she sees herself.

Well, when I walk into a classroom and one of the first things I say is I'm a feminist teacher. So there it is. I'm not just a teacher, I'm a feminist teacher. So that's very much a part of my identity as far as my career choice, my work. I don't think I've ever said I'm a feminist mother, but I am.... It's one of the first things. I don't think of myself as just a White woman, but a feminist White woman.... Is there a relationship between my heterosexualism and my feminism? Well if there is, I don't know what it is.... I've become a vegetarian. And I think I became a vegetarian because of animal rights, not because of any need to eat healthy or anything like that. And I'm wondering if that has a connection with my feminism. A lot of my feminist friends are vegetarian, so I don't know if I picked up on their conversations or what. It just popped into my head, I haven't... It's a new idea, so I'm not sure I could express any connection there. (Judith)

There are some ways that the women in this group seem contradictory in their statements about the role of feminism in their identity. Although they describe their feminist identities as connected to all parts of them, it seems that they compartmentalize feminism in some ways. For example, Daphne described feminism as “all-encompassing to me,” yet she doesn't consider feminism to be a critical element in her relationships with friends. Similarly, Sally asserted that her feminism is “so intermeshed in everything that I do.... It's part of the package.” There are specific identity areas, though, where her feminism is not a factor, including her sexual orientation identity, her relationships with friends and students, and her religious identity. Feminism is seen by this group of women as a part of who they are, but not necessarily a part of each aspect of their identities. The degree of compartmentalization varies among the group members, however. Some talk about only one or two parts that feminism is not tied to, while others see feminism as a very separate part that they bring in at some times and downplay at others.

Resolving Conflict between Feminism and Other Identity Areas

Women who view feminism as a contextual identity are likely to choose an integrative approach to resolving conflicts between feminism and other identity areas. They recognize that there are some contradictions and make conscious choices to integrate

those contradictory areas with their feminism. Louise, for example, sees her role as an upper-level administrator as sometimes competing with her feminism. She resolves that by consciously working from the inside of the organization to effect change.

It can sometimes feel like I'm not being true to who I am or that I'm not being progressive enough or that I have sort of turned into this conservative administrator that people expect... Partly I guess remind myself of the things that can be accomplished through this job and I think they are important. And actually I've been in this position now for about 10 years and that's enough time to develop a lot of relationships so that you can see the consequences, the outcome of that, so that you do have male deans who will listen to what you have to say and respect that. It takes time to develop that, it takes a lot of biting your tongue and carefully stating things, but I think it is important. (Louise)

The sense of context is apparent in how they resolve conflict as well. Choosing how to reconcile a feminist identity with non-feminist relationships depends in some part on the evaluation of the relationship. For example, Emily talked about her relationship with her grandmother as being different from her expectations of friends, and Irene addressed working with others who don't necessarily share her beliefs.

I won't tolerate certain kinds of behavior in my friends. And it's interestingly enough that I would say my grandmother should be able to be in the kitchen if she wants to, that's who she is, and yet I won't, a similar kind of, that I might see as a restrictive gender-based role of people playing out those roles, I won't want those people as my friends. I mean, they're not people that I get closely involved with. It's very interesting that at this point I don't and I can't get intimately involved with people who don't have feminist principles.... And I think part of it is, it's very situational for me, and it's very much about generations and who people are and my grandmother was raised in a certain way and within a certain culture. I mean she wasn't raised in the United States, and she just has a certain cultural background and sort of experience, and I guess in my family context ... I would feel it disrespectful. (Emily)

I've become more tolerant of contradictions and those types of things, though, at the same time and kind of realize ... that in some ways they're unavoidable.... And again, the more I got into issues of race/ethnicity, complications of class, these types of things, the more I realized there is just

no singular model and in some sense it has a lot of pitfalls if you try to do that, as opposed to thinking context to context. In some ways I guess I've also learned to be a little bit more, for lack of a better word, compassionate about it, I guess. I'm not really sure. In terms of expectations and trying to work through differences and those types of things as opposed to being really, for lack of a better term, very hard-ass about it. I'm just trying to understand the different ways that folks are trying to work through these things and again trying to accommodate. (Irene)

In both of these cases, the women described times that they have chosen not to confront others to maintain some level of harmony. These women still describe themselves as feminists in these situations, but are willing to downplay their feminism depending on what they see as a larger issue based on the context.

An Underlying Construct

In this category, feminism is viewed by the group members as an underlying construct in their identity. Feminism is linked to all aspects of identity for these women and is viewed as inseparable from who they are. This is the largest of the four groups, with 19 members. Table 6 presents demographic characteristics for the group members. This is a diverse group, including lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, and nonsexual women; White women and women of color; and women of varying ages. The age range for the women in this group is 35 to 59 years old.

Conception of Identity

The way that women in this group define their identity is as a whole with multiple parts. "Who I am" is defined by multiple roles and characteristics, including occupation, relationships, politics, religion, race, and sexual orientation, but also such things as class, education, age, geographic location (Southern or urban, for example), body size, and culture. All of these identity areas are not present for all of the women in the group, but each woman in this category has more than one element to her identity.

I guess what I would see at the core of identity is, and this has to do with probably my being more analytical and abstract, is a person concerned with justice, that's at the core of who I am. I identify my life by being a just person and trying to be a good person. So I guess it has to do with ethics and behavior in the world, that's sort of how I define myself, is how I want to behave, based on some sort of abstract notions I have about what good behavior constitutes. And then of course that cannot be separated

Table 6

Demographic Information for Group 4: An Underlying Construct

Pseudonym	Location	Position	Race	Age	Sexual Orientation
Andy	SW	Administrator	White	45	Heterosexual
Audrey	SW	Faculty	White	41	Lesbian
Betsy	SE	Administrator	White	53	Lesbian
Dana	SW	Faculty	White	43	Lesbian
Dee	MW	Administrator	Black/African American	47	Heterosexual
Dorothy	NE	Administrator	Black/African American	56	Heterosexual
Esther	MW	Classified Staff	White	59	Nonsexual
Gloria	NE	Grad/TA	White	53	Heterosexual
Heather	MW	Administrator	White	35	Bisexual
Isabella	SW	Faculty	Chicana/Latina	42	Heterosexual
Julie	SE	Faculty	Asian/Asian American	44	Heterosexual
Karen	NW	Faculty	White	39	Lesbian
Lisa	SW	Faculty	White	36	Lesbian
Lucinda	NE	Faculty	White	37	Lesbian
Lynn	SE	Administrator	Black/African American	37	Heterosexual
Renee	SE	Administrator	Black/African American	37	Heterosexual
Ruth	MW	Administrator	White	41	Lesbian
Sharon	SW	Faculty	White	49	Nonsexual
Susan	SE	Faculty	White	42	Heterosexual

from the context in which I find myself, which is as a White woman, middle class, well educated, and all those sorts of things, and so I know that that plays into that. And so I also see myself as all those things together, though at some point some get highlighted more than others. (Karen)

The parts that define the women's identities in this group are seen as interconnected and inseparable. Each identity influences every other area and creates a new, unified whole.

I really don't feel any piece that's peripheral to the others, I mean it really feels, all those things about occupation and feminism and religion and relationships are all sort of one and the same ... it's more like taking paint, so that you have the red and the blue and you mix it and it gets purple and once it's purple you can't separate red and blue anymore. And so that's sort of how that feels, is that there is religion and there is work and there is feminism, but now that they're all poured together, it's a different color and I can't just separate out the other pieces. (Karen)

Conception of Feminism

Feminism is very clearly considered an identity for women in the group who see feminism as an underlying construct. They describe feminism as a construct that is connected to the multiple parts of their identity as well as an identity in itself. The most common sentiment was that feminism is "part of who I am" (Lynn). When asked whether they thought of feminism as an identity, they were unequivocally positive in their responses. One participant equated feminism with being a woman.

Absolutely! How could I not? I think it's every day. Every day. Except when I'm sleeping. I mean, I have a woman's body, a woman's mind. I want social justice for women and minorities. How could it not play a part in my life every day? I see everything as a woman. It's not something that I consciously cultivate. It's something that is so deeply inside of me. And so I don't see it as an ideology, I think of it as part of myself.... That cannot be separated from anything. (Julie)

Another participant finds it unimaginable to separate her feminism from who she is and still maintain her identity.

Without it I wouldn't be who I am. So, it's a—I can't do a percentage because then I would have to measure out some other pieces. I mean, if I say 90%—I mean, I think it's fully a piece of who I am. I mean, other parts of my identity, for

example, would be my spiritual sense of myself, my internal sense but that's also another 100%. So, I just see this as one of the threads that weave in the fabric of my whole being. If you pull that thread out, I think I'd completely unravel. (Betsy)

A third member of this category described feminism as something she does not have to think about all the time because it is so deeply ingrained in who she is.

I think underneath, I think it's definitely an underpinning for just about everything else. I wonder if I could have persevered in this male field ... without having that idea of feminism as the underpinning of my whole personality, I suppose. I think that's a strength.... I've always considered being an artist to be huge part of my identity, but I do think the self definition that I have as a feminist is really underneath everything. It's like the net, probably, that holds everything. So I'm not sure I think about my ideas of feminism very consciously every day. I don't know if I do. But I do think maybe I'm to a point where I don't have to, because it just is part of my actions, and it's a part of who I am and what I do. (Lucinda)

Even though feminism is present in all aspects of identity, it can sometimes vary in its salience. Andy talked about how her feminism is more a part of her life in some areas than in others.

In some ways identities are things that you develop and you put on and you create and they're interchangeable. I think I'm a feminist in every single aspect of my life, like we are talking about. Even though I'm not as much a feminist in my personal life as I'd like to be, I certainly am.... So for me it's in so many parts of my life that it's more than an identity. I mean it's just like I have curly, brown hair. So it's probably more than that....It's really just part of who I am, it is who I am. It's central, it's one of those central characteristics. I can probably dye hair and I can straighten my hair, but I'm not ever going to not be a feminist. (Andy)

Andy's sentiment is echoed by others in the group who talk about feminism varying in salience. This is particularly true of political identity. For example, Sharon noted that "feminism for me is absolutely a political stance. But it's also, I mean really every aspect of my spirituality, my relationships, my scholarship, my creativity, and my politics are all informed by feminism."

The issue of salience arises in other identity areas as well. Lucinda said, “I would say that’s where my feminism is more present in my identity, is as a lesbian and not so much as a professional.” It is important to note, however, that feminism is described as always present for women in this group. A reduction in salience of feminism in a particular identity area is not the same as absence of feminism in that area, as it may be for the group of women who see feminism as a contextual identity. For those who see feminism as an underlying construct, their feminism is present in all parts of their identity. Renee expressed this eloquently:

I don't see how [feminism] could be part of your identity and not [connected to everything]. I mean, if it's part of your core of who you are, all those things impact who you are and what you're doing and whether you're cognizant it or not just like the education or the religion or the spirituality or whatever the case may be.... And I don't know how you can ever really separate out one part of who you are.... It can be done but I don't do it. I mean, it's really too much effort.... It's part of who we are. It makes up who we are. When we get up in the morning or we go to bed at night and when nobody is looking.

Resolving Conflict between Feminism and Other Identity Areas

For women whose feminism is an underlying construct in their identities, the conflicts between feminism and other areas such as religion, culture, and relationships with family and friends are resolved through integration. For the most part, the women in this group recognize the contradictory structures and find ways to maintain their feminism within those structures. As Julie, who is Buddhist, put it, it’s a “healthy contradiction.” Andy considers her identity as a Southern woman, which is partially expressed in how she dresses, to be conflicting with her feminist professional identity.

I think that for me the harder issues in becoming a professional was I'm from the South, and there's a particular kind of Southern female identity that gets constructed. And then a professional identity sometimes seems really in contrast or opposition to that. And the hardest thing for me in graduate school was to start to develop a professional identity that was different than this very feminized identity in the South. And it's something I think I've kind of reconciled, but I still get kidded occasionally about the fact that I wear high heels and I wear makeup and so sometimes this will give me a hard time. Other people think I've done a great job of integrating those and others think I, they don't like the choices I've made. But I get feedback, and I have ever

since graduate school, on how those identities have been blended.... So then there's all these issues of the pressure to be a particular way and then your own personal preference. And then there are also counter pressures from the feminist community and from various other communities who say that you should resist some of these other pressures. And how am I going to reconcile all these different pieces to create an identity that I'm happy with?... Over time I just sort of stopped caring as much about the messages I got back.

This notion of finding areas of comfort and accepting areas that they cannot change is a prevalent theme in this group, particularly as it relates to religious organizations. For the majority of the group members, although not all, the primary response to religious conflict is by “accepting the essence of the faith and the essence of the spirituality that has nothing to do with the organized religions that were made by man” (Gloria). Several women continue to be active in the church while still maintaining a skepticism about some of its structures.

Okay, in my church, in the Baptist church, you can't be homosexual, you can't be real feminist.... I don't struggle with that, because intellectually I know how I feel about it. But, I'm not sitting there going, “Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” You know, I'm like, “Well, I don't go for that.” But I'm really into Jesus, so it's not about what the minister says and all that. (Dorothy)

I'm Mormon, so that is very significant.... Some people ask, some members of the church, especially when I moved here, they ask, “How can you be a feminist and then also be a member of the church?” ... And I said, “Well, I think God was a feminist.” So anytime that you see anything in the church—when I examine the church and I have things that are questionable and I'll bring up, I will address. I'll go to Salt Lake and say, “Hey this doesn't look right.” It's men interpretation, it's not biblical—I mean, the bible's pretty stratified, too. It's man-created, man-interpreted, it's not... The true core of it is quite different. (Susan)

Karen is an ordained minister who is also a lesbian feminist. She understands how others interpret those identities as conflicting, but she has integrated them into a consistent identity for herself as being primarily concerned for issues of social justice.

Probably one of the odd things is that I am also an ordained minister and so I perceive myself as a person of faith, but it doesn't look like what most people out there expect faith to look like and so I try to bring all those things together and to be very consistent so that who I am in the pulpit when I preach is very much who I am in my classroom, it's who I am when I am hanging out with my friends at a bar. So I try to create some consistency there, though I think we all have those difficult moments where one thing will come out more in one place than in another. ...Part of that is the ways I've processed the theology, and I guess that's what seminary gave me, is it gave me those tools so that I could bring all of those things together.... I preached a sermon back in my church a couple months ago ... entitled "I believe," but basically the whole sermon is about the fact that I don't. I don't believe any of it and yet I choose to live my life in response to this. It's sort of that paradox of intellectually it makes no sense to me, but it fits right to live as a justice-seeking person.

Conflict was also apparent in participants' comments about reconciling differences with relationships. Many of the women mentioned family members or friends whose beliefs were in opposition to feminism. Some of these conflicts are tied to ethnic identities related to cultural traditions. The majority of the group members talked about making choices about when to confront those differences with family and friends and when to let them go. Audrey downplays her feminism to avoid conflict in her family.

So you asked me how does my feminism play out in my birth family and the answer is most of the times it's right there. Sometimes if things get too hot, my feminist identity is something I can lay aside for the purpose of keeping the family interactions harmonious. Because that harmony is so important. That is the central community that I need to workout my relationship with as I'm on this earth, and I won't bring stuff to that that is so foreign and so threatening that it would not allow discourse to continue.... Well, then feminism is more of an identity that I can play down or play up. And if there are at that moment conflicts between acting on my identity as the second-to-last sister in this set of four versus the feminist, then I can play up my second-to-last sister in the set of four. (Audrey)

Ruth chooses to let comments from her uncle go by unchallenged in order to avoid being labeled an "angry feminist."

Mostly I just keep it under wraps and decide not to take on my uncle who used to be a marine when I hear him say something really idiotic. But my sister, on the other hand, who is not necessarily an activist, will tell him he's full of crap. So I prefer to let her take that role, because I get labeled as the angry feminist or whatever. So it's easier in those situations if somebody else is willing to do it, I just let them do it. (Ruth)

For Isabella, celebrating the fun parts of her cultural identity and letting the non-feminist aspects recede is a way to avoid making herself miserable.

Patriarchy is part of the dominant society and is part of this society and even aspects of popular culture that are so sexist, I can still enjoy them in very conscious contradictory way, sort of a fun way to deal with it. Who I am is so intrinsic, my cultural identity is so much a part of how I am that it doesn't necessarily mean that 100% of the time it just immersed in the culture, you know there's music that's not Mexican that I like and foods and all that stuff, but what it boils down to is that sort of part of who I am.... That's part of the struggle right there in trying to change the parts of a culture that are so patriarchal without changing the culture. (Isabella)

Feminism does not go away for these women—they do not take off the identity—but they make choices about when to confront contradictions and when to downplay their feminism for the purpose of keeping peace within the family or within themselves. As Audrey explained, “It does not go away. What it does, I can make it silent. It’s an easy thing, too, because feminism has to do with voicing the unvoicable, the nonspeakable.” The key element is as Isabella stated, that it is done in a “very conscious contradictory way.” These women are making very deliberate decisions about how they will express their feminism, taking into account their interpretations of others’ reactions. They have found a way to deal with the contradictions between their feminism and their relationships by prioritizing the relationship and downplaying the feminism.

Difference as Identity

The third research question asked how race/ethnicity and sexual orientation interact with feminist identity. Feminism joins race and sexual orientation as identity areas in which there is an awareness of being different from the majority or the norm. This cuts across the categories of feminism described above. There did not seem to be any consistent differences by category in the relationship of feminism to race/ethnicity or sexual orientation identities.

Many of the women in this study described the sense of being seen as “other” or different, based on their identity as a feminist, a woman of color, or a lesbian or bisexual woman or the combination of these. They also identified ways that their feminist, racial, and sexual orientation identities were interrelated. Finally, members of majority categories—heterosexual and White women—seemed alert to the privilege these positions carry. This is not something women less immersed in feminism would necessarily be aware of.

Other

The experience of “otherness” involves the perception of not fitting in with the majority or being outside of the expected social norm. It is a concept central to much feminist theoretical construction. Being a feminist is a characteristic shared by all the women in this study that sets them apart from the majority culture. The participants spoke of ways their feminism helps them understand their differences while also working to change the structures that make them seen as different. One participant in the underlying construct group described the way feminism defines her as other, which she does not prefer.

So it seems that I am not exactly like everybody else. I am of a second category or something.... I would say that feminism somehow defines me more of being perceived as “the other.” And now I don’t want to be the other. I want to be “the one.” You know? And in that sense I think we should all consider to be the one, in gender, in race, in ethnicity, anything you want. We should be all the one and not the other. Because the other is always derogatory and arrogancy. It’s derogatory towards the other “other,” and it is a very arrogant way of appropriation of anything that’s not you. (Gloria)

A participant in the process to make meaning group described the awareness that feminism brought to her understanding of herself as an athlete.

As a female athlete, you were always part of the out group, whether it was resources or the way the world defines you as less than, and I learned to understand that very quickly at an early age what it meant to be different. (Madeline)

Having a collective identity as a feminist allows some women to accept an identity as other more easily, as illustrated by a member of the process to make meaning group.

And I really have had a hard time, I feel like I’m a, I call myself kind of a fencer, in the middle. I really was not old enough to engage in the second women’s movement of the 70s, but those foremothers or activists that did have reminded me that I haven’t participated, I have a lot to pay

or pay my dues.... One of the students I worked with has done this whole thought of third wave feminism and what that really encompasses. And it really, I feel like I finally have a place to identify with a collective group of feminists, ones that are allowed to self identify in many different ways, but probably the common thread is they take action towards change even when it involves a group they don't belong to. And I think that's where I fit. So I've been a lot time like I don't really fit there and looking over my shoulder. (Madeline)

Intersections of Feminism with Race and Sexual Orientation

Among those interviewed, women of color predominantly see their race as central to their identity, in some ways because that visible identity is how they are defined by others. For feminist women of color, however, their racial identity and their feminist identity are both parallel and intersecting—each develops in a similar manner and each influences the other.

I think certainly what it means for me to be Asian American is inseparable from what it means to me to be an Asian American woman. My experience is not going to be the same as an Asian American man's and again obviously there is no singular even male or female experience either, but I think absolutely how I experience race and ethnicity has everything to do with my gender and how very specifically Asian American women are seen in this culture and in society. (Irene)

I'm a feminist all right, but I'm certainly a Black feminist, by any standards.... African-American women are fighting so much for in terms of just racial equity and all that, but as a Black feminist, I'm talking about gender. That's a little different. But I've got both of them to deal with.... Well, it's everything. Because that's who I am. And the interesting thing about being Black is, even if you don't want to be defined by it, everybody else defines you by it.... I can't separate that. I cannot separate being a Black woman. It just cannot be separated. They're, they're one thing, that's who I am. There's no way that can be undone. (Dorothy)

Lesbian women also talked about the intersections of their feminist identity with their lesbian identity. For women who are not in the heterosexual majority, their sexual orientation can have both personal and political implications. Being a lesbian and being a feminist are mutually supportive identities.

Since I came out as a lesbian in the same time as I was discovering feminist principles, it's impossible for me to separate the two. Some people can—they have a lesbian identity independent of a feminist consciousness—that has to do with their experiences while they were forming, if you will. Mine is completely tied together. I truly believe that in the way that feminism often plays out in lesbian lives and in heterosexual women's lives, there is a privilege or an advantage if you will that lesbians have that, if they're building lesbian community, they're already building this woman-centered community and feminist ideals can be easily incorporated. (Audrey)

I definitely very much feel like a feminist and kind of woman-identified. And also a lesbian. So for me, again, those things are inseparable because to see the world not through heterosexual eyes, to see the institution of the family and marriage and people's social relations in a way that they don't appear natural, the way that a lot of people do see them, I think is amazing to have that perspective. And so it's hard to say, well, what part of that is my feminist self, what part of that is my queer self, I'm not sure. (Lisa)

Privilege

A striking finding in the interviews was that White feminists and heterosexual feminists, regardless of category, made comments that clearly indicated they were aware of the privilege that those identities afford them. Many women of majority status are able to take their race or sexual orientation for granted and generally do not have to think about them as identities. For these feminists, there is an awareness that they have power and access in ways that women of color or lesbians/bisexuals do not. Feminism is credited with opening their eyes as well as giving them the conviction to change oppressive structures.

I'm heterosexual. I think it's probably one of those quote-unquote privileges that you kind of take for granted. You know, no one's questioning who you are, what you do 'cause there's a picture of a man and the kid on my desk or whatever the case may be.... I think that's probably one of those areas in which I haven't given a lot of thought to how it impacts my identity, etc. But, being cognizant of the fact that for people who aren't heterosexual or at least openly so, it's an area in which they deal with a great deal of oppression. (Renee)

I think feminism was critical in teaching a lot of the basic lessons, if you're talking about race that everybody's racist, and understanding the notion of internalized racism—what that's about. Understanding how one learns racism and that one can unlearn it. Yeah, I feel like feminism has—at least for myself as a White woman—opened up the key to the door. Opened up the lock, whatever. I was able to go through the door to understand ... how much racism diminishes me as a person, in terms of cutting me off from lots of people that it would be nice not to be cut off from. (Liz)

Well, it's obviously one of the most important things, but I don't have to think about it because I'm White. So I try to make a point of remembering that I'm White and the role that that plays and how as a White person I have certain power or access or all those things that were granted just by being White. (Ruth)

Summary

Interviews with 40 self-identified feminist women faculty and administrators diverse in age, race, sexual orientation, and geographic location yielded information on how they conceptualize their identities, how feminism relates to their identities, and the interaction of feminism with race/ethnicity and sexual orientation.

How do adult self-identified feminist women conceptualize identity for themselves?

For all of the women in this study, identity consists of multiple parts. These parts include the identity areas established in previous research—feminism, occupation, relationships, religion, politics, race, and sexual orientation—and also areas such as class, age, body size, and avocational interests. All of these identity areas are not present for every woman, but each has multiple areas by which she constructs her sense of self. To understand how an individual constructs her identity, it is important to consider the areas that are important to her; therefore, identity cannot be defined by any one element. The multiple components of identity interact in one of two ways: (a) as a whole with multiple parts, where the identity areas are overlapping or interconnected; or (b) as a collection of multiple parts, where some identity areas are connected and some are separate.

How does feminism fit into that conceptualization?

Women in this study perceived feminism as part of their identity in four categories I identified: (a) as a set of values; (b) as a process to make meaning; (c) as a contextual identity; and (d) as an underlying construct.

Feminism as a set of values guides the women in that group primarily in terms of ethical or congruent behaviors. In the group that refers to feminism as a process to make meaning, feminism is viewed as shaping their world view, their behavior, and their decision making. Feminism is, for most of these women, connected with all of their multiple identities, but is most important in making meaning about their experiences.

For women who view feminism as a contextual identity, feminism is seen as a part of who they are, but not necessarily a part of each aspect of their identities. Some talk about only one or two parts that feminism is not tied to, while others see feminism as a very separate part that they bring in at some times and downplay at others. For those who see feminism as an underlying construct, their feminism is present in all parts of their identity. They describe it as a construct that is connected to the multiple parts of their identity as well as an identity in itself.

In some cases, feminism conflicts with other identity areas, particularly religion and relationships. The way that feminists approach resolving these conflicts varies by the category of feminism. Women who view feminism as an underlying construct and a contextual identity are most likely to find ways to integrate areas of conflicting identity within a unified whole. Women whose view of feminism is as a process to make meaning tend to separate themselves from religious organizations or relationships that conflict with their feminism. Those women who see feminism as a set of values do not attempt either to integrate or separate areas of conflict, rather they disregard the conflicts and maintain the nonfeminist activities.

How do race/ethnicity and sexual orientation interact with feminist identity?

Like race and sexual orientation, feminism is an area where the women in this study see themselves as different from the societal majority or norm. This cuts across the categories of feminism described above. Many of the women in this study described the sense of being seen as “other” or different, based on their identity as a feminist, a woman of color, or a lesbian or bisexual woman or the combination of these. They also identified ways that their feminist, racial, and sexual orientation identities were interrelated. Finally, members of majority categories—heterosexual and White women—seemed alert to the privilege these positions carry, probably because of their exposure to feminism.