

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways that feminism is related to identity. Several broad conceptual questions were at the base of the inquiry: What does it mean to say “I am a feminist”? Is feminism an identity? If so, how is feminism as an identity different from feminism as an ideology? What is identity? Is feminism different for women of different races or sexual orientations? By interviewing a diverse sample of self-identified feminist women, I sought to begin answering these questions and come to a better understanding of the place of feminism in identity.

I interviewed 40 women in five geographic regions across the United States: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest. The participants were faculty, administrators, classified staff, and graduate students affiliated with a university in the region. The women’s center director at each university helped me identify participants by providing a list of self-identified feminists for me to contact, including information on age, race, and sexual orientation when possible so that I could ensure diversity in my sample. Over the course of 10 months I traveled to each location and spent a week completing interviews, each lasting from 45 to 75 minutes.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, using a standard protocol (see Appendix B) as a guide. Questions in the interviews asked about the importance of feminism, occupation, relationships, religion, politics, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation in the women’s identities. I also asked about the connection of feminism to each of the other identity areas. The interview protocol was altered twice during the course of the study, first to add a statement inviting participants to define their own areas of identity and then to add a question about how the participants conceive of their identity as a whole. Refer to Chapter Three for a complete discussion of these changes. Interviews were tape-recorded and the tapes were transcribed for data analysis.

Three research questions guided the data analysis.

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?

In this chapter I will discuss the research findings presented in Chapter Four as they have helped me understand possible answers to these questions. This discussion is presented in three sections, relating to the three research questions: Identity, Feminism in Identity, and Interactions of Feminism with Race/Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation.

Identity

Identity is a fuzzy concept. People talk about their identity in many ways—as their core or center, as the sum of their parts, as the traits they possess, as their affiliations with particular groups. There was no common, accepted definition of identity among the participants in this study, although there were groups of definitions: identity as a whole with multiple parts and identity as a collection of multiple parts. Perhaps the reluctance to have a single definition of identity is related to the finding that identity is a phenomenon of multiples.

A clear finding among all the participants is that individuals have multiple identities. Women are composed of multiple roles, values, beliefs, and affiliations. Each of the elements by which identity is defined varies in its importance within an individual. For some of the women in this study, their role as mother was the most important way they defined themselves. For others their position as a university administrator was their central identity, and for others their identity as a lesbian held a primary position in their sense of self.

The traditional categories by which identity has been defined—occupation, relationships, religion, and politics—exist in varying degrees among this study's participants. These established identity areas, with the addition of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, are a good baseline from which to begin to assess identity, but they are not sufficient. Not all areas are important to every person in how she defines herself, and individuals may have other categories in their personal definitions. For example, several women said that their age was a factor in how they thought of themselves. Others indicated that their status as a “woman of size” (Liza) affected both their self-definition and their perception of how others define them.

No matter what the identity element is, however, it cannot be viewed in isolation from all the other ways that a woman defines herself. To understand a woman's identity, you must understand all of her multiple aspects. There is no single word that encapsulates any person's identity—not professor, not mother, not Protestant, not Democrat, not even feminist. By knowing one thing about a person, you do not know the whole person. You must know about all the multiple ways she defines herself to understand her identity.

Analysis of the interviews in this study indicates that the participants see themselves as having multiple elements that combine to form identity in one of two ways: as a whole with multiple parts and as a collection of multiple parts. The first is an integrated identity while the second is a contextual identity. By integrated I mean that the multiple parts interact with and complement each other to form a unified whole. Some of the participants described that whole as a “center” or “core” identity. Each of the elements that makes up who they are connects with the other elements to lesser or greater degrees. For example, a woman's religious identity may be more connected to her identity in her relationships and less connected to her occupational identity, but all are interrelated in her overall sense of who she is.

In a contextual identity, the multiple parts are sometimes connected and sometimes separate. The variation often depends on the context or situation in which a woman finds herself. The context might vary by setting or by whom she is with. Again, the identity elements may connect to lesser or greater degrees with other elements, but there will also be some identity elements to which there are no connections. Using the example above, in a contextual identity the woman's religious identity may be connected to her identity in her relationships, but completely separate from how she sees herself or how she operates in her occupation.

For all of the women in this study, their conceptualization of their identities is as multiple elements. Because I interviewed only women who are self-declared feminists, feminism was a factor in their self-definitions, but its relation to their identities differed. The next section discusses how feminism relates to identity for women who call themselves feminists.

Feminism in Identity

What is feminism? For the women in this study, feminism means different things. Most would agree that the basis of feminism is a belief in gender equality and an awareness that women have been disenfranchised. Some of the women consider feminism to be primarily concerned with personal empowerment for women, others talk about feminism as a political movement of structural change, and others frame feminism as connected to a broader issue of social justice concerned with ending oppression for all people. For some women activism is a necessary element in feminism, for others it is not. Although feminism had different meanings for the interview participants, its role in their identities was independent of the definitions. I could detect no link between how the participants define feminism and their view of feminism in their identities.

Regardless of how the participants define feminism, the claiming of the label "feminist" indicates a willingness to identify at some level with feminism. For this study, the important factor is not that the individual subscribes to a commonly held definition of feminism, but rather that she has defined what it means to her and how it is integrated into her own sense of herself as a person. By calling herself a feminist, a label that holds negative connotations to many people, she is defining herself.

A critical question is to what degree feminism is an identity versus an ideology. Is feminism "who I am" or is feminism "what I believe"? A feminist ideology can be framed as a feminist consciousness or a level of awareness of, belief in, and adherence to feminist principles. Having a feminist consciousness is a necessary precursor to a feminist identity, but it is not the same as a feminist identity. It is my hypothesis that whether feminism becomes a part of identity depends on the level to which it is interconnected with other identity elements.

From the interviews in this study, I identified four categories of feminism: (a) a set of values, (b) a process to make meaning, (c) a contextual identity, and (d) an underlying construct. The connection between feminism and identity varied by category.

A Set of Values

For the first group, feminism as a set of values, feminism appears to be more of an ideology than an identity. The women in this group talk about feminism as what they hold important or what they believe. The apparent contradiction for all of these women between their feminist beliefs and non-feminist activities points to feminism as not being an integrated part of their identities. Claiming a feminist label indicates some level of feminist identity, but the conflicts they describe and their strategy of disregarding them leads to the conclusion that feminism is less of an identity for these women.

A Process to Make Meaning

The participants who talk about feminism as a process to make meaning span the following two identity groups; there are some individuals in this group who view feminism as an underlying construct and some who view feminism as a contextual identity. The element of a cognitive process by which they interpret their experiences based on their feminist identity is a new level of understanding. Perhaps the strategy of separating from activities or identities that conflict with their feminism is a way to resolve the cognitive dissonance between their feminism and some traditional social structures such as religion or family.

A Contextual Identity

Women for whom feminism is a contextual identity have less of a sense of an interconnected identity than those for whom feminism is an underlying construct. Their multiple identities are a collection of identities rather than a whole. Some of the identities, including feminism, are interconnected and some are separate. Feminism in this case is situational—active in some identities and not in others. The approach to conflicting identities is important in this groups as well. Resolving conflicts between feminism and other areas that feminism is connected to occurs by integration. For those identity areas to which feminism is not linked, the conflict is evaluated contextually and a decision is made about whether or not to confront differences.

An Underlying Construct

For those women in the category of feminism as an underlying construct, feminism is an integral part of their identity. It is connected to all of who they are. As Renee said, “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.” Feminism is one of the multiple elements of their identity and it is connected to all other elements of their sense of self. This is also evidenced by their approach to conflict between their feminism and other identity elements. For women in this group, conflict is resolved through integration: finding ways to maintain their feminism within competing structures.

I view each of these categories as different expressions of identity. I am reluctant to assign a label of “identity” or “not identity” to any of the categories. To do so falsely dichotomizes identity as an either/or proposition. The categories do not represent whether

feminism is or is not identity, but rather the interweaving of feminism with how an individual constructs her own identity. Feminism is more or less connected with overall identity depending on category. To separate feminism as the defining element of identity disregards the notion that the women in this study have multiple identities, of which feminism is one part. For the women for whom feminism is an underlying construct, then, feminism is interconnected with all aspects of her identity, but does not alone define her. Similarly, for the women for whom feminism is a set of values, feminism is less connected with and even conflicts with other identity elements, but it is still one element of her self-definition. No identity element can be isolated as defining identity; all elements have greater or lesser roles in identity. It is the unique combination of elements and the way that the individual woman sees herself that creates her identity.

The categories are not hierarchical, nor do they represent a stage model. My view of the participants is a snapshot of their identity rather than a view over time. My question asked how the participants saw themselves at the moment that I interviewed them. I therefore have no data on which to base suppositions of a developmental process. The categories represent a range of interconnection of feminism with other elements of identity.

Interactions of Feminism with Race/Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation

The final research question asks how feminism relates to race and sexual orientation. The interactions of feminism with race/ethnicity and sexual orientation identities did not vary by category of feminism. Just as with the other identity areas, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation are elements of identity that have varying salience in how a woman sees herself as a whole person.

With the exception of the feminism as a set of values group who were all white and heterosexual women, membership in the other categories included diverse races and sexual orientations. It is hard to interpret the exception because of the small number of group members. However, it may be that women who face multiple oppressions are more likely to integrate those minority group memberships into their sense of identity.

Across all groups, three themes emerged related to the interactions of feminist, racial, and sexual orientation identities: the experience of being seen as “other” or different, the intersections of these identities, and the role of privilege for majority women.

Other

Feminism, race, and sexual orientation as identity areas have a fundamental difference from the other identity areas of occupation, relationships, religion, and politics where there is no majority or minority status. Gender, race, and sexual orientation are social

constructions that have an element of dominance, power, and access. A consciousness or awareness of sexism, racism, and heterosexism may lead to a perception of self as “other” or different based on that minority status.

A majority of women in this sample identified feminism as a way they perceived themselves and were perceived by others as being different. Many of the participants relayed stories of having different ideas or opinions about the role of women before they had the language of feminism to name those ideas. For these women, feminism gave them a way to make sense of their experiences and a community of feminists to allay their feelings of difference.

Similarly, women of color and lesbian/bisexual women also expressed an awareness of their minority status in American society. For the most part, these women considered their racial or sexual orientation identity to be a primary way they identified themselves. Aligning themselves with this identity of “other” may also have been a strategy to find community.

Intersections of Identities

My interviews led me to the conclusion that racial identity or sexual orientation identity and feminist identity are mutually influencing. Since my sample included only women of color who identified as heterosexual, I cannot speculate on the relationship among all three identities, but only feminism as it relates to both race and sexual orientation.

Feminism does not have an impact on racial identity or sexual orientation identity unidirectionally. Each identity influences the other. Because feminism generally develops later in life, during the college or post-college years, race and sexual orientation identities usually develop first. The way that women of color or lesbian/bisexual women experience feminism may be influenced by that primary identity. On the other hand, feminism might change how a woman looks at her race or her sexual orientation. Several women of color, for example, described their racial and feminist identities as being inseparable—each influences and informs the other. In the same way, most of the lesbian women in this study described their lesbian and feminist identities as developing simultaneously. The way that they defined themselves as lesbians was inextricably linked to their self-definition as feminists.

This returns to the idea that identity can only be understood by understanding the whole person and not each element separately. The women in this study expressed themselves as having multiple identities; to separate any of those identities would be false, because it would fail to take into account the context in which they live and the connection of the multiple parts of themselves.

Privilege

The influence of feminism on racial or sexual orientation identity is particularly true for majority women, whose awareness of having a white or heterosexual identity seemed to develop as a result of their feminism. Because of the privilege that being a member of a majority group affords, white women and heterosexual women often do not consider themselves to have a race or a sexual orientation. They are able to negotiate the environment free from barriers in those areas and therefore are free not to think about them. However, the feminist women in this study all expressed an awareness of the way that they hold privilege as white or heterosexual women. Being aware of oppression based on gender as a feminist may make them more likely to recognize the ways that others are oppressed. The majority participants' responses ranged from acknowledging that they do not have to think about their race or sexual orientation to specifying ways that they have privilege and actively working against that.

Summary

Identity is not a singular construct. The adult women in this study defined their identities as being composed of multiple parts that varied in their level of connection to each other. Some women viewed their identities as an integrated whole with multiple elements while others viewed their identities as being a composite of multiple parts, each of which interacts differently with the others. It is clear that identity cannot be defined by isolating any one element of a person's self-definition; all are necessary to make the whole.

For women who call themselves feminists, feminism can be one of the elements by which they define their identity. The incorporation of feminism in identity varies depending on the degree to which feminism is connected with other identity elements. In some cases there is a non-integration or even contradiction of feminism with other identity elements; in others, feminism is interconnected with every element of identity. In addition, feminism can inform a cognitive process by which meaning is made about experiences.

Feminism interacts with other identities of difference. For women of color and white women and for lesbian/bisexual women and heterosexuals, feminism influences and is influenced by racial and sexual orientation identities. The experience of being "other" as a feminist informs identity both as a member of a racial or sexual minority and as a majority member. Feminist women of color and feminist lesbians see those identities as interconnected and inseparable. White feminists and heterosexual feminists recognize the privilege that their majority status holds.

The next chapter discusses how these findings fit with previous literature on identity and feminist identity.