CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between feminism and identity in adult self-identified feminist women. In this chapter I describe the participant recruitment and selection, the interview procedure, and data analysis methods. I also discuss the issues of authenticity, trustworthiness, and generalizability.

Participants

I drew participants for this study from women faculty and administrators who are self-identified feminists or womanists. I set a goal of 40 participants, eight from each of five universities in different geographic regions. Institutions considered for selection were those with women's centers and women's studies programs. Universities were selected because I thought they would be more likely than other institutions to have both a women's center and a women's studies program with several faculty members. The women's center director served a gatekeeping function to assist me in gaining access to the community (Manning, 1992). The women's center director is likely to have ties to feminists across the campus community and therefore was instrumental in identifying participants. Having both a women's center and a women's studies program increased the likelihood that there would be a feminist community at the university.

Self-identification as a feminist or womanist was a crucial component for participants, since this study examined how this identification interacts with other aspects of identity. In an exploratory focus group and interview, I found that women who had not claimed a feminist identity were not able to discuss their personal experiences with feminism.

Men are not included in this study because men who call themselves feminists are likely to have very different experiences from women feminists (Funk, 1997). There are men who believe that they cannot truly be feminists because they do not experience oppression based on their gender (Funk, 1997; Kimmel, 1997). While I am quite interested in the experiences of feminist or pro-feminist men and how they differ from women's experiences, that is beyond the scope of the current study and will be fodder for future research.

Faculty and administrators are more likely than traditional-aged students to have identified themselves as feminists for a longer period of time and therefore are likely to be more self-reflexive about their experiences in feminism. Theorists such as Erikson (1959/1980) and Chickering (1969) indicate that establishing identity is a developmental task of late adolescence. If feminism is indeed a facet of identity, older women are more apt to have passed through that developmental stage and will be better able to talk about that process than younger women.

It is crucial to have diversity among participants in background in order to elicit diverse viewpoints. In recruiting participants, I sought diversity in race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, as well as academic and activist feminist orientations. Academic feminists are those who study and research issues of women's oppression; activist feminists are those who work for social change through pragmatic action. These are not mutually exclusive categories; however, they do illustrate different orientations toward feminism.

Geographic diversity is another important aspect. Attitudes toward feminist issues differ regionally across America (Sapiro, 1990). For example, New England and Pacific states are more likely to support liberal views than other regions, while the South is more likely to support conservative views. For this reason, I identified five regions from which to recruit participants: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest, realizing that the participants in each region did not necessarily grow up in that location. While I did not seek to explore differences in attitudes by region, my sampling method was designed to enhance the diversity of my participants. By selecting participants from a geographic range, I sought to minimize the effect of regional differences on the findings. I did not analyze the data by these differences, however, since this was not one of the research questions.

Selection

In each of the five geographic regions, I identified a university that met the sampling criteria: having a women's studies program and a women's center. For financial considerations, I also chose institutions that were within commuting distance from friends with whom I could stay for the week of the interviews. Four of the institutions were large public universities; in the Southeast region, my interviews were at a medium-sized public university and a large private university within 30 miles of each other. The director of the women's center at the public institution had an affiliation with the private institution and recruited participants from both.

All correspondence with the women's center directors and participants occurred via electronic mail (e-mail). I used the world wide web to locate information about the women's center at each selected institution, including the name and e-mail address of the director. The Southwest university did not have a women's center, but had a diversity center with a staff member who was primarily charged with women's issues; she agreed to be my gatekeeper at that location.

I sent an introductory e-mail to each women's center director, explaining the purpose of my study and requesting her assistance in identifying participants. All of the directors responded positively and agreed to send me a list of 10 to 15 potential participants who were faculty or administrators and diverse in race, sexual orientation, and age. The directors' methods of generating a list varied: two directors, those in the Northeast and Southeast, put an announcement on a campus women's listserv and forwarded replies to me; two directors, those in the Midwest and Northwest, used their center's board of advisors as a source of participants; the director in the Southwest generated a list from among her closest colleagues.

Once I had received a list of possible participants, I contacted the director again to help identify women of color. In some cases, the director also provided information on the sexual orientation of the members of her list. I used the information supplied by the director to generate a list of women to contact, attempting to have equal numbers of White women and women of color, heterosexual and lesbian or bisexual women, faculty and administrators. I e-mailed each woman a request to participate, adding names until I had at least eight participants from each location. Some women declined to participate due to other obligations but offered me the names of other people to contact; this was especially helpful in identifying additional women of color.

I continued to use e-mail correspondence to make interview arrangements with each participant. I sent a copy of the informed consent release (see Appendix A) and received consent by e-mail reply. I presented a paper copy of the consent form to the participant at the interview for her signature and gave her a copy for her records.

Procedure

Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with participants. All interviews followed a standard protocol, included in Appendix B. Questions include those I created in addition to others adapted from the Josselson (1996) identity interview protocol and the Baker and Kline (1998) feminism interview protocol. I asked general questions about feminism, including how participants developed a feminist identity, how they define feminism, and whether they consider feminism an identity. Specific questions followed about the importance of different elements to their identity: (a) occupation; (b) relationships, including partner, family of origin, children, and friends; (c) religion/ spirituality; and (d) politics/activism. These categories are identified by Josselson (1996) as components of identity. In addition, I asked about the importance of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation to their identity. For each of the identity elements, I also asked them to describe the connection of feminism to that area. I concluded by asking the participants to identify any additional elements of their identity not included in my questions and how they relate to their feminism.

Two changes were made to the interview protocol over the course of the study. In reflecting on the interviews from the first two locations, I wondered if naming the six identity areas—occupation, relationships, religion, politics, race, and sexual orientation—might have limited the participants' thinking about other elements in their identities or led them to affirmative responses about the importance of those areas because they believed that was what I wanted to hear. For the last three locations, I added an explicit statement inviting participants to add their own identity areas or to disagree with any of the six established categories.

The second change occurred between the third and fourth interview locations. During preliminary data analysis, I discovered that it was important to know how each woman defines her identity as a whole before understanding how feminism fits into that identity.

For the final two locations, I added a question at the beginning of the interview asking how the participant sees herself as a person. This allowed her to reflect on her identity as a whole before I asked about her identity as a feminist. The revisions to the protocol are noted in Appendix B.

Interviews were 45 to 75 minutes long; most were held in the participant's office. In three locations—Northeast, Midwest, and Northwest—the women's center director allowed me to use space in the center to conduct interviews for those women who preferred that option. I met one participant in her home and interviewed another at an outdoor coffee shop. Participants were assured of confidentiality and were provided with an informed consent release (Appendix A). Participants also completed a demographic data questionnaire. This questionnaire is included in Appendix C. Summary information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	N	%
Race		
Asian/Asian American	2	5.0
Black/African American	5	12.0
Chicana/Latina	3	7.5
Multiracial	2	5.0
White	28	70.0
Sexual Orientation		
Bisexual	3	7.5
Heterosexual	26	65.0
Lesbian	9	22.5
Nonsexual	2	5.0
Position		
Administrator	18	45.0
Classified Staff	2	5.0
Faculty	18	45.0
Graduate Teaching Assistant	2	5.0
Age		
30-38	11	27.5
39-47	14	35.0
48-56	13	32.5
57-63	2	5.0

The majority of participants (N = 28; 70%) identified themselves as White or Caucasian. Two participants (5%) identified as Asian or Asian American, five (7.5%) identified as Black or African American, three identified as Chicana or Latina, and two participants

(5%) indicated their self-identification was multiracial. Most of the women in this study were heterosexual (N = 26; 65%). Nine participants (22.5%) identified as lesbian and three participants (7.5%) identified themselves as bisexual. Two of the participants (5%) chose "nonsexual" as their sexual orientation; both women had previously been in heterosexual relationships but did not consider sexuality an important part of their current identity.

The participants were equally divided among faculty and administrators with 18 (45%) in each category. Two participants (5%) were in classified staff positions at their universities and two participants (5%) were graduate teaching assistants. The mean age of the participants was 44 years, with a range of 30 to 63.

I traveled to each of the five campuses to conduct interviews in the 2000 calendar year as follows: Northeast, February; Southeast, March; Midwest, April; Northwest, September; Southwest, November. I spent one week at each location. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

To ensure confidentiality, names and other identifying information were changed during the transcription. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant and removed any references to the university where she worked and the city and state in which she lived.

Data Analysis

The goal of using a qualitative method is to understand human behavior and how people make meaning from their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process, using data to interpret a phenomenon or generate theory (Manning, 1999). Several methods were attempted in the analysis process. In all, I completed eight iterations of data analysis, described below.

One

The first approach to data analysis was to code each interview transcript based on how weak or strong feminism is to the participant's identity and then rate the participant on a scale of low to high feminism. I looked for representative statements depicting strong feminism and weak feminism to use as benchmarks.

This approach did not work because all of the participants said that feminism was part of their identity. I could not identify benchmark statements that represented meaningful differences because there was not enough range or variability in the responses. This is to be expected in self-identified feminists who have chosen to adopt a label that has many negative connotations in American society.

Two

Next I extracted quotes related to each of the six identity areas and the relation of feminism to each area, attempting to establish a series of scales marking the degree to which each area was important to the participant's identity and the level of importance of feminism to that area. Again I found a limited range of responses. None of the identity areas was ruled out as being universally unimportant to identity, nor was there a consistent link between feminism and any of the areas.

Three

I returned to open coding to generate hypotheses about the relationship of feminism to identity. From interviews in the first two locations (N = 16) I generated 28 hypotheses, such as the following:

1. Individual experiences with discrimination lead to feminist identity.

2. Situational variables influence when feminists confront non-feminist speech or behaviors.

3. Strategies used to reconcile feminist beliefs and social systems (particularly religion and family) show complexity of identity and how it is personalized.

4. Feminism takes different forms for different women; each finds a way to define it for herself in a way that is most meaningful to her.

5. Feminist identity is linked to social justice issues in a broad sense.

6. Feminism enables all parts of women's lives to be given attention.

7. Feminism arises from a sense of difference which is environmentally situated.

This was a more effective approach because it started to identify themes, but it generated statements that were not as relevant to how the participants conceptualize identity.

Four

I next turned to the participants' definitions of feminism to determine if that could be a way to group participants. In the interviews, I did not define feminism for the participants, rather I asked them to provide me with their own definition. By isolating responses to the question "What is feminism to you—how do you define it?" I generated

four themes: (a) a view of self in relation to men or to other women; (b) a political movement; (c) a social justice orientation that is connected to other areas of oppression; (d) a sense of personal empowerment. This analysis led to a revision of the first research question, which became "Is feminism, as defined by the participants for themselves, linked to their identity?"

Five

To answer this revised research question, I needed to be clearer about whether the participants considered feminism an identity for themselves. I examined the responses to the question "Is feminism an identity for you?" and discovered eight categories: (a) multiple identities, (b) underlying structure, (c) lens/view of the world, (d) interactive process, (e) social justice, (f) behavior, (g) developmental, and (h) other. Each category represented a way that the participants viewed feminism as identity.

Six

I compared the definitions of feminism from step four with the categories of feminist identity from step five to see if the view of feminist identity grouped by definition. This did not yield results from the definition groups, but did start to narrow and define the identity groups. It was not clear at this point the distinction between identity as a whole and feminism in that identity.

Seven

From studying the feminist identity groups, it became less and less certain to what extent the participants were talking about feminism and identity as separate constructs. The ways that the women in this study described their identity, particularly as it related to each of the six identity categories, varied. In constructing the research questions, I assumed that all the participants would have a common understanding or definition of identity. This seemed not to be true. To understand the connection between feminism and identity, I needed to return to more fundamental questions: "How do self-identified feminist women conceptualize identity for themselves?" and "How does feminism fit into that conceptualization?" These became my research questions guiding further analysis.

Eight

To understand what the participants meant when they talked about identity, I looked at all identity statements throughout the transcript and compiled an "identity summary" for each participant with everything she said about identity or feminism in identity. I went through each transcript and extracted sentences or paragraphs where the participant was speaking to the issue of identity broadly. I used the whole transcript for this analysis, not one particular question or area. The theoretical identity areas—occupation, politics, religion, relationships, race, and sexual orientation— generally disappeared in the analysis. Looking at just the answers to questions in these areas, regardless of the question, the participant's definition of identity emerged.

The strength of this method was looking at the context of the whole interview, not making a judgment based on the answer to one question. My judgment on identity category was based on multiple statements. Each participant was considered as a whole person, not as a series of unconnected parts.

I read through the identity summaries, creating new categories while reading. From this I drew themes of how the participants conceptualize identity and how feminism relates to those conceptualizations.

Authenticity

Concerns with the interview method include comfort and openness of the participants and the effects of interviewer bias. Using a standard interview protocol minimized interviewer bias, and I took care that my probe questions and my nonverbal responses were not biased, which could have led the participants into a response set based on the responses they believed I was looking for. I tried to develop rapport and explain the purpose of the research project fully to increase the participants' comfort and willingness to be open. As a White woman, I was aware that I might receive resistance from women of color to participating in interviews (Collins, 1996). Developing rapport and being fully open in explaining the purpose and use of the project were critical in gaining access to this group.

A fundamental principle of feminist research and qualitative research is to take data from participants at face value (Reinharz, 1992). This raises the question of the accuracy of the participants' recollections. Some contradiction between participants' replies to the interview questions occurred. When I noticed these, I used member checking during the interview to pursue replies that appeared contradictory, but I report the data here as the participants reported it to me, including the contradictions.

Research on memory and account-making indicates that interpretations of events, particularly stressful events, are influenced by current attitudes and perceptions (Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990). Psychologists hypothesize that "people have better memory for information that supports, confirms, or reinforces their evaluations of social, political, and personal issues than for information that undermines or challenges these attitudes" (Eagly, Chen, Chaiken, & Shaw-Barnes, 1999, p. 64). This study relies on memory to reconstruct events concerning feminism, which could have social, political, and personal implications for the participants. Probe questions focusing on the differences between the participants' current attitudes and their attitudes during their adoption of feminism were an important part of minimizing the effect of memory. This study was primarily concerned with the participants' current perceptions of their feminism, which minimized the effect of memory.

Trustworthiness and Generalizability

Trustworthiness and generalizability in qualitative data are related to reliability and validity in quantitative studies. At issue is how confident I can be that my results are accurate and that they could apply to other situations. Techniques that were used to increase confidence in the results included member-checking (Manning, 1999); using a standard, semi-structured format (Fontana & Frey, 1994); using consistent rules for coding and analyzing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); and carefully documenting my procedures at every step of data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, other experts confirmed my findings and contributed to the conclusions generated from this study.

In general, claims about generalizability of qualitative research are made with caution. Characteristics of this research related to generalizability include a large sample size (N = 40), diversity among the participants in age, race, and sexual orientation, and a systematic selection method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These characteristics increase the confidence in generalizing results to other feminist women in similar settings. However, as with all qualitative research, claims of generalizability must be made with caution, particularly in regard to non-adults, feminists in settings other than higher education, and those who do not label themselves as feminists.