

CollectiveIdentity.org: Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activist Groups

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(Abstract)

This study examines collective identity, a concept that is used in social movement theory to understand why people are motivated to participate in social movements and social movement groups. Collective identity is a social-psychological process that links the individual to the group through a series of group interactions that revolve around social movement activity. This is a qualitative study that examines collective identity in an online social movement group and an offline social movement group. Reports from the two groups are compared to see what variation exists between these two different groups. This research is one of the first examinations of collective identity outside of conventional face-to-face group settings. The research presented in this thesis demonstrates the difficulty a social movement group that exists online might have in generating a collective identity because of an absence of face-to-face interaction.

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I don't think we reflect as much as we should in our lives. At least, I don't think I reflect enough about my life and what has happened in critical moments. Usually one thinks of a critical moment as an all encompassing, one moment in time where something life changing has occurred that will enable a new, revised focus for the rest of the person's life. And often times, it goes by so quickly, we don't get a chance to reflect. At least it seems I don't. Well, this critical moment in time that I have been a part of was not a instant flash one day, but an ongoing process over the past two years. So, here is a brief reflection on what I think about often, but hardly ever verbalize to myself or to others. And now, I'll reflect...finally.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Collective Identity in an Online Setting?.....	1
Chapter 2: Social Movement Theory, Collective Identity, and Cyberculture: A Review of the Literature.....	6
Social Movement Theory: Then and Now.....	6
Collective Identity: Theoretically and Empirically.....	9
Collective Identity and Cyberculture.....	14
Chapter 3: Methods.....	18
Chapter 4: CollectiveIdentity.org Findings.....	23
Collective Identity within the NOW Village.....	24
Sexuality.....	28
Personal Gain.....	30
Opposition.....	32
Shared Definitions in the NOW Village.....	35
Boundary Markers in the NOW Village.....	36
Levels of Consciousness in the NOW Village.....	37
Negotiations within the NOW Village.....	38
Collective Identity in Womanspace.....	38
Friendship.....	39
Opposition.....	40
Shared Definitions in Womanspace.....	41
Boundary Markers in Womanspace.....	42
Levels of Consciousness in Womanspace.....	43
Negotiations in Womanspace.....	44
Summary.....	45
NOW Village versus Womanspace.....	45
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	49
Findings.....	49
Limitations.....	50
Directions For Future Research.....	51
Contributions.....	52
Works Cited.....	53
Appendix 1.....	56
Appendix 2.....	57
Curriculum Vitae.....	58

Chapter One

Collective Identity in an Online Setting?

In *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Alberto Melucci states that a social movement organization (SMO) can generate a collective identity, a group's complex way of distinguishing itself from other groups, through "new communication technologies" (Melucci 1996, 71). However, Melucci does not mention specific technologies, nor give any empirical evidence for this statement. Social movement participants and SMOs have historically used communication technologies to further the cause they are working for (e.g. telephones, television) (Morris 1984). Although these have been very valuable to SMOs and movement participants, only a recent technological advancement in the computer world has made it possible for a group of people to interact and form relationships at low costs, yet be physically absent from each other: the Internet.

This thesis addresses the question: What kind of variation in collective identity exists between two different groups: an SMO group in an online environment versus an SMO group in an offline, face-to-face environment? This research thus focuses on two variables: collective identity (and its components) and use of a new communication technology, the Internet. At the present time no research has directly explored collective identity in a social movement group that exists on the Internet. This research analyzes how collective identity is similar and dissimilar in two different environments.

This study analyzes the collective identity among a sample of participants of two feminist social movement groups. The online group that I studied is called the NOW Village and exists under the National Organization for Women's (NOW) webspace. The offline group that is used in comparison is a group called Womanspace, which is a

student group at Virginia Tech that focuses on issues of sexual assault and rape, peer education, and women's rights.

Collective identity is a concept used to help explain why people participate in a social movement. Collective identity can most easily be described as a link between the individual and a group that the individual participates in that is a result of sharing a common interest. In a social movement, people are working to change the status quo. A collective identity revolves around the activists' interest in the particular movement context. For example, a person involved in the contemporary women's movement theoretically will share feelings that concern issues of gender equality, women's rights, or reproductive rights with other members of the movement. This is why we define collective identity as a social-psychological process. It links the individual to the larger group context through personal feelings that are shared by many, thus aiding the movement progression (Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1996; Taylor and Rupp, 1999; Taylor and Whittier, 1992).

Scholars such as Alberto Melucci (1989, 1996), Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992), and William Gamson (1992) have identified four basic components that must be present for a collective identity to exist:

- Shared definitions
- Boundaries
- Levels of Consciousness
- Negotiations

Shared definitions are what the social movement group or organization defines what is right and wrong about society and the cause they are working for. For example, a shared definition that is a part of the women's movement is gender equality. One of the ways movement participants define this is by equal pay for equal work in the workforce.

Boundaries are social markers that distinguish the social movement organization or group from the rest of society. Since a social movement is typically challenging what is accepted in society, boundary markers are invisible, culturally defined prescriptions for what is considered normal or right in society. The women's movement, for example, fights a system of patriarchy. A boundary marker that would be ascribed by society under this system would be "a woman's place is in the home." If the larger society accepts this idea, then when a group is challenging this idea by saying for example "this is not true, a woman's place is anywhere in society," then this distinguishes the group from society. Because of these opposite viewpoints that arise, the group becomes a collective because of their shared feelings on what is right and wrong.

Consciousness refers to a level of awareness that the group has as a result of its shared experiences, shared values, and shared opportunities. While this usually occurs through physical acts of protest, consciousness is also realized through formal documents, speeches and writings that the group shares.

Lastly, a process of negotiations takes place within the group. This means that a group will discuss and work out in the private sphere how it is going to present itself in the public sphere.

These components are what scholars identify make up a groups' collective identity. With this concept, I examine evidence of a collective identity in an online

setting and interview people who are using the Internet for lengthy discussion about the movement they are a part of. I compare these results to interviews that I conducted with participants of the offline group, Womanspace.

This research contributes to the literature that has emerged over the past two decades that discusses collective identity, what collective identity is, and how social movement groups “generate” collective identity to help sustain a group, organization, or movement. The results give greater insight into this theoretical concept and offer new insights into how this concept applies in a setting different from that of traditional social movement research is done. This research will contribute to Internet and cyber-culture studies in exploring the possibilities of online group identity formation. While scholars have critically examined online identity formation in the individual, little research has been done on group identity formation in an online environment, and no research has been done on social movement group identity formation in an online environment.

This research empirically examines a new setting that social movement research and theory has yet to truly explore. By examining the Internet and cyber-culture as a new realm that social movements work in, this research will provide insight into a different location for social movement activity. It will provide insights into collective identity and whether or not it is only a physical presence phenomenon or can it be created outside of a face-to-face situation. The next chapter will situate this research within the current discussion about collective identity and cyber-culture studies. This literature review will briefly trace social movement theory over the past 30 years, give an in depth examination at the debates surrounding collective identity that have emerged over the past 10 years

and finally, discuss what current work is being done on groups forming an identity in cyberspace.

Chapter Two

Social Movement Theory, Collective Identity, and Cyberculture: A Review of the Literature

Throughout the last several decades, social movement theory has presented different ideas and concepts to explain how and why social movements occur and what motivates people to participate in a social movement. From this literature, the theoretical concept of collective identity has emerged and is an important area of research today. This chapter first traces the history of social movement theory and demonstrates how collective identity has emerged from this literature. Second, I will discuss the current theoretical and empirical research that is being done on collective identity. Last, I will examine cyber-culture literature and place the current discussions in that area into the current context of collective identity work. By doing this, I will demonstrate the importance of my research project and how it will seek to intertwine these current literatures.

Social Movement Theory: Then and Now

The in-depth study of social movements as a special topic in sociology is a relatively recent area of research. Prior to the 1970's, social movements were not analyzed as a separate entity, but part of a concept known as collective behavior (Buechler 2000: 3) that was a core concept of sociology. Three major theories dominated the early stages of social movement research: Symbolic-Interactionist, Structural-Functionalist, and Relative Deprivation.

Symbolic-Interactionism was developed by George Herbert Mead and further developed by Herbert Blumer in the collective behavior context. Symbolic-Interactionism argues that an individual symbolically defines his or her world and by doing so, selects a course of action according to these symbolic definitions (Buechler 2000: 21). Collective behavior is then explained as a group activity that is not defined by social rules, but a spontaneous, unregulated course of action.

Structural-Functionalist theory evolved from Talcott Parson's idea that the overarching structure of society shapes the individuals who make up the society. In this tradition, collective behavior is viewed as occurring under two conditions. First, a structural condition may exist that enables or encourages collective behavior to occur. Second, a "social strain" or structural strain occurs in society that justifies collective behavior (Buechler 2000:25). For example, because of the economic structure, there will be people who are disadvantaged either because of lack of education or urban poverty, and thus, the economy will put a strain on individuals who cannot succeed financially and materially, thus causing the motivation for change.

Lastly, Relative Deprivation theory illustrates the idea that a group will act collectively if it views a reference group as having an advantage over its group in some form. Relative deprivation occurs when a group judges itself lacking resources that are available and enjoyed by the reference group (Buechler 2000: 28). This theory identifies anger and frustration as the guiding emotions behind the collective action and as the motivating factor for participation.

These early social-psychological models of collective behavior all had one key idea when describing a person who would choose to participate in a movement: irrational.

The behavior that is explained by these theories is often described as becoming extreme and dangerous. These social-psychological models set the early foundation for social movement theory, but were eventually challenged by the protests and collective action that occurred throughout the 1960's. In the 1970's, scholars started to examine the availability of resources and political opportunities as enabling (or disabling) social movement activity.

Resource mobilization theory broke with social-psychological perspectives and identified politics as a driving force behind social movements and social movement participation. Scholars such as Oberschall (1973), McCarthy and Zald (1977, 1973), and Tilly (1978) discredited the early social-psychological models that point to grievances as predictors of social movement activity. Instead, a more accurate predictor of social movement participation is resource availability. For these scholars, a group is more likely to participate in collective action if it has access to resources (e.g. money) that can be used to further its cause the actors are working toward.

Resource mobilization dominated the research of the 1970's and 1980's, but a number of scholars began to look at aspects of social movements that had not been explained by this theoretical perspective. New Social Movement (NSM) theory developed in Western Europe in the late 1980's as a response to the class-driven resource mobilization paradigm. NSM theory examines the role of culture and ideology as the basis for movement activity rather than class. Instead of focusing on economic based grievances, new social movements associate activity around a belief system that is specific to the social movement group (Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994: 7). These belief systems revolve around a set of values and symbols that are specific to the group

and are used to bring the group closer together and to create visible differences from the opposition which is a part of the dominant belief system.

NSM theory has developed the concept of collective identity to help explain how the individual connects to the social movement group through a shared belief system. This next section will discuss the concept of collective identity used in NSM theory: specifically what collective identity is, what its characteristics are, how scholars know when they find it, and the current empirical research that has been done testing this concept.

Collective Identity: Theoretically and Empirically

The concept of collective identity helps social movement scholars explain why a person would want to participate in a movement when he or she is seemingly satisfied with his or her current economic state. Collective identity as defined by Melucci (1996) is “an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientations of action and field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place” (44). For Melucci, collective identity is a result of two things: an interactive group and shared definitions. Social movement theorists identify these as being essential for a solid collective identity to be formed. (Gamson 1992; Gamson 1995; Melucci 1989, 1992, 1994, 1996; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Shared definitions are definitions of reality, what the group defines as right and wrong. Shared definitions have a cognitive element that links the person to the cause. These definitions help a person link his or her beliefs to the larger groups’ same belief, thus attaching the individual to the group. Melucci (1996) also points out that these cognitive definitions must be concerned with the groups’ action and the larger

society in which the group is situated. Therefore, cognitive definitions reflect a movement's group feelings about itself and directly reflect the action that the actors are participating in.

While this definition is a good starting point, there is more to consider. Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992) define collective identity differently from Melucci and lay out an analytical framework to use this concept in social movement research. Like Melucci, Taylor and Whittier (1992:105) agree that collective identity involves a group's shared definition about its situation and place in the larger society. But they go on to identify more characteristics that are helpful when using collective identity as an analytical tool to help explain the identity formation aspects of social movements. Taylor and Whittier (1992: 109) identify three characteristics in addition to shared, cognitive definitions that can be used to identify the presence of a collective identity: boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation. This next discussion examines these three characteristics in greater detail. This will provide insight into how one can look for the presence of collective identity in an SMO or social movement group.

For a social movement group, boundaries mark off the group from an opposition by emphasizing differences between the actors in the group and the opposition (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Usually, this "marking off" is done by a dominant group in society; boundaries are set to distinguish the minorities in a society from what is shared and held to be "normal" under the dominant group belief (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 111). Therefore, boundary markers are central in collective identity formation because they stress the minority groups' shared perceptions as being distinct from the dominant group.

It is important to note that boundary markers entail a broad scope, ranging from an ascribed status such as race, to differences about what is culturally right in our society, such as the heterosexual versus homosexual debates. (See Gamson 1997).

In addition to boundary markers that locate a group's place relative to other groups, a level of consciousness of the actors within the group is required for a collective identity to become established (Gamson 1992; Melucci 1989, 1994, 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1992). This means that a group becomes aware of itself through a series of self-revaluations of shared experiences, shared opportunities, and shared interests (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 114). Taylor and Whittier (1992) note that this consciousness is apparent in formal documents, speeches, and writings that the group shares.

Lastly, subordinate groups use a process of negotiation to build their collective identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 118). Privately, a group will negotiate new ways of thinking and acting in the public sphere. Taylor and Whittier (1992, 118) describe "identity negotiations" in which the group involves itself in direct or indirect ways of freeing itself from the dominant institution or culture. In their study of lesbian feminist collective identity, Taylor and Whittier describe how the lesbian feminist communities renegotiate what it means to be a "woman," both privately and publicly (e.g. rejecting traditional notions of what it means to act, dress, and look "womanly").

We can combine these two definitions (Melucci 1989, 1994, 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1992) to make a working definition of collective identity. Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition system that incorporates boundary markers, consciousness, and complex levels of negotiation to situate the individuals and the group

in the larger arena of a dominant – subordinate belief system. This next section will explore the current debates in the collective identity literature.

Friedman and McAdam (1992) examine the difficulties in pinpointing a collective identity and who really counts as “making up” the collective. They point to the “attractiveness” a group’s collective identity can have in drawing members in, thus leading to a somewhat “amorphous” identity that creates a problem of over-generalizing the group identity across a group that comprises members with different reasons and goals in their participation (Friedman and McAdam 1992; Snow and McAdam 2000).

Continuing this debate, Snow and McAdam (2000: 49) raise the issue that collective identity and individual identity construction processes are an ongoing, complex task that works to align the individual with the group. They emphasize that processes such as identity work and identity seeking are factors that contribute to a collective identity and should be examined. Identity work includes activities that individuals participate in that support one’s self-concept (Snow and McAdam 2000: 48). When a person is engaged in ‘identity seeking’ work, a person might seek out a group to identify with because of the groups’ attractiveness (Snow and McAdam 2000: 61)

Taylor and Rupp (1999) call for situating collective identity within three different layers: organizational, movement, and solidary. The organizational layer involves identities constructed around networks or groups; the movement layer links the individual SMO’s to the larger social cause; the solidary layer involves movements that are related to larger identities outside a movement’s context, such as race, class, and gender. While acknowledging that the social movement literature is the main arena of collective identity

(theoretically and empirically) they push for an examination of collective identity in the ideas of identity politics (Taylor and Rupp 1999). They argue that even though the term “feminism” is highly debated, if we take a collective identity approach and situate feminism within this concept and examine it on these three different layers we can see how a collective identity emerges, even though there are numerous agendas under the feminist umbrella (Taylor and Rupp 1999).

Joshua Gamson (1997) adds to this debate by pointing to the deep complexities in the gay and lesbian movement, and argues that boundary maintenance is not just an in-group/out-group phenomenon, but boundaries are drawn within a subordinate group that point to what is right and wrong about the collective social movement agenda (Gamson 1997). Gamson argues, “understanding collective identity construction thus requires careful, grounded analysis...the conditions under which various actors fight for “true” membership status” (Gamson 1997: 192). What is considered true status versus not true status is an internal debate within the collective and can be used in political ways to further a movement, but at the same time exclude some members of the collective. This can lead to a division or split in the groups’ collective identity and leads to question collective identity as a stable issue within a movement.

We can locate this project within the current debates about how groups form and maintain collective identities, whether or not collective identity in an SMO can exist that has seemingly no physical group interaction, and whether or not the definition of collective identity presented above, can be applied in an online setting. To further situate this project in the more general literature about social movements and the role of the Internet, this research will take a theoretical concept of social movement theory and

explore its use in an online environment. To date, little research has been done in reference to social movements and the Internet. The research done discusses basic information: computer networks are sources for social movement activity (Gurak 1999, Mele 1999, Myers forthcoming, Thomas 1997). Mario Diani (1999) discusses the theoretical aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication¹ (CMC) and its role in shaping social movement research, and specifically how CMC could provide a link between the individual and the SMO. He states “I focus in particular on communication between individuals and organizations, and on the spread of collective identities” (Diani 1999: 2). No empirical data demonstrates that CMC does in fact encourage collective identity formation, nor does he discuss any of the relevant concepts or debates surrounding collective identity.

Now that this research has been situated in the current literature and debates surrounding collective identity, I will discuss the current, growing literature on cyberculture studies.

Collective Identity and Cyberculture

As the personal computer has permeated homes and schools over the past ten years, a growing body of research has explored different aspects of personal computers and Internet-related research. The term “cyberculture” has been coined to describe the culture that has developed around CMC and computer-oriented networks of people.

In terms of identity, research in cyberculture studies has focused on the exploration of how the individual explores one’s own identity and the ability to create a

1. Computer-Mediated Communication is communication over computer networks, specifically electronic mail (email), listserv, Usenet newsgroups, chat-rooms, and Multi-User Domains (MUDS).

stable or unstable identity through the use of computer programs that involve some level of interaction between more than one person. Sherry Turkle (1995, 1999) focuses on the ability to “identity play” in CMC activity, because of the absence of face-to-face interaction. At the individual level, an identity can be a way of self-exploration (Turkle 1999). In *Life Online: Researching Real Experience In Virtual Space*, Annette Markham (1998) describes how actively participating in an online CMC arena shaped and formed her identity as a researcher and an individual.

Research on group processes in cyberculture studies, including the notion of a group identity, or community identity, is also emerging. This is the literature that relates most directly to social movement research. What distinguishes this research on Internet groups from my research on SMO’s is that the Internet groups that have been studied are not working toward social change, but come together for other reasons.

In a project studying a Usenet group that revolved around soap opera fandom, Nancy Baym (1998, 62) concludes that CMC aids in formulating group specific meanings, socially negotiated identities, and relationships that aid in communicating about the topic that the group has in common. She also concludes that the specific Usenet group she examined was integrated into the offline world and not limited to cyberspace. Although this is only one case study, it suggests that there might be some sort of integration of the members of virtual groups into that of the face-to-face world. The level of integration was not considered in Baym’s research, and will be explored in this project.

The most closely related study about social movement activity in cyber-culture research is a content analysis and survey of Usenet groups. McKenna and Bargh (1998) explore identity issues within Usenet groups, specifically groups that carry a

“marginalized” status in society: marginalized sexual identities. Their study discusses the idea that Usenet groups provide a place for marginalized persons to communicate with others, thus increasing one’s self-esteem. Their theory is a social identity theory that hypothesizes that group membership is incorporated into the self so that the individual will feel as a member of that group (McKenna and Bargh 1998). Their conclusion is that virtual group identities are just as important to the self as face-to-face group participation, and that respondents felt and identified with the people within the Usenet group. One conclusion we can draw from this study is that virtual groups provide a place where a self-identity could emerge and become stronger, when it would be stigmatized in the physical world.

It is interesting to note, that by taking a social identity theory approach, the extent to which marginalized groups feel a part of the virtual Usenet group is not accounted for. McKenna and Bargh also do not discuss the research that has been done on marginalized groups and their participation in social movements. NSM research directly addresses the issue of social movement participation and incorporates collective identity in the framework to explain how group participation is fostered. They fail to mention that marginalized groups are often working to bring about change and the individuals are not simply doing identity work through group participation.

In this section I have located this research within the current social movement literature, specifically the current literature on collective identity. I have also situated this research in the current work on cyberculture studies, specifically what has said about the

notion of 'identity' via CMC and computer networks. The next chapter will describe the methodology that was used in this project.

Chapter Three Methods

The data for this study were obtained through qualitative semi-structured interviews of feminist activists who are participants in feminist activist groups. For the purpose of this thesis, I defined an online feminist activist group as a group of people who are using the Internet to foster activist-related relationships through discussion over the Internet. According to this definition I came across a few social movement groups that began on the Internet seemed to be good choices to investigate. Quickly a problem arose in choosing the specific group. A level of interaction between the participants had to be distinguished as existing within the group. The first two groups that I wanted to investigate, Spiderwomen.org and Women Leaders Online, had a very inactive discussion list or a very inactive website. The public archives of the Spiderwomen.org group listserv revealed that little to no discussion was taking place through the months of August 2000 – January 2001. This caused me some alarm because it seemed odd that a social movement group discussion list would be dormant during a heated presidential election year. This is how I determined that this group was inactive and ineligible for study.

I determined that the Women Leaders Online group ineligible for study because of the inactive updates of their website. In order to obtain access to the group's listserv, one has to pay to become a member of the group. I did not go this route, but instead used the group's homepage infrequent and uninformative updates to indicate to me that this group is also not an active social movement group.

The group that I finally chose is an extension of the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW has been an active social movement group since the 1960's. They have incorporated Internet technologies into their framework and have provided space through their webspace to foster a group and a group discussion. This online group is called the NOW Village and consists of people who actively discussing issues around the past and present women's movement.

The NOW village group members are using a web-based textual discussion board where registered participants can post messages about whatever the user wants. This group is a primarily made up of women (some men are participating in this group, but no men were used in this study) who are involved in the group on either a daily basis, every-other-day basis, or weekly basis. In order to participate in this group, one must be registered through NOW (registration is free) but anyone who can access the website can observe the discussions. Another feature of the group discussion board is that it allows for a registered user or non-user access to an information box on the specific person. This information box can allow a person to see the participant's date that they registered, the number of total posts that they have contributed, an email address (if they gave one), a homepage address (if they gave one), and a place to fill in one's occupation, geographic location, and/or interests.

By looking for collective identity within this group, this research provides insights into how the group members are using the Internet in terms of their activism. Discussions revolve around a variety of topics, from current discussion in the women's movement, to specific ideas that NOW supports and works towards.

To obtain my sample, I contacted group participants who had provided their email address and who were active participants in the group. To determine that the level of activism was an adequate amount of participation, I did not contact anyone with less than fifty total posts and who had not been active in the group for less than one month. The total sample size for the NOW Village group was five.

A purposive sampling technique was used for both groups. The participants for the NOW village group were contacted by email and invited to participate in the research project. Ten total people were contacted and of the ten, five responded and participated in this study. If the respondent indicated that she was interested in participating in this project, she was then interviewed by email. Geographical distance made this the easiest and fastest way to interview the respondents. In order to get the respondents from Womanspace, I briefly attended one of the meetings where I asked for people who might be interested in being interviewed for this project. The seven people that indicated that they were interested were then contacted by email and phone and were interviewed face-to-face. Of these seven, four responded and were interviewed for this study.

For the comparison group, I interviewed four participants of a local feminist activist group, Womanspace. This is one of two feminist activist groups that are located in the Montgomery County, Virginia area. This group operates at Virginia Tech and is concerned with consciousness-raising around women's rights, women's reproductive rights, sexual assault and rape on campus and in the community. This group uses the Internet at a very low rate. They do not use the Internet for the main source of communication; face-to-face meetings are held regularly where they plan community and regionally based activism.

Questions that were used in the interview process ask about issues that would demonstrate a collective identity in both of these groups. The questions focused on uncovering aspects of a collective identity discussed in the previous chapter. The interviews focused on inquiring about the activists' relationships with other members of the group while participating in the group. Also, I addressed issues of how active the group is, what kind of social movement activities does the group participate in. All of the questions ask about shared definitions, levels of consciousness, boundary markers, and any negotiations between group members that might take place. See Appendix 1 and 2 for the online and offline interview schedules.

Two different interview styles were used to collect my data. The NOW Village participants were interviewed by email. A back and forth email exchange between the participants and me occurred; some more active than others. I exchanged a total of thirty-three emails with the NOW Village respondents. The Womanspace group members were interviewed by me in a mutually agreed upon space on the Virginia Tech campus. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes in length. The investigation of the online group was taken from the typed responses of the interview questions, and the datum from the offline group was taken from the field notes and recorded tape when required for direct quoting.

The research and findings that are presented in this thesis are limited in a few different ways. The first limitation that is apparent is the relatively low sample size that is used. It is difficult to make generalizations about groups when only a small sample is being interviewed for this project. Thus, it is hard to draw any firm conclusions about these two groups and other social movement groups that may be working under the

women's movement or a different movement. The second limitation that became present is the email style of interviewing. In certain instances the interview questions were misconstrued to mean something else. Often times I had to write the respondent back and clarify that I did not mean one thing, but meant another. Thus, I would have to clear up misunderstandings that could have possibly altered the outcome of the responses.

Because a purposive sampling technique was used, this study lacked the benefits of a random sample. The sample in this study was a sample of convenience; it would have been difficult to use any other sampling technique that increases the validity in social scientific studies, such as random sampling techniques.

Chapter Four

CollectiveIdentity.org Findings

This chapter will explore the answers to my research question: What kind of variation in collective identity exists between two different groups: an SMO group in an online environment versus an SMO group in an offline, physical world environment? At the start of this research I was not positive about the potential outcome, but I thought that the Internet and cyberspace creates a space that is unique and does bring people together to form meaningful relationships. And within groups that exist on the Internet, there must be a strong sense of belonging; otherwise, why would one continue to participate? So, in developing this project with the idea of integrating a social movement perspective, I developed in my mind the idea that an activist group online could (and should) be able to develop a strong collective identity that could be used to foster their group's goals and enhance the movement itself. The only difference would be the lack of face-to-face interaction. I did not think the lack of face-to-face interaction would really be a problem in creating a collective identity for a group.

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative interviews that I conducted from February to April 2001. This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss the results from the NOW Village respondents and review themes that have emerged around the four components of collective identity (shared definitions, boundary markers, levels of consciousness, and negotiations). Second, I will discuss the results

from the Virginia Tech Womanspace respondents and review the themes that have emerged within this group. Third, I will then compare the results from these two groups and discuss the findings and their implications.

Collective Identity in the NOW Village

I interviewed five people who are involved in the NOW village discussion boards, which at first glance, looks like a full-fledged social movement group. When you enter into the main NOW webpage, it has defining features that represent the organization as an SMO (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). In the middle of the page, there are news alerts that are updated on a fairly regular basis. These news alerts describe world or national affairs that have an impact on NOW, either in a positive or a negative way. Across the top of the webpage, there is an image of women and men of different races joining together to march for NOW and signs with slogans are being held up in display of what the collective stands for (See Figure 3). The point that comes across is this: these people are together, as a group, fighting for a cause. Below this “unifying” image, we can see links to various parts of the NOW site: everything from how to support NOW, how to contact NOW chapters that might be in one’s regional area, and how to get “tech” support. So, we can see that at first glance, this is where one should come to if he or she is interested in issues that NOW supports.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN




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The NOW Political Action Committee keeps you aware of the issues surrounding current candidates and their campaigns.
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NOW Foundation
The NOW Foundation is an organization devoted to furthering women's rights through education and litigation.
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TOP STORY

NOW Applauds Jeffords Action, Sees Hope in Change of Senate Leadership

"Feminists are optimistic that the change in Senate leadership following Sen. Jeffords' departure from the Republican party will help keep women's rights intact," said National Organization for Women (NOW) President Patricia Ireland.

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Emergency Campaign for Women's Lives
Join the National Organization for Women to help
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Bush's Budget, Tax Cut and Judicial Nominees Lack Family Values

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National NOW Conference
June 29 - July 1, 2001
Philadelphia, PA



Figure 1: NOW Homepage Top Half (www.now.org)

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

[Home-Based Business Shouldn't Mean Home-Bound](#)

[NOW Applauds Jeffords Action, Sees Hope in Change of Senate Leadership](#)

[Media Ignores Gag Rule's Harm to Free Speech](#)

[NOW.org Welcomes Ann Telnaes' Political Cartoons](#)

[Bush Picks Vocal Abortion Rights Foe for Judge](#)

Nine million women entrepreneurs have home-based businesses and face the special challenges of balancing work and family and coping with isolation. The best advice from successful home businesswomen: Hire a baby-sitter and get out of the house.

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FORUM

Equal Protection?

The World Bank's efforts to guard the rights of women have been too little and too late.

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Oppose Unborn Victims of Violence Act

It is essential that you let your elected representatives know that you oppose the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, and that you will not stand for another attack on women's reproductive rights. **ACT NOW!** To send an instant e-letter or get more background, [click here](#).

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OPINION POLL

Should emergency contraception be available

NOW.org Welcomes Ann Telnaes' Political Cartoons

NOW is happy to welcome Pulitzer-Prize winning editorial cartoonist Ann Telnaes as a regular contributor to [www.now.org](#). [Click here to see the most recent: May 17, 2001](#)



Figure 2: NOW Homepage Bottom Half



Figure 3: NOW Webpage Banner

Along the left side of the webpage, the user is notified of various ways that one can become involved *immediately* by clicking on various links. One can sign up for email action alerts and receive updates about certain topics that NOW concerns itself, such as lesbian issues, reproductive rights, and fighting the right. The user has the choice to how he or she wants to become active. Further down the left column, a potential (or current) activist can be led to current NOW press releases or back issues of the in print NOW newsletter. Finally, at the bottom of the page, there is an opinion poll in which the user can voice his or her opinion on a “question of the week” that reflects the organization’s views.

All of this seems essential for a movement group to attract new members through its webpage. The link bar at the top of the page contains a link to the NOW Village. Once a user clicks on this link, the person is transported into a different part of NOW’s cyberspace as well as something that is completely different from NOW. This time, it is a little different than the usual user/text interaction. At the top of the page, you still have the unifying banner of people coming together for change, indicating this “village” is a space for people to come together in the name of social change. But what is different is that this is a space where a user can interact through discussions and become part of a “virtual community” (as they put it) with other like-minded individuals.

Once a user or potential user enters the NOW Village discussions, one immediately can sense a group feeling. People address each other by their “screen names,” address the group as a whole, and discuss things that revolve around the women’s movement, NOW, and themselves as a group. So, to the casual observer or trained researcher it appears that there is a group here, not only because it is under the

NOW umbrella, but also because of this interaction that is occurring on a daily basis. But, as the old saying goes, “looks can be deceiving” and with the Internet this can always be the case. So, to get to the heart of this research question, semi-structured interviews were used to find out if in fact there is that collective identity in this online group that traditional social movement groups have.

After conducting five online interviews with group participants who are heavily involved in the NOW Village², I identify three themes that emerged about the group: sexuality, personal gain, and opposition. First, I will discuss these themes and what implications they have for a collective identity within the NOW Village or the women’s movement itself. Then, I will discuss the four components of collective identity and what emerged and what did not emerge when I asked the questions that would uncover these ideas.

Sexuality

Four of the five respondents discussed issues of sexuality as a reason for being involved in the movement and in the NOW Village itself. Issues of sexual freedom and sexual tolerance were discussed as being very important to the individual and were reasons for being involved in the women’s movement, but not necessarily the reason for participating in the NOW Village. This issue is a guiding factor for these people for becoming involved and staying involved. There is no indication that the reasons for participating in NOW Village is because the group is a place to promote social change about sexual inequalities, which NOW does do (as indicated on their webpage). So, for

these people who are engaging in the NOW Village, sexuality seems to be an issue, but there is no indication that they are participating in this group because the other group members have similar viewpoints on sexual freedom or how to go about changing sexual inequalities. What the issue is actually using this group to connect with others for sex. A good example of this can be seen with this response from Carrie³:

“Someone might say that I have made love to a good portion of the participants. Is there anything more exciting than yelling NOWWWW!!!! during climax?...My involvement in NOW has been for less than five years, but I have been involved in the battle for the rights of women for a long time. One of the things that women, even lesbians, can do is seducing members of the religious right and helping to break up their families. Is there anything more exciting than seeing two crying children of a pastor after his wife has divorced him after he has had sex with a woman such as myself? Do I do that kind of thing? I could be accused of doing any time that I get the opportunity. That sort of thing can be soooo exciting. And some pastors are quite good in bed, though I would much rather have sex with a woman”

Carrie also posted this to the NOW Village this spring, reiterating these ideas in a topic that she starts around the issue of “skin mags”:

“Why should there be a problem with them. Is not nudity and the sex act very natural acts that should be able to be enjoyed by all? As long as this sort of thing is made to sound dirty, will our society ever be truly free? At one time, women voting was considered to be bad. At one time, freeing the slaves was considered to be bad. At one time, being a Lesbian was considered to be bad. At one time, premarital sex was considered to be bad. Does morality seem to be an absolute to anyone? As long as it is fun, enjoyable, and does not hurt anyone, what is wrong with buying, selling or looking at Skin mags?”

Here we can see that she is equating her participation in the movement and with NOW around issues of sexuality as well as an indication of broader cultural and political issues of power and sexuality. When I asked Carrie to describe any bonds or ties that she felt with the other members of the NOW discussion boards she replied with “Unless you mean things such as the joy of fisting publically, why should I have bonds with anyone

² By heavily involved, I mean they are frequent posters and are engaged in discussions almost daily.

³ All of the names in this thesis have been changed to protect the identities of the person.

that I am not intimate with. Without intimacy, what good is a relationship.” Another example of this can be seen with this statement from Maggie when I asked her if she considered herself involved in the current women’s movement:

Of course I am. Why ask a question like that? Why would anyone question my involvement. People like me need to be involved with fighting for women. I fight and fight and fight. I am emotionally involved, mentally involved, and volitionally involved...this is real life...and I have NEVER EVER slept with a woman who is not on my wavelength.

When asked about the strategic planning or real world activism that might be planned in the NOW Village, Sharon replied “I have not found much [activism planned]. This is not to say that three or four of us have not exchanged nude pictures of each other.” When asked about any group ties or bonds that might be present within the NOW Village, Sharon also replied with “If you want to know about my sex life, why should I engage in that kind of talk here? Sexual dynamics I guess would have some similarity. I like to be openly sexual both with a woman and on the board.”

The issues of sexuality that the participants discussed indicate that these participants are not participating in the group because they have a collective identity within the group about the idea of promoting social change for sexual inequalities but rather an interest in using the group for sex.

Personal Gain

A characteristic of being a member of a social movement group is that the participants are working for social change and that the group is more important than any personal gain that might result from participation. The idea of a personal gain in this

discussion is the idea that there is a degree of selfishness attached to the reason people are participating. Reports of personal gain for selfish reasons through the use of these boards came up in all five interviews. Though all the reports were not all the same, this issue is an important one when discussing collective identity. Current social movement literature does not mention building a strong collective identity through what I am describing as a selfish personal gain as a result of participating in a social movement group.

These respondents are having a different experience from typical social movement groups, as we will see later during the comparison with the offline group. Four out of five respondents reported using the discussion group for specifically “picking up” other women. When asked to describe the relationship that one has with people who are online who participate in the NOW Village, Laura replied with “I have not picked up any lesbian lovers but I am developing relationships” indicating that this is a reason for participating in the NOW Village: to have personal sexual gain through this participation. This was not the only example of a member participating in the group for a sexual gain. When asked the same question, a different respondent, Maggie replied with: “I have one sexual online relationship with a woman who is attractive and with whom I have enjoyed spiritually and sexually...Overall I have had my good and bad relationships online.” Again, we can see that when asked about relationships with people that are seemingly participating in an online social movement group, Maggie did not think of these relationships as being built around the movement, but instead personal, sexual relationships.

A user that identifies herself as ‘blueyed’ is another example of the respondents using the group for personal gain. When asked to describe how the use of these

discussion boards makes you feel in terms of your personal activism, blueyed responded with “ I just use it for practicing in arguing.”

For a strong collective identity to exist in an activist group it would only make sense that the idea of selfishness should not be persistent. The social movement literature does discuss issues of individual activists receiving feelings of personal pride and gain as a result of social movement group participation and activism. For example, in McAdam’s *Freedom Summer* (1988) and Elaine Brown’s *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story* (1992) friendships and sexual relationships developed within the organizations and thus, helped create a strong collective identity. We will see this idea play a role in Womanspace later in this chapter. But, in this case, the lack of face-to-face interaction that this group is experiencing seems to stress the respondent’s group participation around the fact that there is a selfish personal gain because of the physical absence of the group members.

Opposition

All the NOW Village respondents in this study cite an opposition. Some are vague references to opposition in general and some are direct references to opposition that has arisen within the NOW Village. The literature says that for a strong collective identity to exist, contact with a defined opponent should bring the group feel closer together. All of the respondents acknowledge an oppositional presence within the NOW Village and in the real world. When asked to discuss the opposition that one encounters when using the NOW Village blueyed replied with:

There is plenty of that [opposition]! I think the opposition is actually a coordinated group of individuals. I’ve seen examples of them subtly correcting others or “reminding” them

of things that seem to be from off-line. I think they are very careful with the words they choose and then pick out things other than the issues to attack with. For example, it is easy for them to lash out at “feminists” while maintaining that they are not misogynists. Women don’t have the luxury. There is no single word for “men that have improper views of women.” (“Misogynist” doesn’t work because they can claim that they are married and love their wife so they can’t hate women).

The opposition that occurs within the NOW Village is what are referred to in the cyberworld as “trolls”. Trolls can be characterized as people who are participating in the group for the “wrong reasons,” and are there to cause trouble through counter-arguments. From January – April 2001, I have witnessed an increase in people joining the group for the sole purpose of causing trouble by trying to discuss issues that are counter to the movement or the group’s ideas. For example, one of the most active trolls is a person who is constantly quoting the Bible and offensive pro-life views. This will obviously stir people into arguments, since one of the principles that NOW organizes around is pro-choice.

All the respondents in this sample mention these “trolls” as the opposition that threatens their group. This is interesting for two reasons. First, there is actually cited opposition within the group. A conventional social movement group would not just let people in to the group that have ideas that go against the grain of what they are fighting for. The social movement literature discusses in traditional movements rifts that occur within movements, but this is not the same as the actual group containing people who are fighting the opposite battle. This technology allows for people on the other side of the movement to become a part of the group. As this online opposition arises and is present, do the members actually think of it as a threat? The respondents in my sample seem to think not. This is a second interesting point I want to discuss. It seems that although

there is a cited opposition these people don't really see it as a threat to the group or the movement in general (which in normal contexts would be a threat). This seems to be due to the fact that it is more seen as an individual threat: one person acting out towards the group. Still, these are sparse indications that there is some small degree of a collective identity within this group because of this cited opposition. Another interesting point is the distinction between this opposition being within the group, thus internal, or being considered external. The questions that I asked did not address this topic. From the interviews that I conducted, the responses cannot lead to any conclusions about how the group participants classify these trolls: group members or outsiders?

When asked to discuss the opposition that occurs within this group, one respondent said that they are "mostly fools for what I have seen. Some people have written a lot of words, but have not said a whole lot." Another respondent summed up the difference between opposition that she faces in real life versus when involved in the online group with the simple statement "Real life opposition is much worse. But real life sex I find to be much better in my life."

These quotes sum up the general feeling that although there is an oppositional presence, it is not the same as a real threat to the feminists in NOW Village. This is a distinction that these group participants are making: real life versus online life. Because there is no physical presence of opposition, it seems that there isn't really much of a threat of actual opposition within the group.

It would make sense that this opposition that appears would foster a stronger collective identity, but in this case it seems that it is not doing this. A question that this research points to, is how should we actually define a social movement group in an online

setting? If it allows for communication on opposite sides of the movement, like NOW Village does, is it still a social movement group? Or is it some sort of new, different social movement group that has really yet to be defined? The fact that there is a distinction made between online versus offline, and where the offline is considered “real” and the online is considered not real, then the online opposition would not help to create a strong collective identity. I will explore this area more a little later when I discuss negotiations.

Now I will discuss the four components of collective identity that scholars have identified as an important aspect in determining the presence of a collective identity: shared definitions, boundary markers, levels of consciousness and a process of negotiation.

Shared Definitions in the NOW Village

Shared definitions are what a group defines as right and wrong in our society. The answers that would indicate shared definitions, the NOW Village group respondents in this sample do not seem to have anything that they are sharing together in about what is right and wrong. When asked about the goals that the group is working towards, all of the respondents referred to their individual goals of participation. As we will see later, this is radically different from the offline social movement group that I studied, Virginia Tech’s Womanspace. There were no ‘we’ statements that indicate a collective identity or that the online group is acting as a collective. Instead of saying “we try to get people to think” blueyed says “I try to get people to think.” Out of all the statements that would indicate evidence of shared definitions, not one respondent discussed anything that would

be considered ideas shared by the group. Instead it is more of an individual and personal reason for participating in this group. This brings up the questions that I raised earlier. These individualistic responses question the actual existence of the NOW Village as a social change group. Even though there were no reports of any specific shared definitions that the group has, the fact that there is cited opposition towards the group is a shared definition that can be identified. These participants are defining what is right and wrong by way of identifying the opposition and their opposing viewpoints. From the data that I collected, it is hard to point to anything specific about what the shared definitions specifically are. Still, this points to another sparse indicator of a collective identity within this group.

At the beginning of this chapter, I briefly described the composition of this group and why it might be considered a social movement group. I will return to this point later in this chapter when I compare the group's responses.

Boundary Markers in the NOW Village

Boundary markers are culturally constructed barriers that mark a social group as being distinct from the rest of society. In a social movement context, this usually occurs because the group has viewpoints that are not congruent with the larger society. When boundary markers are distinct, this should have a positive effect on the group's collective identity because they will highlight the ideas and thoughts that the group has in common.

I asked questions to the NOW Village participants about the opposition that these group members faced, either online or in real life. The presence of the online opposition

that I described earlier is drawing a boundary online and thus creating a distinction between who is for the group causes and who is not.

The literature on boundary markers cites a defined opposition as key to creating a distinction between the social movement group and what is not. All of the respondents discuss an opposition that is present, but as I said before, they don't really see it as anything to worry about. There is a definite distinction that these respondents make between online opposition and opposition in the larger movement context. Concerning this, Maggie said "Real life opposition is like the life that I live. Online opposition is more like doing "research" and turning in silly little papers to overeducated fools who have sheets of parchment on their walls." To clarify this, I asked if she felt real world opposition is basically incomparable to online opposition and if she felt that online opposition is something that is somewhat of a joke to which she responded with "I think that you may be understanding me." As I discussed before, the existence of this opposition should help the group create a collective identity. Of these, boundary markers are something that all the respondents reported and this seems to have the strongest parallel to the offline group that I studied, Womanspace.

Levels of Consciousness in the NOW Village

Levels of consciousness refer to the group's self-awareness through shared experiences, shared opportunities, and shared interests. Through my interviews, it seems that there is no real group consciousness compared to conventional social movement groups. When asked about any feelings that are perceived when interacting and participating in this group (with members who share similar view points) blueyed

summed it up best: “I think there is a lot of frustration. Part of the down side to the boards is that people don’t get the human face to face stories.” Later, when asked if she felt any ‘bonds’ or ‘ties’ with other members of this group she responded “I don’t feel any bonds or ties with other members...I think real groups try and work out more practical solutions. These boards don’t encourage that.” This response is indicating something that is becoming more and more evident: the need of face-to-face interaction to become a group, work as a group, and relate to one another as a group.

Negotiations within the NOW Village

Negotiations are how a social movement group discusses in the private sphere or among themselves how they specifically are going to go about creating social change. When asked about any strategy sessions or “plans of attack” that the group might discuss for creating change, (i.e. planning marches, protests, or letter-writing campaigns) the general response can be summed up with Carrie’s response: “Are you shitting me? Not much if any that I know of.” One respondent did mention some planning by some members to attend an upcoming march, but this does not seem to be an everyday occurrence. At least according to the other four respondents, no strategic planning occurs. This raises the question: why would one person report of planned activism and others not? Taking into consideration the small sample size, this still raises the issue of the solidarity that this group actually has, and also asking is this actually a social movement group at all?

Collective Identity in Womanspace

For the offline comparison group I interviewed five members of a local feminist social movement group, Virginia Tech Womanspace. In this analysis, I will also discuss themes that I identified after the interviews and the analysis of the four components that make up collective identity within a group or movement.

The themes that emerged from these interviews reflect more of what we would expect to emerge from researching a social movement group. Two major themes evident in these interviews are friendship and opposition. I analyze each of these themes and what they mean in terms of the collective identity within this group; then I analyze each of the components of collective identity.

Friendship

All five interviews that I conducted yielded discussions about Womanspace as a positive place for building friendships and growth. This social movement group provides a place for like-minded individuals to come together and support each other in the causes that they believe in and as a result, close-knit friendships that form because of activism. We see this clearly in a statement by one of the respondents: “I would definitely say that Womanspace is really close. You know, the majority of my closest friends here at Virginia Tech are involved in Womanspace. And although we are a really close group, I don’t feel that we are exclusive, either...” One other example that depicts the feelings of closeness within this group came from a respondent when she said “I feel accepted because there are lots of mutual understandings between all of us.”

This theme is important when discussing collective identity because it is indicating that the group members are feeling attached to each other, thus creating a strong bond.

All four of the respondents discussed the importance of friendship in attracting new members. The friendly environment that seems to be fostered within this group is having a strong, positive effect on the collective identity of the group. Friendship is an idea that this research indicates as being a way that collective identity can be sustained within a group.

Opposition

All of the respondents from Womanspace discuss opposition that their group faces can be characterized as a general attitude that certain parts of society has about sexual assault, rape, and women's rights in general. Examples of these sectors could be any group that is promoting patriarchal values. One of Womanspace's goals is to change a general attitude that these sectors seem to have: that feminists (such as Womanspace members) are aggressive and negative people. They feel that the best way to go about creating change is through peer education and consciousness raising. One respondent described this when she said, "I think that there is a negative connotation about what feminism is...we are viewed as aggressive for some reason."

Womanspace is a principal organizer of Take Back the Night, a march that seeks to raise awareness on sexual assault issues in the community and on campus. When asked about what she sees as the general public's perception of Womanspace's efforts, Lorrie said "people don't realize what it's about...and I don't think people want to know." Margo echoed this idea when she said "the best step to change is to promote

visibility in the community and advancement through peer education.” This theme of opposition that has emerged seems to be having a positive effect on the group’s collective identity by uniting them with a cause and creating something to work for. Like other conventional social movement groups, this one is no different in terms of having a defined opposition that is separate from the group and what the group is trying to change.

Now I will discuss of the four components of collective identity focusing this time on Womanspace. This will provide more insights into the collective identity that this real, face-to-face social movement group displays.

Shared Definitions in Womanspace

As said earlier, shared definitions are what the social movement group defines as being right or wrong. The respondents from Womanspace seem to have two shared definitions that are helping to create a collective identity. First, the notion of equality for everyone was discussed by three of the four respondents; not only women’s rights, but also gay and lesbian rights, and equality for all people in general. A great example of this can be seen with Erica’s response: “Women’s rights are human rights...I think that we are proud of being women because of our activism.” All of the respondents were in agreement that this was an important part of the group and an important part in being motivated to participate in the group.

Another important shared definition that this group has is the prevalence of sexual assault in society and the idea this is a major problem in our society and specifically the local community. We can see evidence of this with this statement from Lorrie when she said “speaking as a representative of Womanspace, I would say one of our major focuses

on this campus are sexual assault issues...because that's a real problem on our campus...so I think that is one of the major things we focus on." She also continued with "we really focus on sexual assault because it is such a problem on college campuses. And that's maybe a segment that the national movement doesn't take [focus on] as much." This is interesting because these shared definitions are bringing Womanspace together as a group and also distinguishing them as a social movement group, not only from the general public, but also from the larger movement. Shared definitions seem to play an important part in the creation and maintenance of this group and what it stands for.

Boundary Markers in Womanspace

As stated earlier in this chapter, boundary markers are culturally constructed barriers that make a social movement group distinct from the rest of society. These boundaries are usually created because the group has opposing ideas to the larger society. In looking at the boundary markers that could be created around this group, two oppositions were commonly mentioned.

The first opposition that all of the respondents cited was "society in general." Womanspace is trying to transform a general attitude that it believes "society" has about women, specifically attitudes and incorrect ideas and beliefs as to what sexual assault and rape is.

The second opposition that the Womanspace respondents identified can be characterized as university groups and officials. Groups such as fraternities and sororities, along with the university administration, were cited as problems in

accomplishing the group's goals of education of the community about violence against women, sexual assault, and rape. Both of these specific groups are described by the Womanspace respondents as groups that are unwilling to work for women's rights on campus, and in some cases fostering unsafe places for women. Lorrie stated in reference to the opposition faced during the Take Back the Night march that the "anger evoking responses brings us closer...we try to take negatives and turn them into positives." This statement is showing evidence of a distinction between Womanspace and the opposition by drawing a distinction between "we" versus "they".

These defined oppositions that the respondents discuss are partly what makes these boundary markers distinct and important aspects in creating the group's collective identity. These defined oppositions make it easy to distinguish what Womanspace actually is and what it is trying to change.

Levels of Consciousness in Womanspace

In conventional social movement groups, levels of consciousness refers to a group awareness of itself through shared values and shared experiences. When asked if she felt close to other group members, Erica replied, "yes, I do feel a closeness...because you can't go through the events we do and not [feel that way]." Margaret replied, "it sort of becomes a very important part of your life...you work together on things and get to know each other and it sort of turns into a social circle...everyone has a closeness to one another." We can see by these two examples that there is a heightened awareness of one another that is a direct result from participating in Womanspace.

The shared experiences that this group experiences are protest marches, not only locally organized marches, but often times regional and national marches as well. They travel together to marches and participate as a group. Two examples that were given was lobby day (every January) and a rally this past spring in Washington D.C. These experiences are creating an awareness that in turn is creating a strong collective identity that is based around equality, women's rights, and sexual assault prevention.

Negotiations in Womanspace

As discussed earlier in this chapter, negotiations are ways that a group will discuss in the private sphere how it is going to present itself in the public sphere. Usually this is how the group plans strategies for creating change.

Womanspace is constantly working in the private sphere to promote change and get its message across. One example of this is brain-storming sessions that occur twice a month and are used for general planning. Another example is that group members often will sit down together and plan events. For example, Margaret said "if we are planning an event, we'll all have input: who do we want to come, what do we want to happen, and one person will take the lead on using everybody's ideas...it's pretty well-balanced: the people who volunteer to take things on."

The negotiations processes that take place are helping to create the collective identity of this group. When the group members are interacting with one another is an important way that the group creates a collective identity. According the responses from this sample, negotiations are an important part of Womanspace.

Summary

After reviewing the themes that emerged after these interviews as well as examining the specific components of collective identity, the research on this offline group reinforces the current collective identity literature. The collective identity in this specific group seems to be a strong one; I did not find any conflicting reports that would lead me to question the strength of this group's collective identity, or that they were even a group at all.

NOW Village versus Womanspace

I collected the data for this project to make a comparison between two social movement groups: one that is present online in cyberspace and one that is present in the offline, face-to-face world. The two groups described here are comparable because both are feminist groups working under the women's movement umbrella and both are organized around the idea of social change for women's rights. When comparing the collective identity of the two groups, the variation that could exist would be due to the one key difference of the two groups: the online group lacks physical interaction between members, where as the offline group has the physical, face-to-face interaction that conventional social movement groups have.

The first striking difference is between the groups themselves. The NOW Village group members discussed more personal reasons and personal gain that they receive as motivation for participation. When we compare these results to Womanspace, there is a strong distinction. The Womanspace members are obviously part of a social movement group and are giving their own time to working towards a cause that they individually

and collectively believe in. The NOW Village group members that I interviewed did not report any responses that reflect that they are participating in this online group for anything more than personal gain outside of a social movement context. The key difference between Womanspace and NOW Village is that the Womanspace members seem to be acquiring a personal gain and meaning as a result of their activism and participation. The NOW Village group members in this sample are participating in the group for selfish reasons, which is different than receiving a personal gain as a result of social movement group participation. There is no indication from the interviews and the data that I presented that indicate that the NOW Village is a place where activism occurs.

The second striking difference is the level of activism reported by each group. Womanspace is very active both in the local community and on regional and national levels. They plan and attend marches, distribute literature, and petition administrations. The NOW Village members are not doing any of these things. Nothing is done that would even give the group a real chance to create a collective identity like that occurring in Womanspace. This seems to be due to the fact that there is no face-to-face interaction in close physical proximity that group members must incorporate into their group dynamic. This comparison allows us to see that face-to-face interaction is something that a social movement group needs to be able to work for change and thus to begin to generate a collective identity.

We can examine this idea more closely if we look at the differences in the components of collective identity. First, the shared definitions present in the groups are noticeably different. In the NOW Village there were sparse reports of shared definitions and no real statements that were indicating that there was a group working for social

change. This becomes even more apparent when we look at the shared definitions that exist within the Womanspace group. This group has shared definitions and a definite sense of “we” that its statements reflect. The NOW Village group members do have a sense of “I,” which is very different from a “we” which would strongly indicate collective identity.

Second, boundary markers are the most similar of the four components between the two groups. Both groups have reported oppositions that would in turn construct these culturally defined markers that distinguish the group. The difference is that the online opposition reported in NOW Village is not seen as a real threat or obstacle; the opposition that Womanspace faces is a real threat and an obstacle that the group is working to change. These reported differences in oppositions also highlight the fact that the participants in the NOW Village might not see themselves as an actual group coming together for social change if they do not see the opposition as a threat.

Next, if we look at the differences in the levels of consciousness that each group has we can see another notable difference. The NOW Village are not having any shared experiences or reporting any shared values that the group might have. There are not reports of feeling “close” to other participants. This is radically different from the reports that Womanspace displayed. All of these group members report feeling close to one another as a result from shared experiences and believing in the same cause and ideas.

Lastly, if we look at negotiations that are occurring within these groups we see another remarkable difference. NOW Village doesn’t seem to be planning any sort of concrete activism or planning any ways of promoting social change. In Womanspace there is strategic planning that goes on weekly in their group meetings. The fact that this

online group has no reports of planned activism and the offline group members describe how they want to accomplish their goals calls into question the NOW Village as an actual social movement group. What is especially interesting is that this group is a part of an organization (NOW) that has been very active for decades. These results point to the difficulty that might arise for any conventional social movement group to incorporate this new technology into group dynamics.

If we return to my original question; is there any variation in collective identity between these two groups? -after analyzing these reports and comparing them- the answer is yes. Social movement literature discusses collective identity as an aid to accomplishing a group's goals. This is true of the conventional group that I looked at: Womanspace seems to have a very strong collective identity. The NOW Village does not seem to have any strong sense of collective identity within the group, and this becomes very clear when we consider the Womanspace reports as I have shown. The final chapter in this thesis will be a discussion about the results that I have presented in this chapter and where these findings will lead social movement theory. I will also discuss implications of these findings for future groups that seek to incorporate the Internet into their activism.

Chapter Five Discussion

This chapter is a discussion about the findings presented in Chapter Four. I will discuss the limitations of this study in the sample and methodology. I will then discuss avenues for future research based on the findings and the limitations discussed here. I will discuss how this research contributes to social movement theory, cyberculture research, and how social movement groups work in an online environment.

Findings

The findings showed that collective identity between the online and the offline group was very different. The respondents in this sample of the online group NOW Village displayed very little evidence of a collective identity within the group. There are no reports of experiences that occurred while participating in the NOW Village that would link the individual to the group as in conventional social movement groups, in this case, Womanspace. Womanspace participants reported group activities that help link the individual to the group, such as attending marches and rallies together. The geographical closeness that these group members share allows the group to come together and participate in their activities as a collectivity. This is radically different from the opportunities that the NOW Village group has. There is a geographical barrier to this group that has an effect on them because they are not planning any activism together, nor are they even coming together under one specific cause or central idea. This questions the actuality of this group is a social movement group at all. The answers provided by these respondents suggests this group might be nothing more than people discussing feminist social movement issues but not taking any action within this group. This brings

up a paradox: a group online existing under a social movement organization is not necessarily a social movement group. The NOW Village seems to be a group that is more of a place where people are coming together for a chance to talk, but not act. This of course could change. It does raise the question, why then are these people motivated to spend their time participating in this group if they are not feeling close to or even a strong sense of belonging?

Limitations

The style of the interview process is another difference that is important to discuss. The online group was interviewed in a non-face-to-face situation, non-speaking setting. The offline group respondents were interviewed in person. Although the questions that were asked of the different groups were similar, the presence or absence of the investigator has to be accounted for when discussing these results. One group of respondents could have felt more comfortable answering these questions, simply because I was either there or not. For example, when Carrie discusses sexual escapades with pastors, her openness could have been due to the fact that I was not present and that we have never met. This “space” that the Internet creates between the interviewer and the interviewee could make it easier for a respondent to reply with true-or-false statements since the respondent does not have to see me.

Another problem that arose as a result of interviewing online was misconstruing my questions to be asking something different. Occasionally, respondents would think that I was asking personal information and become upset. I would have to explain myself and rephrase the question to become clearer. This is understandable because when

interviewing online, there is no tone of voice or immediate clarification that can help a respondent understand better what I am asking.

The two groups that were studied are a small portion of the women's movement. Since no demographic questions were asked, it is hard to distinguish how similar these two groups are. It seems that the two groups are from the same class level, since one group is involved with the Internet (and since computers and Internet access require money that is at least on a middle class level) and the other group is situated in a university context which is also an indicator of class.

Directions for Future Research

What are the research directions this thesis leads to? First, more research that investigates different social movement groups and how they do or do not incorporate the Internet into the movement they are working for. Since this is just a comparison of two groups, other differences between other groups could exist. I described variation in collective identity between these two groups, but the results could change if the sample size were increased. So, one way to continue investigating collective identity formation over the Internet would be to investigate more group members within the same groups, as well as different SMO's.

One question that this thesis leaves us with is this: is there another necessary component of collective identity in the form of face-to-face interaction required for social movement groups? The findings here suggest that some level of face-to-face interaction might be required.

Another question that this thesis brings up is what constitutes a social movement group in an online setting? What are the characteristics of these groups, and how are they similar to or dissimilar from conventional offline social movement groups? Lastly, what counts as collective identity in an online space? Does a person who is very active in offline groups and somewhat active in online groups have a stronger collective identity in the offline or online world, or could there be a collective identity hybrid that exists when activists are simultaneously active offline and online?

Contributions

This research argues that the concepts that have been developed within this literature did not hold true in the online group that I studied, thus raising the idea that some face-to-face interaction might be required for a collective identity to exist. I showed that participants in an online group do not feel close to one another as a result of their group participation. Even though people are “together” in cyberspace, this research indicates that they might not feel together.

This research also contributes to the growing body of cyberculture literature in the sense that it describes the way a group can or cannot form an identity over the Internet. As more sociologists begin to study the Internet and group identity construction, this will be an excellent example of the problems that can arise when people are not physically together.

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Appendix 1
Interview Schedule: Womanspace

1. How are you involved in the current women's movement?
2. Were there any specific that happened that you can recall that has led to your activism?
3. Please talk about the organization you work for in as much detail as you would like, describing its conception, its goals, and what you do to further the cause your organization is working towards.
4. If you are a member of a feminist organization, how long have you been a member of this organization?
5. Can you describe the relationship(s) that you have with other members of the movement?
6. How would you describe the way the movement is viewed by the rest of society?
7. Please talk about how your organization views its goals (short and long term) and how these goals are being met or not met.
8. Would you say that these goals are consistent with the overall movement?
9. How would you describe the movement you are a part of views itself? What are some of the things that you and other self-identifiers see as important to the cause you are working for?
10. What makes you feel like a part of the movement?
11. Who or what are you fighting to change or transform?
12. What are some of the groups or organizations that work to inhibit your goals/causes? How are they doing this?
13. In what ways (if any) do you see yourself and your group as being different from what is considered "normal" or appropriate in our society?
14. Please discuss any feelings you perceive when you are interacting with other members of the movement or your organization.
15. What would you describe as being shared values by the group you are working with?
16. Discuss any ways that your organization talks about strategies or "plans of attack" to create the change you are working towards.
17. Please discuss how you view the movement presenting itself in the public sphere. Is this congruent with how you are discussing your activism in private with solely in-group members?
18. Would you say that most people who identify with the movement feel a closeness to each other? Why or why not?
19. Do you believe the movement is an important aspect in shaping who you are as an individual? Why or why not?
20. In reference to the last question, do you feel that this is typical of the rest of the members of the movement? Of your organization? Why?

Appendix 2
Interview Schedule: NOW Village

1. Would you consider yourself involved in the current women's movement?
2. Are you involved with or a member of any specific organization that works for social change?
3. If you are a member of a feminist organization, how long have you been a member of this organization?
4. Can you describe the relationship(s) that you have with other members of the movement, either local in your community, or online?
5. Can you describe the relationship(s) that you have with people that are online who participate in NOW's discussion forum (NOW Village)?
6. Would you say that there are any goals that are trying to be accomplished through the use of these discussion boards?
7. Describe how the use of these discussion boards makes you feel in terms of your personal activism (if anything).
8. Discuss the opposition that you meet when involved in the NOW discussion boards.
9. If any, describe similarities or differences that you perceive to online opposition vs. "real" world opposition.
10. By using online discussion boards, discuss who or what you are trying to change (if anything).
11. Please discuss any feelings you perceive when you are interacting with other participants who share your similar beliefs in the NOW discussion boards.
12. Is there any strategic planning or specific "real world" activism planned through these discussion boards?
13. Describe any bonds or ties that you feel with other members of the NOW discussion boards. Describe any group dynamics that might be similar or different from any real life groups that you have participated in.

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Publications

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April 2000 Review of “Cyberghetto or Cybertopia: Race, Class, and Gender on the
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Professional Presentations

April 2001 “New Collective Identities: The Internet’s Role in Shaping a Social
Psychological Process” Paper delivered at the 64th Annual Southern Sociological Society
Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia.

Research Experience

Research Assistant for “Advice about Romantic Relationships, 1950-1999: A Content Analysis of Articles in Popular Magazines,” August 2000 – May 2001. *Responsibilities included entering and analyzing data from coding sheets, content analysis, code sheet modifications, maintaining sample order.* Principal Investigator: K. Jill Kiecolt, Department of Sociology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University.

Teaching Experience

Teaching Assistant, Sociology 1004: Introduction to Sociology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Fall 2000 – Spring 2001.

Scholarships/Awards

Graduate Faculty Tuition Scholarship, New School University. Awarded for 2001-2002 Academic year.

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Member, Alpha Kappa Delta: International Sociology Honors Society. Inducted April 2001.

Professional Activities

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Graduate Student Representative, Curriculum Committee, Department of Sociology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, August 2000 – May 2001.

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Community Affairs

Jazz Director, WUVT Non-Profit Radio. *Responsibilities include establishing and maintaining relationships with jazz related record labels and marketing companies, weekly charting of music to College Music Journal, reviewing and selecting music for airplay, forming a review staff and conducting weekly meetings.* January 2000 – Present.

Disc Jockey, WUVT Non-Profit Radio. *Weekly host of three hour radio program specializing in jazz and creative/ improvised music.* Fall 1998 – Present.

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