To Be or Not To Be A Feminist: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This research examined definitions of feminists and the relationship between self-identification as a feminist and willingness to engage in action to reduce inequality between men and women. Two focus groups were held to discuss these issues with undergraduate women. All but one of the members self-identified as feminists. Group members aligned themselves with one of two definitions of feminist. Some women defined feminists as those who desire equality for women. This group distanced themselves from radical feminists. The other women asserted that feminists were concerned with human rights for both men and women. The women emphasized that men as well as women could be feminists. Consistent with social identity theory that posits that important identities are associated with action, the women participated in two types of activities that were related to reducing gender inequality. One type of action was individualist, such as responding to sexist remarks. The other type was involvement with groups and organizations that collectively worked to reduce inequality. The one group member who rejected the label of feminist held views and engaged in behavior consistent with a cultural definition of feminist.

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Chapter One

Statement of the Problem

Why can't all decent men and women call themselves feminist?
Out of respect for all the people who fought for this. –Ani Difranco

The purposes of this research were to explore the relationship between self-identification as a feminist, or lack thereof, and willingness to engage in action on behalf of women. This research is motivated by my belief that gender inequality still exists in spite of tremendous gains made by feminists. For example, women only hold 16% of the 545 seats in the U.S. Congress. Only sixteen women are United States senators. (http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Facts.html#congress) Only 21 of the women in Congress are women of color. Still, this level of national political participation is a far cry from the early 20th century when women did not have the right to vote.

Much of the progress in women's rights has been attributed to groups of organized women. Social movements such as the suffragettes in the early 1900's and the women's movement in the 1960's brought attention to the unequal status for women, fought for change, and achieved many victories on behalf of women.

The names given to members of these social movements have changed over time. Women working to get women the right to vote were referred to as "suffragettes," and those in the 1960's were sometimes called "women's libbers". Since then, women involved in movements on behalf of women are mostly referred to as feminists. This term has been used both positively and negatively, depending upon one's level of agreement with or understanding of the goals of feminists.

Within the last decade, researchers have been exploring young women's self-identification as feminists and their views on equal rights for women and activism

designed to benefit women. This research has been guided, in part, by social identity theory.

A central question that this body of research addresses is whether self-identification as a feminist is a necessary pre-requisite to engaging in activism to improve the condition of women? Is it the case that women can hold feminist beliefs and be members of social groups that work on behalf of women without applying the label to themselves? It is these two questions that this research addresses.

Guided by social identity theory, I asked the following research questions. Do college women identify as feminists? What are women's views of feminists and how might these be related to their willingness to engage in actions on behalf[1] of women? To explore these questions, I collected and analyzed qualitative data obtained from two focus groups of undergraduate women.

In chapter two I review the literature on feminist identity and definitions of feminist.

[1] Throughout this research I use the phase "on behalf of women." I recognize that there are a variety of perspectives on what counts as action on behalf of women. For example, behaviors that might be viewed by me as repressive to women might be considered by others as beneficial to and on behalf of women. Also, when I use the phrase "on behalf of women" I am not implying for all women in all places on all issues. For the purposes of this research, I define "on behalf of women" as actions designed to reduce gender inequality in a particular context.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

The overarching research question for this thesis is "What is the relationship between self-identification as a feminist and willingness to engage in collective action on behalf of women?" A key component of this research is to determine how the women involved in the research define "feminist" because there are multiple definitions and perceptions of feminists and these definitions have changed over time.

Defining Feminist

The term feminist can be traced back to a group of suffragettes who met at Seneca Falls in 1848 (Rosen 2001). McCabe (2005) wrote "Since the first widespread usage of the term feminist in the United State's in the 1910's, it has been a highly contentious term" (McCabe 2005:480) with no agreed upon definition of feminist. Even among those who define themselves as a feminist, there remains disagreement as to how to best define the term.

hooks (1984) argues that there are negative implications of the lack of a unified definition. hooks states "A central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definitions that could serve as a point of unification… It indicates a growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement" (hooks 1984:xi).

A variety of definitions are proffered in the literature. One, given by Richards and Baumgardner (2000) is "By feminists, we mean each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality within or outside the

movement, writes about feminism, or calls her-or himself a feminist in the name of furthering equality" (Richards & Baumgardner 2000:54). They include in their definition both men and women and individuals who work toward equality without having to self-identify as such. At the same time, they believe that self-labeling is sufficient to be a feminist. Some scholars have operationalized the term feminist as someone holding feminist attitudes (Henley et. al. 1988, Plutzer 1988 as cited in Schnittker et. al. 2003). One of the problems with this definition is that there seems to be no consistent definition or list of what constitutes feminist attitudes.

Certainly, there is an array of feminist attitudes that appear in the literature. For example, DeVault (1999) writes "Feminists believe that women have been subordinated through men's greater power, variously expressed in different arenas" (DeVault 1999). It still is unclear what beliefs or how many have to be accepted before one can be considered a feminist.

Defining feminist/feminism is becoming increasingly problematic as more and more modifiers are attached to the terms or variants created. For example, there are Black, third world, postmodern, third-wave, liberal, radical, post-colonial, lesbian, and cultural feminist (Lotz 2003:2). As another example, Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" as an alternative to the term feminist and Black feminist.

Some scholars include an action component in their definitions of feminist. That is, a feminist is someone involved in the struggle for gender equality. The term feminism is used to describe women (and men) who share a commitment to acting on behalf of women. Lorber (2005) states that feminism is a social movement whose goal is to gain

equality between women and men. bell hooks defines feminism as "a movement to end sexist oppression" (hooks 1984:xxi). Thus, feminists becomes linked with action.

Feminist Identity Development

How feminist identity develops has been the focus of considerable research. One line of inquiry is that a feminist identity develops through stages. Downing and Roush (1985) (as cited by Fisher et al. 2000) argue that there are five stages of feminist identity development. In the first stage, there is an acceptance of traditional western gender roles, such as the belief that traditional roles are advantageous to women. In the second stage, some crisis occurs that leads to questioning gender roles. The third stage is connectedness with other women and more realistic perspectives on gender issues. In the fourth stage, a positive feminist identity forms that questions traditional gender roles and evaluates men on individual basis. The last stage is active commitment to social change on behalf of women.

Researchers who have examined the stages of feminist development often use the Feminist Development Scale and Feminist Identity Composite that have been shown to have good psychometric properties. The scales contain items such as "I want to work to improve women's status" and "It is very satisfying to me to be able to use my talents and skills in my work in the women's movement" (Fischer et al. 2000). Although this feminist development model has generated considerable research, Bargad & Hyde (1991) assert that there is insufficient research to establish that feminist identity develops in stages.

Factors Associated with a Feminist Identity

There is now a growing body of research that has identified some of the factors that are associated with self-identification as a feminist. Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997:861) found that feminist identification was related to interactions with feminists, exposure to feminism, a positive view of feminists and the feminist movement, support for feminist goals, an awareness of discrimination against women, belief in collective action; self-esteem, and positive opinions of the feminist movement were predictors of young women's willingness to identify as feminist (Myaskovsky & Wittig 1997; Fischer, et al. 2000; Williams and Wittig 1997).

Negative experiences based in sexism can change the way that young women view feminists because they challenge the notion that everything is ok (Buschman & Lenart 1996). For example, experiencing sexual discrimination is related to identification as feminist. If a woman faces sexual discrimination in a job or at the university, for example, the woman is more likely to have a feminist perspective and support the women's movement (Renzetti 1987; Fischer et al. 2000).

Education is another factor related to feminist identity. Renzetti found that as young women progress through their college careers, their support for feminist attitudes tend to increase (Renzetti 1987). Academic achievement also was noted by Fischer et al. (2000) as a predictor of feminist identity.

Consistent with expected gender differences, women are more likely to identify as feminist than men (McCabe 2005). Yet, men who show high levels of femininity are linked with positive attitudes toward the women's movement, feminism, and willingness to consider oneself a feminist (Toller and Suiter 2004). Men who show high levels of

masculine ideology are less likely to identify as feminist, which is consistent with much of the research on masculinity (Toller and Suiter 2004; Burn, Roger and Moyles 2000; Twenge 1999; Jackson, Fleury and Lewandowski 1996).

The relationship between feminist identity and race is complex, with some studies finding that race is a predictor of feminist identity and others finding that it is not (McCabe 2005: Schnittker, Freese and Powell 2003). Some women of color reject a feminist identity because of feminism's origin among white women (Hill Collins 2000). Myaskovsky and Wittig found that African-American women experience conflict between their racial and feminist identities (Myaskovsky & Wittig 1997:881). They also found significant a positive correlation between how racial conflict is perceived and how it affects the opinion of the feminist movement.

A problem with trying to determine the relationship between race and self-identification as a feminist might be methodological. Analysis of race and feminist identity too often simplifies race to a dummy variable, without including important variables that might be relevant to the experiences of women of color (Harnois 2005). Harnois critique's Schnittker et al.'s (2003) study which concluded that generational influences affect a woman's likelihood of identifying as a feminist. Harnois asserts that Schnittker et al.'s (2003) study does not allow for the possibility that varying life experiences could affect women of color differently than white women. "In this case, they do not allow for the possibility that generational differences, income and educational levels, family forms, and involvement in the paid labor force might shape women's feminist identities differently, depending on their race and ethnicity" (Harnois 2005: 810). The use of particular data sets, such as the National Election Studies, contribute to

a lack of understanding of race and self-identity as a feminist because these data sets often do not include variables that could be relevant to women of color (Simien 2005; Reid 1984). Further, another problem with trying to determine the relationship between race and feminist identity is that research too often ignores the intersection of race and gender (Harnois 2005).

Whether young women today are less likely to identify as feminist than older women is unclear. Schnittker et al. (2003) found that females who were young adults during the "second wave" of feminism are more likely to identify as feminist than those who are were born after the second wave (Schnittker et al. 2003). In contrast, Huddy, Neely and Lafay (2000) showed that young women are just as likely to identify themselves as feminist as older generations. These contradicting findings add to the confusion about factors related to feminist identity.

Anti-Feminist Action

Faludi found, through interviews with those involved in the conservative New Right, that many conservatives are engaging in an attempt to dismantle the progress made by feminists and feminism as a movement for social change. The New Right's actions are calculated and organized.

In spite of no supporting evidence, claims have been made that feminism is and should be dead. A goal of conservative, anti-feminist, organizations is to argue that people are suffering because of feminism (Faludi 1991). Faludi quotes Weyrich, founder of the New Right, as saying, "At last the lie of feminism is being understood. Women are discovering they can't have it all. They are discovering that if they have careers, their

children will suffer, their life will be destroyed" (Faludi 1991:230). Another argument is that women and men are now equal and that feminism has done its job and feminists are no longer needed (Faludi 1991).

Phyllis Schlafly is a prime example of New Right conservative who fought against feminists in a very public way. Schlafly is known for her work as an anti-Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) lobbyist. Schlafly organized against the ERA on the platform that the ERA would, among other things, require women to register for the draft and increase abortion paid for by taxpayers (Tobias 1997). Schlafly used her notoriety to frighten women into believing that voting for the ERA meant that they were voting against their bodies as well as being required to serve in the military (Tobias 1997). She argued that the ERA would "Take away the marvelous legal rights of a woman to be a full-time wife and mother and to be supported by her husband" (Faludi 1991: 239).

These conservative attacks on feminists seem to have had an effect. Kramer (1991 as cited in Tobias 1997) found that women say that feminism has made their lives better (at work, through anti-discrimination laws), but they also stated that feminists spend too much time questioning women's roles (Tobais 1997). These views could help explain why women continue to accept feminist beliefs but refuse to identify as feminist.

Rejection of Feminist Label: Acceptance of Feminist Beliefs

A common theme in the literature is that women agree with feminist beliefs, recognize the contributions of the feminist movement, and hold negative views of gender inequality but still will not self-identity as feminists. One reason that women might avoid feminist identification is because of the negative connotations the word feminist has

received (Burn et al. 2000). The term 'feminist' invokes a negative association because some have successfully planted the false assumptions that feminists do not like men and do not respect women who stay at home (Huddy et al. 2000). The term "feminist" has become associated with phrases such as "feminazi", "man hating" etc. Because identifying as feminist is optional and is sometimes stigmatized, identification as a feminist is viewed as optional and potentially costly by some women. Further, those who resist the feminist label are more concerned about how others might react than those who take the label (Williams and Wittig 1997). With the understanding that there are multiple definitions of what a feminist is, it then stands to reason that a rejection of a feminist identity may deal with a specific version of what a feminist is, rather than feminists in general (Quinn and Radtke 2006).

Some women navigate the space between feminist identification and feminist beliefs by using phrases such as "I am not a feminist, but….." (Zucker 2004; Aronson 2003). Aronson found five classifications of women she interviewed: "I am a feminist", "I am a feminist, but…" "I'm not a feminist, but…" "I'm a fence sitter" and "I never thought about feminism" (Aronson 2003). Aronson reported that more than half of the young women in her study were ambivalent about feminists. This was easily seen in the young women who claimed to be "on the fence", meaning that they embraced some areas of feminist identity while rejecting others and avoided defining themselves as feminist in order to avoid being associated with a group they perceived as negative.

Quinn and Radtke (2006) found that women in their focus groups had difficulty accepting a feminist identity as well as difficulty rejecting it. One way that women dealt with this contradiction was by categorizing feminists into different types. This facilitated

their acceptance of feminists without having to consider themselves "one of those types of feminists." The women divided feminists into two groups: a liberal version emphasizing equality and rights and a negative extremist version. This categorization allowed them reconcile the tensions between "I am a feminist" and "I am not a feminist." They did not want to be seen as an extremist, and this was often used as reason for not identifying. At the same time, the emphasis on equality for women was accepted so they could not totally reject the label (Quinn and Radtke 2006:196). Support of pro-feminist goals is found in feminists who identify socially as feminist, and interestingly, also in women who assert they are not feminists but provide views consistent with pro-feminist goals.

bell hooks (1984) suggests that a move away from a feminist identity is not necessarily a bad thing if women who reject the label agree with feminist beliefs. She writes "The shift in expression from "I am a feminist" to "I advocate feminism" could serve as a useful strategy for eliminating the focus on identity and lifestyle. It could serve as a way that women who are concerned about feminism as well as other political movements could express their support while avoiding linguistic structure that gives primacy to one particular group (hooks, 1984:29-30). Still, Zucker (2004) found that feminist identity and self-labeling were predictors in young women's willingness (or unwillingness) to participate in feminist activism.

In chapter three I explore how social identity theory attempts to explain how feminist identity is formed.

Chapter Three

Theory

Identity theory guides my exploration of my research questions. In this chapter I provide an overview of identity theory and also discuss some of the links between social movements and identity.

One of the difficulties in discussing identity theory is that there are two related strands--identity theory and social identity theory (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). Both are used to guide this analysis. Hogg et al. (1995) assert that social identity theory has psychological roots while identity theory developed out of micro sociology. They see these two parallel but different theories as useful for different purposes (Hogg et al. 1995:255). Social identity is described as a person's awareness of belonging to a specific group or category that has a value or emotional meaning (Klandermans & de Weed 2000). Identity theory argues that we have many identities that are multifaceted. Although individuals have multiple identities these identities are not likely to have the same influences on individuals. Rather, identities differ in importance and commitment, and thus affect the relationship between the identities and social behavior (Hogg et al. 1995). Hogg et al. (1995) are quick to note that researchers often make no distinction between social identity and identity theory. Following this model, I sometimes blend the two together without making distinctions between them.

Identity Theory

Identity theory has its roots in sociology and focuses on "social behavior in terms of the reciprocal relationship between the self and society" (Hogg et al. 1995:256).

Identity theory was derived from symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980, as cited in Stryker, Owens and White 2000) and is similar to symbolic interactionism in that identity theory agrees that society affects social behavior through influences on the self. Identity theory differs with symbolic interactionism by arguing that society is differentiated while still being organized (Hogg et al. 1995). This perspective is attributed to Cooley, Mead, and Blumer.

A basic tenet of symbolic interactionism is that "society shapes social behavior through its effect on the self behavior" (Stryker et al., 2000:26). Hughes and Koehler (2005) note there are three basic premises of symbolic interactionism. First, things (e.g. objects and actions) have no inherent meanings. Second, through social interactions, we learn and create shared meanings. Third, we respond to our environment based on these shared meanings of things (Hughes and Koehler 2005:22). In other words, it is through interaction with others that we come to know social life and ourselves.

A particular interest of symbolic interactionists is the development of the self created through interactions with others. Our reference groups and social roles have an important influence on how we perceive ourselves. Stryker et al. notes that there is an "internalized set of meanings attached to a role played in a network of social relationships with a person's self viewed as an important part, and organization of the various identities held by the person" (Stryker et al. 2000:6).

People have different reference groups and social roles that can lead to differing social identities. An identity is apt to become salient if others give positive reinforcement for being involved in that role, want the person to be involved , and give him or her positive feedback for being so and if one views one's own group in a favorable light.

Those identities high in the salience hierarchy (or those that are prominent) should be more closely related to social action. Identities high in salience with related competence should also make a person feel better. One's salient identities can potentially affect one's relationships with others (Stryker 2000).

Social identities are descriptive, prescriptive, and evaluative. As a result, those who identify with a social category create strategies for positive in-group and negative out group evaluations. "Thus, for example, when feminists who believe that men are more aggressive than women categorize themselves as feminists, they will tend to exaggerate men's aggressiveness, to see all men as more aggressive than all women, to see little differences in aggressiveness among men, and to see little differences in non-aggressiveness among women (including self)" (Hogg et al. 1995:260-261). When those with group identities see themselves as different, they will exaggerate their differences.

People who are around each other and identify with the same group are apt to get the same information, have similar interactions and so on. The result is that members can develop similar viewpoints and behaviors. This might lead to collective identities.

A collective identity refers to "an internalized set of meanings attached to a role played in a network of social relationships, with a person's self viewed as, an important part, an organization of the various identities held by the person" (Stryker et al. 2000:6). Collective identities can be conceived of as a process that is constructed. It is negotiated through a repeated activation that links individuals to groups (Melucci 1996 as cited in Klandermans & de Weerd, 2000).

Porta and Diani (2006) argue that collective identities are important for social change because they lead to a greater likelihood of joining in social movements on behalf

of group members. This is particularly the case when there is a clearly identified opponent and actors are linked by dense informal networks (Porta & Diani 2006). Thus, having a feminist identity that is shared by others might lead to not only individual acts on behalf of women but involvement with collective action to reduce gender inequality.

In the following chapter I describe the methods I used for this research.

Chapter Four

Research Methods

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to answer my research questions. It includes a discussion of problems encountered in carrying out the planned methodological procedures.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methodology was used in this research. Defining qualitative research is difficult because there is not one agreed upon definition of it (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Nonetheless, most scholars agree that qualitative research is an interpretive practice that attempts "to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln 2005:3). Using a qualitative methodology allows me to talk to women directly about feminism and action.

An important feature of qualitative research is its flexible design. A qualitative research design allows the researcher to continuously assess whether the methodological approach originally planned is appropriate and to make changes if needed (Maxwell 2005). As discussed below, the research design needed considerable refinement. However, it was only after the fact that need for change was realized.

Feminist Methodology

Qualitative research is grounded in a variety of theoretical perspectives with related methodologies. A qualitative feminist methodology guides this research. DeVault (1990:3) notes that feminist methodology was developed "as a critique that

views the apparatus of knowledge production as one site that has constructed and sustained women's oppression." Given its roots in the feminist movement and the importance of consciousness raising groups, a key feature of feminist methodology is to ground the research in the experiences of women, and by doing so empower women to work toward meaningful social change (DeValult 1999). A feminist methodology resists the more common "how to" approach and instead offers a broader commitment to guiding research practice (DeVault 1999). DeVault sees feminist research practice as a three fold process that includes 1) shifting the focus, 2) minimizing harm to subjects, and 3) using a methodology that values women and women's points of view.

Another characteristic of feminist research is that it minimizes harm, socially, emotionally, and physically, in the research process (DeVault 1999). Historically, this has not always been the case. Women were exploited and harmed during the course of research, and the research was used to further subjugate women.

Further, the implications of the research should benefit women and not lead to further gender inequality. The research should have the potential to lead to social change or actions that will benefit women. DeVault (1999:31) asserts that "What makes practice distinctively feminist is its relevance to change in women's lives or in the systems of social organization that control women" (DeVault 1999:31).

Focus Groups

A key feature of qualitative feminist methodologies is that the research should be grounded in the experiences of diverse groups of women. It is particularly important that women who have largely been ignored in research, such as women of color and lesbians,

be included (Olesen 2005). In feminist research, women should speak for themselves rather than being limited to questions and with a limited number of possible responses predetermined by the research. Further, feminist methodology recognizes the benefits of women talking to each other during the research and not just to the researcher. It can be empowering for women and informative to the research when women agree and disagree with each other in group interactions. Thus, the strategy of inquiry for my research is to hold focus groups with diverse groups of women (DeVault 1999).

For this research I conducted two focus groups. In the broadest sense, a focus group is a collective conversation or collective interview (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2005). A focus group setting is informal and done in a discussion group setting (Neuman 2003).

Although a focus group is a collective process, this does not mean that the goal is to arrive at the one "true" relationship. As DeVault writes "The truths of feminism are smaller, more tailored, and more intensely pointed truths… They are truths that illuminate varied experiences rather than insist on one reality" (DeVault 1999:3). It was expected that the women in each group and across groups would have different responses to the research questions and that their views might shift during the course of the focus groups. For qualitative researchers, the goal is to examine the multiple perspectives; it is not the search for causal laws or "truth."

Recruitment

My original plan was to conduct two focus groups with care being taken to include women of color and lesbian women. Thus, I decided to recruit members via

student organizations that were composed of women, women of color and lesbian women. I initially contacted the president of the Black Student Alliance, Womanspace and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Alliance (LGBTA) to recruit participants. I asked each president to send out an email stating my request to the organization members. The email that was sent out asked students to take part in a discussion about feminists. I also asked to attend a meeting of the group to talk with members about the focus groups. I did not receive a response from the Black Student Alliance, but did receive messages from six students involved in Womanspace and two people in the LGBTA.

However, this response was not enough to complete two focus groups. Thus, I had to change the way I sought focus group members. I had two friends make announcements in their classes. The classes were a Criminology course and an Introduction to Women's Studies course. Again, the students were told that the focus groups would be a discussion about feminists and feminism. As noted below, using the term "feminist" when trying to recruit group members, most likely resulted in only feminists being interested in participating, which prevented me from exploring all my research questions.

From this I received the names of some interested students. Further, through word of mouth I had two students email me asking permission to participate. The new recruitment strategy resulted in enough women for two focus groups. I refer to the first group as "Mixed." The second group I call "Womanspace."

The women who participated in the Mixed focus group were Tori, Marie, Deanne, Marlene, Katie, and Lauren. All of the women were white except for Marlene who was a

woman of color. Deanna, Marlene and Katie were second year students. Tori was a third year student, and Marie and Lauren were in their fourth year. Tori and Marie were in a sorority and heard about the focus group through the criminology class. Deanne and Marlene learned about the focus group from a friend and asked to participate. Katie was in an Introduction to Women's Studies class and was told about the focus group by her professor. Lauren worked at the Women's Center and heard about the focus groups through a friend. Two of the women were active in LGBTA.

The participants in the Womanspace group were all members of the organization Womanspace, a feminist organization on campus. The members of this focus group were Krysta, Tonya, Breanna, Beatrice, Mellissa, and Rosie. Rosie, Mellissa and Beatrice were third-year students. Krysta and Breanna were fourth-year students, and Tonya had just graduated in the previous semester. All focus group members were volunteers between the ages of 18 and 22.

Focus Group Structure

Another graduate student assisted me with the focus groups, primarily taking notes during the focus group discussion. Each group lasted approximately 60 minutes. The groups were held in a meeting room in the Graduate Life Center.

Each focus group began by me providing information about my research. Each participant was then given a consent form to read, sign, and return to me. They were given an extra copy of the consent form for their own purposes.

The focus groups discussions were tape-recorded. However, only after the consent forms were signed, participants were reminded again, and participants agreed to

be recorded was the tape turned on. The informed consent form had the title of my project, "To Be or Not To Be a Feminist: A Qualitative Study", as well as many references to the study looking at conceptualization of feminist and feminism. This may have influenced the discussions that took place during the focus groups.

Questions that related to the research questions were asked with appropriate probes and follow-up questions. The questions for each focus group were asked in a conversational manner. They were short, clear, jargon free, and open-ended (Krueger 1998; Bailey 2007). Additional questions were added as seemed appropriate.
At times, I had to redirect the conversation when I felt that it was too far off topic. However, given the nature of a focus group, considerable latitude was given. The goal in a focus group is to have the women talk to each other, rather than directing their comments solely to me; in the most part, I felt that the women were engaged in discussions with each other.

As I began the discussion I initiated a quick "getting to know you" conversation. The question was designed to be answered quickly to establish a sense of community (Krueger 1998). I asked them to each introduce themselves, to state their major and year in school, and to talk about any campus organizations they were involved in. This mini-introduction got them to talk and gave me some basic demographic information.

The first question asked was, *Would you consider yourself a feminist?* Most answered this question easily. However, I had to probe more to get information about why they did or did not consider themselves feminists.

The Mixed group was fairly quick in response to my question *What do you a feminist is?* Thus, I reframed the question to:

So, if we were to, maybe draw a picture, or outline what a feminist is…What she would look like, what she would act like, what she would think like…What would you say a feminist is?

My last question was,

Have you or would you be willing to engage in activism on a part of women? And, as a way to elicit more information about activism I asked them to think of a time they have done something on behalf of women.

Krueger 1998 suggests that the last question should allow the members one last opportunity to talk about what important to them that they had not yet discussed. He suggests questions such as "Of all the things we discussed, which is the most important to you?", "Is there anything you want to say as we conclude that I didn't say?" or "What is a phrase or sentence that best describes your position on this topic?" My final question was *Is there anything you want to add that we have not talked about?*

Coding

After each focus group, I transcribed the tapes into Word documents. The data were coded based on these transcripts. The notes taken by the graduate assistant who assisted me were not used.

Coding was initially done by open coding. Open coding is performed by taking an initial read through the focus group transcripts and assigning themes, initial codes, or labels as a first attempt to condense large amounts of data (Neuman 2003). After carefully reading through the transcript of each group, I began to assign themes to sections and look for critical terms and key events. I then categorized each theme

(Neuman 2003). The purpose of coding this way is to bring out themes found in the data and apply these themes to the initial research questions. The themes were labeled one through four to match with my four research questions and then where organized according to sub-themes.

Further, I coded for idiosyncrasies. I wanted to be able to include points that women made that did not fit into the themes but might be insightful and beneficial to this research. This is important because disagreements among people are sometimes as important as agreements.

In the following chapter I present an analysis of the focus group results.

Chapter Five

Analysis

In this chapter I present the analysis of the data from the two focus groups. As is described further below, the inability to follow my original plans for recruiting members had major implications for my findings.

Feminist Identity

In response to the question, *Are you a feminist?* Eleven of the respondents described themselves as feminists. This was not consistent with the findings of Zucker (2004), Aronson (2003), and Williams and Wittig (1997) who received a range of answers to the same question. They created a typology of responses with four categories "I am not a feminist, but...", "I'm a fence sitter", "I am a feminist", and "I am not a feminist" (Aronson 2003). In addition to the 11 women who said they were a feminist, I classified the other woman as "not a feminist." However, as noted below, she expressed inconsistent views that made her difficult to classify. Other than the one "non-feminist," the only variation found among group members was that some were assertive in their self-identification while others expressed some hesitancy.

The lack in variation in responses is mostly likely due to how the members of the focus group were selected as well as my recruitment technique. In the email, classroom announcement, and informed consent form I said that this was a study about feminists/feminism. I believe that I would have had greater variation in responses if I had said that this was a study about "gender", "equality", "women", or even "the women's movement".

The Womanspace group is considered the feminist organization on campus. The members of the mixed group who heard about the research through friends and classes, including a Women's Studies class, may well have done so because of their interest in feminists.

The clustering of all but one women in the "feminist" category has serious implications for this research. The overarching research question was what is the relationship between self-identification as a feminist, or lack thereof, and willingness to engage in action on behalf of women. The lack of variation prevented me from exploring whether those with a non-feminist identification would be willing to engage in action. Although these data could not address my main question, the women provided information that gave insight to my other research questions.

"I am a feminist"

My first research question was to determine if the women identified as feminists. Eleven of the women identified themselves as feminists in some form. All six of the women from Womanspace and five of the six women from the Mixed group said they were feminist. For eight of women, their answers to the question "Do you identify as a feminist" were definitive and certain. They said such things as "I consider myself a feminist" (Tonya), "Definitely a feminist " (Breanna), "I am a lifelong feminist" (Beatrice), and "I definitely consider myself a feminist as well" (Rosie).

Three members of the Mixed group elaborated further.

I definitely identify with the term feminist.[2] I've been advocating for women's rights for as long as I can think of. I strive for gender equality. (Deanna)

I guess I see myself as a feminist because I also believe in a woman having to be comfortable, and a woman should be able to celebrate what she is without any shame. (Marlene)

I absolutely identify as a feminist. Looking back I think I always have been a feminist although I think that when I was younger I just did not realize I was. (Lauren)

Two members of the Womanspace group provided the following responses when asked if they were feminists.

I consider myself a feminist too. I don't really know when I realized it though. But I am pretty much obsessed with it because we talk about it a lot. (Melissa)

I'm definitely a feminist. And want everybody to have their place in the world and be valued just as much as the next person. (Krysta)

[2] One difficulty of transcribing tape-recorded conversations is not knowing what punctuation to use that best reflects how the respondents' talk. In some cases, I insert punctuation that seems reasonable. At other times, because the spoken word is different from the written word, I do not include punctuation that would normally be included in a written text.

In contrast to the nine women who identified themselves as feminists with little qualification, Marie and Katie did so with some hesitancy.

> I think I would consider myself a feminist. I have only taken one women's studies course but we talked about the term feminism and how there is a stereotype with it, but, like, we also talked about how to be a feminist you don't have to be radical or extreme or anything like that, like very pro-choice and care about women's rights, so… That's why I think I'm a feminist. (Marie)

Katie too was not as assertive as some of the group members in her identification as a feminist.

> The word feminist to me brings the thought of just knowing a lot about women's rights and stuff… I'm not like, I mean I don't know enough about the issues… I guess I would consider myself a little bit of a feminist because I feel that women are equal to men and I feel as confident, um, as a male would. I feel like anything a woman wants to do she can do. What's the word that you used? [Looking at Deanne] Radical! That was the word. Sorry. Radical feminists know more about the issues and what they are trying to fight for. But I think that I am pretty, I guess I would consider myself a little bit of a feminist because I feel that women are equal to men and I feel as confident, um, as a male would. I feel like anything a woman wants to do she can do. (Katie)

"Only Tori, from the Mixed group, stated that she was not a feminist. However, Tori also made statements that were inconsistent with her non-feminist identification. For example, Tori stated that she was not a feminist but then said that she advocates for women.

> I don't consider myself a feminist. I think I advocate for women's rights and everything but I don't consider myself a feminist. (Tori)

Tori added,

> I want women to be equal. I 100% think women should be. I'm just not the person that's going out and promoting it….That's why I don't consider myself feminist regardless of the fact that I want women to have gender equality and everything. I'm just not the person that's gonna go out and, you know, be marching the parades and all that stuff. I don't even view Take Back the Night as a feminist thing. I think that's like a community thing.
>
> But I, I'm like, more than willing to participate and advocate for things that I truly believe in. But I guess that is not a whole feminist personality. (Tori)

The reasons Tori provided for why she was not a feminist seem congruent with non-feminist views. She placed her explanation for not being a feminist within the long-standing nature vs. nurture debate (see, for example, Lorber 2005). Tori's statement that there are "natural" differences between men and women was in response to one of my final questions.

At the end of each focus group I gave the women a general definition of what a feminist is and asked the women to respond. I had planned on asking this question as a way of correcting misconceptions about feminists that I assumed some of the members would have. This is in keeping with a feminist methodology that research should benefit women. My thought was that by explaining how some feminists define the term, it would help women be more open to joining feminists in their struggle against gender inequality. Given that all but Tori said they were feminists, providing a definition was not as necessary as I thought it might be. However, I gave the definition as planned. I said,

> A general definition that we use in women's studies or when we talk about gender is that a feminist is someone a) who believes that inequality between men and women still exist, b) that the inequality is not natural but is socially created, and c) that something should be done about it.

In response to this definition, Tori repeated that she was not a feminist.

> I think that, in that definition, there's one of those topics that we can't really put in there is that inequality is not natural, that right there puts me not a feminist because I think it is natural that women are different than men, I'm not saying they should not be equal but there are certain issues where women are better and women are less than men. It's just by nature. You know what I mean? Like, right there in that definition I would automatically be, like, that's not me.

And, in previous conversations about what a feminist is, Tori said,

> Um, Ok. This is where I kind of boarder line I think being different from a lot of people, is I think, I recognize that there are differences between men and women and there are some things that men can do better than women, and there are some things women can do better than men. And on those topics, like, you'll never be equal because it is just, like, nature. Like men can never have babies, like clearly we are better at that. Men are physically stronger than women.

Although Tori said that she was not a feminist, her views are somewhat consistent with the position of cultural feminists. Cultural feminists believe in the natural differences between men and women. They see these differences as biological and natural (Lorber 2005).

Other researchers have found inconsistencies in women's self-identification as feminists. Quinn and Radtke (2006) wrote "There is an implied lack of consistency between people's identity and their attitudes, beliefs, and actions when they embrace feminist values while rejecting feminism and a feminist identity" (Quinn and Radtke 2006:187). This seems to be the case for Tori who did not embrace the feminist label, but yet expressed a few feminist beliefs. However, given Tori's repeated assertions that she was not a feminist and some of the explanations she provided, the totality of her statements led me to classify her as a non-feminist.

What Are Feminists?

The women were asked their views on what a feminist is. Their responses were divergent and fell into different categories.

Women's rights and radical feminists

One category of responses to the question *What is a feminist?* stressed women's rights while making a distinction between feminists and radical, extreme, or activist feminists. Only one of the women in this group mentioned gender equality more broadly in addition to a concern for issues related to women. All five of the women in this category were from the Mixed group.

> I have only taken one women's studies course but we talked about the term feminism and how there is a stereotype with it, but, like, we also talked about how to be a feminist you don't have to be radical or extreme or anything like that, like very pro-choice and care about women's rights, so…(Marie)

> Um, I think it doesn't necessarily have any extremist connotations, I think that as long as you are an advocate women women's rights and you celebrate what being a woman is all about I think you can be a feminist. (Deanna)

Later in the focus group, Deanne continued

> But, saying that is sort of like an in your face kind of thing for people. It is a little threatening to men, to women, to anyone saying "I'm a feminist" and they are like "Oh, ok so anything I say you are going to throw back at me?" And stuff like that. Like it is very aggressive. Feminism is not about being aggressive. It is a loving thing. About loving who you are. (Deanna)

Marlene distanced herself from extreme feminists.

> I've been advocating for women's rights for as long as I can think of and I think it's really important that people understand that feminists are not extreme. There is always a spectrum for each school of thought or ideology and, um, there can be really extreme feminists, but there are also not extreme feminists. I don't see myself as extreme. I strive for gender equality. (Marlene)

Katie also mentioned radical feminists.

> At first, when like the word feminist to me brings the thought of just knowing a lot about women's rights and stuff… I'm not like, I mean I don't know enough about the issues… Radical feminists know more about the issues and what they are trying to fight for. (Katie)

Tori said, in part, that she was not a feminist because feminists are more extreme than her. She said "I kind of, I guess there is a stigma to the title of feminist and I guess it is more extreme than I would be".

Gender equality

Another category of responses to the question *What are feminists?* focused on defining feminists as those concerned about equality for both men and women. Interestingly, it was four members of the Womanspace group that expressed views beyond a focus on women. They did not mention the distinction between feminists and radical feminists.

Tonya began the discussion by saying,

> Because I truly believe that feminism isn't about, it's about women's issues but more broadly it's about human issues, essentially. Human rights, and so that's why I believe, why I am deeply motivated by the fact that women's issues come out through feminism. But, basically I believe it is about human rights. (Tonya)

Krysta's view of feminists also included issues of equal rights for all.

> I think that language is power and whoever controls language has the power. And, there are so many stigma's when it comes to the word feminism, just as there are with liberal or conservative, that should not be attached to the word feminist and to be a feminist is to just want equal rights for all people. And to

> want everybody to have their place in the world and be valued just as much as the next person. (Krysta)

Rosie and Breanna both saw a feminist as being for equality for men and women. Rosie said, "I believe that being a feminist means that you believe in social, political and economic equality for men and women". Breanna said, "It's about equality".

Men as feminist

Members of the Womanspace group discussed whether men could be feminists. Mellissa said that although others think that only women can be feminists, this is not the case. She believes men can be feminist.

> I was just going to say, about men being feminist, my boyfriend a feminist and I have a friend who is a teacher at the middle school and I was just thinking like, um, how they both have these pressures to be so manly and that is a societal thing and it is hard for men to take the label of feminism because they get crap for it. (Mellissa)

Tonya agreed with Mellissa. She said,

> My fiancée is a feminist and its really funny because he comes to Take Back the Night every year and like, um, last year he helped pick up trash with our faculty

> advisor's husband and stuff like that and this year he is going to be doing that…(Tonya)

Krysta said she also considers her partner a feminist. She said,

> My boyfriend is a feminist, a huge feminist and he always has been a feminist... But, men can be feminist just as much as women can but it is because they, there are some who think that they can't that many (men) would not consider themselves feminist. (Krysta)

Breanna noted that she has a partner who supports her feminism. She added,

> On that note, my boyfriend had all the same views… And we wouldn't be dating these people if they weren't. But he never would have described himself as this if we hadn't talked about it. (Breanna)

Two women noted that men who identity as feminists are not immune from criticism and stereotyping. Mellissa, in talking about her boyfriend, pointed out that it can be difficult for men to be feminists. Mellissa, in talking about her friend who is a teacher, said,

> Like the teacher friend, he gets, people think he's gay at school because he wears earrings or whatever but he is married and its just ridiculous and annoying. (Mellissa)

Rosie also noted that men who are feminists can be labeled gay, even by feminists.

> One of the biggest feminists I know is a professor here. Going off of what you were saying, I think its really interesting, other women who were in the class who were huge feminists would say, Oh, he must be gay… So even women inside the feminist movement sometimes think that guys who are feminist are automatically going to be gay and my boyfriend is definitely one of the biggest feminists I have ever met.(Rosie)

These women are suggesting that men who breach norms of hegemonic masculinity by being feminists are subject to having their heterosexuality challenged (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Lauren, from the Mixed group, said she "100%" thought men could be feminist.

Feminist stigmas and stereotypes

When asked *What are feminists?* the women gave another set of answers. Nine of the women initially responded to this question by articulating this negative stereotype. In fact, all of the women in the second group responded by simultaneously saying 'Man-hater" Some of the women's responses were consistent with research by Burn et al (2000)

and Huddy et al (2000) that the term feminists evokes the stereotype that feminists are women who hate men.

Marlene, a member of the Mixed group said,

> I think that the stigma that exists now-a-days is that all feminists hate men, and that they think they should be castrated and that they shouldn't have a place in society. People who misunderstand what a feminist is being about sometimes will say that, um, if you identify as a feminist you are aligning yourself with all those man-hating women. (Marlene)

During the Womanspace focus group, Tonya made comments similar to Marlene's.

> I think that the feminist movement has been associated a lot of times with, like, LGBT movements which is not a bad thing by any means, I totally support that but I think that a lot of people have the idea, like Breanna was saying, all feminists are man-haters, all feminists are lesbians. And so that is the stigma associated with it. (Tonya)

Mellissa, a member of Womanspace, recounted that she had been called negative names because of her feminist views.

> I'm in a band with two other feminists and we wrote songs about feminist issues and all that stuff. We try to, because it is in the punk scene, its really sexist so we try to, like, battle that which is hard. People call us femi-nazi's a lot. (Mellissa)

It is interesting that during the Mixed focus group, Tori, who said she was not a feminist, did not view feminists as man haters as some non-feminists do.

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> I mean I know the stereotypes you are talking about, you know "Oh man haters" and… I don't see that. (Tori)

A discussion about the negative stereotypes of feminists led to a conversation about anti-feminism. Focus group members recognized that anti-feminist views, including the misconceptions that equality has been achieved and is detrimental to women are actively propagated. Tonya, a member of the Womanspace group, agreed with Faludi (1991) and Tobias (1997) that anti-feminist attacks are systematic and planned. She said,

> Anti-feminism is so engrained in our culture and is so profound that you are actually discouraging people from being feminists, and I think that is one of the barrier's that all of us face all the time like with our friends and things like that is that our culture says look a certain way, our culture says women have rights, our culture says there is no segregation any more and all of these things combined and sort of say, oh we don't need feminists. (Tonya)

Breanna also felt that misinformation about feminists and equality for women have led people to believe that equality has been reached.

> With the ambiguity also, I think that especially because people can't see the inequality now. I have a lot of people say to me "What are you still bitching about? Didn't you guys take care of this stuff already? Why are you not equal? What opportunities have you not had?" So, you know, facing those kind of questions is also frustrating. (Breanna)

Krysta advocated for practical ways of breaking feminist stereotypes. She suggested that the "This is what a feminist looks like" t-shirt might be a simple way to combat the stigma and stereotypes presented by anti-feminists. She said,

> I think that the "This is what a feminist looks like" t-shirt is a really good example of this kind of situation because you can put that t-shirt on anybody. When you say I'm a feminist, you are going to think of a stereotypical kind of feminist… And that is not what a feminist is and that is why they made that shirt. They are trying to cancel out all those stigma's that they have or those stereotypes. (Krysta)

As noted above, the women indicated that they *were aware* of some of the negative stereotypes connected to feminists; however, none of them articulated that they defined feminists in negative ways.

A unifying definition of feminist

In addition to articulating their definitions of feminists, the women discussed whether there was a need for a standard definition. The question of whether a consistent definition is needed has been addressed by feminist writers. For example, hooks argues that one of the main problems in feminist discourse is the lack of one definition of what a feminist is. She claims that a shared definition is needed to help generate a unified, political movement (hooks 1984:xi). Her argument was reflected in the women's conversations about one unifying definition of feminist.

Deanne, a member of the Mixed group, said,

> I think American society needs to revamp their definition of feminism. I feel like we, like you need to tack down a certain ideal that every feminist, or almost every feminist, has and we can discuss what that ideal is. I think it is necessary, um, see it's hard! I don't know what it is! (Deanna)

Tori, also from the Mixed group, agreed with Deanne.

> Maybe there needs to be a set definition. Because if there is a set definition that you would find, but, like, it changes from person to person. I mean, what I view as a feminist is different than what you view as a feminist and I think that as a society, and women in general we have to set one definition. (Tori)

Tori added a qualifier to her call for a definition.

> I think we should set values to the word feminist, I don't think we should set opinions to it. I think it's setting what a feminist is, like defining what a feminist is rather than defining what a feminist does. (Tori)

Deanne seem to contradict her early statement that some uniformity in what is meant by feminist is needed as she reacted to Tori's comments. She asserted

> I absolutely respectfully disagree. I think that we need to understand that feminism is different. We cannot write in stone what feminism is because people will say "I'm not those 15 things so I can't deal with this" And I do, like… I'm pro-life, I'm extremely Catholic but I hate to see women who are paid less. I think that you are allowed, and every single person in this world, every man, every woman and every lizard is allowed to believe their own definition of feminism. (Deanna)

In the Womanspace group Krysta added her voice to this discussion. She said,

> At first I was going to say that it is terrible that it is so ambiguous, but when you don't have a strict definition for what something is. You know, like an apple is this… You can argue what it's not…(Krysta)

Whether to have a standard definition of feminist is not a trivial concern. Beatrice pointed out that when people did "not know what the definition is" they "jump to the worst" stereotypes.

Is feminist identity related to women's willingness to engage in action on behalf of women?

The last research question addressed whether the respondents would be willing to engage in behavior on behalf of equality for women, even if they did not define themselves as feminists. Again, having all but one feminist in the group prevented this question from being adequately answered. Further, the conversation moved away from this question to what constitutes activism. Still, the women's discussion provided useful information for understanding the relationship between feminism and activism.

Even though the women were asked if one needed to act to be feminist, this question only generated two comments, both from the Mixed group. Tori, who labeled herself not a feminist, although she "advocated" for women, believed that a person had to be an activist to be a feminist. She said,

> Kind of, yeah… Kind of, yeah… You know the term feminist… If you are going to deem yourself feminist you have to do something to get that title. Like a type of situation. You can't just, like, be a feminist. You have to do something to be a feminist and I just don't so… (Tori)

Consistent with her statements that she was not a feminist, Tori said that she would not be active. In addition, she seemed to have a different take than some of the others on what counts as a feminist activity.

> I'm just not the person that's gonna go out and, you know, be marching the parades and all that stuff. I don't even view Take Back the Night as a feminist thing, I think that's like a community thing. I wouldn't have even, like, thought of that as being feminist at all. But I am not the person going out marching in the parades. (Tori)

Unlike Tori, other focus group members specifically mentioned Take Back the Night as a feminist event.

Tonya offered a nuanced answer to the question of whether feminists have to be activists.

> I don't think you necessarily have to try to be an activist if you are a feminist because I think that by being a feminist you pretty much are being an activist because every time that you are challenged you are educating people. So I think education is a big part of being a feminist and in being educated and in educating others, that's activism (Tonya)

Rather than discuss whether feminists have to be active, the women spent time on giving their views on what constitutes feminist activism. When discussing activism, the

women focused on individual acts and not involvement in collective behaviors. Indeed, some specifically noted that feminists did not have to join with others. It was as if they were responding to and trying to counter the viewpoint that only participation in organized actions counts as activism.

During the Mixed focus group, Marlene and Deanne referred to talking as action.

> I see activism as being a very subjective term. Basically I see any person who will make the slightest remark or decision to increase equality is an activist. Basically I see myself as having been an activist because I will always try and educate people about what I think is equal and, um, I guess you don't really have to participate in Take Back the Night or, I guess, volunteer to be an activist. There are lots of little things that you can do to be an activist. (Marlene)

She continued,

> Um, if, I guess if someone says a sexist remark, if someone counters that with a another remark to make them aware that, you know, this is wrong and really you should not be saying those things, then that is just an activist thing to do. (Marlene)

Deanne added that someone who engaged in activism by responding to others needed to be informed to be effective.

> I think another way to be an activist is to be informed. Be really informed. Like, don't stop looking up things, don't stop looking up facts and the truth because I think if you are well informed and someone says something off color, or like, isn't exactly right, you don't have to attack them, just let people know, spread the knowledge. (Deanne)

Mellissa, Rosie, and Krysta from the Womanspace group mentioned talk as action. Mellissa provided an example of a time she spoke up on behalf of women.

> We get that, there was like this one band full of guys who wrote this song that was like "we like pussy" blah, blah, blah and we called them out on it. And they were like, "Dude, it's just a song". So people just think that we take everything to seriously. (Mellissa)

Krysta also mentioned language. She said,

> That's everyday feminism. We're not all out there rallying for, you know, pro-choice efforts everyday. Everyday feminism is fighting to change the language, to change the perceptions of what it is. That is what it comes down to. (Krysta)

In addition to responding to the words of others, Krysta noted that feminists need to be careful what they say.

> I don't know if this is right, but it's kind of a catch 22 because you can be a feminist and say that you are a feminist and say that you are a feminist but then also do things in your daily life that completely negate that. You can call another woman a bitch and that completely negates everything that you are supposed to be standing for. (Krysta)

Rosie mentioned the importance of speaking up.

> We can take a step forward and, like five steps back when there is a feminist who will sit there and stand for things like jokes about rape and guys saying things like " I just want to screw that chick". I have had that happen where it is like a really good friend whose a feminist and they don't stand up for what they believe in. So, I think that you can make a really big impact even if you don't do a lot because I do think it is about the little things that you do. (Rosie)

Beatrice and Rosie both cited examples of talking with younger siblings about feminism as an example of feminist activism.

> My little brother is 12 and I have told him all about the things that I do here, and he and I have talked about it and I think now he says he's a feminist and he will tell his friends about it. So, like, the little things, you know, they eventually will make a big difference. (Beatrice)

> Going back to what Beatrice was saying about her little brother. When I got my little sister and my mom shirts that say "this is what a feminist looks like" and my sister, who is really religious which is weird because no one else in my family is, she went to church one day wearing it and she had all these people bombarding her and were like, "what's a feminist? What are you talking about?" and like, I trained her, like before she left I was like "ok, what's the definition of a feminist?" (Rosie)

When asked if they have or would be willing to engage in activism, only Tori said that she would not. Two members from the Mixed group said that they would be willing but did not say that they had done so.

> Yeah, I think that I would be willing to be active and participate in things that I like, also believed in. (Marie)

> Would I be willing? Yes of course. I don't know why, or what has stopped me, I guess I just haven't found where or how and, um, I guess I haven't pursued it. (Katie)

Other women provided examples of what they had done on behalf of gender equality. When discussing what types of activities they have engaged in, the focus group members discussed involvement in collective behaviors and organized activities.

Although they noted earlier than speaking up against sexism counted, they also were members of organized efforts to improve the condition of women.

Deanne, Marie, and Lauren who were members of the Mixed group were involved in a variety of organized activities. Deanne indicated that she worked for equality through her involvement in organizations and issues that might not be specifically labeled as feminists.

> I have participated in things that are feminist orientated. They are generally equality orientated like, worked with young democrats to try and defeat ballot issue 1 which was like a marriage act. [the same sex marriage ban]
> …And I guess anything that has to do with domestic or sexual abuse are really important because I don't think it matters what your view on any thing is, like everyone should be active in that. (Deanne)

Marie's involvement in activism also included participating in collective behavior.

> I've done two Take Back the Night Rally's and my freshman year I went to George Mason and, um, there were pro-life people, I guess since they are so close to DC that there were pro-life people set up all the time. And they would have these big huge posters of abortion pictures and fetuses and stuff like that to kind of get their opinion and their point out and that made me want to, like, I guess like combat against them and now I do more things on campus to kind of, like, go against that. (Marie)

Lauren asserted "I am absolutely an activist" and then provided examples of working with others in coordinated efforts to reduce inequality.

> Most of my activism around here is through the women's center on campus as well as with the Women's Resource Center in the New River Valley… I'm a CARE companion *(note: CARE is an acronym for Crisis Advocate Responding Effectively. They go to hospitals or police stations when a victim of sexual assault reports)* and that's probably, I think a very different way, a lot of times you think of activism, you think of going out and marching and protesting and making your voice heard and all that stuff. I feel like being a CARE companion is a very different way to be an activist... To be there with a victim, usually right after something has happened. I'm also a feminist activist in South Dakota on this Indian reservation where women's issues are so very different than they are here in Blacksburg, it's a very different situation. (Lauen)

Not surprisingly, Krysta and Rosie, members in the Womanspace group, mentioned participating in organized events.

> Well, first of all, I mean, because we are all members of Womanspace we have specific things that Womanspace does every year that we have all been involved in for at least the past however many years we have been here, so for me it is four.

> And, those events include Love Your Body Day… The clothesline project…Take Back the Night rally and march. (Krysta)

As with others, Rosie's activism extended beyond events at Virginia Tech.

> I worked at the feminist majority foundation this summer in Los Angeles so I got to do a little activism there on the campus in California and also we worked with the California labor union to get them to say they would vote no on the parental notification act that was going on in California so that was good. (Rosie)

In the following chapter I present a discussion of the focus group findings.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between self identification as a feminist, or lack thereof, and willingness to engage in activism on behalf of women. Through two focus groups I attempted to answer the following research questions.

1) Do college women identify as feminists?

2) What are women's views of feminists?

3) Is feminist identification related to action on behalf of women?

Given that all but one woman involved in the focus group identified as feminist, the above questions could be only partially answered.

In regards to the question of whether the women in the focus groups identify as feminists, the answer was yes. Although some women said they were with less certainty than others, they still identified as such. Only one woman said she was not a feminist, but even in her case she said that she "advocated" on behalf of women. Even though I did recruit focus group members in the way that I wanted, I was still under the illusion when I started this research that I would have women who fell into Aronson's (2003) categories—"I am a feminist," "I am not a feminist…but," and so on. This was not the case.

The lack of diversity in feminist identity was most assuredly a result of my recruitment strategies. The lack in variation in responses is mostly likely due to how the members of the focus group were recruited. In the email, classroom announcement and informed consent form I said that this was a study about feminists/feminism. I believe

that I would have had more variance if I had said that this was a study about "gender", "equality", "women", or even "the women's movement".

The Women were recruited from a feminist organization on campus and from volunteers interested in the topic. Further, all the women in the Womanspace group knew each other. Identity theory and symbolic interactions state that social identities are shaped by interactions with others. Our reference groups and social roles have an important influence on how we perceive ourselves. Thus, membership in a feminist organization and association with others who have feminist identities could lead to and reinforce one's one self-identification as a feminist (Stryker et al. 2000:6). In fact, the influence of social groups is so strong that it is surprising that one member noted that a woman in Womanspace does not identity as a feminist. Two women in the Mixed group knew each other as well.

The discussion on what is a feminist was more fruitful with divergent views being offered. However, the women's discussion of what a feminist is did not reflect the diversity of types of feminists that have emerged since the 1960s. Rather than feminism, for example, we now talk of feminisms. The women did note that all feminists are not the same. For example, they articulated that one can be a feminist and be pro-life. However, radical vs. non-radical were only distinction the women made about types of feminists.

Some spoke of feminists working for women's rights, but qualified this by making a distinction between feminists and radical or extreme feminists. This division has been found in other research on feminist identification. Quinn and Radtke (2006) found that women in their focus groups had difficulty accepting a feminist identity as

well as difficulty rejecting it. One way that women dealt with this contradiction was by categorizing feminists into different types. The women divided feminists into two groups: a liberal version emphasizing equality and rights and a negative extremist version. This facilitated their acceptance of feminists without having to consider themselves "one of those types of feminists." Some of the women in my focus group did this as well.

Others explicitly said that feminists worked toward equality for both men and women and human rights, not just women's rights. This led the women to ask if men could be feminists. After little discussion, they conclude that men could and provided examples of men they knew who were. Their conclusion fits that of a definition of feminists posited by Richards & Baumgardner (2000); they too assert that men can be feminists. They write. "By feminists, we mean each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality within or outside the movement, writes about feminism, or calls her-or himself a feminist in the name of furthering equality" (Richards & Baumgardner 2000:54).

The women were well aware of the negative stereotypes associated with being feminists. Although none of them seemed to agree with these, some distanced themselves from radical feminists. It is possible that these women might hold negative views of some feminists. Given the concerted effort made by conservatives in the New Right, it is not surprising that the women identified the propaganda that has been made to turn back and stop the accomplishments of feminists.

An important discussion that I had not anticipated was when the women wrestled with whether a uniform definition of feminist is needed. Arguments were made on both sides without resolution. Feminist scholars also have engaged in this debate. For

example, hooks (1984) argues that there are negative implications of the lack of a unified definition. hooks states "A central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definitions that could serve as a point of unification… It indicates a growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement" (hooks 1984:xi). Others don't agree with hooks. Rather, they posit definitions of feminists that include a wide range of characteristics that would probably prevent consensus formation. For example, Richards and Baumgardner's (2000) provide this definition of feminists: "By feminists, we mean each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality within or outside the movement, writes about feminism, or calls her-or himself a feminist in the name of furthering equality" (Richards & Baumgardner 2000:54).

The final research question was whether feminist identification was related to action on behalf of women. The one woman who said she was not a feminist did not engage in actions on behalf of women. Two women said that they had not as yet participated in feminists activism, but they would be willing to do so.

The remaining women listed a variety of activities. Identity theory would suggest as much. Most of the women were assertive in labeling themselves as feminists. They indicated that being feminists were important parts of who they are. Identity theory argues that when identities are important then social behavior is likely to result (Hogg, et al. 1995).

The women's involvement in a variety of activities seems congruent with those scholars who include an action component in their definitions of feminist. Two types of

activism were identified by the group members. First, they spoke of individual actions such as speaking up when sexist statements were made.

Second, they talked of being involved in collective behavior and organized events and groups that worked toward feminist goals. The women listed an impressive list of involvement in organizations that ranged from the campus and the community to national organizations. Their participation in organized events suggests that to some degree, they are involved in the larger social movement to gain equality between men and women and end sexist oppression (Lorber 2005; hooks 1984).

Participation in organization is one way that collective identities are formed and maintained (Melucci 1996 as cited in Klandermans & de Weerd, 2000). Porta and Diani (2006) argue that collective identities are important for social change because they lead to a greater likelihood of joining in social movements on behalf of group members. This is particularly the case when there is a clearly identified opponent and actors are linked by dense informal networks (Porta & Diani 2006). Thus, having a feminist identity that is shared by others might lead to not only individual acts on behalf of women but involvement with collective action to reduce gender inequities. This seems to be the case for the women in the focus groups.

When I first thought about selecting this research topic, it was because I was worried that maybe feminists were irrelevant. As I encountered college-aged women who rejected the feminist label, I feared that gender inequality might become worse or progress stalled. Then I reflected that maybe self-identification as a feminist was no longer a pre-requisite for action on behalf of women. Might it be the case that women could be motivated to work toward the advancement of other women without taking on a

feminist identity? Because all but one of the women in the focus groups identified as feminist, I was not able to answer the question that motivated this research. Nonetheless, from my interactions with these 12 women, I feel reassured that there is a new generation of feminists who have joined the struggle.

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Vita for Adrienne M. Trier-Bieniek

EDUCATION

Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI
PhD, Sociology to begin Fall 2007

Virginia Polytechnic and State Institution, Blacksburg, VA
MS., Sociology-May, 2007
Graduate Certificate-Women's Studies, completed December 2006

Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Allendale, MI
Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Studies-Interpersonal Relations, December 2002
Minor: Women and Gender Studies, December 2002
Minor: Sociology, April 2005

West Shore Community College, Scottville, MI
Associate of Arts, May 2000

AWARDS RECEIVED

- Outstanding Female Student, Grand Valley State University, Winter-2003
- President's Award, Grand Valley State University, Winter-2003
- Heart and Soul Award, (an award for excellence in service learning) Michigan Campus Compact, Winter-2003

COURSES TAUGHT

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
Research Methods Lab, Spring 2006

TEACHING INTERESTS

- Social Inequality
- Social Problems
- Introduction to Sociology
- Sociology of Women

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Diversity Training, Grand Valley State University Women's Center, Fall 2002-Present

- Developed diversity training for all volunteers to participate in
- Facilitated multiple trainings for volunteers on areas such as privilege, confidentiality, diversity and service learning
- Performed administrative duties such as research, developing curriculum for training, tracking trained volunteers and reporting results to

Community Working Classics, Grand Valley State University, Fall 2001-Winter 2002

- Participated in service learning program and taught Shakespeare and Ethic's classes at Grand Rapids Job Corps
- Worked with students ages 16-24
- Prepared lessons for each class

- Performed administrative duties such as grading and planning activities outside of the classroom

ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS

Research Fellow-Feminist Methodology Symposium at Virginia Tech
Presenting Master's Thesis: To Be or Not To Be A Feminist: A Qualitative Study, Spring 2007, Blacksburg, VA

Panelist- Inspiring Feminist Activism- *Panel for the National Women's Studies Association 2007 Conference,* Summer 2007 Chicago, Illinois

Panelist and Moderator, Grand Valley State University Women and Gender Studies Festival, Allendale, MI

- *The Labor of Creativity*: A Discussion of The Vagina Monologues, Winter 2003, moderator and panelist
- *Women and Volunteerism*, Winter 2003, moderator and panelist
- *Service Learning and Social Research*, Winter 2002, panelist

PEW Faculty Teaching and Learning Conference, Allendale, MI

- *Service Learning and Education*, Fall 2002, panelist

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
Graduate Assistant, August 2005-May 2007

- Assisted faculty member with preparing for undergraduate courses
- Taught Research Methods lab for undergraduate students
- Completed tasks as requested by faculty

Grand Valley State University Women's Center Allendale, MI
Volunteer Coordinator, July 2002 – 2005
Developed new program that aimed to service women and girls in the community

- Identified and developed ongoing relationships with community agencies serving as potential sites for student volunteers
- Developed and administered service learning curriculum for all new volunteers
- Interviewed, recruited, and trained new student volunteers on areas of diversity
- Facilitated ongoing training and informational meetings of volunteers and staff
- Tracked volunteer time as well as agency input.
- Administered tracking of volunteers and program evaluations for agencies

Producer- GVSU's Production of The Vagina Monologues and the V-Day College Campaign
Produced and coordinated 6 benefit performances of *The Vagina Monologues* with the 2004 and 2005 V-Day College Campaign

- Production raised $12,900 for University Women's Center and local Women's Shelters in 2004
- Wrote and received grant for $4750 cover expenses
- Coordinated and recruited cast, crew and volunteers for event
- Managed Budget and all financial contributions
- Oversaw publicity, casting and program guidelines

Intern/Teacher- Community Working Classics Program, Grand Valley State University, September 2001-May 2002
Award winning, philosophy based service learning program focused on doing education and volunteerism with inner city and lower income community members.

- Taught at Grand Rapids Job Corps Center, State-funded program providing educational opportunities for 16-24 year-olds who are seeking completion of high school equivalency and job skills training
- Prepared lessons and taught separate courses in Shakespearean literature and Ethics utilizing multiple methods including lecture, performance, and discussion
- Administrative responsibilities included class and teacher evaluations; facilitation of guest speakers; and field trips including program planning, site selection, transportation, and meals

GRANTS AWARDED

Women's Issues Volunteer Corps, 2002-2005

- Received service learning grant from The Dorothy Johnson Center for Philanthropy for the Women's Issues Volunteer Corps, $6500 per year

The Vagina Monologues

- Received grant to cover administrative expenses from The Nokomis Foundation, $4750