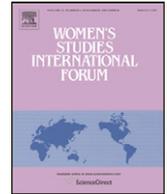




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Feminist identity, collective action, and individual resistance among contemporary U.S. feminists[☆]



Maura Kelly

Department of Sociology, Portland State University, 1721 SW Broadway, #217, Portland, OR 97201, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 24 November 2014

SYNOPSIS

This article examines the relationship between feminist identities and engagement with feminist activism in everyday life, including collective action and individual resistance. I draw on in-depth interviews with women and men in knitting communities, which some have identified as part of contemporary feminist culture. I found variety in feminist identities, including those who identified publicly as feminists and those who identified as feminists only privately. Other participants held postfeminist positions, represented by support for feminist issues but declining a feminist identity. I found that feminist identity was inconsistently associated with feminist activism. Participants with public feminist identities, with definitions of feminism that drew on discourses of equality (rather than choice), and those with broader knowledge of feminist issues were more likely to be engaged with feminist activism. In defining activism, participants put significant emphasis on individual resistance or everyday feminism.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Understanding what it means to identify as a feminist and the implications for feminist activism are of central concern to feminist scholarship. Previous qualitative research has examined women's attitudes towards feminism (e.g. Aronson, 2003; Crossley, 2010; Rich, 2005) and activism in the context of feminist social movements and communities (e.g. Bobel, 2010; Reger, 2012). In conceptualizing feminist activism, some scholars have adopted a broad definition that includes both collective action and individual resistance (e.g. Reger, 2012) as well as institutional and extra-institutional tactics that target the state, other institutions, or culture (e.g. Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). A few quantitative analyses have assessed connections between women's feminist identities and their

engagement with activism (e.g. Liss & Erchull, 2010; Yoder, Tobias, & Snell, 2011). I contribute to these discussions by examining narratives of feminist identity and activism and their relevance in everyday life, drawing on in-depth interviews with men and women. My primary goals are to examine the identities of feminist and activist and, further, how these identities translate (or do not translate) into engagement with collective action and individual resistance.

In this article, I investigate feminist identities and activism in the contemporary U.S. context, drawing on in-depth interviews with men and women involved in knitting communities. Some writers and scholars have identified knitting as part of contemporary feminist culture and have noted that some feminists view knitting as a way of reclaiming a devalued feminine craft (e.g. Pentney, 2008; Wills, 2007); however, other scholars have observed that while there are many feminists in knitting communities, there are only occasional examples of knitting as an intentional feminist practice (e.g. Kelly, 2014; Groeneveld, 2010). Recruiting participants from knitting communities provides a useful opportunity to address the connections between feminist identity and activism in everyday life because of the range of orientations towards feminism in

[☆] This project was funded by a Doctoral Dissertation Extraordinary Expense Award at the University of Connecticut. The author would like to thank Mary Bernstein, Nancy Naples, David Weakliem, Jo Reger, Amy Lubitow, Gordon Gauchat, and Natalie Peluso for their helpful comments on drafts of this manuscript. A version of this paper was presented at the Pacific Sociological Association meeting in Seattle, WA and the American Sociological Association meeting in Las Vegas, NV in 2011.

knitting communities, including many self-identified feminists. Given my interest in individual resistance and feminism in everyday life, I take up the strategy of recruiting from communities with wide variation in attitudes towards feminism, as opposed to recruiting from feminist social movement organizations where participants are more likely to have consistently stronger commitments to feminism and activism. Specifically, I ask three questions: (1) How do these feminists define their feminist identities? (2) How do they describe their engagement with activism? (3) How do they understand the relationship between their feminist identities and activism? In conceptualizing activism and activist identities, I take a broad definition (informed by previous scholarship and my participants' narratives) that includes all challenges to constituted authority, that is, collective and individual actions that impact institutions as well as cultural targets.

In the following sections, I first examine previous work on feminist identities and activism and describe the methods of the current project. I then examine narratives about feminist identities, including those who claim public feminist identities, those that have private feminist identities, and narratives of postfeminism. In examining participants' definitions of feminism, I focus on discourses of equality and choice, intersectional definitions of feminism, as well as knowledge of feminism. I then discuss participants' experiences with activism with a focus on participants' discussions of everyday feminism. Finally, in the discussion, I reconsider the theoretical questions about the connections between feminist and activist identities raised in previous scholarly work.

Literature review

Feminist identities

Feminist identity is, most basically, a collective identity, that is, “an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285). Within the social movements literature, feminist identity has primarily been examined as a movement identity, that is, an identity associated with membership in a feminist social movement (e.g. Bobel, 2010; Reger, 2002; Rupp and Taylor, 1999). Nancy Whittier (1995, 1997) suggested that feminist identities should be considered in the context of “political generations” of feminists. Feminist scholars have been interested in articulating the similarities and differences between those who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, the “second wave” of U.S. feminism, and those who came of age after second wave feminism, some of whom have taken up the label of “third wave” feminism. Social movements scholars have documented both the cohesion and the diversity of feminist identities within contemporary feminist social movements and communities (Beechey, 2005; Bobel, 2010; Gilmore 2005; Maddison, 2004; Reger, 2001, 2002, 2012). In *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States*, Jo Reger (2012) examined three feminist communities (two located in college/university settings and one centered in a progressive metropolitan area). Reger (2012) argued that feminism can appear to be both “everywhere” (an ideology shaping individuals' worldviews and cultural and social norms) and “nowhere” (limited visibility of explicitly feminism activism).

In addition to the work on feminist identity in the context of the social movements literature, sociological and social-psychological empirical studies have focused on feminist identity as an individual identity rather than as a collective identity. A central concern in this literature has been how individuals define feminism and varying degrees of commitment to feminist ideology. A few studies noted differences between private feminist identities (“I consider myself a feminist”) versus public feminist identities (“I identify myself as a feminist to other people”) (Leaper & Arias, 2011; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Szymanski, 2004). Other studies described a continuum of orientations towards feminism (Aronson, 2003; Kamen, 1991; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Sigel, 1996; Taylor, 1996). These articulations of the “feminist continuum” included people who identified as feminist, those who identified as feminist with qualified support (“I'm a feminist, but...”), those who did not identify as feminist but supported feminist goals (“I'm not a feminist, but...”), those who did not identify as feminist and disagreed with feminist goals, and those who were unable to define feminism. Several studies examined the “I'm not a feminist, but....” or postfeminist position, that is, support for feminist goals but rejection of a feminist identity (Aronson, 2003; Budgeon, 2001; Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Butler, 2013; Crossley, 2010; Jolles, 2012; Rich, 2005; Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008; Sharpe, 2001; Williams & Wittig, 1997; Zucker, 2004). These studies suggested that postfeminist young women adopt some aspects of feminist ideology tempered by an emphasis on individual choice.

Another significant issue in this literature has been the factors or experiences that lead contemporary young men and women to adopt or decline feminist identities. Some scholars have offered evidence that women's feminist identities develop in stages, with self-labeling as a feminist theoretically associated with the “synthesis” stage, which has been characterized by a sense of empowerment (e.g. Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Downing & Roush, 1985). However, other scholars noted that high levels of empowerment among all young women (not just feminists) led to a weak correlation between the synthesis stage and feminist self-labeling (Erchull et al., 2009; Liss & Erchull, 2010; Zucker, 2004). These scholars instead emphasized the correlation between awareness of gender inequality, a commitment to activism, and the development of feminist identities (Liss & Erchull, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011). In assessing how feminists attain knowledge and beliefs about feminism, studies found that exposure to feminism, usually defined as having feminist family members or friends or taking women's studies classes in college, was a consistent predictor of feminist identity (Aronson, 2003; Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Cowan, Mestlin, & Masek, 1992; Stake, Sevelius, & Hanly, 2008). Other studies noted that experiencing sexism predicted feminist identity (Liss & Erchull, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008; Reid & Purcell, 2004). Several studies pointed out that some young people declined to take on a feminist identity because they did not know enough about feminism to form an opinion of it (Aronson, 2003; Houvouras & Carter, 2008; Manago, Brown, & Leaper, 2009; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997). Alternatively, other studies noted that women rejected the label due to the stereotypes associated with feminists, such as “man-hating”, “militant”, or “lesbian” (Breen & Karpinski, 2008; Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Twenge & Zucker, 1999).

A final concern of sociological and social-psychological literature on feminist identity has been on differentiating the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/375925>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/375925>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)