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A Call for Feminist Mentors

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The word feminist*, contrary to any actual definition one might find in a dictionary, has been, and is, used as a derogatory term to denote such evils as man-haters and hairy-legged dykes. For women in college, this negative public perception can be detrimental to development of a positive feminist identity. The purpose of this paper is to review feminist history and the current divisions within the movement in order to set a stage for current campus attitudes toward feminists as a group. The history of different feminisms is then applied to the identity development of college students, with an emphasis on the importance of visible administrators and student affairs personnel who encourage growth through strong feminist role modeling.*

When this article was being written, the University of Vermont's newspaper, *The Vermont Cynic*, ran an op-ed piece entitled "Feminism is not a Four Letter Word" (Wehry, 2006). In it, undergraduate author Christina Wehry spoke to readers about the importance of feminist work and the consistent negativism that exhausts her as a feminist. Wehry uses her strong public voice to plead with her fellow students for respite from the constant assault on feminism and feminists who are doing good work.

The derogatory use of the word feminist is not a new phenomenon. Individuals and collectives who challenge the status quo are rarely celebrated in their time. Feminists have been demonized as man-haters, femi-nazis, lesbians, and hairy-legged dykes regardless of their personal classification within any of these groups. For women in college, this negative public perception of their group can be detrimental to development of a positive group identity.

The purpose of this paper is to give a brief overview of feminist history and the divisions currently within the movement, contributing to negative public attitudes towards feminists as a group. The importance of this history is then applied to the feminist identity development of college students and the need for administrators and student affairs personnel to encourage young people to cultivate a positive group identity through strong feminist role modeling.

What is Feminism?

Feminist activism dates back to the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. This first wave of feminism continued through to the 1920s and ended at the time of women's suffrage (Gilley, 2005). The fifty years between the first wave of feminism

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and the second are not a time of fragmentation within the movement, in the way that the second and third wave distinction tends to be, but are simply a passage of time. The second wave of feminism arose in the 1960s during the civil rights era (Gilley) and was characterized by gains in education and employment equity as well as political backlash from the Reagan and first Bush administrations.

From "its earliest inception feminist theory had as its primary goal explaining to women and men how sexist thinking worked and how we could challenge and change it" (hooks, 2001, p. 19). The silence of the voices of women of color and lesbian feminists in the second wave can be interpreted as directly encouraging the outgrowth of third wave feminism. Third wave feminism began as an attempt of younger feminists to distance themselves from their foremothers and emphasize individual difference within the movement. While second and third wave feminism are rooted in the same commitment to gender equity, the third wave has an important emphasis on personal choice and freedom which is rooted in individualism, as opposed to the second wave's quest for unity and the need to define a core female experience.

The young feminists found on college campuses today fall into the third wave of the movement based on their birth years (Gilley, 2005). The third wave on the whole takes issue with its predecessors' emphases on solidarity. A major point of the third wave is the stress on the multiplicity of identity. The third wave owes much to the voices of women of color and lesbians for claiming a place in the predominantly White, heterosexual, and middle-class second wave (Gilley). Importantly, the need for a third wave of feminism is influenced by the media's pronouncement of an early death of feminism. The twin beliefs that the second wave did not make enough progress and was stifling to women of color, working-class women, and lesbian, bisexual, and queer women necessitated the third wave.

Why Feminism?

Feminism has been a source of strength for many women. Snyder and Hasbrouck (1996) found that women who identify with feminist values as measured through Bargad and Hyde's (1991) Feminist Identity Development Scale were less likely to express dissatisfaction with their bodies, were less concerned with a drive toward thinness, and showed fewer bulimic tendencies (Snyder & Hasbrouck). This research may show that feminists base their body satisfaction on personal rather than social standards and are thus less likely to experience disturbed or disordered eating habits (Snyder & Hasbrouck). Feminist attitudes also contribute to a higher sense of self-esteem. Because feminist women feel a positive group identity, they are more likely to engage in collective action against sexism and gender violence (Carpenter & Johnson, 2001).

Most importantly for today's feminists, the goals of feminism have not been met. Although the media has joined in an effort to proclaim a post-feminist era, implying that the need for feminism is over and women have attained equity (Taylor, Whittier, & Rupp, 2006), women are still discriminated against in job markets and education, and violence is still perpetrated against women in disturbingly high numbers. In a longitudinal study of women and feminist identity, Aronson (2006) found that though only 14% of women "felt they had experienced blatant instances of gender discrimination, nearly all had experienced what they considered to be minor instances of discrimination or were aware of its possibility in the future" (p. 523). Though there may not be a core experience of womanhood, there is evidence that sexism connects all women.

Attitudes Toward Feminism

As identified in Wehry's (2006) article, feminists on college campuses and elsewhere are not applauded for their work against gender bias and violence against women but are instead characterized in unflattering ways. Stereotypes about feminists may have significant impact on individuals' decisions to identify as such because when one is bombarded with negative beliefs about a group or subscribes to some of them, one is less likely to want to belong to the stigmatized group (Williams & Wittig, 1997). When women encounter feminism it can significantly alter their previously held beliefs, like bell hooks' experience at Stanford University when feminism "rocked" the campus. hooks (2000) reflects, "feminist thinking helped us unlearn female self-hatred. It enabled us to break free of the hold patriarchal thinking had on our consciousness" (p. 14). Feminism gave women the right to draw from experience rather than training.

Women are programmed to believe they are inferior and can be pressured into fulfilling this prophecy:

> Stereotype threat can be thought of as the discomfort targets feel when they are at risk of fulfilling a negative stereotype about their group; the apprehension that they could behave in such a way as to confirm the stereotype—in the eyes of others, in their own eyes, or both at the same time. (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998, p. 85)

As evidenced by Aronson et al., stereotypes feed into insecurities of women and minorities when they engage in activities, especially academic, where they are generally believed to show poor performance as compared to their White, male counterparts. Feminism cannot detract importance from instances of gender stereotyping, but it can be a source of strength. When women are exposed to positively identified feminists, their beliefs regarding core truths about feminism are changed (Williams & Wittig, 1997).

Feminists are Made and not Born

Downing and Roush (1985) developed a stage model of feminist development based on Cross' (1991) Black identity development model. The five-stage model begins with a passive acceptance phase in which traditional sex roles are favored and men are accepted as superior; the model progresses through to the end point of active commitment in which a feminist identity is embraced and action to end sexism is valued (Downing & Roush). The third stage in the model, embeddedness-emanation, is integral to development an "characterized by a first phase involving the discovery of sisterhood, and immersion in women's culture, and a preference for socializing with women to the exclusion of men" (Bargad & Hyde, 1991, p. 183). It has been suggested that feminist identification is strongest in this third stage (Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001) and the need for a supportive network of feminist identified role models is integral for students on their way towards developing synthesized feminist identities.

Though general belief in the tenets of feminism is more common now than during the political backlash of the 1980s, the expression of feminist ideals is decreasingly correlated with the feminist label. Moreover, "in academic settings, female students are hard-pressed to find enough female professors 'to go around', due to the disproportionately low number of senior faculty members who are women" (Rader, 2001, p. 80). For women, a same-sex mentor can be a living demonstration that women can be leaders in their fields and have healthy personal and professional lives (Rader). Though it may be easier for women to find opposite-sexed mentors, "male mentors may adopt a 'father' role that discourages autonomy" (Rader, p. 81). The need for feminist direction necessitates more strong female leadership in the academy. This absence of enough female mentors stresses the continued societal need for feminism.

"Older feminist thinkers cannot assume that young females will just acquire knowledge of feminism along the way to adulthood. They require guidance. Overall, women in our society are forgetting the value and power of sisterhood" (hooks, 2000, p.17). The emergence of Women's Studies programs on campuses attests to a growing emphasis on the histories and lives of women. One of the goals of Women's Studies as a discipline is to "encourage an understanding and a practical adoption of a feminist perspective" (Bargad & Hyde, 1991, p. 182), and in this realm, there has been some success. Research shows that women who have encountered feminist theory and thought in an academic setting have felt encouraged in their feminist identity development and empowered toward collective action (Bargad & Hyde). Though a step in the feminist direction, Women's Studies courses cannot reach every student, let alone every woman. A feminist education should not be relegated to its own corner of the academic realm but infused throughout the university.

Implications

There has been some indication that developing academic groups specific to feminist scholars is intensely beneficial to feminists in the academy. Butler (1998) found in developing a feminist research group that connecting with other feminists was seen as a positive and influential piece of supporting feminist identified scholars. Simply the process of being on a feminist listserv without actually attending the majority of meetings was a welcome step for feminists who felt isolated in their experience, but did not classify themselves primarily as feminist researchers (Butler). Groups that meet regularly, like Feminist Majority Leadership Alliances, can reach more people via the Web than those members who have time to attend meetings.

A woman-centric curriculum was also influential to the development of women in the Academy. "When we challenged professors who taught no books by women, it was not because we did not like those professors (we often did); rightly we wanted an end to gender biases in the classroom and the curriculum" (hooks, 2000, p.15). Given the history of feminism, it is important to note that within the movement, women of color, lesbians, and working-class women have been in less supported positions for developing positive feminist group identities (Taylor et al., 2006). It is important for young feminists to see a wide variety of feminist leaders and works within the academy that facilitate a multidimensional understanding of what a feminist is and how one is made.

Though women were hesitant to adopt the label of feminist themselves, even considering their beliefs about gender equity, men had a much more difficult time accepting a feminist label (Williams & Wittig, 1997). There is little research about the process of feminist identity formation in men and possible differences in how men make meaning of feminism or what a feminist identity provides for men. There is certainly room for such scholarship as male allies can provide sources of strength for females who carry the brunt of the feminist movement. The presence of out male feminists on campus as role models would have a significant effect on perceptions of feminists. When men join the movement, feminists cannot be labeled man-haters.

Though research points to benefits for women who adopt feminist identities, there is a consistent lack of feminist role models on campuses. Due to negative assumptions and classifications of feminists, it is essential that women encounter feminists of all stripes in order to further their understanding of feminism as a group composed of individuals. When there are enough feminist role models in public view, women can feel more comfortable and supported in developing their own identity as feminists. Students like Christina Wehry (2006) will not need to stand alone.

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