

Drawing Theory from Research and Practice

My personal reflections

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<http://critical-courses.cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php>

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Theoretical lessons from my research on feminism

- First, I would like to note that feminism is a loaded term, shifting and negotiated over time and taking on different shapes and understandings depending on one's perspective and location.
- Moreover, there are a myriad of feminist theories ranging from feminist critical theory, liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, post-modern feminism, etc.
- My theoretical framework:
 - A conceptualization of the feminist movement as those movements that struggle for gender equity and liberation from sexist oppression
 - The notion of the waves of feminism to describe three main phases of the feminist movement
 - Open space understood as a space that is socially horizontal, with no leaders, relatively undirected without an owner, where ideas can be freely exchange, and which celebrates diversity and plurality. Whitaker also likens open space to a factory of ideas or an incubator where new movements can emerge with more specific aims yet which also amplify the wider struggle
- Finally, and ultimately I suppose, my paper attempted to examine how open space and dissent has allowed for the evolution and growth of both the feminist movement and feminist theorizing

Theoretical links to practice

- I did attempt to link both feminist theory, as well as theories of open space to practices within the feminist movement:
 - Second wave feminists began to question the essentialist and universal category of "woman" and instead advanced the notion that gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality intersect in their identity formation and that they experience oppression on many levels, not just as women. In practice, this translated into new, and often small and local, women's groups emerging in the 1980s to represent the needs of specific categories of women which allowed women from marginalized groups to voice their concern that the majority white, heterosexual feminists must begin to take into account the differences in race, religion, ethnicity, different abilities, ages, and sexual orientations (Black, 1993).
 - Third wave feminist theorizing consisted of concepts of multiple identifications, complexities, and ambiguities, and cautions against thinking in dichotomous terms. In practice, these theoretical perspectives translated in the use of personal narratives, the Internet, and zines, all of them having the constant thread of practicing feminism at the individual, personal level
 - Taking the broader theory of open space, I was able to identify several instances of open space in practice such as woman-centered collectives and

forums; consciousness-raising groups; and well as textual strategies of independently produced zines, and the Internet, which served as an important space for women and girls to communicate with others as well as organise and share information.

- The World March of Women (WMW) is also one example of how theory has informed practice:
 - Janet Conway notes that the debates of the second wave of feminism regarding how women differently experience their gender depending on their geographical location has led to a greater sensitivity to these differences as well as a commitment to fighting inequality not only between women and men, but among women.
 - Also, the creation of a Women's Global Charter for Humanity in 2005 was developed through what the World March of Women referred to as "tried and true" practices that were present in earlier feminist waves such as talking together, sharing stories, and finding common interests
- Another important lesson in examining theory is to question both its usefulness, and its role in perpetuating stereotypes and subordinating others.
 - Feminists remain implicated in reproducing the marginalisation of women of colour by continuing to reconstruct a particular version of history that relies on mainstream sources which omit women of colour (Cooper, 2000). Women of colour in both advanced capitalist states as well as former colonies are still pushed to the margins of Western feminist discourse and depicted as "monolith, pitied as passive, dismissed as tradition-bound" in a discourse that "mirrors the Empire... and of global capitalism" (Carty, 1999, p.41).
 - Another common critique of the feminist movement, whether from the first, second, or third wave, is that it has been taken over by white, middle-class women who focus on the privatisation of the family. This white, middle-class version of feminist thought focuses on how women have been relegated to the domestic sphere of the household and focuses on gender oppression as the central cause of women's inequality, yet sidesteps an analysis of how race and class impact on women's experiences both inside and outside of the house as well as how their white privilege afford them to engage in the struggle in the first place (Carty, 1999; Cooper, 2000). In other words, second wave feminists, who were largely white and middle class, often focused on gender oppression as the central cause of women's inequality while ignoring how race interacts with one's experience as a woman (Cooper, 2000).
- Lastly, a lesson learned on theory and practice is that it is in constant evolution.
 - In my particular case, I examined how open space and dissent within the movement has motivated, initiated, or provoked evolving theory. bell hooks noted the necessity of feminism to be "a theory in the making" which necessitates criticism, deeper analysis, and the exploration of new possibilities. In considering feminism as a theory in the making, it becomes clear that dissenting views that challenge homogenous or universalistic notions of a woman's experience help to both deconstruct feminism as well as add layers to it thereby contributing to the process of critique, analysis, and opening of new possibilities which hooks advocated as necessary for the growth of feminism.