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CONCEPTUALIZING FEMINISM

Clarifying Social Science Concepts

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of structured conceptualization to develop a framework for understanding the concept of feminism. Ideas were brainstormed by 84 self-defined feminists and 150 of these ideas were randomly selected from the 710 which were contributed. Two other groups of self-defined feminists (total n = 34) conducted an unstructured sort of the ideas and the sort information was analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis to produce a concept map. The map which resulted is described and some of the advantages of using this method are considered.

Feminism in its theoretical formulation is so broad, varied and conflicting that it escapes definition in specific terms. Attempts made over the past 10 to 15 years to capture and categorize its meaning and characteristics with various labels (e.g., Eisenstein, 1983; Freeman, 1975; Fritz, 1979; Jaggar, 1983) have contributed to a flourishing literature which continues to reflect feminism's diverse and rather elusive theoretical meaning. Although process is a definite focus for feminist theorists, not as much attention has been given to systematic recording, analyzing, debating, and synthesizing the meaning of feminism as it is embodied in practice. For example, what does the practice at the Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice tell us about the meaning of this concept (Linton, in press)? What is revealed about the meaning of feminism in the continuing struggle for reproductive rights, e.g., from legal and legislative campaigns to preparations to resist the growing number of increasingly violent attacks on birth control and abortion clinics?

There is often confusion about the relation of the terms "feminist" and "women." Some women see themselves as advocates of feminism;[1] others do not (Rowland, 1979). Advocates of feminism consider all women's experience as a basis for defining issues, although our own life experience and circumstances constrain what we know about "all women's experience." Further, many women who do not consider themselves advocates of feminism still support the efforts of advocates of feminism on many issues which benefit them specifically or which benefit women in general. They also, both individually and collectively, work on varying issues as women. Although this study concentrates on activities and beliefs of women who are advocates of feminism, it should be understood that the base of experience which constitutes the domain of our activities is the life experience of all women (for further examples, see references: Association of African Women for Research and Development, 1980; Beneria & Roldan, 1986; Davies, 1983; Kishwar & Vanita, 1984; and Russell, 1976).

Clearly the conceptual domain of this topic is rich in its variety of both substance and method. Accessing this domain in a way consistent with feminism's tenets and producing an outcome which is useful in the continuing clarification of the concept is the challenge facing our conceptualization method. The study I will cite to illustrate this method (Linton, 1985) had a dual purpose: to produce a conceptual map of the meaning of feminism to the particular participants involved; and to

[1]This term, advocates of feminism, is used by bell hooks (1984) in her recent book to indicate a belief in ending sexist oppression, rather than a belief in seeking sexual equality. I use it consciously to reflect her meaning.

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explore the fit of the conceptualization method to feminist principles as derived from feminist practice. This paper focuses on the former—the concept mapping process itself. In addition to raising questions about and clarifying our present knowledge and activity, the map can further provide a basis for thinking about and debating future theoretical and programmatic directions.

THE CONCEPT MAPPING PROCESS

In the implementation of the study, a group-centered approach to the three steps of the general model (i.e., generation, structuring, and representation) was followed. I refer to these steps in a perhaps more common language as expansion, contraction and interpretation. Ideally, all three steps are done with the same group in the context of working toward accomplishing some programmatic goal. However, in this study, two different groups contributed to steps 1 and 2, and participant voices from both steps 1 and 2 constitute the basis of the interpretation step (3). (It should be noted that this study was limited to participants in the U.S.)

Expansion

The ideas for the conceptual domain were contributed by 84 (of 205 requested) self-defined advocates of feminism from 21 states who were randomly selected from one predominantly white women's group and two national level gatherings addressing the issues of women of color and third world women's perspectives on feminism (Linton, 1985, pp. 51–80 give a detailed description of the participants in both steps 1 and 2). In a mailed survey participants were asked to "brainstorm feminism." Of the 710 ideas contributed, 150 were randomly selected to constitute the conceptual domain.

Contraction

The participants in this step were 34 self-defined advocates of feminism who attended meetings to organize the ideas; one meeting was held in Ithaca, New York (26 attending) and one, a week later, in New York City (8 attending). Each participant received a stack of 150 cards containing the ideas selected and was asked to sort them into piles which made sense to them. Recording systems were provided. The data was then analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis procedures. Graphic representations were in the form of a two-dimensional map of the ideas with clusters identified by symbols. An additional task for participants was to rank each idea on a scale of from 1 (least) to 5 (most) on its level of importance to feminism.

Interpretation

In an ideal situation, participants meet in a group and are provided with copies of the cluster map, lists of the ideas by cluster with their ID number, and their average level of importance to feminism value. They then engage in a process of negotiation to come to agreement on naming the clusters based on their thematic content, and to possibly name regions of the map based on cluster themes and location. Further exploration of the meaning of the conceptual framework utilizes the familiar conceptual tools of distance and direction to understand the meaning of the location of the ideas and their interrelationships. The level of importance to feminism indicator can be used as a height dimension so that "mountainous" areas of the map can be interpreted as more important.

In my non-ideal study, the interpretation of the map was limited by my lack of access to the participants. Given this condition, the interpretation of the meaning of the map is limited. However, some impressions can be given to indicate some possible meanings.

First, an example of a general meaning can be seen in the names of the clusters as shown on Figure 1. The names are based on the similarity in meaning of the ideas which compose them, and give an idea of the breadth of the thinking about the concept. There is no inherent order of importance in their listing.

Second, the general meaning of the concept map can be approached by viewing the map as a whole. When doing so, every entity is represented in relation to every other entity. The organization of the entities into clusters and the arrangement of these clusters and the regions which they form provide a constant and undeniable picture of the interrelationship among all of the individual ideas. Viewing the map as a whole can reveal direct as well as underlying connections. For example, there is clearly a direct connection between both the meaning and the location of Clusters 7 and 8, creating a region of clusters relating to feminist theory. Another example of direct connections can be seen among Clusters 2, 4, and 9, a region of those clusters relating to specific and practical goals, actions, and changes. The relationship between these two regions, which lie directly across the map from each other, is an example of an underlying connection. This particular underlying connection could be viewed as a dimension connecting theory and practice. Comparisons of the content of these clusters could reveal whether what advocates of feminism actually do reflects what we say we are doing—and vice versa. For example, one entity from Cluster 8 is "feminism concerns itself with a broad spectrum of issues of concern to women." Such issues are specifically noted in Cluster 9: "quality, affordable housing;" "an absolute stop to involuntary sterilization;" "cooperative business enterprises and housing;" "no more torture;" and "complete overhaul of welfare system so that women aren't trapped in per-

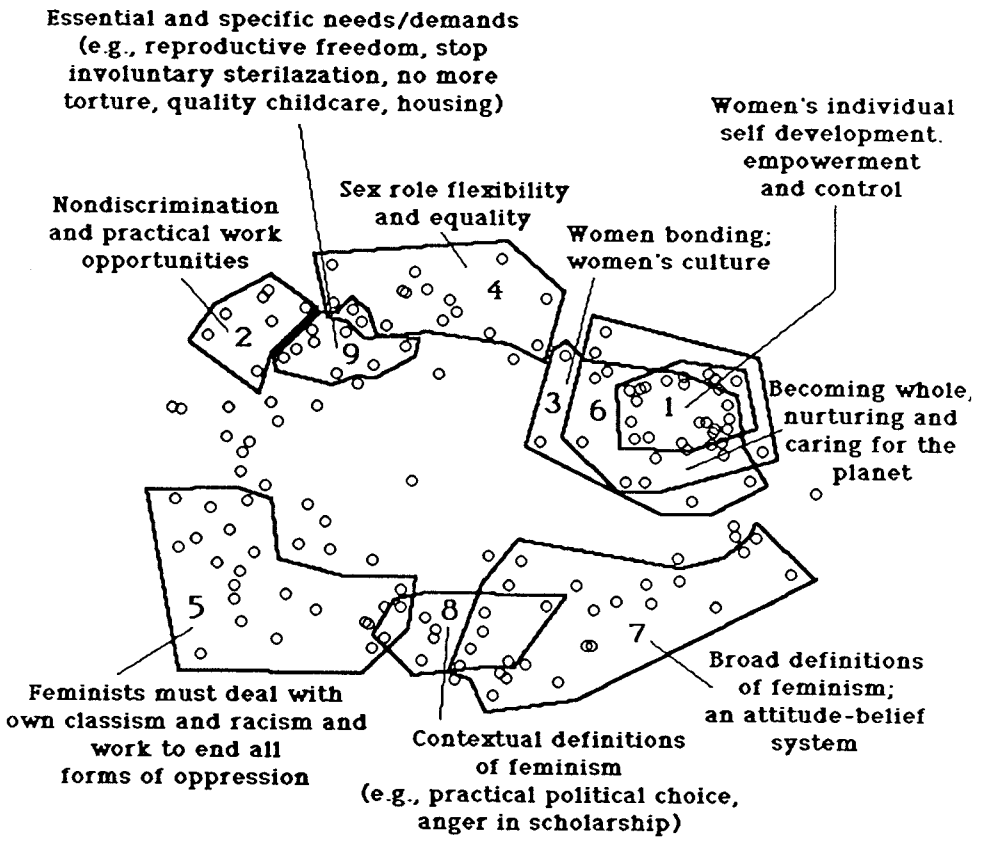

Figure 1. Concept map of "feminism."

petual dependency on the state." Underlying connections can also reveal inconsistencies in our thinking. For example, consider the underlying connection between Clusters 1 and 5. The dimension connecting these two clusters could be interpreted in several ways: it could be called self and other, or personal and political, or domestic and global, all very familiar ideas developed in both theory and practice over the past two decades. There is one contradiction to this connection, however. Entities claiming our needs as advocates of feminism to deal with our own classism and racism fall in the "other oppressions" cluster (5) rather than into the personal/self development and change cluster (1). There apparently is a difference in how we think about personal changes relating to other oppressed groups and personal changes relating to our own self development, affirmation, and empowerment (i.e., personal "growth"). Confronting our own racism and classism somehow is viewed as being in a cluster of "other" rather than "self." How and why this occurs, and what we do about it, are only some of the questions raised by this information. Viewing the map as a whole can also provide some insight into possible action on such questions. For example, it can be proposed that movement from Cluster 1 to Cluster 5 requires either a huge leap across the "unknown center" or going by way of theory in one direction or practice in the other. In other words, in order for advocates of feminism to connect our selves and personal development to dealing with our own classism and racism, as well as working to end all oppressions, we have to go through some theoretical or practical experience. It doesn't just happen. The specific ideas in either of those regions may give direction as to how and/or why this particular separation exists, and how to move to change this condition of separation.

One further general observation about the cluster relationships, when viewing the map as a whole, is that when moving from the top of the map to the bottom (i.e., along the vertical axis), cluster meanings change from specific to general. Similarly, when moving from side to side (i.e., along the horizontal axis), from west to east, cluster meanings change from other, or global, to individual, or self. This information forms an overall framework within which to view the individual ideas, clusters, regions, and their interrelationships.

Third, an indication of what the group considered important can be seen by individual idea and cluster level of importance to feminism values. Values closer to 5 are higher. Two ideas had values between 4.6 and 5.0

and could be considered the two most important ideas in the study. The highest value (4.6667) was given to the idea "recognizing the interconnectedness of the struggles of all oppressed persons—working to end all oppressions" in Cluster 5, and the second highest value (4.6061) was given to the idea "control of own life" in Cluster 1. The idea with the lowest value (1.2308) was "being more feminine" in Cluster 1. Cluster averages reveal that Clusters 2 (Nondiscrimination and practical work opportunities) and 3 (Women bonding, women's culture) were considered most important, and Clusters 7 (Broad definitions of feminism, an attitude-belief system) and 8 (Contextual definitions of feminism, e.g., practical political choice, anger in scholarship) least important. When considered in the context of the other clusters in the two regions represented by clusters 2 and 8, these level of importance values raise interesting questions. Clusters 2 and 9 contain action oriented entities relating to specific practical needs/demand including an emphasis on work opportunities. Cluster 3 includes an emphasis on women actively relating to each other by exchanging support and joining together to strive for common goals. Clusters 8, 7, and 6 contain more passive entities, such as ideas of what feminism is about, and descriptions of the nurturant and caring, holistic views of women. This comparison indicates that advocates of feminism appear to value action on specific issues more than thinking about them and, perhaps, more than thinking about the meaning of those actions. This could mean that in our commitment to change what has been labeled our passivity and resulting victimization, we could be acting on a short term, short-sighted basis in ways that may conflict with our long term, more globally stated beliefs.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of this study some impressions of the advantages of using the concept mapping process in this context for clarifying the concept of feminism for both theoretical and programmatic purposes are in order. It is clear that this method of conceptualization is an open, moving, dynamic process which is responsive to rather than manipulative of participants; which includes data, the format of which allows for inclusion of a wide diversity of similar and conflicting ideas; and which is accessible to interpretation by a wide population. It can be used within groups and across groups, producing conceptual maps for comparison and as a basis for single or joint group discussion, evaluation, and planning.

Further, the process itself tends to defuse potentially hostile and defensive feelings and situations, and to support the growth of group unity. Some reasons for this are: there is equal power and influence of all participants in all phases of the process (with the possible exception of group brainstorming where power relations may be unbalanced); the agreed-upon final set of contributed ideas is included in the final conceptual map; there is easy accessibility to understanding the meaning of the map; there is a lack of pressure attached to the process because its orientation is to how specific parts relate to the whole rather than isolating them to sink or swim on their own; the group synergism creates a whole which is obviously more than the sum of its parts, validates the individual's investment of trust, and energizes rather than drains the group; the interpretation of the map places what is already known into a configuration which incorporates new information in both substance and method.

The following list provides a short summary characterizing advantages of this method:

- it invites many and diverse voices to be heard
- voices can be gathered which have not had access to being heard in print
- it asks for women's own words to name our reality
- it is grounded completely in women's life experience and thought
- it is non-judgmental, accepting all contributions
- all participants' contributions have equal power
- the group setting for structuring works to balance power between participants and researcher
- it requires a minimum of intrusion of the researcher's opinion in all three steps
- it does not eliminate any of the ideas; they all appear on the map
- it presents all of the ideas in relation to each other
- it reveals simultaneously each entity in relation to all others and to its own cluster-mates, cluster relations overall and regionally, as well as the total concept, all in a holistic view
- it emphasizes connections rather than "significant' differences
- it actively involves the participants in the knowledge creation process
- the process can be as important as the product, esp cially when done in a single group
- it provides a possible learning experience for pa ticipants in exchange for helping the researcher
- it tends to create a positive feeling among parti pants, especially when all three steps are done wi an on-going group

- it tends to create a feeling of ownership of the product among participants
- it results in the researcher not being totally isolated
- throughout the steps there is a strong collaborative, cooperative aspect among participants and including the researcher
- the map provides open access to interpretation because it is a widely familiar format
- it does not exclude people from understanding its results if they do not have knowledge of the use and meaning of special research techniques such as statistics and graphics

However, although western advocates of feminism may be ready to utilize this method, recent discussion with advocates of feminism working in other countries indicate less potential. For example, women planning an international youth conference rejected the method based on its use of western high technological machinery which they distrust as a weapon of imperialism. Caribbean advocates of feminism in highly educated circles like the method but don't see how it can be used with non-literate women, while an English researcher, who trains women from the third world in research techniques, thought it would be useful in understanding some crucial problems occurring in women's cooperatives, but questioned the women's access to computers in their own countries, as well as their suspicions of the priority given to western high tech methods in the face of the low priority given to solve more fundamental life problems such as famine, starvation and the imposition of export economies in third world countries. These comments clarify one point where the method is clearly not consistent with feminist activity/principles; that is, although the participants have major control of the conceptualization meaning, and decision making about much of its structure and process, they are dependent on the researcher for the technology. Although there are ways to minimize this dependency in some situations (e.g., by the use of skill exchange in the study), it is a potentially serious limitation to use of the method to clarify the concept of feminist theory and practice from a more global perspective.

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Guest Editor

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