Power of a Feminist Identity on Sense of Self and Purpose

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Abstract

This study centered on feminist-identified women and the meaning they made from their feminist identity. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis design, eight women were interviewed to understand their lived experience and the influence their social or political identity had on how they experienced and made sense of their world. The overarching finding was that all participants exuded a strong sense of self, which seemed to provide resilience and empower participants to navigate sexism and other injustice. Themes that support this finding include exhibiting confidence and self-advocacy, confronting sexism, and describing a connection between feminist identity and career or activism. Implications are provided for counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors. Recommendations include recognizing the importance of clients' feminist identities throughout the counseling process and drawing on a feminist framework to process lived discrimination and injustice, empower clients, and locate support systems.

KEYWORDS:
advocacy, career choice, empowerment, feminism, social identity

Power of a Feminist Identity on Sense of Self and Purpose

A powerful and overarching definition of feminist theory, as presented by hooks (hooks, 2000) asserts that: "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression" (p. 26). Fundamentally, feminism is the movement toward gender equality in economic, social, and political realms (Sue et al., 2019). Women in the United States and around the world suffer from economic exploitation and violence (hooks, 2000). Although there is an upward trend in wages earned by women in the United States, women earned just 82.3% of what men earned in 2020, and men earned more than women at each educational level (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Additionally, there are significant racial inequities in employment, with Hispanic and Black women earning less and being unemployed at higher rates than Asian and White women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Women also contend with sexual harassment in the workplace, submitting 78.2% of reports received over a 3-year span (U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, 2022). Data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that women experienced higher rates of intimate partner and sexual violence over their lifetimes (Basile et al., 2022). These common injustices contribute to negative mental health outcomes, which counselors should assess and address in therapy (Sue et al., 2019).

Identification With Feminism

With such injustice and inequity, it is not surprising that people recognize the continued relevance of the feminist movement; however, rates of identifying as a feminist vary. Some U.S. polls have found higher rates, with approximately 60% of women identifying as feminists (Barroso, 2020; Cai & Clement, 2016). Another U.S. poll found lower rates of identification, with modest increases over a short period of time; in that poll, 32% of women claimed the feminist label in 2016 and 38% in 2018 (Ballard, 2018). However, a *Washington Post* survey found that fewer than a third of self-identified feminists classified themselves as "strong" feminists (Cai & Clement, 2016). A Pew Research Survey found similar results, with 19% of women responding that feminism described them very well, compared to 42% responding feminism described them somewhat well (Barroso, 2020).

Over time, feminism has been viewed as a topic of contention (Freedman, 2002). This continues to be evident, with 39% of women and 52% of men believing that feminism is polarizing (Barroso, 2020). Results from the American National Election Study indicated that most people identify as non-feminist and 16% identify as anti-feminist (Elder et al., 2021). Baumgardner and Richards (2010) explained this disillusionment with the statement: "Feminism, a word that describes a social-justice movement for gender equity and human liberation, is often treated as the other F word" (p. 50). People might not identify as feminist—or at least not a strong feminist—due to negative stereotypes, such as that feminists are ugly, feminism is dead (Valenti, 2007), or that feminists hate men—in fact, the opposite has been found (Anderson et al., 2009). Negative stereotypes have been used to discredit the movement and do not have factual standing (Houvouras & Carter, 2008; Valenti, 2007). Likewise, advances toward gender equity have been met with hostility, which Faludi (2006) referred to as "backlashes because they have always arisen in reaction to women's 'progress' (p. 10)." Still, self-identified feminists are more likely to actively engage in the movement for women's equality (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011). Researchers have also explored differences in whether people keep their feminist identity private or share it publicly. For example, Kelly (2015) found that those who publicly identify "felt that feminism influenced their everyday decisions and interactions to some degree" (p. 89).

Feminist Identity Development

Feminist identity and associated values can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. One prominent model, the Model of Feminist Identity for Women (Downing & Roush, 1985), conceptualizes development in five stages. First, in *passive acceptance*, individuals do not recognize situations as sexist and discriminatory. The second stage, *reevaluation*, begins when an incident prompts the individual to reassess the way they view oppression. *Embeddedness-emanation*, the third stage, is characterized by women forming a new identity and focusing on relationship building with other women. The fourth stage, *synthesis*, is characterized by developing "an authentic and positive feminist identity" (Downing & Roush, 1985). *Active commitment*, demonstrated through advocacy against sexism, is the fifth and final stage. Another model, the Discursive Identity Processing model (Olson et al., 2008), classifies individuals into one of four categories. In the *embracing* category, individuals self-identify as feminist and ascribe to the ideals of feminism, which are integrated into their sense of self. Individuals in the *denouncing* category hold feminist principles but do not think of themselves as feminist. In the *reframing* category, individuals do not

self-identify as feminist but believe in feminist principles; however, such beliefs are not integrated into their sense of self. The *resisting* category is evidenced when individuals reject feminist ideals and the feminist label and ascribe to traditional gender attitudes (Olson et al., 2008).

Yet another way to conceptualize feminist identity is through social or politicized identities. Social identity theory recognizes how people might understand themselves to be part of a distinctive social group (Tajfel, 1982). In a review of the literature on social identity theory, Hornsey (2008) wrote that the importance an individual places on categorization or differences between specific social groups varies. When categorization is highly defined, it affects "the way people see themselves, in the sense that it activates a different level of one's self-concept" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 206) to align someone with their identified social group. This process could result in one being "motivated to think and act in ways that achieve or maintain a positive distinctiveness between one's own group and relevant outgroups" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 207). Similarly, in their review of the literature on feminist identity, Frederick and Stewart (2018) noted that feminism as a politicized identity might be more accurate because it examines differences in power among groups. This latter approach— examining feminism as a social or politicized identity—is used in the present study.

Being introduced to feminist principles coupled with self-identifying as a feminist can result in a mixed emotional response (Katz et al., 2004). Specifically, understanding the pervasiveness and gravity of sexism along with the restraining effects of socialization can lead to psychological distress. However, possessing a deeper understanding of sexism can empower individuals to reject and challenge sexism (Ayres et al., 2009). Researchers have found feminist self-identification to have positive effects on self-worth (Rudman & Phelan, 2007). Saunders and Kashubeck-West (2006) found that participants in the *active commitment* stage of Downing and Roush's feminist identity development model possessed greater psychological wellbeing. Recognizing inequities exist can also lead to taking collective action for gender equity (Yoder et al., 2011). Having a feminist lens influences various domains of life. With a feminist political consciousness, how do feminist-identified women perceive their world differently? In this study I explored how feminist-identifying women make meaning of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career. Such an understanding could inform counselors and helping professionals of the unique considerations and strategies to better support clients at various life stages. Additional findings from this study, which focused on adversity and community of support, were published in 2022 (Diekmann, 2022).

Method

The research findings presented here come from two overarching questions: (1) What does it mean for you to identify as a feminist? and (2) How do your feminist identity and career influence each other? I selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative approach because its focus is to "explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.53).

Research Design

The research paradigm that guided this study included feminism and intersectionality frameworks, constructivism, and an IPA design. Feminist theory is defined by Kolmar and Bartkowski (2010) as a framework that "attempts to describe, explain, and analyze the conditions of women's lives. …The basic issue that has concerned feminist theory is…women's inequality, subordination, or domination by men" (p. 2). In this study, I asked participants to share life experiences, including experiences with sexism. Intersectionality theory asserts that discrimination based on an individual's multiple identities interconnects to amplify the effect of oppressive experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). I invited participants to share salient identities, to offer a better understanding of how intersecting identities shape experience. My research lens is also influenced by constructivism—the belief that people construct meaning from their experiences—which affects their understanding of the world (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022).

The IPA design provided structure to the study and is influenced by three perspectives—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.53). Because the purpose of this study was to understand the meaning ascribed to having a feminist identity, the phenomenon studied was the participant's feminist identity and associated experiences. The influence of hermeneutics occurs through exploring the meanings participants made and researcher interpretations of participants' feminist identities and life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, idiography involves attention to detail when analyzing data (Smith et al., 2009), so considerations such as word choice and emotions expressed were part of the analysis.

Participants

This study centered around the social or politicized identity associated with feminism; thus, the main requirement to participate was to self-identify as a feminist woman. Upon receiving approval from my university's institutional review board, I recruited participants through a listserv of a women's organization in a mid-Atlantic U.S. metropolitan area. I used a dichotomous question to assess feminist identity, which some scholars find produces clearer data (Liss & Erchull, 2010; Yoder et al., 2011). I used purposive sampling because the aim of the study was to highlight the specific factor (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) of being a feminist. Participants self-reported salient identities (Table 1). The eight participants were in their 20s and early 30s and identified as middle class with a bachelor's degree or higher. One participant identified as African American, and seven as White or Caucasian.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Racial & Ethnic Identities	Current Socioeconomic Status	Education Level Completed	Additional Salient Identities	Field of Work
1	28	Caucasian	Middle class	Master's degree	None given	Non profit
2	23	Caucasian	Middle class	Bachelor's degree	Pro-choice, Democrat, liberal, progressive, matriarchal family	Political Sector
3	23	White	Lower-middle class	Bachelor's degree	Cis-gender, female, queer	Non profit
4	22	White	Middle class	Bachelor's degree	Jewish	Political Sector
5	28	White	Upper-middle class	Bachelor's degree	Queer	Political Sector
6	33	African American	Upper-middle class	Master's degree	Mother, feminist, liberal	Non profit
7	31	Caucasian	Middle class	Master's degree	Liberal, married, heterosexual	Non profit
8	28	White	Middle class	Bachelor's degree	Immigrated as refugee, raised in progressive city	Non profit

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used "to understand the 'lived experiences' of the individual" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 118). Aligned with IPA, an interview schedule was created with attention to the flow of topics (Smith et al., 2009). The first question, "What does it mean for you to identify as a feminist? ", was followed by prompts about personal definitions of feminism and the effects of feminism on life and personal relationships. The second question, "How do your feminist identity and career influence each other? ", included inquiries into the career choices made, how feminism aided or hindered opportunities, and involvement in activism. The interview schedule also included questions about related work experiences. Interviews were audio recorded so data were detailed enough for an IPA analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Becoming familiar with participants' narratives is paramount (Smith et al., 2009), so I personally transcribed interviews and reviewed each transcript to make sure what I transcribed was accurate. This was followed by rounds of examining and commenting on various aspects for each case. Attending to the idiographic tenet, details in language and emotion expressed were examined. Aligned with hermeneutics, I explored meanings participants made from their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This led to identifying *emergent* themes within each case, *numeration* of the frequency of each theme, and describing how themes were connected (Smith et al., 2009). I documented my analysis of each case using a table with three columns including the original transcript, exploratory comments, and emergent themes. I recorded emergent themes on notecards that were color coded by participant. Through grouping the notecards, I identified themes across cases (Smith et al., 2009) and created a separate document to confirm themes with documentation.

Trustworthiness

Numerous measures were taken to ensure quality and address trustworthiness. As recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008), outside influences and literature were blocked as much as possible so as not to sway the interpretation process. This strategy, known as *bracketing*, includes avoiding assumptions about data and instead seeking new meanings about what data reveal and promoting innovative thinking (Smith et al., 2009). Maintaining an audit trail that documented my thoughts and activities related to the study assisted me in bracketing my biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I journaled about my reactions and interactions with the data including attending to personal assumptions and reflections about the research. An additional step I took to foster trustworthiness was triangulating or comparing the analysis of participant interviews to existing literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following my analysis, an outside reviewer conducted an independent audit, examining the transcripts and

conducting a separate analysis that was compared to the original analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Related to demographics, this reviewer noted participants had earned a bachelor's degree or higher and described themselves as liberal. Related to the findings, the reviewer also found that feminist identity seemed to relate to a strong sense of self.

Positionality

My social position is a highly educated White woman raised in an upper-middle-class family in a very rural community. Although I did not identify as a feminist until my early 20s, I became interested in feminism by way of my resentment of injustices I saw and experienced, along with my strong values of social justice. Intentional or not, I have pursued volunteer opportunities and employment congruent with my values of feminism and social justice. Encountering various forms of sexism—both within and outside of my professional experiences—reaffirms my feminist identity, which in turn empowers me to challenge sexism. My own positionality affects my interest in this topic and how I conducted the study. To address the effects of my positionality and in alignment with feminist research, I engaged in *reflexivity*. As described by Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007), "Reflexivity exposes the exercise of power throughout the *entire* research process. It questions the authority of knowledge and opens up the possibility for negotiating knowledge claims as well as holds researchers accountable to those with whom they research" (p. 495). I engaged in reflexivity through developing rapport with participants and recognizing power dynamics between each participant and myself. Additionally, I used active listening during interviews and reflected on how my connections to participants' stories might affect my interpretations. Instead of assuming we had a common definition of feminism or understanding of life experiences, I inquired more deeply into the meanings participants made from their identity and experiences.

Results

The data analysis presented in this article centers on a strong sense of self and can be further understood through three themes: (1) confidence and self-advocacy, (2) confronting sexism for self and others, and (3) connection of feminist identity to career and activism. Participants felt empowered to live their lives in accordance with their feminist values, demonstrated through choosing a career or activism focused on advancing women's equity, advocating for themselves and others, and calling out injustices.

Confidence and Self-Advocacy

The first theme of confidence and self-advocacy was characterized by participants exhibiting an air of confidence, particularly in sexist situations, and was present for all participants. The theme was named to reflect the passion with which participants spoke about "sticking up" for themselves. Four participants described the importance of finding their own "voice" or empowering other women in finding their voice. For example, Participant 7 stated: "I have my voice and I'm not scared to use it." Several participants shared experiences where they advocated for themselves, and despite adversity they encountered, spoke out against sexism. One such experience was in response to gender-related issues occurring on their college campus where Participant 8 stated: "I spoke my mind because I had opinions" and "was actively called aggressive by my male colleagues." Despite active resistance from peers, this participant pushed forward and continued to engage in advocacy efforts around a variety of feminist issues. Participant 3 shared another experience: after being harassed and assaulted in a train station, their friends questioned the validity of their experience. This participant responded with: "you're going to lessen my experience by doubting my account and unintentionally siding with this guy who harassed me in the [train] when I was coming home from work. That's not okay." Even with friends casting doubt, the participant remained confident and defended that this experience was harassment. For some participants, this confidence and self-advocacy extended into the workplace through negotiating salaries, which came up in two interviews. This was also described as claiming space and speaking during meetings in four interviews. For example, as Participant 2 stated:

> It's a really small thing, but women tend not to sit at the table at meetings or sit at the outskirts instead of sitting at the table. And so, I make a conscious decision in every meeting I go to, even if I am the most junior person there. I'm going to sit at the table. If I'm there and there's still a seat, I'm going to sit there. And if you're late, then tough shit, you don't get to sit at the table.

Using one's voice and possessing confidence as Participant 2 demonstrated was apparent in all interviews. This empowerment seemed to lead to self-advocacy, as was the case for Participant 4:

> In terms of advocating for myself, I think feminism definitely gives me the ability to feel that I can—like I said, one of the things that I think is really important about feminism is not apologizing and I think that, in and of itself, is advocating for myself—the ability to live my life as I want, and to be who I want, and to dress as I want, and do what I want.

Similarly, Participant 6 credited feminism for the confidence to follow their career aspirations:

> I wake up every day and I know that I can do whatever I want to do, which I know sounds cliché. But I know that I'm just as good as men and so—it's just, I think— really given me a confidence.

Whether it was occupying space, having a "can-do" attitude, exhibiting an air of confidence, or exerting one's voice, possessing a feminist identity was significant to all participants in both their personal and professional lives.

Confronting Sexism for Self and Others

The next theme of confronting sexism was defined by calling out discriminatory acts to dismantle gender inequities. Six participants described interrupting sexism they saw and standing up for other women. Additionally, three noted that they look out for or mentor women in their organizations. Five participants noted that they found their voice or described examples of speaking up. For example, Participant 1 stated: "I'm not afraid to call somebody out for being sexist or not afraid to let people in social situations know how I feel about sexist situations or gender discrimination." Participant 2 also demonstrated this: "I'm the first person to speak out when my guy friends or my boyfriend say something degrading to females, however extreme or non-extreme." Two participants provided specific examples of intervening when they saw sexism. Participant 6 provided an example of how a boss of theirs was more likely to trust and recognize a "type of guy who's like him, who he feels more comfortable with, who they kind of like use theoretical language and they have a certain vernacular," noting that, "As a woman, you really have to work harder to be in that position with him." This participant reported that they had a good relationship with their boss and was able to tell their boss about the gender discrepancy that they observed. When discussing how they engage in advocacy efforts when interacting with people inflicting discriminatory language or behaviors, Participant 3 stated:

> I'm a really vocal person and I'm not a person that is shy…my identity as a feminist has…led to me engaging in a lot of arguments with people…because I will say—like I will say it—if you're being transphobic, I'll say you're being transphobic…if someone is like going to street-harass my friend, it's important to me that that is recognized as street harassment and it's not just like "oh, guys just do that."

Similarly, Participant 7 noted:

> If someone is doing something or saying something that I don't agree with or I feel like maybe an injustice is happening, then it's me being able to stand up and say something, whether it's…an action or I organize specific activity around it.

In addition to calling out sexism when they witnessed it, some participants would also discuss the incident with the person affected. For example, Participant 6 stated:

> It's really important to me to have regular check-ins with the women [at work]…that if I see a woman not speaking up in a meeting…or if I see men in meetings totally dominating, I'll talk to them about it. So, in general I'm very cognizant of the role of women in the organization and that our voices are being heard and that's very much aligned with my feminist identity.

Although some participants described adverse experiences, this did not stop them from acting authentically and advocating for others.

Feminist Identity Connection to Career and Activism

Implicitly or explicitly, the connection between feminist values and career or activism was apparent in all eight interviews. Participants described their career or activism as advancing goals aligned with feminism. For example, one participant passionately spoke about how correlated their feminist identity was with career choice:

> Extreme—100% correlation. Like they're exactly connected. I do what I do because eventually I would love to be one of those female senators that I'm trying to work for right now. Ultimate, ultimate career dream is to be a female United States senator. So, everything I do is completely connected to fighting for women and their equality rights. I just—that's basically it—they're just 100% connected.

Participant 4 also described this relationship as being co-influential:

> They definitely influence each other. I think it's a very back and forth process. First, for me, in terms of the way my feminism influences my career, I'm always very interested in the way that gender intersects. Gender and sex both intersect with the different other issue areas that you can work on because nothing is a vertical compartment...And I think for me, my feminism also means that I'm much more open and understanding to different types of injustice.

Participants also expressed that the activism they engage in has a lot to do with their feminist identity and ideals. Two participants discussed protests and standing up for others' rights as part of their feminist identity. For example, Participant 5 said:

> My feminist identity is a lot about sort of this fighting the good fight—whether it's for other women, whether it's for People of Color, whether it's for LGBT persons. I think that that for me is part of it and so that has certainly influenced my career choice. I think it's a lot about sort of seeing injustices and really being called to try to correct those and try to fight for people and standing up for each other.

When asked about activism, Participant 6 nearly forgot their support to feminist endeavors:

> And then in terms of activism—unfortunately, I don't have a lot of time to do activism anymore, but I care a lot about women's issues, and I, right now with my career and my child, I unfortunately don't get to do a lot of volunteer—well, actually, I do—I actually am on the board of an organization...that is something that I commit time and money to and that's very much aligned to my feminist identity. And then I continue to support—give money to—the first organization where I worked.

Forgetting this involvement might have been due to the activism being completely engrained in their sense of self. On the other hand, having a job that does not uphold feminist ideals was unfathomable for two participants. Participant 4 stated: "I don't think I ever experienced discrimination in my job search, but I think that places that weren't as open or potentially had more discriminatory practices, I would not apply to." Similarly, Participant 8 discussed not being able to imagine working in a field that was completely void of feminism:

> It's really hard for me to picture myself doing something that's not this or that's not— that doesn't have a feminist angle...I don't know how I would have a job that's completely divorced from feminism. You know, even if I were working in the corporate world for something totally unrelated—I don't think that I would.

Finally, two participants stated that feminism aided their careers. As Participant 7 explained:

> I think [feminist identity has] given me more direction and a sense of purpose in my career. Instead of being able to say, "I know that I like to work on campaigns," I can now say, "I like to work on this advocacy issue because of x, y, and z."

All participants reported the connection between feminist identity and career. What made it particularly notable was the rich description and vocal emphasis in the narratives.

Discussion

All participants exuded a *strong sense of self*. They spoke passionately about identifying as a feminist, which seemed to be tied to their sense of self in a significant and fundamental way. This can be further understood through Downing and Roush's (1985) five-stages model of feminist identity development. Based on feminist self-identification and descriptions provided during interviews, all participants could be placed in the final two stages. Related to Stage 4, synthesis, each participant in the current study projected a positive sense of self, which was evidenced by empowerment and confidence. Aligned with Stage 5, active commitment, many participants actively engaged feminist advocacy through paid or volunteer work.

Confidence and self-advocacy—the first theme discussed—was evident among all participants, often coming up more than once in each interview. This was observed through the confidence participants possessed in proactively advocating for something—such as a higher salary or claiming physical space in a meeting. Some credited their feminist identity as giving them a voice or confidence to advocate. Saunders and Kashubeck-West (2006) suggested that perhaps "women with a more advanced feminist identity are able to better differentiate between healthy behavior and socially ingrained behavior, empowering them to choose more beneficial life alternatives" (p. 208). The findings from the current study also reinforce research conducted by Eisele and Stake (2008), who found that participants in a women's studies course who held a feminist identity or beliefs had higher levels of self-efficacy. Additionally, the cognitive development theory developed by Belenky et al. (1997), as presented in their book *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, offers further understanding. This theory details five ways women will discern information, with beginning perspectives characterized by unawareness and believing that authority figures possess the truth. As individuals advance, they see other sources including themselves as the holders of knowledge. Participants in the current study appear to be in or transitioning into the final perspective, constructed knowledge, where individuals consolidate different sources of knowledge, incorporate empathy or care, and use their "authentic voice" (Belenky et al., 1997). Participants in this study demonstrated a nuanced understanding of sexism and other injustices and had the confidence to advocate for themselves and others.

Confronting sexism for self and others—the second identified theme—was evidenced by participants' refusal to be passive bystanders to sexism and other injustice. Most participants described examples where they interrupted discrimination, such as calling out sexist practices at work and getting into arguments with friends or family who made discriminatory remarks. Existing literature supports this theme; for example, Weis et al. (2018) found that feminists possess a willingness to challenge sexist behavior. This is also consistent with research by Ayres et al. (2009), who found that feminist-identified women are more likely to engage in activism in response to sexism, and by Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010), who found that feminists are less accepting of sexist situations compared to those who did not label themselves as feminists. Relatedly, Gervais et al. (2010) found that women who actively asserted that a sexist prompt was problematic or inappropriate had better psychological outcomes than women who did not outwardly identify the sexist comment as problematic or inappropriate. Although participants noted negative feelings from sexism, they identified the incidents as sexist and confronted the injustice.

Connection of feminist identity to career and activism—the third theme presented—was evident for all participants. Throughout each interview, feminist values were present, with some participants asserting a direct relationship between their identity and career. Perhaps even more striking is that two participants could not imagine working in a career incompatible with feminism. This suggests that for some feminist-identified women, being in a feminist-minded environment is essential. Recent research conducted by Lee and Wessel (2022) is relevant to this discussion. The authors conducted two studies collecting survey data—the first with female students ranging in age from 17 to 32 years, and the second with women from a crowdsourcing marketplace who ranged in age from 19 to 77 years. In both studies, Women of Color accounted for approximately 48% of the participants. Overall, Lee and Wessel (2022) found that participants who exhibited numerous associations with feminism (e.g., self-identification, holding feminist values, and engaging in related activism) had stronger career cognitions or aspirations. Whether in their personal or professional lives, participants in the current study were invested in gender equity, social justice, and the success of other women. Participants were dedicated to "fighting the good fight" and being part of activism that supported women. Relatedly, in a qualitative study with feminist women who ranged in age from 59 to 90 years, McDougall and McGeorge (2014) noted that "a central component of identifying as feminists for our participants was striving for equality in their own lives and for other women" (p. 91). Interest in feminist activism by participants in the current study is also supported by past research finding a connection between feminist self-identification and higher participation in the women's movement (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011).

The current study resulted in a better understanding of how feminist identity is connected to a strong sense of self, and arguably higher self-esteem and self-efficacy. Through this empowered sense of self, women could possess more resilience to navigate sexism and other injustice and, in turn, be more likely to achieve academic and career goals.

Implications for Counselors and Helping Professionals

Centralizing feminist identity in the counseling process can help foster connection and empowerment, and thus, ward off the lifelong and harmful effects of sexism. There are several implications for counselors and helping professionals related to this study: (a) using a feminist lens and fostering feminist identities as part of individual therapy, (b) incorporating group work and encouraging clients to seek out educational opportunities and communities of support to address oppression, and (c) supporting clients in finding careers and activism congruent with their feminist values.

Fostering a feminism identity through counseling can empower clients and serve as a source of strength and support. Incorporating therapies with social justice principles at their core—such as feminist therapy (Brown, 2018; Enns & Williams, 2012; Evans et al., 2011) and multicultural counseling and therapy (Sue et al., 2019)—is one important implication. For example, Feminist Empowerment Therapy is particularly relevant because it attends to intersecting oppressions and continuing harm to individuals. This theory indicates that pathology lies within society, not the individual (Remer & Oh, 2012). It is crucially important that counselors recognize clients' multiple identities and provide culturally competent counseling (Sue et al., 2019). By overtly discussing values and social identities, counselors can help clients draw on what are perhaps unused resources—clients' feminist identity and the related benefits—to better meet the current and future needs and development of the client. This starts with assessing what identities are important to the client, what was learned about gender growing up, and notable experiences regarding relationships (Remer & Oh, 2012). A variety of feminist therapeutic interventions can be emboldening, such as analyzing power dynamics, gender roles, intersecting identities, and systemic oppression (Remer & Oh, 2012). This type of work requires therapists to understand how power operates in society, recognize how their own socialization affects them, and address power dynamics between the counselor and client (Bordeau et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2019). Additionally, McDougall and McGeorge (2014) suggested that when clients encounter various gender inequities, therapy could explore feminism and use it as a resource. Framing discussions of discriminatory experiences through the tenets of feminism and social justice can be instrumental. Calling out systematic oppression can reduce the likelihood of internalizing sexism and discrimination, thereby buffering its negative effects.

In this study, participants' feminist identity empowered them to use their voices to confront sexism for themselves and others. As clients of any age experience and respond to sexism, a second implication of this research is to recognize and process sexism and other injustices with clients in therapy. Narrative therapy techniques that defy sexism and intersectional oppression while incorporating direct interventions to embolden clients to further use their voice are particularly beneficial. Western (2013) suggested feminist group work, such as consciousness-raising groups, to be useful in addressing gender-based violence and depression among women. Groups can validate and support women and could include resistance work through activism and rejecting sexist societal expectations (Western, 2013). With feminist groups, it is particularly important to consider power differentials among members and work to reduce power held by the facilitator through techniques like appropriate self-disclosure (Western, 2013). Similarly, counselors can encourage clients to connect with organizations or social groups in their communities, colleges, or universities as well as participate in educational programming or classes with feminism and social justice at their core. These referrals can help clients find support and community, while advancing their own understanding of identity and fostering lifelong development. McDougall and McGeorge (2014) asserted that fostering a sense of community can alleviate isolation clients might feel when encountering oppression, and clients interested in feminism could be encouraged to become involved in related activism. Similarly, Conlin et al. (2021) found that participating in feminist collective action and having a critical consciousness of oppression was related to positive affect and increased life satisfaction. But, without collective action, critical consciousness was related to more negative outcomes in life satisfaction (Conlin et al., 2021).

Finally, for participants in this study, being engaged in a career and activism that was congruent with their feminist identity was essential. When working with young, middle, and older adults who are reconsidering their life and career goals, it is common to look to an individual's interests, skills, personality, and values. However, a more focused discussion on social

or politicized identities and how that might affect future career and life satisfaction would be useful. In *Authoring Your Life: Developing Your Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges*, Baxter Magolda (2009) offers a thorough guide that is beneficial to helpers and clients alike. Participants in the current study clearly described finding what Baxter Magolda described as an internal voice—moving away from relying on external influences toward finding and trusting personal beliefs and priorities and, ultimately, committing to a life that is congruent with that internal voice. Helpers who are a part of a client's journey can engage in various strategies to facilitate the process of self-authorship, including "respecting their thoughts and feelings, thus affirming the value of their voices, helping them view their experiences as opportunities for learning and growth, and collaborating with them to analyze their own problems, engaging in mutual learning with them" (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p.251).

Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors

Specific implications for counselor educators and supervisors include facilitating: (a) feminist-informed pedagogy, (b) curriculum on intersectionality and advocacy, and (c) supervision congruent with feminist principles. Professional standards, competencies, and ethics all emphasize the critical nature of infusing social justice and advocacy practice into the curriculum for counselors-in-training (Hayden & Crockett, 2020). To meet this ethical imperative, pedagogy and curriculum need to have intersectionality at their core, while continually assessing and addressing oppression and power. This can be aided through adopting a feminist or critical pedagogy. In their review of literature, LaMantia et al. (2016) identified and described six principles congruent with feminist teaching. First, *reformation* adopts a shared system of power between instructor and student and recognizes many sources of knowledge. *Empowerment*, the second principle, shares power by involving students in creating and managing class expectations and requirements. Third, *building community* is grounded in an environment of respect where members share responsibility in the learning experience and outcomes. Recognizing that students come with diverse knowledge based on their unique identities and experiences is the fourth principle, *privileging voice*. Fifth, *respecting diversity* is centered on knowing that the social positions and experiences of each person are unique. *Challenging traditional pedagogy* is the final component and includes questioning past discourse and practices and recognizing that "teaching is not value free" (LaMantia et al., 2016, p. 76).

There are additional considerations when it comes to curriculum to train counselors. As a result of a study surveying graduate students in a culture and identity course, Brinkman and Donohue (2020) relayed the importance of introducing intersectionality, because although the student participants recognized clients' multiple identities, most were not knowledgeable about intersectionality. The authors suggested making space for students to deeply reflect on their own identities because participants in their study usually focused solely on their clients' identities (Brinkman & Donohue, 2020). Similarly, Hayden and Crockett (2020) encouraged covering curriculum around social justice issues using experiential strategies such as case studies grounded in current events, development of a related advocacy action plan, and ample time to process and debrief each activity.

Finally, there are unique implications for supervisors of counselor trainees including incorporation of a feminist approach to supervision. Porter (1985) identified four sequential steps in the process of feminist supervision to facilitate supervisee development. Putting these into practice, supervisors can first introduce the feminist perspective and related implications to counseling and then help their supervisees understand socialization and sexism present in society. Next, supervisors can assess supervisee attitude, help them recognize personal biases, and encourage activism and related collective work (Porter, 1985) . Additional techniques for supervisors include using appropriate self-disclosure to foster a collaborative environment, revisiting power dynamics present in supervision, incorporating a focus on gender and intersectionality in case conceptualizations, and facilitating supervisee understanding of their own contexts through genograms, or an exploration of patterns and dynamics within families (Degges-White et al., 2013). Another implication to supervision is modeling from a feminist and social justice-informed approach; Jeon (2015) wrote: "Modeling the use of sociocultural and political perspectives in the supervisory relationship, feminist supervisors train supervisees to use those perspectives to conceptualize life issues their clients experience and help them find resolution" (p. 53). Supervisors can model collaborative and respectful relationships with supervisees and take a nonexpert stance to demonstrate how to use such strategies to empower clients (Degges-White et al., 2013).

Recommendations for Future Research

The main limitation of the current study was the homogeneity of participants. Expanding this research with participants who self-identify as feminist and who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, or who identify as disabled, non-binary, and trans would affect the meaning they make from their feminism and life experiences and would offer important contributions to the field. Although intersectionality is a key part of my lens, a more nuanced approach to exploring intersecting identities and injustices would expand the current research. A qualitative study examining feminist identities with more demographic dimensions—such as a diversity of ages, geographical regions including rural areas, educational levels, socioeconomic levels, and career fields—would contribute to the field. Interviewing individuals holding additional social or politicized identities, such as being a womanist, would contribute to understanding the effects such identities have on sense of self and is an additional area to study. Coined by Alice Walker in 1983, the womanist identity signifies the unique standpoint of Black women and Women of Color due to oppression, including from within the feminist movement, and incorporates an added component of selflove and healing (Ross, 2015). Additionally, several participants noted that their feminist identity was directly connected to their choice of employment and activism; however, this was a small focus of the current study. Thus, it would be particularly interesting to conduct a mixed-methods longitudinal study of the bidirectional influence between feminist identity and career and activism.

Conclusion

In discussing feminism, hooks (hooks, 2000) stated: "Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives" (p. 28). Findings from this study demonstrate the meaningful way that participants were empowered in their careers and lives. A society that allows patriarchy to thrive, gender discrimination and violence to be condoned, and victims of such oppression to be blamed will result in negative consequences for clients throughout their lifetimes. However, if counselors, educators, and supervisors shift this narrative to affirm how positive a feminist identity can be, therapeutic and classroom environments could be transformational in creating emboldened women—like those who participated in this study—who reject the damaging and unjust status quo in society, live empowered, and thrive in accordance with their feminist values.

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