

Social Exclusion and Official Recognition of Hijra in Bangladesh

Journal of Research
on Women and Gender
Volume 9, Pages 3-19
© Abdul Aziz and
Sameena Azhar, 2019

Reprints and Permissions:
Email jrwg14@txstate.edu
Texas Digital Library:
<http://www.tdl.org>

Abdul Aziz and Sameena Azhar

Abstract

This research study investigated the processes of social exclusion and legal recognition of hijra in Dhaka, Bangladesh, focusing on experiences in accessing work and health services. The goal of this study was to explore how official recognition of hijra as a third gender shaped experiences of social exclusion, following the passing of a new policy allowing individuals to legally register as a third gender. Fifteen interviews were conducted with hijra and five interviews were conducted with key informants. Thematic analyses of interviews were conducted to better understand processes of social exclusion of hijra. Findings demonstrate that while the Bangladeshi government reports that they officially recognize hijra as a third gender group, hijra have not actually been able to legally register under this category at local government offices. Additionally, systemic discrimination prevents them from being able to find gainful employment or fully access health services. Without legal protections for their civil rights, hijra lack the ability to make legal claims of discrimination. These findings suggest that: (1) increased vocational and training opportunities should be offered to hijra, (2) healthcare providers who interact with hijra in medical settings require greater sensitization to work with this community, and (3) legal advocacy is needed to ensure the protection of hijra's civil rights, including their ability to legally register as a third gender person and change their legal names, as is currently allowed by Bangladeshi law.

Keywords

social exclusion, access to work, health services, recognition, hijra, Bangladesh, transgender

Introduction

Hijra¹ are referred to as a third gender and encompass a group of gender-nonconforming people in South Asia, including transvestites, transsexuals, intersex individuals, and transgender people. In South Asia, the concept of a third gender has existed for centuries. While the word

hijra is often translated to mean transgender, the lexicon of “transgender” has not been widely utilized in the South Asian context (Reddy, 2005; Nanda, 1999). The word, “hijra” is often translated into English from Hindi (Nanda, 1999) and Urdu (Rehan et al., 2009) as eunuch, transvestite, or hermaphrodite. Because many hijra have undergone castration, hijra were often

¹ The term ‘hijra’ is used in both the singular and plural sense.

considered sexually impotent and unable to have children. Haider and Bano (2002) provide fifteen categories of hijra, based on genital appearance, social identity, sexual preferences, and degrees of masculinity or femininity. Differences pertaining to the labelling of third gender groups varies substantially from region to region within South Asia.

Important distinctions also exist between the social meanings ascribed to these various sexual and gender minority identities (Towle & Morgan, 2006). In comparison to hijra, the term, “transgender,” is often used in the Western context as an umbrella term to identify individuals who do not conform to gender binaries and may present with a blurring of conventional gender roles or expression (UNDP India, 2010). In the present study, hijra are identified as people who do not identify as either male nor female, but rather identify as a third category of gender that is indigenous to South Asian cultures. Depending on their location in South Asia and the vernacular of local language, the range of names for other gender-nonconforming categories within this third gender label include the identities of kothi, panthi, khwaja sara, kinnar, khusra, zenana and others (Boyce, 2007; Cohen, 2005; Reddy, 2005). In the Bangladeshi context, people who identify as kothi often belong to working-class backgrounds. They do not live in separated communities, as hijra usually do. Though many kothi have sex with both men and women, they often take a more effeminate role in relationships with men. Some hijra also identify as kothi or as transgender, and some kothis/transgender people also identify as hijra. These identities are neither

mutually exclusive nor completely overlapping.

Hijra experience social exclusion at multiple levels in society (Kalra & Shah, 2014). Bangladeshi culture places a high value on close familial relationships, fulfilment of gendered expectations of family roles, and performance of social duties. Experiences of social exclusion often begin within the family itself (Khan et al., 2009). As youth, hijra often experience isolation and ostracization in school from their instructors and peers. As students, hijra are likely to be ostracized and bullied. Because of these experiences of discrimination, many hijra drop out of school during primary education. Those hijra who have not completed secondary education are less likely to secure gainful employment in the formal labor sector and are more likely to reside in transient housing. Hijra may choose to leave their families to protect them from experiencing further social stigma or may be forced to leave their homes if family members do not approve of their life choices (Khan et al., 2009).

Changes in Gender Policy

The foundations of criminal law in British India were laid by the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Criminal Procedure Code (CCP), which were adapted from British law (Godwin, 2010). After declaring independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh adapted the Pakistan Penal Code, which in turn had also been derived from the IPC (GHRD, 2015). The twenty-seventh Article of the Bangladeshi Constitution states that all citizens are equal before the law and are eligible for equal protection under the law. Discrimination on the grounds of

religion, race, sex and caste is prohibited (Article 28) and public employment must ensure equal opportunity for all citizens (Article 29). However, section 377 of the Penal Code, violates these rights by effectively criminalizing homosexuality, and arguably also gender nonconformity, by prohibiting sexual intercourse that is considered “against the order of nature.” The Penal Code is used in combination with sections 54 and 55 of the CCP, which sanctions law enforcement agencies to arrest someone in suspicion of committing a “cognizable offense” (UNDP Bangladesh, 2015). The exact parameters for this offense are subject to legal interpretation.

In 2013 the Bangladeshi cabinet endorsed a policy allowing hijra to self-identify as a third gender on all government forms, including passports and national identification cards (Hossain, 2017). Despite this policy, in practice, it remains impossible for a hijra to complete this registration process as these forms continue to lack a third gender option. The election commission (EC) has not provided reasonable justification as to why these changes have not yet been implemented. The EC updated their voter list on January 31, 2016, and enlisted 99,898,553 voters, including 50,320,362 men and 49,578,191 women, but did not offer numbers of hijra/third gender voters who had been registered on the updated list (New Age, 2016). The lack of reported numbers for hijra/third gender voters suggests that hijra have effectively been barred from registering under the third gender status through the EC.

Social Exclusion and Access to Health Services/Work

Social exclusion results from unequal power relationships across the dimensions of culture, economics, politics and interpersonal relationships (Popay et al., 2008). Social exclusion can take place in the context of families, friendship circles, community organizations, working environments or religious groups. Social exclusion has been linked to poverty (Sen, 2000), poor mental and physical health, reduced access to education, and lack of political participation (Popay et al., 2008). Social exclusion creates a lack of resources, the inability to fully engage in relationships and social activities, and lack of participation in cultural and political arenas (Levitas et al., 2007).

Gender creates a categorical disadvantage in settings of poverty (CPRC, 2005). The intersection of gender-based injustice and economic precarity makes women and gender-nonconforming people from impoverished families more vulnerable to social exclusion and discrimination (Kabeer, 2006). In this study, we specifically focus on the social exclusion of hijra in regard to access to work and health services.

Access to work is the idea that people have a human right to participate in productive employment (UNDP, 2015). Increasingly, social interventions focus on not just providing work, but providing “decent work.” The decent work agenda is a concept created by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1999 with the aim of ensuring minimum conditions and rights at the workplace (ILO, 2013). The Universal

Declaration of Human Rights hypothesizes that there are four interconnected elements at the core of the notion of decent work: the right to work, equal pay, just remuneration, and freedom of association (United Nations, 1948; Ghai, 2006). While sex work has been recognized by the United Nations as a valid form of labor, and has been distinguished from the coercion associated with sex trafficking (UN OHCR, 2000), the conditions under which panhandling, street performance and sex work occur for hijra in Bangladesh could easily be considered to be violating ILO standards for safe and equitable venues for work.

In terms of accessing health services, poor health is considered both a risk factor as well as an outcome of social exclusion. Hijra face stigma when accessing health services and are often avoided by physicians (Khan et al., 2009). Poverty and social exclusion appear to be the driving forces behind health inequities and subsequent health system costs in developing contexts like Bangladesh (WHO, 2015).

Methods

Before beginning fieldwork, the researchers contacted Bandhu Social Welfare Society (BSWS), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Dhaka that works for the human rights of gender and sexual minority groups. Through BSWS, the research team was introduced to several of the participants. Team members also approached hijra by conducting street outreach. However, no hijra agreed to participate in the study without obtaining the explicit permission from their *guru* or leader. Conversations were scheduled with gurus to discuss the

study and establish the financial incentive for study participation. Each respondent was provided an incentive of 400 BDT (around \$5 USD). This amount was deemed appropriate after consultation with others who engaged in research with NGOs.

To better understand the social exclusion of hijra, we interviewed hijra and key informants from Dhaka and Chittagong, two large cities in Bangladesh. Between August and September 2016, we conducted 15 interviews with hijra and 5 key informant interviews with NGO workers, journalists and researchers familiar with hijra communities. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized, focusing on themes regarding experiences in the context of access to work and healthcare (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

We utilized open-ended questions to capture the forms of discrimination that hijra experienced. The main objective of these interviews was to gauge how experiences regarding gender identity had changed, following legal recognition from the government of a third gender. In interviews with hijra, respondents were also asked about their experiences in accessing health care and work. In interviews with key informants, respondents were asked about their experiences with assisting hijra in accessing work opportunities and health care services.

We obtained oral informed consent from all participants by explaining the purpose of the study, as well as the risks and benefits involved in participation. Written consent was not obtained to protect the confidentiality of respondents and to minimize the possibility of adverse consequences from

participant affiliation with the study. To further ensure the confidentiality of participants, we have not reported the exact location or date of interviews.

All interviews were conducted in Bengali. A male researcher conducted the interviews with a female companion. Interviews were audio recorded with the participant's permission and translated/transcribed directly into English. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed by two coders, using thematic analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998). This process involves open coding, identifying themes, clustering themes by patterns, and discerning meaning from these patterns. Differences in opinion regarding coding decisions were resolved between the two coders; consensus was reached on all coding decisions.

Data analysis was completed in October 2017. Following data collection, the interviewer consulted with a prominent Bangladeshi hijra activist, who currently lives in the Netherlands, via internet video conferencing. The purpose of these consultations was to obtain feedback on the interpretation of the interviews. We intended to ensure that the iterative process was appropriately being conducted and in accordance with an appreciation for local customs, traditions and semantics of hijra communities.

Results

All respondents in the sample identified as hijra; none of the respondents identified as either male or female. The age of the respondents was between 20 and 45 years. The mean age of participants was 36.25 years ($SD = 7.78$). Most hijra hailed from rural areas

of the country and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Six respondents had studied up until the primary level of education (roughly equivalent to eighth grade) and one individual was illiterate. Only four hijra had a long-term partner, known as a *parikh*. Some hijra were homeless and lived in public parks, central train stations, or slums. These hijra reported being homeless since they left their parents' homes in their youth. Even in these precarious homeless settings, hijra reported feeling fewer threats to their personal safety than when they lived with their families in fear.

Most hijra lived in houses in the same community in kinship groups similar to a family, following a maternal leader, known as a *guru*. The *guru* supervises a small community of disciples, known as *chela*. Guru and chela affiliations follow hierarchical social roles. The guru usually receives a portion of the chela's income. In return, the guru is responsible for training and socializing their chela to the lifestyle of the hijra community. She teaches them *ulti* (meaning backward in Bengali), a secret language spoken only among hijra and inflected with Farsi words. The guru also guides her chelas through the process of becoming an authentic member of the hijra community, processes which may involve castration, penectomy, hormone therapy, or breast augmentation.

All of the hijra we interviewed had left their families between the ages of seven and ten when they chose to join this community. Most of the parents of these hijra lived far away in rural areas and participants did not have ongoing relationships with them. Several hijra reported finding it challenging to find safe

places to live on their own. Hijra reported that landlords will request higher amounts for rent from them. Many landlords refuse to rent flats at all to hijra, no matter how much more money they are willing to pay over other tenants.

Most hijra earn their livelihood by engaging in *hijragiri* or *badhai*. *Hijragiri*, *badhai* or *bazaar tola* include a range of activities, such as collecting payment for giving blessings, obtaining donations from local shop-keepers, and panhandling passengers at traffic intersections, railroad stations and other public spaces. *Badhai* is a public performance involving loud clapping, singing and dancing, prompting shopkeepers and passersby to donate money to hijra. Hijra have historically been bestowed with spiritual powers to bless and curse people. Because hijra are aware that people are afraid of receiving a curse (*badua*) from them, and because many people believe in their supernatural powers, hijra utilize *badhai* as a primary means of income. Some hijra also subsist on daily wage labor through jobs, such as cleaning homes or selling items in the market.

A smaller proportion of the hijra community live independently and do not follow a guru. These hijra do not primarily rely on *hijragiri* or *badhai* for livelihood. They have jobs through local NGOs and are directly involved with the third gender rights movement in Bangladesh. They do not regularly engage in panhandling or sex work. Most of these hijra were born in Dhaka and have studied up through the Higher Secondary level. They hail from higher socioeconomic castes and have a higher degree of education. In our sample, three individuals fit this description. They were involved in political advocacy movements

for third gender rights. They all had male partners with whom they would be seen publicly. One of these hijra was as a Program Officer at a local NGO with ten years of experience working for hijra rights.

It is notable that the hijra who engaged in traditional livelihoods for the community, such as *badhai*, often hail from lower socioeconomic castes while the hijra who work in non-profit settings often hail from higher socioeconomic castes. The class divisions between these hijra groups reflect larger social divisions within Bangladeshi society that demarcate groups of people based on their literacy, education, religion, occupation, and socioeconomic status.

Inability to Legally Register as a Third Gender Person

A recurring theme in the interviews was the frustration that hijra felt about not being able to actually register as a third gender person. Most members of the hijra community considered registration a personal priority, but were unable to move forward with the legal process. On the current voter registration form, many hijra reported that they still identify as either male or female as there is no place on the voting form to identify as third gender. This effectively prohibits many hijra from voting altogether for fear of being questioned about their gender identity at the polls. Jhunjhuni, a 24-year-old hijra from Dhaka who engages in sex work, noted:

The Election Commission has yet to enroll us as voters and provide us with national identity cards that display our gender identity.

Another respondent Keya, a 38-year-old hijra who also engages in sex work added:

We hesitate to wait in the lines of either male or female voters to vote. Though there's a single option (others) for hijras in the passport form, we cannot use it as there's no such option on the birth certificate and the National Identity card.

One important consequence of being given third gender status is being able to be recognized by the government as a member of a scheduled caste. Such an official designation offers hijra the ability to access particular entitlements from the state, similar to affirmative action, such as reserved seats on *panchayats* or local village councils, and access to ration cards. Without being able to register as a third gender person, hijra are unable to avail of these social entitlements. As Pinki, a 32-year-old hijra noted:

I am grateful to our government for making space for us. However, we have a long journey to go.

Kanta, a 46-year-old hijra activist who engages in sex work, expressed frustration about their gender identity not being legally recognized:

In my passport, bank account and voter ID, everywhere I am mentioned as a woman, so what is the meaning of recognition to me? However, I will keep fighting for the rights of the hijra community.

The distinction is made clear here that hijra do not typically identify as women, but rather as a third gender. The inability to actually register as a third gender, despite the change in official law, is reflective of the ways in which this policy has failed to be effective.

Discrimination in Accessing Health Services

Another recurring theme in interviews was the difficulty in accessing health care services. Most hijra did not see any change in the provision of health care services after having their gender identity officially recognized. Many hijra reported that they rarely go to government health centers if they suffer from medical issues. Most hijra reported experiencing discrimination from medical staff in public settings, namely by doctors and nurses.

Many hijra are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) because of their engagement in sex work (Khan et al., 2009), but are often hesitant to request care for these medical issues. Pinki, a 32-year-old hijra expressed,

"If we suffer from STIs, it is virtually impossible to disclose this to the doctor in the public hospitals. They do not respond well and they disapprove of hijra's sexual relations."

Pinki added that discrimination also occurs when attempting to obtain other medical referrals within the hospital, preventing hijra from receiving adequate medical care:

"Sometimes we want to visit a specialist because of a critical medical situation, but we cannot. We are often informed that the doctors are not present. Therefore, we often have no choice but to take care of our medical issues ourselves, even if we are in critical medical need."

Many respondents reported that HIV prevention and safer sex education were heavily prioritized by NGOs and

public clinics, with less attention being paid to other health concerns. Nilima, a 32-year-old hijra depicted the prevailing condition within accessing health services:

Some NGO health services only provide a prescription for STIs. Aside from these diseases, we suffer from psychological problems, addiction, and these issues are entirely ignored.

Kanta reported experiencing similar treatment:

The NGOs are limited to giving condoms, lubricants and HIV/STI related services. It is important to initiate an environment where we can talk to doctors frankly.

Kanta indicates their inability to share with doctors their concerns about other health issues, as STI prevention and treatment was the overwhelming focus of health intervention. Four hijra who are activists and sex workers reported that they experience better treatment in private clinics than through the public hospitals or NGOs. Criticizing the government's lack of targeted interventions for their population, Romana, a 39-year-old hijra from Chittagong said:

I see nothing from the government in regard to health services for us.

Romana also mentioned that there is often a long wait to be seen in public hospitals. Respondents reported that people often stare at them in hospital waiting rooms, resulting in feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. Rupa, a 34-year-old hijra expressed:

Once I went to the doctor in the hospital, I saw people hesitate to sit near to me. Everyone was staring at me. I was kept waiting for a long time to see a doctor. All other people in the waiting room had

already been seen. Is this not discrimination?

Hijra were criticized by hospital staff and were told that their presence made other patients uncomfortable. Keya, a 38-year-old hijra reported:

I went to the public hospital with my friend to see a doctor. I observed men were making fun of us. We just kept calm and quiet. Women tried to hide their face with their veil, implying that I stink! I always use deodorant while going out to any public area, especially in the hospital, to avoid the looks that people give.

Similarly, Julie, a 29-year-old hijra from Dhaka related:

In government hospitals, we need to wait in a line to visit a doctor where many other people are also gathered. And there we have to face a dilemma: whether we should stand in the gents' or ladies' side. Neither of them allows us to enter their line.

Some hijra reported feeling exploited by NGOs, who use them as poster children for their media campaigns. One hijra reported that many NGOs only invite hijra for World AIDS Day events or for health rallies, but otherwise ignore them during the remainder of the year. Though hijra are paid 350-400 Taka for their participation in the rally, engagement with the NGOs does not continue after the event. While hijra reported that they have participated in programs funded by international donors and human rights groups, they often feel that these programs only provide lip service to the health needs of their community.

Discrimination in Labor Markets

All respondents indicated a desire to work; almost all had experienced discrimination in obtaining employment. Most hijra reported that they continue to engage in *hijragiri* and sex work as these venues offer them higher wages than other forms of day labor. Most respondents say it is the only option they have to make a reasonable living. Respondents complained about the difficulties in collecting money from shops and in public markets through *badhai*. Many reported they had a more sustainable livelihood from *hijragiri* in the past when society placed greater value on their importance in the community. Pakhi, a 38-year-old hijra from Dhaka, reported how she was injured while performing *hijragiri*:

I was beaten while I was asking for money from a shopkeeper in the market. They refused to pay me money, but I forced them to pay... Now wherever we go for collecting money, we go together to avoid any clashes.

Most hijra were unable to get a job because of a lack of education/skills or lack of acceptance of their gender nonconformity. Hijra reported that employers viewed the ways in which they dress to be unacceptable for a professional working environment. Expressing frustration over their lack of job opportunities, Nilima depicted this condition:

We have no access to mainstream jobs because of our feminine gestures. Employers do not want to recruit us on the grounds of 'polluting' the job environment.

A third gender option is not provided on most job applications, preventing hijra from openly applying to

jobs in many sectors. For example, the readymade garments industry in the manufacturing sector employs almost the same number of men and women (GISW, 2015). Nonetheless, hijra find it difficult to obtain a job in this field. Romana, a 39-year-old hijra spoke about her difficulties in obtaining employment at a local textile company:

I can work at the garments company, but they recruit only males and females as there is no option for 'other' on the job application form.

This prohibited some hijra from applying as they fear being questioned about being male or female at the workplace. Shompa, a 33-year-old hijra, said:

Not every job has a favorable environment for us. It would have been better if we could do some office work. In jobs where we have to work in shops or with garments, we have to face so many hurdles and hear unpleasant comments made about us. The government identifies us as hijra, but we cannot get a job. No one wants to recruit us.

Shompa reported that when she obtained a manager position with the help of an NGO, she still experienced physical, verbal and sexual abuse at work. Hijra reported that employers may refrain from hiring hijra because they claim that they want to save the workplace from "sexual pollution." Even if hijra are initially hired, they may lose their jobs once their gender identity becomes known. Kotha, a 44-year-old hijra from Dhaka shared this experience:

I got a job (while) hiding my identity but eventually was fired when employers came to know of my feminine attitude and gender.

When asked how they were able to get these positions at all, Kotha said that it was because of their education and training. Shukhi, a 39-year-old hijra similarly commented:

I am educated and well trained. I deserve a government job. However, there is no option except some recruitment from NGOs.

Akash, a 39-year-old hijra who works at an NGO, shared experiences of social isolation at the workplace:

I was irritated by most of my colleagues at my office. I had to eat my lunch alone as they would not sit me with me during lunch time.

Similarly, Shiuly a 40-year-old hijra from Chittagong who works as a dancer and an activist, voiced struggles in obtaining education and leading a fulfilling life:

I envision a society where hijras will not be separated from society. I am a hijra. I have been given special gifts by God. My identity should not be a problem to society.

Hijra often become separated from their family from childhood, leading to greater social and economic vulnerability. This forces them to be dependent on their guru, the hijra community, or their partners/boyfriends for housing and income. Shonali, a 34-year-old hijra reported living independently in their own house, but was dependent on a partner for the rent. Later she moved in with a community of hijra as her parikh was no longer supporting her:

I did not have a job beforehand. I used to maintain my living by receiving money from my parikh. He used to give me money. However, he does not send me money now. Now I sing and dance.

Lack of employment opportunities leads many hijra to engage in sex work, public performance and panhandling. Nilima reported this paradox well:

We have been recognized as hijra by the government, but there is no way to work outside of the sex trade. We survive by selling our bodies and we know people hate us for selling sex.

Hijra who engage in sex work often experience violence from their clients and reported being beaten by local gangs. Hijra often do not report these incidents to the police to avoid further harassment or prosecution from the authorities. Shonali, a 34-year-old hijra from Dhaka, expressed resentment towards having to engage in sex work:

Now I am thinking to leave the sex trade, like many of my friends have. But I do not have any idea where I would work. How will I earn enough to live? My destiny is cursed. It is better for hijra to die!

Choiti, a 43-year-old hijra, discussed the lack of accessibility of the government's workforce development initiatives:

Actually, we asked our guru [about these government programs], but she did not tell us anything. I do not have a clear idea of what the government is doing for us.

Key informants also expressed that hijra face several issues in being able to earn a livelihood. One informant reported that he knew a hijra who had worked in a garment factory. Once people became aware that this person was a hijra, the person faced personal threats and was eventually forced to leave the job for their safety.

According to key informants, hijra make a weekly visitation schedule for

shops and divide the covered area into segments. If people refuse to give them money, hijra may argue with them and an altercation may ensue. Most people end up paying hijra to keep them quiet and to prohibit them from making a public scene. Similar interactions take place at weddings and childbirths, where hijra bless the couple/child in exchange for monetary donations. Wedding patrons may be compelled to pay off hijra in order to allow the wedding to proceed.

Another key informant reported that conflicts arise within the community over the perceived authenticity of hijra. Hijra who have had a penectomy or have been castrated are sometimes considered to be more authentic than those who have not had these surgeries. Some hijra report that they avoid these surgical procedures as they consider these acts to be going against the wishes of God and therefore are impermissible.

Key informants reported that initiatives have been taken in public/private spheres to offer hijra job opportunities. NGOs hire hijra for employment in their organizations, but only if they have been formally educated. In 2015, the Ministry of Social Welfare recruited 14 hijra to work as office assistants and clerks. A private television channel in Bangladesh also employed five people from the third gender community to work as security officers and office workers. While these opportunities are scant, they offer some hope for both the public and private spheres to open up more work opportunities for this community.

One key informant, who is employed as a journalist, reported that the Bangladesh Welfare Ministry and Bangladesh Bank recruited hijra for

positions in state-owned banks. Not many hijra participated in the program as the salary for the position was very low. Additionally, the central government bank, Bangladesh Bank, created an initiative to provide microcredit loans to third gender people for small businesses. As part of their recruitment into the Bangladesh Bank scheme, hijra were asked to undergo a medical examination. For all applicants to this program, the medical examination made them ineligible for the scheme as they were not considered to be “authentically” hijra. The basis for this determination was the fact that these people still had either a penis or testicles, and were therefore classified as male. The Ministry of Social Welfare immediately dismissed the appointments of all these applicants, claiming that they were male-bodied people who impersonated hijra (Hossain, 2017). This situation validates the notion that gender continues to be constructed in biological ways. Anatomy continues to be prioritized as a category marker for hijra over one’s self-proclaimed gender identity.

Lack of Legal Recourse for Discrimination

Respondents voiced their lack of legal recourse for discrimination. If they experienced discrimination based on their gender identity, there was no legal process to file a grievance or discrimination case. According to Nilima:

We are recognized, but there are no legal rights regarding our identity. We are being discriminated in education, in the family, at work, and in terms of our sexual rights.

Many hijra reported that though the announcement of legal recognition

was a positive advance for the hijra community, it has not brought about any substantial changes: Pakhi, a 38-year-old hijra mentioned:

I was so happy to hear about the recognition! At least now we have an identity in this society. Nevertheless, the situation remained the same.

Venkatesh, a 32-year-old hijra who lives in a slum and earns a livelihood through panhandling, said:

Finally, the government recognizes us. It is happy news for us, but still, we do not have a normal life. We are not normal human beings... Sometimes I hate myself when I realize I am hijra.

Expressing resentment regarding these experiences of social exclusion, Kanta expressed:

Society recognizes who we are, but they treat us like strangers. They always try to avoid us in the market and public bus. We are ignored by our families, our society, and sometimes even our partners. Because people have no clear idea about the hijra identity, people treat us with fear and confusion.

Experiences of social exclusion, isolation, and depression permeate the stories of these respondents.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is its small sample size. Given the fact that this study examined the qualitative experiences of a small group of hijra in two Bangladeshi cities, it may not be possible to generalize from this study to experiences of gender-nonconforming people either within or outside of the study area. Because of the stigmatized nature of this gender identity and its

associated occupation with sex work, we were only able to speak to a small number of hijra. Therefore, generalizations regarding gender-nonconforming people in Dhaka, or even in Bangladesh at large, cannot be made.

Another constraint to our study was the timing of the interviews. Scheduling times for interviews was not easy as respondents needed to obtain their guru's permission before speaking with the interviewer. Respondents preferred to talk inside a room versus in a public space. However, during the summertime, some homes were darker inside as some respondents did not have working electricity for five to six hours. This led interviews to occur within a restricted time period. Interviews were completed before sunset as evenings were prime working hours for hijra. These constraints of time and space may have had some unintended consequences for the openness with which respondents could share their experiences.

Another major limitation is the translation of interviews into English. Some nuances of interviews may be "lost in translation" as responses were originally in Bengali and were transcribed/translated directly into English by the lead researcher.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that, while there has been a change in Bangladeshi social policy, people who identify as a third gender continue to experience difficulties in being able to be legally recognized as such. Additionally, the law has been ineffective in increasing access of hijra to employment or health services. As other researchers have

demonstrated, the experiences of sexual and gender minority groups are severely affected by social exclusionary processes (Popay et al. 2008). The results of our study demonstrate that access to work and health services are closely tied to experiences of social exclusion. Work augments human development by providing earnings and income, reducing poverty and moderating growth (UNDP, 2015). Unemployment can therefore be one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion.

Hijra continue to experience discrimination in terms of obtaining employment and accessing health care as there are no legal protections against these practices. Sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh report being worried about their safety in public, particularly because of homophobic remarks made by local political leaders (Al-Jazeera, 2016; HRW, 2016). To ensure their safety, social activists working on queer issues said that they are forced to hide their identities and restrain from public acknowledgment of their advocacy work. Those who are public in their activism may be susceptible to threats to their security, as evidenced by the recent murder of one of Bangladesh's most vocal queer rights activists (Al-Jazeera, 26 April 2016). This fear resonates in Kanta's account of feeling targeted by feelings of hate:

Killing a gay activist is a wrong signal for the whole hijra community as it means that we can be targeted at any time. Who can we ask for help? Society is against us.

The results of this study also demonstrate that hijra have limited access to health care. As has been evidenced by other researchers in Bangladesh (Khan et al., 2009), hijra have been barred from

accessing health services and from being allowed to freely make appointments with doctors. Many respondents reported avoiding public hospitals because they had been previously humiliated in these settings. Only being able to access private health care services is not a sustainable option for individuals with minimal means to pay for such services.

Conclusion

Hijra continue to feel a sense of shame in disclosing their sexual and gender identities to mainstream physicians. Hijra receive suboptimal medical care because they do not feel comfortable with openly discussing those sexual or drug-using behaviors that may increase their risk for STIs. Because of fear of judgment, hijra often fail to report anal STIs to their physicians. Hijra may consider it embarrassing to disclose these issues as their behaviors are considered immoral or socially taboo.

The public health infrastructure needs to ensure that hijra do not experience discrimination in public medical settings by providing sensitization training to medical providers. Constant fears of discrimination impact the mental health of hijra and reduce the efficient provision of STI prevention and care, as well as overall primary medical care. Hijra also need to be able to access a wider range of health services, including mental health services (Bondyopadhyay & Ahmed 2010). Awareness about sexual and gender minorities among medical professionals in government psychiatric hospitals and other mental health settings also needs to improve. Despite the fact that psychiatric discourse has moved away from pathologizing gay identities, many

Bangladeshi doctors continue to view homosexuality as psychotic and abnormal (Coulshed and Orme 2006).

In terms of work opportunities, hijra are often morally blamed for engaging in sex work, yet it is not appreciated that few other employment opportunities exist for this community. The notion of social inclusion in the workforce must go beyond simply offering a handful of jobs in select work settings to contributing to activities that will improve the lives and job opportunities of hijra in multiple spheres of employment. Access to work includes the improvement of employability and abilities that will help an individual to connect with professional life (UNDP, 2015). According to key informants, although the government has initiated new programs to integrate hijra into job programs, only a few have actually benefited from these programs. The government offers subsidies for job placement of hijra in particular industries or regions, but many hijra remain unaware of these initiatives and many companies fail to avail of these opportunities to obtain subsidies.

Widespread media campaigns need to be initiated to ensure that more members of the hijra community are aware of these programs and that these programs actually provide a sustainable livelihood to their participants. For instance, a beauty parlor owned by a member of the hijra community was recently opened in Dhaka with the financial assistance of police officials (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). Greater civil collaboration with government programs is one means of ensuring that hijra gain access to greater employment opportunities.

In summary, this study explored how hijra face several forms of discrimination in accessing work and health services. Though hijra are officially recognized by the State, they continue to be unable to obtain identification cards that reflect this policy change. Access to health services remains challenging as the community faces continued systemic discrimination in both public and private settings. Hijra also continue to largely exist outside of the formal labor sector as panhandling and sex work remain the main forms of income for members of this community. Most hijra continue to live in unstable economic situations. Their participation in the mainstream labor force is an essential step in helping these communities to overcome poverty, develop greater financial self-sufficiency, and achieve improved physical and mental health.

Future research on the topic of sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh, and throughout South Asia, will benefit from evaluation of social interventions that aim to reduce these experiences of social exclusion in the spheres of work and health. Larger scale social interventions are necessary to test how medical and mental health providers in India can be better sensitized to more aptly cater to the needs of the third gender community, without inflicting shame or blame during the process of health service delivery. Vocational and employment interventions that seek to increase the options for employment for this population are also acutely needed. ■

Address correspondence to:

Abdul Aziz, Free University Brussels

Email: abdul.aziz@vub.ac.be

References

- Auerbach, C. E, & Silverstein, L. B. (2003). *Qualitative data: An Introduction to coding and analysis*. New York: New York University Press.
- Al-Jazeera. (2016, April 26). Two gay rights activists hacked to death in Bangladesh. *Al-Jazeera*. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/people-hacked-death-bangladesh-capital-160425141155758.html>
- Bondyopadhyay, A., & Ahmed, S. (2010). *Same-sex love in a difficult climate: a study into the life situation of sexual minority: lesbian, gay, bisexual, kothi and transgender persons in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bandhu Social Welfare Society.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boyce, P. (2007). 'Conceiving kothis': Men who have sex with men in India and the cultural subject of HIV prevention. *Medical Anthropology*, 26(2), 175-203.
- Cohen, L. (2005). The Kothi Wars: AIDS Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification. In *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*, edited by Vincanne Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg, 269–303. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC). (2005). *The Chronic Poverty Report 2004–05*. Retrieved from: [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/u](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/CPR1_ReportFull.pdf)
- Coulshed, V., and Orme, J. (2006). *Social work practice: an introduction*. 4th Ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dhaka Tribune. (2018, March 1). Zero Discrimination Day: Would you visit a parlour run by hijras? *Dhaka Tribune*. Retrieved from: <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/03/01/zero-discrimination-day-visit-parlour-run-hijras/>
- Godwin, J. (2010). Legal Environments, Human Rights and HIV Responses among Men who have Sex with Men and Transgender People in Asia and the Pacific: An Agenda for Action Retrieved from: <http://www.hivpolicy.org/bib/HP001804.htm>
- Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) (2015). *The Invisible Minority: The situation of the LGBT community in Bangladesh*. Retrieved from: http://www.ghrd.org/fileadmin/user_upload/LGBT_Report.pdf
- Global Information Society Watch (GISW). (2015). *The 'third gender' in Bangladesh*. Retrieved from: <https://www.giswatch.org/sites/default/files/gw2015-bangladesh.pdf>
- Ghai, D. (2006). *Decent Work: Objectives and Strategies*. Geneva, ILO.
- Kalra, G. & Shah, N. (2014). The Cultural, Psychiatric, and Sexuality Aspects of Hijras in India, *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 14:4, 171-181, DOI: 10.1080/15532739.2013.876378

- Haider, S.K., and Bano, M. (2006). "Fallacy about Male-to-Female Gender Dysphorics in Pakistan." *Pakistan Journal of Psychology* 37(2):45-60.
- Hossain, A. (2017). "The paradox of recognition: hijra, third gender and sexual rights in Bangladesh." *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 1-14.
- Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2016). "I Want to Live With My Head Held High"
- Abuses in Bangladesh's Legal Recognition of Hijras. Dec. 23, 2016. Retrieved Dec. 30, 2018 from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/12/23/i-want-live-my-head-held-high/abuses-bangladeshs-legal-recognition-hijras#>
- International Labor Organization (ILO). (2013). Decent Work Indicators: Guidelines for Producers and Users of Statistical and Legal Framework Indicators. Geneva: ILO.
- Retrieved from: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---integration/documents/publication/wcms_229374.pdf
- Kvale, S and Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Kabeer, N. (2006). Social exclusion and the MDGs: the challenge of 'durable inequalities' in the Asian context. London: Institute of Development Studies.
- Khan, S. I., S. Islam, M. I. Hussain, S. Parveen, M. I. Bhuiyan, G. Gourab, G. F. Sarker, S. M. Arafat, and J. Sikder. (2009). Living on the Extreme Margin: Social Exclusion of the Transgender Population (Hijra) in Bangladesh. *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition* 27 (4): 441-451.
- Levitas, R., Pantazis, C., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., Lyod, E., & Patsios, D. (2007). *The Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion*. Bristol: Bristol Institute for Public Affairs.
- Nanda, S. (1999). *Neither Men nor Women: The Hijras of India*. London: Wadsworth.
- New Age. (July 24, 2016). 'Hijras' third gender identity virtually remains unrecognized. *New Age*. Retrieved from: <http://newagebd.net/242131/hijras-as-third-gender-identity-virtually-remains-unrecognized/>
- Popay, J., Escorel, S., Hernandez, M., Johnston, H., Mathieson, J., & Rispel, L. (2008). Understanding and Tackling Social Exclusion. Retrieved from: http://www.who.int/social_determinants/knowledge_networks/final_reports/sekn_final%20report_042008.pdf
- Reddy, G. (2005). Geographies of Contagion: Hijras, Kothis, and the Politics of Sexual Marginality in Hyderabad. *Anthropology and Medicine* 12 (3): 255-270.
- Rehan, N., I. Chaudhary and S.K. Shah (2009) Socio-sexual Behaviour of Hijras of Lahore *Journal of Pakistan Medical Association* 59(6): 380-4. Retrieved from: www.jpma.org.pk/full_article_text.php?article_id=1719

- Sen, A. (2000). *Social exclusion: Concept, application and scrutiny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Towle, E. B., and L. M. Morgan. (2002). Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of Third Gender Concept. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 8(4): 469–497.
- United Nations (U.N.). (1948). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Geneva: U.N. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>
- United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR). (2000). Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Geneva: U.N. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>
- United Nations Development Projects (UNDP). (2010). *Hijras/Transgender women in India: HIV, human rights and social exclusion*. Geneva: U.N. Retrieved from: http://www.archive.nyu.edu/jspui/bitstream/2451/33612/2/hijras_transgender_in_india.pdf
- United Nations Development Projects (UNDP Bangladesh). (2015). *Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*. Geneva: U.N. Retrieved from: [http://www.bd.undp.org/content/dam/bangladesh/docs/Projects/jsf/Best%20Practice%20Handbook%20\(Final%20Draft\).pdf](http://www.bd.undp.org/content/dam/bangladesh/docs/Projects/jsf/Best%20Practice%20Handbook%20(Final%20Draft).pdf)
- United Nations Development Projects (UNDP). (2015). *Human Development Report, Work for Human Development*. Geneva: U.N. Retrieved from: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2015). Ending violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. Geneva: WHO. Retrieved from: <http://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/news/un-statement-on-lgbti/en/index1.html>

"It ain't a fight unless you hit me": Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence in a Sample of African American College Women

Journal of Research
on Women and Gender
Volume 9, Pages 22-38
Celeste Walley-Jean, 2019

Reprints and Permissions:
Email jrwj14@txstate.edu
Texas Digital Library:
<http://www.tdl.org>

J. Celeste Walley-Jean

Abstract

Previous research on perceptions of intimate partner violence is limited in that the research has not focused on how college students specifically define intimate partner violence. Additionally, although research has supported that African American college women are at a relatively higher risk for experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) than college women from other ethnic groups, little research has specifically examined the experience of IPV in this specific population. Through the qualitative exploration of responses to an open-ended questionnaire from a sample of African American college women, the current study describes their perceptions of intimate partner violence and expands the understanding of intimate partner violence in this population. Findings indicate that African American college women use a wide range of behaviors in response to conflict in their relationships and, generally, they accurately define emotional, verbal, and physical violence. However, a substantial number of African American college women in the current study did not define acts as intimate partner violence unless it was physical violence. This finding also appeared to be age-related, in that younger women were more likely to define violence as only physical.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, African American, college women, perceptions

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as a pattern of threats or behaviors encompassing physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual abuse or psychological coercion or degradation that occurs between domestic or intimate partners (Al'Uqdah, Maxwell, & Hill, 2016), is a significant problem across the world.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), worldwide, close to 30% of women who have been in a relationship report experiencing some form of physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. In general, intimate partner violence research in the United States focuses on White and poor women

(Bent-Goodley, 2001). However, research has indicated that African American women experience IPV at significantly higher rates (Bent-Goodley, 2004, 2016; Catalano, 2012; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and are at greater risk for poorer health outcomes than women of other races (Lacy, Sears, Matusko, & Jackson, 2015). Approximately 41% of African American women have experienced violence by an intimate partner during their lifetimes (Breiding, Smith, Basile, et al., 2014). Furthermore, African American women are more likely to receive more serious injuries, kill their partner, or be killed by their partner compared to other women (Violence Policy Center, 2017). Less these findings are overgeneralized to suggest that African Americans are simply more violent than other groups, it is imperative to recognize that historical factors (e.g., legacy of enslavement, continued systemic racism), socioeconomic factors (e.g., living in impoverished neighborhoods, unemployment or underemployment, etc.), external barriers (e.g., impact of labeling, stereotypes, lack of cultural competence on help-seeking behaviors, effective intervention, and retention in IPV treatment), and internal barriers (e.g., racial loyalty, gender entrapment) (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Bent-Goodley, Chase, Circo, & Anta-Rodgers, 2010; Ritchie, 1996) play significant roles in the experience of IPV among African American women.

Research has also demonstrated a high prevalence of dating violence, a form of IPV that occurs among college populations, with estimates ranging

from 10%-50% (see Kaukinen, 2014 for review). Research also suggests that African American college women are at a relatively higher risk for experiencing this form of IPV than college women from other ethnic groups. For instance, in a large study of college women (87% identified as Black) attending four Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs;), Barrick, Krebs, & Lindquist (2013) found that, in comparison to findings from a study of women attending two Predominantly White Colleges/ Universities (PWCUs) (Krebs, et al., 2009), twice as many women attending HBCUs (17% vs. 34%) reported being insulted, humiliated, or treated like an inferior by a dating partner since entering college. Additionally, 18% of the respondents in the HBCU study reported experiencing physical IPV (i.e., pushed, shoved, hit, slapped, grabbed; choked, slammed, kicked, burned, or beaten) in the past year in contrast to only 5% from the PWCU study reporting similar experiences (Barrick, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2013). To date, however, there is little research examining the experience of IPV specifically among African American college women (e.g., Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009). Generally, intimate partner violence research focuses on White and poor women (Bent-Goodley, 2001). Furthermore, much of the existing research on African American women and intimate partner violence investigates the experiences of African American women in low-income community samples and who are experiencing more severe violence (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Garfield, 2005; Potter, 2008; Ritchie, 1996; West, 2004; West, 2007). Given the diversity

within the African American population, further exploration of the experiences of IPV among African American college women is warranted.

Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence among College Students

One important area in evaluating the experience of IPV is perceptions of intimate partner violence. Inconsistency in generally accepted definitions of intimate partner violence and the ways in which individuals define their and their partners' relationship behaviors may lead to increased perpetration and/or victimization (Miller, 2011). Additionally, incongruence in how intimate partner violence is defined and perceived may also lead to couples ignoring signs that violence in the relationship may be escalating, to perpetration and/or victimization in future relationships, or an absence or reduction of help-seeking behaviors (Miller, 2011). Studies examining perceptions of IPV, specifically among dating partners, have primarily focused on gender differences in (e.g., Beyers et al., 2000; Dardis et al., 2017; O'Campo, et al., 2017) or gender effects on perceptions of the severity of violent behaviors (e.g., Hamby & Jackson, 2010; Hammock et al., 2015; Hammock, et al., 2017; Sylaska & Walters, 2014). Although important, no studies have specifically examined college students' perceptions of what behaviors they identify to characterize intimate partner violence.

Furthermore, Bent-Goodley, Chase, Circo, and Anta Rodgers (2010) assert that it is vital to the

development of effective and culturally-informed prevention and intervention efforts to understand individuals' conceptualizations of intimate partner violence. Researchers have indeed found the conceptualization of intimate partner violence influences the types of interventions those who use and experience IPV seek or are responsive to. In a study of 1,530 college students, Miller (2011) found that although one in four students were involved in a physically abusive dating relationship, over 85% of them failed to self-identify as ever having received and/or perpetrated any act of physical abuse. In addition to influencing the experience of intimate partner violence within individual relationships, similarly, a lack of understanding among practitioners and researchers of how violence is conceptualized among those who use and experience it may lead to a deficit in the knowledge needed to develop and implement effective prevention and intervention strategies. In discussing the necessity of cultural competence in addressing intimate partner violence in the African American community, Bent-Goodley, et al. (2010) voice it is vital that practitioners understand African American women's concepts of intimate partner violence in order to develop a therapeutic relationship that is built on common understanding. Utilizing a community sample of African American women, Bent-Goodley (2004) also previously supported the need to better understand women's specific perceptions of intimate partner violence, particularly in relation to how

their perspective affects help-seeking.

To date, there is little research examining the conceptualizations (e.g., motivations, justification, perceptions, etc.) of IPV specifically among African American college women (e.g., Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009). Yet, in a population that is ostensibly more vulnerable to the experience of IPV (i.e., African American college women), research examining their conceptualization of IPV is lacking. The Walley-Jean Cultural Socialization Model of IPV (Walley-Jean & Swan, 2018), insists it is not only necessary, but imperative, that research on IPV within African American college women consider cultural perceptions, socialization, and interpretations to fully understand the experience of IPV within this population. Walley-Jean & Swan (2018) build upon extant previous scholarship (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; Bent-Goodley, 2001; Garfield, 2005; Potter, 2008; Richie, 1996; West, 1998) that asserts that examining IPV through an intersectional framework (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) provides the opportunity to better understand and address the issue of IPV within the African American community. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore perceptions of intimate partner violence in a sample of African American college women.

Method

The sample for this study consisted of 50 African American college women, a subset of a larger study sample of 113 college students, recruited from a medium-sized, predominantly minority-serving

institution in the southeastern United States. The percentage of African American women in the overall sample (44%) was representative of the percentage of African American women enrolled at the institution in which the data were collected (45%). The only inclusion criteria were that participants were 18 years or older. Open-ended responses to a questionnaire designed to obtain information about how participants resolve relationship conflict and their perceptions of intimate partner violence were the primary sources of data. The current paper focuses on the African American women in the sample, a consistently underrepresented population of interest in college samples.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in varying ways. Flyers were posted in common areas where students gather and distributed at student organization events. Additionally, the primary investigator contacted institutional faculty via email to request permission to visit their classes to recruit potential participants and/or request the faculty member forward a copy of the recruitment flyer to their class listserv or post to their class websites. The study was also advertised via the institution's online internal communications page. Lastly, research assistants sat at information tables set up in a highly populated building on campus and solicited potential volunteers. Potential participants who expressed interest were provided an information card which included a link to the online study. Participants completed an informed consent form and the study

questionnaire via a secure, online survey system licensed to the university. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Measure

Participants completed a questionnaire developed by the primary investigator. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions (i.e., age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, length of relationship, and gender of partner). Seven open-ended questions were used to gain insight into the actions participants use to resolve conflict in their relationships, their perceptions of their partners' actions, and whether they perceive their or their partners' actions as "relationship violence." Participants were prompted to respond to the questions with the following instruction, *"No matter how well a person gets along with their romantic partner, there are times when they disagree. The following questions are designed to give you the opportunity to describe the types of things you say or do when you and your romantic partner disagree."* (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The questions are listed in Table I (see Appendix).

Sample

A total of fifty-three (53) African American women provided demographic information. Of those participants, fifty (50) also provided a minimum of one response to the open-ended questions. Participants who did not provide a minimum of one response to the open-ended questions were deleted ($n = 3$). It should be noted that of the remaining

participants, six did not respond to all 7 open-ended questions; however, they were kept in the sample and the responses they provided were included in analysis. Prior to analysis, the data were reviewed for errors (e.g., duplicate data, missing data, etc.). NVivo 10, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was used to organize, code and analyze the data. The software also facilitated reliability checking between coders.

Data Coding and Analysis

A two-stage process was used to code and analyze data. To minimize researcher bias, two researchers (a senior and junior researcher) coded and analyzed the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, guided by the questionnaire questions, the researchers engaged in open coding to develop an initial coding framework (Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom & Herrington, 2014). For example, "communication", "actions", and "violence" were used for initial coding. The researchers used the initial coding framework to establish inter-rater reliability and consistency between coders. For the reliability building process, a random sample of approximately 20 percent of the files (23/113) was selected (Neuendorf, 2002). The researchers individually coded, using both open and axial coding, a subset of the files to assess reliability and to reach inter-coder agreement (i.e., reconcile through discussion whatever discrepancies coders had on coded text). Team members formally communicated once per week to discuss their coding process and progress. After achieving a sufficient level of inter-rater reliability

(a minimum criterion of .80 Cohen's Kappa reached using NVivo 10), the researchers proceeded to the second stage of the process.

During the second stage of coding and analysis, the researchers employed a more in-depth level of data analysis. The researchers re-coded all 50 files of African American participants using the refined coding scheme, including those files initially coded during the inter-rater reliability building process. Sub-categories (e.g., "disengage" became a sub-category of "actions") as well as independent codes (e.g., "perceptions of behavior") emerged from the data.

The researchers used an iterative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to capture common and recurring themes in the data. The researchers met throughout the coding process to share findings, discuss emergent themes, and refine the coding framework. The researchers also discussed connections that were being made, and the meanings and conclusions being applied. Internal documents (i.e., coding schedule and summary notes) were used to track progress and guide analysis (Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2014).

Strategies were also employed to increase the validity and trustworthiness of the data and findings, including outlining the steps and decisions made throughout the process. Internal documents (e.g., coding spreadsheets, memos) were used throughout the process to track progress and guide analysis. Following Osborne-Lampkin et al., (2014), team members met throughout the coding

and analysis process to review emergent categories, discuss differences in individual interpretations, and to arrive at a consensus for any categories included in the analysis. The researchers also employed strategies to test and confirm findings and ensure the quality of conclusions. Researchers were required to provide evidence of any findings used in the analysis, including specific language and corresponding reference numbers for all coded data. As

Osborne-Lampkin et al. (2014) notes, this documentation is particularly important for clarification of researchers' interpretation and team consensus to justify including data in the analysis and to guide the formulation of overall findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, 1994; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom & Herrington, 2014; Yin, 2014, 2009).

Results

Demographic Information

Age and Sexual Orientation: Thirty-six percent (36%) of the sample reported being 18- 21 years old and 28% reported being 22-25 years old. The remainder of the sample (36%) reported being 26 years or older. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual (88%). Four (4) of the remaining six participants identified as bisexual or lesbian. Two (2) participants did not respond to the sexual orientation question.

Relationship Status and Length: Forty-eight percent (48%) of the sample described their relationship status as "single, not dating." Eighteen percent

(18%) reported their status as “single, dating casually,” while twenty-four percent (24%) reported “dating exclusively.” Finally, sixteen percent (16%) reported being “married or equivalent.” Of those who reported currently being in a relationship, the majority (63%) reported being in their current relationship for a length of one year or less. Fourteen percent (14%) reported being with their partners between one and five years while twenty-two percent (22%) reported being in relationships five years or more.

Responses to Conflict

Three overall themes emerged from the open-ended responses related to what participants and their partners say and do when a disagreement arises (i.e., responses to conflict; Questions 1-5). The themes were (1) forms of verbal communication (i.e., arguing, talking it out); (2) forms of non-verbal communication (i.e., not talking, ignoring); and, (3) disengagement (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Verbal Communication: In response to the questions of what typically happens, what is done, and/or what is said, participants routinely reported that they “argued” or “talked things out” when a disagreement arose in their relationships. For example, Respondent 11 (22-25 years old) reported, “An argument normally occurs, and I become reserved because I don’t like to feel uncomfortable.” Another participant explained, “It’s usually just an argument...” (Respondent 106, 18-21 years old). Other participants reported talking the situation out. For example,

Respondent 13 (>45 years old) explained, “I normally say what I need to say and never mention it again. My partner listens and we always come to an agreement and try to move forward and really try to have an open and honest relationship.”

Non-Verbal Communication: Other participants described non-verbal responses to conflict in their relationships. For instance, Respondent 105 (>45 years old) reported she “shut[s] down and not talk” while Respondent 107 (18-21 years old) explained that she typically, “get(s) mad and not talk for a couple of days.”

Disengagement: Participants also reported that either they or their partners disengaged from the situation when a disagreement occurs. For example, one participant described that “when we (them and their partner) disagree he generally walks away” (Respondent 1, 22-25 years old). Similarly, another participant explained that her partner “leaves when it’s too challenging” (Respondent 105, >45 years old). These responses were consistent with other participant responses who reportedly disengaged as a response to conflict.

Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence

Interpretation of participants’ perceptions of what they considered intimate partner violence was a primary focus of the current analysis and was informed by participant responses to questions 6 & 7. Questions 6 & 7 asked, “In thinking about what you (Question 6)/your partner (Question 7) say and do

when you have a disagreement with your partner, do you think any of your/your partner's words or actions are relationship violence? Why or why not?" Generally, most participants did not report that their (98%) or their partners' (79%) actions would be defined as intimate partner violence. In evaluating participant responses, three (3) themes related to their perceptions of intimate partner violence emerged: (1) Perception that actions are not intimate partner violence; (2) Perception that actions are intimate partner violence; and, (3) Intimate partner violence defined as physical violence only (Table 2).

Perception that Actions Are Not Intimate Partner Violence: Some participants provided explicit statements that indicated they did not perceive the ways in which they resolve relationship conflicts as intimate partner violence. For example, Respondent 31 (>45 years old) stated:

No violence. Before we ever loved each other, we respected each other. We were each other's best friend and protector. Verbal or physical or psychological violence has never defined our relationship or been a component of it. We never lose sight of the fact that the other person, though not perfect, is God's gift to us and we must answer to Him as to our treatment of each other especially when we disagree.

Another participant asserted, "No, because I am not verbally abusive nor physically abusive." (Respondent 105, (>45 years old). Yet another participant declared, "No, there is no verbal or physical abuse. We do not curse at one another when we are heated."

(Respondent 2, 31-35 years old).

In addition to these types of statements, participants also voiced utilizing non-violent, respectful ways of resolving conflicts. Respondent 33 (>45 years old) stated, "No, their [*sic*] is no violence because I will always try to work through the disagreement [*sic*]." Additionally, Respondent 60 (22-25 years old) voiced, "No, I don't disrespect or provoke him in any kind of way. If we cannot talk about it like adults then we'll leave it alone until we can." Respondent 63 (26-30 years old) explained, "No. I try to respect whoever [*sic*] I am dating enough to come to them as a woman in a disagreement, and not belittle or provoke them to a point where they begin to act out of character."

Perception that Actions Are Intimate Partner Violence: Although most participants did not perceive their and their partners' actions as intimate partner violence, some participants (18%, n=9), indeed, reported that their or their partners' actions could be defined as intimate partner violence. In these cases, participants explicitly stated their actions could be defined as either physical, verbal, or emotional violence; however, the behavior most often identified as violence was "verbal abuse." As an illustration, Respondent 49 (22-25 years old) described, "I would consider it more so as verbal abuse because we may say mean things to each other" while Respondent 47 (>45 years old) reported, "Yes, verbal violence mainly." and Respondent 38 (>45 years old) described, "Yes, because it borders on verbal abuse."

Those who defined their or their partners' actions as intimate partner violence were also generally accurate in

their evaluation. That is, they identified behaviors which are generally consistent with the formal definition of intimate partner violence. In addition to verbal aggression, other respondents described what they perceived as “emotional violence.” For example, Respondent 29 (22-25 years old) stated, “Yes, because we have some emotional violence where I do not care how my actions make my partner feel.” Participants also accurately identified physical violence, such as Respondent 62 (35-40 years old), “Yes, he did have a physical fight with his ex-girlfriend years before we got together...” and Respondent 97 (18-21 years old) who described, “I might fight him, but he won’t fight back as in throw punches. He’ll just hold me down.”

Of interest was the finding that how a participant specifically defined intimate partner violence could potentially influence whether they classified their or their partner’s actions as intimate partner violence. For instance, even among the participants who identified their or their partners’ actions as violence, participants provided responses that differentiated physical violence from other actions. As an example, Respondent 11 (22-25 years old) stated, “...I know it’s not okay to be in someone’s face hollering and pointing fingers, but I definitely don’t push or get physical but I do feel I can be verbally abuse [*sic*] at times” and Respondent 7 (26-30 years old) who asserted, “...I punched him once, otherwise, it’s not physical. My words are ruthless, but I assume that is typical when an individual is irate.”

Intimate Partner Violence Defined Only as Physical Violence: This conceptualization of intimate partner

violence as *only* physical actions was also supported by responses from participants who did not perceive their or their partners’ actions as intimate partner violence.

Specifically, of the forty-five participants who did not perceive their or their partners’ actions as violence, fifteen (33%) made statements that suggest their conceptualization of violence only includes acts of physical violence. For example, respondents made comments such as, “No, we don’t hit each other.” (Respondent 32, 18-21 years old) and “No, we never hit each other.” (Respondent 77, 22-25 years old). Other participants made similar comments such as, “No, we don’t put our hands on one another,” (Respondent 106, 18-21 years old), “No, because don’t put our hands on each other...No, not touching me.” (Respondent 24, 18-21 years old), and “No, I do not put my hands on someone.” (Respondent 93, 22-25 years old).

Participants also made comments that specifically distinguished physical touch that was enacted violently, “No, we have never put our hands on each other in a violent manner....No, he would never hit me.” (Respondent 8, 26-30) and “No, because it is not physical violence...No because he isn’t hitting me.” (Respondent 26, 18-21 years old). At least one participant also reported their past actions could be defined as violence yet described only her use of physical violence. She explained, “No, not anymore! However, I use to physically hit him when I was angry, but he never hit me back until he got tired of it and he grab [*sic*] me very harshly. I stopped

being physical because he is a man and is much strong [*sic*] and I wouldn't want neither of us to get hurt" (Respondent 109, 22-25 years old). One of the most definitive responses was provided by Respondent 75 (22-24 years old) who specifically noted, "No, because the definition of violence is the 'intentional use of physical force' and it hasn't come to that."

Discussion

The current exploratory study offers valuable insights into conceptualizations of intimate partner violence among African American college women. Although an extant literature on African American women and intimate partner violence exists (e.g., Bent-Goodley, 2001; Garfield, 2005; Potter, 2008; Richie, 1996; West, 1998, 2002), this literature has primarily addressed IPV in poor African American women and African American women who are experiencing more severe violence. Although few, some studies (Barick, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2013; Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Field, 2005; Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009) have specifically investigated the experiences of IPV in African American college women; however, none have examined African American college women's perceptions of IPV. Furthermore, the literature on perceptions of violence among college students is limited in that the research has not focused on how college students specifically define intimate partner violence (as opposed to gender differences or effects on the definition of intimate partner violence). Thus, describing African American college women's perceptions of how they and their partners' resolve conflict within their

intimate relationships adds significant new knowledge to our understanding of this specific population.

The current findings indicate that African American college women use a wide range of behaviors in response to conflict in their relationships. These behaviors can be effective (e.g., talking it out, etc.) or ineffective (e.g., shutting down, disengaging). Unlike previous findings of college students' perceptions of intimate partner violence (i.e., Miller, 2011; Fass & Benson, 2008), it is also encouraging that most women in this sample accurately identified verbal, physical, and emotional aggression as intimate partner violence and did not seem to minimize or deny the existence of these behaviors within their relationships. However, the finding that a third of the sample who did not define their or their partners' behaviors as intimate partner violence unless it was physical violence is concerning and demonstrates that how African American women perceive and define intimate partner violence is multifaceted and warrants further study.

Researchers have demonstrated that psychological aggression is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of physical aggression in romantic relationships (e.g., Baker & Stith, 2008; O'Leary, 1999). It is also estimated that psychological aggression occurs in approximately 80% of college student dating relationships while physical aggression occurs in approximately 20-30% (Bell & Naugle, 2007; Shorey et al., 2008). Barrick, Krebs, & Lindquist's (2013) findings that 34% of the women in a sample of African American college women reported being insulted, humiliated, or

treated like an inferior in contrast to only approximately 18% reporting experiencing physical IPV (i.e., pushed, shoved, hit, slapped, grabbed, choked, slammed, kicked, burned, or beaten) are sobering. This finding also demonstrates that, among African American college women, physical violence is only one form of intimate partner violence being experienced. These findings are even more disturbing when coupled with the fact that African American women in the current study who perceived their or their partners' behaviors as intimate partner violence most often described the behavior as "verbal abuse." Therefore, the propensity of some of the women in the current sample to not classify behaviors as intimate partner violence until those behaviors reach the level of physical violence may increase the likelihood of their remaining in an unhealthy relationship that contains other forms of intimate partner violence that are not physical. Future studies should expand on the current exploratory study by holding focus groups or conducting individual interviews with African American college women to gain more in-depth understanding of what they perceive constitutes intimate partner violence.

The identification of behaviors as intimate partner violence only if the behaviors are physical in the current sample also seems to be associated with age. That is, of the participants who made comments supporting this category, the majority (73%) were 18-25 years old. It may be that younger women have not yet had experiences that broaden their definition of intimate partner violence past physical violence. Yet, as illustrated by the findings of

Barrick, Krebs, & Lindquist (2013), African American college women are indeed experiencing additional forms of intimate partner violence other than physical violence. Bent-Goodley, et al. (2010) note diversity within the African American population must be considered when examining intimate partner violence. The difference in conceptualization of IPV by age in the current study suggests the possibility that the development of IPV in African American women might have a specific trajectory that involves an intersection of different factors, including age, and maybe other variables such as socioeconomic class, education, etc. Thus, future studies should compare the conceptualizations of intimate partner violence in African American women of varying ages, socioeconomic class, education levels, relationship status, and perpetration and victimization histories.

Limitations

Although providing important information about perceptions of intimate partner violence within an under-researched population, the current study has limitations. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the researchers did not obtain information about specific incidences of intimate partner violence. Thus, the current project does not allow for a comparison of participants' perceptions of IPV with their actual, self-reported experiences of IPV. Future studies should obtain information on participants' behavior to compare whether it aligns with their perceptions of the behaviors. Additionally, future research should obtain information from both partners. The participation of both partners

allows for corroboration of each partners' perceptions as well as comparison between partners.

Another limitation in relation to the questionnaire used as the method of data collection for the study was that the questions were not piloted before use. Additionally, questionnaire data is self-reported, relying heavily on the ability of participants to accurately and honestly recollect their experiences. The use of an online questionnaire enabled the researchers to obtain information that participants may perceive as sensitive that they might not have otherwise provided using other methods of data collection (e.g., focus groups, interviews). And while the use of the online, open-ended questionnaire provided an opportunity for participants to provide more complete and detailed responses and further clarification, researchers have noted some concerns about the inability to control the environment in which the online questionnaire is being taken. More explicit qualitative methodology, particularly focus groups or individual interviews, may have provided a better opportunity for participants to contextualize their responses.

Conclusion

In a population that is ostensibly more vulnerable to the experience of IPV, research examining their conceptualization of IPV is noticeably lacking. Women of color scholars (e.g., Bent-Goodley, 2004; Garfield, 2005; Potter, 2010) have asserted and demonstrated the importance of studying the lived experiences of African American women to our overall understanding of intimate partner

violence within this population. Building upon this foundation, the Walley-Jean Cultural Socialization Model of IPV (Walley-Jean & Swan, 2018), insists it is not only necessary, but imperative, that research on IPV within African American college women consider cultural perceptions, socialization, and interpretations to fully understand the experience of IPV within this population. The continued study of the experience of IPV in African American college women provides a much-needed intersectional lens to IPV research. To fully understand and eventually eradicate IPV, it is vital to investigate how the intersectionality of varying social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class contribute to and impact the experience of IPV.

Findings from the current study contribute to our knowledge of how African American college women conceptualize and understand their and their partners' use of verbal, emotional, and physical violence to resolve conflict in their relationships. No group, including African American women, are monolithic and the current findings provide evidence that further study of the diversity of experiences and conceptualization among varying groups of African American women is necessary. Future studies can expound on the findings of the current study by exploring the definitions of verbal, emotional, and physical violence in African American college women who have or are currently experiencing IPV. Additionally, future studies should specifically evaluate these conceptualizations across African American college women of varying ages or longitudinally to investigate whether there is a developmental trajectory to the

conceptualization of IPV in this population. Finally, it is also important that future studies include partners to obtain an understanding of how the conceptualizations of IPV are mirrored or not within couple dyads. ■

Address correspondence to:

J. Celeste Walley-Jean, Clayton State University

Email: jeanettewalley-jean@clayton.edu

References

- Al'Uqdah, S.N., Maxwell, C., & Hill, N. (2016). Intimate partner violence in the African American community: Risk, theory, and interventions. *Journal of Family Violence, 31*, 877-884.
- Baker, C., & Stith, S. (2008). Factors predicting dating violence perpetration among male and female college students. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Treatment, 17*, 227-244.
- Barrick, K., Krebs, C., Lindquist, C. (2013). Intimate partner violence victimization among undergraduate women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). *Violence Against Women, 19*, 1014-1033.
- Bell, K. & Naugle, E. (2007). Effects of social desirability on students' self-reporting of partner abuse perpetration and victimization. *Violence and Victims, 22*, 243-256.
- Bent-Goodley, T. (2001). Eradicating domestic violence in the African American community: A literature review and action agenda. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 2*, 316-330.
- Bent-Goodley, T. (2004). Perceptions of violence: A dialogue with African American women. *Health & Social Work, 29*, 307-316.
- Bent-Goodley, T. B. (2016). Domestic violence and its impact on communities of color. In Copeland, V. C. (2016), Ed. *People of Color in the United States: Contemporary issues in education, work, communities, health, and immigration.* (pp. 104-109). Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood
- Bent-Goodley, T. B., Chase, L., Circo, E., & Anta Rodgers, S. T. (2010). Our survival, our strengths: Understanding the experiences of African American women in abusive relationships. In L. Lockhart & F. S. Danis (Eds.), *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and culturally competent practice.* (pp.67-99). Columbia University Press.
- Beyers, J., Leonard, J., Mays, V., & Rosen, L. (2000). Gender differences in the perception of courtship abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15*, 451-466.
- Brieding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Basile, K. C., et al. (2014). Prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence victimization: National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey. *Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report, 63*, 1-24.
- Caetano, R., Ramisetty-Mikler, S., & Field, C.A. (2005). Unidirectional and

- bidirectional intimate partner violence among White, Black, and Hispanic couples in the United States. *Violence and Victims*, 20, 393-406.
- Catalano, S. (2012). *Special Report: Intimate partner violence, 1993-2010*. Washington, DC.: U.S. Department of Justice., Office of Justice Programs.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241-1299.
- Dardis, C. M., Edwards, K. M., Kelley, E. L., & Gdiycz, C. A. (2017). Perceptions of dating violence and associated correlates: A study of young adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32, 3245-3271.
- Fass, D. F., Benson, R. I., & Leggett, D. G. (2008). Assessing prevalence and awareness of violent behaviors in the intimate partner relationships of college students using internet sampling. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 22, 66-75.
- Garfield, G. (2005). *Knowing what we know: African American women's experiences of violence and violation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hamby, S., & Jackson, A. (2010). Size does matter: The effects of gender on perceptions of dating violence. *Sex Roles*, 63, 553-565.
- Hammock, G. S., & Richardson, D. S. (2015). Perceptions of psychological and physical aggression between heterosexual partners. *Journal of Family Violence*, 30, 13-26.
- Hammock, G. S., Richardson, D. S., Lamm, K. B., Taylor, E., & Verlaque, L. (2017). The effect of gender of perpetrator and victim on perceptions of psychological and physical intimate partner aggression. *Journal of Family Violence*, 32, 357-365.
- Kaukinen, C. (2014). Dating violence among college students: The risk and protective factors. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, 15, 283-296.
- Krebs, C.P., Lindquist, C.H., Warner, T.D., Fisher, B.S., & Martin, S.L. (2009). The differential risk factors of physically forced and alcohol or other drug enable sexual assault among university women. *Violence & Victims*, 24, 304-321.
- Lacey, K. K., Sears, K. P., Matusko, N., & Jackson, J. S. (2015). Severe physical violence and Black women's health and well-being. *American Journal of Public Health*, 4, 719-724.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A. M., Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, L. M. (2011). Physical abuse in a college setting: A study of perceptions and participation in abusive dating relationships. *Journal of Family Violence*, 26,

- 71-80. doi:10.1007/s10896-010-9344-2
- Neuendorf, K.A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Campo, P., Zhange, Y. J., Omand, M., Velonis, A., Yonas, M., Minh, A., Cyriac, A., Ahmad, F., & Smylie, J. (2017). Conceptualization of intimate partner violence: Exploring gender differences using concept mapping. *Journal of Family Violence*, 32, 367-382.
- O'Leary, D. (1999). Psychological abuse: A variable deserving critical attention in domestic violence. *Violence and Victims*, 14, 3-23.
- Osborne-Lampkin, L., Folsom, J. & Herrington, C. (2014). Applied methods for analyzing Florida districts' principal training plans. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. Limited Distribution Document.
- Potter, H. (2008). *Battle Cries: Black women and intimate partner violence*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Rennison, C. M. & Welchans, S. (2000). *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Intimate partner violence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- Ritchie, B. (1996). *Compelled to crime: The gender entrapment of battered black women*. New York: Routledge.
- Shorey, R., Cornelius, T., & Bell, K. (2008). A critical review of theoretical frameworks for dating violence: Comparing the dating and marital fields. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 13, 185-194.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Straus, M. A., Hamby, S. L., Boney-McCoy, S., & Sugarman, D. B. (1996). The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Studies*, 17, 283-316. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251396017003001>
- Sylaska, K. M., & Walters, A. S. (2014). Testing the extent of the gender trap: College students' perceptions of and reactions to intimate partner violence. *Sex Roles*, 70, 134-145.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Extent, nature, and consequences of intimate partner violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.
- Violence Policy Center (2017). *When men murder women*. Washington, D.C.: Violence Policy Center.
- Walley-Jean, J., & Swan, S. (2009). Motivations and justifications

- for partner aggression in a sample of African American college women. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 18, 698-717.
- Walley-Jean, J. C., & Swan, S. C. (2018). I'm not a victim. I just got into a fight.”: A culturally-informed model of IPV among African American women. *Unpublished manuscript*.
- West, C. (1998). Lifting the “political gag order”: Breaking the silence around partner violence in ethnic minority families (pp. 184-209). In J. L. Jasinski and L. M. Williams (Eds.), *Partner Violence: A comprehensive review of 20 years of research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- West, C. (2002). *Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue*. Haworth Press: Binghamton, N.Y.
- West, C. (2004). Black women and intimate partner violence: New directions for research. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19, 1487-1493.
- West, C. (2007). “Sorry, we have to take you in”: Black battered women arrested for intimate partner violence. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma*, 15, 95-121.
- World Health Organization (2017, November). Violence against women. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks: CA.

Appendix

Table 1

Questions
1. Describe what happens when you and your partner disagree.
2. Describe things that you might say and how you say it when you have a disagreement.
3. Describe things that your partner might say and how they might say it when you have a disagreement.
4. Describe things you might do when you and your partner disagree.
5. Describe things your partner might do when you disagree.
6. In thinking about what you say and do when you have a disagreement with your partner, do you think any of your words or actions are relationship violence? Why or why not?
7. Now, in thinking about what your partner says and does when you have a disagreement, do you think any of your partner's words or actions are relationship violence? Why or why not?

Table 2

Themes: Responses to Conflict	Themes: Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence
➤ Verbal Communication	➤ Perception that Actions Are Intimate Partner Violence
➤ Non-Verbal Communication	➤ Perception that Actions Are Not Intimate Partner Violence
➤ Disengagement	➤ Intimate Partner Violence Defined as Physical Violence Only

Disrupting Students' Misunderstandings (and Misgivings) about Feminism through a Popular Press Book: A Feminist Research

Journal of Research
on Women and Gender
Volume 9, Pages 41-56
Samantha D. Christopher and
Elizabeth A. Sharp, 2019

Reprints and Permission:
Email jrwg14@txstate.edu
Texas Digital Library:
<http://www.tdl.org>

Samantha D. Christopher, Elizabeth A. Sharp, Lauren T.

Abstract

In response to the sustained and widespread resistance to feminism within U.S. classrooms and the underuse of undergraduate researchers in large universities, our research team experimented with a popular press book on feminism. Using our research team as a case study, we argue that the book, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, offered benefits including: (a) advanced understandings of feminism, (b) increased comfort with critiquing arguments, and (c) increased confidence and application of feminism. We hope the paper encourages other feminist-identified scholars to expand their use of feminist popular culture texts to cultivate interest, increase understanding of fundamental feminist sensibilities, and ultimately enhance their research projects while working with undergraduate researchers.

Keywords

feminism; research; undergraduate engagement; teaching

Introduction

Misperceptions, distortions, and misgivings of feminism are common in the wider U.S. culture and within U.S. universities (Budgeon, 2001; McCabe, 2005; Rich,

2005). Within universities, there are powerful barriers that discourage college students from engaging with feminism, including misunderstandings of what it means to be a feminist (Budgeon, 2001; Liss, Hoffner & Crawford, 2000; Rich, 2005) and acceptance of negative stereotypes of feminists (e.g., “feminazi,”

“bra burners,” and “man-hating”) (Aronson, 2003; Crossley, 2009; Weiss, 1998; Williams & Wittig, 1997; Horne et al., 2001; Robnett, Anderson, & Hunter, 2012; Liss, Hoffner, & Crawford, 2000). These and other misrepresentations may fuel hesitations for college students to take Women’s and Gender Studies courses (Sevelius & Stake, 2003; Stake & Malkin, 2003), and engage in feminist discussions (Webber, 2006).

In response to this widespread problem within universities across the U.S., we share how we experimented with popular culture texts and offered concrete ideas and tools for other feminist scholars to critically engage college students in feminist research. Our understanding of feminism is fluid and draws primarily on several feminist strands, including: Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990), post-structural feminism (St. Pierre, 2000), and queer feminisms (Marinucci, 2016). Based primarily on our use of a popular press book, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman’s Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (FFF), and analyses of popular movies and commercials, in this paper, we share media-related practices of encouraging feminist thought among a group of undergraduate research assistants (RAs). Because undergraduate researchers remain underutilized in many U.S. universities, we especially hope our paper encourages more feminist-identified faculty to invite undergraduate students to be part of their feminist research projects. By helping students understand feminist theory and apply feminist theory to research practices, we hope to bolster students’ sense of self-efficacy and prepare them for academics and work beyond their undergraduate degree. Training future feminist scholars is both timely and vital within the wider

political landscapes we find ourselves in (Madden, 2016).

Feminist Thought, College Students, and Undergraduate Research Assistantships

Within the current backdrop of neoliberalism (i.e., individual, market-based focus) and post-feminist and post-racist ideologies (Current & Tillotson, 2018; Ringrose et al., 2013), the (perceived) need for understanding and applying feminism may seem irrelevant to a large number of college students (e.g., Current & Tillotson, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). Disrupting strong-held and pervasive misconceptions is not easy, especially within large classrooms. One fruitful strategy we have found is to look beyond the classroom setting and examine undergraduates’ engagement with feminist thought in their work on a research team. It goes without saying that students would be more likely to engage deeper with theoretical concepts if given the opportunity to apply the theory in the context of a research assistantship. As an example, research teams are often smaller than the enrollment size of typical college classrooms at large universities. The intimate setting allows students to engage more deeply in discussions and to receive more individualized attention from the professor. This creates conditions where students are encouraged to draw on theoretical insights from readings to analyze personal experiences and research content (Tang, 2013). Additionally, group discussions foster an atmosphere of collaboration and support among peers as

students explore new concepts (Nah, 2015).

Although a growing practice, the inclusion of undergraduate students in research remains an underutilized, yet powerful resource at many universities. This is especially the case for under-represented minority students (Ong et al., 2011). This is a cause for concern especially because including undergraduate students on research teams is a valuable experience for the students, as well as for graduate students and faculty. Undergraduates' academic experience is enhanced by gaining research experience (Madan & Teitge, 2013) and has been documented across multiple academic disciplines including psychology (Wayment & Dickson, 2008), engineering (Narayanan, 1999), biology (Reynolds et al., 2009), and physiology (Desai et al., 2008).

Graduate students also benefit from working with undergraduate researchers. Within a research team, graduate students serve as mentors and role models for younger scholars, gain valuable experience in their own development as future faculty and mentors, and experience personal satisfaction mentoring undergraduate students (Dolan & Johnson, 2009). Faculty who mentor undergraduate student researchers also experience satisfaction from mentoring undergraduates (Lei & Chuang 2009; Potter et al., 2009), as well as increased scholarly efficiency (Brandenberger, 1990; Chapman, 2003; Cech, 2003; Coker & Davies, 2006; Dolan & Johnson, 2009). Additionally, by working with undergraduate RAs, faculty gain a better understanding of what motivates students to learn, effectively helping faculty tailor the courses they teach (Jenkins et al., 2007).

Introducing students to feminism and teaching feminist concepts also creates space for students to have opportunities to engage in discussions about diversity, oppression, and multiculturalism. In small group settings, such as a research group, students have the opportunity to more intimately apply feminist concepts and engage in difficult discussions with their peers in order to refine their knowledge of themselves, within larger social, cultural, and political contexts. Teaching feminism in this way can be considered a form of "slow activism" in which daily practices that, on the surface may seem inconsequential, actually play a large role in planting "seeds" for students as they navigate their lives both in their other courses as well as after they leave the university (Zhang, 2018).

Although benefits of undergraduate RAs are well-documented, there is little discussion in the literature about research experiences involving participation in research teams privileging feminist thought. Barriers that college students face engaging with feminism, in combination with the larger systematic discourses that frequently render feminism irrelevant or problematic, create a unique challenge for feminist researchers engaging in research with undergraduate students. These issues raise the question: Within a larger sociopolitical context that widely denounces and distorts feminism, how do feminist-identified faculty and graduate students effectively encourage undergraduate students to learn and apply feminist theories in their research projects? In the present paper, we offer possible solutions to this challenge.

Experimenting with Full Frontal Feminism, a popular press book

On our research team, we (two PhD students and a faculty member) experimented using a popular book, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*. The author is Jessica Valenti, a popular feminist journalist who holds a master's degree in Women's & Gender studies. She was a co-founder of the *Feminista* blog, has written four books, and taught Women's & Gender Studies courses. Additionally, Valenti worked for the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund and for the Women's Environment & Development Organization. She also wrote a blog for NARAL Pro-Choice America.

The impetus to use *FFF* grew out of conversations between the first author and the faculty member. In a conversation about how to present the concept of feminism to students joining the research team, the first author shared that she had experienced a personal transformation from reading *FFF* when she was an undergraduate student. *FFF* had been an entry to feminism for her friends and colleagues and wanted to present it as an option to more effectively engage students in feminist concepts. Given these testimonies, coupled with the challenges of introducing feminism to students, the faculty member took a risk and gave her twelve research assistants a copy of *FFF* when they joined the research team. The purpose was for RAs to engage with *FFF* as an introduction to feminism, gain experience in critical thinking about the author's arguments, and to have an accessible framework to understand feminist thought underpinning the faculty

member's ongoing research endeavors. It was the faculty member's expectation that the RAs' exposure to feminism in *FFF* would enhance their experience of conducting research.

The faculty member assigned the book with some trepidation. She deemed the book risky because she considered the book "diluted feminism" and worried about consequences of using a book written by a journalist within the context of her research. As other scholars have argued, the book may be characterized as "feminism lite," with Jessica Valenti overgeneralizing, glossing over important complexities, and moving in and out of attending to and critiquing larger structures (Hays & Butler, 2008).

Although the faculty member concurred that Valenti had important, timely feminist messages to share and appreciated her boldness, she also was weary of the ways Valenti may have reinforced the dominant status quo through lack of careful, nuanced arguments and that Valenti (at times) encouraged a neoliberalist sensibility. The premise of the book is that feminism will improve one's (middle-class) life, frequently glossing over a critique of interlocking structures, which, of course, is the crux of intersectional feminism.

This book was written to appeal to a young audience and is written at the appropriate level for contemporary young women who have little to no exposure of academic feminism (Hays & Butler, 2008). Valenti noted that, before she wrote the book, she had a realization:

Young women don't have enough outlets teaching them and showing them how great feminism is. Of course, there are women's studies classes and books, and maybe some of us are lucky enough to have moms and

friends who are self-professed and proud feminists. But the majority of young women only know the total-crap stereotypes. (p. 2)

Her stated purpose in writing this book was “to change the way you [the reader] think about feminism, and the way you think about yourself” (Valenti, 2007, p. 3). One reviewer of her book promised that, “Readers will leave this book feeling educated and inspired, not lectured” (McConnell, 2014, para. 4). The book is written for an audience of young adult women and provides an introduction to central issues commonly raised in popular feminist thought.

Procedure

The research team consisted primarily of undergraduate students in both Psychology and Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) as well as graduate students from Psychology and HDFS doctoral programs (of the 12 students, 4 were graduate students) at a large Midwestern university in the United States. The undergraduate student RAs came from varying backgrounds and experience (first-year students to seniors) and most received course credit during their tenure as RAs (some students volunteered to participate without course credit). During the 2015-2016 academic year, the research team focused on several projects including an examination of an anti-feminist Facebook groups’ images and comments about feminism; a project focusing on college students’ understanding of feminism; and a project examining the interplay of desire, romance, and eating among first-year college women transitioning to college.

A copy of *FFF* was given to RAs when they joined the research team. When introducing the book, the faculty member

provided context for the RAs. She pointed out that the book was marketed to high school students, and (partly) because of this, the book contains a heavy volume of slang and cursing. As they were reading the book, the RAs were asked to provide their reactions to the book via several structured questions. Questions included: (a) What are your reactions to the book? (b) What were the three main messages from the book? (c) What did you learn about feminism? (d) What was your favorite chapter? Why? (e) What was your least favorite chapter? Why? (f) How does the book map on to academic feminist thought? (g) Other reactions/comments you want to share?

Reaction questions such as those used as a supplement for *FFF* are often used by educators as a method to gradually introduce critical analysis of materials. For example, Calcagno (2015) and Hetzel-Riggin (2014) have reflected upon their use of open-ended inquiry and using reflection questions to elicit students’ personal experiences to engage with the material. In addition to writing reflections, students were also asked to orally discuss their thoughts and reactions to the book during weekly research meetings (which were audio recorded with RAs’ permission). The discussions were unstructured and the facilitator (either the faculty member or a graduate student) provided a supportive environment for students to process their reactions to the text and share how the text was shaping how they saw other projects. In other assignments given in the research assistantship, students were asked to forge links among other assignments they worked on and ideas from *FFF* as a way to continue their development of feminist analysis. Students provided copies of their reflections to the faculty member as part of their assistantship.

In engaging in analysis for this paper, we re-read reflection papers, assignments, re-listened to audio recordings of the discussions and re-examined our notes. Drawing on constant-comparative method (Boeije, 2002; Glaser, 1965; Kolb, 2012), we each separately created themes (i.e., threads of larger ideas running through the data) and met to discuss emerging ideas. Through our discussions, we developed three overriding themes.

The Power of *FFF*: Corrective, Increased Comfort with Critiquing, and Increased Confidence and Engagement

This book was advantageous to our research team for several reasons. First, this book was less like a heavy academic endeavor. A few RAs finished the book very quickly because they found Valenti's writing engaging. Second, several RAs had no experience (or came with misunderstandings) of feminism and the book was accessible to RAs with varied experiences and understandings of feminism. Another appealing aspect of the book was Valenti's coverage of a wide array of topics including pop culture, health, violence, beauty standards, sex, and education as these topics relate to feminism. There was a topic that resonated with each of the RAs based on their own personal interests. Finally, the book included relevant pop culture and current events regarding feminism and its presence in everyday life. This last point was an exciting element of the book as young

college students were enticed by the, at times, shocking material. For example, Valenti discusses how "In Mississippi you can buy a gun with no background check but vibrators are outlawed" (2007, p. 38), which surprised many of the students and peaked their curiosity into other ways in which a feminist lens can be applied.

Our analysis revealed that *FFF* influenced our RAs in three distinct ways. First, the book helped students re-consider definitions and thus enhanced their existing conceptualizations of feminism(s). Second, the book helped students feel more comfortable raising critical questions and critiques. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the RAs reported that their confidence increased in working on other research tasks over the course of the semester.

Correction: Re-thinking Feminism

A salient feature of the book is attention to the definition(s) of feminism. In her introduction, Valenti defines feminism as; (1) "belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes; (2) "the movement organized around this belief" (2007, p. 13). RAs revealed that, prior to reading *FFF*, their definitions of feminism were clouded by peers and the media. RAs highlighted that *FFF* helped them realize that feminism is more complex than they had previously understood. This point is particularly interesting considering one of the *FFF* critiques is that the author overgeneralizes issues and glosses over important complexities (Hays & Butler, 2008). One RA began to understand the nuances of intersectionality over the course of reading *FFF*:

Although I had a vague understanding of the intersectionality of feminism with other unfair “isms”, I had no idea how important it is to recognize that although all women are oppressed, women are not oppressed in the same way.

Our RAs conveyed bewilderment and astonishment with their new understanding(s) of feminism. Notably, RAs described epiphanies when they learned that “anyone can really be a feminist.” Additionally, some RAs also came to realize through reading *FFF* that they themselves were “actually feminists” [their words].

The experience of the RAs recognizing that they are feminists supports Valenti’s claim that many people do not realize they are feminists because of distorted definitions of feminism circulating in U.S. culture. This experience resonated with several RAs. For example, one RA found Valenti’s argument that feminists wanted to remove double-standards that exist for both men and women especially poignant, as the RA had previously believed that feminism was only for women. Another RA confirmed that *FFF* made her feel unashamed of identifying as a feminist, and that she felt empowered to make a difference for “women in this country.” Other RAs shared that the book was an outlet for them to express their personal concerns with cultural messages surrounding feminism, often citing how “unfair” it is that feminism has such a bad reputation. As such, at least among our small group of RAs, Valenti’s book appears to have achieved the goal of changing the way feminism is perceived and encouraged our RAs to reconsider their identities as feminists.

Generally, RAs noted that the book was “eye-opening and educational,”

emphasizing that the book was “easy to read and understand.” Perhaps one of the most powerful responses from an RA was that, although she would have not read this book otherwise, she is “thankful” that she read it because she “realized [she is] a hardcore feminist and a lot of issues that [she] was not even aware of really bother [her] about our government and mindset as a whole.” This reflection touches on the idea that, for many students, the exposure to feminist critiques is not just about feminism. This introduction to feminism may also be the first time they have examined larger sociopolitical issues that directly impact their lives. The book was a catalyst for RAs to begin engaging with feminism as well as exploring and acting on more politicized issues in culture.

Increased Comfort with Critiquing

In addition to providing an accessible and non-threatening entry to feminist thought, the casual tone of the text was also important. The casual tone of the book allowed RAs to feel comfortable and confident in offering critiques about the book, as opposed to more academic writing which is more intimidating to evaluate. Below, we offer examples of the critiques. RAs pointed out Valenti’s unidimensional framing for certain topics and were able to identify the author’s biases, particularly in the discussion of sexuality (e.g., chapter on sex tips). One RA wrote:

I felt the author... over exaggerated and over generalized with points and examples used. [For example], while critiquing abstinence-only teachings in schools, Valenti says, “because of abstinence-only education, we’re going to have a generation of sexual dum-

dums." My reaction to this statement is an over-generalization made trying to prove her point...

A similar critique was waged by another RA:

...I really didn't like... the reproductive chapter. I just didn't[omission] think in some cases she was very disrespectful to other side[this sentence doesn't fit the context of the quote as it connotates a double negative]... And respect is a really big thing to me so like, whether you believe you're right or wrong, instead of like calling pro-life people like they... just want to keep people from having sex, there's like other reasons they're doing it...

Both critiques call attention to Valenti's controversial, one-dimensional framing of complex and nuanced issues. We realize that Valenti may have overgeneralized and/or over-simplified issues as a rhetorical tool to get her point across at the expense of glossing over nuances deeply entrenched in academic feminist analysis. In addition to attending to oversimplified arguments, the book lends itself to take issue with the actual arguments that are put forth and map the arguments onto the wider cultural (mis)understandings.

Students offered important and thoughtful critiques and critical analyses of the text. We praised the RAs and encouraged them to continue to critique the information they are exposed to daily, both inside and outside the classroom in addition to their work on the research team. The non-intimidating and causal writing style of *FFF*, coupled with our discussions of the text facilitated by the faculty member and graduate research assistants, are examples of how Valenti's book can facilitate undergraduate RAs confidence in discovering and writing their critiques of

the text. The RAs were able to find aspects of the book they found useful and, simultaneously, identified other parts of the text that were problematic. This book has given them valuable experience with nuanced and critical arguments/reflections. This, in turn, helped RAs formulate critiques on the other assignments and projects they worked on throughout the semester and, it is assumed, will be used in all their coursework.

Increased Confidence and Engagement with other Tasks

The undergraduate RAs' ability to offer a nuanced critique in their first assignment on the research team (i.e., reading and critiquing *FFF*) helped lay a foundation that fostered their critical analysis in other assignments over the semester. Most of the RAs described a shift in how they viewed feminists and defined feminism. These RAs' shifting definitions of feminism helped them notice larger themes related to women's objectification in the media. This was especially the case for RAs who were given the task to critically examine images and content of anti-feminist social media sites. The increased consciousness of inaccurate media-definitions/framings of feminism helped the RAs engage in more critical analysis when coding. One example from a reflection around this project:

[The people posting have a] preoccupation with a made-up assumption that feminists body shame, double standards, attractive vs. unattractive women, what feminists are doing wrong/should be doing. Again, it seems that most people that identify as "anti-feminist" have misunderstood feminism

completely. A majority of these people claim that they are not feminist but promote equal rights. Another subgroup seems to believe that unattractive women use feminism to make them feel better about themselves.

FFF provided a simple framework of understanding feminism which helped RAs identify themes of misunderstanding feminism while also endorsing values of feminism (e.g., promoting equality between men and women) in this other project.

We also used the analysis of FFF as a springboard to promote critical perspectives while broaching different topics. As one example, RAs read an academic journal article about Nike's *Girl Effect* (Switzer, 2013). Students were able to examine their reactions to readings as well as utilize logic and complex reasoning to address major concerns associated with different topics related to feminist thought and theory. For example, one RA explained:

The [Nike] girl effect... objectifies girls and makes them "targets of consumption, intervention and remediation" (Switzer, 2013, p. 349) ... I see how objectified and sexualized the girls are, especially in the "The clock is ticking" video; the only feature on the graphic of the girl was her breasts! The girls in question are not treated as humans but as commodities in need of rescue.

Notably, the *Girl Effect* campaign was meant to promote a sense of empowerment, however, our RAs were able to look past this façade and problematize the methods in which Nike objectified girls in the context of neoliberal politics and consumerism.

By starting each of the semesters with reading FFF and gaining experience in the critical examination of ideas, RAs reported that they were more confident in their critiques of other conceptual and

empirical readings and articles. FFF provided a form of scaffolding over the semester – RAs were able to learn strategies to critique a book that was easily accessible and full of critique-able concepts and then apply those skills to more nuanced and complicated concepts.

Discussion

Our paper ventured to offer solutions to a couple of separate and widespread problems: (a) undervaluing and misunderstanding of feminism(s) among college students and (b) under-utilization of undergraduate students as participants in research teams, especially at large research universities. Using our research team as a site of analysis, we suggest that the use of a feminist popular press book can be a useful tool for feminist-identified faculty to reach and recruit undergraduate students to their research teams.

As mentioned previously, the book served as a way to help RAs understand the "basics" of feminist thought and to gain experience in critical analysis. The book was also beneficial for RAs who came in with a prior understanding of feminism. As one RA indicated:

...It [The book, Full Frontal Feminism] was just a validation of things that I already believed ... But making them more cohesive. You know, giving me a cause to fight for that I never really felt... (long pause). I never felt drawn to any causes, any political causes before. It gives me kinda a purpose...

FFF helped other RAs reignite a sense of direction within feminism or finding a cause that most resonates with their values and passions. Remarking on FFF's accessibility, another RA said:

... it's a really good starting point for girls who like never like experienced [feminism]

at all like to just like dip their toes in and see like what exactly is feminism like it's not as scary as what people think it is...

Several RAs shared their copies of *FFF* with their friends and family members. One RA provided the following response to the prompt, “Other reactions/comments you want to share?”:

I did have a question about the FFF book...How long do we have to keep those? I have been discussing it with my roommate, who I definitely, although she doesn't know it yet, believe is a feminist! She mentioned she would like to read after I was through. May I let her read it as well?

Students would frequently discuss their experiences of sharing their book and discussions with others to process during research meetings. Many RAs shared how they felt more confident in disrupting misunderstandings of feminism among their peers in classes and with their friends and family. Peer-to-peer mentoring can be powerful. A recent article indicated the value of feminist graduate students mentoring other feminists in their teaching (Madden, 2016). In addition to peers, some RAs shared the book with older family members. One RA told us: “I enjoyed this book so much and will be sharing it with my mother!”

Additionally, the ways in which RAs described sharing this book with their friends, roommates, and family members, might distantly map onto the initial purpose of consciousness-raising groups from the early second wave of the feminist movement. Historically, consciousness-raising groups allowed members of oppressed groups to connect with others of similar experiences and discuss how aspects of personal dissatisfactions and difficulties are attributable to social forces (Firestone & Koedt, 1970). The phenomena of

wanting to share the book is important considering misconceptions surrounding feminism – and something as simple as this text can be used as a catalyst for spreading awareness of feminist ideology and diminishing false or distorted understandings of feminism. Coupled with reflections, guidance, and other feminist readings, *FFF* may assist college students in gaining a more intricate and dynamic perspective of feminism and its history. Engaging in provocative discussions pertaining to feminism are necessary as college students are overexposed to negative and damaging media espousing misunderstandings of feminist thought. Popular texts, such as *FFF*, may provide an accessible starting point.

Based on our experiences, feminist educators who wish to use this book for their own students would not have to assign the entire book to be effective. Using specific chapters from the text would likely have a similar effect while also highlighting particular issues educators want to focus on. For example, the chapter “Beauty Cult” identifies issues of women’s bodies and larger social structures that promote the “thin ideal” in a way that is accessible to readers not familiar with these concepts. Some RAs found the chapter on pop culture especially compelling:

My favorite chapter was chapter three: “Pop Culture Gone Wild.” It was extremely relatable because I knew exactly what Valenti was talking about – how important it is to be attractive, the lengths women will go to achieve this perceived attractiveness, and all of the insane contradictions women are supposed to adhere to (such as “be a virgin, but be sexy”). All of these standards are an unquestioned part of society. Some people believe that it's just the way things are. What I loved about this chapter is that

Valenti described it as what it really is: unattainable, completely unfair, and nonsense! A woman can't live her life if she's so worried about being what she's "supposed" to be.

For two men on the research team, both expressed that their favorite chapter was “Boys Do Cry.” As one RA reflected:

My favorite chapter was chapter ten “Boys Do Cry.” I liked that the author pointed out how men suffer from sexism too and that men are needed/welcome in most feminist circles. I appreciated her pointing out the groups of men who are fighting for equality for both sexes.

Limitations

Despite our overwhelmingly positive experience in using this text with our RAs, using *FFF* as an educational tool within a feminist research context does have its limitations. First, our RAs were self-selected to engage in gender research. This may predispose this particular group to be more receptive to feminist analysis, even without prior knowledge or experience with feminism. Students may have also been “feminist curious” when beginning their work with us. Additionally, RAs wrote reflections that they knew would be reviewed by the faculty member and graduate student researchers. Undoubtedly, this impacted how students wrote their reflections, even though RAs did not receive an evaluation based on their specific reflections (they received credit for completing the assignment).

Conclusion

As feminist educators, we hope that by exposing students to feminism in intimate, hands-on learning environments,

students might be willing to claim a feminist identity for themselves and find ways to incorporate a feminist understanding in their academic and personal lives. Our “experiment” in utilizing a feminist popular press book to engage undergraduate RAs was successful for our feminist research team. We were able to engage our RAs with feminist thought and foster critical analysis of feminist texts. As we discussed throughout this article, as a team we were able to use the book as a tool for helping students reconsider their understandings of feminism and raise important questions and critiques about the book itself. This, in turn, helped students gain confidence in their abilities to engage in critical thinking which promoted critical thought in other assignments. As educators, our contribution remains in the hope that other feminist educators consider utilizing and experimenting with *FFF* as a method of introducing undergraduate students and research assistants to feminist thought and providing opportunities for students to engage in critical analysis.

We leave the readers with two more excerpts from our RAs in hopes that other feminist scholars will consider using this text to help their own students and undergraduate research assistants critically engage with feminism:

I am really glad you gave us this book to read. I feel I would not have picked it up and read it otherwise, so I am extremely thankful that I did. I also realized I am a hardcore feminist and a lot of issues that I was not even aware of really bother me about our government and mindset as a whole. I realized I need to work on my way of thinking as well. I am a part of the path of least resistance because I was raised in a world that is man-centered, but the more I become aware of the situation the more I can

try to change it to equality for all genders and sexes.

The more someone knows and understands...feminism, the more they realize how unfair our culture is (and other cultures around the world) and (to be honest) it makes me upset, and angry...I feel like I'm being cheated in life... Ignorance can be bliss, but then I have to remind myself that nothing will change for future generations if we live in our bliss ignorance.

Address correspondence to: ■
Samantha D. Christopher,
Texas Tech University
Email: Samantha.dee.christopher@gmail.com

References

- Aronson, P. (2003). Feminists or "postfeminists"? Young women's attitudes toward feminism and gender relations. *Gender & Society*, 17, 903-922.
- Boeije, H. (2002). A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analysis of qualitative interviews. *Quality & Quantity* 36, 391-409.
- Brandenberger, J. R. (1990, June). *The multifaceted case for undergraduate research*. Third Annual Council on Undergraduate Research conference, San Antonio, TX.
- Budgeon, S. (2001). Emergent feminist(?) identities: Young women and the practice of micropolitics. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, 7-28.
- Calcagno, J. (2015). A current media approach to learning and teaching in psychology of women courses. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 39(2), 268-271.
- Cech, T. R. (2003). Rebalancing teaching and research. *Science*, 299(5604): 165.
- Collins, P.H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Chapman, D. W. (2003). Undergraduate research: Showcasing young scholars. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(3), B5.
- Coker, J. S. & Davies, E. (2006). Ten time-saving tips for undergraduate research mentors. *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*, 35, 110-112.
- Crossley, A. D. (2009). 'When it suits me, I'm a feminist': International students negotiating feminist representations. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 33(2), 125-133.
- Current, C. B., & Tillotson, E. (2018). Hipster racism and sexism in charity date auctions: Individualism, privilege blindness and irony in the academy. *Gender and Education*, 30(4), 467-476.
- Desai, K. V., Gatson, S. N., Stiles, T. W., Stewart, R. H., Laine, G. A., & Quick, C. M. (2008). Integrating research and education at research-intensive universities with research-intensive communities. *Advances in Physiology Education*, 32(2), 136-141.
- Dolan, E. & Johnson, D. (2009). Toward a holistic view of undergraduate research experiences: An exploratory study of impact on graduate/postdoctoral mentors. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 18(6), 487-500.

- Firestone, S., & Koedt, A. (Eds.) (1970). *Notes from the second year: Women's liberation*. New York: Radical Feminism.
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Hays, S. & Butler, J. (2008). Low-calorie feminism. *Contexts: Understanding People in Their Social Worlds*, 7(3), 72-74.
- Hetzel-Riggin, M. (2014). A feminist, ecological, safety-centered approach to teaching about gendered violence. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 38(3), 425-429.
- Horne, S., Mathews, S., Detrie, P., Burke, M., & Cook, B. (2001). Look it up under 'F': Dialogues of emerging and experienced feminists. *Women & Therapy*, 23(2), 5-18.
- Jenkins, A., Healey M., & Zetter, R. (2007, April). Linking teaching and research in disciplines and departments. *The Higher Education Academy*.
- Kolb, S. M. (2012). Grounded theory and the constant comparative method: Valid research strategies for educators. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 3(1), 83-86.
- Lei, S. A., & Chuang, N. K. (2009). Undergraduate research assistantship: A comparison of benefits and costs from faculty and students' perspectives. *Education*, 130(2), 232-240.
- Liss, M., Hoffner, C., & Crawford, M. (2001). What do feminists believe? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 24, 279-284.
- Madan, C. R. & Teitge, B. D. (2013). The benefits of undergraduate research: The student's perspective. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*. Retrieved from <https://dus.psu.edu/mentor/2013/05/undergraduate-research-students-perspective/>
- Madden, M. (2016). Pedagogical encounters, graduate teaching assistants, and decolonial feminist commitments. *Feminist Teacher*, 25(1), 55-74.
- Marinucci, M. (2016). *Feminism is queer: The intimate connection between queer and feminist theory*. Zed Books Ltd.
- McCabe, J. (2005). What's in a label? The relationship between feminist self-identification and "feminist" attitudes among U.S. women and men. *Gender & Society*, 19(4), 480-505.
- McConnell, H. (2014, December 24). Book review: Full Frontal Feminism. *I Was A High School Feminist*. Retrieved from <https://iwasahighschoolfeminist.com/2013/12/24/book-review-full-frontal-feminism/>
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Nah, Y. (2015). Rethinking the idiom for feminist pedagogy: The collaboration of theory and activism. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 21(2), 147-165.
- Narayanan, R. M. (1999). Use of objective-based undergraduate research project experience as a graduate student recruitment tool. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 88(3), 361-365.

- Ong, M., Wright, C., Espinosa, L. & Orfield, G. (2011). Inside the double bind: A synthesis of empirical research on undergraduate and graduate women of color in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. *Harvard Educational Review*, 81, 172-209.
- Potter, S. J., Abrams, E., Townson, L. & Williams, J. E. (2009). Mentoring undergraduate researchers: Faculty mentors' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of the research relationship. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 6(6), 17-30.
- Reynolds, J., Smith, C., Moskovitz, R. & Sayle, A. (2009). BIOTAP: A systematic approach to teaching scientific writing and evaluating undergraduate theses. *Bioscience*, 59(10), 896-903.
- Rich, E. (2005). Young women, feminist identities and neo-liberalism. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 28(6), 495-508.
- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305-323.
- Robnett, R., Anderson, K., & Hunter, L. (2012). Predicting feminist identity: Associations between gender-traditional attitudes, feminist stereotyping, and ethnicity. *Sex Roles*, 67, 143-157.
- Sevelius, J. M. & Stake, J. E. (2003). The effects of prior attitudes and attitude importance on attitude change and class impact in women's and gender studies. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33(11), 2341-2353.
- Stake, J. E., & Malkin, C. (2003). Students' quality of experience and perceptions of intolerance and bias in the women's and gender studies classroom. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27(2), 174-85.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477-515.
- Switzer, H. (2013). (Post)Feminist development fables: The Girl Effect and the production of sexual subjects. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 345-360.
- Tang, W. (2013). Constructing and practicing feminist pedagogy in Taiwan using a field study of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb. *Gender, Place, and Culture*, 20(6), 811-826.
- Valenti, J. (2007). *Full frontal feminism: A young women's guide to why feminism matters*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Wayment, H. A., & Dickson, K. L. (2008). Increasing student participation in undergraduate research benefits students, faculty, and department. *Teaching of Psychology*, 35(3), 194-197.
- Webber, M. (2006). 'I'm not a militant feminist': Exploring feminist identities and feminist hesitations in the contemporary academy. *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal/Revue D'etudes Sur Les Femmes*, 31(1), 55-63.
- Weiss, P. A. (1998). *Conversations with feminism: Political theory and practice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Williams, R., & Wittig, M. A. (1997). "I'm not a feminist, but . . .": Factors contributing to the discrepancy

between pro-feminist orientation and feminist social identity. *Sex Roles*, 37, 885-904.

Zhang, C. Y. (2018). Teaching as slow activism. *Feminist Formations* 30(3), 198-208.

Feminist Knitting: How Stitching Together a Visual Statement for the 2017 Women's March

Journal of Research
on Women and Gender
Volume 9, Pages 59-73
© Mia Moody, 2019

Reprints and Permission:
Email jrwg14@txstate.edu
Texas Digital Library:
<http://www.tdl.org>

Mia Moody

*"Women are going to form a chain, a greater sisterhood than the world has ever known."
– Nellie McClung, 1916*

Abstract

After a divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election, a large segment of the population took to social media to express their frustrations and to find solace in the unity created by the Pussyhat Project™ and the 2017 Women's March. This content analysis examines how Facebook users framed the social movement. Findings indicate that the platform allowed a directed viewpoint to catch momentum. True to fourth wave feminism, the social movement received widespread media coverage and the pink hats became an iconic visual symbol of the Women's March that helped empower participants and raised awareness about various social injustices.

Keywords

2017 Women's March, Pussyhat Project, Donald Trump, feminist fourth wave, Facebook representation, social media advocacy

Introduction

Like many iconic movements, the Pussyhat Project™ started with a good idea. Participants knitted hats and joined in the historic 2017 Women's March to help raise awareness on issues such as immigration reform, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inequalities and other social causes. The worldwide

demonstration was held the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump on January 21, 2017. Co-founders Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman (along with pattern creator Kat Coyle) shared the following purpose of the Pussyhat Project™ movement in the *Pussyhat Project Manifesto* (2016):

"We love the clever wordplay of "pussyhat" and "pussycat," but yes, "pussy" is also a derogatory

term for female genitalia. We chose this loaded word for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment. In this day and age, if we have pussies, we are assigned the gender of "woman." Women, whether transgender or cisgender, are mistreated in this society. In order to get fair treatment, the answer is not to deny our femaleness and femininity, the answer is to demand fair treatment. A woman's body is her own. We are honoring this truth and standing up for our rights."

Social media, craftivism (craft-related activism) and online sharing across social media platforms played key roles in the success of the Pussyhat Project™, which offered a means for national participation in the 2017 Women's March on Washington, a worldwide protest held on January 21, 2017 to advocate for legislation and policies regarding human rights and other issues. More than a million women attended the historical event while others helped further the cause by hand-crafting pink hats to create a bright visual statement advocating for women's rights. Demonstrating the popularity of this manner of participating in the Women's March, craft stores began running out of pink yarn weeks before the march (Shamus, 2017).

Groups of women gathered throughout the months of November and December in 2016 to produce hats for the marchers in Washington. With each stitch, women were figuratively knitted together to stand united and to be heard loud and clear. The wave of pink hats adorned with tiny ears covered much of Washington, D.C. and spilled out into the world: A judge in Texas wore a pussy hat while on the bench; the movement's icon graced the cover of the February 8, 2017 issue of

TIME Magazine; and even Lego figures were festooned with little pink hats.

The 2017 Women's March, with the help of social media, turned into a global event, with millions of women joining in protest and solidarity. Some media outlets estimated that more than five million people took part in global gatherings with approximately one million pussy hats turning Washington, D.C. into a sea of pink (Zweiman, 2017). Costumes as a visual political statement are not a new phenomenon. The 2017 Women's March echoed another march more than a century earlier, in 1913, which happened after the election of Woodrow Wilson, an event where women wore hats and marched in support of women's suffrage (Boissoneault, 2017):

On March 3, 1913, one day before the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson, more than 5,000 women descended on Washington to fight for the vote. Some came on foot, some on horseback, some in wagons. There were costumes and placards and about half-a-million spectators lined the streets. Among the marchers were journalist Nellie Bly, activist Helen Keller and actress Margaret Vale—who was also the niece of the incoming president (who was by no means an ally of the suffrage movement; he once said women who spoke in public gave him a "chilled, scandalized feeling"). Despite being heckled and harassed by the crowd, the march was enormously memorable; six years later Congress passed the 19th Amendment, extending the franchise to women nationwide.

Central to feminism is the view that the condition of women is open to change. "At its heart is the belief that women's voices should be heard – that they should represent themselves, put forward their own view of the world and achieve autonomy in their lives" (Hannam, 2007, p.

2). Chiriță (2012) adds that women's rights, women's emancipation and women's movements were all used by feminists at different times to help describe their goals and deeds. While the issues have evolved from voter's rights to education to intersectionality, feminist studies continue to highlight how media function ideologically with other social and cultural institutions to reflect, reinforce and mediate existing power relations and ideas about how gender is and should be lived (Gallagher, 1981; hooks, 1992; Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006; Van Zoonen, 1994; Wood, 2005). Such studies concluded that women are often underrepresented or stereotyped by mainstream outlets across media platforms (e.g. Gallagher, 1981; hooks, 1996; Van Zoonen, 1994). However, Rakow (1986) asserts that gender research in communication must evolve beyond the study of gender differences and analyze feminism as an evolving social system created through communication. In other words, scholars should go beyond the use of simple categories to compare communication in men and women.

Building on previous feminist scholarship and addressing a gap in the literature on the use of social media in women's movements, this study examines Facebook posts that emerged before, during and after the 2017 Women's March to determine the depth and breadth of the discussion surrounding the evolution of women's rights in the 21st century. This article is important as it provides an in-depth overview of the 2017 Pussyhat Project™ and historical context of other feminist social movements. Furthermore, it expands the literature on the feminist fourth wave with an analysis of how individuals used social media to

create/share and participate in a social movement. Specifically, it explores how social media helped the directed viewpoint of a unified voice to catch momentum during the 2017 Women's March.

Literature Review

To explore the literature on feminist theory and social movements, we looked to two primary streams of knowledge in the literature: 1) gendered identity on social media and 2) digital and community activism. An awareness of narratives social media users might draw upon to frame an issue is important as the manner in which Facebook users depicted the Women's March and Pussyhat Project™ influenced media coverage of the event, audience reception and participation. Using these two key concepts as context, our literature review exploring these topics provides a framework for understanding the present study.

Gendered Identity and Social Media

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical disciplines. It encompasses work done transdisciplinary with an approach that prominently includes women's roles, lives and feminist politics. Gender-schema theory proposes that cultures tend to polarize females and males by organizing social life around mutually exclusive gender roles. Ardener (1975), for instance, proposes that within patriarchal, capitalist societies, women and men tend to form two distinct circles of experience and interpretation - one overlapping the other (cited in Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The masculine circle overshadows the feminine

circle as it converges with the norms of society, providing a masculine signature that subjugates feminine viewpoints. Therefore, women's voices and perspectives are often overlooked or not openly articulated.

A variety of women's studies scholars including Armstrong (2014), Byerly and Ross (2006), Creedon (2003), Everbach (2018) and hooks (1996) have written extensively about the objectification and suppression of women. Early analyses found that media deeply implicated the patterns of discrimination operating against women, invisibility or gender stereotypes (e.g. Gallagher, 1981; Van Zoonen, 1994). Such media coverage often followed the patriarchal paradigm as outlined by Hartmann (1981), who defines the model as a set of materially based social relations that create a solidarity among men of all races and classes "who are united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women" (1981, p. 14-15). Recent scholarship has turned to debating the proper classification for the current phase of feminism, often highlighting it as the feminist fourth wave and/or "postfeminism," a period in which the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s is seen as largely absent or in contradiction to previous periods. "Liberal feminism," on the other hand, is an individualistic form of feminism that focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices.

The feminist fourth wave is noted for its value and contribution to a movement marked by a resurgence of interest in feminism in the media and among young women. One example of this trend is the Facebook feminist political affinity group Pantsuit Nation, which

emerged as a 2016 Twitter hashtag and Facebook group to rally Hillary Clinton supporters during her 2016 presidential campaign in the United States. Modern feminism combines concern for finances, politics, mental well-being, stability in an overarching vision of change for women, intersectionality and inclusiveness (Cochrane, 2013). Campaigns of the past few years have begun with individuals or small groups that have responded to issues about which they feel strongly. For instance, Phruksachart (2017) highlighted the rise of social media to share political messages and encourage women to unite over various issues.

The 2017 Women's March illustrates evolving social systems and a call to action encouraging the participation of women across the nation. The use of social media preceding the January 2017 Women's March mobilized women for a real plan of action and activism, blending with other voices in the framework of the internet. Collectively, while three women simply wanted to allow others to help create a visual context to the Women's March, millions have somehow engaged in the conversation. Reclamation was a primary goal of the 2017 Women's March and the Pussyhat Project™. Reclamation of the word "pussy" has a threefold significance to Zweiman:

The word pussy is symbolic for three reasons: 1) Cats (animals) made a connection to the pattern designer, Kat (Coyle). 2) It responded directly to the "Access Hollywood" hot mic incident where Trump talked about grabbing women by their pussies. 3) The use of "pussy" in name-calling, denigrates an individual because the societal norms consider feminine characteristics as weaknesses, dismissing such individuals as inferior. Reclaiming the word "pussy" was

important to our ability to stand up as women for women. The continued, positive use of the term, within the context of the craft project, framed the term “pussy” in a feminist space.

The term “pussy” is considered a derogatory descriptor of the female anatomy and of weak or undesirable individuals. The color pink was also suitable for reclamation as it has been used to symbolize weakness. Pussyhat Project™ organizers state in their manifesto: “Pink is represented as a very female color representing caring, compassion, and love—all qualities that have been derided as weaknesses but are reclaimed by the project as strengths” (Zweiman, 2016). Women wearing pink clothing embody a powerful statement of an unapologetic attitude that is positively feminine and unapologetically a stand for women’s rights (2016). Koller (2008) asserts that there is a tendency to reclaim pink and redefine it as the color of women who regard themselves as having achieved equality in social and economic terms and are therefore embracing pink as a marker of their femininity and equality. Koller further argues that pink is used to “communicate fun and independence, financial and professional power without conforming to masculine norms, as well as femininity and self-confidence” (Koller, 2008).

Digital Activism

Traditionally, media have operated simultaneously as gatekeepers and news creators. However, social media networks or user-generated content sites have created an avenue by which the public can post messages reaching large audiences (Curnutt, 2012). This proliferation of user-generated content is equated with a form of citizen or participatory journalism (Goode,

2009). The definition of citizen journalism includes “practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events” (Goode, 2009). The internet—as a platform and vehicle for voice in marginalized communities—has become one of the most powerful ways to bypass mainstream media. Scholars of protests/activism have turned their attention to how citizens use social media to build solidarity for various causes (Miladi, 2011; Harlow, 2013; Al-Rawi, 2014; Cabalin, 2014). Cabalin (2014) considered the relationship between new social media and youth political actions during the 2011 Chilean student movement. His content and textual analysis of Facebook’s page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) in 2011 revealed that the group utilized Facebook mainly as a call to action and to highlight the achievements of the movement. They also used Facebook to identify their opponents.

Adding to this literature on activism, we analyzed how social media played a role in the success of the Pussyhat Project™. Following the election of Donald Trump, people gathered in yarn shops, living rooms, coffee shops and other welcoming spaces to create hats. Online social networks, such as Ravelry, increased the reach of these social interactions far beyond the boundaries of originators’ hometowns. Many have dubbed these united efforts as an illustration of “craftivism”, a form of activism that incorporates forms of anti-capitalism, environmentalism, solidarity and feminism, that is centered on practices of crafting or making a product—in this case—a pink hat. Craftivism also reflects earlier times

during which women knitted together in circles as a form of socialization and problem-solving. Bratich and Brush (2011) note craftivism includes the mainstream forms found in *Martha Stewart Living* as well as the more explicitly activist (or *craftivist*) versions such as Cast O, Anarchist Knitting Circle, MicroRevolt, Anarchist Knitting Mob, Revolutionary Knitting Circle, and Craftivism. The two researchers add that a whole range of cultural forms exist including virtual knitting circles and crafting blogs as well as the association with feminist magazines.

As mentioned previously, the Pussyhat Project™ is not the first time crafts have been used in a social movement. From the French Revolution to the underground railroad, fiber arts have been a part of activism. One recent illustration of craftivism was the NAMES Project which honored people who died of AIDS with individual quilt squares created in their memories. The quilt project is now more than 111 miles long and weighs more than 54 tons. Yarnbombing (a type of graffiti using knitted or crocheted items) was one particularly visible example of craftivism. New York crochet artist Olek covered a homeless women's shelter in India in brightly colored crocheted squares to draw attention to the plight of the homeless women living in the shelter. Other projects like Knit the Bridge in Pittsburgh aim to

bring together diverse facets of the community to beautify common space.

Methodology

While there is no single feminist method of study, feminist communication researchers generally incorporate and transform different methodologies to study trends, stereotypes and mass media representations (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). One common thread in feminist-informed methods is the placement of gender and gender-related concerns at the center of analysis, highlighting notions of power in different ways. For this study, researchers compiled a sample of public Facebook posts published between November 7, 2016 and January 31, 2017. The sample was collected using the term “pussy hat.” The initial sample included 734 posts which were downloaded and pasted into a Word document for review. Of these 734 posts, 26 were eliminated due to a lack of relevance and/or human error for a discard rate of less than 3.5%. The final sample included 708 Facebook posts.

Following a comprehensive review of the feminist, protest literature, we coded each Facebook post for overall theme as defined in Table 1, with our final analysis including frequencies and percentages for each category.

Table 1

Operational definitions for the themes

Craftivism: creating and sharing hats

Call to Action: join the movement/knit for the movement/participate in the Women's March

wearing hats

Activism: attending or attended march
Commerce: the sale of yarn, crochet and/or other materials
Generational bonding: Facebook users of all ages featured participating in the movement with family members.
Digital sisterhood: images of the online community created by the Pussyhat Project™
Pussy hat Design: hands knitting crocheting
Inclusion of males

Intercoder reliability was calculated using percent agreement (Tables 2 and 3). Intercoder reliability for the initial round of coding was 75% for tone and 30% for themes. However, the researchers refined

the coding instrument to achieve a higher level of agreement and the final percentages were 81% for tone and 71% for themes, demonstrating an overall improvement in agreement.

Table 2

Intercoder Reliability for Tone

Positive	18	14
Neutral	4	2
Negative	1	1
Percent agreement: 61 out of 75=81%		

Table 3

Intercoder Reliability for Themes

Call to action: join the movement/knit for the movement/participate in the Women's March	34.47%	81
Craftivism: creating/sharing hats	18.30%	43
Wearing or displaying hats	14.04%	33
Digital sisterhood: online community	0.00%	0
Generational bonding	0.43%	1
Inclusion of male(s)	0.00%	0
Hands knitting or crocheting	0.85%	2
Yarn/knitting/crocheting materials	3.40%	8
Commerce: selling yarn/crochet/knitting materials	6.81%	16
Media reference	15.32%	36
Other (list)	1.28%	3
Total	100%	225

Findings and Discussion

Tone of Facebook Posts

76% of the public Facebook posts sampled directly displayed or expressed a positive feeling toward the Pussyhat Project™. This overall positive tone reflects the intentional approach to the project according to co-founder Jayna Zweiman: “It was a positive project. It gave people voices and helped people recognize there isn’t just one way to be an activist.” (personal communication,

March 28, 2017) Many of the posters agreed, using such terms as “positive, kind, inspiration, love,” throughout the social media channel.

Table 4		
<i>Tone of Facebook posts</i>		
<u>Tone</u>	<u>%</u>	
<u>Frequency</u>		
Positive	76.07%	531
Neutral	19.34%	135
Negative	4.58%	32
Total	100%	698

One reason for this widely held positivity may have been its expression as a call to action, as crafters were invited to create pink hats to produce a visual feminist statement during the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, D.C. Fiber art crafters could actively participate in the gathering even if they were unable to physically attend. Their

work could serve as a stand-in for them and join with many others to make a statement. This movement, propelled through social media, helped the Pussyhat Project™ create and share an estimated one million hats for the march, all within a 60-day time frame.

Themes of Facebook posts

A variety of themes emerged from the analysis of the literature. Our content analysis indicates themes evolved over the period of the study. Frequencies and percent for the themes were: wearing hats 83 (11.72%); activism 64 (9.04%); yarn/knitting/crocheting materials 45 (6.36%); commerce: selling yarn/crochet/other materials 25 (3.53%); generational bonding 18 (2.54%); digital sisterhood/online community 17 (2.40%); inclusion of male(s) 17 (2.40%); hands knitting crocheting 16 (2.26%).

Findings indicate that the posts mainly focused on the crafting of hats, the finding of patterns, supplies and joining the effort while the movement was building momentum. Leading up to the Women's March, there was increased focus on the event, including posts involving travel planning and in-person participation. Another component to note was the increasing media coverage of the project. A pussy hat adorned the February 8, 2017 cover of *TIME Magazine* and received mentions in many local and national media outlets. Whoopi Goldberg and other members of the television show *The View* wore the hats on set.

From the craftivism perspective, many posts indicated a community of knitters working together to create the one million hats needed for the marchers. Noting the diversity of the individuals who participated in the movement, organizers encouraged women to include notes regarding any topic they wished with the hats that they knitted and sent to Washington D.C. A wide age-range of people were directly involved in the

creation of these hats. One mortician told the project founders that an 80-year-old woman had left final instructions with her daughter that she wished to be cremated while wearing her pussy hat. The fact that a diverse age-range of people participated led to the mention of a "digital sisterhood" as well as "generational bonding." One post read, "My grandmother might not be able to march, but she raises her fist and wears a pussy hat like a champ! Go Nana!!!" Another post read, "Yay! Mom's #pussyhat arrived in time! Complete with Kindred Post "Smash the Patriarchy" pin! Mom is my earliest social justice role model <3 <3 <3."

Race and sexual orientation are other key indications of diversity. African Americans (primarily women) made up 3% of the individuals in photos in our sample. Asian Americans made up 5% of the sample. Other groups were split, with Anglos making up the largest percentage of participants. Many of the photos included several people in racially diverse groups. A woman of color featured as Rosie the Riveter was a prominent illustration highlighted during this period under analysis. The February 6, 2017 issue of *The New Yorker* featured the image. Members of the LGBTQ+ community also took part. Special rainbow-colored hats and headbands adorned with ears were fashioned for women of the LGBTQ+ community. Images of these alternatives to pink hats were shared using the Facebook platform.

The active participation of knitters and marchers allowed for fiber-based activism in contrast to social media campaigns which are exclusively online.

This online form of activism is called “slacktivism” and it is defined as actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement (Glenn, 2015). The fact that so many hats were created in such a short timespan showed how knitters joined together and motivated each other. “There is an incredible community that got built. Knitters are amazing! They are compassionate, caring, giving and creative. And they make stuff for people!” (Zweiman, 2017).

Media references and links made up 128 (18%) of the samples. While several were media outlets promoting stories on their Facebook pages, the majority were posts shared by members of the movement who shared media coverage of the

movement and the hats with their Facebook followers and friends.

Table 5

Themes of Facebook Posts

<u>Theme</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Count</u>	
Craftivism	21.19%	150	
Call to Action	20.48%	145	
Other	18.08%	128	
Wearing hats	11.72%	83	
Activism	9.04%	64	
Knitting and crocheting materials	6.36%	45	
Commerce	3.53%	25	
Generational bonding	2.54%	18	
Digital sisterhood	2.40%	17	
Inclusion of male(s)	2.40%	17	
Hands knitting crocheting/holding final hat	2.26%	16	
Total	100%	708	

Craftivism accounted for 150 (21%) of the samples. Knitters, crocheters and sewers discussed the act of creating and how many hats they had made or intended to make. Photographs of this theme most

often featured someone wearing a hat or a hat in the process of being created. Many reported learning a new craft to create a hat. This theme also included Facebook posts that discussed the sharing of hats.

Worth noting was the large number of posts that included a reference to commerce. While the majority of the pussy hats were knitted by individuals and sent to Washington D.C. to be worn during the march, individuals also sold pink pussy hats via Facebook, using outlets such as Etsy and Amazon. Owners of craft shops discussed the shortages they faced in trying to stock pink yarn in their stores.

Another large portion of the sample (145, 20.5%) was a call to action, offering various ways to get involved. Posts invited Facebook users to join the movement by sharing content on social media platforms encouraging the attendance of the march and the knitting of hats for those individuals who would be in attendance at the march. Facebook posts also noted the date of the march and additional ways to participate, such as the virtual march by wearing and posting a photo in a pussy hat. One surprising find was that generational bonding made up 2.5% of the sample. Facebook posts featuring generational bonding included grandparents, aunts, uncles and children of all ages wearing or creating hats. The theme highlighted social activism being shared across generations. Examples include an image of a son wearing the pussy hat that he requested. Photos of grandmothers, mothers and daughters wearing their pink hats were also commonplace. The most widely shared illustration, which features a group of empowered and unified women filling the streets of Washington, D.C. donning pink hats and protest signs, was created by the group as part of their manifesto. People learned from this illustration about the intent and mission of the project. The relatively simple graphic seemingly struck a

nerve with knitters and activists as it was reproduced in nearly 12% of the sample.

Conclusion

After a divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election, a large segment of the population took to social media to express their frustrations and found solace in the sisterhood created by the Pussyhat Project™. Facebook was used as a tool by individuals who turned to the platform to share ideas, suggestions and crochet patterns. This content analysis looked at the photos and text in Facebook posts before, during and after the 2017 Women's March in Washington, D.C. to assess how users discussed the Pussyhat Project™. People posted photos and text to frame the event mostly in a positive manner. In fact, this study found that this positive attitude translated into a wave of conversations, sharing intimate and touching stories of women's struggles, all while trying to bring together a movement of unity by creating a sea of pink.

The most salient themes characterized the movement as a peaceful craftivism project that united women across the globe to help them find their collective voice. Our study indicates, as a matter of reclaiming the dignity of women, participants in the Pussyhat Project™ first worked to reclaim the intimate word "pussy" to continue moving feminism forward. Next, they chose a symbol—the hat—and the color pink to help foster solidarity and unity. Knitting/crocheting circles and the directive to create hats for others fostered a sense of digital sisterhood that catapulted the project to success.

Communal crafting allowed women to create and find satisfaction and form bonds of sisterhood while also existing in

community. As the project originator of the Pussyhat Project™ puts it, it was just “mind-blowing” that so many hats were hand-crafted in such a short amount of time. The movement that combined old-time crafting with social media gave people, and especially women, the imagination to share the Pussyhat Project™ globally, generating worldwide coverage of this pink fiber phenomenon. Indicating that the hat had become a popular culture symbol, mainstream media coverage included a pussy hat on the cover of *The New Yorker* as well as *TIME Magazine* and a cameo appearance on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live*. The inclusion of the Pussyhat Movement in media content indicates the movement permeated society. The primary themes found in the Facebook posts coincided with the Pussyhat Project™ manifesto, involving craftivism to help create a visual statement during the Women’s March which was indeed successful. “We created a sea of pink at the march. It was mind-blowing!” (Zweiman, 2017). These hats, as a representation of creative crafting and feminism, allowed millions to participate in a variety of fashions.

As with any study there are noted limitations. One is that Facebook does not offer the capability for users to easily search and download previous posts. To find sites in or around a certain timeframe, users must manually scroll through the sites. In addition, Facebook allows mostly private networks, limiting what researchers can discover in posts that are public. However, even with these limitations, this study is valuable because it provides a snapshot of the activism and the Women’s Movement in 2017. The majority of Facebook activity is still private and available only to Facebook itself. Even with just the

available public data, researchers face ethical and privacy concerns when deciding what to publish (Olmstead & Barthel, 2015).

This study is a good starting point as it offers an overview of the themes used to depict the Pussyhat Project™. Future studies might build upon these findings as a springboard for investigating a larger sample. Suggestions include addressing the use of social media as private safe spaces within these channels. Review of public comments on posts about pussy hats on neutral sites, like media outlets, may also prove important for further study. Continued research on craftivism can also include a look at displays and collections by the fiber arts community. After the Women’s March, many archives requested mementos from the event as well from the Pussyhat Project™. Pussy hats are on display in several museums along with many other feminist movement articles dating back to suffrage.

The Pussyhat Project™ worked in tandem with the Women’s March. To this day, Zweiman continues to plan other craftivism actions. Further research, including more study of niche social media sites like Ravelry, which currently has more than 7 million registered users, may produce additional insight into how grassroots efforts take shape, act and take on a life of their own. Three women, two needles and one skein of yarn were the basic pattern needed to launch what became a worldwide movement which sought to create a visual response to an attack on feminism. This study of discussions on Facebook begins to unravel the positive and affirming actions of many who sought to reclaim what had been lost in the presidential election, to affirm one

another and to be seen - a sea of pink and an ocean of supporters around the world, loudly making a visual statement on feminism.

Address correspondence to:

Mia Moody, Baylor University

Email: aimhigh3@yahoo.com

References

- Al-Rawi, A. K. (2014). The Arab Spring and Online Protests in Iraq. *International Journal of Communication* (19328036), 8, 916–942. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=97253160&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Ardener, S. (1975). *Perceiving women*. London: Malaby Press.
- Armstrong, C. (2014). *Media disparity: A gender battleground*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books
- Boissoneault (2017). The Original Women's March on Washington and the Suffragists who paved the way. *Smithsonianmag.com*.
- Bratich, J.Z. & Brush, H.M. "Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2011, pp. 233-60.
- Byerly, C.M. & Ross, K. (2006). *Women and media: A critical introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cabalin, C. (2014). Online and Mobilized Students: The Use of Facebook in the Chilean Student Protests. *Communicar*, 22(43), 25–33. <http://doi.org/10.3916/C43-2014-02>
- Chiriță, D. (2012). (non) Value in Women's Magazines. *Communication & Marketing / Revista De Comunicare Si Marketing*, 3(5), 39–52. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=85205058&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Cochrane, K. (10 December 2013). "The fourth wave of feminism: meet the rebel women". *The Guardian*.
- Creedon, P.J. (1993). *Women in mass communication, Second Edition*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.
- Curnutt, H. (2012). *Flashing Your Phone: Sexting and the Remediation of Teen Sexuality*. *Communication Quarterly*, 60(3), 353–369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2012.688728>
- Everbach, T. (2014). Women's (mis) Representation in News Media. In Armstrong, C. (ed.) *Media Disparity: A gender Battleground*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Glenn, C. (2015). Activism or "Slacktivism?": Digital Media and Organizing for Social Change, *Communication Teacher*, 29:2, 81–85, DOI: 10.1080/17404622.2014.1003310
- Goode, L. (2009). Social news, citizen journalism and democracy. *New Media & Society*, 11(8), 1287–1305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809341393>
- Hannam, J. (2006). *Feminism* (1 edition). Harlow, England: Routledge.
- Harlow, S. (2013). It was a "Facebook revolution:" Exploring the meme-like spread of narratives, during the Egyptian protests, *Revista de Comunicacion* 12, 59–82.

- Hartmann, H. (1981). The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union. In L. Sargent, (Ed.), *Women and revolutions: a discussion of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism* (pp. 1-41). Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, B. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Koller: 'Not just a colour': pink as a gender and sexuality marker 415-416
- Krolokke, C. & Sorensen, (2006). *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Olmstead, K., & Barthel, M. (2015, March 26). The challenges of using Facebook for research. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/26/thechallenges-of-using-facebook-for-research/#>.
- Miladi, N. (2011). New media and the Arab revolution: Citizen reporters and social activism. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 4(2&3), 113–119.
https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr.4.2-3.113_2
- Phruksachart, M. (2017). Who will save us from the Pantsuit Nation? Reading liberal media in the age of Trump. *Feminist Media Studies*, 17(3), 513–516.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1304717>
- Rakow, L. (1986). Rethinking Gender Research in Communication. *Journal of Communication*. 36. 11 - 26.
10.1111/j.1460-2466.1986.tb01447.x.
- Shamus, K. (2017). Pussy hat [project has hot pink yarn flying off Michigan shelves. Retrieved April 1, 2017, from <http://www.freep.com/story/news/2017/01/12/pussyhat-project-womens-march/96355616/>
- Van Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Wood, J.T. (2005). Women and Language: WL; Urbana(28)2, p. 61-64,72.
- (Zweiman, 2017). Change to “Our Story,” (January 24, 2017). PussyHatProject.com.

Challenges Facing Emirati College Student Mothers Post Childbirth

Journal of Research
on Women and Gender
Volume 9, Pages 76-90
© Tennant & Dickson, 2019

Reprints and Permission:
Email jrwg14@txstate.edu
Texas Digital Library:
<http://www.tdl.org>

Lilly Tennant and Martina Dickson

Abstract

The vast majority of women in higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are first generation college students and about over half of them are student mothers. The education of women has been the top priority of the UAE government. The intent of the study was to examine the needs and challenges of student mothers at a teacher education campus in Abu Dhabi. The research study, using a mixed methods approach, surveyed about 71 students and interviewed about 13 students, a representative sample of student mothers, about experiences after their return to college post childbirth. The findings of the study revealed the physical and academic challenges faced by the mothers and their ways of coping in order to pursue their education within the constraints of the college policies. Recommendations and implications for teacher education colleges are discussed.

Keywords

mothers; preservice-teachers; higher education; post childbirth; United Arab Emirates

Introduction

The growth of young Emirati women enrolled in higher education has been significant with over 65.76% of female students in federal institutions in the United Arab Emirates. (MOSHER, 2013). The enrollment of female Emiratis has increased from 16,619 student in 2018 to 22,819 students in 2014. Two-thirds of

the UAE government employees are women; two thirds are graduates from federal universities and a third of the UAE cabinet are women (The Khaleej Times, 2016). The accelerated pace of modernization has given women new opportunities to go beyond their traditional stereotypical role of mothers. Educational reforms in the past decade have allowed for women to pursue higher education and employment in the workforce which reflects the outgrowths of the expansion of

educational opportunities and socioeconomic changes rather than gender-specific educational policies. In short, Emirati women who account for 49.3% of the national population are in the forefront of UAE's educational, social, economic and political spheres.

The status of women in the UAE has evolved considerably with all kinds of rights and responsibilities provided to them in all aspects of life. Emirati women are involved in political roles in the government, serve as ambassadors, work in different professions in various sectors and build the economy of the Emirates (Bristol-Rhys, 2010). Due to the visionary leadership of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, women have been empowered to take significant roles in the country, keeping with Islamic principles and respect to women:

The means to develop a country and modernize its infrastructure is a magnificent burden that should not be taken up by men only....It would lead to an unbalanced rhythm of life. Hence, women's participation in public life is required and we must be prepared for it.... Nothing could delight me more than to see woman taking up her distinctive position in society. Nothing should hinder her progress. Like men, women deserve the right to occupy high positions, according to their capabilities and qualifications. (Augsburg, Claus, and Randeree, 2009, 29–30).

After the demise of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan in 2004, his wife Sheikha Fatimah bint Mubarak played a very influential role in the advancement of women in higher education and in the government. The

Emiratization policy adopted by the country in 2014 has particularly allowed women to take leadership roles. Emirati women play a mediating role in a country which has a strong western influence by representing their own cultural roles, values, and traditions. Samier (2015) has elaborated in her experiential discourse that the Emirates has evolved as a modern country, preserving the Islamic values, providing a safe environment and empowering women in higher education.

Cultural and social expectations of young married Emiratis to have children soon after marriage is common in the UAE which can be challenging while pursuing higher education. There have been incidences where female Emirati students take time off from universities and fulfil their duties of motherhood (Thomas, Raymor, & AL Marzooqi, 2012). According to Abdulla (2007), young Emirati women experienced a conflict as the result of their higher education and what their society perceived of them as daughters, wives and mothers. There remains a view that education could interfere with the mother training her daughter in traditional tasks. One of the major factors that influences women's participation in the workforce is the difficulty of balancing family and work responsibilities (Aryee et al., 1999; Hijab, 1988; Rugh, 1985; Sha'aban, 1996).

Despite a gradual change in cultural traditions, barriers do exist which illustrate many of society's views about women, such as the presumption that women are responsible for childcare and household duties, the restriction on women mingling freely with men and the need to maintain family honor. Crabtree (2007) notes, "academic studies do not appear to be

taken for the love of learning solely, but rather that families view an education at this level as providing the final polish to a young girl's life, that marks her out as being successfully poised on the brink of adult life, commensurate with Islamic and cultural expectations of womanhood" (P.577). Despite the cultural considerations limiting career options and career planning for Emirati women, teacher education is still viewed as a suitable profession as it is comparatively female dominated (Salem, 2011).

Research shows that student mothers find balancing work, study and family life particularly challenging. Tennant, Stringer & Saqr (2013) found that married Emirati students pursuing higher education experience a lot of stress and anxieties in fulfilling their multiple roles as married women, mothers and full-time students. Other such feelings expressed by married student teachers are the lack of quality time that they spend with their spouse and children as well as meeting the requirements of college coursework (Stringer, Saqr, Tennant, 2014; Thomas, Raynor & Al Marzooqi, 2012).

Studies in the United States of non-traditional students such as student mothers indicated that some college campuses are not family friendly places and have policies that do not allow student mothers to engage in campus life, such as the timing of academic activities and inflexible scheduling for required classes, therefore delaying a timely completion of a degree (Astin, 1999; Mahaffey, Hungeford & Sill, 2015; Siebert, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Lack of childcare facilities in colleges or universities was another barrier for student mothers while studying in regional campuses in Ohio (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley,

Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Therefore, it is critical to find out the needs of student mothers and what services need to be provided to them for retention as well as to empower their education.

The intent of the study was to understand the perspectives of the young mothers who return to college soon after childbirth and to find out the challenges and barriers that they face while attending a Bachelor of Education Program. In addition, to examine appropriate services, colleges could provide for student mothers, and to understand student mothers' perceptions of college expectations and its related policies. The following research questions are addressed: 1) What are the main challenges that student mothers in a teacher preparation college face upon their return to college studies after giving birth? 2) What are the student mothers' perceptions of college expectations and related policies? The study aims to explore the needs and obstacles faced by student mothers as they pursue teacher education. The findings will inform higher education institutions and policy makers to support future teachers of the nation.

Method

The mixed methods approach to conducting research was based on the notion of "what works" and choosing methods that best address the research questions (Creswell, 1994). In this study, the mixed methods design, which included both quantitative and qualitative methods, was used to investigate the challenges that are faced by Emirati student mothers who return to college soon after childbirth. A convergent parallel mixed methods design was used in which the quantitative and

qualitative data was collected in parallel, analyzed separately and then merged. In this study, the survey data was used to find out specifically from student mothers from a larger sample of college students about their personal challenges post-childbirth. Qualitative data obtained from individual interviews was used to explore the student mothers' experiences during their transition back to college after childbirth. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to converge the two forms of data to bring greater insight about the challenges faced by Emirati student mothers and to corroborate results obtained from two sources of data separately, allowing for the triangulation of data.

Participants

At the time of the study, the total number of students enrolled in the college was 410. For the purpose of the study, only students who identified as student mothers were contacted, which was 90 students. Among the 90 students, 71 student mothers consented to participate in the study. Participants were student mothers who were enrolled in the four-year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) program in a college in Abu Dhabi Emirate. Student mothers at this teacher education college are being qualified to teach Cycle 1 students (grades 1 to 5) a range of subjects including English, Math and Science, which will be conducted in the English language. The recruitment of participants was done by an email that was sent to all of the college's students which included the criteria for participation. Information about the research study was provided in the message. Students who had become

mothers during their study at the college consented to participate and 71 completed an online survey of which thirteen who completed the survey volunteered to participate in individual interviews. The age range of the participants was between 18 years to 30 years. 71 Arabic-speaking student mothers who consented to participate in the study were at different year levels in the four-year B.Ed. program of study. The number of children bore ranged from one to six. At the time of the study, 54% of the student mothers had one to two children, 25% had between three and five children, 7% had more than 5 children and 9% were pregnant. The age ranges of the children ranged from newborns to 14 years old. Out of the 71 student mothers, 69 were married, 1 separated and 1 divorced. The years of marriage of the student mothers ranged from one to sixteen years. About 53% of the student mothers lived as a nuclear family in a private home, 23% of the participants lived with their spouse's family and 24% stayed with their own maternal family.

Survey Instrument

The survey items were designed to find out the forms of support systems available to student mothers and the challenges they faced post-childbirth. The survey statements were created by the researchers based on their student observations and also as discussed in the review of literature related to social and cultural aspects of Emirati mothers. The total number of survey items was thirty, and the items were divided into seven major sections: demographic information; childbirth and breastfeeding related;

support systems at home, type of support provided by their spouse and extended family members; kinds of challenges; level of satisfaction with college support services. The survey responses varied in form; from yes, no, to multiple choice, Likert type scale and one free form response. The final version of the online survey used both the English and Arabic languages. The survey items were verified for clarity by experts other than the researchers. The survey items were entered into the eSurveysPro online software. The survey link was sent to all of the college students with a call for student mothers to voluntarily participate in the research study. 71 student mothers who consented participated and completed the survey, however, there were some participants who skipped certain questions, hence the response rate varied for each of the survey statements. Two weeks after the initial email, an additional email reminder was sent to the college students. The survey link was open during the data collection period of four weeks. The quantitative data obtained from the survey responses was tabulated electronically and presented using descriptive statistics.

Individual Interviews

Interviews allow the researcher to enter the inner world of another person to gain understanding from their perspective (Patton, 1987). In this study, in-depth interviews elicited depth of data (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Hussey & Hussey 1997; Patton, 1990) as participants were encouraged to reflect, discuss their experiences post-childbirth including their coping mechanisms, support networks available, challenges faced and their

perceptions of the support provided at the college and suggestions for the college to assist student mothers after they return from their brief maternity leave. In addition to the survey data, thirteen students opted to be interviewed. These were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative interview data was coded and grouped into tentative categories and then classified into themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to address the research questions.

Findings & Discussions

Inferences are drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study which provide insight on the intent of the study. Merged mixed methods data findings are presented for each of the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the main challenges which student mothers in a teacher-preparation college face upon return to their college studies after giving birth? The findings to this research question are addressed in the form of following themes: i) physical challenges; ii) academic issues; and iii) concerns on college facilities.

Physical Challenges

When asked about the type of birth of their first child, out of 55 student mothers, 85.45% had a normal delivery and 14.55% had a Caesarean section. The number of weeks of leave taken post-childbirth varied as depicted in Table 1.

In reviewing the survey findings, about 50% of student mothers who responded mentioned that for their first child they took only one or two weeks of

maternity leave and returned immediately after to the college to continue their studies. Student mothers stated that returning after two weeks of leave was not enough to take care of the baby while in college, and for a few it was their first child.

However, Rizk, Nasser, Thomas and Ezimokhai, (2005) found in their study

on women's perceptions of childbirth experiences that the prevalence and correlates of postnatal psychosocial morbidity in UAE are not different from those observed elsewhere.

In addition to the physical challenges they faced, student mothers expressed feelings of guilt for leaving their newborn with a nanny, lack of spousal support, limited extended family help, and financial strain. One of the participants shared her anguish: *"I cannot enjoy my time. I feel, last week, my baby called the housemaid Momma and when I took him ... he doesn't want me. He cried. It's hard for me ..."*

Regarding the duration of breast feeding, survey data from 50 respondents showed that about 8% did not breast feed, 10% breast fed for a period of one month, about 16% for about a year and 28% for over a year. While attending the college, out of the 56 respondents, 58.93% were breastfeeding their newborn while 41.07% were not breastfeeding. Therefore, this suggests that many of the student mothers were dealing with the challenge of not

being available for their newborn as they had to return to college. About 23.64% expressed their breast milk and 76.36% did not express their breast milk while at the college. During the interviews, when asked

Table 1: Number of Weeks Taken for Maternity Leave

Participants	Ordinal Position	5 weeks or more	4 weeks	Three weeks	One –two weeks
# of Responses 34	Child 1	14.71%	5.88%	29.41%	50%
# of Responses 16	Child 2	18.75%	18.75%	31.25%	31.25%
# of Responses 9	Child 3	1%	11.11%	44.44%	33.33%

about breastfeeding, two of the participants responded:

I breastfed for two months and continued in the evenings but giving formula milk when I am in college

It was difficult to come back after 2 weeks, breastfeeding was hard, went to the nurse's office, I used to pump and kept it in the fridge, breast fed only for 4 months

In a study conducted about childbirth and parenting with 216 women in the UAE, findings on duration of breastfeeding decreased across three generations of women. 89% of grandmothers breastfed, 52% of mothers breastfed, and 26% of daughters breastfed. It is a religious expectation in Islam that babies be fed breast milk for at least 2 years (Schleifer, 1996). A verse in Surat Al Baqarah in the Quran states: "Mothers may breastfeed their children two complete years for whoever wishes to complete the nursing [period]" as cited in the national newspaper (Al Khoori, 2014). Since all of the student mothers in the study are

Muslims, this religious expectation creates a dilemma and poses a challenge for them.

The weaning process and combination of utilizing formula with breastmilk differed among the Emirati grandmothers, mothers and daughters (Green & Smith, 2006). Similar to the recent trends around the world, breastfeeding has declined in the UAE (World Health Organization (WHO), 2005). More recently, the Federal National Council (FNC) included a clause about breastfeeding as mandatory in the Child Rights Law in the UAE (Salem, 2014) until the age of two years. Hence, the educational campaign on the benefits of breastfeeding have been propagated. Breastfeeding facilities have been installed in some public places such as shopping malls and airports and breaks for breastfeeding mothers are being provided by certain employers. However, mothers still face barriers such as short maternity leave, lack of private breastfeeding facilities, no designated space to express milk or store it, and the lack of nurseries in colleges and workplaces. Therefore, challenges continue to exist for student mothers as they juggle their dual roles and responsibilities.

Academic Issues

When the student mothers were surveyed about their challenges post-childbirth, as depicted in Table 2, out of the 55 responses, the areas that they felt were very challenging were managing academic coursework, deprived sleep and disrupted sleep cycle, and difficulty catching up with college work. Student mothers had to deal with medical related issues post-childbirth. They had concerns over their physical well-

being and many of them reported that dealing with their newborn and also managing their other children was very challenging which affected the completion of their coursework.

Qualitative interview data analysis revealed that the majority of student mothers had difficulty coping with their college work and managing their time, balancing their duties at home and at college. One of the student mothers mentioned: *“I sacrifice my sleep and do projects...work only when baby is asleep, it is hard to manage with six kids...”* Another participant shared that she felt: *“physically tired, no sleep... I am thinking of my new baby and can't focus...”* A few revealed in the individual interviews that

Table 2: Challenges Faced Post-Childbirth

Type	Very Challenging	Sometimes Challenging	Not a Challenge
Managing my course load and all the assignments	70.00%	22%	8.00%
My sleep cycle	69.23%	26.92%	3.85%
Catching up with college work that I missed during my maternity leave	66.67%	25%	8.33%
Managing medical care, doctor appointments and hospital visits	57.69%	34.62%	7.69%
My physical health after having the baby	53.19%	31.91%	14.89%
Dealing with my other children and the baby	51.02%	26.53%	22.45%

they considered dropping out of college as one of them remarked:

Sometimes, I wanted to drop. I don't want to continue ... in year 3 it was too much pressure for me ... too many projects, many exams, everything ... so in that time I want to stop because my husband didn't help me with the children. He also had other issues to deal with ... so no-one helped me with the children... what I will do miss ... but I do it ... I tried to do what I can.

Another student mother with similar sentiments shared: *"Sometimes I felt like dropping out during the pressure of project time..."*

One of the significant difficulties for mothers who are student teachers is lack of time to spend with their children, spouses, extended families and friends, and to study and complete college assignments. In spite of their academic challenges, student mothers mentioned that proper planning and time management have been key to their academic success. One participant stated *"I am strong woman. If you can manage at home your kids and husband, you*

can do everything." Student mothers are self-motivated to complete their teacher education degree within the constraints of college and home life.

Concerns about College Facilities

As presented in Table 3, student mothers' satisfaction scale about the types of supports or facilities at the college were analyzed.

The findings of the study revealed that the student mothers were satisfied with their access to online resources that are available through the college's learning management system software known as D2L, or Desire to Learn. A few of the students were very dissatisfied with accessing course materials on D2L because of constraints pertaining to Internet access at home. While examining the qualitative data, student mothers shared that there were some teachers who supported them and showed flexibility on deadlines for

submission of project work. A few of the student mothers mentioned:

Teachers helped me a lot and to answer my

Some friends pick up handouts for me when I miss class or tell me what I missed

Friends support me to continue to encourage

Table 3: Level of Satisfaction on College Support Services

Types of support/facilities	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Not Satisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Access to course materials on D2L	26.42%	33.96%	28.30%	3.77%	7.55%
Access to my teachers at the college after I returned from maternity leave	15.22%	21.74%	41.30%	19.57%	6.52%
Classmates help with missed course work after I returned to the college	12.77%	29.79%	34.04%	17.02%	6.38%
The number of leave days that I received from the college	4.44%	6.67%	22.22%	35.56%	31.11%
College facilities to rest when tired after childbirth	2.27%	9.09%	18.18%	20.45%	50.00%
College facilities for expressing milk	0	15.56%	28.89%	22.22%	33.33%
Study area or space at the college	0	19.57%	30.43%	19.57%	30.43%

questions on assignments...

Teachers ask me to come to their office for help

The teachers understand when I talk with them, my situations and they support me

but they are busy

Friends are not supporting, mainly teachers.

As presented in Table 3, when asked about access to their college instructors after their return from maternity leave, a few responses were positive and others were neutral in their opinions on the level of support they received. Regarding help from their classmates for their coursework that they missed during their maternity leave, there were mixed opinions, many were satisfied with the support and a few others felt not very supported by their classmates.

A few of the quotes obtained from the individual interviews with student mothers are included here:

My friend (A) supports me for assignments or exam and study together

Out of the 53 student mothers who responded about their satisfaction with the number of maternity leave days granted by the college, the majority were dissatisfied with the two weeks of maternity leave as well as the college's motherhood facilities. Also, student mothers were dissatisfied with the facilities dedicated to studying provided by the college.

Comments from student mothers in the interview were:

It was hard for breastfeeding to come to college after 2 weeks; 2 weeks leave to take care of newborn was not enough.

It was difficult to come back after 2 weeks, breastfeeding was hard, went to the nurse's office, I used to pump and kept it in the fridge.

Dickson & Tennant (2019) explored the support systems that contributed to

Emirati student mothers' ability to return to their college studies after only a few weeks of maternity leave. The types of support included domestic, family, spousal, and self-support. However, among the supports that were discussed, student mothers' intrinsic motivation was significant to completing their education within their academic constraints.

Research Question 2: What are student mothers' perceptions of college expectations and related policies?

According to the college student handbook, the number of excused absences for students cannot exceed more than 15% in each of the classes that they are enrolled in during that semester. However, in exceptional circumstances such as health or personal matters, students are allowed to suspend their study for one semester (Emirates College for Advanced Education, 2015-16). With regard to maternity care, married students are required to provide the college with early notification of their pregnancy and must return to classes no later than 2 weeks (10 working days) after their child's birth. In reviewing another higher education statement on maternity leave, female students are encouraged to suspend their registration for that semester in which the baby is expected to be born. If a student chooses not to utilize a term or semester maternity attendance suspension but instead to deliver her baby and return to complete the term or semester, her total semester absences must not exceed 15% to receive credit for the class (Zayed University Catalog, 2015-2016). These policy expectations are challenging for student mothers. From the findings of this

study, none of the student mothers took up the option of suspending an academic term because they would have to wait until the following academic year to take the courses, hence the student mothers returned to college after two or three weeks post-childbirth.

Referring to Table 4, the survey included statements about their opinions or views of possibilities in the future.

Out of the 54 student mothers who responded, many of them strongly agreed that, in the future, the college should consider having specific policies pertaining to maternity leave and attendance. During the interviews, several of the student mothers would have preferred a longer maternity leave than two weeks and the ability to increase the percentage of absences from the college. The majority of the student mothers wanted to have nursery facilities in the college. Student mothers voiced:

We need a baby nursery...

Need to get a nursery, I told the student services...

A room in the college to bring my nanny with the baby, even if there is no nursery....

The traditional Gulf practice of a woman staying at her parental home immediately following delivery was followed by most of the women, albeit in a shortened form, since they are required to return to their studies after two weeks. Emirati mothers have been found to wish their daughters'

Table 4: Views on College Facilities

Opinions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Having college policies specifically for student mothers such as extended maternity leave and attendance	53.85%	21.15%	3.85%	13.46%	9.62%
Having nursery facilities in the college would support me	64.81%	25.93%	9.26%	0	0
A mix of online and face to face course work will support me to complete my college degree	46.30%	33.33%	12.96%	3.70%	3.70%
Having a choice to take a few evening classes from 4:00PM to 6:30PM would support me	35.85%	7.55%	18.87%	15.09%	22.64%

lives to be easier than their own (Crabtree, 2007).

When asked about online and face to face approaches to coursework, the majority of the student mothers responded that they preferred a blend of both. Interview analysis indicated that student mothers welcomed the idea of blended teaching. These were some of their comments:

I like online course, many friends also were telling me to have online courses, some subjects yes, not Math...

Mothers with new baby, should come 2 hours less instead of 6 hours to be in the college and manage class work from home...

Online teaching – oh my God, that will help at least after delivery, it will be amazing, life-saving and will be supportive.

Out of the 54 respondents, there were mixed feelings about having a choice of evening classes. Interviews revealed that student mothers preferred a choice in class timings. A couple of them commented:

Leave early from college by 1:30-2:00PM, so I can be there for the children when they come from school

The timings are difficult for mothers, 8:00-4:00 because it is very long. 8:00-2:00 would be better

A previous study on married students enrolled in a teacher education college (Stringer, Saqr & Tennant, 2014) showed that students experienced inflexibility with schedules and the lack of course delivery options which concur with the findings of this study. Reviewing college policies and providing the necessary facilities for married students were key factors highlighted as pertinent to college success (Saqr, Tennant & Stringer, 2014; Tennant, Saqr & Stringer, 2014). Therefore, we can infer from the findings that the student mothers who were participants of this study face several challenges while they pursue a college degree and that their voices need to be heard especially among the key personnel in the administration of higher education institutions.

Future Implications of Study

In reviewing the findings of this study, there are implications specific to the college and a few to other similar higher education institutions. One of the recommendations is to offer childcare services or facilities on college campuses as this would allow student mothers convenient access to their babies during the early months of childhood for bonding and breastfeeding. Since the maternity leave allowed for students at the tertiary level is only two weeks and excused absences up to 15% of class time, one of the options would be distance education or a blended teaching approach. Creating more cultural awareness of the roles of Emirati student mothers among faculty would allow for greater understanding of their concerns and better rapport between faculty and students. In addition, having special counseling services for mothers' post-childbirth or postpartum is important as the mothers have experienced a lot of stress and these services would give them more avenues to cope. Another implication is for higher education institutions to provide married students and student mothers a special workshop or session on coping strategies, stress and time management to balance their multiple roles. Future work has been planned regarding these student mothers to observe their challenges and experiences having transitioned from being student mothers to novice teachers in public school.

Conclusion

Women's entry into higher education has consistently increased over

the past two decades (UNESCO, 2009) and is considered essential and necessary for the construction of a new society (Al Qazzat, 2003). A large proportion of female university students in the UAE are mothers of young children or become mothers whilst at university. The purpose of the study was to gain insight on student mothers' experiences post-childbirth while they were in the Bachelor of Education Program. This study has provided a meaningful insight of Emirati student mothers' challenges and realities while pursuing a teacher education degree. Studies such as these are important because they inform policy makers of the needs of key stakeholders, in this case, student mothers. Emirati student mothers in this study demonstrated a commitment to the educational process, and a desire to make a valuable contribution to their families, the college community and to the nation. They have valuable knowledge and experience to contribute and are an asset to the college and their community. Higher education institutions also need to be mindful that not supporting these student mothers may ultimately lead to high rates of attrition in their predominantly female student body. Therefore, teacher education programs need to be proactive in meeting the needs of student mothers and appreciate their self-efficacy and resilience.

In order to attract and retain student mothers in tertiary education, it is critical to provide them with adequate facilities and support because they are largely responsible for the building of the young Emirati generation. In conclusion, Emirati women value higher education and realize the benefits of being an educated mother for their own children as well as their country.



Address correspondence to:
 Lilly Tennant, Martina Dickson
 Emirates College for Advanced Education
 Email: tennant38@gmail.com
mdickson@ecae.ac.ae

References

- Abdulla, F. (2007). *Emirati Women: Conceptions of Education and Employment*. In Soaring Beyond Boundaries, pp. 73-112. Brill/Sense Publishers
- Al Khoori, A. (2014). Breastfeeding should be a choice, not a legal obligation, say UAE mothers. *The National*, Retrieved from: <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/breastfeeding-should-be-a-choice-not-a-legal-obligation-say-uae-mothers>
- Al Qaazat, A. (2003). Education of Women in the Arab World. Cornell University Library available at on www.cornell.library.edu/colldev/mideast/awomeduc.htm
- Aryee, S., Fields, D. and Luk, V. (1999), A cross-cultural test of a model of the work-family interface, *Journal of Management*, 25(4), 491-512.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). A journey through adult student involvement on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs*, 10, 287-293.
- Augsburg, K., I. I. Claus, and K. Randeree. 2009. *Leadership and the Emirati Woman: Breaking the Glass Ceiling in the Arabian Gulf*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Bristol-Rhys, J. 2010. *Emirati Women: Generations of Change*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Crabtree, S. (2007). Culture, Gender and the influence of social change amongst Emirati families in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. 38(4), pp. 575-587.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2003). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dickson, M., & Tennant, L. (2019). Emirati University Student Mothers Post-Childbirth: Support Systems in the Home, *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 12:1, 88-105, DOI: 10.1080/19407882.2018.1533479
- Emirates College for Advanced Education (ECAE). (2016-17). *Undergraduate Student Handbook*. Retrieved from <https://portal.ecae.ac.ae/default.aspx>
- Green, K.E. & Smith, D. (2006). Change and continuity: Childbirth and parenting across three generations of women in the United Arab Emirates. *Child Care, Health and Development*, 33, 266-274
- Hijab, N. (1988), *Womanpower: The Arab Debate on Women at Work*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Khaleej Times, (August 28, 2016). It's one giant leap for Emirati women retrieved from <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/its-one-giant-leap-for-emirati-women>
- Hussey, J., & Hussey, R. (1997). *Business Research. A Practical guide for*

- undergraduate and postgraduate students*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). What matters to student success: A review of the literature? *Commissioned Report for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/kuh_team_report.pdf
- Mahaffey, B., Hungeford, G., & Sill, S. (2015). College Student Mother Needs at Regional Campuses: An Exploratory Study. *AURCO Journal*, 21, 105-115.
- (MOHESR, n.a) UAE Higher Education Factbook 2013/2014 (2013). *Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR): United Arab Emirates*, Patton, M. Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- (missing Patton (1987))
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. (2ndEd.) Newbury Park: Sage.
- Rizk, D., Nasser, M., Thomas, L., & Ezimokhai, M. (2005). Women's perceptions and experiences of childbirth in United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Perinatal Medicine*. Vol 29, 4, pp. 298-307, DOI: 10.1515/JPM.2001.043
- Rugh, A.B. (1985), "Women and work: strategies and choices in a lower-class quarter of Cairo", in Fernea, E.W. (Ed.), *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, pp. 273-88.
- Salem, O. (2011). Marriage comes first, say women. *The National*, 8 April.
- Salem, O. (January 21, 2014). FNC passes mandatory breastfeeding clause for Child Rights law, Retrieved from: <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/fnc-passes-mandatory-breastfeeding-clause-for-child-rights-law>
- Samier, E. (2015). Emirati women's higher educational leadership formation under globalization: culture, religion, politics, and the dialectics of modernization. *Gender and Education*, 27 (3), 239-254, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1028901>
- Saqr, S., Tennant, L. & Stringer, P. (2014). Perspectives of Married Women in Higher Education. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 2(1).
- Schleifer, A. (1996). *Motherhood in Islam*. Louisville, KY: Islamic Texts Society
- Sha'aban, B. (1996), "The status of women in Syria", in Sabbagh, S. (Ed.), *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, Olive Branch Press, New York, NY, pp. 54-61.
- Siebert, A. (2006). *Adult students need resilient, emotionally intelligent colleges*. Retrieved from <http://adultstudent.com/eds/articles/usingei.htm>.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Stringer, P., Saqr, S. & Tennant, L. (2014). Challenges and support factors of married Emirati

- students in teacher education. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, 2(8), 46-56.
- Tennant, L., Stringer, P. & Saqr, S. (2013). Motivation and Challenges of married Emirati students in Teacher Education. *International Review of Contemporary Learning Research*, 2 (2), 99-109.
- Tennant, L., Saqr, S., Stringer, P. (2014). Married Emirati Students Pursuing Teaching Careers from the perspective of their spouses. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 4(6).
- Thomas, J., Raynor, M., & Al-Marzooqi, A. (2012). Marital status and gender as predictors of undergraduate academic performance: United Arab Emirates context. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives* 9(2) Retrieved from <http://lthe.zu.ac.ae>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed.), Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- WHO, (2005), World Health Report: Make every mother and child count. Geneva: WHO Press.
- UNESCO. (2009). *Global education digest comparing education statistics across the world*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Zayed University. (2015-2016). *Zayed University Course Catalog*. Retrieved from http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/colleges/course_catalog.aspx

Of Immigration, Cosmopolitanism, and Diversity: Lost Identity and the Challenge of

Journal of Research
Women and Gender
Pages 96-109 44396-
Tatiana Prorokova, 2019

Prints and Permission
jrwg14@txstate.edu
Texas Digital Library:
<http://www.tdl.org>

Dr. Tatiana Prorokova

Abstract

Bringing together the problems of immigration, cosmopolitanism, and diversity, the article considers immigration as a powerful force of globalization. Examining Hiromi Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the article unwraps the intricate issue of immigration, focusing specifically on the lives of Japanese (and later, Japanese Canadian) women in Canada. Considering the well-known concept of the melting pot – that the novel overtly questions – the article demonstrates that the life of an immigrant even in cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse Western societies can turn into a personal and generational nightmare. The article pays close attention to the novel's technique of mixing two languages, i.e., English and Japanese, as well as two fonts, to demonstrate how the issue of otherness becomes twisted and how the immigrants turn into strangers both in their native culture and in the new one. To corroborate this idea, the article also considers some of the main problems for immigrants that the novel singles out, including new climate, food, traditions, as well as one's appearance, particularly when it is ethnically charged. Finally, the article examines the issue of otherness as a gendered problem, claiming that it is particularly hard for women to lead the life of an immigrant, preserve a specific culture, and be able to pass it on to further generations.

Keywords

immigration; diversity; cosmopolitanism; gender; identity; *Chorus of Mushrooms*

Introduction

Immigration is an old concept that describes the process of moving from one's home country or country of origin to another. Once moved to another place, one has to settle there, and adjust both culturally and linguistically. History knows multiples cases of successful and unsuccessful migration. The process of migration has also been imagined and reimagined in literary fiction and nonfiction. This article focuses on the Japanese Canadian author Hiromi Goto's 1994 novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* to discuss the problem of gender in particular but also race in migration. I closely examine the three female characters to unveil the novel's interpretation of migration as a gendered practice, commenting on the difficulties that women face once having chosen to migrate. I deal explicitly with the migration of Japanese women to Canada and their adaptation in the country, as described in *Chorus of Mushrooms*.

While the first largely recognized migration of Japanese people to Canada was in the 1870s (Hickman and Fukawa 2011: 5), Asian Canadian literature as such, including Japanese Canadian fiction that discusses migration, appeared only a century later (Ty 2016: 566). This is so primarily because, as Roy Miki pinpoints:

The existence of Asian in Canadian has always been a disturbance – a disarticulation that had to be managed originally as the 'Asiatic,' as the 'Oriental,' and subsequently as a sign of the multicultural, as the 'Visible Minority,' in order to sustain the figure of the citizen as the end of assimilation" (qtd. in Ty 2016: 566)

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 played a large role in constructing the image of the Asian as the Other in a number of countries, including

Canada. The bombing not only turned Canada and Japan into enemies, but it has also dramatically changed the attitudes of white Canadians to the large Japanese Canadian population that was immediately perceived and treated as the enemy, too (Hickman and Fukawa 2011: 5). The memory of the war for decades prevented Japanese Canadians from being viewed as decent members of society. Their migrant backgrounds were silenced. Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* is thus a culturally important text that contributes to the construction of the Japanese Canadian history of migration, tackling the problem from the perspectives of gender and race.

Depending on various factors, immigration can be both a positive and a negative experience: while some move to another country because it gives them a chance to get a better education or job, others have to flee their homeland because of war, persecution, disease, or poverty. In other words, while for some immigration is a choice, others are forced to become immigrants. I use *immigrants* as an umbrella term that describes all individuals, including refugees and asylum seekers, who move to another country, regardless of the reasons for their immigration. Individual attitudes about living in a foreign place differ depending on various factors. Moreover, whereas some move to a new place while still babies or young children, others move at an older age. Significantly, age is one of the key factors that facilitate or, on the contrary, complicate one's adjusting to new cultures, traditions, and languages. While these factors provide only a superficial overview of immigration, they give a hint at how complex such a social, political, and cultural phenomenon immigration is, since, at times, optimistic expectations turn into a harsh life in a foreign, if not fully alienated, place. And this does not necessarily depend on the

people who surround an immigrant. Frequently, it is immigrants' longing for such basic things as food, smells, sounds, and climate conditions that can make one's life a nightmare far away from the homeland.

Globalization has, to some extent, "opened" borders to many, turning immigration into an ordinary process. That surely does not mean that this process is an easy one: certainly, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and other factors play a part in the visa regimes and the possibilities of mobility around the world, especially so in the case of Western Europe and North America. Yet, to borrow from Peter S. Li, "[t]here were . . . international exchanges even before the age of globalization, but the speed, the scope, and the complexity of present-day cross-border interconnections mark the uniqueness of the global era" (2003: 2). It would be wrong to claim that globalization has somehow made immigration a happier or less painful *personal* experience. Immigration as an *intimate* phenomenon demands breaking the tight bonds with the homeland, becoming either partially or completely isolated from it. One might wonder then: How does one integrate into another society and a new country? How is the process more difficult if in a new place one is considered a racial minority? Does gender play a role in perceptions of immigrants? Is it harder for women to become immigrants? These are the questions that this article attempts to answer, closely engaging in the analysis of Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*.

Immigration and Diversity: The Twofold Nature of Today's Globalized World

The arrival of Western European colonialists to the New World has turned the Americas into the most overt places for immigration. Canada has been particularly proud of its immigration history, which, in turn, has largely influenced the people's values and traditions. The country has become a cherished destination for numerous immigrants as a place of freedom, democracy, financial promise, and a peaceful future.

Having accepted a large number of people with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, Canada, one might argue, has, in principle, become "postethnic" – the term that I borrow from David A. Hollinger (2000: 79). To specify, one might wonder to what extent the country preserved "the ethnos of [its] own" (Hollinger 2000: 79). Particularly in relation to Canada – the country that was initially populated by indigenous peoples of various tribal affiliations and later invaded by white European immigrants – this question seems both acute and disturbing. On the one hand, the white population has, indeed, become the majority on the continent during the times of colonization, having exterminated a large number of the Native American population. Yet a number of fugitive slaves as well as many slave descendants moved/fled/migrated to Canada, constructing a considerable part of the population. Moreover, the perception of certain parts of the North American continent, including Canada, as the Promise Land, has later encouraged migration to that land. Therefore, while such a phrase as *the Canadian nation*, indeed exists, it is quite problematic to deal with it from a cultural perspective, particularly when considering the multiple cultures that the country accommodates. The term arguably poses a danger of *universalism* that would never accept the diversified nature of the Canadian culture.

The concepts of immigration and diversity are crucial in North American socio-cultural discourses. In turn, the notions of cosmopolitanism and pluralism help better understand immigration and diversity. Hollinger contends that cosmopolitanism “is defined by . . . recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity” (2000: 84). The scholar continues: “Cosmopolitanism urges each individual and collective unit to absorb as much varied experience as it can, while retaining its capacity to advance its aims effectively. For cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact” (2000: 84). In turn, pluralism, according to Hollinger, prioritizes certain cultures within the population, prompting the existence and vitality of those ones that are particularly prominent. While for cosmopolitanism, Hollinger writes, it is the individual that matters, for pluralism the group and the community as such is the key (2000: 85-86). It is difficult to identify which of the two concepts, as interpreted by Hollinger, puts diversity at risk. In principle, I would argue that neither undermines diversity; rather they tackle the issue from slightly different perspectives, still acknowledging the idea of multiculturalism and rejecting universalism *per se*. Nevertheless, it seems that cosmopolitanism encompasses a larger group of people and thus appears to be less discriminatory. Globalization undoubtedly plays a crucial role in the formation of the idea of diversity when, to borrow from Homi K. Bhabha, “the articulation and enunciation of ‘a global or transnational imaginary and its “cosmopolitan subjectivities”’ [are enabled]” (qtd. in Gikandi 2011: 110).

When discussing immigration, the problem of definitions and terminology can be a very delicate issue. In the context of such a multicultural society as Canada, how does one define newcomers? That is,

do immigrants tacitly become a part of that society and are thus conceptualized as *us* or are they viewed as a separate social cell that differs from the main population (or perhaps also from those immigrants who arrived earlier) and thus should be addressed as *them*? I raise these questions because they are of primary importance to the novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* that will be analyzed further in this article, for in it, through the experiences of three generations of women, the author explores the difficulties and possibilities of adjusting to a new culture or preserving the culture of one’s ancestors while being an immigrant. For now, to clarify these questions, I refer to the concept of space that is relevant to any multicultural society. Masao Miyoshi insists that “in . . . immigrant and multiracial countr[ies] . . . multiculturalism is an obvious consensual choice, each group, minority or majority, demanding its own autonomous and independent, that is, incommensurable space” (2011: 137). Thus, in such countries, diversity is, indeed, a pivotal concept that does not harm or distort one’s cultural individuality; diversity accepts differences and never proposes limitations or commonality. Preserving diversity as the key cultural policy, however, as becomes clear, for example, in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, might be a hard task. The novel illustrates how some immigrants simply do not want to be considered as *them* but rather try hard to become the cultural majority (speaking the language without any accent, cooking meals that seem to be traditional in Canada, celebrating holidays that one has never celebrated in one’s home country, etc.). In turn, others refuse to do any of these and quickly become outcasts. Diversity thus, according to the novel, while a possible and desirable aim, is also difficult to achieve. Gender and age, as the novel suggests, and as I will illustrate later in this article, are two

significant issues to consider when discussing the problems of immigration and diversity.

Another perilous concept that emerges in this context is “totality” that, according to Miyoshi, “does not vanish when a nation is divided into ethnic or gender groups” (2011: 137). The scholar speculates about the division that one can make when dealing with various ethnic groups. Specifically, when talking about the Canadian nation, one can single out a group of Asian Canadians in it. However, it is unclear why one does not tend to specify any further: Does one talk about Japanese Canadians or Chinese Canadians? Is it a group of women or men? Are they heterosexual or homosexual? Finally, Miyoshi laments: “Where does the logic of difference stop? Doesn’t a particular individual remain as unrepresented within such categories as does a citizen of a totalized nation?” (2011: 137). To put it differently, totality – as a means of defining a nation or a specific group within that nation – can be both advantageous and disadvantageous for immigrants: on the one hand, it helps one be immediately considered as part of that nation, tacitly rewarding one with the features of that nation; yet, on the other hand, such a unification is a conspicuous lie that not only completely ruins the nature of diverse society but, in principle, rejects the ideas of individualism and cultural variety. The latter only intensifies the fear of being considered *them* that an immigrant might experience.

Since this article zeroes in on the story of three Japanese/Japanese Canadian women who are the protagonists in Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, it seems particularly useful to examine how the problem of immigration is treated specifically in Canada. Li claims there are two major ways to perceive immigrants. Firstly, immigrants

are “those who have immigrated to Canada, and who, as newcomers from different backgrounds with unequal individual abilities, have varying degrees of success in adapting to Canadian society” (2003: 38-39). Secondly, “the social and economic worth of immigrants can be gauged by immigrants’ performance in reference to native-born Canadians. Thus, what native-born Canadians do and think become the benchmarks to measure the success or failure of immigrants” (2003: 38-39). These two “assumptions,” as Li calls them, “influenc[e] how they [immigrants] are evaluated and ultimately how they are incorporated into Canadian society” (2003: 38-39). These ways of perceiving immigrants, however, can be applied to other immigrant societies, as they aptly pinpoint the major issues that surround those who start a new life in a foreign territory. A weightier problem that emerges in relation to immigrants in Canada is articulated in a so-called “folk version” of who an immigrant is (Li 2003: 44). The first immigrants came to Canada from France and England; yet their descendants no longer consider themselves immigrants. Immigrants from Asia, Africa, and some other non-European territories started to come to Canada only after the 1960s. Their non-whiteness was visually distinct to native-born Canadians and ultimately made the former “deemed to be too culturally and normatively removed from mainstream Canadians,” unlike, for example, immigrants from Great Britain or the United States who are apparently not even singled out by the collective consciousness as immigrants (Li 2003: 44).

Having introduced a new immigration policy in the 1960s, Canada took a path towards cultural and ethnic diversification. According to the report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration from 1994, “*Diversity is one*

of the Canada's great strengths . . .” (qtd. in Li 2003: 132; italics in original). One of the most illustrative proofs of that point is perhaps Canada's strong adherence to multiculturalism: this policy “emphasiz[es] ethnic differences . . . and encourag[es] immigrants to pursue separate ways rather than to embrace the Canadian way of life” (Li 2003: 133-134). It is worth mentioning that not every native-born Canadian approved of this proposition, which resulted in relatively harsh censure of the policy by some citizens (Li 2003: 133). Despite this drive for diversity, one can speak of a “dominant culture” that particularly strongly influences children who inevitably turn away from their native cultural practices while learning and exercising new ones (Li 2003: 136). Indeed, age, as it has already been mentioned above, is one of the key concepts to consider when examining such notions as *immigration* and *diversity*. This will be further underlined in the analysis of *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Additionally, the article will argue that, along with age, gender plays a significant role when dealing with the issues of immigration and one's lost or newly acquired identity.

The ‘Gendered’ Immigration in *Chorus of Mushrooms*

Is immigration gender-biased? Is it equally difficult (or, for that matter, easy) for men and women? To what extent does gender determine how individuals will integrate into a new culture? Nahla Abdo asserts: “The processes of migration and immigration are gender-based: the decision to immigrate, choice of destination, access to knowledge and/or finance are all typically male prerogatives” (1998: 41). And although this view is not entirely true

today considering the number of women who choose to become immigrants, it is clear that patriarchy has shaped the notion of immigration as the one that describes a male activity. In other words, for a long time, it was a man who was responsible for the financial security and physical safety of his (future) family, and, therefore, the choice to move to another country was made by a man. Immigration, however, as multiple examples demonstrate today (including *Chorus of Mushrooms*), is a problem that largely involves and affects women. Immigration is a feminist issue.

In this article I focus explicitly on heterosexual (single) women with children, because this is who the characters of *Chorus of Mushrooms* are. Yet while I exclude lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women from my analysis, I would like to note that for them immigration might be an even harder process. Immigration is evidently a feminist issue because of how and to what extent it affects women. It seems plausible to argue that a woman, and especially a woman with a child, is initially more vulnerable because if she moves to another place, she will be responsible not only for her own well-being but also for the well-being of her child (or her future child, if she chooses to have one). Indeed, according to the United Nations Population Fund (2018), women and girls make up half of all migrants; moreover, women choose to/have to migrate alone, being the breadwinners for themselves and their children. For women, an alien environment turns into an even harder place to exist in because she has to make sure that she, first, earns enough to put food on the table both for herself and her child, and, second, help her child adjust to a new place. Not being a citizen in a new country and thus initially being in a disadvantaged position, as well as being a woman, i.e., being already marginalized (indeed, Simone de

Beauvoir's interpretation of the woman's place in a patriarchal society as "the second sex" proposed in 1969 continues to be relevant today), it might be too difficult for her to exist as an immigrant. Moreover, migrant women more frequently than men become victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, they can be/become pregnant on their way to the country of destination or once they arrive, and they generally experience various health problems on the move and/or in another country (UNPF 2018). Thus, immigration is indeed a feminist issue, and gender plays an important role in the immigration question. Along with that, Margaret Abraham et al. pinpoint: "Women, people of color, im/migrants, and other disadvantaged and oppressed groups have been and remain instrumental in pointing out how citizenship produces and affects insiders and outsiders . . . and how it can work towards a society that respects and accommodates people of all origins" (2010: 12). Not being citizens, female immigrants constitute a group of people who can experience a hard life in the country of their choice.

Hiromi Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* is a particularly interesting case to examine when dealing with the problem of immigration from the perspective of gender. The novel tells a story of three generations of Japanese (and later Japanese Canadian) women – Naoe, who is frequently referred to as Obāchan, is the oldest of the heroines; Keiko (or Kay) is Naoe's daughter; and Muriel (or Murasaki) is Keiko's daughter – exclusively focusing on their struggle to adjust to their new lives in Canada as immigrants.

Theodore Goossen and Kinya Tsuruta underline the fact that "[f]or millennia, the Pacific Ocean was a virtually impassable barrier dividing the lands of East Asia from the North American

continent" (1988: 1); yet this is no longer true. Narratives like *Chorus of Mushrooms* aptly demonstrate how North America in general, and Canada in particular, has become the destination of some Japanese families. The reason for immigration for this particular family was World War II and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Having survived the war, Naoe finds a new home in Canada. The life away from the homeland is, however, not entirely idyllic for Naoe and her daughter.

The novel meditates upon the feelings of the female immigrants, inevitably dealing with the multifaceted nature of immigration. Naoe fails to adjust to the new environment as she, virtually, does not want to do so; Keiko, on the contrary, is very willing to become *Canadian*; whereas the youngest, Muriel, was born in Canada and is thus the most assimilated of the three. The novel chooses several trajectories to depict the failure to integrate or, on the contrary, the success to do so; specifically, it attempts to question the status of Canada as a domestic space for the three women through the strong focus on cultural and linguistic problems that emerge within the immigrant family, both challenging and celebrating the issues of cosmopolitanism and diversity.

Ann McClintock contends that "nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space" (qtd. in Perry 2016: 111). In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, it is exactly the problem of defining a domestic space in similar terms within one family that alienates the women from each other. Naoe's recluse is the most overt. One might argue that it is so because she moved to Canada being already a grown-up person: to break the ties with Japan is an impossible task for her. Having left her homeland not only because she wanted to but also – more significantly – because the post-war chaos in her

homeland made her do so, Naoe becomes metaphorically trapped within the Canadian borders, realizing that she does not belong to the new culture. Yet this happens not because Canada rejects her or her family, but rather because Naoe herself refuses to welcome the new culture and instead vehemently protects her Japanese cultural heritage. Immigration becomes a traumatic experience for this woman, not only because she finds herself far away from her homeland, but also because she realizes that her descendants will lose the cultural heritage of their ancestors, turning into cultural hybrids or forgetting about their Japanese belonging for good. Naoe is the only heroine in the novel who speaks Japanese, as if constantly reminding her daughter and granddaughter who they really are. To borrow from Ewa Bodal, “the loss of ancestral languages [is] key for the protagonists’ negotiating and fashioning their postcolonial identities” (2013: 237). The static life that Naoe leads in Canada is described by the heroine as follows:

Ahh, easy to lose track of days, of years, when a chair becomes an extension of your body. I wasn’t born in this chair, and I won’t die in it, that’s certain, but I have room enough to think here, and almost nothing can sneak past my eyes. I may be old, but I’m not blind. This chair can serve me still and I needn’t move at all. My words will rattle around me, I speak my words, speak my words, and I say them all out loud. I yell and sing and mutter and weep from my seat of power. (Goto 2014: 25)

Naoe creates a world of her own where she still exists as Japanese, both culturally and linguistically. The chair which she spends most of her days in symbolically stands for Canada, and although it “becomes an extension of [her] body,” i.e., she is, indeed,

not just Japanese but rather a *Japanese immigrant*, she insists on her cultural belonging, claiming that “I wasn’t born in this chair, and I won’t die in it,” thus underscoring the importance of cultural and linguistic heritage for her. The Japanese language turns into a means of reaching that balance between being an immigrant and remaining part of one’s native culture. At the same time, by not giving up her cultural belonging, Naoe manages to transform the place where she is into her “seat of power,” vividly illustrating the legitimate nature of diversity that she herself embodies.

Unlike her mother, Keiko enjoys her new life and considers herself Canadian. She tries hard to be part of the new culture and is even ready to change her name: “My name is Keiko, but please call me Kay” (Goto 2014: 193). Her desire to be integrated into the Canadian culture started immediately after the immigration:

When I decided to immigrate, I decided to be at home in my new country. You can’t be everything at once. It is too confusing for a child to juggle two cultures. Two sets of ideals. If you want a child to have a normal and accepted lifestyle, you have to live like everyone else. This has nothing to do with shame in one’s own culture, but about being sensible and realistic. If you live in Canada, you should live like a Canadian and that’s how I raised my own daughter. It’s very simple, really. (Goto 2014: 193)

Keiko is truly the only woman in the family who not only wants to be considered Canadian herself but who also tries to turn her other family members into such. For her, those immigrants who “always pine for the past” (Goto 2014: 193) are lost people, strangers on a foreign land, who came there by their own will but, in principle, always

want to leave. Keiko, on the contrary, finds it important to decide for yourself: either to go back to Japan or to stay in Canada and live the Canadian way of life. Having raised Muriel as Canadian, Keiko has clearly demonstrated the importance of belonging to only one culture (which is the dominant culture of the people in a specific country), depriving her own daughter of her ancestors' cultural heritage.

However, it is the youngest of all, and, for that matter, the most *Canadian* of all – Muriel – who seems to be most sensitive towards the delicate yet painful issue of lost identity. Naoe has never tried to adopt a Canadian identity; Keiko was eager to turn into a Canadian; in turn, Muriel was forced into becoming a culturally *new* person. Muriel laments that the choice of her mother to turn her into a Canadian and to teach her English instead of Japanese deprived her of any possibility to communicate with her grandmother. “I wasn’t given the chance to choose. I feel a lot of bitterness about how I was raised, how I was taught to behave. I had a lot of questions about my heritage, but they were never answered. The place where we lived didn’t foster cultural difference. It only had room for cultural integration” (Goto 2014: 193-194).

Muriel realizes that her family – “the only Japanese-Canadians for miles around” – somehow differ from the others in that “small prairie town,” when her school friend Patricia points out the “funny smell” in Muriel’s house (Goto 2014: 126, 126, 67). This smell that clearly distinguishes Muriel’s family from any other Canadian family in the town symbolically stands for the cultural difference of the immigrants, intensifying the fact that no matter how hard Muriel’s mother tries to be considered Canadian, she will never be one because she is different:

I [Muriel] was horrified. Something so insidious tattooed into the walls of our home, the upholstery in our car, the very pores in our skin. We had been contaminated without ever knowing. For all that Mom had done to cover up our Oriental tracks, she’d overlooked the one thing that people always unconsciously register in any encounter. We had been betrayed by what we smelled like. We had been betrayed by what we grew. (Goto 2014: 68)

The language that the author chooses to describe the shock that Muriel experiences finding out about her being different is crucial. The words “insidious,” “contaminated,” and “betrayed” are used to reinforce cultural differences as some polluting, poisonous, unhealthy, and very dangerous phenomena. The migrant family is identified as the Other, meaning not just being different but indeed being a threat to the *Canadian society*. Japanese culture is not seen as one of many other cultures but rather it is perceived as a disease. Pivotaly, this is a perception that not only is shared by Muriel’s Canadian friends, but that infiltrates Muriel’s mind too, making her believe that not fitting a certain cultural norm is embarrassing at least and a crime at most.

Being finally told by Canadians that Muriel is different, the girl is eager to find out more about her cultural heritage. Surprisingly, she finds support not in her mother, whom she speaks the same language to, but in her grandmother – the person who speaks the language that Muriel has never learned. She eventually adopts a new name – Murasaki – the one that her grandmother gives her. According to Pavlina Radia, one should view this process of renaming as following: “[T]he loss of belonging caused by immigration produces psychic, linguistic, and cultural

longing that evokes the need to covet the unnamed or missing whatever the cost” (2009: 193). The changing of her name and the fact that Muriel lives in peace with her Japanese heritage illustrates her being proud to consider herself *different*. Unlike her mother, she is never ashamed of her Asian roots and believes that hiding her heritage is not only impossible in *white* Canada but also unnecessary. Her cultural identity is not a crime, looking *different* is not a crime, speaking a foreign language is not a crime. Being the youngest and the most alienated from Japanese culture, Muriel teaches her grandmother and mother how to be an immigrant. Muriel’s attempt to cook a Japanese meal – the *tonkatsu* (which is also her Japanese family name) – for dinner is very symbolic in this context, as the meal, according to Donald Richie, “had divine, medical powers to ‘bring the diseased body back to life’” (qtd. in Radia 2009: 194). The *tonkatsu* not only resurrects Japanese identity in Muriel’s life, making her find out more about the traditions of Japan, but it also literally turns into a remedy for the family that has been rejecting their Japanese belonging for too long.

Goto deals with the problem of immigration, cosmopolitanism, and diversity not only by means of portraying the three Japanese women in Canada, paying close attention to their views and behavior, but she also attempts to present the language as the key aspect in an immigrant’s life. Bodal contends that “the particular language spoken . . . may serve as an important tool in shaping one’s view of the world” (2013: 235). It is, therefore, pivotal that, when presenting each heroine, Goto uses different languages and even fonts. Naoe is perhaps the most vivid example here, as she is the only one who speaks Japanese exclusively. The reader is never provided with a translation, which

intensifies the cultural and linguistic difference that Naoe personifies. It is interesting, however, that the Japanese characters are used very rarely in the novel; for the most part, the author transliterates the words, thus an English-speaking reader sees familiar letters but is never able to understand what the old woman talks about. Naoe’s case is particularly interesting to examine, for she is indeed the only character in the novel that explicitly rejects the new culture and attempts to preserve her Japanese cultural and linguistic heritage. Generally, a number of migrant and postcolonial literary narratives use native words albeit the texts’ main language which is English. Postcolonial studies scholars claim that “many postcolonial writers are trying to overturn the assumptions of cultural and racial inferiority imposed by the colonizers and foolishly accepted by the colonized. Therefore, nativization of the English language in postcolonial texts is a means of ‘teaching’ the colonizers that there is nothing disgraceful about the culture and traditions of the colonized” (Kehinde 2009: 76). In the context of migrant literature, the use of native words performs a similar function: these words that occasionally appear throughout the novel reinforce the validity of the Japanese language. One’s native language is not something shameful that migrants should get rid of, forget, or unlearn as soon as possible. On the contrary, it is a significant part of one’s native culture that remains a part of an immigrant’s life. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, including the words in the characters’ native language helps promote diversity; moreover, transliterating these words, while on the one hand may be interpreted as partial destruction of the language, is also a useful technique to make this language more comprehensible (at least in terms of reading) for English-

language speakers both in Canada and worldwide. Keiko, as it might already be clear, never uses Japanese words. Muriel's (un)familiarity with the new language is, however, commented through the usage of 'foreign' words several times. Once, while choosing an eggplant in a supermarket, she is asked by a local woman what "an eggplant" is called in her language; the woman obviously does not realize that 'Muriel's' language is English. It is even more problematic that, seeing an Asian-looking girl next to an aisle with Chinese ethnic food, the Canadian woman assumes that Muriel is Chinese, to which Muriel responds: "I don't speak Chinese" (Goto 2014: 97). The scene foregrounds racial discrimination that the descendants of Asian immigrants might experience in countries like Canada.

Another important scene takes place later, when Muriel goes to a special store to buy Japanese products. She gives a list of necessary products written by Muriel's grandmother to a shop assistant, saying: "I know what the words mean, but I have no idea what they are" (Goto 2014: 140). The cultural dissonance is apparent in this scene: while Muriel, indeed, comes closer to Japanese culture, learning new words, she discovers only the linguistic side of her ancestry. The true Japanese nature remains a mystery to her that she, living in Canada, will never be able to attain. Hence her request to help her with the shopping: she might have heard about the products that she is asked to buy, she might have even tried them as part of some meals, but she has never had to buy them, search for them on the shelves, cook something from them herself. In other words, she has never experienced this side of Japanese culture, having been born in Canada. Her grandmother and mother might have told her stories related to Japanese products but, until the moment Muriel had to go

shopping herself, those were indeed just stories.

Through Naoe, Keiko, and Muriel, Goto portrays archetypes of female immigrants, accurately accentuating numerous aspects of their lives. Goto presents three painful experiences. Naoe, in principle, never adjusts. It is crucial that she goes missing at the end of the novel, thus metaphorically showing that she, indeed, cannot live in a foreign country, pretending that she is part of that culture. Keiko so strongly wants to be Canadian that she almost turns into a parody, ready to reject who she is just to make sure that the others think of her as *us*. It is pivotal that Keiko is demoralized when she finds out that her mother – the woman who most of all reminds her of her homeland – is gone. Having lost Naoe, Keiko finally loses all attachments to Japan, which turns out to be a deeply traumatic experience for her. Indeed, despite her strong desire to be recognized as Canadian, she ultimately acknowledges the importance of her Japanese cultural heritage. Muriel becomes stuck between two cultures, realizing that she does not fully belong to any of them. While *Chorus of Mushrooms* understands the power of diversity, it reveals how difficult, and in some instances even impossible, it is for a society or its certain members to facilitate diversity. The novel focuses on numerous aspects that accompany immigration, revealing it as a traumatic process in many ways. A combination of various cultures can be beautiful on many levels, yet, as the novel demonstrates, an attempt to combine several cultures can be met with negativity by the country that accepts immigrants and is thus difficult for immigrants who try to build a new life in a new place, their descendants being continuously affected by these cultural intolerances and injustices.

Conclusion

In the novel, Goto writes: “There are a lot of sad immigrant stories” (2014: 108). And although this is undoubtedly true, the stories of Naoe, Keiko, and Muriel/Murasaki can hardly be described with the simple word *sad*. Through the three different stories about the members of one family, the novel attempts to illustrate a complex yet successful account of immigration. Clashing two strikingly different cultures and bringing them together in the lives of the three women, the novel celebrates diversity; it celebrates cultural differences and gives hope for every other person who chooses the difficult path of leaving their homeland and finding a new one.

In the end, it is important to address the issue of diversity as the one that is tightly connected to the problem of space – whether a geographical, linguistic, cultural, or personal one. Goto’s technique to create a cross-cultural setting in her novel contributes to a great extent to one’s understanding of the problems of immigration, diversity, and cosmopolitanism. The author comments on the choice of place/space in her narrative as follows:

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, I was utilizing a setting or background that I was very familiar with – my father does have a mushroom farm. What is very interesting about mushroom farming in Alberta is that you have to create such an alien environment on the prairies. The space is enclosed and the temperature has to be maintained as well as the humidity – which is ludicrous, especially in a prairie winter – so it was interesting for me as a writer to explore the implications of that sort of enclosed, “safe” environment,

within a broader, larger geography that could be perceived as hostile, which fed into a lot of the themes I was working with. (Goto 2002: 18)

Creating this “alien environment” for her Japanese heroines in Canada, the author underlines the differences between the two cultures and their polarities that eventually result in the hardships, misunderstandings, and, at times, despair in the lives of the three women. Yet while never imposing a connotation of *homeland* on the new environment (indeed, Japan remains the country of a special significance to each heroine), Goto reveals how this alien space can transform into a *safe* space for the three generations of immigrants. This space enables the women to feel *at home*, never forgetting who they really are. These complex and intricate issues entwine *Chorus of Mushrooms*, turning it into a story about loyalty – loyalty to one’s self, one’s culture, and one’s family – that ultimately respects and promotes diversity.

Address correspondence to:

Dr. Tatiana Prorokova, University of Vienna

Email: tatiana.prorokova@univie.ac.at

References

- Abdo, N. (1998). “Gender” is not a “dummy”: Research methods in immigration and refugee studies. In *Gendering Immigration/Integration: Policy Research Workshop Proceedings and a Selective Review Policy Research Literature 1987-1996*, Status of Women Canada, p. 41-50.
- Abraham, M. et al. (2010). Rethinking citizenship with women in focus. In M. Abraham et al. (Eds.) *Contours of Citizenship: Women, Diversity and Practices of Citizenship*, p. 1-21. Ashgate.

- Bodal, E. (2013). "A loss so fine it pierced my heart." Lost languages and cultural identity in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of mushrooms* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. *TransCanadiana. Polish Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue Polonaise d'Études Canadiennes*, The Peaceable Kingdom? Cultural and Language Communities in Canada and the Rule of Law/Le Royaume paisible? Relations entre les communautés culturelles et linguistiques du Canada et l'application de la loi, 6, 235-248.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1949, 2010). *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Books.
- Gikandi, S. (2011). Globalization and the claims of postcoloniality. In L. Connell and N. Marsh (Eds.) *Literature and Globalization: A Reader*, p. 109-120. Routledge.
- Goossen, T. & Tsuruta, K. (1988). Introduction: Nature and identity in Canadian and Japanese literature. In K. Tsuruta & T. Goossen (Eds.) *Nature and Identity in Canadian and Japanese Literature*, p. 1-18. University of Toronto – York University, Joint Center for Asia Pacific Studies.
- Goto, H. (2014). *Chorus of mushrooms*. 20th anniversary ed. NeWest Press.
- Goto, H. (2002). Cross-cultural creatures: Hiromi Goto brings magic into everyday life. *The Women's Review of Books*, 19.10 (11), 17-18.
- Hickman P., and M. Fukawa. (2011). *Righting Canada's Wrongs: Japanese Canadian Internment in the Second World War*. James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers.
- Hollinger, D. A. (2000). *Postethnic America: Beyond multiculturalism*. Basic Books.
- Kehinde, A. (2009). "English and the postcolonial writer's burden: Linguistic innovations in Femi Fatoba's *My 'Older' Father and Other Stories*." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 21, no. 1, 75-89.
- Li, P. S. (2003). *Destination Canada: Immigration debates and issues*. Oxford University Press.
- Miyoshi, M. (2011). Turn to the planet: Literature, diversity, and totality. In L. Connell & N. Marsh (Eds.) *Literature and Globalization: A Reader*, p. 132-139. Routledge.
- Perry, L. (2016). *The cultural politics of U.S. immigration: Gender, race, and media*. New York University Press.
- Radia, P. (2009). "The Missing Part" of the immigrant story: The phantom haunting of cultural mourning in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of mushrooms*. *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 84, 182-199.
- Ty, E. (2016). (East and Southeast) Asian Canadian literature: The strange and the familiar. In C. Sugars (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, p. 564-582. Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Population Fund. (2018). "Five reasons migration is a feminist issue." 9 April 2018. <https://www.unfpa.org/news/five-reasons-migration-feminist-issue>.