

Identity Politics, Consciousness Raising, and Visibility Politics

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Abstract

This chapter first describes the emergence of consciousness-raising, including differences among women. It then discusses collective identity, explaining the concept and describing activists' attempts to reconstruct collective identity as women and to determine how to practice their collective identity in daily life. Next, it discusses coming out and other forms of visibility politics, which aim to display collective identity and change conceptualizations of the group and its issues. Finally, the chapter explains the controversies and debates over identity politics and describe some of its contemporary manifestations. Identity politics” refers to organizing around the specific experience or perspective of a given group and to organizing that has identity visibility as a goal. Identity politics has, from its beginning, grappled with the question of differences within each identity group. For women’s movements, questions of the intersections between gender and race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions have been fundamental. Identity politics is often dismissed as divisive. In contrast, this chapter focuses on its origins and development in terms of intersectional feminist theory and the construction of collective identity, conceptualizing it as a social movement practice. To understand the breadth of identity and visibility organizing by women, the chapter discusses a range of women's movements, not just those that identify as feminist. Aimed less at policy and law than at culture and subjectivity, identity and visibility politics reflect an attempt to broaden the scope of social change.

Keywords: feminist, women’s movements, identity, identity politics, tactics, intersectional feminism

Introduction

“Identity politics” are widely invoked, as divisive, transformative, ineffectual, common, or obsolete. In fact, the basic idea that identity – both individuals’ sense of self and how groups are defined – is socially created and thus a necessary part of movements for social change is fundamental to many social movements. Women’s movements in particular often have organized around identity and pioneered many the tactics, organizational forms, and theories related to social change around identity. Feminists originated the term “consciousness raising,” which refers to a deliberate self-reconstruction of identity, thought, and feelings related to gender. The idea is that one’s inner self and “personal” experiences are a product of societal oppression; changing the individual is connected to changing society. This idea has spread broadly and given rise to diverse tactics aimed at proclaiming new versions of a group’s identity publicly in order to change both individuals and the world. While many feminist campaigns have used tactics like protest, lobbying, and other conventional forms of collective action, many campaigns instead (or also) have focused on reconstructing the collective identity of women, and on visibility tactics aimed at changing the beliefs and feelings of outside audiences.

“Identity politics” refers to organizing around the specific experience or perspective – or the collective identity, in sociological terms – of a given group as well as to organizing that has identity visibility as a goal. Identity politics has, from its beginning, grappled with the question of differences within each identity group. For women’s movements, questions of the intersections between gender and race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions have been fundamental. Understanding these intersections and how they have played out sometimes in separate organizing, sometimes in conflict and critique, and sometimes in coalition, is a central

focus of this chapter. Identity politics is often dismissed as divisive and overly-focused on the differences among subgroups. In contrast, understanding its origins and development in terms of intersectional feminist theory and the construction of collective identity, helps us see it as a social movement practice. Aimed less at policy and law than at culture and subjectivity, identity and visibility politics reflect an attempt to broaden the scope of social change.

In this chapter, I first describe the emergence of consciousness-raising, including differences among women. I then discuss collective identity, explaining the concept and describing activists' attempts to reconstruct collective identity as women and to determine how to practice their collective identity in daily life. Next, I discuss coming out and other forms of visibility politics, which aim to display collective identity and change conceptualizations of the group and its issues. Finally, I explain the controversies and debates over identity politics and describe some of its contemporary manifestations. To understand the breadth of identity and visibility organizing by women, I include a range of women's movements, not just those that identify as feminist, in this chapter.

Consciousness raising

Consciousness raising is the collective reconstruction of identity and consciousness, famously practiced in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and incorporated implicitly and explicitly into a wide range of movements. Consciousness raising entails reinterpreting one's individual experiences, seeing them as shaped by social forces and identifying as part of a group with shared experiences. In women's movements, it has typically occurred in small groups through mutual discussion. The phrase "the personal is political" stemmed from feminist consciousness raising in the 1960s and 1970s, summing up the idea that

individual problems, even those considered personal, are the product of larger social forces and therefore are political issues. Instead of blaming oneself and attempting to improve one's individual life, consciousness raising promotes collective action to address the social roots of women's circumstances. For participants, consciousness raising may produce changes in individual identity, emotional transformation, affiliation with collective identities, or participation in collective action.

The term and organized practice of consciousness raising emerged in the late 1960s, and was first made explicit by the group New York Radical Women which, as member Kathy Sarachild (1978:145) described, "hoped to learn about 'the whole gamut of women's lives, starting with the full reality of one's own'" (quoted in Keating 2005:87). After Sarachild presented a workshop about consciousness raising at a 1968 National Women's Liberation Conference, the practice spread rapidly, as activist women around the country met to talk about their experiences (Keating 2005). The groups proliferated; within a couple of years, consciousness raising or "rap" groups existed in virtually every area of the U.S. (Cassell 1977; Enke 2007; Rosen 2000). These early participants were mostly young, white, with previous experience in the New Left anti-war, civil rights, and student movements, and with at least some college education (Breines 2006; Evans 1980; Freeman 1973; Roth 2003). They were not coordinated, but rather were grassroots, local, and non-hierarchical by design (Brownmiller 1999; Cassell 1977; Enke 2007; Evans 1980; Freeman 1973; Rosen 2000; Roth 2003; Whittier 1995). As Drucilla Cornell (2000) wrote, "All those who came into feminist consciousness-raising groups were to be given a voice and heard with seriousness." Participants discussed experiences including not being taken seriously as activists in the New Left movements, sexual experiences, abortion, sexual assault, restrictive childhood gender socialization, discrimination

and sexual harassment in the workplace, body image, menstruation and pregnancy, medical treatment, and more. Discussing and analyzing gendered experiences, including those that are generally silenced, was emotionally transformative. As Cornell (2000:1034) wrote, “The frank discussion in these groups about everything from getting breasts to having periods, to living with pregnancy, to exploring our bodies, was clearly an effort to release ourselves from shame.”

Recognizing that many of their experiences were shared, participants also developed theory about the nature and causes of women’s subordination. This theory melded analysis of social institutions, culture, and power, with an account of how they shaped women’s experiences at the interpersonal and individual level (Cassell 1977; Keating 2005). Such theoretical insights have become widespread, for example, the idea that rape is an act of domination and control rather than sexual desire or sexual pleasure for the victim, and theory about the operation of gender socialization (Matthews 1994; Whittier 1995; Whittier 2009,).

Although consciousness raising began among primarily white and educated younger women veterans of the New Left, it spread to women of various ages and those with little prior political involvement (Freeman 1973). Its widespread appeal was one of the engines of the mass women’s liberation movement that grew during the late 1960s and 1970s. Married women, suburban women, mothers, housewives, and employed women all participated (Cassell 1977; Keating 2005). Despite this spread, the movement’s origins in white networks and the resulting political framework – emphasizing gender as primary, critiquing the family as oppressive, encouraging separation from men – meant that participants in many groups continued to be primarily white and middle class (Breines 2002). Critiques and separate consciousness raising efforts by women of color highlighted these issues. Separate organizing by white and women of color also partly reflected activists’ view that groups were primarily responsible for organizing

among their own demographic, that is, that white activists ought to be organizing whites, women organizing women, Black activists organizing in Black communities, and so forth (Roth 2004).

Women of color participated in consciousness raising groups that were sometimes mixed-race but often primarily made up of women of color, sometimes pan-ethnic and sometimes specifically organized by women of one racial/ethnic group. In fact, much organizing among Black, Latina, Native American, Asian American, and other feminists of color throughout the 1970s and 1980s had an overt consciousness-raising dimension, as women talked with each other about their experiences in both white-dominated feminist and black-dominated civil rights organizations, their similarities and differences across race and ethnicity, and the distinctive forms that racial and gender oppression took for them (Springer 2005). These groups produced recognition and organizing around shared racialized and gendered experiences. The Black feminist Combahee River Collective (1983) described its consciousness-raising component, writing, “In our consciousness-raising sessions... we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex.... We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before....” Another group, primarily made up of African American and Latina women, named themselves “Las Grenudas” (“the uncombed”) in recognition of the dictum against having natural, unstraightened hair and, by extension, the expectation that Latina women distance themselves from Blackness (Cornell 2000). That group, in Cornell’s (2000:1034) description, “...spent hours discussing the specificity of how we were femmed differently because race and class were integral to the mapping of femininity onto femaleness.” For the Combahee River Collective, for example, being “femmed differently” included the fact that “all of us, because we

were 'smart' had also been considered 'ugly,' i.e., 'smart-ugly.' 'Smart-ugly' crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives." Some of the reflections and theory that grew from such work were published in collections such as (see, e.g. Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1993; Moraga and Anzaldua 1984).

In addition to "organizing one's own," deliberately coalitional consciousness raising was viewed as a political act in itself, although not a replacement for specific and separate spaces for different groups. For example, Cricket Keating (2005:87) built on calls by many feminists of color, including Bernice Johnson Reagon (1998), Chandra Mohanty (1998), and Maria Lugones (2003) to argue for what she called "coalitional consciousness-building" as a means of "engendering solidarity across multiple lines of difference." Rather than emphasizing points of commonality among participants' experiences, coalitional consciousness-building would entail focus on points of difference, with an eye toward understanding how race, class, and other factors shape women's experiences and how a coalitional activism might emerge. Similarly, what Hill Collins (2000) calls "transversal politics" entails coalitions in which all participants are grounded in their own position and conscious of their differences.

The practice of consciousness raising and the notion of the personal as political animated feminist campaigns around wide-ranging issues including sexuality, abortion, education, parenting, sports, rape, and many more (Cassell 1977; Freeman 1973; Maier 2011; Whittier 1995, 2009). Although consciousness raising is often thought of as a practice limited to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and to informal organizations, it has found a home in more formal organizations and has continued in various forms up to the present. For example, Jo Reger (2002, 2004) documented how, during the 1990s, chapters of the National Organization for Women incorporated consciousness-raising into their activities, as a means of recruiting new

members and fostering emotional transformation and solidarity. Some men's groups, mainly those supportive of feminism, have also engaged in consciousness-raising, with a focus on rethinking masculinity (Connell 1993; Messner 1997, Schwalbe 1996). Reger (2012) also documents more informal consciousness-raising elements in some contemporary feminist organizations, particularly those in hostile environments. The Riot Grrrl and third wave strand of feminism in the 1990s also engaged in consciousness-raising through the sharing of experiences and the process of coming to identify one's personal problems as having political roots (Garrison 2000; Sowards and Renegar 2004) as well as a continued focus on intersectionality (Yu 2011). Zines, or hand-produced and distributed publications, were particularly important in this move (Bates and McHugh 2005; Schilt 2003). A similar process of semi-public consciousness-raising likely continues online, as discussed later in this chapter.

Although consciousness-raising refers to a particular practice of collective conversation and assessment of shared experience as a basis for feminist theorizing and action, it is closely related to processes of reconstructing what it means to be a woman that occurs more widely in women's movements. Consciousness raising is about reconstructing individual identity and coming to understand it in the context of a collective identity. I turn next to more general processes of collective identity construction in women's movements.

Collective Identity

Collective identity entails a sense of connection with others, beliefs about the nature of one's group and its place in society, and associated actions in daily life. Taylor and Whittier (1992) term these three main components of collective identity boundaries, consciousness, and the politicization of everyday life. Whereas social identity is an individual's sense of herself as a

member of social groups, such as woman, Latina, student, daughter, and so forth (Burke and Stets 2009; Stryker and Burke 2000), collective identity is a group's definition of themselves as a collectivity and entails shared beliefs, symbols, and rituals (Klandermans 2014). While individuals engage in identity verification processes, seeking out contexts or interactions that confirm their internal sense of self (Stets and Burke 2005), oppositional groups work to shape how they are seen by others as part of seeking to change their group's status (Bernstein 1997). Collective identities become politicized through power struggles, as groups define their shared grievances, assign blame for their position, and call for action (Klandermans 2014; Taylor and Whittier 1992). The construction and politicization of collective identity is important in promoting participation in protest (van Stekelenburg 2013). Collective identity is what the "identity" in identity politics refers to and making collective identity visible is at the core of visibility tactics.

Collective identity is not a simple reflection of a group's structural location, for example, its race and gender. It is an interpretation of that structural location or status that emerges from activism, conversation, experience, and reflection (Melucci 1985). Social movements work to define their constituency in their own terms, promoting that definition to the larger public and using it as a basis to critique existing definitions (Bernstein 1997). Groups present their collective identity publicly as a strategic attempt to frame their own collective identity as well as that of opponents (Duggan 2008). Overall, collective identity can be a goal in itself, can be strategically deployed publicly to advance other movement goals, and can promote mobilization (Bernstein 1997, Melucci 1985; Polletta and Jasper 2000; Whittier 2012). All of these aspects of collective identity have been important in women's movements.

Feminist collective identity varies by – and is contested over – sexuality, race, class, age, and other differences. From the 1910s through the 1950s, “feminism” was by and large a collective identity claimed by activists for women’s suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment (Buechler 1990; Giele 1995). These groups defined themselves as “women,” with little differentiation or recognition of differences of race and class. When the second wave women’s movement grew in the late 1960s, the first activists – mostly white, mostly educated, as discussed above – similarly tended to emphasize a “sisterhood” that bound women together through shared oppression. The collective identity “feminist” and the redefinition of “woman” that activists promoted was thus implicitly white and middle class.

By the late 1970s, feminists of color were producing clear statements of collective identity that emphasized the inseparability of race from gender. For example, in 1977 the Combahee River Collective (1983:274-5) wrote, in what became a classic statement, “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” For them, as for other feminists, social change required both internal and external transformation. As they wrote, “The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist.” As Roth (2003) and Breines (2002) show, white, Latina, and Black feminists understood themselves as distinct groups, effectively constructing different but related feminist collective identities. Working class feminists and other groups followed (Roth 2008). Intersectional collective identities emerged in the context of the growth of feminist organizations by and for Black, Latina, Native American, Asian American, Jewish, working-class, and other distinct groups of

women, as well as in the context of sometimes bitter disputes over racism and classism in White-majority feminist groups (Smith 1983; Springer 2005). Understanding collective identity in intersectional terms, these thinkers and activists also influenced some white feminists to develop collective identities centered around anti-racism and an effort toward multi-racial feminism (Evans 2015; Thompson 2002).

Different collective identities rested on different *boundaries*, or definitions of who is part of the group. Who is a “feminist,” are “black feminists” distinct from “socialist feminists” or “liberal feminists?” How is the group “woman” defined, and can it be considered a unified group that shares meaningful similarities? These collective identities also grew from and developed different kinds of *consciousness*, or theorizing and beliefs about what the characteristics of the group are, how it has been oppressed, and what needs to be done to change its lot. For example, for Black and multiracial feminists (among others), being a “feminist” entails a commitment to anti-racism, and feminists without such a commitment could be considered less than fully feminist (Hill Collins 2000; Springer 2005; Thompson 2002).

In addition to boundaries and consciousness, collective identity also has implications for practices in daily life (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Adopting a politicized collective identity often entails attempting to live a life more consistent with one’s beliefs. Participants in women’s movements report everything from adopting feminist fashion (Reger 2012), egalitarian relationship forms, parenting practices aimed at raising non-sexist children (Risman 1998), and entering nontraditional jobs or seeking paid work that also promotes social change (Whittier 1995), among other things. Some feminists adopt a presentation of self that deliberately deviates from the norms of conventional femininity, such as not removing body hair, avoiding high heeled shoes or clothing that accentuates the body, and cultivating physical strength and a self-

confident style of movement (McCaughey 1997; Whittier 1995). Others consciously reclaim some aspects of conventional femininity, such as wearing makeup, traditional feminine crafts like knitting, or embracing mothering, and seek to re-signify them as powerful rather than subordinate, or as for the benefit of the individual or other women, rather than the male gaze (Stein 1997). Of course, participants may also engage in more conventional forms of collective action.

Because collective identity is an interpretation of a group's commonality and grows from interaction among participants, it changes over time and is shaped by context. One tension emerges because many groups want both to deconstruct the barriers that separate them from the mainstream and simultaneously to organize around their distinctness as a group. For example, Gamson (1995:391) shows that queer activists sought to break down the idea of sexual identity as essentialist but also to police the boundaries of "queer," for example by debating the inclusion of bisexuals. As he writes, the dilemma springs from the fact that "fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power." Broad (2002:241) documents a similar dilemma for transgender activists, who engaged in both "processes of collective identity construction and deconstruction." Similarly, Ghaziani (2008) shows ongoing dissent within LGBT organizers about which groups ought to be included under their rubric and what their position should be. Some younger, more recent organizers, Ghaziani (2011) shows in a study of college students, are instead claiming what he calls "post-gay" collective identities under phrases like "pride," instead of enumerating specific groups that are part of that collective. Reger (2012) similarly shows that for contemporary feminists in liberal locales, a distinctly feminist collective identity has declined, in favor of collective identities that assume or include feminism but are centered around commitment to other issues (such as anti-racist or transgender activism) or

around “articulated” identities that connect feminism with other causes (whether LGBT, anti-racism, or environmentalism). Overall, these dilemmas are over whether the group is similar to or different from others. Activists can more easily convey either sameness or difference to external audiences; attempting to convey both aspects of collective identity is more difficult (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008:8). Similarly, when internal movement audiences or participants are more varied, the “work” of constructing a collective identity that can incorporate both commonalities and differences is more difficult (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008:8).

Most broad collective identities (“feminist,” “environmentalist,” “LGBT”) are in fact internally diverse, since broad social movements are fundamentally coalitions among diverse organizations and individuals (Rochon and Meyer 1997; VanDyke and McCammon 2010). They therefore require the identity work that Einwohner, Reger, and Myers (2008) identify and that feminist activists have called for historically, as discussed above. Some collective identities, such as “multiracial feminist” (Thompson 2002) make this internal diversity more explicit than others. Anna Carasthesis (2013:941) argues that “conceptualizing identities as in fact coalitions, as complex, internally heterogeneous unities” is a means of advancing movement organizing. Similarly, Ghaziani argues that “dissent” in movements pays “dividends,” in the form of helping activists to articulate otherwise-unspoken values and goals. This parallels the calls to coalitional consciousness building (Keating 2005) discussed earlier.

Like consciousness raising, the construction and public display of collective identity can be a movement goal in itself, for example, changing the dominant view of what it means to be a woman (Bernstein 1997). It can also be a tactic, an attempt to produce social change, as in the coming out and visibility campaigns discussed next.

Coming Out and Visibility Politics

Visibility tactics include “coming out,” social movement art, and media campaigns. Many collective actions also have a component of visibility politics, or collective coming out, such as gay pride parades. Contemporary examples include campaigns around sexual assault on campus, “slutwalks,” and immigrant rights activism. Like coming out, other forms of visibility politics attempt to produce change for participants and others by making the group’s collective identity and point of view publicly visible. Less overtly instrumental than some strategies, visibility strategies aim to change culture, but can also have policy goals. In this section, I will first give an overview of coming out as a form of identity and visibility politics, and then discuss other forms of visibility politics.

Coming out entails the disclosure of silenced or politicized identities (rape survivor, queer, person with AIDS, person who has had an abortion) in daily life or in public events such as speak outs. Disclosing a stigmatized identity publicly can powerfully shift people’s identities both emotionally and cognitively, and can help change onlookers’ beliefs about the group (Whittier 2012). As an identity strategy, coming out aims to change how individuals perceive and feel about their identities, as well as changing cultural views of the group, or, ultimately, changing institutions and policy.

Coming out as a conscious strategy began in the lesbian and gay movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the idea that feeling and displaying pride in one’s identity was widespread among social movements at that time, including, for example Black Power and feminist consciousness raising work. Coming out at the individual level has become widespread, as in the steadily increasing wave of LGBT people who have come out to family and friends over the past 40 years. Encouraged by activists and events like National Coming Out Day, LGBT

people's increasing openness about their identity has produced major changes in attitudes and policies toward homosexuality (Whittier forthcoming). Women's movements have also used individual disclosures in daily life of stigmatized experiences such as having had an abortion, been sexually assaulted, and having experienced postpartum depression as a means of shifting opinion on these topics (Taylor 1996; Whittier 2009).

Coming out also occurs at a collective level, through events like speak outs and at some demonstrations, in which participants publicly proclaim their membership in a group and recount their experiences. For example, Take Back the Night marches against violence against women often feature a rally at which speakers describe their experiences of sexual assault (Whittier 1995). To Tell the Truth is a similar event for survivors of child sexual abuse, in which some locales feature public rallies and others speak outs for smaller audiences (Whittier 2012). Similar speak outs have occurred by women who have had abortions, people who have experienced the subtle expressions of racism, transphobia, homophobia, or sexism in daily life that are termed "microaggressions," and undocumented immigrants (Terriquez forthcoming). For example, Harvard students started a campaign in which students of color posed with placards recounting racist statements made to them, such as "Having an opinion does not make me an angry black woman" (I Too Am Harvard 2015; New 2015).

Political art, including visual art, theater, and music, is another important form of visibility politics (Adams 2013). Theater, visual arts, music, and writing have coalesced around major progressive social movements, including the Communist, Left, and labor (Lieberman 1989, Isaac 2009), the Black arts movement (Collins 2006), the feminist arts movement (Collins 2006; Eder, Staggenborg, and Sudderth 1995; Lippard 1984), and AIDS activism, particularly ACT UP (Crimp 1988; Krouse 1993; Gould 2009). In women's movements, activist art includes

poetry, writing, and visual art published in newsletters, online, and through independent presses; musical or theatrical performances at conferences or in local communities; visual expression in arts shows at conferences, local spaces like coffee shops, or public galleries. Movement art that uses a visibility strategy often aims to depict the group and its experiences – particularly its oppression. It is often produced by laypeople rather than trained artists. For example, the movement against child sexual abuse used songs, poetry, and visual art depicted the experience of abuse, the emotions felt by children and adult survivors, the brutality of offenders, or the indifference or cruelty of other adults. In addition to individual performances, collective public art projects are common. For example, the Clothesline Project holds T-shirts depicting experiences of abuse and violence painted by visitors to the exhibit (Whittier 2012). Much activist art aims to break the artist's own silence and bring visibility to the issue, presenting the movement's analysis of its issue and reflecting members' consciousness and collective identity. For example, when activists against sexual assault talk about "bearing witness," they emphasize the ways that silence and stigma make rape and child sexual abuse possible and imply that sexual abuse could not continue if it is made visible (Whittier 2012).

Visibility politics are not always successful, even in gaining access to the mainstream. Within movement contexts, activist art can present "the collective's view of events free from the censorship of dominant culture" (Eyerman 2002:447). If activist art gains wider distribution, it can spread the movement's point of view to the general culture. However, the diffusion of activist art may entail the watering down of its content. Artistic presentations that are more culturally resonant, which are generally those that are less challenging, have greater access to mainstream outlets (Adams 2005; Johnston and Taylor 2008). For example, Johnston and Taylor (2008) show that the radical challenges to beauty standards made by a local theater troupe could

reach only a small audience, while the much milder expansion of bodily norms by the Dove advertising campaign reached a very wide audience.

Visual representations of collective identity can aim to make both the issue and affected individuals visible and can be a form of coming out. For example, AIDS activists in ACT UP created eye-catching and provocative posters and campaigns such as brightly-colored posters and stickers with slogans such as ACT UP's famous inverted triangle and "Silence = Death." The Women's Health Action Mobilization grew out of ACT UP's women's caucus to use similar tactics for reproductive rights and women's health (Morgan 2002). Activists against child sexual abuse created similar images, with colorful stickers stating "Proud Survivor" and other slogans. At one demonstration, activists plastered their bodies with these stickers, proclaiming their individual and collective identity and ensuring visibility (Whittier 2009). Here, art enables coming out as individuals displayed their identities and allegiance to a collective identity in hopes of producing change in observers and in themselves.

Besides art, many protests, demonstrations and other collective actions have a significant visibility component. Protest can bring people who share a collective identity together in public to reinforce a sense of commonality, work through differences (Ghaziani 2008), present a particular image of the group, and illustrate what Tilly (2004) called its worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Gay pride parades are the classic example of this. Protests or vigils that bear witness to collective violence have been used by activists against police violence, as well as of anti-war and human rights (Whittier 2012). Taylor, et al. (2009) show that attempts by same-sex couples to receive marriage licenses and public same-sex weddings themselves were not simply about personal relationships, but were strategic attempts to influence law and policy on same-sex marriage through making individuals, relationships, and the issue publicly visible in

a dramatic way. Like other visibility politics, collective action around marriage was about “strategic claims-making,” not simply self-expression, and sparked similar protests in other locales (Bernstein and Taylor 2013).

Women’s movement organizing around sexual violence has resurged since 2013, with highly visible campaigns against sexual assault on college campuses and a rape culture that promotes and routinizes sexual violence against women. This organizing, like earlier organizing on the issue, uses visibility strategies such as speak-outs and demonstrations in which some participants display an identity as survivors. For example, during the 2014-15 academic year, an activist against sexual assault at Columbia University designed an art project in which she carried her dorm mattress around campus to dramatize her own sexual assault and the university’s failure to punish the alleged assailant (New 2015); she and others formed a group called “No Red Tape” and “Carry that Weight” to advocate for more effective institutional responses. Activists at other campuses wore red tape or carried their own mattresses or pillows to demonstrate support and become visible themselves. Marches against sexual violence, a long-standing feature of women’s movements, also took a new form in 2011 after a feminist group in Toronto, responding to a police officer’s comment that women’s slutty clothing and behavior were to blame for inciting rape, organized a “slutwalk” to challenge the idea that women’s behavior could justify rape. The protest form spread rapidly around the U.S. and, indeed, worldwide, as marches in which some activists dressed in underwear or scrawled “slut” across their bodies to dramatize the problems of victim-blaming and the sexual double standard (Reger 2014). Like earlier forms of visibility and identity politics, some women of color criticized the slutwalk for defining the problem in terms of white women’s experiences and for a perceived

“reclaiming” of the identity “slut” that was not possible for women of color, for whom sexual deviance and profiling as prostitutes has been central to their devaluation (Reger 2014).

For participants, coming out individually or collectively or participating in other kinds of visibility politics can be transformative emotionally. Britte and Heise (2000) see the shift from shame to pride as the key dynamic in identity politics. Gould (2009) similarly finds the emotional transformation of shame key to AIDS activism. Participants in speak outs about child sexual abuse also talk about their effect in reducing shame (Whittier 2009). Participants in consciousness raising groups transformed anger or hopelessness into a sense of efficacy (Reger 2004). Such emotional transformations can strengthen collective identity as well as participants’ level of involvement in activism.

At the same time, differences within the social movement in participants’ level of comfort “coming out” as survivors of abuse, in specific experiences, and in intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, mean that visibility does not always strengthen collective identity. The emphasis on individual “truths” can also heighten internal differences within the movement, potentially weakening collective identity or decreasing solidarity. In addition, as Lee and Lingo (2011) show, activists do not agree on whether art is effective in promoting mobilization or garnering support, and thus they may not use arts-based strategies regularly. These differences of opinion are found among activists in relation to other kinds of visibility strategies, with some viewing visibility politics as ineffective and favoring a more instrumental focus on political goals. Some of these differences of opinion are reflected in the conflicts over identity politics, discussed in the next section.

Identity Politics and its Controversies

Identity-based and visibility politics have been influential in recruitment and solidarity for women's movements, as well as in shaping larger cultural change. But they have also been controversial and defined in various ways (Bernstein 2005). As Cressida Hayes (2014) puts it, identity politics entails, "the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, one transforms one's own sense of self and community." The phrase "identity politics" itself may have originated in the Combahee River Collective (1983:274-5), which wrote in its classic 1977 statement, "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves...." The ethos of "organizing one's own" (Roth 2003), which reflected differences and tensions over race and sexuality in feminism, contributed to the growth in the late 1970s and early 1980s of schisms and separate groups for women of color, lesbians, and other identity categories (see Enke 2007; Springer 2005; Whittier 1995). The idea that affected people were best equipped to understand and organize around their own experiences, that a group's shared experiences and social location were an important basis for organizing, and that non-group members might be allies but should not attempt to speak for or direct others was widespread in the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, and has persisted into the present.

Scholars of social movements writing about identity-based movements have also used the phrase identity politics, generally to refer to a range of "status-based movements" that are

organized around categories other than class that are “externally imposed and [form] part of the basis for grievances” (Bernstein 2005). Some scholars have focused on culturally expressive tactics used by identity-based movements (e.g. Echols 1989; Kauffman 1990; Taylor, et. al 2009), and others on the apparently novel case of non-class based movements (Bernstein 2005). Armstrong (2002) defines an “identity political logic” that aims to “overcome alienation through creating, expressing and affirming collective identities” rather than aiming at policy or economic change (Bernstein 2005:62). But although scholars of social movements have sought to identify distinctive features of identity based movements, they often identified features that exist to greater or lesser extent in most movements, such as the construction of collective identity, challenges to how the group is defined by those in power, and the incorporation of expressive or cultural tactics (Bernstein 1997; Rupp and Taylor 2003). The term “identity politics,” then, is more useful for understanding a strand of activism that has influenced a wide range of movements, and for understanding the conflicts that have gathered around identity practices. I will next discuss these conflicts in greater detail.

While some activists called their own work identity politics, as in the Combahee River Collective Statement, the phrase has been most widely used as a negative description. Identity politics came under criticism by other scholars and activists as overly emphasizing “ideological purity” (Ryan 1992), cultural politics (Brown 1995; Echols 1989), prescribing narrow political standards for daily life and sexual practices, separatism, and alienating potential allies. These criticisms came from both the left and the right. Critics from the women’s movement and other progressive movements used the phrase to decry various aspects of identity-based movements, and critics from the right used it to complain about all efforts to focus on inequalities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other “identity groups.” As Nancy Fraser (1997:113, quoted in

Bernstein 2005) wrote, “the expression ‘identity politics’ is increasingly used as a derogatory synonym for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism.” Here, I focus mainly on the critiques from feminists, which reflect disagreements about the proper goals, tactics, and priorities of women’s movements.

Feminist critics have been concerned about excessive focus on “personal expression and self-transformation” and culture at the expense of confronting institutions and power relations (Bernstein 2005). Wendy Brown (1995) has argued that identity politics promotes a politics of victimization and injury that is ultimately depoliticizing. Similarly, feminists who take a Marxist or neo-Marxist approach argue that identity politics focuses on group recognition rather than the redistribution of resources and power (Bernstein 2005; Fraser 1997; Hayes 2014). Activists and scholars writing about the women’s movement have concurred, describing a descent into cultural politics, with a focus on internal community dynamics, subcultural music and social events, and sexuality (Whittier 1995). Alice Echols (1989), in an influential narrative, dubbed this strand “cultural feminism,” with the implication that it was a retreat from a truly challenging radical feminism into an internally-focused and ultimately apolitical celebration of women’s supposed differences from men. Barbara Ryan (1992) argued that identity politics, and especially the focus on politicizing daily life and cultural expression, led to demands that every aspect of feminists’ lives be consistent with their politics, and that those who dissented or whose lives diverged were purged from the movement; she singled out feminists of color for their challenges to white women, and lesbians for their challenges to heterosexual women. Among lesbians, conflicts over politically appropriate forms of sexual practice erupted in the late 1970s and persist to the present (Reger 2014; Rubin 2011; Vance 1984). The idea of political correctness, which refers to an attempt to bring behavior into alignment with political ideals, can also be a

means of criticizing apparently imperfect or inconsistent behavior and can contribute to factionalism.

In contrast, others argue that, rather than factionalism, efforts by lesbians, women of color, and others to shape more specific agendas and organizations was a response to the falsely universalizing definitions of women and women's issues that grew from the consciousness raising tradition's tendency to generalize from the experiences of a homogeneous group of women. In this view, organizing around intersecting identities is not only necessary, but positive. Further, involvement by outsiders to the movement's collective identity has been promoted by some groups, with an "ally" identity developing as a way of signaling support and a measure of insider status that recognizes and legitimizes the idea that those who directly experience a particular form of oppression have a privileged position in a given movement. For example, Myers (2008) shows how heterosexual supporters of LGB movements both support and challenge an identity politics approach to organizing around sexual identity through constructing an identity as allies.

Another point of disagreement about identity politics is whether a group's cultural and identity differences from the mainstream are socially constructed, the result of differential treatment, or are essential, the outgrowth of some innate inclination. For critics like those discussed above, attempts to create and celebrate cultural expressions of womanhood came far too close to suggesting that women's positive traits (like empathy, nurturing, egalitarianism) are biologically-determined, which they believed undermined the argument for feminism (Echols 1989). Indeed, many women's movements, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, military family activists for peace, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina have relied on women's status as mothers to justify their influence, in what is termed maternalist politics

(Fisher 1989; Ferree and Mueller 2004; Leitz 2011). Bernstein (2005) and Phelan (1989) argue, in contrast, that many groups employ a “strategic essentialism,” using essentialist language to make claims for rights, without embracing biological determinism. In addition to women’s movements, these debates have been particularly acute around LGBT politics, in which a strand that views sexual identity as innate or fixed – and views that claim as the most politically pragmatic and effective – clashes with a strand that emphasizes non-normative sexuality of all kinds as “queer,” rather than essential differences according to sexual object choice (Walters 2004). Emerging from the activist group Queer Nation, this anti-essentialist and anti-identitarian view has also been reflected in academic queer theory (Berlant and Warner 1995; Seidman 1996; Valocchi 2005). This view reflects a reluctance to pursue group recognition, believing that such recognition inevitably entails assimilation and the reification of group definitions; instead, a queer approach celebrates differences from the mainstream without linking those differences to fixed identity categories. For theorists who take a Foucauldian or post-modern understanding of power, social control occurs through the construction and naturalization of categories (Bernstein 2005; Phelan 1989; Seidman 1996). Organizing to undo identity categories is potentially contradictory, as it requires simultaneously recognizing and critiquing the importance of the category, what Gamson (1995) called the “queer dilemma.” This dilemma, along with the question of gender essentialism, has been widely discussed within the women’s movement.

In sum, critiques of identity politics come from several different directions. While some critiques argue that a focus on identity and culture fails to take account of material and structural conditions and is thus ineffective or apolitical, particularly for women who face racism or class oppression (Christensen 1997), others see identity politics as essentialist, as falsely universalizing women without regard to differences of race and class, as promoting factionalism

and divisiveness, or even as reinforcing the very forms of oppression it seeks to overcome. Ultimately, the debates over identity politics are between activists with different views about political priorities, the relative importance of class compared to other social cleavages, the impact of changing culture and subjectivity compared to demanding economic and legal redress, and the relationship between political commitments and practices of daily life.

Despite the controversy, identity and visibility politics have remained common and appealing to women's movement and other activists (Reger 2014). They have been highly prevalent in online feminism, whether on Tumblr where detailed discussions of identity and its variations are widespread, or on feminist news and blog sites, which feature extensive coverage of issues related to specific identity groups as well as online commentary parsing the privileges and experiences of specific groups (Keller 2012). "Hashtag feminism," and other forms of online organizing, also take a visibility approach. For example, young women's organizing against rape culture uses social media to make the issue visible and to build connections (Crossley 2015; Khoja-Moolji 2015; Rentschler 2014; Rodino-Colocino 2014). New identity categories, such as transgender women, have gained visibility and support through online as well as offline organizing. Online identity politics, like earlier and offline formations, enables the construction and expression of a politicized identity and also produces conflict over which expressions should be celebrated or condemned. There has been considerable criticism of the resulting "call-out culture" (Ahmad 2015), suggesting the persistence, albeit in new form, of longstanding disagreements among activists about the importance of solidarity vs. separatism, change focusing on language and culture vs. redistribution, and the validity of new identities that criticize earlier identity formations. Further, the interactive nature of social media may produce a form of

consciousness-raising, in which participants compare experiences and use them as a basis for theorizing and for action.

More conventional forms of identity politics also continue. The large women's movement organizations that have existed for decades, such as the National Organization for Women, and similarly large formal organizations in other movements, such as the National LGBTQ Task Force, continue to use caucuses or mandated board representation by gender, race, and other categories. The Occupy movement also saw identity based organizing (Hurvitz and Taylor forthcoming). In response to charges of sexism and white dominance, caucuses of various groups formed within Occupy encampments (Larson 2011). In sum, a wide range of social movement practices remain oriented around collective identity and visibility.

Conclusion

In sum, women's movements have used a wide range of visibility and identity tactics as they sought to deploy their oppositional collective identities to transform the larger culture. Visibility politics are important for understanding women's movements for several reasons. First, the feminist movement's legacy of consciousness-raising and negotiation of collective identities around gender, race, class and sexuality has influenced coming out and visibility politics in a wide range of movements. Visibility politics are thus partly an outcome of feminist organizing. Second, women are important participants in the visibility politics used by many contemporary movements. They most likely constitute a majority among DREAMers (Terriquez forthcoming), outspoken survivors of child abuse (Whittier 2009), and at least some of the other movements using visibility tactics. An intersectional approach to gender helps us see movements organized around other issues as "women's movements." Third, visibility politics build on norms

and practices often traditionally associated with women, such as personal self-disclosure, discussion and display of emotion, and close bonds with others (Taylor 1996). They are thus a gendered strategy.

Coming out and visibility strategies also have significant limitations, which are related to the critiques of identity politics. Identity strategies, by elevating the perspective and role of members of particular groups, limit the role of people outside that identity category (Whittier 2012). “Allies” or supporters can be important and valued, but by definition are outsiders, with the assumption that their perspective is inevitably different from the core of the movement. Second, and also at the core of the critique of identity politics, is the problem of the power of existing definitions of the group (Gamson 1995). If a group is only distinguished from the mainstream by the fact that it is constructed as subordinate or even pathological – constructions that apply to women, people of color, LGBT people, and many others – does organizing around that identity category actually produce social change, or simply reinforce the category’s existence? Activists, even those who attempt otherwise, can easily be cast in terms of the dominant definitions of the category. Finally, visibility can produce only some kinds of social change. If a movement relies on coming out, visibility, and identity strategies exclusively or in all situations, its effectiveness can be reduced.

Nevertheless, consciousness, visibility, and identity strategies are a central part of women’s movements. Consciousness-raising has transformed both individuals’ sense of themselves and produced new insights into the experiences of diverse groups of women. Collective identity disclosure and other visibility strategies can affect the identities and emotions of participants, potential recruits, and outsiders. Like any other collective action, identity

strategies are limited by cultural and political constraints, but their impact on women's movements is undeniable.

There are several fruitful directions to develop in further research. How do identity, consciousness, and visibility strategies and processes in women's movements compare to those in other movements? How are they shaped by gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and nation? How have they changed over time, and how do they compare cross-nationally? What kinds of outcomes are associated with these strategies, for individual participants and for movement goals? Theoretically, how can we integrate consciousness, visibility, and identity strategies into broader theories of social movements? How are they connected to emotion, collective identity, political opportunities, organizational dynamics, and to other strategies? These are relatively under-studied topics, and there is considerable opportunity for future researchers to develop both theoretical and empirical knowledge.

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