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Mutuality without alliance: The role of community in becoming a college student feminist

Abstract:

Feminism has made a resurgence in the last several years, especially on college campuses (Davies, 2011). Actions to address sexual violence and other forms of 'lad culture' (Phipps, 2014) are growing in visibility, as young feminists come together to challenge patriarchal norms on campuses. While feminist actions are being documented in the mainstream media, little is known about how feminist community functions to solidify individuals' commitment to liberatory action. The meaning-making process of college-age feminists in the United States and United Kingdom is relevant to the ongoing question of how social change movements function and flourish. This study chronicled 33 college feminists in the US and UK describing how feminist communities on campus served to foster stronger commitment to feminism and greater confidence in advocating for feminist values and viewpoints. Participants' experiences suggest that feminist community matters, and that both difference and unity circulate to shape action and belief. Connections to Rowe's (2008) theory of feminist powerlines, forged through consciousness of one's differential power and privilege and productive engagement with difference was notably absent in these narratives, signaling nascent and thus incomplete encounters with cross-coalitional alliance. (186 words)

**Introduction**

“Feminism is back, and we want to finish the revolution”-- so heralded a recent headline from *The Guardian* (Davies, 2011). For gender equity activists, the notion that feminism died is laughable; still, its death knell was resolutely signaled by some during the economic upturn of the late 20th century (Bellafante, 1998), while others instead characterized this period as a time of dormancy (Taylor, 1989). Over the course of the last decade, the political movement for women’s empowerment, particularly as practiced by feminists under age 25, has increased significantly in visibility as movements to advance women’s safety on the streets (Mendes, 2015), to promote women’s agency in the workplace (Coslett & Baxter, 2014; Martin, 2016), and to both validate and trouble women’s roles as mothers and primary caretakers (Menon, 2016; Smith, 2008) have surfaced and gained momentum. College-age feminists, particularly, are benefiting from raised profiles as they lead the charge on holding their colleges accountable for responses to sexual violence (Dick & Ziering, 2016). Importantly, some have leveraged scholarly critique of the ways in which “new feminist visibilities” (Gill, 2016) in mainstream media “fail to speak to or connect with contemporary feminism” (p610). Nonetheless, an uptick in scholarly research on young feminist lives (e.g., Guest, 2016; Harris, 2007; Author A & Author B, 2014; Author B & Author A, 2015) has also signaled renewed interest in the experiences of budding gender change activists, and the critical nature of responding to the concerns of, and capturing the so-called ‘fourth wave,’ in action.

In this particular moment in history, social activism once again appears to have a strong presence on college campuses, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom (Ellin, 2016; Pearce, 2014; Wong, 2015). College campuses have proven to be especially fruitful sites for activist engagement, strategy development, and visibility, and provide a relatively hospitable ‘testing ground’ for those coming to voice and power (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Author B, Author A, and XXXX, 2016). Feminist identity development appears to be especially catalyzed by the college experience (Moradi, Subich, & Phillips, 2007; Vaccaro, 2009; Author B & Author A, 2015; Author A & Author B, 2014). For this reason, continuing empirical exploration of the experiences and meaning-making process of college-age feminists in the United States and United Kingdom is relevant to the ongoing question of how social change movements function and flourish. In this study, we examined the ways that participants’ engagement in feminist community nurtures their feminist politics. Participants in this study, all current or recently-graduated university students, were actively involved with other feminists, whether through a campus based women’s center, a feminist student organization, or wider feminist networks. Our examination sought to determine how these communities function to sustain and support feminism, to provide both a holding space and a catalyzing force. We also endeavored to understand, in full dimensionality, the “enduring quality of [feminist] alliances” (Rowe, 2008, p. 5), as they circulate and solidify during university.

**Conceptual framework for understanding feminist community**

In order to examine the role of community in defining and refining the process of feminist becoming (Author A & Author B, 2014) among college students, it is critical to first explore how the extant literature has framed this relationship. Feminist theorists across different disciplines have long asserted that women’s individual, moral, and cognitive growth and development happens frequently *in relationship,* maintaining the importance of relationships to the full flourishing of women. Developmental theories focusing on women’s identity posit that emergent gender consciousness happens in stages, wherein greater levels of complexity are arrived at through a series of crises followed by successful resolution (Josselson, 1973, 1987). Josselson asserted that women seek relationship not as a means to an end, but for the intrinsic value of the relationship itself. The process of values discernment that deeply engaging in relationship yields is inherently meaningful to young women, as they invest energy in trying on new personas and ways of being and relating to others (Josselson, 1973).

 Prominent theories of the moral development of women have also been grounded in constructs of relationship. Gilligan’s (1982, 1993) work provided evidence that women make decisions in concert with the perceived impact they will have on others in their lives, and that a responsibility toward caring for these others often surfaces as paramount for them, rather than a concern for justice (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) as the highest-order moral factor. Critics of Gilligan (Senchuk 1990; Walker 1984) argue that essentializing women’s nature as being selfless and other-oriented obscures the diverse realities and structural forces shaping women’s lives and value systems. A salient question raised by her work is whether the relationship-focus is a *result* of gendered realities (where femininity is constructed as more relationship-focused as result of women’s greater involvement in caring) or a *cause* of gendered realities (i.e. women are more involved in caring because they are fundamentally more relationship-oriented).

 Gilligan’s ideas were heavily informed by Jean Baker-Miller’s theory of women’s psychological transformation (1976) known as Relational-Cultural Theory [RCT]. Avowedly feminist in its premise, RCT advanced the growth-inducing merits of interconnectedness, asserting that women’s well-being is fostered through valuing, fostering, and cultivating relationships, specifically characterized by mutuality. Mutuality is assured by one’s impulse to increase connection, to do so with “energy and zest” (p. 31), and to engage in ways of relating that increase one’s knowledge of self and others. Perhaps most germane to the study of young feminist activism, Baker-Miller (1991) suggested such “being in relation” leads to a desire to take action within and outside the relationship, and an overall increased sense of self-worth. About RCT, Baker-Miller’s co-theorist Judith V. Jordan (1997) declared that “we are suggesting that the deepest sense of one’s being is continuously formed in connection with others..marked by..increasing empathic responsiveness in the context of interpersonal mutuality” (p.15). Knowledge acquisition and idea contestation is central to the practice of communal social action. Relatedly, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986) found that women’s cognitive development flourishes in community, and that connected knowing-- knowing alongside and in relation to others’ perspectives, experiences, and positions -- solidifies the knower’s sense of confidence, clarity and commitment.

Scholars have explored the individual psychologies of those who join social movements (Duncan, 1999, 2016; Dutt and Grabe, 2014; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996), and the strong sense of community which can generate activist networks and collective identities (Taylor et al, 1992; Taylor, 1989). However, while theorists have asserted the value of exploring various facets and manifestations of ‘relationship’ for evidence of their developmental and growth-fostering powers, larger questions about the outcomes, benefits, or challenges that are produced through engagement in solidarity propelled by a shared cause have gone largely unanswered. This study thus employs an avowedly feminist sociological lens to understanding the role that community plays in fostering feminist agency and commitment, and theorizes from the work of scholars who have actively grounded feminist identity in notions of connection, alliance, and fealty.

**Theorising feminist alliances**

In order to make meaning of the narratives of the young feminists we interviewed, we employed the conceptualization of power lines (Rowe, 2008) to explore the connections between and among feminists of different nationalities, races, sexualities, and other social locations in this study. Aimee Carillo Rowe’s 2008 work, addressing the intricacies of transracial feminist alliance in academe, surfaced these connections in their complexity. Both literal and symbolic, Rowe defined power lines as “manmade circuits through which people are joined and power is transmitted….[doing] the invisible work of enabling the messy connectivity of lives” (p.1). Rowe continues, “feminist alliances are also power lines that connect us to one another and to circuits of power. We build alliances to link our lives together, to transmit power, and potentially for the purpose of transforming power” (p. 1). According to Rowe, feminist alliances create a special kind of spark, and belie a tension inherent in the relationships of women of color and white women, exposing the ways that power circulates unevenly between them. The act of redistributing power through alliance raises inevitable questions: “with whom do we build alliance and for what purpose? What kind of power is transmitted through those connections, and whose interests are served?” (Rowe, 2008, p. 2).

 Not content to locate such questions in one-dimensional analysis of alliance, Rowe insisted upon bringing the relational into the picture. Rowe names the “politics of love” as an essential site for theorizing about alliance (p.3). Love in this sense is not a sentimental feeling, but an active commitment, in terms of “who we are becoming….[and] whose lives matter to us” (p.3). This mattering is negotiated through the nexus of *belonging,* via“the selves we are creating as a function of where we place our bodies and with whom we build our affective ties” (p.3). It is crucial to note that Rowe’s theorizing is grounded in the realities of transracial feminist alliance among academics, and thus differs significantly in context and focus from this study of feminist students. However, her ideas are rich with insight about feminist community, its power, and possible peril, and thus offer meaning for this study.

Rowe distinguished alliance from coalition, noting that alliance requires commitment that is “longer standing, deeper, and built upon more trusting political relationships” (Albrecht and Brewer, as cited in Rowe, 2008, p.5). The young feminists in this study are forming coalitions of closeness and camaraderie, yet their readiness for and evidence of building alliances was conspicuously absent. In and through their commitments, they express *belonging* to feminism and to one another. Yet in order to forge truly transformative feminist blocs, Rowe’s analysis suggests that we must be willing to mine the depths of privilege and power in academic feminism, among those in different disciplinary locations and with different degrees of privilege based on race. Toward understanding how community functions to support social change, Rowe noted, “how we insert ourselves in community produces a range of options not only for what kinds of experience become possible, but also how we come to understand these experiences...and how we seek to transform, challenge, and resist the conditions which produce [community]” (p.10-11). It is our contention that the individual narratives in this study provide the grist for understanding more deeply how the collective functions to imbue contemporary feminism with its potency, as well as to reveal its limits.

Our analysis, then, centers on considering how community advances or solidifies commitment to feminism among college feminists. While psychosocial theories (Baker-Miller, 1984; Gilligan, 1982,1993; Jordan, 1997; Josselson, 1973, 1987) offer important insights about the ways that relationship serves to catalyze women’s gendered consciousness, further sociological analysis of how community operates to support and constitute feminism is needed. Our research question is, how is community important in young women’s developing feminist consciousness? What are the contours of feminist relationships, for college students, and how do they inform our understanding of the state of feminism in current practice? Our data revealed that community is singularly important in young women’s feminism, emergent feminist consciousness, and in their enactment of feminist movement (hooks, 2000). Their narratives revealed that community isn't simply a random coalescence of like-minded individuals, but, as Rowe (2008) asserted, is the shifting, embodied ground on/through? which a social movement, its practices, theories, strategies, are constituted. At the same time, our analysis also revealed that lack of engagement with differences of power and privilege served to limit young feminists’ ability to be truly in alliance with one another. Rowe’s conception of feminist alliance thus offers a useful framework for critical analysis of the meaning-making narratives of college feminists. Analysis of how this constitution takes place, or does not, is crucial, especially as these alliances function to interrupt or reproduce racial and other inequalities in educational contexts.

**Methodology**

This qualitative interview study explored several aspects of feminist becoming, belonging and activism at university: the participants’ experiences of gender-based inequality, how they came to identify as feminist, the significant influences and deterrents to embracing feminism, their experiences of university feminist communities and their engagement in feminist activism. Interviews provide a useful data collection method to observe the respondents’ meaning-making (Seidman, 2005) of the contemporary gender order and engagements with feminism.

Given that we were examining a particular phenomenon, our sample was purposive (Patton, 1990), drawn primarily from existing networks of feminist students, including feminist societies[i] (in the UK) and women’s centres (in the US). Sampling started with outreach to feminist organizations, visibly activist students, and at feminist events, and additional participants were found through snowball sampling (Creswell, 1998). Each face-to-face interview was conducted by one of the first two authors in 2012 with students on degree programmes running between 2008 and 2013. While those who participate in higher education are of a particularly privileged and socially mobile type, there are also significant differences *between* institutions in terms of the social demographics of the student population. To account for this and to ensure diverse perspectives, we made certain to include women of mixed class backgrounds (working, middle, and affluent), ethnicities (women of color, recent immigrants, and white non-immigrant women), and institutional types (public and private, and ‘elite’ and non-elite). Most participants were not studying women’s studies degrees, and were varied in their fields of study, including humanities, sciences, and social sciences.

*Table 1: Demographics of sample group*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Location and number of interviews*** | ***Race/Ethnicity*** | ***Age*** | ***University level*** | ***Sexual Orientation*** |
| UK: 18 | White: 17Black African: 1 | 19-21yrs: 622-26yrs:12 | Undergraduate: 9Recent graduate: 2Masters: 2PhD: 5 | Heterosexual:11Bisexual: 3Lesbian: 3Prefer not to say:1 |
| US: 15 | White: 10African-American: 1Asian American: 1Latina: 2Biracial: 1 | 19-21yrs:1222-26yrs: 3 | Undergraduate: 14Recent graduate: 1 | Heterosexual: 10Bisexual: 2Lesbian: 1Queer: 2 |

Regarding gender identity, while we recruited college student feminists of any gender for this study, all participants self-identified as cisgender women.

***Analytical Approach***

The analytical process started with transcribing, an admittedly laborious process but one in which the first seeds of analysis emerge. Transcribing enables reflection upon the content of the interviews, what was said – and how it was said – as well as what was not said (see Fine & Weis, 2003, for an analysis of silence in discourse).

 The experience of reading transcribed data on the page is markedly different from hearing the audio recording, with all its inflections, emphases, laughter, and pauses. The transcribing process allowed us to hear again the voices of our respondents as they expressed their enthusiasm, frustrations, energy, uncertainties and confusions about their experiences of coming to and being a part of feminism.

From these initial reflections, we took a thematic approach to analysis of the interview data. We read - and re-read - all the transcripts, and then, through a series of discussions about emerging themes, supported by our ongoing review of the relevant literature, developed a set of 14 broad analytical codes.

To ensure inter-researcher reliability and to increase our familiarity with the dataset, each interviewer coded the interviews she had not conducted. This process also alerted us to similarities and differences in the UK and US sample groups. We each read the resulting documents several times, annotated the text with our observations and recorded the themes that seemed to stand out, as well as the tensions and contradictions in the data. Alongside this process, we continued to have frequent conversations to discuss our emerging analysis and understanding of the data, in light of the existing relevant scholarship.

Throughout this analysis, we were influenced by Mason’s (2011) ‘facet methodology.’ Drawing on this approach, we conceived of our data as a cut gemstone with many facets which ‘refract and intensify light, taking up the background, and creating flashes of depth and colour as well as patches of shadow’ (p.75). We found this approach, ‘with its emphasis on the significance of flashes of insight rather than the production of ‘“maximum data” of a descriptive kind’ (p.75) encouraged us to use our ‘skill, inventiveness, creativity, insight and imagination’ (p. 77) as researchers and scholars, interweaving our growing familiarity with the existing scholarship and with our participants’ accounts of their experiences, lives and reflections. Instead of simply identifying the most common themes expressed in our data, our analysis centered on moments where participants offered particularly clear or insightful reflection about their experiences of gender politics on campus, revealing the contours of young women’s experiences of feminist communities.

**Findings**

Analysis of data from the 33 participants in this study yielded two specific themes regarding the role of community in supporting feminist consciousness and collective action: 1) the yearning for like-minded others, and 2) encountering diversity without difference. Participants’ embrace of others with whom they shared some core values, while only superficially negotiating ideological and identity differences, pointed to a nascent, rather than seasoned, feminist identification and which revealed insights into some of the faultlines inherent in contemporary feminism.

***Yearning for like-minded others***

A key aspect of the search for feminist community in this study was the desire to make connections with ‘like-minded’ people. For some this is a powerful driver, akin to the yearning Rowe (2008: 57) observed amongst women of color in the academy as they seek alliances with one another: “each yearning arises from the author’s desire to constitute her humanity.” In the ways outlined below, young women in this study ‘yearned’ for others like them in order (partly) to validate their own subjectivity, including their feminist politics. For example, some value the sense that being in community with others lifts them out of the loneliness of being a solitary feminist, as Heather[ii] (white, heterosexual, US) described:

In high school I had a couple of close friends who were feminist and really passionate about it, but other than that, it was just....all the stuff I was doing was on my own. Kind of figuring it out, not really knowing what's going on. And in college it is awesome to have people who are, to know so many people who feel the same way about these things as me, and are interested in different aspects of feminism than I am and different aspects of oppression than I am. It is really, really cool and totally expanding my life and my knowledge.

The experience of being the solitary “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2010: 50) whose unusual perspective forces her to question her own sanity is countered when a feminist community is encountered. It is the experience of being in feminist community with others-- “people with whom you have strategic interests in common” (Rowe 2008: 141) -- that brings a dynamic energy and enthusiasm to their feminism. Patriarchal heteronormative cultures render college feminists killjoys: the community of other feminists provides a valuable alternative, a “safe haven.” This can be a personal safe haven, where connections and dialogue with others helps one make sense of one’s own circumstances including the deeply personal burdens of patriarchy. Candice, (biracial, heterosexual, US) said:

 I used to have an eating disorder in high school and during my first year here, it was really hard. And hanging out with more feminists and feminism and reading the Body Project or stuff like that, made me realize that it’s not something that I did and that it isn’t a personal failing. And also just to have a lot of people who were very confident with themselves and no one really talked about their bodies and I used to be – I’m quitting this year, but I was on the Hip Hop team and constantly bodies are brought up. It’s such – it’s amazing how when that talk is removed, how much better you feel.

Feminist community can also provide an intellectual safe haven, where like-minded individuals share and develop a critical analysis. This sharing is an important antidote to the ‘depressing’ experience of being surrounded by the “wallpaper of sexism” (removed for peer review, 2015); feminist communities can share and engender more agentic responses. Speaking to what feminist community provides her, Lucy (white, lesbian, UK), expressed:

...sometimes it's happiness and other times it's, when you see some of the stuff that is going on in the world, it's very depressing. So it's very nice to have some kind of safe haven where you can actually, although you're sort of moaning about all these issues you feel there are people who are being positive and saying ‘right, we do need to address this’ and trying to do things about this. Yeah, trying to keep a positive attitude and not get overwhelmed.

The emotional bolster provided by being in community was stabilizing as well as energizing. For women of color in our sample, to reduce the experience of racialized oppression, identifying communities of solidarity and support was also crucial, “arisi[ing] out of necessity and survival” (Rowe, 2008, p. 56). Vanessa, a black, heterosexual woman from the US speaking specifically to her experience in a group for black women at her university, named this community as a source of reducing the significant isolation she experienced in society as well as in her campus culture:

I understood that there was this necessity to have sort of protective structures and I think I started seeing, really seeing the absence of like women in, and especially black women, in important spaces. So like you go to the mall and you look around at all of the ads on the store windows, and not one of them is a black woman. And it's like, okay, so this represents beauty, but beauty in the absence of everything that I know as myself. The question that the black women's group is trying to answer is, how do we put ourselves in those spaces? and make spaces for ourselves? so I think that's the realization I sort of came to and that took a long time.

The safe haven also provided an alternative to the non-feminist, destructive relationships between women, as Laura (white, heterosexual, UK), commented:

So it's been finding women that I can relate to and who aren't going to grind me down in a popularity contest has been a revelation. That's something that I've really enjoyed about [the feminist society].

Friendship emerged as a significant part of community forged by student feminists in this study. Although close friendships with other feminists were neither essential nor inevitable, they were described as a valued outcome of feminist communities, as well as a reason for seeking feminist communities in the first place. Krissy (white, bisexual, US) described:

Being part of the women’s center here, I have a whole built in group of friends, and that’s not something…I mean I guess I might have met all of those people without being in the feminist club, but I don’t think so, I think that caring about the same things and working on them together is really what makes us connected and what makes me feel part of that world.

Participating in activism played an important role in solidifying feminist friendship for women in our study. As Emma (white, heterosexual, UK) described:

I’d just moved to Newcastle and I didn't really have a group of friends so I met these girls and then I suppose the turning point in my friendships with them was the Slut Walk -- and it was a day like this, and we went and we made banners up at Heaton Park, and we had a barbecue and it was just really nice and really cool and we were just hanging out and talking with people who didn't care that I questioned things, and valued that in fact.

Perhaps most poignantly, participants in this study thoughtfully reflected upon the critical nature of sensing and experiencing connection with others that transcended friendship, and took on a quality of deep caring. The notion of both caring for and being cared for (Noddings, 1984) emanating from participants’ narratives seemed to bolster their sense of connection to other feminists and to feminist movement as well. This shifts the focus of feminist consciousness from one’s own interests to being “radically inclined toward others, toward the communities to which we belong” (Rowe 2008: 3). As Maggie, a white heterosexual woman from the US opined:

The [women’s] center is definitely my community, at least around this stuff. It is so reassuring because I guess it is just really nice to realize that you are not alone, you are not crazy for thinking that there are things that are wrong with this world... It’s helpful, like you said, to be in a group of people who share your values, because religious people have their religion and they all share similar values and faith or whatever. It’s like that, only I feel we are, I don’t know, we are contributing to something greater.

These young women’s accounts reveal that their feminist communities are rooted in the importance of seeing and being seen. Life in a patriarchal world renders them the feminist killjoy, on the margins of mainstream campus culture, struggling to find a way to thrive without denying their feminist sensibility or yearning for different cultures in which they can live authentically. In feminist communities, they find others with whom they share intrinsic values. Aspects of themselves that fit awkwardly on campus and may be silenced are, in these communities, validated and acknowledged. This mutual recognition creates a valuable connection - a connection to others, and to a part of oneself that is not seen or nurtured in their everyday life at university.

While symbiosis (a sense of caring in community) was important to feminists in our study, we are conscious of the pitfalls of “alliances forged through the reproduction of sameness” (Rowe 2008: p. 140). A vital feature of feminist communities is their potential to foster community across diversity or their resistance to doing so, as we discuss (and later problematize) in the next sections.

***Encountering diversity without difference***

Throughout our analysis we were struck by the extent to which participants in our study expressed that they found deep meaning and value in connecting with others committed to feminism, often across facets of difference such as social location, academic field of study, and ideological diversity. They experienced a strengthening of themselves as feminists, and through such encounters, forged a stronger sense of self in relationship to others. Participants recognized their identities as meaningful but also malleable; as Alma (a bisexual US Latina) noted:

I definitely gained a community, I gained people who thought similar as I did, our views might clash sometimes but we have each other to learn from, and especially since I work in the women and gender studies department, there are people I can learn from because there is still so much I have to learn, so much I still have to analyze while building my identity as a feminist. Because your identity does...I feel like your identity is there, but through the years it builds up, and then you change and you mold it into something else, and it's always something that is changing and you might have a root to it but it is always changing.

Diana (white/Jewish, heterosexual, US) also described the way that the diversity of the community encountered in her women’s center contributed to the expansiveness of thinking and theorizing, in contrast to stereotypes of feminists as rigid and dogmatic (e.g., Patai and Koertge 1994; Zerilli 2005). Core values were cited as the ‘glue’ that enabled communities to flourish despite differences. Diana observed the power of this diversity as follows:

People in this community, in the women's center community, have such -- come from so many different backgrounds and have so many different perspectives, that I really value this community for opening my eyes to ways of thinking and ways of being that I hadn't been exposed to personally before. So that's one thing I really value, and another is just the openness of discussion here, and the idea with… that in this community, I have found that people are okay with not agreeing. But knowing that sort of… I guess maybe not agreeing on every issue, but knowing that the -- again, going back to the values I guess -- that the values are the same, the core values are there and the ways those are interpreted can become different and that's okay. … I think values aren't -- aren't necessarily as broad of a range, and I think that's a good thing in some ways. I guess can be limiting in other ways.

Without expanding further on these limits, Diana signaled the tension inherent in the potentially unifying force of shared values. Yet if alliance relies on sameness of identity or experience, it by definition excludes or delimits alliance with ‘unlike’ others (Rowe 2008). The notion of safe space was frequently invoked: Ashley (white, heterosexual, US) expanded on this by stating:

I feel like community is just a safe open space for discussion about anything, even if it is heterodox, you can talk about it. People might push back but they are going to help you work through it, and they feel like that is something good for them to do because, not because they are obligated but because you're in a community and I would do the same thing for them…. So there's a sense of like, mutual aid in a way. In community, for me.

Time and again respondents referred to the value of challenging and being challenged in a constructive, supportive environment, where disagreements were not based on personal dislike but on legitimate debate, where dialogue can explore difference and facilitate development and growth as a feminist. Krissy expressed how exploration of these differences was valuable in her work with other feminists to create a campus sexual assault response center:

I think that my politics have gotten clearer, or more activist, with the women’s center community people, they are the ones who often were willing to challenge me, and no one in my life challenges me in a way that feels good to me but they did and it did. I don’t think it changed my politics per se but just made them feel more real to me, more important, and maybe a bit more urgent.

Participants valued having these discussions in private, among other feminists, where they could work out and clarify their positions away from public scrutiny. Engaging with difference did not always lead to uniformity of thought, but revealed the importance of relationship even in disagreement, as described by Julie, a white, bisexual UK participant:

So we had a discussion in the feminist society a little while ago about pornography. A lot of women were saying that they like to watch pornography but they realise it's wrong (laughs) and this kind of thing...I think it's really important to get together with a group of people and really thrash it out even if you end up having totally different ideas, for me that's really important to be always thinking about things. And also just friendships, just meeting really really nice people that you've got a lot in common with.

This comment, among others, signaled to us a common absence we noted in our data: that while they encountered diversity of both idea and identity, they rarely, if ever, commented on grappling with *difference*, particularly of privilege, power, and social location. In the discussion section, we will further problematize the uncritical valuation of ‘diversity’ expressed by our participants, for whom this tension was tolerable, even productive. In-group differences were reported as mostly productive and nurturing, but were absent of consideration of the ways in which differences of position and privilege serve to delimit the access of minoritized feminists to power, a reckoning so crucial to forming authentic alliance (Rowe, 2008). Feminists in this study used feminist spaces and collectives to try on, try out, and refine ways of thinking without the necessary confrontation ?with matters of difference in agency and access. Even in discord, a resolute sense of calm surfaced in their testimonies, belying greater concerns. As Claire (white, heterosexual, UK) noted,

We can all self-identify with certain key goals like equality between the genders, there will be certain things we disagree on and I don't think that’s any bad thing, in fact I think it's a welcome arena for discussion. Not everyone can agree on the same things when you've got a movement that’s supposed to represent half the world.

These positive depictions of difference contrast with Rowe’s analysis of transracial alliances amongst feminist academics where difference and challenge were more problematic experiences. Rowe (2008) noted that “[t]he negative valence placed on these relationships, framed as ‘challenging’ or ‘difficult,’ implies that such experiences are to be avoided” (p. 151) when writing of the ways that white women resist engagement with difference, as it would unsettle their racial privilege. Rowe argued that an alternative approach would be to frame these experiences and challenges “not as a deficit, but as a resource” (p.151) which can develop learning, understanding alliances. In the discussion to follow, we consider this paradox within our study in more depth.

Additionally, there were some distinctive ways in which they discussed disagreements which might reflect a more complex approach to diversity. A common linguistic trait was to refer to disagreement in feminist communities and quickly assure the interviewer with phrases such as Katie’s (white heterosexual UK), who said “it's fine, it's not an argument you know.” We could interpret this tendency to indicate that *most* disagreements are experienced as negative, or that there is a negative cultural value put upon disagreements. That might reflect the paucity of the wider intellectual scene, especially but not only on social media, whereby personal criticism and ad hominem invective are increasingly replacing reasoned and reasonable public debate (see Jane 2014; removed for peer review, 2017 in press), for discussions of online misogyny). It might also reflect a gendering of disagreement and debate. In societies in which “women’s voices are not being heard in the public sphere; more than that... an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species” (Beard, 2015:11), disagreement, conflict and disputatious dialogue may be uncomfortable experiences for many women. Helen (white, heterosexual, UK) experienced this discomfort as a sense that she might cry in the midst of arguments, and welcomed the chance a feminist community offered her to develop her ability to argue:

I know points that I'm trying to make are right, I'm just worried that I'm not the right person to make them which is why I was really excited about the [feminist] society. You know I can borrow other people's intellect (laughs)

 Respondents rarely mentioned instances when disagreement in feminist communities was uncomfortable, but Caroline’s (white, bisexual, UK) account indicates such experiences, as well as the gendered discomfort around conflict:

I sort of feel like we've got enough problems, we don't need to be arguing this much within the group….it's just been a bit frustrating to watch the energy go against other feminists…...I think it was something like the sex industry or porn and it was just sort of, I think one person was saying something about how as long as it was completely consensual, and then the other person was just well no because it's all still dehumanising and everything. And I could see both their viewpoints, it got quite heated, and it was difficult it just felt a bit uncomfortable to watch and be there for it….I think it is good for there to be different viewpoints and for there to be disagreements but when it gets to a certain level, I don't know, it might just be me because I don't like confrontation or arguments so it might just be that I didn't like watching it because it was an argument.…

While the dominant theme in the interviews was to frame challenge, debate and disagreement in their feminist communities as positive forces, their linguistic styles and the view that ‘just arguing’ is unproductive, indicate a greater complexity around negotiation of difference which warrants further investigation, and suggest that uncomfortable, but necessary, engagement with the costly trappings of power difference might be steadfastly avoided.

In contrast to traditions of male ownership of public debate, feminist communities where debate flourishes can generate improved confidence to speak, honed skills in argumentation and enhanced criticality - all valuable skills for students as well as for citizenship beyond the educational environment. As Candice commented:

At first – I was scared. But now, we have this one group that we started, it’s a feminist collective and each week we talk about a new topic and – so we, from the beginning of it, now I talk a lot more...And it’s nice because I felt like it’s helped my overall self. I know as a first year, second year, I didn’t talk a lot in class. But now I won’t shut up and I think being able to practice that in that space has helped me….I think it’s made me realize that what I have to say is important, even if the content is not important, but the fact that I’m saying it, is important.

The confidence is marked by a self-assurance that one’s knowledge can supersede one’s fear, as echoed by Liz (white, heterosexual, UK)

I've become less frightened to say so as well. Because I think there was a tendency for me when I spoke to people, which was quite rarely, about feminism, because I didn't have a feminist friendship group at all, to be quite careful about what I said for fear of being branded a little bit extreme or off my rocker type thing. And now it's a lot more like I don't mind talking to people about rape statistics, prevention, intervention and consequences and all those things. So I'm not so concerned about whether people think it's appropriate or not.

In summary, participants in this study expressed the value of mutuality in diversity, and the central role of dialogue and debate in solidifying feminist consciousness. Difference of perspective was described as unproblematic, even positive, in the formation of feminist community, while difference of identity ws rarely named or explored. The confidence stemming from ‘hashing out’ differences of perspective among other feminists enabled women in this study to gain confidence and build skills for more public forms of debate and defense of feminist values, while the relative neglect of difference of identity prevented formation of authentically forged alliances (Rowe, 2008).

**Discussion**

In analysis of the narratives captured in this study, two divergent thematic resonances that texturize the meaning of community for young feminists were revealed: yearning for similar others, and encountering diversity without difference. Participants talked about the importance of community, forged through participation in women’s centers, feminist societies, and other related feminist networks embedded in their campuses and local areas. These spaces and experiences allow for connection, challenge and encounters with ideological difference, while buttressed by a core of ‘shared values’ that defined and delimited the tensions experienced in these gatherings.

While feminist community had a positive impact on those taking part in it in many respects, we noted that when participating in multi-racial feminist communities, participants were largely uncritical of the role of racial difference, power, and the manifestations of power in their own feminist communities, especially among participants who were white women. We found this absence of commentary and reflection troubling. In Rowe’s (2008) analysis, white women are invested in racial power and in turn, institutional power; this proclivity shapes their perception of forming alliances with women of colour as ‘challenging.’ Rowe reminded us that when considerations of racial difference and the power attendant to them are not surfaced and addressed, this does not mean they are not present, and that “while the institutionalization of feminism may appear to be a faceless process in which power heartlessly reproduces itself, it is more likely the case that power is transferred and (re)produced within the intimate spaces cleared by alliances.” (p. 141).

Because our respondents are comparatively young, inexperienced, and are operating within educational environments that function as essentially flat playing fields, we surmised they are not yet invested in institutional power, and are not leveraging it for their own gain (yet). Perhaps, given their youth and relatively short engagement with feminism, they have simply not yet accumulated a variety of experiences in feminist communities, nor the tensions arising from difference, and we encountered them at their most hopeful, positive and enthusiastic. Notably, while women of color commented on seeking feminist community intentionally to cope with marginality, white women in the study had not engaged with considerations of their own racial privilege; devoid of this, the alliances they forged perilously over-rely on the “reproduction of sameness” (Rowe 2008:140). This was somewhat surprising, given the emphasis often discussed within 21st century feminism on intersectional difference (Munro, 2013), while critiques of mainstream feminist movement assert that an insidious side effect of their white-centeredness is obliviousness to the need to engage in anti-racist practice (Loza, 2014; Roth, 2003). This reminds us that there are very real disjunctures between ideological difference and positional differences and that such choice-making obscures the realities of racial, class, sexual orientation and other kinds of positional differences within feminist communities, risking the mistaken belief that all differences are equivalently positive. When allies engage authentically with difference, including valences of power and privilege, “space for allies to disagree and push each other within a sanctioned space of mutual confidence” can emerge, rendering such alliances “a potentially transformative site” (Rowe 2008: 157).

 With this lack of reflexivity about difference and power noted, our study suggests that feminist communities can provide environments where students learn to debate and disagree despite wider gendered social norms which make argument and debate the domain of men and which increasingly emphasise personalized rather than intellectual criticism. Previous research on political engagement has found that increasing knowledge facilitates more interest in issues, and promotes future political behaviors by enhancing an individual’s awareness of what is at stake and why their contribution matters (e.g., Galston, 2001; Kinder, 1998). Their accounts suggest that these novel experiences also create and reflect a certain intimacy, reflecting the love for others and need for belonging described by Rowe (2008) as essential to the process of alliance for transformation. Our sense is that most participants’ unwillingness to name and critique power differences may be part and parcel of their newness to feminist ways of thinking, being, and relating. Several participants referred to engaging in “passionate” debate, suggesting these are intense experiences in which they lay bare aspects of themselves. Exposing such vulnerability in a supportive environment marks out these communities as significant cornerstones of young feminists’ lives and development, and suggests potential for the difficult but necessary work of deconstructing harmful power differentials as they continue on in their feminist journeys.

As noted in this study, feminists express many different but interconnected outcomes from participating in community with one another at their universities, including a strengthened sense of connection, increased confidence, solidified views through debate and dialogue, and fortification for continuing the work of social change. While early developmental theorists, such as Baker-Miller (1984), Josselson (1973; 1987), Gilligan (1982; 1993), and Jordan (1997) recognized the life-altering shift inherent in one’s feminist becoming, they frequently conceived of these transformations internally and individually, rather than mapping the terrain of change as it happens among women engaging in feminist community. This study suggests that forging of feminist identity and consciousness happens inextricably through relationship. Rowe concurred that “feminism arises from experience, but reconfigures experience relationally. Because experience occurs and is processed within community, it is vital that we attend to the politics of relation as productive of our feminisms,” both recognizing and continuously interrogating the crucial role of community in gendered social change.

**Conclusion**

Feminist community on college campuses provides space for the experiential, dialogic emergence of feminism among individuals and as collectives, yet engagement with imbalances of agency is not assured. Given this reality, there are significant implications for educational practice inherent in this study’s findings. Educators committed to fostering social change and the empowerment of women should nurture these connections through the establishment and strengthening of women’s centers and feminist societies, not only for feminist advancement but for developmental benefits these groups provide to students who participate in them. Feminist community clearly serves as a catalyst for well-being, fostering growth and mutuality, while more intentionality is required to construct opportunities to reckon with privilege and dismantlement of power imbalances. The data suggest that in the building of such communal spaces, educators must be more conscious of and intentional about creating and nurturing spaces for community building that require consciousness around racial and other identity differences and forms of privilege. The relative ‘safety’ of educational environments allows for the generation of strategies for shifting racial privilege and disadvantage, and suggests that “learning to listen across powerlines is essential” (Rowe 2008: 175).

Questions for further exploration that emerge from the study include: How can we better connect feminist communities with feminist mentors of any kind, conscious of the power of intergenerational feminism for forging a more difference-conscious kind of powerful alliance (author & author 2014)? Given that our sample was entirely composed of feminists attending university, we wonder if our findings are unique to the feminist movement and/or unique to tertiary educational environments, and what girls’ experiences in early and secondary education may suggest relative to their feminist relationships and emerging consciousness. Our analysis suggests that the value of feminist communities, constituted of feminist relationships, is meaningful for many, and that feminist educators should continue to nurture them as we work to “consider the ways in which power becomes intelligible through a politics of [feminist] love” (Rowe 2008 p. #).

Notes

[i] UK University feminist societies are generally established by groups of students, are open to other students and operate as relatively independent bodies. Some are affiliated to the university’s Student Union, although some of our respondents reported their SU was resistant to the establishment of a feminist society. It is believed that student feminist societies have multiplied (see, for example, Pearce, 2014) in recent years although we know of no reliable empirical evidence that supports that claim.

[ii] Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our respondents.

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