

Knowing feminism: the significance of higher education to women's narratives of 'becoming feminist'

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Abstract: Educational spaces have long provided opportunities for politicisation and activism. However, research into the processes through which students become politicised can often focus on participation in recognised forms of political action, thereby ignoring the multiple factors active in developing a political consciousness. This paper draws on narrative interviews with feminist women to consider the importance of education to their experience of becoming feminist. It considers how, for a particular group of women who were all students or recent graduates of non-STEM disciplines, academic feminism formed an important part of their narrative of becoming feminist. Each of the women referred to having a long-standing feminist inclination, instinct or feeling and indicated that studying academic feminism offered them the tools for reflecting on and articulating this.

Keywords: feminism; identities; education; knowledge; politicisation; narrative

Introduction

Educational spaces have long provided opportunities for politicisation, activism and the development of counter-cultural identities (Broadhurst 2014; Crossley 2008). In a UK context one recent and highly visible example of student politicisation was seen in 2010/11, where student-led activism was prominent in the protests against the austerity measures of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Increased tuition fees and the marketisation of higher education were the focus of many of the UK-wide protests, including the National Union of Students organised demonstrations, campus walk-outs and the occupation of university buildings (Solomon and Palmieri, 2011). These protests had a significant feminist presence, illustrating the intersections between feminist and broader leftist politics and highlighting another dimension of a surge in visible feminist activism more generally (Dean, 2012). Despite these high profile events, a tendency has been observed within strands of sociological work to declare young people politically apathetic (Rheingans

and Hollands, 2013). This perception of a generational decline of political participation is echoed in narratives of the ‘death’ of feminism in both academic and popular discourse (as discussed by Dean, 2012; Downes, 2008; Hawkesworth, 2004). This is despite evidence of feminist mobilisation in the UK that has had increased visibility and influence in recent years (Dean 2012, Downes, 2008).

Declarations of political apathy occur in part because of the narrow definitions of politicisation or activism. The apathy thesis often draws on quantitative measures of participation, rather than allowing students to define political engagement or activism for themselves (Rheingans and Hollands, 2013). Studies using voting turnout as a measure of political engagement, for example, can label young people apathetic, rather than as politically engaged yet disillusioned with certain political processes (Henn and Foard, 2014). Even when attention is given to other forms of political engagement, definitions often remain narrow, even in work seeking to challenge the apathy thesis. For example, Nick Crossley’s (2008) study of the politicisation of two groups of students used the measures of political identity, group membership and political practices, in order to gain a holistic view of politicisation. However, Crossley defines an individual as ‘practically active’ (20) only if they had participated in a political demonstration, meeting, sit-in or strike. There are methodological limitations to work that uses quantitative measures to explore a topic so open to interpretation and shifting definitions.

Making this point specifically in relation to *feminist* activism, Julia Downes stresses the importance of broadening the definitions of activism to acknowledge the ‘plethora of cultural, performative and discursive forms of resistance’ (Downes, 2008:1). When these more expansive ideas of political mobilisation are taken into account, the picture of student or young people’s political engagement, feminist or otherwise, might seem rather different. There is, therefore, a methodological argument to be made for researching political

identification, mobilisation and activism in ways that can encompass its variety and diversity and so offer more expansive notions of each. In this paper, narrative interviews are used to explore how women develop a feminist consciousness. This allows women to define political identification and participation for themselves.

For many of the women I interviewed educational spaces offered fertile ground for engagement with feminist ideas, entry into activism and a language to articulate what were often described as feminist instincts or feelings. Their accounts echoed the importance of the campus for politicisation observed by others (Broadhurst, 2014; Crossley, 2008). The interviews suggest that entry into higher education offers opportunities to engage in recognised forms of activism, such as marches. However, they also revealed the multiple ways through which a feminist consciousness may develop. I focus here on how academic feminist thought created a space for some women to reflect upon and renegotiate their feminist identities.

Methodology

Twenty-five feminist women aged between twenty and thirty-five and living in the UK took part in narrative interviews that incorporated photo-elicitation methods. During the interviews the women were asked to tell their story of becoming feminist and to share images that were significant to it. The women were recruited online through social media, feminist blogs and email lists, as well as a range of other general interest groups. Of the women interviewed one had a foundation degree, 14 had, or were in their final year of an undergraduate degree, one had a postgraduate diploma, 6 had a master's degree and 3 were studying for a PhD.

This paper considers the significance of the university experience to some of the younger women I spoke to who had recently completed, or were in the final year of their studies. All of these women were studying non-STEM subjects (science, technology,

engineering and mathematics) at British universities. Their subjects included: English literature, history, sociology and media studies -- subjects that offered opportunities to engage with academic feminist thought. I am therefore concerned with a very specific group of women and their discussion of the significance of academic feminism to the development and articulation of their feminist identities. In this paper I refer in particular to three of these women, Lisa, Elizabeth and Emma.

Feminist educations

Many of the women I interviewed discussed their participation in protests and other forms of activism whilst at university. However, the interviews also highlighted different markers of politicisation. Many of the women discussed the importance of their engagement with academic feminist thought for offering them the tools to reflect on their understanding and experience of feminism. In the following extracts Lisa, Elizabeth and Emma each mark out their engagement with academic feminism as a point of transition in their feminist identities. Lisa was twenty-one when interviewed and in her final year of a sociology undergraduate degree. She remembers:

The very first time I really had any kind of proper sort of, academic kind of thing with it was, erm, when I started doing sociology at college. That's when I first really got interested in, you know, what sort of books are out there, that sort of thing. So I think for me it's always been important to me, because I was, well, I was, like, raised in a house full of women...so I think that makes me more inclined to it slightly...doing what I do, like my degree has been more, erm, aware of certain things.

Lisa's feminist identity, by her account, developed as a consequence of her experience of family life. She considers that her all-female household made her more *inclined* to feminism. It was, however, her studies that facilitated an active engagement with feminist ideas as she began to seek out feminist books, which further intensified her interest. Lisa suggests her

acquisition of feminist knowledge at an academic level affirmed her pre-existing, pre-academic feminist 'inclination'.

Lisa does not credit her degree studies with introducing her to feminism, but acknowledges its crucial role in affording her a means of engaging with feminism academically. This was not an unusual story across the interviews I conducted.

Elizabeth was 22 when interviewed and had recently completed a postgraduate degree in English Literature. When asked to recount how she came to identify as feminist, she said:

As far as I can remember I pretty much always identified as a feminist. Even at quite a young age...I think it was just a sort of instinct and, you know, I sort of felt like 'of course I'm a feminist, everyone's a feminist'...Since I started to focus on it a bit more with my studies at university, definitely helped me to, erm, understand a lot more what I mean when I say that I'm a feminist.

And Emma, a twenty-three year old theatre studies graduate, gave a similar account:

It was only when I went to university...we were looking at feminism in plays and theatre and then I started to realise actually I really completely agree with all of this I'm reading, and this is kind of how I feel, but it was just kind of, someone just told me what it was called, 'feminism', and so I was a bit like 'okay' and I really got into it that way.

Like Lisa, both Elizabeth and Emma describe their younger selves as having a feminist inclination, instinct or feeling, but depict it as something that was developed through education. Of the three women it is Elizabeth who named this instinct 'feminism', but it is through her studies that she gained an increased understanding of the term and began to refine and nuance its meaning. For Emma, going to university and reading feminist material offered her a language to fully articulate her feelings about the world and recognise them as 'feminist'.

In all three accounts, the move to college or university and the resulting engagement with academic feminism marked a shift in the women's feminist identities. They reflect on and reinterpret a feminism that was knowable to them as an inclination, instinct or feeling. This affective engagement with feminism is consolidated through formal education, resulting in an increased awareness, understanding and, in Emma's account, recognition of feminism. In many ways this is unsurprising; educational spaces are experienced as transitional in a number of ways, as young people often live away from home and renegotiate relationships and identities (Briggs et al. 2012; Finn 2013, 2014, 2015). But accounts of this transitional period demonstrate that there are processes of politicisation that can go unrecognised or under-recognised when there is a narrow focus on *direct participation* in political activism. Narrative interviews can illuminate these multiple and intersecting aspects of an individual's politicisation.

While Lisa, Elizabeth and Emma regard their exposure to academic feminism as having confirmed to their pre-existing 'feminist feelings' and enable them to articulate their 'feminist instincts', alternative means of encountering feminism are not necessarily less important to them. It is perhaps unsurprising that academic feminism does take certain precedence in their narratives, considering they were all either students or recent graduates of courses that introduced them to such material. Educational narratives might be drawn upon to legitimise feminist identities, as indicated by Lisa's use of the term 'proper' in reference to academic feminism. However, this does not mean that their feminist identities are fixed by this narrative, but that this articulation of becoming feminist has visibility in the interviews because of the women's proximity to their university experience.

Lisa, Elizabeth and Emma illustrate how shifts in political identity can occur through entry into an academic community that validates feminist ideas. They draw attention to the changes in access to higher education that resulted in more people attending university

(Archer, 2003). These three women are part of the second or third generation of women in the UK who regard university study as normal for young women and they identified higher education as one of the key spaces through which they are able to engage with feminist ideas. This is perhaps a distinct feature of the politicisation of recent generations of feminists. Their accounts also draw attention to the place of feminism within the academy and the significance of this to the development of a political consciousness.

Robyn Wiegman has suggested that feminism is “‘in power” as a critical discursive agency’ (2000: 821) in the academy, arguing that one of the processes by which feminist-identifying subjects are formed is through the circulation of texts that students of academic feminism must come to know in order to demonstrate competency. It is argued that this limited range of texts reinforces the hegemony of certain types of feminist knowledge. Wiegman’s critique is temporally situated and feminism’s status within the academy is not always considered by researchers to be so secure. Writing two years earlier, Gabriele Griffin (1998) questioned the narrative of feminism’s ‘progress’ and ‘achievement’ within the academy, arguing that it masks the more uneven, insecure and ambiguous place that feminism occupies within academia. Indeed, this is still reflected today in the institutional instability of gender studies in a disciplinary bound context, where it contends with the twin challenges of the marginalisation of intersectional studies and their categorisation as a ‘special interest’ subject.

Feminism’s ‘home’ within the academy may then be an insecure one. Academia’s shifting and uneven terrain poses risks to academic feminism. Students such as Lisa, Elizabeth and Emma were able to secure and consolidate their feminist inclinations, instincts or feelings because feminism was an object of study available to them at university, where feminist texts were already in circulation and held some authority within their chosen

disciplines. These opportunities must be safe-guarded for future students, and not solely for non-STEM students such as those in the present study.

Conclusions

While academic feminism is central in Lisa, Elizabeth and Emma's accounts of becoming feminist, their pre-university feminist identities were also regarded as key to their personal development, in a cultural context where personal trajectories and biographies are considered so important in the development of a sense of self (Lawler, 2013). Whilst the women at times appear to use their engagement with academic feminism as marking a point at which they become a so-called 'proper' feminist, their academic engagement in fact represents a point in the process of 'becoming feminist' which enabled them to articulate, and to refine, their pre-existing 'feminist instincts' and 'feminist feelings' a political concerns.

When exploring the importance of educational spaces to the development of a political consciousness it is crucial that the variety of ways by which students might become politically engaged are considered. Participation in various forms of feminist activism was an important part of becoming feminist for the women I interviewed. However, for many, as important was their engagement with academic feminist thought. Indeed, this aspect of their feminist becoming intersected with and formed their ideas about activism, as well as offering them the tools to reflect upon their feminist politics and identities. This entanglement between feminist feeling and academic feminism became apparent in the stories these women tell about becoming feminist. Narrative methods, therefore, can offer a means of exploring the numerous and intersecting ways that political identities are formed, understood and articulated. Such methods highlight the processes of politicisation that cannot be measured solely by participation in particular practices. Indeed, they offer a means of understanding

why and how an individual might come to participate in these forms of political activism that are often taken as a marker of a political identity.

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