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Feminist Identities: Career Choices and Experiences of College-Educated Women

By

Kerry Diekmann

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

In

Counselor Education and Supervision

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May 2015

Feminist Identities: Career Choices and Experiences of College-Educated Women

Kerry Diekmann

This dissertation has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

Dr. Diane Coursol, Advisor

Dr. Jennifer Preston

Dr. Jacqueline Lewis

Dr. Richard Auger

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# Feminist Identities: Career Choices and Experiences of College-Educated Women

Kerry Diekmann

Dr. Diane Coursol, Dissertation Advisor

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how feminism as a social identity impacts how women interpret their career and life experiences. The overarching research question that guided the study was: How do feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path? The theoretical framework that provided the lens for the study included feminist, multicultural, intersectionality, and career development theories. Two distinct bodies of literature were reviewed to provide a foundation for the study: (a) women's career development, in particular, the supports and barriers experienced, and (b) feminist identity, including influences to adopting the feminist label and factors associated with a feminist identity such as the expectation of egalitarian relationships. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the research design and informed the data collection and analysis. Eight college-educated and feminist-identified women participated in the study and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Four themes emerged through the data analysis: (a) personal journey to feminism, (b) community of support, (c) adversity experienced, and (d) empowerment and authenticity. Although there were a few limitations around generalizability, the findings suggest a connection between feminist identity and career choices as well as the positive impact women can have on other women through providing inspiration, mentoring, and support.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

Despite how media figures and critics of feminism have questioned the vitality or need for feminism, the feminist movement is far from its demise. Some believe that women have reached equality. On the contrary, when compared to their male counterparts, women around the world and in the United States remain subjected to economic exploitation, high rates of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and a number of other injustices. Women contend with harassment and sexual violence at much higher rates than men. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) and similar agencies received 11,364 reports of sexual harassment within the 2011 fiscal year, with only 16.3% reports coming from men. Through data collected in 2010 for the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, Black et al. (2011) reported that at some point during their lifetime, 18.3% of women respondents reported they had been victims of rape through physical force (p. 18) and 44.6% of women respondents reported they had been victims of another type of sexual violence (p. 19). The rate at which men experienced rape through physical force was 1.4% (p. 18) and other types of sexual violence was 22.2% (p. 19). During their lifetime, 16.2% of women respondents had been victims of stalking, whereas 5.2% of men reported being stalked (Black et al., 2011, p. 20). Both women and men report high rates of intimate partner violence, however, women still report this type of violence at higher rates than men. An alarming 35.6% of

women respondents reported being victims of some type of violence by an intimate partner (p. 39) and 30.3% of women respondents specifically reported physical violence (p. 43). Men reported being a victim of intimate partner violence at a 28.5% rate (p. 39), with 25.7% of men reported being a victim of physical violence (p. 44). The effects of being a victim or survivor of violence can have a profound negative impact on one's career and employment. Through interviewing women survivors of sexual violence and support providers, Loya (2014) found that employment was impacted in a variety of ways including missing work to recover, lower work performance, and job loss. Swanberg, Macke, and Logan (2007) conducted a survey with women survivors of intimate partner violence and found that participants reported that perpetrators interfered with their employment in numerous ways including harassment at work and threats made to the survivors and their coworkers.

Additionally, women face significant exploitation in employment in the form of not being paid fair wages as well as in the pervasiveness of sexism in the workplace, to the extent that the work women engage in is devalued and this also promotes feelings of less worth (hooks, 2000b). This inequity is so widespread in society that many women do not even recognize they are being discriminated against, or that their opportunities have been limited because they were socialized according to what women "should" like and what types of work are "appropriate" for women (Betz, 2005). Women are not well represented in higher paying professions, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Corbett & Hill, 2012). Moreover, women are grossly underrepresented in the U.S. Congress, with only 18.3% women representatives and senators in 2013 (Center for American Women and Politics, 2013). Women also contend

with the gender wage gap. Interestingly, the stature of careers have changed throughout history in accordance to the participation fluctuations of a specific gender, and is marked by decreases in status and salary when women hold the majority of jobs within an occupation (Freedman, 2002). The most recent U.S. census confirmed that at each educational level, men are given higher compensation as compared to women (Ewert, 2012). Women in full time employment earn just 81% of the salaries earned by their peers that are men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011, p. 1). While the gender pay gap has narrowed over time (AAUW, 2014), the gap has barely budged in almost a decade (National Women's Law Center, 2012). A greater and more troubling discrepancy exists when race and ethnicity is taken into account, with Asian and White workers earning the highest incomes, and Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino workers earning the lowest incomes (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Women also earn less than men within all racial and ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). The gender wage gap cannot be completely explained by factors such as choice of major, career, and experience. One third of this wage gap is unexplained and may be due to gender discrimination or gender differences in salary negotiations (Corbett & Hill, 2012).

There are many definitions of feminism (Smith, 2013; Treichler & Kramarae, 2010), but hooks (2000b) offers a succinct definition: "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression" (p. 26), or in other words, it is "anti-sexism" (hooks, 2000a, p. 12). Discussing the intentions of feminism, hooks (2000b) states: "Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives" (p. 28). Feminism means taking a political stance and working to eliminate

violence against women, end sexual and economic exploitation of women, advocate for women's reproductive health and choice, and decrease the disproportionate number of women living in poverty. Although "Feminism is the belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth" (p. 7), it has been a topic of contention from its conception (Freedman, 2002). Self-identified feminists must contend with the negative connotations and backlash associated with the feminist movement. As such, those who identify with the movement and declare their identity as feminists are more likely to be committed to taking action to work for women's equality (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder, Tobias, & Snell, 2011; Zucker, 2004).

The existing research addressing women's career development has explored the unique barriers such as those addressed above, as well as supportive factors such as the role of mentors (Brown, 2005; Gibson, 2004). What has not been addressed by the existing literature is how identifying as a feminist may impact a woman's career development. For example, areas that have received little attention include how feminist-identified women view their career possibilities, interpret experiences related to their career, recognize sexism and other barriers, and how feminist identity influences career decision-making. This study will explore women's career development from a feminist lens, and in particular, address how self-identified feminist women make meaning of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path.

Before delving into women's career development and the feminist identity literature, which will be the focal point of chapter two, this chapter will begin with relevant background information including a brief history of the feminist movement in the United States, the challenges the feminist movement has received, and the significant

historical events for employment equality. This chapter will also detail the theoretical frameworks that guide this study, and will end with a brief discussion of women's career development and purpose of the study.

### **Feminist Movement and Challenges**

In the United States, the feminist movement is categorized as having three distinct waves, which all served different purposes and uniquely worked to address various issues. The main issue the first wave took on was women's suffrage and is generally said to have begun in 1848 at the famous Seneca Falls Convention, however, the nineteenth amendment granting the right for women to vote was not passed until 1920 (Dicker, 2008). Other issues that women organized and promoted during the first wave included civil rights, the right to participate in employment outside the home, information about reproduction and choices regarding sexuality, and the temperance movement (Dicker, 2008). The second wave, which was at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, was largely about equality in the workforce and freedom for women to make choices about their bodies (Dicker, 2008). The wage gap was so wide that in 1970, women were making just over half of men's wages at the time (Dicker, 2008, p. 57). During this time period, women also organized to raise awareness about sexual harassment and domestic violence (Dicker, 2008). The third wave of feminism developed as a result of the 1990s criticism against feminism and women's rights. This wave largely addressed the threats to women's equality including the violent attacks on clinics providing abortion services and continued problems with sexual and domestic violence (Dicker, 2008). Additionally, this wave was much more inclusive, recognizing people's multiple identities (Dicker, 2008).

Unfortunately, the great strides the women's movement has made in gender equality have sometimes been met with hostility. Faludi (2006) describes this well when she stated: "These outbreaks are backlashes because they have always arisen in reaction to women's 'progress,' caused not simply by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status" (p. 10-11). While the women's and feminist movements have received criticism and faced attacks throughout its history in the United States, the strength of this crusade against feminism was felt strongly in the 1980s and is still present today. Faludi (2006) wrote about the 1980s backlash in great detail and demonstrated how widespread antifeminism was then, however, much of this backlash is still applicable in analyzing today's society. For instance, Faludi (2006) noted that backlash is present when politicians argue that the Equal Rights Amendment is not necessary because equality has been achieved despite the fact that the gender wage gap is still a harsh reality. Backlash is also present when some media sources claim that independent, educated women are unlikely to find a man to marry and suffer from loneliness, as was the focus of many news reports and articles in the 1980s (Faludi, 2006). Regrettably, there is no shortage of examples in which stories containing numerous inaccuracies were generated in order to create a bad name for feminism. For example, Faludi (2006) noted a few 1980s stories such as an *ABC* network report and a *Newsweek* article that were forthright about their disdain for feminism, suggesting that it was indeed bad for women. The fact of the matter is that many of the studies these stories were based upon were problematic in methods, and through her research, Faludi (2006) uncovered spuriousness with the studies that were unfortunately used to instill fear among women and discredit the feminist movement.



In 2006, Faludi asserted that the general climate of feminism was perhaps worse than the feminist backlash of the 1980s, an atmosphere which contributed to the disillusionment of the movement. Baumgardner and Richards (2010) demonstrated this present day disillusionment with the feminist movement when they stated: “*Feminism*, a word that describes a social-justice movement for gender equity and human liberation, is often treated as the other F word” (p. 50). While feminism is simply an anti-sexist, anti-oppressive movement, many individuals are hesitant to label themselves as feminists and view this term in a negative fashion. This avoidance of the term “feminism” is not helped with anti-feminist icons spreading rumors equating feminism with killing babies and abandoning marriages (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). Much of this negativity infiltrates into the stereotypes about feminism and ways in which anti-feminists try to discredit the movement. One such stereotype is that feminists hate men, when in fact, Anderson, Kanner, and Elayegh (2009) found the opposite, reporting that feminist women demonstrated fewer negative attitudes toward men. While the list of stereotypes and reasons not to claim the feminist label is numerous, Valenti (2007) addressed a few of the most commonly heard misgivings. One of the most patronizing is the message used to deter people from feminism declaring that only ugly people are feminists (Valenti, 2007). Another includes that feminists are White women from older generations, which stems from how the feminist movement unfortunately excluded Women of Color in the past. The movement is now more inclusive including women from a variety of age and ethnic groups (Valenti, 2007). Other stereotypes identified by Valenti (2007) include that feminism is dead and the idea that “things are fine the way they are” (p. 9). None of these

stereotypes used to discourage women from feminism have any documented factual standing, as gender equality and sexism still pervade today's society (Valenti, 2007).

Fortunately, in the United States, those who are unsupportive of the women's movement are in the minority. Most people think gender equality is important; in a 1996 poll, 66% of women and 59% of men responded affirmatively that they believe such equality is "important" or "very important" (Huddy, Neely, & LaFay, 2000, p. 331). More recently, The Huffington Post paired up with YouGov and collected data to explore attitudes about feminism and women's equality. YouGov collected data over a two-day period, and the sample selected reflected many demographic factors of the general population in the United States (Swanson, 2013). In the 2013 The Huffington Post and YouGov poll of 1,000 Americans, a strong majority, or 82% responded affirmatively to the following question: "Do you believe that men and women should be social, political and economic equals?" While there is considerable support and positive feelings regarding the women's movement, there is less support when it comes to feminism with many people holding negative stereotypes about feminists (Huddy et al., 2000). The recent poll through The Huffington Post (Swanson, 2013) and YouGov (2013), also found that feminism was not popular, with only 20% of respondents identifying as feminists.

### **Employment Equality**

A number of historical events and legislation have specifically addressed the issue of women's equality in regard to opportunities and compensation in employment in the United States. One of these events includes the passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made it illegal to pay different wages based on gender for the exact same job

(Dicker, 2008). This legislation did not adequately address equal pay because it did not extend to comparable work, in which case jobs traditionally held by women generally paid less than jobs traditionally held by men (Dicker, 2008). In 1964, the United States saw another significant event in employment history: the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, that made it a requirement not to discriminate based on gender (Dicker, 2008). In an attempt to counteract gender discrimination, women were included to the Affirmative Action policy in 1967 (Freedman, 2002). Seeking to establish gender equality and first presented in 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment gained a lot of momentum in the 1970s but surprisingly never passed the U.S. Congress (Dicker, 2008). On the other hand, in 1972 Title IX brought significant changes in terms of funding for women's athletics and substantially changed higher education, making it much more equitable for women (Dicker, 2008). Despite these strides, women employees still face much gender discrimination and have brought forth lawsuits in response, which have received some attention from the media. One prominent example of such a lawsuit in recent history is the ongoing battle with Wal-Mart's significantly unbalanced hierarchy in management with men hugely outnumbering women at the higher ranks (Collins, 2009). Yet another extremely relevant and disheartening example is the experience of Lilly Ledbetter at Goodyear. Throughout her career, Ledbetter had made significantly less than her peers with the same tenure with the company and level of position and even made less than male employees with much less experience (Collins, 2009). Because this discrepancy was unbeknownst to her until late in her career, she was unable to successfully sue Goodyear within the timeline governed by law and based on this technicality, the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of Goodyear (Collins,

2009). Although Ledbetter did not receive financial compensation for her many years of unequal pay, in her honor, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act became law in 2009, extending the timeline in which employees can bring suit against their employers (Collins, 2009).

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The theoretical framework that guided this dissertation is three-fold. Feminist theory largely informs this research and influenced the topic chosen, the methods used to carry out the study, and the analysis of the data. Intersectionality and multicultural theories guided the dissertation, and recognizes that gender is not the only lens or identity that impacts one's career development and life experiences. Career theories, and in particular those that address women's career development and the unique issues women may experience, also are major influences to the study. All three theoretical frameworks are discussed below.

#### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory has developed over time and now includes a number of theories that fall within the field of feminist or women's studies (Smith, 2013). Kolmar and Bartkowski (2010) provide a basic yet comprehensive definition when they state:

Put most simply, feminist theory is a body of writing that attempts to describe, explain, and analyze the conditions of women's lives . . . The basic issue that has concerned feminist theory is, depending on the terms one prefers, women's inequality, subordination, or domination by men. At the root of these is the issue of gender asymmetry – the designation of women and things associated with

women as different from, inferior to, or lesser value than men and things associated with men. (p. 2)

While feminist theory and activism has not drastically changed the world, evidenced by many gender inequities that still exist, feminist theory can be a helpful framework to interpret inequitable behaviors and beliefs that women encounter (Smith, 2013). Feminist theorists can differ in their ways of expressing the reasons behind such a gender divide (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010).

There are many gender imbalances that are identified and described by feminist theorists. Some of these have particular relevance to the topic of this study, such as power and how labor is divided. Power refers to the history of men dominating women and the advocacy for women to gain social and economic equality (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010). Such power can take on a variety of forms. In the public realm, power is evidenced in women having been historically barred from public offices and many educational and occupational spaces. The private realm consists of many injustices from harassment to sexual and physical violence (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010).

Division of labor is another imbalance that feminist theorists often point out and includes that of unpaid labor in the home, or the types of jobs in which women tend to gravitate to or work (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010). As mentioned previously, women have low representation in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields (Corbett & Hill, 2012). Hooks (2000b) asserted that capitalism has helped to maintain this power imbalance since women whose work is primarily in underpaid service positions or unpaid housework are also undervalued as workers, which in turn allows for economies to profit.

Another theme that exists when examining feminist theories that Kolmar and Bartkowski (2010) identified is the long-standing debate among scholars on how differences among genders are explained. Scholars with an essentialist perspective, which focuses on the innate differences between genders, believe that women have a unique and collective perspective. Social constructionist scholars believe that it is critical to consider the historical and cultural context in which the differences occur. Yet other scholars have moved away from the essentialist or social constructionist dichotomy, finding it useless or restrictive (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010).

### **Intersectionality and Multicultural Theories**

Everyone has multiple identities that can include but are not limited to ethnicity and race, social class, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, educational attainment, and religion. In 1989, Crenshaw described how multiple identities come together to create a unique experience and termed this phenomenon *intersectionality* (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). While other frameworks tend to look at each identity individually and incrementally, the main premise and identifying feature of intersectionality is the interaction of identities producing a unique outcome—one that cannot be understood by examining each identity separately (Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2004). In doing so, researchers run the risk of neglecting other important influences, which “sometimes results in the essentialization of differences” (Jordan-Zachary, 2007, p. 259). Thus, if a researcher focuses solely on gender, many other components of an individual’s identity and the interaction of the components may be neglected (Jordan-Zachary, 2007). Further, how an individual’s multiple identities

intersect with one another influences how oppression and privilege are experienced (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2004).

Women are already marginalized by their gender and women who hold additional oppressed identities may feel pressure to choose one identity over another. For example, Crenshaw (1991) asserted: Women of Color may experience the “need to split one’s political energies between two sometimes opposing groups” which results in “disempowerment that men of color and White women seldom confront” (p. 1252). The political divide described by Crenshaw is extremely relevant to the career development of women with multiple oppressed identities, specifically in considering their work environments. For instance, work environments employing few women or few People of Color may be particularly challenging to Women of Color as they may be more likely to be tokenized and feel pressured to align with one identity over another. Also, women with multiple oppressed identities may experience increased discrimination (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2004).

An additional relevant framework that is helpful in conceptualizing multiple identities and working with individuals holistically is multicultural counseling and therapy (MCT) theory. Due to the complexity of MCT theory, this paper will identify a few tenets that are most pertinent to the current discussion. A unique feature of this theory is that it is a meta-theory, whose purpose it is to provide an overlying framework that can be used in conjunction with other theories (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). This theory takes a slightly different approach in that it considers identities separately by noting the relevance an individual assigns to a particular aspect of their identity may change over time resulting in an ever-evolving identity (Sue et al., 1996). This theory can

fill in the gaps other career development theories leave behind by providing a greater understanding of each individual's unique identity and their context. Another principle of MCT theory is recognizing how worldviews shape expectations and interpretations (Sue et al., 1996).

### **Career Development Theories**

Despite the phenomenal strides taken by the women's movement in the United States within the last century, sexism and gender inequity continue to be major concerns in today's society. In regard to employment, just the simple fact of being a woman brings with it additional barriers, including the glass ceiling effect, which makes it more challenging for women to advance due to gender inequity, hostile work environments, and gender discrimination (Betz, 2005). Additionally, early socialization and gendered stereotypes that young girls are subjected to could negatively impact their career development by limiting the work they see as appropriate for their gender (Gottfredson, 2005). Thus, career development theories that identify how social factors could impact women's career choices and career development are extremely pertinent and crucial to this dissertation.

One career development theory that is particularly relevant to this discussion is the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA), which most closely attends to the compatibility between the individual and workplace (Dawis, 2005). This theory is known as a person and environment fit theory. Thus, a main premise of TWA is to examine the personal characteristics and skill set a person brings to the job and whether that is similar to the desired aptitudes and characteristics outlined by the employer. An additional tenet of TWA is to consider the interaction between the person and environment, recognizing that



both influence one another and will change throughout time. Not only are skills important to consider in the fit, but also an individual's needs are relevant. Specifically, job satisfaction is largely determined by the extent to which an individual's needs are met. Also essential to TWA is examining how well the individual is meeting the expectations set by the employer. Job performance and job satisfaction are significant in whether the individual persists at that place of employment or the degree of work adjustment (Dawis, 2005). An individual's work adjustment is also predicated on one of four personal factors. The first of the adjustment factors where individuals can vary is flexibility; the more comfortable a person is with change, the less likely they are to be unsatisfied. Activeness, or the extent to which a person is assertive when personal needs are not being met is the second aspect of work adjustment style. Third, reactivity refers to how an individual does or does not engage in behaviors to improve job performance. Finally, perseverance is operationalized by how willing an individual is to continue in a position before giving up and finding a different position (Dawis, 2005).

An additional career development theory that has great relevance and influence to this study is the Theory of Circumscription and Compromise, which was developed by Gottfredson (2005). Two concepts central to this theory include *cognitive growth*, which refers how children develop intellectually as they grow older, and *self-creation*, defined as becoming a unique people who are "active agents in our own creation" (Gottfredson, 2005, p. 74). Genetic and environmental influences are believed to influence individuals, however, how one experiences and may be changed by a situation is different for each individual. Also critical components to this theory are those of *circumscription*, or the process of narrowing the list of careers to consider, and *compromise*, or considering the

compatibility of oneself with a specific career. There are four stages of circumscription that span the childhood years. Beginning at approximately age three, children are in the first stage and are becoming aware of how powerful someone appears (Gottfredson, 2005). Stage two begins at around six years of age and is characterized by connecting certain occupations to a specific gender. In the third stage, starting at around nine years old, children begin to be able to identify the prestige level of careers. A greater understanding of self in regard to future careers begins at approximately 14 years of age and marks the final stage of the circumscription process. With respect to compromise, children begin recognizing their own personal characteristics and anticipate challenges to attaining the skills and education required for certain careers, and consider these together when eliminating career possibilities and deciding on occupations (Gottfredson, 2005).

### **Purpose of the Study**

While research in the field of career development has paid particular attention to women, especially with respect to the barriers and supportive factors experienced, what the research has not addressed is how a social or political identity such as that of a feminist identity may influence career development. Based on the literature reviewed in the next chapter, it seems likely that feminist identity or other social identities may substantially affect the career choices and career development of women. Specifically, it seems plausible that one's social or political identity would impact the way one sees the world, how one perceives the work they do, and how they understand their work environment. For instance, women who embrace a feminist social identity generally recognize the sexism and inequitable gender systems that are present in today's society (Liss & Erchull, 2010). Additionally, a social or political identity would likely impact the

value that is placed on work and the work one seeks to achieve their values and live in accordance to their values. Namely, those who adopt a feminist identity are more likely to engage in activism for the advancement of gender equality (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011; Zucker, 2004). Therefore, it follows that having a feminist identity would in fact impact the career development of women who self-identify in that way.

The purpose of this study is to address the research gap that has been identified in the preceding section, specifically the literature regarding how feminist identity impacts career choices and experiences. The overarching research question is: How do feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path? Further, this study seeks to examine how feminism as a social or political identity impacts career development. Specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
2. How have life experiences impacted your career choices?
3. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
4. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
5. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a discussion about the term feminism, and the misconceptions and misgivings that many people associate with the term. Simply put, feminism is “anti-sexism” (hooks, 2000a, p. 12) and seeks to end economic exploitation and social inequality. Brief histories of the waves of feminism in the United States,

historical events that are particularly pertinent to employment gender equality, and the current feminist movement and backlash were presented. One of the many oppressions women face is employment discrimination where women earn unequal pay and encounter harassment in the workplace. This, coupled with early gender socialization, may have a significant impact on women's career development by potentially limiting career options. Because feminists are generally more aware of sexism and societal inequalities and the fact that the research has not addressed feminist identity in career development, this study is focused on how feminist-identified women conceptualize their career development. This chapter concluded with the theoretical frameworks used to guide the study and identified a gap in the literature along with the purpose of this study. Chapter two will present two bodies of literature that are relevant to this research: the barriers and supportive factors women experience in their career development as well as feminist identity in regard to adopting the label of a feminist, identity development, and outcomes associated with feminism.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

While women have made considerable gains since the U.S. Census began looking at gender and other demographic data with wages, the fact still remains that women lag far behind men. This wage gap is demonstrated in the report detailing 2010 data by the Bureau of Labor Statistics with women in full time employment making \$669 on average each week compared to the \$824 men average (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011, p. 1). Another troubling factor is that women are not well represented in higher paying professions, particularly in the science and math related fields. Betz (2005) suggested that “some barriers to career choices are socialized barriers, that is, socialized belief systems or behavior patterns that lead women themselves to avoid certain career fields” (p. 256). For example, girls and women are less likely to pursue math courses and may have lower self-efficacy regarding math, which may limit their career choices later as many majors and jobs require individuals to complete certain levels of math (Betz, 2005). Another socialized barrier that Betz (2005) described is the impact that stereotyped gender roles play in the career choices women make about having children, or jobs that are thought to be better suited for women.

Not only must women contend with pay inequity, underrepresentation in higher paying jobs, and socialized barriers, but women are also often faced with additional discrimination based on gender and other marginalized groups to which they belong.

Such discrimination may include sexual harassment, hostile work environments, and the glass ceiling effect where it becomes difficult or nearly impossible to get promoted because of one's gender (Betz, 2005). In fact, only 16.3% of sexual harassment reports that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) and similar agencies received in 2011 came from men. Because such discrimination is entwined with the world of work, it stands to reason that discrimination is likely to have a negative impact on women's career development. Unfortunately, women may limit their career choices based on gender stereotypes they may encounter (Betz, 2005; Gottfredson, 2005). While none of these aspects make for a healthy or satisfying work environment, the cumulative effect may make it even more problematic to pursue the most desirable career choice.

Considering the limiting influence gender stereotypes have on women's career choices (Betz, 2005; Gottfredson, 2005), the greater likelihood that women will report being sexually harassed than men (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.), and the fact that women on average make less in wages than men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011), the feminist and women's movement seems as vital as ever. While there is considerable support for the women's movement and greater gender equality, there remains an active avoidance of claiming the feminist label (Huddy et al., 2000; Swanson, 2013). Exposure to feminism and adopting the feminist label can be helpful and empowering to women in several distinct ways. For instance, in owning a feminist identity, one is more likely to recognize the occurrence of sexism along with understanding gender inequities present in the greater society (Liss & Erchull, 2010). Feminist identities are also associated with greater participation in activism efforts (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011; Zucker, 2004); such efforts attempt to dismantle

gender discrimination and work toward gender equality. Therefore, it seems plausible that those with feminist identities may have a greater realization of certain obstacles to their career development such as that of sexism, and may feel empowered to challenge gender inequality in life, as well as in their career.

Furthermore, much of the literature reviewed and outlined in this chapter includes participant samples that were not very diverse or did not have ample representation of individuals with multiple marginal identities to infer whether participants' experiences were uniquely different from individuals with greater privilege. While the studies reviewed in this chapter are richly contextual and informative, they were based upon samples where multiple marginal and intersecting identities were not consistently addressed or considered. This chapter makes note of select demographics from the studies reviewed so as to offer clarification about the level of generalizability provided by each study reviewed.

The purpose of this literature review is twofold and will address the distinct sections of the literature on women's career development and feminist identity development, as a basic understanding of each of these fields is crucial to this dissertation. The literature on women's career development will provide an understanding of the key factors that are influential in women's career development, such as the perceived options available, actual career goals, attainment, and career progression. The first section of this literature review will detail specific factors that have positive and negative influences on women's career development and will include gender socialization, personal identity variables, social class, parental relationships, mentors and role models, partners and motherhood, sexism, and racism. While this is not an exhaustive list of the factors that

impact women's career development, it does cover many of the more general factors. Second, this literature review will explore the research on feminist identity development in terms of models of feminist identity development, influential factors in developing feminist attitudes or a feminist identity, actions or beliefs that have been associated with a feminist identity, and the impact of holding feminist attitudes or a feminist identity.

### **Factors in Women's Career Development**

It is a well-understood belief that people are treated differently on the basis of their gender; socialization based on gender often begins the minute children are born. Such socialization includes the colors that are seen as better suited for girls versus boys, or the activities, behaviors, and emotions that are seen as appropriate for one's gender. It is not surprising that socialization in turn is influential in the career development of girls and women. This section of the literature review focuses on research that has examined unique obstacles and supportive factors women experience in terms of their career development. While some of these factors work to bolster women's career development and have been identified by women as supportive factors, other influences have been identified as negative in nature and are looked at as obstacles or barriers to women's career development. A few factors can be strictly viewed as only positive or only negative to all women's career development, while other factors can take on both positive and negative characteristics depending on the situation.

### **Gender Socialization**

The concept of gender, along with the societal expectations and stereotypes it dictates, permeates people's lives in significant ways. This socially constructed concept of gender begins quite early and is evident throughout the lifetime. Gottfredson (2005)



asserted that children as young as six years old begin to categorize and associate certain characteristics, such as clothing, with a specific gender. Based on activities and behaviors, children at this age may associate certain jobs with a particular gender as well (Gottfredson, 2005). In reviewing and summarizing many articles that have focused on the topic of gender, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) stated: “gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference” (p. 510). When it comes to career development among girls and women, Betz (2005) identified two avenues in which gender role stereotypes can influence decisions. One avenue includes the belief that having and raising children should be of primary importance to women (Betz, 2005). The second stereotype dictates the work deemed appropriate for women and men (Betz, 2005). Such beliefs may hinder girls and women from reaching their academic and career potentials through systematic elimination of jobs or careers that are not considered gender appropriate or those that do not appear to be family friendly (Betz, 2005) or consistent with one’s own identity (Gottfredson, 2005). Thus, the limiting effects socialization has on women’s career development occur at every developmental stage—from the time before girls are even considering what they want to be when they grow up to when women become adults and face stereotypes that put pressure on them to uphold certain roles within family and work life.

Gender role beliefs can also be influential in the career development of young adults. Evans and Diekmann (2009) examined the relationship between gender role attitudes with life goals and career interests among students at a university in a series of three quantitative studies. Women and men participated in all three studies, with 81 to

95% identifying as Caucasian. The first study comprised 50 participants and explored how women and men rate careers according to gender stereotypes, and found that participants responded as hypothesized. That is, when asked about gender stereotyped occupations, participants confirmed that women would be more likely to work in the professions that researchers had identified as being stereotypically for women, and men would be more likely to work in those professions that were stereotypically for men. These same participants were asked to consider two different types of future goals, one focused on status and the other on caregiving, and asked participants to rate how selected professions would help achieve those goals. As Evans and Diekman (2009) expected, participants believed that the careers deemed traditionally for women would help in achieving the caregiving goal, whereas, participants believed that careers thought of as being traditionally for men would aid in achieving status. The second study including 65 participants explored personal goals and career interests, and found that women's goals were more consistent with caregiving and men's goals with status, which predicted career interests stereotypically associated with their gender (Evans & Diekman, 2009). The third study of 348 participants was more complex, exploring the impact of internalized beliefs and sexism. The authors found that while sexism was not found to be a significant factor, gender related attitudes were significant. In fact, beliefs about gender roles were internalized and influential in future goals selected by the participants, which in turn led to careers the participants were more interested in (Evans & Diekman, 2009).

### **Personal Identity Variables**

A wealth of research in the career development field has focused on a number of personal identity variables including an individual's personality, interests, abilities, and

values. Some of this research has focused on theory development or theory validation, while other research has looked at the effectiveness and reliability of career instruments. Many experts in the field have identified these four personal identity variables as instrumental in the career decision-making process, as evidenced by the career decision-making textbooks that are widely available to help individuals make a well-informed, holistic decision for their future career (Ducat, 2012; Sukiennik, Raufman, & Bendat, 2012). While each individual's career choice is unique because it involves a one of a kind compilation of personal identity factors, some researchers have found evidence to suggest that gender may influence the values subscribed to and in turn, influence the types of careers considered (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). For the purposes of this literature review, the remainder of this section will consider the role of gender in career development.

The set of values qualified as central to an individual's identity is a complex phenomenon to examine, particularly when addressing it in a career development context. There are various ways in which a researcher or career counselor can help individuals conceptualize values, and it often takes the form of defining values in terms of work environment versus personal beliefs, or internal versus external motivators. In an examination of work values across various demographic groups, Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) found both similarities and differences in the espoused values between women and men participants. The authors chose to study the classifications of work values identified by Elizur (as cited in Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007), which were prestige and social, extrinsic and intrinsic values. The data were collected through a survey given to first-year college students over a 10-year period. In a data set of over 30,000 college students, the authors found no differences between women and men in the role that career prestige and

intrinsic values played in career selection. Where Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) did find variations between women and men in values adopted was in the remaining value classifications of extrinsic and social type values. Socially oriented values were more often endorsed by women respondents, whereas, men identified extrinsic values as being more influential in their career aspirations. This finding might provide some explanation of the higher rates of women versus men in socially oriented fields including careers that provide service to others (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Further, the finding that men are more likely than women to cite extrinsic values, including aspects such as salary, as important to their career selection (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007) is interesting in light of the gender pay gap. Though White students were more likely to value autonomy and both African American and Asian American students were somewhat more likely to value extrinsic components, the authors noted due to the moderate effect size, this needs to be explored further. To summarize, while there are several factors that impact one's ultimate career decision, research has indicated that women may be more apt to choose a career that advances humanity and serves others, while men may be more likely to select a career that brings in more compensation.

### **Parental Relationships**

Researchers and career theorists have long been interested in the impact of parents on the career development of their children. Some research in this area has focused on the types of parenting styles used or the types of attachment between parents and children, while other research has looked to simple conversations between parents and children to help explain the career aspirations and attainment of the children. Although some studies solely focus on women, other studies show outcomes that may vary based on the gender

of the children. For the purposes of this literature review, articles that focused on the impact of parents on daughters' aspirations and achievements were explored.

In a recent study, Wojtalik, Breckenridge, Gibson Hancox, and Sobehart (2007) were interested in the role that early parental influences played in their children's later career aspirations and attainment. Participants in this phenomenological study included eight women who all identified as Caucasian and were in the fields of education or business. Half of the participants in each group were leaders in their field. The authors fully described their research process and used several techniques to provide holistic and detailed findings. In addition to interviews, participants kept journals, completed a self-esteem assessment, and were involved in focus groups. Overall, Wojtalik et al. (2007), found that socialization and parenting influenced daughter's later career choices and leadership attainment. Career attainment was not found to be influenced by the parental unit performing traditional gender roles, but was related to the beliefs parents held of their daughters. For instance, parental beliefs were crucial in the academic achievement of the women participants. Specifically, over half of the women in the study were college graduates and all of these graduates have memories of their parents expecting them to further their education (Wojtalik et al., 2007). The opposite was true for the women without advanced education; their parents had no college expectations for them. How women viewed their mothers in terms of subservience and independence also played a role in their career later in life, as evidenced by women with less independent mothers who were not apt to hold leadership positions within their career fields (Wojtalik et al., 2007). From these findings, Wojtalik and colleagues suggested that daughters are influenced by the overt and subtle messages communicated by their parents.

Drawing from developmental and child psychology, the types of attachments children develop with their parents and the types of parenting styles utilized can be significant in achievement outcomes during childhood and adulthood. As Lease and Dahlbeck (2009) found while reviewing existing literature, authoritative parenting is unanimously classified as the model parenting style, and is characterized by parents who are affectionate yet firm with their children. Parents using an authoritative style are thought to be supportive of their children's development, as opposed to the other parenting styles that are thought to be associated with less desirable outcomes. Authoritarian parenting is a more directive style that employs lower levels of affection toward children, while passive parenting is the near opposite and displays high levels of affection and low levels of directedness (Lease & Dahlbeck, 2009).

The literature reviewed reported that the attachment between parent and child resulted in an array of outcomes, and outcomes that varied on their level of support or hindrance to the child's career development. In their study, Lease and Dahlbeck (2009) examined the relationship between the confidence participants had in making a decision about their career, also known as career decision self-efficacy, and parental factors including the style of parenting used and quality of attachment. This quantitative study included 257 university students, most who identified as White (60%) or African American (33%). Four questionnaires, all with established validity and reliability were utilized. Lease and Dahlbeck (2009) found that daughters who were confident about the career they selected tended to have a healthy attachment to their mothers. However, the research did not support similar levels of career decision self-efficacy with attachment between fathers and daughters. The authors were surprised to discover that the

authoritarian parenting style was most influential on children's confidence in their career selection. Because the authoritative style is generally regarded as the ideal, it was hypothesized this type would be most closely linked to feeling confident in the career selection process (Lease & Dahlbeck, 2009). In a similar study, Li and Kerpelman (2007) examined college women's career decision confidence and its connection to the relationship the college women had with their parents. The study included 304 traditionally aged college women, 95.7% of whom identified as European American. Specifically, Li and Kerpelman (2007) asked the participants to consider that their mother or father hypothetically showed opposition to their selected career. Coupled together, a strong relationship with a parental figure and parental opposition to the career selected, resulted in the participant reporting a negative affect. Furthermore, college women were more apt to abandon their current career choice in exchange for a career that their parents found desirable when a strong parent-child attachment was present (Li & Kerpelman, 2007). Participants were less likely to report that they would alter their decision if they could cognitively delineate their own opinions from those declared by their mothers. This finding of staying true to their personal aspirations as a result of dichotomously considering personal and parental opinions was also found for fathers, but was dependent upon being able to engage in mother-daughter conversations about future goals (Li & Kerpelman, 2007).

While some researchers have examined children's general career aspirations and the influence of parental factors, other researchers have looked specifically at those who aspire or have attained careers in science. Studying women who choose the science field or other careers dominated by men is particularly interesting because women have a long

history of low representation in science and related fields. In a study using a historical sample of 803 scientists, Sonnert (2009) compared women to men in the factors reported as instrumental in the decision to pursue a career in science, and found that it was more common for women to credit their parents and specifically their fathers as instrumental to their career decision. The authors suggested that the occurrence of fathers being more instrumental to their daughter's career decision might be because men have much higher representation in the science field (Sonnert, 2009).

On the other hand, in exploring participants' perceptions of success and the factors they attribute to their achievements, Bradford, Buck, and Meyers (2001) recruited volunteers from two professional organizations. Participants included Black and White identified women who were asked to complete a questionnaire that the authors developed and was influenced by the research they conducted and existing survey questions they adapted. The authors found that participants believed that their mothers were more instrumental in the achievements they had attained as compared to the role played by their fathers. This impact of mothers on success was felt even stronger among Black daughters, as their mothers took their involvement with their daughters to a new level, one that was characterized by advice giving and problem solving to bolster success (Bradford et al., 2001).

As might be expected, research has demonstrated that parents have an impact on their children's career choices. Some of the research that was reviewed yielded mixed findings, exhibiting a stronger correlation between either the mother (Lease & Dahlbeck, 2009) or father (Sonnert, 2009) and the daughter's career choice. Because a college education can lead to additional career options, it is important to note that the research



indicated that parental expectations for children to advance their education could have a strong correlation to the child's subsequent enrollment at a university or college (Wojtalik et al., 2007).

### **Social Class**

Social class clearly impacts the resources any given individual has access to, and resources that factor into an individual's career development do not seem to be exempt. For example, in a study of undergraduate students in which women were the majority of respondents, Thompson and Subich (2006) examined how self-efficacy in the career selection process was influenced by the class position or status held by the respondent. To ensure validity and reliability of the assessments used, the authors first conducted a pilot study. The sample included 147 women and 74 men enrolled in psychology courses, a majority of whom identified as Caucasian American (79.8%) and nearly 10% of participants identifying as African American. Because with higher socioeconomic status generally comes greater access to resources, the authors expected and found that career selection that was met with self-assured individuals tended to be those belonging to higher, more prestigious classes (Thompson & Subich, 2006).

The prestige level of the careers adolescents aspire to is related to this discussion on social class and is an area that a few researchers have investigated. In a large national database comprising of just over half female adolescents, Rojewski and Kim (2003) explored the role that socioeconomic status played in the desired future occupations of the participants. The authors noted that the data was fairly dated, some that was from 10 or more years prior to their study. Socioeconomic status was found to be a strong predictor of desired occupations. Specifically, the authors found that students who came

from higher socioeconomic status families were more apt to go on to college and those who reported plans to go to college were more likely to desire higher status occupations. On the other hand, the adolescents from lower socioeconomic status families tended to plan to go directly to work after high school and not enroll in college (Rojewski & Kim, 2003).

Whereas the studies reviewed so far in this section have examined various socioeconomic class or social position among its participants, Lapour and Heppner (2009) invited adolescent women from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds who attended a private prep school to talk about their beliefs around their career decisions. Because it was important to create a fairly homogenous sample so the research question could be studied in depth, the authors were selective about recruiting participants, and all participants were enrolled in a private prep school. All participants were White, and the great majority of their parents were college graduates. Through 10 participant interviews analyzed using a grounded theory design, the authors found that families' high socioeconomic statuses did impact the way participants thought about the career options available to them in various ways. Coming from privileged backgrounds, these participants were exposed to many opportunities that are not available to students from other social classes and often looked up to their father and their father's achievements (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). Moreover, the researchers found that participants had high expectations for themselves and tended to view establishing their career as a priority. While these factors are seemingly supportive in nature, other findings from this study were more neutral or even at odds with having a wide array of options available to these adolescent women. For example, some participants in this study felt compelled to

maintain the social status they grew up with and avoided some careers accordingly. More specifically, participants were cautious of careers that were not as highly respected, lateral careers in which promotion is uncommon, and unstable professions in which a set income could not be depended upon (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). As the authors suggested, not only are these women provided with great opportunities that encourage them to consider careers with high prestige, being exposed to high socioeconomic status values also seems to eliminate careers that would not allow them to maintain their status level.

Similarly, Pisarik and Shoffner (2009) were interested in looking at the relationship between the socioeconomic class held by each individual and the perceived possible career options. In a somewhat diverse sample of 201 college students and women making up the majority of participants, nearly 26% identified as African American and just over 64% identified as European American, with other identities including Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American. The authors examined a number of factors that were compiled in the authors' self-developed questionnaire on "work possible selves." Influenced by a few inventories measuring work values, this instrument assessed items such as satisfaction with work, achievement orientation, and making use of personal skills. The purpose of this instrument and the study in general was to consider various aspects of career selection by addressing not only the career deemed as most desirable even if unattainable, but also to consider the likely career outcome and the beliefs held by the respondents. Instead of making a simple inquiry, social class seemed to be subjectively established by the authors taking into account the status assigned to the current job position held by the respondent with the socioeconomic class that was self-reported by the respondent. No effect was found for

socioeconomic status on the desired or fantasy career, socioeconomic position was positively related to increased anticipation of their work possible selves (Pisarik & Shoffner, 2009). In other words, having a higher socioeconomic status implied that a participant anticipated their future work would utilize their skills, be satisfying, and other positive attributions assessed on the instrument.

Social class can have a profound impact on educational experiences and resources available, and therefore, is likely to impact access to career options. Those from higher socioeconomic classes are more likely to attend universities and colleges, thereby gaining access to a greater variety, as well as higher paying jobs (Thompson & Subich, 2006). However, being from an economically privileged background may also serve to limit one's consideration of a number of careers due to the fact that some careers could not support or maintain a particular lifestyle or that some careers are seen as less prestigious (Lapour & Heppner, 2009).

### **Mentoring Relationships and Role Models**

In recent years, many researchers have been interested in looking at the impact of mentoring on the career outcomes of the mentee, particularly in regard to women's career advancement (Brown, 2005; Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Wiethoff, 2010). In a review of the literature on mentoring, Gibson (2004) noted there were several ideas of what mentoring was, but that mentors can be helpful in learning organizational structure and providing career advice. Mentoring programs can be found essentially everywhere, being present in academia, the private and nonprofit sectors, and in a variety of disciplines. Moreover, mentoring does not have to be a part of a formal program where a coordinator matches a mentee with a mentor within the organization or field. Mentoring can take on a

more informal approach, with mentees finding role models they can ask advice from and look up to.

Some researchers studying mentoring have focused on the specific outcomes of the mentees involved in the mentoring relationship. In a qualitative study of nine full-time women faculty, Gibson (2004) sought to explore how mentoring relationships were helpful to women mentees and identified several themes in the stories of participants. Participants were recruited through university faculty email lists or through discussing the study with the researcher. Overall, mentees credited the mentor relationship with desirable personal and professional outcomes (Gibson, 2004). Several specific themes were identified through this phenomenological study. First, mentees believed that their mentor was looking out for them and that they demonstrated regard for their mentees (Gibson, 2004). Second, central to the mentoring relationships was experiencing connectedness, and was evidenced by a level of trust (Gibson, 2004). Third, mentors fostered a sense of mattering and accomplishment felt by their mentees. Fourth, mentees noted that knowing there was support and not being isolated when experiencing uncomfortable situations was significant. Finally, the author identified that having an environment in which mentoring is encouraged is helpful to the success of mentoring outcomes (Gibson, 2004).

Not only do mentors provide career related support, they have also been found to aid women in overcoming some of the barriers associated with sexual and racial discrimination. For example, Bacchus (2008) explored the coping strategies that Black women used in dealing with stress from their jobs. A total of 203 participants were included in the sample, in which all had earned at least a bachelor's degree. While

spirituality and positive thinking topped the list and several other factors were more commonly noted, Bacchus (2008) found that 41% of participants reported mentors as one of the coping mechanisms used. Another study looking at barriers and how participants overcame such barriers, Jackson and Harris (2007) surveyed African American women who had achieved the position of president at a higher education institution, exploring both the barriers and coping mechanisms used. Prior to the study, the author ensured validity of the survey used by consulting with experts and conducting a pilot study. While the participants in the study encountered numerous obstacles and were trailblazers in obtaining a high-power position traditionally held by men, among many other achievement-related variables, mentors that positively influenced their career attainment were mentioned by 35% of the participants (Jackson & Harris, 2007).

In a study that explored the supportive role mentoring can have in the career advancement of women, Brown (2005) surveyed 91 women college presidents, the majority of who identified as White. The author found that more often than not, the career progression experienced by these women college presidents was impacted by a mentoring relationship they had. In fact, some of the respondents had mentors who were very direct in guiding them to apply for such job positions (Brown, 2005). The gender of those in the mentoring relationship has also been a topic of exploration among researchers in this area, and has been researched by Ramaswami et al. (2010) in a study of lawyers paired with a mentor. The sample included 236 participants, the majority of whom were men. Interestingly, Ramaswami et al. (2010) found different outcomes between women and men mentees when matched with high-ranking lawyers who

identified as men, discovering that the effect on career advancement was greater for women.

Similar to the importance of mentoring on career attainment, role models can make a difference in women's career aspirations. Quimby and DeSantis (2006) explored the impact of self-efficacy and role models collectively in a sample of 368 university women students, the majority of whom identified as White. In using instruments with proven validity and reliability, the authors found that the combined factors of self-efficacy and role models were influential in the types of careers chosen by participants. The sole influence of role models on careers chosen played a small, yet significant role that was above and beyond only assessing skill confidence for numerous career types except for science related fields.

The research on mentoring relationships on women's career development is overwhelmingly conclusive, exhibiting strong evidence of the positive impact mentors have on mentee's career progression in different employment sectors (Brown, 2005; Ramaswami et al., 2010). Not only do mentors lend support and help mentees understand how to negotiate the politics inherent in their particular organization, but mentors can also have a profound impact on mentees' future career aspirations and attainment (Gibson, 2004).

### **Partners and Motherhood**

It is not uncommon for women to hear the narrative that they cannot "have it all" in terms of having a family and a career, with this message sometimes coming from powerful women leaders (Caprino, 2014). While some of the research does support this type of advice given to professional women (Hewlett, 2002), other research has argued

that women do not necessarily have to give up having children or be a bad mother when it comes to climbing the career ladder (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009). This is not to ignore that having both a family and a career will be challenging or will require careful consideration; however, it is possible to have both a family and career, and to be satisfied in both realms (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009).

An example of one of the more negative perspectives on this phenomenon is expressed in an article authored by Hewlett (2002). Through the title, *Executive Women and the Myth of Having it All*, the author asserted that it is actually a myth that women can be successful and satisfied in both their parenting role and executive career. Though more details about the study may be presented in the author's book, this article did not outline the survey questions used, validity or reliability of measures taken, or many details about participants. Through surveying women who were highly successful in their careers and some successful men to make a few comparisons, Hewlett (2002) found men were more likely to be fathers despite the fact they held successful careers, while the highest achieving women were less likely to be mothers. A similar effect was found when examining marriage rates among the participants; highly successful career women were less likely than their male counterparts to be married. The author also noted a few other reasons why having both a family and a career can be problematic, including how the time in which it would be optimal to invest a lot of energy into a career coincides with the time it is desirable to have children. Moreover, Hewlett (2002) warned that if women delay having children too long, they may find they are infertile when trying to conceive a child. An additional finding that puts women at a disadvantage is the long researched fact that women still perform a majority of the household chores. After a long day at work,



women were also more likely than men to care for children and take on basic household responsibilities. Thus, this author suggested that the choice to have both a high-ranking career and have a family would be considered a barrier because professional women will be unsatisfied with one or both aspects of their lives (Hewlett, 2002).

Although some women experience negative reactions in the quest to “have it all” such as the previous study suggests, other women have a more neutral or positive outlook on mothering and having a successful career at the same time. Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) set out to interview high-ranking career women who have obviously worked diligently at their success while experiencing great satisfaction from family life at the same time. Participants included 25 high-level professional women who also were in an intimate partnership. After compiling data from these interviews, the authors suggested that women who were satisfied in both domains possessed “a certain character and outlook on life” (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009, p. 275) that included a general positive outlook along with purposeful contemplation and planning.

Support from partners and other sources has also been a topic of research when examining women who successfully balance work and family roles and report satisfaction in both domains. While much of the research assumes heterosexuality and the desire to get married, such research nonetheless seems applicable to same-sex and heterosexual partnerships. For example, husbands or partners who step in to provide moral support, share in the childcare and household tasks, and make sacrifices for their partner’s career can make a big difference in a woman’s ability to successfully manage multiple roles (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009). In an earlier article, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008) provided more in-depth information regarding what exactly is helpful for

executive women when it comes to relationships with their spouses or partners. Using a qualitative design, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 high-level professional women. When it came to household and family related tasks, this article also identified that women valued how their husbands stepped in to perform domestic tasks without the research participant requesting the work to be done (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008). In addition to those household and childcare tasks previously discussed, the authors mentioned high achieving women appreciated when their partners simply listened and provided suggestions regarding their career situations. On the other side of the spectrum, the women participants in Ezzedeen and Ritchey's (2008) study also identified what constituted their partner as unhelpful in their management of career and family life. Common concerns women had regarding the lack of support from their partner included the partner not sharing in the domestic work, their partner being discontented about their absence from the family and sharing this discontentment with others, and having their career come second after their partner's career (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

Based on survey research and interviews with high achieving women, Hewlett (2002) found that women often felt regret or loss over not having children and recommended that women who want to "have it all" should focus on partner selection and beginning a family earlier on in one's life journey, while finding both a career and organization that is family friendly. Through their interviews with women who reported satisfaction in both the family and career domains, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) found that women also generally enjoyed positive relationships with coworkers. Other strategies that women engaged in as identified by Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) included being intentional in attending to one domain at a time, or being very systematic in attending to

both work and family at the same time. Moreover, women who successfully managed both a successful career and family life were open to finding other ways that would free up some time including paying for housecleaning services (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009).

Whether or not women can simultaneously maintain a full-time career and be a mother, while being satisfied continues to be controversial, both in today's media and in academic research. Some authors have asserted that women who attempt to "have it all" will never be happy, and that it is an unrealistic feat to try and maintain a full-time career while also having children (Hewlett, 2002). Other researchers have found that women can be satisfied in both roles, but found that supportive partners who share in the childcare and household duties help in maintaining work-life balance and satisfaction with their career and family role (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

## **Sexism**

Sexism is another external factor that has been a major obstacle for many women as they are pursuing their careers. Sexism is an issue that exists on different levels, including institutional, interpersonal, and unconscious sexism (Cudd & Jones, 2005). All three levels of sexism can impact women in their career development, albeit in different ways. First, the various rules, policies, or regulations that hinder women from equality on an organizational level are considered examples of institutional sexism (Cudd & Jones, 2005). Interpersonal sexism is relationship based and includes the observations people make and encounters they have that teach them what is deemed "appropriate" for their gender, limiting them from activities and behaviors that are considered nontraditional for the individual's gender (Cudd & Jones, 2005). Unconscious sexism is sometimes difficult

to discern, however, is evidenced when people for reasons unbeknownst to them favor men over women (Cudd & Jones, 2005).

Sexism continues to be pervasive in today's society and is evidenced in employment in numerous ways. One such way is through wage discrimination, where women earn less on average than men do. While factors such as whether someone is employed full or part time and educational differences such as choice of academic major can explain part of the discrepancy in wages, part of the wage gap remains unaccounted for (Corbett & Hill, 2012). A report by the AAUW (2013) noted: "In nearly every line of work, women face a pay gap. Among the many occupations for which the Bureau of Labor Statistics collects data that allow for valid comparison, women's earnings are higher than men's in only a handful" (p. 15). Upon graduating from college, women are still faced with a wage gap that only increases over time. While this expanding wage gap can be partially attributed to having children, the percentage of the wage gap that is unexplained is even higher, "which suggests that discrimination may worsen over time or that the effects of gender discrimination are cumulative" (Goldberg Dey & Hill, 2007, p. 28).

Women also are prone to experiencing harassment, which is likely to impact work satisfaction, lead to a hostile work environment, and hinder opportunities for promotion or advancement. Out of the 11,364 reports of sexual harassment complaints filed to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) and similar agencies, only 16.3% of reports came from men. Sexism can include thoughts and behaviors that are quite obvious to those that are not easily recognizable as sexism. Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter (1995) effectively explain the change in how sexism plays out in society as they stated:

People, while rejecting old-fashioned discrimination and stereotypes, may believe that discrimination against women is a thing of the past, feel antagonistic toward women who are making political and economic demands, and feel resentment about special favors for women, such as policies designed to help women in academics or work. (p. 200)

The above statement is referring to what the authors called “modern sexism.”

In a recent study, Watkins et al. (2006) were interested to see how modern sexism or the beliefs one holds might impact progression in one’s career. The sample included 192 participants, who largely identified as either African American (45.3%) or White (49%) and the majority of whom were men. Specifically, the authors found that gender matters and is connected to modern sexism when it comes to the people to whom an individual looks to discuss work situations. Watkins et al. (2006) also found support for the idea that gender matters in talking about the career progression or promotions enjoyed and specifically found that those who addressed their career concerns predominantly with men enjoyed greater outcomes. Additionally, a connection has been identified between the first two findings, discovering an indirect link between holding sexist beliefs and advancement in one’s career (Watkins et al., 2006). The authors stated that gender did not matter in terms of the person who sought out someone for advice and cautioned readers that “women holding modern sexist beliefs who, in turn, move up the organization may be the women least likely to assist other women in getting ahead” (Watkins et al., 2006, p. 533).

To summarize, from the gender wage gap to outright gender-based harassment, sexism is still alive in and outside the workplace. While there are many factors that

partially account for the wage gap, such as academic major, occupational choice, and hours worked, part of the wage gap is unexplainable (Corbett & Hill, 2012). Additionally, women contend with sexism and harassment in the workplace. Sexism can take on many different forms, and can include discrimination at the institutional level by way of unfair policies to discriminatory stereotypes regarding behavior that is deemed appropriate based on gender to other unconscious actions that are sexist (Cudd & Jones, 2005).

### **Racism**

In addition to sexism, Women of Color may often face additional discrimination and harassment based on their race. The previous section discussed the gender wage gap, however, the wage gap is even greater when race and ethnicity is considered. Asian and White workers earn higher wages, while Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino workers earn lower wages (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). When comparing the average earnings of women to men within each racial and ethnic group, women earn less than men. Compared to the overall weekly average for full time employees of \$669 for women and \$824 for men, Black or African American women averaged \$592 per week, Latina or Hispanic women averaged \$508, and Asian women averaged \$773 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011, p. 6).

In addition to the wage gap outlined above, coupled together, racism and sexism can have unique and obviously detrimental effects on personal well-being. For example, in a study of 91 African American women who were involved in suing their employer because of sexual harassment, Buchanan and Fitzgerald (2008) examined participants' work satisfaction and personal well-being. The authors found that assessing racial harassment along with sexual harassment clearly predicted personal well-being more than

solely considering sexual harassment. That is, racial and sexual harassment were associated with poorer personal and occupational well-being. The fact that examining the outcomes of racial and sexual harassment together is a better predictor provides support for how one's whole identity must be taken into account. By neglecting to consider one or more aspects of an individual's identity, there is a risk of not understanding the true experience or situation. The authors found mixed findings when assessing possible interactional effects of sexual and racial harassment. Buchanan and Fitzgerald (2008) found that racial and sexual harassment intermingled produced increased negative outcomes on a few factors measuring occupational well-being, when compared to the two types of harassment studied simultaneously. Personal well-being, however, was not found to be further impacted by the interaction of the two types of harassment (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008).

Due to racial and sexual discrimination, many women may feel pressure to "shift," that is take on different personas according to what is desired in their workplace setting. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) detailed many women's stories about shifting and their experiences with racial and sexual harassment. Shifting can be extremely challenging and can encompass many behaviors including overcompensating to break the myths. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) emphasized how shifting can be exhausting, resulting in women feeling disconnected and can lead to health problems. Black women interviewed by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) also noted various times where they experienced employment discrimination including being treated poorly, being passed over for a job opportunity after the employer realized they were Black, and being overworked without compensation. Because their gender is racialized and they may be sexually objectified,

Black women frequently face sexual harassment, which is an assault on women's personal well-being and also impacts their work (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Due to their multiple marginalized identities, Women of Color may find themselves working against more pervasive discrimination based on their gender and race. The compilation of race and gender discrimination is extremely problematic and has been found to negatively impact both employment and personal well-being (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Faced with ongoing discrimination, Black women may find themselves with numerous stress-related health problems and being excluded from promotion opportunities due to sexism and race discrimination (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

### **Feminism and Feminist Identity**

The literature reviewed so far has focused on women's career development, and in particular the supportive factors and barriers identified in the research. However, there is much more to women's career development than the factors detailed so far in this chapter such as an individual's multiple identities. It is relatively common to find career development research exploring unique considerations or experiences of a specific group identity, such as Black or African American students (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007; Nichols, & Tanksley, 2004), Latino students (Constantine et al., 2007; Gushue, Clarke, Pantzer, & Scanlan, 2006), Asian American students, (Fouad et al., 2008; Winnie Ma & Yeh, 2005), African immigrant students (Stebbleton, 2007) along with other racial and ethnic identities; lesbian, gay, bisexual (Nauta, Saucier, & Woodard, 2001; Schmidt, Miles, & Welsh, 2011; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006), and transgender people (Scott, Belke, & Barfield, 2011), and people with disabilities (Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011; Nota, Ginevra, & Carrieri, 2010). A general topic that has been relatively neglected in the



career development literature is how adopted social identities impact personal career development. Social identities are those that are chosen to describe a philosophy on life and actions taken by an individual, and could include identifying as a liberal, conservative, feminist, womanist, humanist, and so on. Each of these distinct identities is likely to have unique implications on career development as they serve to describe the individual's personal views and moral values, and provide a lens from which one views the world. For the purposes of this dissertation, the social identity of classifying oneself as a feminist was selected as the primary factor for analysis. Since a solid research base does not exist in terms of feminist identity and its impact on career development, and because it is crucial to have a broad understanding of feminist identity for this dissertation, the remainder of this literature review will focus on various factors of feminist identity including different theoretical frameworks of feminist identity, precursors to adopting feminist attitudes or a feminist identity, outcomes associated with adopting such an identity or attitudes, and the choice of labeling oneself as a feminist.

### **Models of Feminist Identity**

Researchers have examined feminist identity and attitudes in a variety of ways. Some studies have focused on the attitudes held such as beliefs toward gender roles, while others have considered participant beliefs and assigned participants to a stage on a developmental model. Yet other researchers have been more interested in how individuals label themselves and have used dichotomous variables requiring participants to identify as or not as a feminist, or identify in other ways such as privately versus publicly, and various possible combinations of adopting a feminist label with feminist-held beliefs.

One prevalent model that was cited in several articles (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Liss & Erchull, 2010; Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001; Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Yakushko, 2007; Yoder, Fischer, Kahn, & Groden, 2007; Zucker, 2004; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010) is Downing and Roush's (1985) developmental model of feminist identity which is modeled after the Black identity development model by Cross (1971). The Downing and Roush (1985) model has five stages in which women can cycle through, revert back, and become stuck in. The first stage, *passive acceptance*, is evidenced by women not recognizing sexism. This is followed by the second stage, or *reevaluation* period, when some event or multiple situations arise that often cause negative feelings and motivate women to reassess their worldview (Downing & Roush, 1985). Third, with the *embeddedness-emanation* stage, women may form new identities and relationships with other women (Downing & Roush, 1985). *Synthesis* is the fourth stage and is characterized by the "development of an authentic and positive feminist identity" (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 699). The final stage, *active commitment*, is demonstrated by a woman's dedication to advocating against sexism in a way that is valuable and helpful (Downing & Roush, 1985).

People seem reluctant to identify themselves as feminists (Swanson, 2013); however, this hesitancy seems to decrease when given the option to select out of identifying as a "strong" feminist (Huddy et al., 2000). In fact, researchers have found that there are significant numbers of women who believe in a range of feminist principles, yet do not identify as feminists (Aronson, 2003; Liss, et al. 2001; Zucker, 2004). Olson et al. (2008) focused their study on this very topic and examined the feelings that both women and men have toward feminism. This qualitative study consisted of six focus

groups; in half of the groups, all the participants along with the facilitator were women, and the other half, all the participants along with the facilitator were men. Each facilitator began with a script, with the rest of the focus group being more conversational and followed a semi-structured interview format. The authors created a theoretical model from the data, in which participant attitudes toward feminism were delineated into four categories. The *embracing* category was characterized by participants referring to themselves as feminists in addition to believing in the ideals of feminism and having a sense of self that contained feminist ideals (Olson et al., 2008). The only difference between this category and the *denouncing* category was that the participants in the latter did not adopt the feminist label (Olson et al., 2008). In the *reframing* category, participants believed in feminist principles but such beliefs were not incorporated into their sense of self and participants in this group did not think of themselves as feminists (Olson et al., 2008). Finally, participants in the *resisting* category not only refused to identify as a feminist, but they also rejected ideals and lived in accordance with traditional gender attitudes (Olson et al., 2008).

There are a variety of ways to conceptualize feminist identity and researchers such as Downing and Roush (1985) have created a stage model in which individuals progress through levels of varying awareness and activism related to feminism. Others have focused on the extent to which individuals adopt feminist principles, along with whether or not they self-identify as a feminist.

### **Influential Factors on Feminist Attitudes or Identity**

In addition to feminist identity development, researchers have been interested in the influential factors that either introduced participants to feminism or played a role in

strengthening their identity as a feminist. This section will explore the literature pertaining to common and influential factors to adopting a feminist identity that have been the focus of research, and includes exposure to feminism in formal ways such as through women's studies coursework and informal ways such as through friends and family or experiences with sexism.

Many scholars have studied the impact that taking gender and women's studies coursework has on an individual's recognition of gender inequality and feminist beliefs held by the individual. For example, through a lengthy questionnaire and quantitative analysis, Yoder, Fischer et al. (2007) examined gender-related attitudes among 120 college students at the beginning and end of a psychology of women course, and compared these results with a control group of 228 students in an introductory psychology course. It is also noteworthy to mention that the authors sampled a number of sections of the psychology of women course and the courses were taught by a few different instructors. A few interesting findings came from this study. First, women students who chose to enroll in the psychology of women course held beliefs that were different from students in introductory level psychology in terms of taking on a more constructionist view that recognizes the impact gender socialization has on individuals rather than believing all differences are more biological based or an essentialist way of thinking (Yoder, Fischer et al., 2007). Second, constructionist attitudes became more common while essentialist attitudes decreased after taking the psychology of women course (Yoder, Fischer et al., 2007). Third, Yoder, Fischer et al. (2007) considered the feminist identity developmental model and found that psychology of women students progressed there as well.

In a study that also compared students enrolled in a psychology of women course to an introduction to psychology course, Katz, Swindell, and Farrow (2004) found similar results. This study included only women participants, 55 from the psychology of women course and 41 from the introduction to psychology course. Through a quantitative analysis using several well-established surveys, the authors found that feminist beliefs held among participants increased from the beginning to the end of the women's studies course. The authors were interested in more than exploring how feminist attitudes change as a result of the women's studies course. Additionally, Katz et al. (2004) sought to explore the impact that the psychology of women course had on collective self-esteem, which was modeled from an article authored by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) and identified four main components including perceived position of the individual within the group, the reputation the group has amongst the general society, opinions the individual holds about the group, and the significance of the given identity to the individual. Participants enrolled in the psychology of women course were found to have significantly different experiences with collective self-esteem from the beginning of the course to the end, evidenced by an increased understanding that women are not valued while at the same time having an increased sense that an important piece of their identity is being a woman (Katz et al., 2004).

Instead of relying on one course in which to obtain participants, Eisele and Stake (2008) assessed students twice during the semester in numerous women studies courses. In a sample of 435 college students where the majority of participants identified as women, just over 10% identified as African American, over 5% as Asian American, nearly 75% as Euro American, and over 3% as Latino. Participants completed a

comprehensive survey that assessed feminist identity and attitudes, along with self-efficacy. Similar to the previous studies, the authors found evidence that beliefs that are congruent with feminism increased among women students over the course of the semester. The effect of the women's studies course did not stop there; instead, these beliefs in turn were related to a greater likelihood of adopting a feminist label (Eisele & Stake, 2008). And those who held feminist beliefs and self-identified as feminists enjoyed greater levels of self-efficacy; in other words, they had a stronger belief in themselves that they could achieve something (Eisele & Stake, 2008). Reid and Purcell (2004) sought to study the effect that a number of positive experiences with feminism had on participant attitudes and identity. Such experiences not only included enrollment in women's studies courses, but also included having an influential feminist in their lives. A total of 96 women college students, who identified mostly as Black (31%) or Hispanic (50%) were included in the sample. The authors found that positive experiences with feminism did indeed impact the women participants in significant ways. Participants that reported having these experiences identified many benefits including that their identification as a feminist was strengthened, they felt a greater sense of belonging to women as a collective group, and held fewer negative and stereotypical views of feminists (Reid & Purcell, 2004).

While the research reviewed in this section has thus far focused on the impact women's studies courses and other positive experiences have on students in regard to feminist attitudes, feminist identity, or self-efficacy, other researchers have considered potentially negative experiences that women have that may lead to an increased alignment to feminism whether it be in beliefs held or labeling themselves as feminist.

Leaper and Arias (2011) explored the influences on self-identifying as a feminist through a questionnaire that was comprised of many measures. In a fairly multiculturally diverse sample of 169 women participants, participants mostly identified as Asian (14%), Latina (10%), and White (54%). Leaper and Arias (2011) discovered that participants who labeled themselves as feminists were likely to have been introduced to feminism through coursework or people they knew. An interesting finding was that self-identified feminists were likely to have experienced sexist events, however, this finding did not remain significant in the final analysis. Leaper and Arias (2011) also found that individuals who equated untrue or negative personal characteristics with feminism were less likely to label themselves as a feminist.

Through experience in gender and women's studies courses, students gain a better understanding of injustice and are more apt to believe in the principles of feminism (Katz et al., 2004). Taking gender and women's studies coursework can also have a positive influence on the choice to adopt a feminist identity (Eisele & Stake, 2008). Moreover, knowing others who identify as feminists can influence one's feminist identity development (Leaper & Arias, 2011).

### **Outcomes of Feminism and Feminist Identity**

Feminism is a philosophy of thinking in which one recognizes the numerous inequities based on gender and works for gender equality. As already established, feminism can also be an identity, and one that can be instrumental to the individuals who hold feminist values or identify as feminists. The literature on outcomes related to labeling oneself as a feminist is varied and somewhat contradictory with some research

pointing out associations with psychological distress and other research connecting identity to personal well-being.

An example of a study that has found both potentially negative and positive outcomes with self-identification is the previously discussed study by Katz et al. (2004). The authors examined the interactional effects of enrolling in a psychology of women course to participants' levels of depression and anxiety in relation to the participant's collective self-esteem based on their group identity status. Significant changes were not found in the rate women experienced depressed mood, however, anxiety was found to have interactional effects. The results indicated that feelings of anxiousness arose upon the grave realization of how much society fails to recognize women to the extent they do men; however, this outcome appeared to be cancelled by the fact that anxiety decreased when participants internalized and adopted feminist values (Katz et al., 2004).

Psychological distress and its relationship to feminist beliefs has been a topic of a few studies. While at first glance, these studies appear to show evidence that a feminist identity is undesirable, that is not the case. For instance, Moradi and Subich (2002) explored psychological distress in a quantitative study using a questionnaire that was completed by 191 women college students and women university employees. Moradi and Subich (2002) found some evidence that the participants experienced psychological distress at lower stages of feminist identity development. A quantitative study conducted by Fischer and Good (2004) appears to strengthen this finding. In a sample of 191 college women comprised mostly of White participants, the authors found that psychological distress was more common among those in the second stage of Downing and Roush's five-stage model of feminist identity development. This is not surprising since Downing



and Roush's feminist identity development model is progressive; those at the first stages are developing their awareness of the constraints that gender roles place on people.

Several studies have found evidence that possessing feminist attitudes or labeling oneself a feminist is associated with positive psychological outcomes. In a fairly socioeconomically diverse sample, participants identified as African American (13%), Asian American (8%), European American (57%), Latina (11%), and Native American (4%), with the remaining participants identifying with another identity or as multiracial. Through this sample that included staff and faculty at a university as well as students at varying levels, Saunders and Kashubeck-West (2006) examined personal well-being with the Downing and Roush's developmental model of feminist identity. Participants scoring in the highest level of feminist identity development were found to be better off psychologically (Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006). Similarly, Yakushko (2007) explored personally held attitudes through a large sample of 691 women, the majority of whom were White, 77% of whom had earned a bachelors degree or higher. The author found that when considering attitudes, women whose beliefs were feminist or moderate in nature experienced greater well-being than those holding traditional beliefs (Yakushko, 2007).

Other studies have focused on empowerment, and in particular how being a feminist has been associated with taking on equality initiatives. In examining participant responses to sexist events, Ayres, Friedman, and Leaper (2009) conducted an extensive quantitative study comprising of 338 women participants, most who were students in a college psychology course. In this fairly socioeconomically diverse sample, participants largely identified as Asian (14%), Latino (12%), or White (61%). The authors found that

women who adopted the feminist label reported a history of being confronted with sexist events and were also more likely to partake in activist efforts. Although these findings were not significantly correlated with challenging someone on their sexism, the authors found that self-identified feminist women were also more likely to actively respond to situations in which someone was being sexist toward them. Other variables associated with a likelihood of participants addressing sexism was if it was directed at them and if the participant and perpetrator knew one another and were considered peers (Ayres et al., 2009).

Other researchers have been interested in how feminist teachings or attitudes impact aspects of a person's well-being including those of body image and romantic relationships. In one study, Sabik and Tylka (2006) examined how being subjected to sexism is connected to attitudes consistent with disordered eating, but found that participants in the top two levels of the Downing and Roush feminist identity model fared better with the interaction between sexism and disordered eating being not as evident. In a sample of 160 women college students with participants identifying as African American (9.7%), Asian American (3.2%), European American (64.4%), and Latino (17.5%), Peterson, Tantleff-Dunn, and Bedwell (2006) examined the impact of educational interventions on body image. After analyzing the initial and follow-up surveys, the authors found that participants who had been exposed to feminist teachings not only increased their likelihood to identify with feminism, but also enjoyed higher levels of satisfaction with their body. Through an online survey, Hurt et al. (2007) examined the relationship between subscribing to a feminist identity to a few societal-related pressures. The sample comprised of 282 women who were mostly middle or

upper-middle class and White. The author found that self-identified feminist participants were less likely to feel stressed to conform to society's culture of thinness or pressure to be in a romantic relationship. When it comes to romantic relationships, possessing feminist attitudes also appears to be beneficial. In a sample of men and women college students, Rudman and Phelan (2007) found a relationship between not subscribing to feminist principles "with lowered expectations for egalitarian long-term intimate relationships...as well as less sexual assertiveness, overall and in the areas of initiation and safe sexual practices" (p. 370). Relatedly, among partners in heterosexual relationships, Rudman and Phelan (2007) found better relationship outcomes when both members were feminists.

Being introduced to feminism and subsequently adopting a feminist identity can bring about a mixed emotional response (Katz et al., 2004). On one hand, understanding the gravity of sexism and the restraining effects of socialization have the potential to cause psychological distress. To the contrary, understanding sexism and identifying as a feminist can empower individuals to take a stand by rejecting stereotypes and actively responding to sexism (Ayres et al., 2009). Furthermore, adopting feminist principles or a feminist identity has been found to have positive effects on an individual's self-worth and relationships (Rudman & Phelan, 2007).

### **Feminist Self-Identification**

The feminist movement has made great strides for gender equity, yet many people are hesitant to identify as feminists. In fact, nearly all the studies that inquired about self-identification found that the majority of participants did not identify themselves as feminists (Houvouras & Carter, 2008; Liss et al., 2001; McCabe, 2005; Nelson et al.,

2008; Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Yakushko, 2007; Yoder et al., 2011). Despite that sexism is still a fundamental problem in today's society and that gender equity is far from being achieved, most people do not identify with feminism for one reason or another. Often times, this rejection of the feminist label is linked to perceived negative characteristics, stereotypes about feminists, or the assumption that feminism is not valid or needed anymore.

Other times it may be due to not feeling like the feminist movement is a collective unit that encompasses all gender-related concerns and instead excludes many groups with multiple oppressed identities such as gender with race, sexual orientation, disability, or class. For instance, the United States feminist movement has been criticized for focusing on the concerns of White women and ignoring how women with multiple marginalized identities have a different experience and therefore different concerns (hooks, 2000b). This standpoint is valid, and is evidenced by the fact that White women have historically been at the forefront of the feminist movement in the United States, and have focused on the issues they felt were critical to their lives. In regard to feminism and the suppression of Black feminist ideas, Hill Collins (2009) asserted that "Theories advanced as universally applicable to women as a group upon closer examination appear greatly limited by the White, middle class, and Western origins of their proponents" (p. 8). Unfortunately, this trend resulted in many Women of Color and women with multiple marginalized identities feeling disenfranchised from the feminist movement. While the feminist movement today still possesses various challenges and problems in regard to race, class, and heterosexism (Valenti, 2007), the third-wave feminist movement strived to be more inclusive of many groups of people and their concerns relating to equality

(Dicker, 2008). Interestingly, among a large, but rather dated, participant sample from across the United States, McCabe (2005) did not find significant differences between participants' race and class as to whether they adopted a feminist label. In contrast and similar to other research, Eisele and Stake (2008) found that Black women were less likely to classify themselves as feminist than White women, however, Black women still believed in the principles of feminism. Moreover, in a fairly dated sample, Aronson (2003) found noteworthy social class and racial differences with those claiming their feminist identities without question coming from privileged class or White racial backgrounds. In comparison, those who considered themselves feminists but whose identity required explanation tended to either be Women of Color or women from less privileged classes but a White racial background (Aronson, 2003).

Many researchers have examined the phenomenon of self-labeling or self-identifying as a feminist and studied it among a number of other variables including positive and negative stereotypes associated with the term, political orientation, and belief in the importance of being an activist or taking collective action. The primary purpose of this section is to explore the variables associated with self-identifying as a feminist in more detail. Before that discussion can take place, it is relevant to consider who and what people consider to be feminist; in other words, individuals' definitions of a feminist. In a recent study of 270 women and men, Houvouras and Carter (2008) paired up college students to interview one another on how they conceptualized feminists, and compared these definitions to whether the participants considered themselves feminists. Employing a mixed qualitative and quantitative research design, the authors found that the college students held a wide range of definitions including inaccurate and negative

stereotypes, particularly among those who did not consider themselves feminists. Consistent with previous research, participants self-identifying as feminists constituted the minority at 30% with women more likely to identify as feminists than men (Houvouras & Carter, 2008, p. 244). Definitions varied among participants, but generally were able to be categorized into three areas including beliefs, actions, and characteristics. In the beliefs category, the most frequently shared belief particularly among self-identified feminists, was that feminists were people who believed in equal rights. In contrast, a small number of students who did not claim the feminist label had alarming views of feminism, believing that feminists were against equal rights. The stereotype of feminists claiming women as superior was another commonly held belief, though one that was more often held by those who did not identify as feminists (Houvouras & Carter, 2008). Not following gender role expectations was yet another part of the definition of feminism that some students held. When it came to actions category, activism and participating in gender equality activities was a common answer used to describe feminists. Other definitions that were action oriented included the belief that feminists are people who have participated in the discrimination of women or men, and people who were bra burners. Finally, several characteristics of people were used to define who feminists are including being a woman (Houvouras & Carter, 2008). Negative and derogatory words were also used to describe feminists, though those not identifying as feminists more often suggested these. A number of respondents believed in the stereotype that equates being a feminist with being a lesbian. While a few participants reported positive personal descriptors of feminists, this was uncommon and mostly reported by self-identified feminists (Houvouras & Carter, 2008).

To explore just how influential stereotypes can be on whether an individual chooses to identify as a feminist, Roy, Weibust, and Miller (2007) conducted an experimental study with 414 women college students who identified as mostly White, and assigned participants to one of three groups. Participants in the first two groups were presented with attributes of feminists that were either positive or negative in nature, and students in the third group simply read something that was on another subject all together (Roy et al., 2007). Although the two groups were only presented with a paragraph containing stereotypes, the effect that the paragraphs had on the participants was noteworthy. Women students who read the paragraph that delineated positive attributes of feminists were much more likely to label themselves as feminist than women students who had read the paragraphs that portrayed feminists in a negative way or was unrelated to feminism (Roy et al., 2007).

Not surprising, research that has examined perspectives about feminists and sexism found significant differences between feminist-identified and non-feminist-identified participants. For example, through quantitative analyses of surveys from 629 women, who largely identified as White, Liss and Erchull (2010) noted that participants who self-identified as feminist were more likely than their non-feminist-identified counterparts to note they had faced sexism and recognize gender inequity as a problem. In a quantitative study comprising of 333 university alumnae whose graduating classes spanned 40 years, Zucker (2004) examined the differences between women who adopted the feminist label and held feminist principles, those who adopted feminist principles but did not self-identify as feminist, and those who neither self-identified nor held feminist beliefs. The participants who both identified as feminist and held feminist beliefs more

commonly noted personal encounters of sexism (Zucker, 2004). Similarly, in a quantitative analysis in which 276 college women students completed surveys, Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010) found that feminist-identified women were significantly different than those not identifying with feminism or not adopting the label in that they were less accepting of all forms of sexism.

When examining feminist self-identification, other researchers have been interested in exploring collective beliefs that feminists are likely to hold even if they are not directly related to feminism. For example, in a quantitative study including 233 women college students who identified mostly as White and middle or upper class, Liss et al. (2001) found that among the 16% of women college students in their study that adopted the feminist label, these women were less likely to also hold conservative beliefs. In a more recent quantitative study comprising of 282 women who were mostly White and middle to upper class, Nelson et al. (2008) found that those who self-identified as feminists held more liberal views than non-feminist-identified participants. Similarly, in a large national sample, McCabe (2005) found that feminist-identified participants were not only more likely to hold liberal views, but also more likely to identify as Democrats. Self-identified feminists also generally hold more positive views of feminists (Liss et al., 2001; Nelson et al., 2008). In addition to a binary choice of whether one identifies as a feminist, Liss et al. (2001) studied feminist identification as a continuous variable and found that a third of the self-identified feminists were comfortable being open publicly about their self-identification, while another third of feminists preferred to keep that identification private. Most of the remaining women students that originally self-identified as feminists believed in feminist principles but did not claim the label on this



second scale (Liss et al., 2001). It was not uncommon for participants in the study to align themselves with some of the principles of feminism but not to claim the feminist label, and this was demonstrated by the majority of non-feminist-identified women believing in some of the features of feminism (Liss et al., 2001).

An additional pertinent finding that researchers have found when examining other beliefs held by self-labeled feminists is the collective belief in activism. In their sample of 220 women college students, Yoder et al. (2011) asked participants whether they considered themselves feminists and compared this to their reported participation in collective action. Self-identified feminist women were more likely to be actively involved in the women's movement through activism and other activities than non-feminist-identified women (Yoder et al., 2011). Participation in collective activism was also found among self-identified feminist participants in a study conducted by Nelson et al. (2008). In a study of university alumnae participants over a large range of years, Zucker (2004) also found that feminist-identified women are more apt to be participants in the movement advocating for equal rights.

Despite the fact that many agree with the main principles of feminism, there is much stigma attached to identifying as a feminist. Many of these negative connotations contradict or have nothing to do with what it means to be a feminist (Houvouras & Carter, 2008). Stereotypes with no grounding are plentiful and include being a man hater and a bra burner. Aligning oneself with feminism can have significant positive implications to advocating for a more just world, including recognizing the inequities that exist and taking collective action to overcome such inequities (Yoder et al., 2011; Zucker, 2004).

## Summary

Despite sexism and other barriers, women have made great progress in their career development. This literature review has explored a number of obstacles and supportive factors to women's career development and included the factors of personal values, child socialization, social class, parental relationships, mentors and role models, partner support and motherhood, sexism, and racism. While women have taken large strides in the world of work as evidenced by more and more women advancing further in their careers, breaking into nontraditional career fields, and starting to earn a salary that is closer to men, the fact that large discrepancies still exist in these areas coupled with the pervasiveness of sexism in today's society are major concerns.

Some research has examined the unique experiences of women with marginalized identities, however, minimal or no research has explored how having a feminist identity impacts one's career development. In order to have a better understanding of the impact of a feminist identity on women, the second half of this literature review focused on theoretical models of feminist identity, influences to adopting feminist attitudes and the feminist label, outcomes associated with believing in the principles of feminism, and factors that are correlated with the decision to assume a feminist identity. Findings suggest that those who adopt the feminist label tend to recognize sexism, value the work that women engage in, and believe in gender equality. All of these factors may impact the career development of women in terms of how they view supportive and obstructive factors, how they have been influenced by experiences or exposure to feminism, and the impact that self-identifying as a feminist has on their career choices.

With a feminist political consciousness and being able to recognize the gender inequities that are pervasive in our society, feminist-identified women may have a unique path or perception of their own career development. With this in mind, the overarching goal of this dissertation is to provide a venue to explore how feminist-identified women make meaning of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path. The following research questions served as a guide to this research:

1. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
2. How have life experiences impacted your career choices?
3. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
4. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
5. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?

The next chapter will delineate the methodology used in this dissertation to address the research questions outlined above.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the research design and methods that were used throughout this study. This chapter initially describes the gap in the literature and purpose of the study. Following the introduction to the study, the chapter details my worldview, influential theoretical frameworks, and my social position statement. The research design is the focus of the next section, and includes the methodology, participant selection, research methods, and data analysis. The final section describes the measures that were taken to ensure trustworthiness and overall quality.

#### **Restatement of Purpose**

This study intended to address a gap in the literature by exploring how a feminist identity impacts women's career development. There has been a substantial amount of research focused upon women's career development, primarily on the supports and barriers to career development, as well as on recommendations for career counselors. While much has been written on the broad area of women and career development, little has been delineated about feminism and career development. Some researchers have expressed interest in specific career development aspects such as feminist career assessment (e.g., Forrest & Brooks, 1993), while others have simply used a feminist approach in their research (e.g., Roper, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2005). However, there is much to be explored in terms of the relationship between feminism and career development. In particular, there is a gap in the literature regarding feminist identity and

career choices and experiences. Embracing the feminist label has been associated with an awareness of social justice and an activist approach to equality (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder, et al., 2011; Zucker, 2004). I believed that an individual's identity or worldview may in turn impact the careers women are drawn to, how they interpret their career journey and attainment, and their career goals for the future. Additionally, I anticipated that having a feminist political consciousness might impact one's life work.

To address this gap in the literature, this study's overarching research question was: How do feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path? This was explored through the following research questions:

1. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
2. How have life experiences impacted your career choices?
3. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
4. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
5. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?

### **Research Paradigm**

In qualitative research, it is vital that authors outline their research paradigm because it is influential through all stages of the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined the research paradigm as "a systematic set of beliefs, together with their accompanying methods" (p. 15). This section will detail the overarching research paradigm utilized, which will include discussion of postpositivism along with feminist,

intersectionality, and career theories. Additionally, this section will specify how the chosen research paradigm influenced the study.

### **Postpositivist Epistemology**

Essential to discussing one's research paradigm are epistemologies, or "theories, beliefs, and assumptions about the ways we can learn about the world" (Pascale, 2011, p. 29). The epistemology that guides my research and worldview is that of postpositivism, and is also referred to as naturalism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guba and Lincoln (1982) described five characteristics of the naturalistic paradigm. First, reality is viewed as complex with numerous truths (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). I see reality as constructed by each individual and was interested in learning about the lived experience and reality of each participant. The second component recognizes the mutual influence that exists between researcher and participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). The participants likely ascertained that I felt a certain way about this study, and in particular, that I identified as a feminist, which in turn may have influenced their responses. This study used interviews to collect data, and in following up and gathering more information, I may have been influenced by what each participant had already shared with me. Next, Guba and Lincoln (1982) delineated the limits on generalizations due to all data being contextually situated. The fourth characteristic stipulates that causal relationships cannot be determined. This study did not aim to obtain results that were widely generalizable or show casual relationships; instead, the focus of this study was to explore the interplay of feminist identities with career and life experiences. Finally, Guba and Lincoln (1982) established that the values of the researcher would impact the study in a number of ways, such as the selection of the research questions, guiding theories, and the analysis process. My own

values and experiences as a career counselor and with feminism certainly had an impact on my interest and choice in this research topic, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approach.

### **Feminist Theory**

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore how self-identified feminist women understand their feminist identity, career development, and life experiences; and thus it followed that the primary lens in which the data were collected and analyzed was guided by feminist theory. Feminist theory surely impacted this research, from the participant interviews to the interpretation of the data. To truly define feminist theory and all of its details would be an enormous undertaking and one that is beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, my view on feminist theory and its power to change the world is well described in a quote by Bunch (2010):

While feminist theory begins with the immediate need to end women's oppression, it is also a way of viewing the world. Feminism is an entire worldview or *gestalt*, not just a laundry list of "women's issues." Feminist theory provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives, and a feminist perspective can affect the world politically, culturally, economically, and spiritually. (p. 13)

When engaging in a feminist research project, DeVault and Gross (2007) asserted that it is important that authors clarify exactly how their research upholds feminism. The current research study coincides with many feminist issues and principles. First, this research clearly revolves around a feminist issue: career development and employment experiences. Discussed at length in chapter two, women experience sexism in many ways involving their career including wage discrimination, harassment, and the glass ceiling.

The research method chosen is also inherently feminist since it involves talking with women about their experiences and providing them with a space to share their voice. This study explored how a feminist identity impacts career development, perhaps extending to how exposure to feminism can aid in women's career trajectories and outcomes. Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007) articulated the impact feminist research could have for women when they stated: "By documenting women's lives, experiences, and concerns, illuminating gender-based stereotypes and biases, and unearthing women's subjugated knowledge, feminist research challenges the basic structures and ideologies that oppress women" (p. 4). Through the interview, participants had the opportunity to discuss experiences related to their feminist identity and career path, which included barriers likely due to their marginalized identities.

Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) also addressed important characteristics of feminist research, including the importance of recognizing the power dynamic between the researcher and participant by identifying and defining a related concept: "Reflexivity exposes the exercise of power throughout the *entire* research process. It questions the authority of knowledge and opens up the possibility for negotiating knowledge claims as well as holds researchers accountable to those with whom they research" (p. 495). As maintained by Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007), it is important for the researcher to consider power and its potential to impact the study from beginning to end. Attending to how I interacted with participants during the interview process and throughout the interpretation of the data was of paramount consideration throughout the study. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) suggested that researchers check themselves at multiple points during the study on whether they are being reflexive and offered a list of considerations



to reflect upon. Such items on their list that I engaged in included identifying biases and positionality, staying alert to the researcher-participant rapport and power, being an active listener, and recognizing how interpretations of participant stories are altered by commonalities or differences (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Additionally, DeVault and Gross (2007) asserted that it is imperative for researchers to examine how power in the researcher-participant relationship can impact the research outcome. When it comes to listening to the participants' stories, it is important not only to be an active and good listener because it impacts the interview itself, but also to recognize how privileges and various marginalized identities affect experience (DeVault & Gross, 2007). Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I engaged in personal reflection to ensure that power and biases were not taking over the data collection or analysis.

Although as the researcher I may share the common identity of being a feminist woman with the participants, it cannot be assumed that they automatically recognized this commonality or my authentic interest in their stories (DeVault & Gross, 2007). In congruence with reflexive interviewing, I remained open with the participants regarding the study's purpose and my own beliefs (DeVault & Gross, 2007). In fact, this study did not try to "trick" the participants, nor did it rely on them to be unaware of the study's intentions. Quite to the contrary, I remained transparent in the process and was careful to attend to potential biases.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

The fact that an individual's experience will highly differ from the experiences of others in how their gender interacts with other identities and contextual factors and that gender cannot be examined in a binary way complicated the idea of studying women as a

group and feminist research (DeVault & Gross, 2007). This is exactly why this study employed an intersectional and multicultural framework to guide data analysis.

Developing out of the feminist movement, intersectionality theory works to understand how an individual's multiple identities, particularly those influenced by oppression and privilege, intersect to create a unique experience (Shields, 2008). It is crucial to consider all components of an individual's identity and, in this case, not limit this to the role feminism or gender has on an individual's experience. Also central to the intersectionality approach is the notion that "Identities are fluid in that they can change over time, however, they are experienced as stable, giving the self a sense of continuity across time and location" (Shields, 2008, p. 304). Not employing intersectionality theory would jeopardize the soundness of the findings through neglecting significant influences (Jordan-Zachary, 2007). Furthermore, the way privilege and oppression plays out in an individual's life and how that person experiences privilege and oppression will differ according to how that person's multiple identities come together to make for a unique experience (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising if throughout the research questions and during data collection, that the participants would discuss their identities and how aspects such as privilege and oppression have played out in their career and life experiences.

Intersectionality and multicultural theories are particularly relevant to this study because many people have experienced barriers to their career development in the form of discrimination and harassment. Additionally, individuals with multiple marginalized identities are likely to experience discrimination at higher rates and greater extremes than individuals with identities that are not oppressed. Such discrimination not only impacts

an individual's overall life experience, but also can limit the access they have to education and the career choices they can make (Worthington, Flores, & Navarro, 2005). Because each individual is unique in the identities they hold and how the identities interact, as well as how individuals with marginalized identities face discrimination, it was crucial that this study employed an intersectional and multicultural approach.

### **Career Development Theories**

A variety of factors are believed to impact an individual's career choice. Some experts identify that, collectively, an individual's values, personality, skills, and interests are central to the career decision-making process (Ducat, 2012; Sukiennik et al., 2012). Those four personal characteristics, however, are not the only factors that drive an individual's career choice and attainment. There are numerous career theories that seek to explain various aspects of career development and progression throughout one's lifetime. Career development theories are of utmost importance to this study as women and girls experience unique barriers to career development, such as socialization that hinders career choice by way of gendered occupational stereotypes, and concerns about balancing career and family (Betz, 2005). Two career theories have been particularly important in guiding this study and have influenced the research questions selected. The first, Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA), focuses on the bidirectional fit between an employee and workplace (Dawis, 2005). The influence that individuals have on their work environment, and vice versa, is another core tenet of TWA. Several predictive factors determine an individual's adjustment, and include the ability to accept change, asserting one's desires or needs, taking action to adapt as needed, and enduring through the process (Dawis, 2005). TWA is relevant to this study in that participants were asked about both the

supportive factors and barriers to their career attainment or progression, and that the degree of fit that the participants have with an organization may be influential in whether they decide to stay at their organization. Additionally, it is likely that situations with colleagues or practices within an organization will have some sort of impact on the participants.

The second career development theory that has been influential in conceptualizing this study is Gottfredson's (2005) Theory of Circumscription and Compromise. Circumscription is a process that begins with preschool-aged children being able to recognize power differential, and then at around age six, children understand and internalize gender stereotypes in regard to occupational choice and attainment. Based on gender, children are often provided with different opportunities, particularly regarding what activities are deemed "appropriate" based on their gender during playtime. Starting at about nine years of age, children then recognize prestige and income disparities that are connected to occupational attainment. Next, adolescents ponder how their own personal characteristics and life goals will fit among different occupations (Gottfredson, 2005). The process of compromise occurs when individuals determine what is required to obtain certain jobs, consider personal fit within a career, and identify other occupational possibilities. The Theory of Circumscription and Compromise is particularly relevant to this study, as gendered occupational stereotypes may likely impact the participants' career choices and development. Participants were asked what has influenced their career development, and in particular, how they came to select their chosen career.

## **Social Position of the Researcher**

In keeping with the customs of feminist and qualitative research, it is important that researchers detail their position in terms of worldview, bias, and point-of-view (Morrow, 2005). Corbin and Strauss (2008) identified that prior personal experience with the topic under investigation can be problematic in conducting research if not considered and addressed. As noted previously, this self-exploration is referred to as reflexivity (Hesse-Biber, 2007). In practicing reflexivity, I will not only discuss my own social position, but will also delineate how this impacts my research process. As such, this section describes my background along with how I came to identify as a feminist. I am a White, highly educated, self-identifying feminist woman who was raised in an upper-middle class family. Also pertinent to this study and central to my identity is that I am passionate about social justice and advocate for women's rights and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) community. Growing up in an upper-middle class family certainly afforded me with many privileges and has influenced my worldview and values, however, it is also important to note that I grew up in an extremely rural community with little diversity. The population was largely White and working or middle class. Growing up, I enjoyed a sense of safety and stability, had access to nutritional food and adequate healthcare, and had the resources to pursue higher education. On the other hand, educational and extra-curricular opportunities were limited due to having a very small school population and living far away from a metropolitan area. Thus, I had little exposure to cultures, identities, and worldviews that were much different than my own until I moved to a major metropolitan area for my undergraduate education. From my perspective, education or the active pursuit of knowledge is helpful in introducing an

individual to a wide variety of perspectives, which will in turn shape their worldview. This is not to say that higher education is the sole place where such development occurs, as my upbringing has been largely influential as well. I have experienced frustrating encounters that served to limit women's voices and participation, such as in the religious institution in which I was raised. At the same time, my parents taught me to think critically and develop my own viewpoints, strongly encouraged me to attend university, and supported me in pursuing the career of my choice.

I have not always identified as a feminist, and did not adopt the label until my early 20s. Prior to identifying as a feminist, I still noticed numerous injustices particularly those that impacted women, but did not understand the extent of the privileges I held or what feminism really was. I would become frustrated, sad, and angry at such injustice as I still do, but did not have a way to describe myself then. I became interested in feminism by way of my resentment of the injustices I saw and experienced, along with a passion for women's equality. My feminist identity began to develop at the very end of my undergraduate education and solidified for me during graduate school. After working full time for a few years post graduation, I chose to return to school for a doctoral program and have since been intentional in pursuing volunteer opportunities, internships, graduate assistantships, and professional employment that are congruent with my values of feminism and social justice. Those experiences, coupled with my pursuit of taking courses with a gender and multicultural focus, have only intensified my feminist identity. Although I have sought experiences that are compatible with my feminist identity, not all my experiences have been pro-feminist. To the contrary, I have encountered various forms of sexism, both within and outside of my professional experiences, such as

harassment in response to the volunteer activism I have participated in or sexist remarks I hear on an all too frequent basis. While negative, these situations have also reaffirmed my feminist identity, which in turn has empowered me to challenge sexism and harassment.

Considering my own background, I might have been more likely to adopt the feminist label because the feminist movement has addressed many issues I see as problematic in society. However, this is not necessarily the collective experience of women, as the feminist movement has historically and regrettably neglected the unique needs and perspectives of Women of Color and LGBT+ women. While gender is the primary lens in which I view the world, my holistic self has been shaped by more than my gender. I believe that my experiences and specifically how I interpret those experiences are influenced by the unique combination of the multiple identities I hold. This is one of the reasons why I believe that intersectionality and multicultural theories must be infused in research in order for the findings to be considered valid and of good quality.

While I have not always identified with feminism, I now enthusiastically claim the feminist label and strongly hold the values of feminism. As I was introduced to and learned more about feminism, the more I understood how pervasive sexism is in the United States and the detrimental impact sexism has on individuals and society as a whole. Additionally, I recognized how I had unconsciously internalized many sexist messages, and the negative impact that had on me. Pertinent to this study, I believe that identifying with feminism has shaped my career aspirations, goals, and how I view my own career trajectory and work situations. The more my feminist identity evolved, the more interested I became in doing social justice education and found activism rewarding.

Self-identifying as a feminist has had major implications on this study, starting from the topic I chose to the outcome I expected to find. Although there is no way to predict the conclusions that came of this study, I anticipated that the majority of women that participated would feel like their feminist identity was important to their sense of self and what paid or volunteer work they were drawn to. I also presumed that as feminist-identified women, the participants would have had experiences with sexism and likely would have advocated for more equitable practices or called out the sexism they experienced or witnessed. These assumptions were obviously something I needed to keep in check when conducting interviews with feminist women to ensure that I was not persuading participants to believe that feminism had made a significant contribution in their career development, unless that was their actual perception. To limit this influence, I exhibited caution when creating the interview schedule, including avoiding leading questions.

While it is important to be cognizant and limit research influence, my feminist identity may have proved beneficial in developing rapport with participants and allowing participants not to be on the defensive about why they identified as feminists. This is particularly important considering the extent to which feminism is equated with negative connotations, misrepresented, and delegitimized. Moreover, a researcher that is more in tune with the principles of feminism and has chosen to adopt the feminist label may likely be more cognizant and familiar with what is important within each participant's story. A researcher who is neither familiar with feminist principles, nor examines life through a feminist lens, may not be privy to specificities or reasons behind choosing a particular job because it is congruent with one's feminist ideology or the choice to take a



stand against sex discrimination. Therefore, I believed that identifying as a feminist would aid in developing rapport and alleviate a defensive response from participants. That being said, I still avoided sharing the significance feminism plays in how I make sense of my career and life, so as not to lead the participants or influence what aspects of their experiences they identified as being significant to their career development and feminist identity.

### **Research Design**

In the broadest sense of methodology, this study employed a qualitative design because it best addressed the research questions at hand and would bring awareness to the unique career development and career experiences of feminist women. Morrow (2007) asserted that qualitative approaches are not only appropriate when there is nominal existing research, but also when the purpose is to provide an extensive understanding of a specific topic or experience. Therefore, a qualitative design was both appropriate and suitable for this study because there was minimal research on feminism and career development, particularly in the area of how a feminist identity impacts women's career choices and experiences. A narrative and interpreted account of feminist women's career experiences complements the existing research and helps fill a major gap.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Approach**

More specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the qualitative approach used throughout the course of this study and guided how participants were selected, how data was collected, and how data was then analyzed. Other qualitative approaches were considered but ruled out, as IPA seemed to better address the research goals. The highest contender was Grounded Theory, as it also strives to understand and

explain phenomena. Grounded theory was ruled out as it places high emphasis on developing a theory to explain the collective data; whereas IPA allows for a more detailed and personalized account of how the individual makes sense of a particular experience (Smith et al., 2009), which aligns more closely to the purpose of this study. Narrative and discourse analysis were briefly considered for this study, but eliminated based on the strong emphasis on language or content (Smith et al., 2009), rather than on the participants' understanding of their own experiences.

The overarching goal of IPA is to get at "how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). People's careers and the progression made throughout life in regard to career, generally constitutes a large part of people's lives. Thus, IPA was an appropriate method to use for this study, as it helps decipher what aspects or events people considered important in how they chose the careers they did and how people made major decisions regarding their careers. If someone identifies as a feminist and has incorporated feminist principles in all avenues in their life, this is likely to have an impact on how they see the world, particularly in how they perceive their career development and career decisions they have made. IPA is especially suitable in addressing how feminist-identified women understand their life and career experiences, as the focus of IPA is to "explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). In the current study, the personal world refers to an individual's career and life choices they have made, and the social world entails experiences they have in academia and the workplace and whether those experiences were positive in the form of supportive factors to their career advancement or negative in the form of sex discrimination or harassment.

While IPA first appeared in a 1996 article by Jonathan Smith that described the method, the roots to IPA have a much longer history (Smith et al., 2009). The creation of IPA as a distinct approach was influenced by three ideologies: *phenomenology*, *hermeneutics*, and *idiography* (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology involves extensive study about how a person experiences life or a culture experiences a specific phenomenon. In order to achieve the level of attentiveness and data, phenomenology requires one to engage in intentional reflection and be present in the moment (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretation aspect of IPA is derived and informed by hermeneutics. Hermeneutics involves examining the meanings participants make from their experiences, as well as the how the researcher then interprets participant experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The final theoretical component that informs IPA is idiography, which encourages attention to detail when analyzing data (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, idiography specifies that the analysis extend only to explaining how the individual participant or group of participants experiences a phenomenon as opposed to being generalized to a larger population (Smith et al., 2009).

The unique combination of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography that inform IPA was ideal in regard to the overarching purpose of this investigation. As mentioned, this study sought to gain a better understanding of how feminist women perceive their feminist identity, career choices, and experiences. This study encompasses phenomenology in its aim to learn more about feminist women's experiences, hermeneutics by considering and analyzing feminist women's interpretations of their experiences, and idiography as the study was focused on the detailed and specific experiences of a few participants and did not intend to widely generalize the findings.

## **Selection of Participants**

Because this study examined the role a feminist identity has on women's career development, the participants in this sample had to self-identify as women and feminists. This participatory requirement of self-identifying as a feminist may have factored out participants who subscribed to the major tenets of feminism, yet for some reason or another, did not identify as a feminist. While those who are politically conscious or feminist-minded but do not take on the feminist label would likely have much to say about how their worldview impacted their career development, this would complicate the study and would be a diversion to the study's fundamental purpose. As detailed in the literature review, some researchers examine an individual's commitment to feminist principles through assigning participants to a developmental stage (Downing & Roush, 1985). Other researchers classify one's commitment to feminism through assessing the intersection of whether one adopts the feminist label and the degree to which one subscribes to the tenets of feminism (Olson et al., 2008). There is something to be said about those who self-identify as feminists despite the stigma and negative connotations around the feminist label. Self-identified feminists are less likely to condone sexism (Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010) and are more likely to partake in collective action efforts against sexism (Yoder et al., 2011). As such, the basis of the current study was to detail the experiences of those who self-identified as feminists and thus, the degree of adherence to the tenets of feminism was not a factor in the data collection. The meaning feminism takes on for each individual is unique, as is how feminism is personally defined. Thus, each participant's idea of what feminism is and its impact on life is different, which may explain discrepancies among the cases. Additionally, each participant's personal

definition of feminism is unique and may not always match up with my personal definition. As discussed in the section detailing theoretical frameworks and epistemological approach, however, it is acknowledged that there are numerous realities as opposed to one ultimate reality, and recognizing such discrepancies leads to a greater grounding of the interplay between feminist identities and career experiences.

Participants in this study were feminist women who have achieved some level of career success. Each participant primarily determined personal career success, but to be a part of the study, the participant had to be currently employed. Because this study required participants to reflect upon how their feminist identity has influenced their career choices and experiences within a professional job setting, it would be counterproductive to have participants who were students and who have yet to enter their professional field or who have not yet chosen a career path. However, participants need not to have achieved their ultimate dream job or have had extensive experience in their field. Participation was open to participants employed in a variety of settings including academic, private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Participants also did not need to have a background in women's studies, but only needed to self-identify as a feminist; therefore, participation was open to women in a variety of occupational fields and educational backgrounds.

For researchers working toward a professional doctorate, Smith et al. (2009) estimated that four to ten interviews would make for a solid and extensive study (p. 52). Therefore, interviews were conducted until saturation, or until ample data was collected to develop a theoretical construct, which was expected and occurred after interviews with eight participants. Focusing on just a few cases is also consistent with the IPA approach

as the main function of this approach is to be able to conceptualize and make sense of the experience by going in great depth with each participant (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Sampling was purposive in nature so that it allowed for selection of “a case because it illustrates some feature or process” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 166). In this study, the qualifications of being a self-identified feminist and a successful professional was considered the “case” and the relationship of having a feminist identity to career development was considered the “feature.” This type of sampling is central to qualitative research because it serves “to provide the most information-rich data possible” (Morrow, 2005, p. 255). This is consistent with IPA, where referral is a common way to find participants and the focus of research is for participants to “‘represent’ a perspective, rather than a population” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). Participants were recruited through a listserv associated with a women’s organization in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The call for participants was posted twice on this listserv and resulted in more people volunteering for the study than the eight I was seeking. Participants were selected in the order they responded as long as they were qualified and agreed on a date and time they could participate in the interview. The only screening that took place in regard to participant selection was to ensure that potential participants were self-identified feminist women who were currently employed and who agreed to participate in an interview.

### **Research Methods**

Much research has been conducted in the area of feminist identity, with researchers and scholars using a variety of venues to assess feminism, beliefs, and identity. Some researchers believe that solely using a dichotomous question to assess feminist identity can be both limiting and helpful in research (Zucker & Bay-Cheng,

2010). Other researchers have ascertained that using a dichotomous question may result in more clear data (Liss & Erchull, 2010; Yoder et al., 2011). For the purposes of this research study, a dichotomous (yes/no) question to select participants based on their feminist identity was utilized, as it would result in the least ambiguous data possible and better address the research questions.

To best describe each participant's experience with their career development and how their feminist identity has impacted them, in-depth interviews were selected to collect data as this type of interview "seeks to understand the 'lived experiences' of the individual" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 118). The interviews were semi-structured with particular topics and questions to guide the interview (Hesse-Biber, 2007), but were flexible since each person had a unique experience to share, which might have been stifled with a structured interview. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher flexibility, particularly in the use of follow-up questions to clarify or expand on a specific aspect of a participant's story, which led to data that was more rich and explanatory. In accordance with the IPA approach, I used an *interview schedule* to guide the participant interview. The interview schedule was created by identifying topics central to the discussion and situating them in an order that allowed conversation to flow well (Smith, et al., 2009). Several questions that were consistently asked of all participants were included in the interview schedule; however, the exact wording, prompts, and follow-up questions were somewhat different for each interview. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I became very familiar with the interview schedule prior to the actual data collection, so as to not have it be a distraction during the interview by referencing the guide. In addition to being prepared to glean as much information as possible from

participants' stories, I was prepared to ask follow-up questions to prompt participants to provide additional detail if needed (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In creating the interview schedule, I used a technique called *funneling*. As defined by Smith and Osborn (2008), funneling is the process of inquiring about an experience in a broad way prior to asking for the details about an experience. It is important to ask the broad question first, so as to not lead the participant to only address what was focused upon in the initial question (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As recommended by Smith and Osborn (2008), the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to ensure that the utmost attention was afforded to each participant and to ensure that the data was detailed enough to conduct an analysis with an IPA design (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

As mentioned previously, the prompts associated with each interview question differed according to the narrative presented by each participant. The interview schedule closely followed the overall research questions that guided this study, with the addition of a couple clarifying questions. The questions that were asked of all participants are as follows: (a) Tell me about your current job. (b) What does it mean for you to identify as a feminist? (c) How did you develop your identity as a feminist? (d) How have life experiences (such as educational, employment, or personal) impacted your career choices? (e) What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment? (f) What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment? (g) How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?

### **Data Analysis**

As mentioned previously, IPA provided the framework for analyzing the data collected from participants. This methodology was chosen because through this



investigation, I sought to understand how participants came to identify as feminists, how their career trajectory has unfolded, and how their feminist identity has intersected with career choices and experiences. Furthermore, this study intended not only to describe the career development of feminist-identified women but also to explain the participants' interpretations of these experiences through an extensive analysis. Therefore, this study was not focused on making behavioral observations, as that type of data collection would not advance the understanding of the research questions.

After interviews were recorded, I transcribed all interviews in detail, noting any pauses and audible noises such as sighs, and then reviewed each transcript for accuracy. While there is much flexibility in the IPA approach, Smith et al. (2009) identified several sequential steps to help guide the process, which are particularly useful for a researcher new to IPA or qualitative analysis. As recommended by Smith et al. (2009), I first read through the transcript multiple times to become familiar with the narrative, while keeping in mind and setting aside personal biases. Next, as advised by Smith et al. (2009), I proceeded into perhaps the most time intensive stage of the analysis, or the stage where I recorded my comments on the data. In this stage, I commented on initial reactions and identified parts of the interview that resonated, and then went back for a more detailed look at the transcript, commenting on specific language use and indicators of emotion. This led into another round of comments and involved greater interpretation of the data (Smith et al., 2009). I then proceeded to the third step in the overall analysis process, which was to begin to consider *emergent themes*, and the fourth step, which involved identifying themes that repeated throughout the transcript or how one theme might be related to another (Smith et al., 2009). This step had several techniques associated with it

that I found helpful in the overall analysis. For example, being attentive to *polarization* or opposed themes and *numeration* or looking at the number of times a theme is repeated (Smith et al., 2009). Each case was analyzed thoroughly before moving onto the next case, which is the fifth step of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, the last step was to make connections between participants and interviews (Smith et al., 2009). To make sense and organize the analysis, I catalogued the themes in the order that made the most sense, with related themes grouped together (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Themes were not only compared to the actual data to ensure that the themes were truly representative of the interviews, but also with the exact phrase that demonstrated the theme, including its location in the transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2008). To control for researcher and case bias, I reviewed the cases in the same order the interviews were conducted.

### **Standards of Quality**

Numerous measures were taken to ensure quality at all stages of this study, beginning from creating a researcher-participant relationship and collecting data through interviews, to the data analysis and providing recommendations. The focus of this section is on measures I took to establish *trustworthiness*, or demonstrate that the results are of high quality. This section will also detail additional strategies consistent with the IPA method that I engaged in to ensure overall quality.

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Quality is especially important to any research study, and measures of validity and reliability are highly recognized research standards. These standards are not fully applicable to qualitative research, and measures of quality in qualitative research not only take on different terms, but also operate differently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow,

2007). Quality work in qualitative research is signified by ensuring trustworthiness and defined by whether the “findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify several strategies to foster trustworthiness; those that are relevant to this study and were employed during data collection and analysis included *triangulating*, keeping a journal, and keeping an *audit trail*. In this study, triangulation strategies included comparing participant data with existing literature, and noting how existing research supported or negated the findings of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was employed after all cases had been analyzed, as to help control for outside influences. My journal and audit trail were one in the same and included a chronological list of research-related tasks. Observations, personal biases, challenges, and conclusions made about the data or the research process were recorded in the journal as well. Further, as noted by the IPA approach, the transcribed interviews and research notes collectively created an *independent audit*. The purpose of the independent audit is to ensure quality of the research by assessing whether the process was described both adequately and with enough depth so someone not involved with the research can understand the researcher’s process and results of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I then had a peer doctoral student conduct an independent audit that consisted of him reviewing the transcripts, single case analyses, and the full analysis to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The intention here was to ensure that an outside reviewer could follow my independent audit, check for researcher bias, and ensure that the conclusions I made were trustworthy. While I did meet with the peer reviewer to provide instruction and any clarification on the peer review process, I provided him with minimal information beyond the analyses documents so as to not

influence him. Through his analysis, the peer reviewer identified six single themes. While using slightly different terms to describe the themes, four of these themes identified by the peer reviewer directly overlapped with the four overarching themes that I identified. His two additions to the themes I named were explained in other areas of my analyses. One of the additional themes identified by the peer reviewer was related to a subtheme that I identified. I chose not to change my analyses because of the context provided by the participants around this finding and that it was not present in all participant interviews. The second difference was that the peer reviewer identified a common demographic that was explained for by the recruitment strategy utilized to invite participants to the study.

As asserted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is established by ensuring *credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability*. First, with respect to credibility, I engaged in triangulation techniques as discussed previously, and checked in with participants to ensure I was understanding their narratives accurately and for any pieces I needed clarifying. If a participant's story was related to the research questions but deviated from the narratives of other participants, that story was examined, rather than ignored. Second, transferability was addressed by providing enough context and detail so that readers would be able to determine whether the study is applicable or generalizable in their work. The measures of trustworthiness, dependability and confirmability, were addressed by this study through establishing credibility and maintaining an audit trail as discussed previously.

### **Strategies to Ensure Quality**

One strategy that is central to IPA by way of phenomenology is *bracketing*. Bracketing involves setting aside preconceived notions and experiences at various points

throughout the study, such as during the interview so as to not influence participant responses or during the data analysis to ensure that personal bias is not impacting what themes are attended to (Smith et al., 2009). Corbin and Strauss (2008) asserted that it is essential to block outside influences such as relevant literature as to not sway the interpretation of the data, avoiding assumptions about the data and instead looking for new meanings, and making inquiries about what the data is saying to promote innovative thinking. While outside knowledge and literature was used to ensure quality by triangulating the data with existing research, such literature was only considered after the data had been analyzed.

In their instructional manual on IPA, Smith et al. (2009) delineated the strategies recommended by Yardley (2000) to produce high quality research. Yardley (2000) distinguished four categories to assess qualitative research, which were met in this study. The first, *sensitivity to context* encourages researchers to have a great knowledge of any theories used to guide the research, understand the factors that may impact the participant's experiences, and empower the participant in the data collection process (Yardley, 2000). In chapters one and three of this paper, an explanation was provided about feminist, intersectionality, and career theories—all of which impact my worldview and were instrumental in how the interviews were conducted. Additionally, a broad understanding of the likely factors that would arise in the participant accounts through a review of the literature was necessary and was the focus of chapter two. My understanding is also informed by coursework in career development and gender and women's studies, along with work experience as a career counselor and coordinator of women's equality programming at a university. *Commitment and rigour* make up the

second category and were addressed by taking adequate time and measures to obtain an accurate and in-depth picture of the participant's experience (Yardley, 2000). I conducted in-depth interviews to ensure I was able to allow ample time for participants to share their experiences related to their career and feminist identity. Data analysis takes considerable time with a qualitative study; the steps that have been outlined ensured that the analysis was thorough and remained true to the participants' narratives. Third, Yardley (2000) discussed the importance of assessable and pertinent information to the research question and named this category *transparency and coherence*. As the researcher, I reconsidered how the interpretation I constructed actually addressed the research questions and provided excerpts of participants' stories that support the interpretations. The final factor that Yardley (2000) named was *impact and importance* of the research. The analysis and interpretation that has developed as a result of this study will certainly contribute to the existing research as little has been written about how feminism intersects with career development; and specifically, career related experiences of feminist women are not addressed in the current literature. Such an understanding may be useful to career and employment counselors as they work with feminist-identified women to gain a better understanding of how their feminist values impact career decisions and how they interpret situations and the actions taken when encountering certain experiences. This study also benefits the fields of career development, higher education administration, counseling, and women's and gender studies as it explores how a feminist identity impacts and interacts with a major component of an individual's life: a person's career. Additionally, professors in women's and gender studies along with other professors who

place a high value on women's and gender equity may use this research in how they mentor aspiring professionals.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the study's purpose, theoretical framework, research design, and standards of quality. The intention of this study was to describe and explain the career development of feminist-identified women. Specifically, this study considered how women participants interpret their own career development and the impact that labeling oneself as a feminist has had on their career choices and experiences. Participants were self-identified feminists who were successfully employed in the profession of their choice. The study employed qualitative techniques, using semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection. Data was analyzed using an IPA design, and themes were identified to highlight significant aspects of participant interviews, as well as congruencies among participant narratives.

As with qualitative research as a whole, IPA has similarly been questioned whether it is a legitimate approach (Shinebourne, 2011). Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) claimed that this may be because IPA may be seen as a descriptive approach when in actuality its focus is to interpret each individual's experience and that it is "easy for flexibility to be mistaken for lack of rigour" (p. 103). To help address this concern, this chapter provided a detailed account of the procedures that were taken to analyze the data, along with strategies to ensure quality. The fourth chapter will not only share the participants' experiences, but will also share my interpretation of these experiences. The interpretation will be transparent in that I will share how I came to the conclusions and provide narratives from the interviews to support my analysis. This chapter concluded

with measures that were taken to ensure trustworthiness and the overall quality of the study.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter details the findings of the study and provides the collective analysis of the eight feminist women's accounts that make up this study. Participants were recruited through a listserv for a women's organization located in the Washington, DC area, and the requirements to participate included self-identifying as a feminist woman and having current employment. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately an hour to an hour-and-a-half were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed.

#### **Participant Demographics**

Demographic information was collected through open-ended questions regarding age, racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic class, and education. Beyond identifying as feminist women, the eight participants in the study ranged in age from 22 to 33 years old, with a mean age of 26.9 years. Seven participants identified as White or Caucasian, and one participant identified as African American. In terms of socioeconomic class, five identified as middle class, two as upper-middle class, and one as lower-middle class. All eight participants had earned a bachelor's degree, and three held a master's degree. No one majored in gender and women's studies; rather majors varied, with a number that were related to political science. The majority, or five of eight participants were employed in the nonprofit sector. The remaining three participants held positions in the political sphere: one as a government employee, one in campaign work, and the other as a contractor. Half of the participants' work had a focus on women's health or women's

advocacy. Additionally, participants were asked if there were any other identities that would help me understand their experiences with feminism and their career. During this open question, two participants identified as queer, and three identified as liberal. Other pertinent identities included being an immigrant who immigrated with family as a refugee, a mother, Jewish, heterosexual and married, cisgender, democrat, pro-choice, and from a matriarchal family.

### **Overview of Themes**

This study explored how feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path. Five research questions guided the study and interview process, and four overarching themes resulted from the collective analysis. The four themes that developed out of the analysis included: (a) personal journey to feminism, (b) community of support, (c) adversity experienced, and (d) empowerment and authenticity.

The overview of findings along with the connections between the research questions and themes are presented in this section and are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Research Questions and Connection to Overarching Themes*

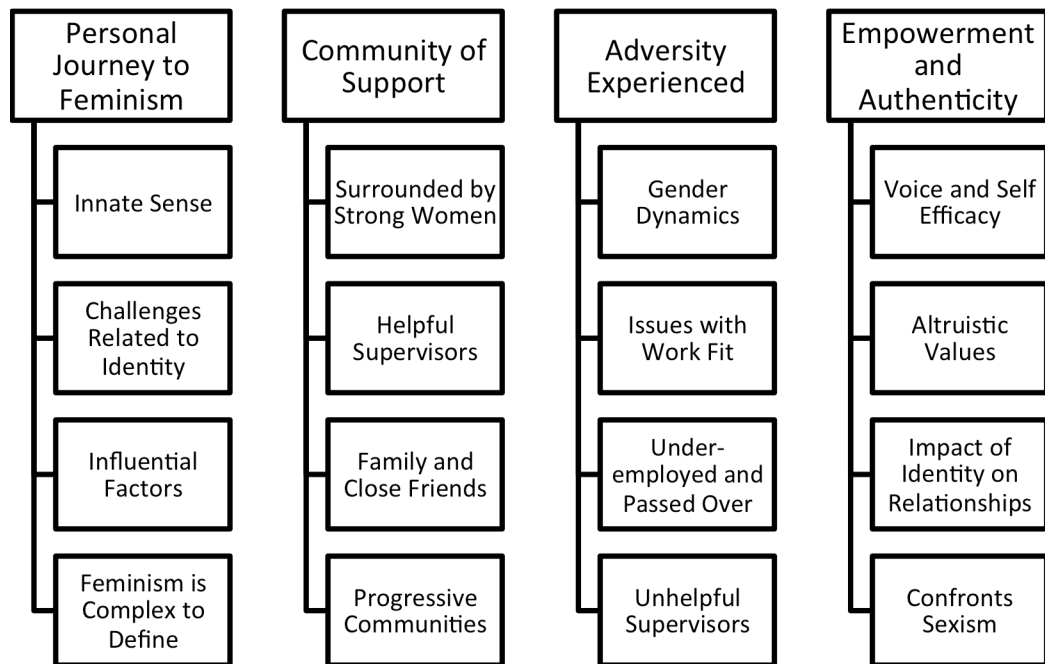
<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Overarching Theme(s)</b>
1. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?	Personal Journey to Feminism (first theme)
2. How have life experiences impacted your career choices?	Community of Support (second theme) Adversity Experienced (third theme)
3. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?	Community of Support (second theme)
4. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?	Adversity Experienced (third theme)
5. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?	Empowerment and Authenticity (fourth theme)

Personal journey to feminism (first theme), developed from the first research question, which was: How did you develop your identity as a feminist? This theme of personal journey to feminism was substantiated by the following subthemes: innate sense, challenges related to identity, influential factors, and feminism is complex to define. Community of support (second theme) was connected to the second research question: How have life experiences impacted your career choices? The community of support theme (second theme) also developed from the third research question: What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment? The subthemes that came together to create the community of support theme included: surrounded by strong women, helpful supervisors who were mostly women, family and close friends, and progressive communities. Adversity experienced (third theme) emerged out of the second research question: How have life experiences impacted your career choices? The

adversity theme (third theme) also developed from the fourth research question: What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment? The following subthemes supported the adversity theme: gender dynamics, issues with fit with organization or field, underemployed or passed over, and unhelpful supervisors. Empowerment and authenticity (fourth theme) developed from the fifth research question: How does your feminist identity and career influence each other? The following subthemes emerged and together make up the empowerment and authenticity theme: voice and self-efficacy, altruistic values, impact of identity on relationships, and confronts sexism.

Themes and the subthemes that provide support and further clarification for the four overarching themes are detailed in Figure 1 and will be discussed thoroughly in this chapter.

**Figure 1.** Overarching Themes and Subthemes From Participant Interviews



*Figure 1.* Through the analysis of interviews with eight self-identified feminist women, four overarching themes emerged. Each of the overarching themes was further supported by four subthemes.

## **Personal Journey to Feminism (Theme Emerged from Research Question 1: How Did You Develop Your Identity as a Feminist?)**

When discussing feminism and how this sample of women came to identify with the term, what stood out most across participants' stories was how unique and personal each participant's journey was. There were indeed pieces of their narratives that had similar undertones, which make up the subthemes, however, the stories were also quite varied. The four subthemes that fall under the theme of a personal journey to feminism include having an innate sense of their feminism, challenges related to identity, influential factors to identity, and feminism being complex to define.

### **Innate Sense**

There did not seem to be a defining moment when participants first identified as feminists. As Participant 3 stated: "I can't really remember a time when I didn't identify as a feminist." When participants were asked the age they were when they first identified as a feminist, there was no automatic answer given in any of the interviews. Instead, during many of the participants' reflections, language such as "probably" and "maybe" was frequently used to discuss when they first identified. Some participants recalled first identifying within their elementary school years, others in high school, and some really embraced the label or developed a better understanding of the identity or term while in college.

In addition to not stating a definite age when they first identified as feminists, participants indicated that their feminism was just a part of who they were and existed before they knew the term. For instance, Participant 1 stated: ". . . at five years old I was

like ‘that’s B.S. these gender distinctions are crap.’” Similarly, another participant discussed that such feminist beliefs have always been a part of their worldview:

Um yeah, I think I just never even questioned whatever like innateness in me— just like never even questioned like how ridiculous it is that women aren’t allowed to do something, we’re not paid equally to do the same work and issues like that. And I don’t—I can’t pinpoint where it comes from um you know my family is not like that. Like my parents um subscribe to much more traditional gender roles than I do. So it didn’t come from that. Um but I think it’s just always been the way I’ve seen the world. [Participant 8]

And yet another participant joked that identity was likely adopted the moment they learned the term:

. . . I guess I’ve sort of always been a feminist. I just—I don’t know how—I don’t remember a particular moment when I realized that—I just—you know everybody around me was so progressive that I mean it literally it probably a matter of when did I learn the word “feminism” and I don’t remember at what age [laugh] I learned the word “feminist.” [Participant 5]

It was surprising to learn how young some participants recalled first identifying as a feminist, particularly given the negative connotations that are often connected to feminism and the feminist backlash. Perhaps this is due to many participants recognizing what the word means and whole heartedly believing in gender equality. What was most noteworthy around feminist identity development was how innate participants’ feminist beliefs were to their sense of self.

## Challenges Related to Identity

Participants noted several situations where their feminist identity presented challenges—both in terms of fully embracing the identity and also relative to relationships with others. In a world where identifying as a feminist is often portrayed as radical or one with negative connotations, it was not that surprising that challenges related to one's feminist identity was identified as a subtheme. What was perhaps most striking in this subtheme was how half of the participants questioned their authenticity as a feminist, specifically stating they may be a “bad” feminist or not a “good” feminist. Participant 7 discussed this as it related to media viewed: “I’d probably be called a bad feminist if um you know I feel like if I admitted to some of the stuff I like on shows.” Another participant mentioned feeling like a bad feminist based on work values:

. . . I work at actually like a really feminist organization in the sense of work-life balance and family-friendly and all of those things, but I as a worker, I feel like a bad feminist for it but like I don't necessarily support those practices as a coworker in the sense like I don't think that is the best environment for me to work in because I want to be working a lot. I want everyone that I work with to be like dedicated in both like time and energy and everything and not as focused on like all of these other things in their lives which I think are important and have a place but I do see how that um limits your ability to do your job really well and um so I feel like my beliefs in that realm and what I want in my own life are not um congruent and I feel bad about that . . . [Participant 1]

Another participant noted not being sure what a good feminist is:



Um but—to be honest, I—I’m not great at fighting for myself. I am much better for fighting for other people. Um and so I um—so in that sense you know—I mean. Is a feminist a feminist you know—is a feminist a feminist if she only fights for herself? Is she a feminist if she only fights for other people? Is she a feminist you know—do you have to do both to be a feminist. I don’t know that there’s a good answer to that. But I um you know I fight for other people and I like fighting for other people and I’m pretty good at it. Um but I don’t know that I fight for myself as much and I don’t know—I don’t know. I don’t know what it means to be a good feminist. [Participant 5]

This phenomenon is particularly interesting considering all of the participants self-selected themselves to be a part of the study and one of the stipulations for participating was to self-identify as a feminist. During interviews, all participants seemed knowledgeable about feminism and talked about feminism. Therefore, it is peculiar that four of eight participants questioned how good of a feminist they were. Perhaps there is pressure for participants to be the perfect feminist because there are anti-feminist movements and the feminist movement is often criticized and made to be something that it is not. For instance, there are many stereotypes that go along with being a feminist, which do not automatically denote whether one is or is not a feminist. One participant related an experience with a boyfriend around stereotypes:

. . . my boyfriend—he calls me a lipstick feminist which like drives me crazy and he does it in a joking way . . . because you know I still get dressed up to the nines and wear make-up and shave and blah blah blah and it’s just like uh—so he

knows I'm a feminist and he's like "Uh you're not a real feminist though because you shave" and I'm like "You're an asshole. [Participant 2]

Two participants discussed particular issues in relating to others around their feminist identity. For one participant, exclusivity within the feminist community was noted as troublesome:

. . . I think that there's always this weird one-upping in the feminist world truthfully. Um, I think there's this weird idea to always be the better feminist and to always understand all these different intersectionalities and everything and people just assume they understand all these things and they don't. And people assume that they're infallible and they're not, and it's not okay to make a mistake and it's not okay to say the wrong thing. And so I think in terms of relationships, I have surrounded myself both with males and females who are feminist um in a variety of different ways which I think is what's great about feminism. But I've also realized that the feminist movement at large to me is sometimes an ostracizing one um and so the relationship I've had with that and some people that identify with it, and in it, has changed over the years to be a little bit more critical I guess—not because I don't think that it's great—I just think that sometimes it's exclusive in its own right. [Participant 4]

This is definitely a problem in any community, where some people will feel included while others feel excluded. In addition, within social justice movements this is troublesome on a different level as well; the purpose of such communities is to find a sense of solidarity and community in a world where one may feel ostracized or experience oppression. The purpose is also to advocate for change, which is likely to be

more powerful when more people are involved. Another participant hinted at instances when being around people who did not understand feminism and how that has impacted relationships with others:

. . . the only time I've really been negatively impacted by identifying as a feminist is with people I don't care to be around anyway. Because I feel like if you're going to marginalize me for identifying as a feminist then you don't understand—there are a lot of things. You don't understand feminism. You don't understand who I am as a person. And you probably don't understand the privilege you have . . . [Participant 3]

Finally, two participants discussed their discomfort in having a feminist lens particularly in watching television as Participant 6 noted “there's so much like fucked up stuff out there [laugh].” Similarly, another participant described this experience in more depth:

I've gotten to the point where I'm like super difficult to be around when like watching a movie or like a TV show or anything like that because it's really hard—I know that I'm hypersensitive to sexism depictions in the media. Um it's really hard for me not to point it out or call it out um and I think that things that I've said before like commercials, like it's really hard for me to watch commercials and not be upset by this like benign sexism—the supposedly benign sexism that's happening in them just from like depictions from like women's roles and men's roles and society—girls wearing pink, boys playing with Legos, things like that. [Participant 8]

Based on the very reasons that often bring people to self-identify as feminists, it follows that the participants of this study would encounter challenges based upon of their feminist

identity. Sometimes this had more to do with relationships with others, whether that was with their partner or with other feminists. Other times, issues were more internal such as the impact the media has on their well-being or their personal evaluations of their own feminism.

### **Influential Factors**

When it came to influential factors to their feminist identity, what was most striking was how varied everyone's experiences were. Some participants noted informal education such as media or more formal coursework, while others noted extracurricular activities. Yet other participants noted specific people in their lives that were influential including personal relationships and instructors. Often times, however, it was a combination of many of these experiences that ultimately impacted one's feminist identity. Two participants specifically noted online blogs as a place where they learned about feminism:

I think that Tumblr has really educated me on a lot of different feminist issues. And I think it's because the people that I've like—random people I've chosen to follow on Tumblr that blog about feminist issues have really like educated me in terms of things that I've never thought about before. Um and I'm really thankful that I've had that resource... [Participant 3]

Another participant partially credits television shows with increased understanding and identification with feminism:

. . . I think that the TV, TV—media, whatever, shows, movies, that kind of stuff—do a great job of showing that—and music actually as well um which I'm not sure if that's media but that's fine—do a great job of showing that it's—that it's okay

to be a strong woman who still wants to have sex, who still doesn't want to have sex, who has sex with people they're not married to, all those kinds of things—um I think are fantastic and aren't talked about that frequently and are kind of pushed aside in a lot of movements as you know “sex is taboo” and many parts of society so the fact that TV can be a medium that can kind of break through that. Even if you think of a show like “Sex in the City”—those were four women who had a lot of sex. And that's kind of cool um and a lot of people would have issues with the show and whatnot but I think that's really empowering. The idea that sexuality and feminism can be interlinked and that I think that the media has done a great job of helping me figure how I want to express that part of my feminism in terms of saying that because it is—it is really hard to tell people you know—people are so shamed about all these different things around sex and kind of figuring out how that fits into feminism and how to balance those kinds of things—I think the media has really truthfully helped me to do. And so—I guess, thank you television. [Participant 4]

In both accounts around media, participants noted how blogs or television has introduced them to a new way of thinking—whether that was in learning about additional feminist issues not considered before or the representation of women in media.

Formal coursework was also instrumental in several of the participants' personal journeys toward feminism. While all participants in the study earned a bachelor's degree or higher, no one had majored in women's and gender studies. Five of eight participants specifically identified coursework as being influential to their feminist identity; one

participant discussed a course in high school while the other four participants discussed courses they had taken in college.

. . . I know that a lot of my identity as a feminist was developed in college through taking a lot of feminist . . . and queer theory classes so you know it was something that—like I said I don't know that I ever articulated it like I knew that like I thought women were equal to men and I knew all of that stuff. But then when I got to college and I actually was able to put a vocabulary around it and think about it and I was—I've been very um very um inspired and influenced by um Black feminist thought. So like Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audrey Lorde—um so I really immersed myself in a lot of that and um always—every since I was 18 also been really interested in um in this idea of intersectionality, so the idea that you know “I'm not just a woman, I'm not just a Black woman. I am all of these things. All of these pieces of my identity intersect.” So you know that's really um—that's really where my understanding and um love and just excitement about feminism came is through really reading those texts and discovering them throughout college. [Participant 6]

Formal education and its impact on feminist identity seemed to be a common thread through participants' stories. While courses identified often had a focus on women or feminist components, many were outside of the women's studies discipline.

In addition to educational experiences, influences to one's feminist identity were highly experiential as well and were discussed in depth by three participants. For example, two participants specifically noted experiences with traveling abroad as particularly

significant in the development of their feminist identity. One participant recounted a study abroad experience in South Africa:

. . . the fact that women who live in the shanty towns have to go to the bathroom in their house at night because you can't walk to the bathroom because you probably will be assaulted. Things like that. I think seeing—and I think this is going to sound potentially really weird so bear with me while I try to work it out—but seeing the fact that there's a lot to be done in terms of women's equality and feminism in this country and I'm not saying that there isn't. But seeing what other women around the world face every day to do small things like go the bathroom—I think to me have really shaped my feminism and showed me that it's important, therefore, that I take advantage of the opportunities that I'm presented here because a lot of people don't even have that small of an amount you know the opportunities which I don't believe that my opportunities have been small but things like that where we forget a lot how lucky we are um and so seeing that and experiencing kind of living in a society where always watching your back and um my 12 year old host sister would, you know, would put me on the other side of the sidewalk as her and be a barrier between me and the—when we walked by the bars. Things like that where a 12 year old shouldn't have to take—I was 20 at the time. I think that would be a big turning point in my feminism. [Participant 4]

Two participants discussed experiences in student organizations as influential in their development as a feminist. For example, Participant 8 noted one influential experience was in “. . . taking over the students for choice group on my campus and seeing the pushback from faculty, seeing the pushback from other students, um staff on campus . . .”

Another participant noted specific activism as a part of a student organization and took on a leadership role:

. . . definitely the most impactful experience in college was um when I founded a student organization—or I co-founded a student organization . . . the organization ended up spear-heading—students supported a strike. And I was one of the leaders in the um in the strike. And so you know that certainly shaped my identity as a leader and as a compassionate person and as um as a lot of things.

[Participant 5]

Thus, experiences in student organizations during undergrad, particularly with regard to activist and leadership roles, seemed to have played a large role in solidifying feminist identity for these participants.

Learning from personal relationships or professors was also influential in some participants' identity development as a feminist. Participant 5 noted that the mom of a best friend was a professor and was largely influential, while also noting "I just have known so many women who [laugh] were such feminists for so long that I really don't—I don't remember." Participant 3 identified a previous partner as being influential: "I dated a woman who is transgender...but dating her and being around and learning from her very much liberalized the way that I think about gender and sexuality and things like that."

Additionally, two participants noted watching family members, namely their mothers, live through difficult situations as influential to their feminist identity. For example, one participant noted:

. . . my mother was married to a guy and had me and he ended up you know being a really shit—a big shithead...my mom was strong and saw that all that was going



on....one day my mom just like picked up and left and threw me in a car and drove back to (home state) to be with her family, um and left him and you know through her strong will of saying like “You don’t need a man, like I raised you on my own.” [Participant 2]

While some of the influential experiences recalled by participants were positive in nature, other events that were discussed were more negative. Even for the less positive experiences such as altering one’s behaviors while studying abroad or witnessing men treating their mothers poorly, participants seemed to reflect on these experiences and were empowered to engage in feminist activism.

### **Feminism is Complex to Define**

Similar to the large variety of influences in how participants came to identify with feminism, participants had slightly varying definitions of feminism, but commonalities such as equality and choice were present in many of participants’ personal definitions. When asked about their personal definition of feminism, one participant responded:

Oh that is something I think about a lot. Um I think—to me it means just that I believe that in every aspect of a women’s life or anyone who identifies as a woman as well as actually for men as well—there’s the opportunity to do what you want. And it took me I would say a while to get here—but that includes you know the ability to get a higher education and then be a stay-at-home mom—that’s an extremely, to me, a very feminist thing to do. Or, to continue to work your entire life or the entire spectrum. The—just the idea there needs to be the equal opportunity—not that every woman needs to take all those opportunities. Um and I think that that to me is a big point because a lot of people think that that

means that every woman needs to be taking every opportunity that's given to her but I just believe it's the ability to have those opportunities and then choosing for yourself what is best for you in the different circumstances, and your family if that's a consideration and everything else. Um and also I think one of the things about feminism to me is not having to apologize or to make excuses for actions that you take. [Participant 4]

Similarly, another participant discussed gender distinctions made by society and a range of issues impacting women's equality:

. . . I strongly believe in gender equality um to the point of—sorry, I'm trying to phrase this correctly—um gender equality to the extent where gender is no longer in the definition um defining something. . . I would say that um my feminist identity definitely stems from being just hyperaware of all of the inequality ranging from honor killing all the way to the fact that commercials for laundry detergent feature women doing the laundry, right. And so all of those things are the same to me. Um issues of abortion access, child marriage, um domestic violence, everything that happens on an unequal and the you know represent—female representation in congress and in the CEO uh—CEO uh proportion inequality. Um all of that kind of range of things to me is all under the exact same umbrella of manifestations of the patriarchal oppression of women. Um so that's where my feminism comes out of—just being hyperaware of all of the inequities and the intersections of inequalities across socioeconomic um cadres and racial lines and everything there as well. [Participant 8]

What was perhaps most striking about analyzing participants' personally held definitions of feminism, however, was how half of the participants indicated that defining feminism was "hard" or that it was more complex than having one definition. Another piece that was interwoven in the discussion of being challenging to define was the importance of personal activism that was associated with feminism. When asked for a personal definition of feminism, one participant stated:

This is such a hard question—it's just so multi-faceted. But to me plain and simple—what it means to be a feminist—a feminist is women are equal. Uh in some cases I have a bias 'cause I am a woman and I think women are stronger and smarter. Um I think being a feminist means that you stick up for women...

[Participant 2]

Another participant's account included similar tones but also noted having to engage in self-advocacy:

This is a really hard question... I don't think there is one definition of feminism like what is feminism...to be a feminist today I think it's just continuing the fight for equity and you know I am as good as a guy, why can't I get paid as much as him? Why do I have to fight as hard—harder to get a job that he can get? ...And so feminism for me is continuing to fight for my current place in society.

[Participant 7]

Considering the complexities involved with personally defining feminism might have something to do with all of the negativity that comes along with the term and the gross misunderstanding much of society has of feminism. What was compelling in this section of the research was in how participants seemed to have a strong sense of their own

identity but that it may have been so complex and intertwined to whom they are as a person to extrapolate into a simple definition.

**Community of Support (Theme Emerged from Research Question 2: How Have Life Experiences Impacted Your Career Choices? and Research Question 3: What Supportive Factors Did You Encounter That Aided in Your Career and Employment?)**

Participants credited many people in their lives who served as role models, and who were there for support throughout their lives or at more specific times during turning points in their education or career. The community of support theme contains four subthemes, including being surrounded by strong women, having helpful supervisors, having close friends and family, and being a part of a progressive community. While not all participants identified people within these four themes, all participants did discuss people who provided support or encouragement.

**Surrounded by Strong Women**

The majority of the participants either reported *strong* women in their lives that made an impact on their life or specifically talked about being *surrounded* by women. For example, Participant 2 stated: “I’ve always been surrounded by really strong women . . . I’ve always had strong female role models around” and Participant 4 similarly noted: “. . . I found myself surrounded by a lot of feminists. Um of—all sorts of feminists.” Other participants identified strong women in their lives, and particularly in relation to the impact of strong women in their career journey. One participant discussed influential women from a variety of arenas:

. . . I've been surrounded by strong women my whole life—my mom, my grandmother, um church people. Career wise, I was hired by, you know, a woman that—she's amazing. She was loud. She was boisterous . . . And continuing on to my career and being hired by another very strong woman. . . . And then uh through my graduate degree, I met other women that encouraged me down a women's path. I mean it's all being surrounded by like this network of really powerful and really secure women. [Participant 7]

Another participant noted how role models whose actions were true to feminism were instrumental to personal feminist identity and career journey:

. . . my very first job, real job after undergrad was at a nonprofit that was run by a group of women, all of whom strongly identify as feminists and actually were extremely active in the women's health movement in (city) in the 1970s and now all still work at this amazing organization . . . so I spent three years, um really formative years of my early 20s surrounded by women who really just walked the walk and like just would share with me stories about um about the women's health movement and who were very passionate about choice and um women's rights and reproductive rights and so I mean they had a huge influence on me not only in my feminism but even in my career choice . . . [Participant 6]

What is perhaps most interesting is how in each account, there are collective groups of women whom participants have labeled as being strong and influential. While it cannot be determined that there is a causal relationship between being surrounded by powerful women and one's later feminist identity or a career that is rooted in social change, it is also unlikely that it is not a factor in later identities and career development. Instead,

these powerful women likely helped lay the groundwork on which the participants could internalize these positive messages in a world where there is so much feminist backlash and gender discrimination, and developed authentic feminist identities and became empowered women.

A few participants spoke about family members, such as mothers, grandmothers, and great-aunts that were strong and resilient women and were also influential role models. In each of the stories, the participants held these family members in very high esteem. For instance, Participant 3 noted: “Yeah I was raised by a single mom and um she is like a total badass . . . ever since I was little—it was just like ‘a woman can do anything that a man can do.’” Participants’ stories also included how their mothers and grandmothers defied expectations or stereotypes of women, only to surpass obstacles and be empowered and successful women.

. . . I think that seeing my mother being so strong and like not giving a shit about anybody else but doing what had to be done to, you know, have a good life for her and me and then you know, getting remarried, having two kids, always having a full-time job on top of raising three kids and like having the you know middle class, suburban household. You know just watching my mom do all that showed me that women are strong and that we need to be able to display that right for that and that it’s important and it matters. [Participant 2]

Another participant credited grandmothers for demonstrating the importance of education:

. . . I guess in terms of people who were strong, female role models—I’ve always said this um both of my grandmothers went to college um which I always found

to be really amazing comparing it was 1940 that they both did and neither of my grandfathers did, which is to say nothing bad about my grandfathers but the fact that they both believed and always taught me how important education is um was really meaningful to me and very influential in my life in terms of my appreciation for what education can give you and to me the most important thing education can give . . . [Participant 4]

Gaining positive and supportive messages from family and particularly parental figures was a narrative that spanned throughout several of the stories told by participants. The nonverbal messages that participants picked up from mothers about being a strong woman seemed to be internalized and helped build a foundation where the participants could truly develop to their full potential.

Two participants also noted their friends among the strong women they knew. Participant 2 stated: “. . . my girlfriends from high school and college are just like me. Like super strong-minded, super independent women. Like not getting married, not even thinking about getting engaged anytime soon.” Another participant talked about a college experience:

So in college I was in this professional foreign service sorority . . . And basically it was a group of some of the most amazing women I ever met in college . . . and the women who were in it are all amazing, phenomenal women, very strong women um they're all doing great things. [Participant 4]

Representation of women in powerful roles is crucial in whether girls and young women can see a pathway to various types of careers. Furthermore, with a number of participants noting they had role models that portray a strong and independent sense of self, it is not

surprising that the participants interviewed also possessed many of these same character traits. Perhaps they were drawn to such women, or saw a part of themselves in their role models and aspired to be there someday as well. Considering all of the participants named at least one supportive person and several participants named a number of role models or supportive people from different parts of their lives, it is not surprising that the participants in this study possessed a strong and empowered sense of self.

### **Helpful Supervisors**

In all but one interview, participants noted that they have had at least one supervisor who has been helpful and supportive. Most of the supervisors mentioned were women and those who the participants held in high regard with respect to how well they performed in their careers. For example, Participant 8 noted: “my boss is um the most wonderful person in the world. She—I can’t imagine working for anybody better than her.” Participant 6 also noted how women who ran a company where previously employed, created a supportive culture: “. . . it wasn’t just like the fact that they created this great culture but they were actually intentional about empowering young women.” Yet another participant reflected upon how supervisors have boosted personal confidence:

I think having a really, um really encouraging um, supervisors throughout my career. It’s not only, it—I’ve not always had the best managers, but I’ve always had people who were really encouraging and complementary of me and my skills which I think has always encouraged me to like take the next step and to keep pushing and keep um believing in myself which um as I’ve advanced and as my different—as my career interests have changed, that I think has been a consistent



factor that has helped me feel competent in my choices and abilities. [Participant 1]

Supervisors were commonly noted as being intelligent and successful, as Participant 4 stated: “Oh she’s [my supervisor is] wonderful. Um she’s very intelligent . . .” Similarly, another participant views some supervisors as role models:

. . . one of my supervisors on (team name) and my old um boss on my current team . . . were all people who I was like “Wow, she is really a hard worker. She is really on top of her shit, knows so much, is so smart but also is like nice and like has her personal life together. And like wow.” They’re all great people so I think those are like people closer to me that I think have had—been like kind of role models for me. [Participant 3]

Not only do participants view their past and current supervisors as being supportive and good role models but also as being helpful in what the future brings.

And she’s [current supervisor] supportive of me and my career—like on um—totally separate from the fact that I work for her. I actually have had conversations with her about um me leaving this position and going in a different direction, um which I plan to do . . . And she’s really supportive of it. [Participant 8]

Most participants were complementary of current or past supervisors and credited supervisors with being very supportive. Participants discussed how encouraging their supervisors were and seemed to admire the work of their supervisors. This level of trust coupled with a belief in their supervisors’ abilities likely impacts job morale.

Additionally, having a supervisor who is so supportive may also positively affect self-efficacy, and possibly the belief in current and future career success.

## **Family and Close Friends**

As to be expected, participants also noted family and close friends as being supportive in their career and life. Of particular note, parents and grandparents were emotionally supportive and encouraged education with all but one participant naming a parent, grandparent or combination that provided support. One participant noted the support of parents despite not fully understanding the choice of career:

. . . one thing that is consistently highlighted for me is that my parents have always been really supportive. They've never really understood my career choices or totally understand my motivations for having them. But are various—but still do whatever they can to help me along the way, whether it be financially when I was first out of college and again in grad school or if it's—you know, trying to um—just trying to be supportive and like do what they can to show that even though they don't really understand why I make the choices I make. [Participant 1]

Another participant noted how family believed in the importance of education and particularly how a grandfather modeled the importance:

. . . having a family that encourages education and like talks about why education is important. Um when I was young my grandfather used to read to me all the time and um he would take me to school sometimes when I was like in middle and high school and um he would quiz me on my vocab uh—like having a family and like people around you that value education I think definitely have gotten me to where I am today. [Participant 3]

Perhaps the most notable influence when it came to family was the role that women family members played in participants' experiences. Specifically, mothers were identified as being supportive in five of the eight interviews and were talked about as being a friend and mentor. For example, Participant 2 stated: "I could talk to my mom about anything. She's like my best friend and my mentor." Some participants discussed their mothers with great admiration, particularly with balancing several responsibilities:

. . . my mom is one of those understated leaders. Um I would definitely say that my mother influenced my um—my feminist identity . . . I just always really admired her work-life balance um 'cause I felt like she did a really good job.

[Participant 5]

Similarly, another participant noted:

My mom's an amazing lady. She's got her doctorate and . . . just how many balls she always had in the air and that she just kept going and she was there for my family. She you know was a friend to me growing up—I was the only child. Um just kind of see her in action and knowing how she was involved in the community and at work was always really amazing. [Participant 7]

Witnessing firsthand how their mothers were able to balance a number of responsibilities well, while being a good mother was obviously very influential to these participants.

While some family members were great role models and provided support, one participant went on to discuss how family members, notably a mother and grandmother, provided encouragement by way of complementing the participant's strengths:

. . . both my grandmother and my mother have always said to me like "It's really important that you get an education and like you're really smart, (participant's

name). You need to go to college. You need to like have a great career and be able to support yourself.” [Participant 6]

Relatedly, another participant’s grandmother had great aspirations for the participant:

And um my grandmother . . . was just a very—excuse me—very amazing woman. Um you know I only knew her as my grandmother so—uh but she was always supportive of what I did and wanted to know about what I was doing and just had so many dreams for me and was always so thrilled about what I was doing and was just there for me. [Participant 7]

Having family members or other people one trusts communicate that they believe in you and verbalize this confidence seems to be an extremely powerful influence and has no doubt impacted the aspirations and confidence participants had in themselves. Without this self-efficacy, it is unlikely that these women would have been as successful in their academic and professional lives.

In addition, there were two participants in the study who identified as being married and both discussed their husbands as being supportive in their life situation and career trajectory. One of the participants was also a mother and stated they had an egalitarian partner relationship:

. . . one of the reasons I decided to marry my husband is because he *loves* the fact that I have a career—that in a lot of ways is actually is more um—even more demanding than his and I absolutely would not have a child unless I had a partner who 100 percent supported me and who you know—there have been days when my daughter’s been sick and I’ve had to go to work and my husband has stayed home with her. And that’s really, really significant for me. [Participant 6]

The other participant who was married noted:

And my husband, oh my god my husband is just like “You gotta do this.” Like he’s just—he’s been a rock. He’s been so supportive. He fights harder than me on a lot of my stuff. He’s like “You gotta go do this. I believe in you.” And he’s just never doubted. [Participant 7]

Having a partner and an egalitarian relationship can impact one’s overall satisfaction, happiness, and balance in life. Having a person you are intimately involved with believe in you can also in turn, impact one’s self-efficacy. Those who are in unhealthy relationships sometimes have issues of confidence in other arenas in their lives.

Finally, four participants reported friends who were supportive of them, particularly with their work life. One recalled how supportive a friend was during the job search process:

. . . the other person [that was helpful in the job search process] would be my best friend from college...she would always call me and remind me that it had only been like two months or whatever and that it was okay and that she ended up with a job that she loves, that it is possible to find the job that you love out of college and things like that. And she always was like “You can always move, it’s okay, you don’t have to feel stuck or anything like that.” [Participant 4]

Another participant talked of the importance of having a supportive circle of friends when doing the advocacy work:

Um I think my friends have just been so supportive of all this. Like the work that I—tends to be pretty Debbie downer um so just you know, my friends just being there for me and listening when I need to gripe about things or when I’m upset

about something that happened uh with clients etcetera. So um yeah, I think that having that support system has been really, um really instrumental in like my ability to do this work. [Participant 8]

Having people who one can count on who are supportive is essential. Participants noted various family members, partners, and friends—all of whom were supportive in both their career and life. What was most interesting about the people identified as supportive was how many mothers and women supervisors were noted as being role models. Perhaps seeing successful women firsthand, and those with whom participants had different relationships with, provided a consistent message and proven representation of women balancing various responsibilities and being strong.

### **Progressive Communities**

A final subtheme of the overarching community of support theme that came through during participant interviews was having been a part of a progressive community, whether while growing up or during their more current employment. Five participants used the words progressive, liberal, or social justice to describe the communities they were a part of. One participant spoke of the city they lived in as liberal and their high school as feminist:

. . . I went to school in an extremely—well (city) is as a whole—in extremely liberal and progressive little community um and so it's weird because it wasn't weird—none of the things that I did in high school were, quote unquote, weird because everyone kind of had similar ideals um—we always joked—yeah it was just a very progressive-minded community and so it wasn't even that at high school anyone had to say they were feminists. I worked on the newspaper and we

wrote an article about why the school district was a feminist school district and we never thought that was anything abnormal. [Participant 4]

Another participant spoke of how the religious community they were raised in embraced social justice:

I mean I was sort of brought up in the social justice movement. Um I—my church has been reconciling, so accepting of LGBT persons since I was one year old and I grew up with a lot of really great role models in um you know just uh in—my church was very, very social justice oriented so I grew up with a lot of strong role models, both female and male um and transgender. [Participant 5]

Organizations where one participant worked were also noted as being communities of progressive people:

. . . being surrounded by a community of progressives throughout my various jobs and everything has also been really helpful too, you know see that there are all these other people around you who think similarly and share your values and that you're not, you know—even when you feel like that one kid being the pain in the ass in the room, being like “hey I can do that too, even though I'm not a boy” in other venues, you know, like how, that like having a similar experience you know there are these other people who feel the same way and that do have your back even if they're not like present in that space, that you're not like, actually like that weirdo, only one calling it out. [Participant 1]

While there are many reasons why participants have been successful in college and career, or why they decided to take on the feminist label, being a part of liberal or social justice oriented communities may have been an aid to the participants who mentioned such

experiences while growing up. Progressive workplaces may offer feminist women places where they can be themselves and be with like-minded people—which may lead to greater work satisfaction and feelings of belonging.

**Adversity Experienced (Theme Emerged from Research Question 2: How Have Life Experiences Impacted Your Career Choices? and Research Question 4: What Barriers Did You Encounter in Your Career Choices and Employment?)**

All participants talked of experiencing some level of adversity in life, particularly with respect to their career or current position. While this was not all that surprising as everyone is likely to experience adversity, many participants noted experiences that were specific to their gender. This finding was expected due to the prevalence of gender discrimination in society. Four subthemes were found around adversity through the collective analysis, including gender dynamics, issues with work fit, feeling underemployed or passed over, and having unhelpful supervisors. Narratives from the participants' stories to demonstrate these subthemes and the larger adversity theme are detailed in this section.

**Gender Dynamics**

Gender dynamics ranged over a number of experiences—from noticing that women are treated differently in the workplace to discrimination experienced—and were noted in six of the eight participant interviews. How women are viewed in the workplace came up in several of the interviews, not only with respect to personal experience but also in recognizing experiences of other women. One specific issue that was raised on a couple of occasions during participant interviews was how ideas shared by participants in work situations were disregarded or completely ignored, only to have a man bring up the



same idea and then suddenly, it was not only recognized but was also praised as a great idea.

I think it's really common among me and my female friends to speak up at work and have our ideas just pushed aside um and then you know when a male colleague brings it up, all of a sudden everybody is just all ears. I think that's something that happens kind of every day now. [Participant 8]

Another participant noted a similar situation:

There are times when I'll be in a meeting and I'll say something and people will sort of ignore it or not respond or whatever. And then a White man or someone else in the same meeting will say virtually the same thing you know a minute later, 30 seconds later. And everyone's like "Oh absolutely, that's a great idea." And I'm like "wasn't that what I just said?" Um I mean yeah, I think that's—that happens. And you know I think it's not—it's not necessarily because I'm a woman but it you know—it's certainly—I've certainly seen other women in similar situations have sort of that type of um—people ignore them, sort of like that. [Participant 5]

This is problematic for a number of reasons; one being that women are not given the credit they deserve and colleagues who are men are taking the credit when it is not earned. This in turn, could impact later work evaluations, promotions, and advancement. Another issue lies within how the others in the room seem to be more likely to pick up on ideas shared by men, which may be partially due to how people are socialized around gender and leadership. Feelings of being perceived differently based on gender also came up during interviews. For example, Participant 1 stated: "I think I'm really conscious of the

different ways that women are perceived in the workplace and everything from the—um you know how you negotiate is perceived differently and whether you negotiate is perceived differently.” Being hyperaware of how women are perceived differently due to their gender can be exhausting, and may result in changing one’s behavior in work situations. This could be limiting in that an individual may believe that they have to tone down their assertion to avoid being perceived negatively. Or, this could also mean that an individual may choose to ramp up their message in order to be heard or has to work harder to get ahead like one participant noted:

I just feel like it’s been harder as a woman in having to prove myself but, you know, I don’t feel like I’ve—haven’t been fired for being a woman, haven’t been pregnant so I haven’t been fired for being pregnant and I know that there’s stories out there. Um but no, I think I’ve just been lucky and that’s made me, you know, just kind of take my path through life and that’s where I am today. And I see these other injustices happening around me and that’s what I want to fix. [Participant 7]

Whether women have to change how they assert themselves so as to not to be taken negatively or whether they have to work harder to be heard or to get ahead, this could contribute to an individual not being authentic in who they are and potentially lead to higher stress for being hyperaware of how they are perceived differently.

In a few of the excerpts provided previously as well as with the one that follows, some participants mentioned gender injustices but believed them to be limiting in terms of their success in life.

. . . I think that like, you know, the discrimination that I have faced is probably been like people taking me less seriously because I’m a woman or like I have

blond hair or I can act like outgoing and it makes me seem kind of ditzy. Or like I wear high heels so I'm seen like a Barbie. But like those are all like very small instances where like I don't think they really affected like my life. Like they affected like my day or like maybe how one person viewed me . . . [Participant 3]

Though these internalized messages of not being taken seriously may not have cost an individual their job, it still entered and impacted the participants' consciousness and therefore likely contributed to some level of thought or stress around others' perceptions of them.

It is challenging to deconstruct each and every injustice to determine exactly how one is perceived and the impact that may have on that person's success. One participant noted a couple examples of discrimination, but was unsure if it was due to gender or racial discrimination or both.

Um I was just—my husband and I were talking about this. That like for some reason whenever we go—when we travel like there are old White people in airports find it like—find it necessary to like say something to me as if I don't know what I'm doing. So one time we were flying to—we were flying to visit our family and I got in the first class check-in line because like I have elite status and you know this old White guy was like “This is the first class check-in line.” I'm like “I know this—you know I know this is the first class check-in line.” Or even like last week we were coming back from (city) and I was like following the TSA agent who was bringing us to the family line and he's like—oh the White people were like “This is where you're supposed to go. Where you're going?” And you know I don't know if that's—I mean I've read like I've seen on Jezebel [feminist

website] like other women business travelers who have talked about that—that like men are not used to seeing women in like first class or in business class and like will often just assume that they're not in the right place. Um so I don't know if that's what it's about or if it's because I'm Black or just the combination that I'm a Black woman who's like traveling in ways that um you know not a lot of other Black women travel—traveling the way that I travel. [Participant 6]

Regardless of whether this was a result of gender or racial discrimination, or a combination of the two, questioning one's legitimacy is very problematic on a personal level, likely causing distress as well as on a societal level by resulting in an erasure or invisibility of women and Women of Color in powerful positions.

### **Issues with Work Fit**

Half of the participants, or four out of eight, mentioned issues with fit within their current organization or position. Connecting with coworkers is more important to some people than others. If having those connections with immediate team members is an important work value, issues with fit in this area will likely have a strong and negative impact on work satisfaction. Some participants mentioned issues between other departments within the organization. For example, Participant 8 stated: “. . . the um rest of my working environment is lacking . . .there's a big clash in schools of thought . . .” Yet another participant reported the lack of connection between departments can lead to feelings of defensiveness.

Um within our building we're really kind of siloed from the other departments so there's not a lot of interaction I guess. I mean even though I'm regularly having meetings with one of them, there's always this like kind of feeling of autonomy

over what we are working on and a lot of maybe defensiveness against your project and you know just making sure like you're owning what you're doing.

[Participant 7]

For other participants, issues of work environment fit played out in relationships, or lack thereof, with coworkers on their immediate team.

I'm probably not best suited for a predominately female environment. I have probably have what all the books would probably describe as more male work tendencies, and so I'm a little bit more straightforward and aggressive on certain things that doesn't quite fit with the culture of my predominately female organization. [Participant 1]

Another participant mentioned a discrepancy around age and life situation, and did not feel connected to older people on the team.

. . . so I am closest to people at the—I guess like technically it's like one level below me—like it's what I started as... I think that has a lot to do with my age. Um most people that work at (company) or at least on my team are older. Um and not like that much older um but they're definitely at different places in their lives . . . [Participant 3]

Finally, both participants who mentioned not fitting into their team of coworkers also reflected upon being satisfied with the work itself. One participant is actively seeking other job opportunities with a slightly different focus.

. . . the space isn't quite right for me and um I care about reproductive health but there's other aspects of international development that I'd rather be working in

and so um, I am exploring those opportunities now and looking for opportunities to move into another sector. [Participant 1]

Desiring to be more involved in the implementation of direct programming, rather than administrative tasks was of note for one individual.

. . . I'm so busy doing like those administrative operational tasks that I'm not able to really contribute substantially to our programming...and that's what I really, really care about and that's what I really want to do with my career is be more involved in gender programming and I feel like I don't have the opportunity to do that because I have so much other work that I have to do that I don't really get the chance to do that. [Participant 3]

Feeling unsatisfied with job responsibilities is particularly concerning with the participants in this study as many were involved in organizations that provided services, advocacy, or programming for women. Participants decided to go into their chosen field because of their passion or interest in women's issues, and ended up having some dissatisfaction when they discovered they wanted something else or did not get to engage in work that was meaningful.

Being consumed with work tasks and responsibilities that are not fulfilling can lead not only to dissatisfaction with one's job or career but also to burnout. Two other factors that lead to burnout, feelings of being underemployed and passed over, also came up in interviews and are discussed next.

### **Underemployed and Passed Over**

Three quarters, or six of eight participants talked about feeling either underemployed, overworked, or passed over in their current position. Participants

reported high levels of frustration surrounding these issues. Participant 3 mentioned feeling overworked: “. . . I have a lot of work compared to other people at my level . . . the distribution of work is not totally fair . . .” Participant 8 talked about this in a way that painted a picture of the competitive and disposable nature of people employed in social activism jobs in the region.

. . . I live in a place where there is a high concentration of people who are exactly like me. People who believe what I believe in, people who do the work I do—um I think in such a highly concentrated place like this especially with the number of like ambitious type A people that exist here which by the way, I’m not one of—um it’s—it breeds competition. When you know when your social activism is a job, there’s always going to be competition for that job . . . so I’d say that’s a barrier. And then, the fact that because that competition exists, organizations are always able to find somebody to underpay and overwork. Um I think that there’s—within that world, there’s very little—there’s very little money, right. And there’s—that also tends to sometimes manifest in um seeing people as replaceable, right. So if I go and I get you know underpaid and overworked at my nonprofit job and I burn out and leave after a year, there’s like 10 people more than willing, happy and able to take my spot. [Participant 8]

Two participants also noted feelings of frustration with being underemployed and having education and skills that go much beyond what they were called to do on a daily basis for their job.

I have seven-ish years of work experience and through um, a master's degree and feel that I'm not being utilized to the degree and not really doing exactly what I came here to do and so that's a frustration or challenge. [Participant 1]

Similarly, another participant noted a desire to move into a position that was a better fit in terms of skills.

. . . I feel very underemployed, um very underemployed. Um and I think that that for me is a real frustration because I have sort of—there are a lot of different areas that I would like to go into and there—I wish I could find a job that like actually utilized you know a bigger percent of the skills . . . [Participant 5]

This is problematic in a few ways including organizations missing out on valuable employee resources that they are not otherwise noticing or utilizing. Moreover, this could impact future commitment and dedication to the organization. On a personal level, this may have a significant negative impact on morale and may lead to further discontent with the career field one has chosen.

Yet another common occurrence noted by three participants was that of being passed over for another employee. Participant 2 had an understanding with their place of employment that they would likely receive a specific title after some time with the organization, but that did not happen.

My boss had told me multiple times this is never going to be—that uh you know I'm not going to be (current position) . . . I will probably get a title bump. But she [person hired without participant's knowledge] kind of has the title that I would have gotten. [Participant 2]



Two other participants applied for positions within the organization they had been working, only to feel passed over when outside candidates were hired.

. . . I applied for a position in sort of the same department but working for a different person that I was really excited about um and it would have been doing sort of a much broader set of things . . . and they didn't hire me even though I was *so* much more qualified than the person that they hired. [Participant 5]

For the other candidate who felt passed over, this led to feelings of ambivalence of working for that organization in the future.

. . . the fact that the place that I have been working for eleven months at that point in my senior year [of college] when they would hire other people and things like that and I always felt kind of passed by, made me not want to work for them or some of their partner organizations—not because I didn't love them because I do but it just felt like a lot of the work that I had been doing which was a lot of work—was overlooked for new people who didn't know anything about the organization . . . [Participant 4]

Feeling discontented with employment was definitely a frustration reported by many of the participants. Considering that all participants held bachelor's degrees or higher and have taken considerable strides and risks to get to where they are in their career today, this is unfortunate. It is also, however, fairly typical of nonprofits and advocacy work that many participants were involved with.

## Unhelpful Supervisors

Five participants mentioned a current supervisor or recalled a past supervisor who hindered their career development in some way. Sometimes this took the form of having a supervisor who was a micromanager who did not place any trust in their employees.

. . . it's frustrating too because I care a lot about the organization and she [supervisor] has really done a lot of damage to our reputation and to um to you know our portfolio, we used to handle a lot more—we used to cover a lot more issues and represent our workers a lot better um than we do now because she has to micromanage everything and it has to be perfect . . . she's uh challenging. So uh—so it's tough to see somebody who treats you so badly, do such a terrible job . . . [Participant 5]

Another participant recalled a related experience:

. . . [A previous boss] just was a terrible person and he was like a crazy um crazy micromanager. And so I had just come from running a program in (another location) where I had 11 staff, all of whom were older than me to like working for this guy who like I couldn't like—he didn't even want me to even send an email you know without him reviewing it. [Participant 6]

In both of these accounts, the participants not only mentioned that their supervisor was a micromanager, but also that they were “terrible.” These experiences regrettably were major challenges that both of these participants have experienced. With Participant 6, the negative interactions with a boss led to seeking and securing employment in another division.

Two of the participants discussed supervisors who were supportive in some ways, but ended up being a hindrance to their career path when it came to future opportunities. One participant described an unhealthy or controlling work relationship.

Um one of the women that has been actually like supported me very heavily and like identifying myself and career path wise, she's also one of the women who's held me down the most. Um she [sigh]—she would like build you up and give you all these opportunities but then she would keep you on leash and then like the second you would like start to sly away like you would feel yanked back with this tremendous force. [Participant 7]

Another participant noted that a past supervisor hindered possible career opportunities—not by way of being controlling—but instead by not connecting the participant with the supervisor's network.

. . . someone that I worked for for a couple of years who has a— had a large network and I was, did a lot for her, she was my supervisor and everything— wasn't very helpful in um in my like next career and job steps when um I left working for her. And I thought that and—you know someone that has that capacity and just wasn't willing to do that despite being very complementary of me and very like in a position where she could have, I think that was a bit of an inhibition I guess . . . [Participant 1]

Yet Participant 2 discussed situations involving supervisors that made work life challenging to some degree. One situation involved a time where the participant and a past supervisor “buted heads constantly because she didn't like how strong-minded and independent I was and that she would always try and put me in situations . . . where I

would fail.” Another example this participant provided was how the supervisor created an environment that could be potentially off-putting, or even hostile to some.

My boss is just kind of a pain sometimes. He says stupid masculine crap. . . . and he thinks it’s funny and yeah whatever it is. But if like if I wasn’t so easy going, other people would find it uncomfortable. Can’t remember anything in particular right now. But just like talking about how celebrities are hot. [Participant 2]

Considering more participants than not had recounted unpleasant experiences with supervisors is disappointing, yet not all that surprising. A lot of supervisors may have supervision styles that conflict with the needs of their supervisees, and this may have been even more pronounced if participants were expecting a more egalitarian relationship that would be consistent with feminism. Additionally, many managers supervise without having formal training in how to be an effective and empowering supervisor.

### **Empowerment and Authenticity (Theme Emerged from Research Question 5: How Does Your Feminist Identity and Career Influence Each Other?)**

The final overarching theme that was noticeable throughout all the participants’ narratives was that of having a sense of empowerment and being authentic to who they were. This theme is comprised of four subthemes including voice and self-efficacy, altruistic values, impact of identity on relationships, and confronts sexism.

#### **Voice and Self-Efficacy**

In some way, talking about finding their “voice” or exhibiting an air of confidence and self-efficacy was apparent among all eight participants and in some interviews it came up multiple times. Sometimes this was attributed toward their feminist identity; it was also discussed as being separate. Yet other participants did not identify the relation

between the two. One participant discussed how feminism positively influenced self-advocacy:

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

[Participant 4]

Whereas, Participant 5 noted that feeling empowered was separate from feminism: “. . . I think for me college was—it wasn’t about being a feminist, it was about being an empowered person. It was about being a leader and finding my voice.” With both of these accounts, whether or not feminism was credited as being influential, it is interesting to note that participants all seemed to possess some sort of empowerment.

A number of participants shared experiences where they advocated for themselves, and despite the adversity they encountered, they remained authentic to themselves and spoke out against sexism. One participant discussed an experience at a conservative university:

And you know I started putting all those connections together, our executive um—our like student body council was all male, um you know our eating disorders rate and sexual assault rate was out—like astronomical and I started to really kind of realize like because I spoke my mind because I had opinions I was actively called aggressive by my male colleagues . . . [Participant 8]

Despite active resistance from peers, this participant pushed forward and continued to engage in advocacy efforts around a variety of feminist issues. Another experience that was shared was an account of being harassed and assaulted in a train station, and having friends question the validity of the experience afterward:

. . . someone touched me in the Metro. When I was walking to get the train like some guy like reached behind me and touched my butt and like obviously that wasn't okay and I like texted some people about it after it happened and one of my close friends who's a guy was like—oh like actually a couple people did this—they're like “are you sure like he meant to touch you, there?” And I was like “Really? Like am I sure? First of all, I'm pretty fucking sure because he like reached around and touched me. And second of all, like wha—you're gonna like say that after that happened to me. Like you're going to make my experience—you're going to lessen my experience by like doubting my account and unintentionally siding with this guy who harassed me in the Metro like when I was coming home from work.” Like that's not okay. [Participant 3]

This account was obviously an assault on this participant; and what followed with having a friend call the experience into question happens all too frequently in society. While these friends likely were not being intentionally dismissive, what they did was cast doubt. In some cases, victims and survivors of this type of harassment and violence begin to doubt themselves or even blame themselves. In this situation, however, the participant remained grounded in the experience and spoke back with great confidence.

Four participants exhibited confidence in the workplace—through negotiating space and negotiating salaries. Speaking up during meetings or claiming a space at the table came up in a few interviews. For example, one participant stated:

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

[Participant 2]

Negotiating one's salary also came up in two interviews, as one participant discussed:

I mean tomorrow when I see my boss, I have to bring up the topic again of “Hey, you know, you said we'd talk Friday about the possible raise. I understand like we weren't in the office and things couldn't come up but could we schedule a time you know today—between like today and Thursday to actually talk about it. And being a feminist means you're not scared to stand up to a male boss. In some aspects somewhere in my mind that means that like you are equal. Yes, he's your boss but if it was a woman boss or a male boss you still have to have respect for your boss. But he purposely seems intimidating you know that's just the kind of guy he is. He's like an athlete and shit. But like I just—it helps me advocate for myself because I'm not gonna back down and act like a “good little girl,” if that makes sense. [Participant 2]

What is inherently fascinating about these stories is not just how participants discussed how they have or will speak up for themselves, but the confidence and power behind the

words. There is a “no nonsense” essence that permeates both of these accounts—one that comes from empowerment and being authentic to oneself.

Matters of finding or using one’s “voice” also came up in a few of the participants’ stories.

I would say I am a lot more secure in what my feminist identity is now and what it means and kind of the direction I’ve taken and knowing that it’s going to change and I’m okay with that because I have my voice and I’m not scared to use it.

[Participant 7]

Finally, another participant credited feminism for the internal confidence when applying for schools or jobs:

So um I think that in a lot of ways like I wouldn’t be where I am today if I wasn’t a feminist. Um because I think that having this—having this identity as a feminist and having this background both like—kind of emotional background as well as intellectual and academic background as a feminist—really like I don’t know. I wake up every day and like I *know* that I can do whatever I want to do which I know sounds cliché. But like I know that I’m just as good as men and so—it’s just I think given—really given me a confidence . . . [Participant 6]

All in all, feminist identity or believing in feminist principles appears to have had a significant impact on all participants, particularly with regard to their careers.

### **Altruistic Values**

Implicitly or explicitly, the connection between values and careers or activism was apparent in all eight interviews with participants. For example, one participant was very passionate when identifying just how correlated feminist identity was with to the



choice of career. When asked about the connection between one's career and feminism, this participant responded:

Extreme—100 percent correlation. Like they're exactly connected. I do what I do because eventually I would love to be one of those female senators that I'm trying to work for right now. You know, ultimate ultimate career dream is to be a female United States senator. So everything I do is completely connected to fighting for women and their equality rights. Um I just—that's basically it—they're just 100 percent connected. [Participant 2]

The relationship between career and feminist identity was also described as being co-influential:

They definitely um influence each other. I think it's a very back and forth process. Um first for me in terms the way my feminism influences my career, I—I'm always very interested in the way that gender intersects—gender and sex both intersect with um the different other issues areas that you can work on because nothing is like a vertical compartment of—nothing—everything intersects so the way that you know—how stigma and discrimination in different places against anyone but women. And I think for me my feminism also means that I'm much more open and understanding to different types of uh injustice. [Participant 4]

Yet another participant explained how personal this connection is:

. . . learning about these different issues um that affect women all the time, I just felt like, you know, like I know that these issues exist and they're so—they're part of my everyday life as a woman that like that it is important to me that I kind of

like dedicate my life to doing something that, you know, has to do with these issues 'cause obviously they're really personal to me. [Participant 3]

Considering how prevalent sexism is in society, it is not surprising that these issues are personal to participants. What perhaps distinguishes the participants of the study from women who do not identify with feminism is having a deep understanding of disparities between genders and recognizing how issues of gender equity have impacted them. Two participants discussed protests and standing up for others' rights as part of their feminist identity. As one participant noted:

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

[Participant 5]

Another participant identified activism engaged in outside of paid employment, however, nearly forgot about participation in current activism. While this may have been attributed to other life's tasks, it was also probably due to the activism being completely engrained in a personal sense of self.

And then I'm you know in terms of activism, unfortunately I don't have a lot of time to do activism anymore but um I care a lot about women's issues and I mean right now with my career and my child, I unfortunately don't get to do a lot of volunteer—well actually I do—I actually am on the board of an organization at

(organization name). . . So that is actually like something that like I commit time and money to and that's very much aligned to my feminist identity. And then you know like I continue to like support—give money to like my—the first organization where I worked . . . [Participant 6]

Being in a job that does not uphold feminist ideals and equality was not fathomable for two participants. For instance, Participant 4 stated: “. . . I don't think I ever experienced discrimination in my job search but I think that places that weren't as open or potentially had more discriminatory practices, I would not apply to.” Similarly, another participant discussed not being able to imagine working in a field that was completely void of feminism.

. . . I think it's really hard for me to picture myself doing something that's not this or that's not like—that doesn't have a feminist angle just because it's like I think it's important to integrate that into everything that happens, right. So um I don't—I don't know how I would have a job that's completely divorced from feminism. You know even if I were working in a corp—in the corporate world for something totally unrelated—I mean I don't think that I would . . . [Participant 8]

And ultimately, two participants discussed how feminism has aided in their career. As one participant stated:

Um I think it's [feminist identity] given me more direction and a sense of purpose in my career. Instead of being able to say like “I know that I like to work on campaigns,” I can now say you know “ I like to work on this advocacy issue because of x, y, and z.” [Participant 7]

The connection between feminist identity and career was one that was felt by all participants. While this was a question that was asked during the interviews, what was especially notable was how descriptive the stories were and the emphasis placed on this connection.

### **Impact of Identity on Relationships**

Through their narratives, participants demonstrated how true they were to their feminist identity, and how they were willing to stand up for their personal beliefs and for others as well. Six participants discussed examples of how they stuck up for other women or themselves.

A few participants discussed the impact of their feminist identity on key relationships in their lives. For instance, one participant discussed how feminism has positively impacted friendships:

Um I think it's [my feminist identity has] made a lot of my friendships stronger—um being able to bond over um shared experiences that I think most women have um and being able to recognize a lot of those and share together and heal together and be angry together and like work toward changing it in some situations.

[Participant 8]

Similarly, another participant discussed the positive impact feminism has had in a partner relationship.

Um I also think my identity as a feminist has really enabled me to have a wonderful relationship with my husband and to be . . . a parent—to be a mother in a way that I am really excited about. Um because I've just really always um

expected to be in an equal partnership and to be in an equal marriage . . .

[Participant 6]

One participant described how identifying with feminism has had a negative impact on parental relationships.

I think it's [my feminist identity has] negatively affected my relationship with my family um because they don't necessarily see it the way I see it. And I think they—it's hard for us to kind of bridge that gap with me feeling like they aren't taking these views seriously and they don't think that they're a huge issue um and—but like these are the views that I like work toward in my career like it's my whole life and so um—so I'd say that has been an issue. [Participant 8]

A number of participants discussed how it was important to them to be around people who upheld feminist beliefs. Two participants specifically noted creating online dating profiles and being upfront with their feminist identity. One of them stated:

. . . when I made an online dating profile on (dating website), um like my “about me” section was like “I'm a feminist.” Like “I'm an atheist” Like “these are two things about me that like you should know immediately because they're not going to change and they're important about me.” And so yeah—so I like I'm very vocal about it and it's really important. [Participant 3]

Outside of relationships in their personal lives and the interplay with their feminist identity, three participants overtly identified looking out for and mentoring other women, often providing multiple examples. One participant mentioned the importance of physically sitting with others, even if they are in lower-ranking positions.

. . . there's an all staff meeting and there's not enough seats at the table for everybody but if I get there I'm going to sit at the table and if my intern gets there before like a senior staff member I'll make them sit at the table and like I've called them out and been like "no. Sit at the table. You've got to lean in. Come on" [laugh]. [Participant 4]

Another participant provided multiple examples of creating an environment that is supportive of other women employees.

. . . it's really important to me to like have regular check-ins with the women who work at (organization) to like make sure that like if I see a woman not um speaking up in a meeting or not—if I don't hear her voice, I'll talk—just mention that to her or if I see men in meetings um totally dominating, I'll talk to them about it. So in general like I'm very cognizant of the role of women in the organization and that our voices are being heard and that's very much aligned with my feminist identity. [Participant 6]

Whether in their personal or work lives, the majority of participants mentioned examples of how their feminist identity has impacted how they advocate for themselves and others. This is not surprising, as acting on one's beliefs seems to be a significant part of what it is to assume a feminist identity.

### **Confronts Sexism**

The final subtheme that emerged within the overarching theme of empowerment and authenticity was in how participants confronted sexism and other discrimination. Specifically, five participants either noted that they engage in speaking their voice or described instances where they did speak up. Two participants noted being known as the

person that calls discriminatory language out. Participant 4 noted: “. . . I’m the person in groups where people know—you know—‘Don’t say that around (participant’s name) because she’s, you know, she sticks up for women.’” What was quite apparent is how participants were not afraid to speak their minds. For instance, Participant 1 stated: “. . . I’m not afraid to call somebody out for being sexist or not afraid to, you know, let people in social situations know how I feel about sexist situations or gender discrimination . . .”

Two participants provided specific examples of how they have intervened when they saw issues related to sexism. One example a participant provided was involved having a conversation with a boss about gender dynamics in how he trusts others:

I’m very aware of dynamics and like how people—how men interact with each other. And, you know, I mean actually one example is that my boss is always looking for like super star people and it’s—he’s actually like someone who doesn’t trust people very easily. Um what I mean by that is like he doesn’t—he’s not—like you’re not going to join (organization) and he’s going to be like “You’re amazing. I don’t need to like worry about what your work.” It’s like—it takes time. But I definitely noticed—and I’ve said this to him. We have a good relationship. But like you know he—there’s a certain type of guy who’s like him, who like he feels more comfortable with, who like they kind of like use theoretical language and like they have a certain vernacular—who he’s much more comfortable with and is like just more likely or more quickly um kind of will identify those guys as “These are—this is like a super star. This is someone who I can really trust.” As a woman you really have to work harder to be in that position with him. [Participant 6]

Another participant described instances of harassment, and how they would interact with the person imposing the discriminatory language or behaviors.

I'm a really vocal person and I'm not a person that is shy. And I think that—you know, I hang out with people just by the nature of my job and interests that are, you know, like into politics, into, you know, talking about issues um and I think my identity as a feminist has help—not helped me but it has led like to me engaging in a lot of arguments with people. Um not necessarily that were contrary to me but I think that, you know, people will engage with me more and debate with me more because I will say—like I will say it. It doesn't matter what it is but I will say it. Um if you're being transphobic, I'll say you're being transphobic. If like—I just don't want to deal with it. Um so I don't know if it's necessarily like the fact that I say “I am a feminist” but maybe like what is important to me—like you know like if someone is like going to street-harass my friend like I—like it's important to me that like that is recognized as street harassment and it's not just like “oh like guys just do that” or whatever. [Participant 3]

Adopting a feminist identity involves an active choice and one that is often met with apathy and stigma; therefore, the stories of speaking one's mind the participants shared were expected. While some participants described adverse experiences, this did not stop them from acting authentically and advocating for others.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a comprehensive account of the data results, analysis, and collective findings from the eight participant interviews. Four overarching themes resulted from the collective analysis, along with several subthemes that fell under each



theme. The first theme was the uniqueness of each participant's journey toward feminism, including the identity seeming more innate rather than having a defining moment of identification and having a wide range of experiences that influenced their feminist identity. Participants also experienced some internal challenges related to their feminist identity and found feminism as somewhat challenging and complex to define. The second theme, community of support, was a theme throughout the participants' stories, particularly with respect to being surrounded by strong women, having supervisors who were helpful, finding support from close friends and family, and being a part of a progressive community. The third theme indicated how participants experienced adversity in their work lives, which presented itself through issues around gender dynamics, fit with the organization or career, feelings of being passed over or underemployed, and having had supervisors who were unhelpful. Theme four, suggested that participants possessed a level of empowerment and authenticity. This was further supported through the subthemes of voice and self-efficacy, possessing altruistic values, the impact feminist identity had on relationships, and confronting sexism and other discrimination.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

This chapter will begin by providing an overview of the study and then will discuss the implications of the findings delineated in chapter four. As noted in the findings chapter, four overarching themes emerged from the collective analysis of all eight participants' interviews. The first overarching theme was aligned with feminist identity and more specifically found no single narrative describing one's journey toward identifying as a feminist; instead, each of the participants' journeys were unique. The second and third overarching themes were specific to participants' career and work experiences, and included having a network or community of people who provided support and having encountered various types of adversity. The final theme that was present in all participants' narratives was that of possessing a sense of empowerment and authenticity. This chapter triangulates the findings of this study with the existing literature that has been published in two distinct fields including feminist identity development and women's career development, while keeping in mind the intersections of multiple identities held by participants. Results that are consistent with the existing literature as well as areas where this study contributes to a new understanding of how women experience their feminist identity and career development will be discussed. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an explanation of the limitations of the study and will also provide implications for future research and practice in the fields of career

development, higher education administration, counseling, and gender and women's studies.

### **Overview of the Study**

This study addressed the overarching research question: How do feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path? A secondary focus area was to explore how feminism as a social or political identity impacts career development. The following research questions were employed to explore feminist women's experiences:

1. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
2. How have life experiences impacted your career choices?
3. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
4. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
5. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?

### **Research Design and Paradigm**

This study used a qualitative design known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was selected due to its focus on the way people interpret their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Three ideologies inform IPA: phenomenology or the extensive exploration of phenomena, hermeneutics or assessing the meanings of experiences, and idiography or the focus on the specifics (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA was selected to explore the different factors that participants recalled from their life experiences and the meanings they made that were related to their feminist

identity development. This method also allowed for an exploration of what life events or experiences were deemed influential to career decisions.

The research paradigm that served as the basis of this study included a combination of theories and an epistemology. The epistemology used was postpositivism or naturalism; and theories that served to guide the study included feminist, intersectionality, and career development theories. It is important to understand the research paradigm as it not only serves as a guide during the study, but it also provides a context or lens by which to interpret the results. Three of the five tenets of naturalism include different truths exist, the researcher and participant can influence one another, and the values held by the researcher will impact the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). The other two tenets described by Guba and Lincoln (1982) focus on the implications of the results, particularly that the results are specific to the participants' contexts so they should not be widely generalized and the direction of relationships cannot be determined.

This study in its entirety was influenced by three main theories: feminist, intersectionality, and career development. Feminist theory refers to a larger field of literature that contains a number of distinct theories (Smith, 2013). Many of these theories focus on the various types of inequities or imbalances due to one's gender, particularly with respect to the power differential with men historically being the dominant power around social and economic realms (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010). As noted by Kolmar and Bartkowski (2010), this power differential has been evidenced in public life including educational and employment opportunities as well as in private life, which is seen with harassment and violence.

A second theory that guided this study was intersectionality, or addressing the fact that everyone holds multiple identities and how they intersect will be unique for each individual (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2004). Intersectionality provides a greater understanding of how women with multiple marginalized identities may feel pressure to pick one identity to align themselves with at work (Crenshaw, 1991).

Third, career development theory is also an overarching field of literature that encompasses many distinct theories. One that was especially pertinent to this study is the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA), which examines the interaction between the person and the environment to determine fit and includes skills possessed by the employee, personal needs of the employee, skills sought by employer, work performance, and various personal characteristics that influence how well a person adapts to a new work environment (Dawis, 2005). Other career development theories that are developmental in nature were also of interest, such as the Theory of Circumscription and Compromise, which focuses on how children learn about careers and narrow their choices (Gottfredson, 2005).

### **Review of the Findings**

The literature to date has not addressed how a political or social identity such as that of self-identifying as a feminist may influence one's career choices and life experiences; this was the focus of this study. Considering that being a feminist is a chosen identity and one that still has many negative connotations attached to it, it seemed likely that this identity meant a lot to those who embraced the label and that it might influence how one interprets career experiences.

Four themes emerged from the data including personal journey to feminism, community of support, adversity experienced, and empowerment and authenticity. The first research question, how did you develop your identity as a feminist, was elucidated by the theme of personal journey to feminism. This theme was further supported by the subthemes: innate sense, challenges related to identity, influential factors such as education and experiential aspects, and feminism being complex to define but one that incorporates characteristics such as equality and choice. The second research question, how have life experiences impacted your career choices, was explained through the themes of community of support and adversity experienced. From the third research question, what supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment, the community of support theme emerged. This theme was further broken down into the subthemes: surrounded by strong women, helpful supervisors who were mostly women, family and close friends, and progressive communities. The fourth research question, what barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment, led to the theme, adversity experienced. This theme was supported by the subthemes: gender dynamics, issues of fit with organization or field, underemployed or passed over, and unhelpful supervisors. Finally, from the fifth research question, how does your feminist identity and career influence each other, emerged the theme of empowerment and authenticity. This theme was made up of the subthemes: voice and self-efficacy, altruistic values, impact of identity on relationships, and confronting sexism.

The next four sections in this chapter will detail each theme, providing a discussion of the findings as well as how the themes are supported by the research or lead to a new understanding of feminist women's career and life experiences.

## **Personal Journey to Feminism (Theme Emerged from Research Question 1: How Did You Develop Your Identity as a Feminist?)**

One of the striking themes that surfaced from the participants' interviews was the unique and multifaceted nature of their journey with feminism—from the factors that influenced them to adopting the identity to how they experienced their life through a feminist lens. Personal journey to feminism (first theme) developed from the first research question: How did you develop your identity as a feminist? This theme was supported by the following four subthemes: innate sense, challenges related to identity, influential factors to identity, and feminism being complex to define.

### **Innate Sense**

Though all participants came to identify with feminism in their own way, what was interesting is that no one had a strong defining moment in which they first identified as a feminist. This innate sense was the first subtheme in the personal journey to feminism theme. This finding was somewhat contrary to what was expected given that the feminist label is not one that is generally projected onto someone, but instead, it is a choice or decision to adopt the identity. Based on the research around influential factors that tend to increase an individual's beliefs consistent with feminism (Katz, Swindell, & Farrow, 2004; Yoder, Fischer et al., 2007) or one's self-identification as a feminist (Eisele & Stake, 2008), it was expected that there would be some reported defining moment or collection of experiences that participants would describe regarding how they came to affiliate themselves with the feminist label. The expectation that there would be a defining moment is somewhat supported by the book, *Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists* (Martin & Sullivan, 2010), which suggests that something triggered a response

to identify as a feminist. This collection of essays by different authors identifies the moment at which the authors first identified as feminists and details their journeys toward feminism. Narratives varied, with some identifying specific moments, a number of significant events, or possessing feminist beliefs only to adopt the identity later. While the title of this book edited by Martin and Sullivan (2010) is not fully consistent with the experiences shared by the participants in this study, the book is similar in how varied the experiences of those who come to identify with feminism.

Participants had an early and heightened awareness of gender, and identifying as a feminist may have been a natural progression of their egalitarian and feminist oriented beliefs. Feminist identification and holding feminist beliefs may lead to expecting equality in relationships women have, whether those are romantic (Rudman & Phelan, 2007) or professional relationships. The expectation of feminist or egalitarian relationships would likely impact employment related expectations and experiences. If expectations of egalitarian relationships are not met, this would likely result in dissatisfaction in one's personal or professional life.

Additionally, participants often used qualifying language to describe when they adopted the feminist label, using terms such as "probably" when guessing at what age they identified, mentioning that they did not know when they learned the term, or being transparent and stating that they really had to think about it. Furthermore, two participants seemed to adopt the identity in their early college years and for the other participants, identity was often assumed in high school, if not even younger. Some talked of their identity as if they have "always sort have been a feminist," and spoke of it as an innate quality in them, or even thinking that "gender distinctions are crap" by age five.



This is somewhat of a deviation from the existing research, which has focused on influences rather than an internal and innate difference felt in individuals as young as early childhood. Identifying as a feminist early on may have been aided by being surrounded by progressive communities or social justice-minded individuals that some participants discussed during their interviews. Feminist identification and recognizing gender inequities can be life changing and impact one's career. Having the ability to recognize sexism, for example, can help women recognize gender discrimination for what it is, instead of the possibility of misinterpreting negative events or challenges as a result of their skills as an employee. Understanding the different types of discrimination can also be a motivating force with respect to advocating for oneself. For instance, knowing that on average, women are compensated less than men, may help women to seek the knowledge and skills they need to negotiate their salaries and compensation for what they are worth.

Having an innate sense of feminist beliefs and noting how most participants identified as a feminist prior to graduating from high school are two ways this finding enhances the understanding of feminist identities and advances the research in this area. This finding suggests that for some women the acquisition of a feminist identity may be a more gradual, developmental and subtle process likely influenced by a number of factors. Consideration of this potential process and factors, while beyond the scope of this study, certainly point to the importance of future research to examine the development of a feminist identity in more detail.

## **Challenges Related to Identity**

Given that feminism developed out of the movement to achieve women's equality, it is not surprising that people would also have challenges related to their feminist identity, which was the focus of the second subtheme within the personal journey to feminism theme. In a society where there has been considerable backlash against feminism (Faludi, 2006), and numerous stereotypes that have sought to dismantle feminism (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010; Valenti, 2007), it would not be surprising had participants discussed adversity they experienced specifically related to their feminist identity. Though many participants did talk about adversity they experienced based on gender dynamics, some of the more surprising findings of this study included the fact that participants had internalized what a good versus a bad feminist meant to them. Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that very few people actually identify as feminists; in one study only 20% of respondents identified with the feminist label (Swanson, 2013). This, coupled with the broad stigma associated with this term may create more pressure to be a perfect feminist. The book, *Bad Feminist* (Gay, 2014a), which is a collection of essays that provides a personal account of embracing the label of bad feminist while at the same time critiquing popular culture and gender discrimination, illustrates this concept.

This is further complicated by the extreme gender norms, stereotypes, and expectations set forth by society. Women who hold feminist beliefs may experience additional distress if the communities they are a part of subscribe to sexist expectations and stereotypes, which also may be influenced by where they live and the political nature of the communities they encounter on a regular basis. This obviously can impact one's personal life in terms of past and current communities, and can extend to one's workplace,

since feminist women may find themselves in the middle of work cultures that condone or even reinforce sexism. When these gender beliefs contradict principles of equality that are consistent with feminism, one may feel pressure to disassociate or reject the medium that these inequitable or restricting norms are carried out. For example, women portrayed in inequitable and degrading ways on television is pervasive including less representation in speaking roles when compared to men and sexual objectification (Women's Media Center, 2014). Thus, women in particular, may feel pressure to reject mediums that portray women in this way, and then feel guilty if they enjoy watching television shows depicting women in problematic ways. Consistent with the literature, four participants discussed how media, particularly television shows, were problematic because of how girls and women were portrayed. One participant suggested that others might find it challenging to be in the same space when viewing such media because this participant verbally critiqued poor representations of women. Similarly, the harshness in which women are criticized based on their beauty is another potential challenge, particularly around whether one rejects society's standards of beauty or if they uphold them in some manner. For instance, one participant discussed how their boyfriend teased them about being a "lipstick feminist" when choosing to present themselves in a very feminine manner.

Another challenge that participants had was in their own internalized ideals of what a feminist was and it being discordant with their own personality or values. For instance, one participant struggled with a workplace that encouraged work-life balance when it conflicted with their personal work style and another participant mentioned not engaging in self-advocacy. This pressure may partially stem from how few people

identify with feminism and how much stigma and negative stereotypes exist around this identity. Participants may have felt increased pressure not to deviate from their perceived ideals of feminism. Yet another challenge participants faced that they associated with their feminist identity was in relation to others. One participant discussed an experience with this in terms of how other feminists were critical or seemed to treat their feminism as a competition. This is similar to and has been evidenced in social media and blogs where people have criticized others' authenticity as feminists, such as when bell hooks, a feminist scholar, criticized Beyoncé, calling her anti-feminist (Gay, 2014b). The perceived or actual pressure to be the perfect feminist may add to the extra stress women may already experience if they are also encountering challenges in the workplace due to their gender or other marginalized identities. Experiencing such pressure has the potential of also being limiting, as it is possible that someone may never feel like they are "good enough" to apply or seek out a project or position they aspire or dream to achieve.

Existing research has identified how recognizing sexism can take a toll on one's psychological well-being but that identifying as a feminist serves as a protective factor (Katz et al., 2004). Where academic research falls short is in exploring the challenges or pressures of being an "ideal" or "good" feminist that feminist-identified people may experience. This study's finding that some feminist women felt they may not be a "good" feminist or that others may see them as a "bad" feminist is an important contribution to the research and an area for further exploration.

### **Influential Factors**

The third subtheme that strongly demonstrates the overarching personal journey to feminism theme is that of influential factors. Although each participant had a unique

story when it came to how they developed their identity as a feminist, specific coursework was mentioned during five of the interviews. Something critical to point out about this coursework, however, is that it was not necessarily coursework in women's studies; and in fact, no participant majored in women's studies during their college career. One participant mentioned they would have liked to take an introductory women's studies course. Courses that were identified as being influential to feminist identity ranged from women's studies courses to courses with a women's or feminist focus to courses in philosophy. Participants mentioned that their coursework helped them question assumptions, shape their identity, and increase their excitement about feminism. This study's findings support prior research indicating courses having a gender focus may impact an individual's choice in identifying with feminist beliefs. For example, Yoder, Fischer et al. (2007) and Katz et al. (2004) studied college students enrolled in a general psychology course versus those enrolled in a psychology of women course and found that over the course of the term, students' beliefs that were consistent with feminism increased for those enrolled in the psychology of women courses. Similarly, Eisele and Stake (2008), found that students enrolled in women's studies courses not only exhibited an increase of identifying with feminist beliefs but also were also more likely to identify as a feminist after the course of the semester. More consistent with the findings of this study, Leaper and Arias (2011) found that those who did self-identify as a feminist were more likely to be introduced to feminism through coursework or someone they knew. When asked about role models and education, many participants discussed examples of people in their lives and courses they had taken that had been of some influence to their identity. One participant, however, specifically said that neither had been present or had

influenced their identity and another participant mentioned that no one had really talked to them about feminism.

Not surprisingly, several participants discussed influential people in their lives that had some impact on their identity. As expected, two participants mentioned professors they had. Another participant discussed how dating a transwoman was influential to understanding feminism and another participant mentioned a mother of a friend. Less expected was how two participants specifically witnessed their family members going through difficult times as an influential factor in their identity—one was how their mother had overcome a problematic relationship with a man and another was in how both their mother and grandmother were not treated well by men. Personal experiences, whether positive or negative in nature, will broaden one's perspectives. Although participants did not attribute one specific experience to their adopting the feminist identity, the finding that particular experiences impacted feminist identification is aligned with the premise of the book, *Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists* (Martin & Sullivan, 2010).

Experiential factors were also found as being largely influential to participants' understanding and identification with feminism. For example, two participants identified experiences of studying abroad; particularly noting gender discrepancies and inequities they lived through or witnessed. This finding is consistent with research by Dwyer and Peters (n.d.), where it was documented that having a more global understanding and perspective can have a significant impact on an individual's worldview. Another participant discussed experiences at a more conservative college, and noted various

observations of how gender played out in the classroom and how the college or student body did not support advocacy around issues impacting women.

Additionally, several participants also mentioned media as an influential factor to one's feminist identity and development. Specifically, two participants discussed how they had learned about feminism and feminist issues through blogs they read, and another participant mentioned interpreting particular television shows as empowering to women. This finding can be better understood through the analysis of literature on media in early adulthood offered by Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard (2013). Coyne et al. (2013) suggested that individuals might look to various forms of media as a way to understand different identities they hold. Social media and blogs can be a place where individuals can find a sense of community, particularly when they feel misunderstood or marginalized based on an identity they hold. Though online media and television often portray stereotypes, these mediums can also be great sources of information.

What was most surprising in the subtheme of influential factors to identity was the varied nature of the participants' experiences. While some of the influential factors that participants identified supported findings put forth in prior research, what has been missed in the existing literature is how individualized this process is for each individual. When examining influential factors to adopting feminist beliefs or an identity, existing research has tended to be quantitative in nature, with less focus on the interactional effects of multiple factors that may be influential to one's identity. This study enhanced the understanding of how a range of people can be influential to developing one's feminist identity. The participants in the study may have already identified within

feminism, however, relationships they had with others seemed to advance how they made sense of, interpreted, or further developed their feminist identity.

### **Feminism is Complex to Define**

Consistent with the other subthemes in the overarching theme of a personal journey toward feminism, there was variability in the definitions of feminism that each participant subscribed to, which makes up the fourth subtheme in this area. While “choice” and “equality” were present in many of the definitions participants put forth, each participant had their own interpretation about the definition, with some being more descriptive than others and including examples of inequities and areas they were passionate about. This study’s finding that “equality” was often included in participants’ personal definitions of feminism is consistent with research by Houvouras and Carter (2008), where self-identified feminists generally mentioned “gender equality” in their definition of feminism. One interesting commonality found among four of the eight participants in this study was in how feminism was complex or was challenging to define. The findings of this study suggest that individuals come to learn about and identify with feminism in very individualistic and unique ways, and thus, it follows that one may also describe and define their feminism differently as well. The variations in definitions may come from feminism working for the advancement of equality across all gender inequities, or from the fact that a social identity is going to mean something different to each individual, as is how they experience it. In fact, there are different types of feminism, such as liberal, radical, and socialist feminisms (Tong, 2014) and each interpret gender oppression differently. Moreover, the issue of not having a single definition of feminism



is not new. In fact, one scholar recognized the lack of a single definition and called for a reexamination of the meaning behind the term, feminism (Offen, 1988).

**Community of Support (Theme Emerged from Research Question 2: How Have Life Experiences Impacted Your Career Choices? and Research Question 3: What Supportive Factors Did You Encounter That Aided in Your Career and Employment?)**

Community of support (second theme) developed from the second research question: How have life experiences impacted your career choices? and also from the third research question: What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment? Four subthemes provide support for the overarching community of support theme and include being surrounded by strong women, having helpful supervisors, finding support from family and close friends, and being a part of progressive communities. All of the participants in this study mentioned multiple people in their lives who were either role models or sources of support for them. Sometimes participants discussed this support as it was related to them pursuing and completing a college education. Other times, participants discussed supportive people with respect to their career trajectory. And yet other participants simply talked of influential or inspirational people in general and not specifically related to their career. The existing research notes specific types of support connected to one's career trajectory (Gibson, 2004; Yoder, Fischer et al., 2007) and feminist identity development (Reid & Purcell, 2004; Yoder, Fischer et al., 2007). Findings from this study expanded this understanding to consider how having multiple sources of support and influence could create a community of support that aided in feminist women's lives overall.

Though participants were not asked directly about mentors in this study, they were asked about supervisors and role models. When participants described being surrounded by strong women, having helpful supervisors, and having support from family and friends, it strongly resembled qualities of a mentoring relationship. In fact, in some instances, participants did describe people, including a supervisor and a mother, as mentors. While some participants may or may not have identified these relationships as formal mentoring relationships, they appeared to take the form of informal mentoring. A number of researchers have been interested in the outcomes associated with women's career advancements and having a mentor (Brown, 2005; Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Wiethoff, 2010) and the findings of this study are consistent with this body of research suggesting that the importance of mentors and other key relationships are significant elements of one's community of support.

### **Surrounded by Strong Women**

The first subtheme associated with community of support theme was in specifically being surrounded by strong women, which was noted in three quarters of the interviews, or six out of eight of the participants interviewed. It is important to note that while many of the participants who mentioned strong women in their lives connected the influence to their career attainment, some simply discussed women in their lives who had an impact on them which resulted in feelings of empowerment. Some of the existing research has indicated that the opportunities offered to women might be more plentiful when they have mentors who are men (Ramaswami et al., 2010). This is somewhat concerning, but makes sense when considering that men are more likely to be in higher ranking and higher paying positions, and thus, may have more access. Another researcher

reported a different finding when exploring the role gender played with respect to mentors identified by college students. Lockwood's (2006) findings suggested that college women feel inspired and empowered when connected to highly successful women in their career. These outcomes were not found for women college students when connected to highly successful men. Moreover, in a second study by Lockwood (2006), college women were more apt to identify a woman as a mentor than a man. Though the author noted that the college women did not recognize gender as the reason why they selected a woman mentor, it may be in part due to being able to discuss how women mentors have managed career barriers related to gender.

Seeing women role models is likely a critical piece of breaking through some of the barriers to women's career development. Three of the participants in this study specifically noted being "surrounded by women" and another participant discussed being "surrounded by feminists." In addition to being surrounded, participants often noted qualities that were characteristic of these women including women who were "strong," "powerful," or who "walked the walk." It is interesting how many of the participants' narratives included being surrounded by women role models. Moreover, these narratives included commentary from mothers and grandmothers who persisted through hardships and participants feeling empowered as a result, to the many people that participants encountered during their career journey who were inspirational and supportive.

Given that many of the participants in this study mentioned women as being supportive, this may further support the necessity of having women role models in order to impact girls' and women's later career attainment. This also raises the question of women who may not have or identify with strong women in their career fields, and

whether that impedes future career goals and attainment. This may be particularly true for women who hold additional marginalized identities with respect to low representation of women with multiple marginalized identities in positions of power. For example, Women of Color may not readily see themselves in a specific career field due to lack of visibility and mentors who also identify as Women of Color. Research by Bacchus (2008) indicated that when dealing with sexual and racial discrimination, mentors were one of the coping mechanisms noted by Black women. Thus, with limited role models and mentors, women and particularly women with multiple marginalized identities may find themselves with additional and unique career obstacles and stressors.

### **Helpful Supervisors**

One area that has been minimally researched in terms of women's career development is the interaction between women and their supervisors particularly when their supervisors are also women. This was the second subtheme in the overarching theme of community of support. While participants also had negative experiences with supervisors, many talked of current or past supervisors in a positive light. Seven of the eight participants talked about at least one supervisor that had been helpful to them in some way, and often times participants used strongly worded affirmations to describe their supervisors. Of the participants who noted helpful supervisors, all identified their supervisor or supervisors as being women or referred to them using "she" and only one used "he" in talking of a current supervisor in a positive way. This is not to claim that women supervisors were more helpful—it may have been that the majority of supervisors participants had were women. This finding is somewhat of an extension of the last subtheme, with participants finding great support from women they were surrounded with.

Supervisors were described as being “wonderful” and “intelligent,” and participants saw them as being “supportive,” providing encouragement and positive affirmations of participants’ work. As such, the findings of this study are consistent with Gibson’s (2004) findings, where mentees reported positive feelings about mentee and mentor relationships including feeling like their mentors looked out for them, feeling a sense of connectedness, and feeling like they mattered. For example, one participant identified conversations with a supervisor that focused on future career steps that were outside of the current organization. Related to feeling a sense of connectedness, another participant described the relationship with a supervisor as “close.” Although no participant specifically identified that their supervisor made them feel like what they did mattered, it was very apparent in many of the interviews. This finding is related to research conducted by MacDonald, Kelly, and Christen (2014), who indicated that positive rapport with one’s supervisor was related to the supervisee’s satisfaction at work, which in turn was positively related to job motivation and negatively related to job burnout. The finding from this study noting the positive relationships with one’s supervisor adds to the research that has been published on women’s relationships with their supervisors as participants were very complimentary of their supervisors and mentioned they were supportive in their careers.

### **Family and Close Friends**

The third subtheme within the community of support theme included the quality of relationships with family and close friends. All participants talked about people in their lives that were supportive; with many specifically noting family members and close friends. The existing research has examined the role of parents in the career development

of women including around educational attainment (Wojtalik et al., 2007) and parents' support of their daughter's career decisions (Li & Kerpelman, 2007). In this study, parents and grandparents were identified as being supportive or encouraging for participants to obtain an education. Though participants noted that their parents did not always understand their career choices, they were nonetheless supportive in their endeavors. Most often, what participants were describing was emotional support, and sometimes they also mentioned financial support. Thus, this finding serves to support the existing research that supportive family members can be influential to women's educational and career attainment. Additionally, mothers were key in terms of encouraging their daughters beyond being verbally supportive, from witnessing their mother earn a doctorate or seeing their mother balance work and life roles, to demonstrating independence and through providing for a family as a single mother. This specific finding adds to the understanding of mothers being among women's role models and how that can lead to a sense of empowerment in women.

Having supportive and egalitarian partners was identified by the two participants who mentioned being married, and is also found in existing research. Motulsky (2010) explored career transitions of midlife women and the impact of the various relationships in their lives. Women who identified their partners as being both involved and supportive enjoyed better outcomes; whereas, unsupportive partners negatively impacted women's career transition (Motulsky, 2010). In this study, one participant also noted having a husband that was supportive and took on a significant role in caring for their daughter. This finding is consistent with Ezzedeen and Ritchey's (2008) findings when they examined executive women's satisfaction with balancing work and motherhood. The

husband of the other participant was also described as supportive, specifically as being a “rock.”

What has not been as well substantiated by academic research is the role of women’s friends on their career satisfaction or attainment. This is an area that the findings of this study may contribute to a new understanding of the supportive factors that impact women’s career development. For instance, one participant noted how a friend was instrumental in providing support during the job search process, and another found friends as essential to helping relieve the high stress that comes with a social justice-oriented job. Exploring the experiences of women in midlife, Motulsky (2010) found that the majority of participants “declared their friends to be critically important influences on their career transition experience” (p. 1094). Bagwell et al. (2005) also reported some evidence of how friendships can provide support. Through examining friendship pairs, the researchers found that participants enjoyed higher levels of self-esteem when they felt more supported by their friends as well as when friendships possessed more positive characteristics (Bagwell et al., 2005).

### **Progressive Communities**

A finding of this study that was not expected, though not surprising, was being a part of progressive communities. This fourth subtheme of community of support theme came up in five of the eight interviews. Existing literature has found that those who adopt the feminist label more often hold liberal views as compared to their non-feminist counterparts (McCabe 2005; Nelson et al., 2008). This finding was somewhat surprising because political affiliation or leaning was not a question that was asked in any interview. Instead, participants discussed liberal or progressive mindsets in the context of the

communities in which the participants were raised or the atmosphere of their workplaces, suggesting a stronger connection between feminist identity and a liberal political mindset.

What was not discussed in the existing literature was how growing up within a progressive community or currently being a part of a feminist community impacts one's career development or perception of feeling supported. For one participant, this community was found in high school, for another it was at a social justice-oriented church, and another discussed experiences at a current workplace.

**Adversity Experienced (Theme Emerged from Research Question 2: How Have Life Experiences Impacted Your Career Choices? and Research Question 4: What Barriers Did You Encounter in Your Career Choices and Employment?)**

Adversity experienced (third theme) stemmed in part from the second research question: How have life experiences impacted your career choices? The adversity experienced theme also supported the fourth research question: What barriers did you encounter that aided in your career and employment? Four subthemes provide clarification in terms of what adversity was experienced and included gender dynamics, issue with fit in the organization or field, underemployed or passed over, and unhelpful supervisors.

Adversity for the purposes of this study refers to the adversity experienced by participants within the career or work sector. This is not to diminish the harsh reality that women experience other forms of adversity in their lives at greater rates than men, such as that of sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking (Black et al., 2011), or the fact that these acts of violence can also impact women's work lives (Loya, 2014; Swanberg et al., 2007). The history of gender inequity in the workplace in the United States is well



documented, and great advancements have been made including legislation such as the passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which prohibited different wages for the same job because of gender; the ban on gender discrimination by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1964 (Dicker, 2008), and adding women to the Affirmative Action policy in 1967 (Freedman, 2002). On the other hand, first introduced in 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment has not been passed by the U.S. Congress (Dicker, 2008), with several states that have yet to ratify the amendment. Despite all of these strides, there is still a 22% gender discrepancy in earned wages with men being compensated at higher levels than women (AAUW, 2014, p. 3).

Despite advances in pay equity and increases in representation in fields traditionally dominated by men, women still experience large issues of adversity in the workplace. Adversity or gender discrimination can also take the form of sexual harassment, underrepresentation in higher paying positions, not being promoted due to gender, and hostile work environments (Betz, 2005). All participants noted experiencing some form of adversity—with the majority of participants noting issues revolving around gender dynamics, feelings underemployed or passed over, and having at least one supervisor that was unhelpful; and half of the participants mentioning issues with organizational or career fit.

### **Gender Dynamics**

Participants in this study contended with various forms of adversity—some of which were attributed to gender dynamics and others that were not directly associated with gender. Gender dynamics was the first subtheme and was identified by six of the eight participants interviewed. Participants did not necessarily connect gender dynamics

to discrimination or see it as a barrier to their career; however, they still brought up experiences that were discriminatory based on gender and were consistent with everyday or modern sexism. Modern sexism refers to beliefs and behaviors that do not support women's equity such as bitterness toward practices and policies to increase gender equity (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Additionally, some scholars are calling for more attention to be given to gender-based harassment. In their study examining harassment of women in two sectors that traditionally employ more men than women, Leskinen, Cortina, and Kabat (2011) found that emotional and occupational well-being were lower among women who had experienced harassment as compared to those who had not. Of particular relevance to this study, Holland and Cortina (2013) examined the impact of sexism in the workplace on feminist-identified women. While self-identified feminist women reported less gender-based harassment than their non-feminist-identified peers, feminist women experienced greater detrimental effects including less satisfaction at work and greater intention to leave (Holland & Cortina, 2013).

The experiences shared by participants in this study can also be better understood when considering gender *microaggressions*. Nadal (as cited in Capodilupo et al., 2010), defined gender microaggressions as everyday utterances or behaviors projected at women that create an unwelcoming or degrading environment. There are a number of different types of gender microaggressions. Sue and Capodilupo (as cited in Capodilupo et al., 2010) identified six types: "(1) *sexual objectification*, (2) *second-class citizen*, (3) *assumptions of inferiority*, (4) *denial of the reality of sexism*, (5) *assumptions of traditional gender roles*, and (6) *use of sexist language*" (p. 197). Additionally, Nadal (as cited in Capodilupo et al., 2010) extended this list to also include: "(7) *denial of*

*individual sexism* and (8) *environmental microaggressions*” (p. 197). Through focus groups that had a total of 12 participants, Capodilupo et al. (2010) found support for all of the different types except the themes where women do not recognize the occurrence or effects of sexism.

The findings of this study are supported by what Capodilupo et al. (2010) reported in their study. What stood out most in this subtheme were participants not feeling like they were being taken seriously, which in and of itself, matches with the second-class citizen type of microaggressions. For example, two of the participants discussed experiences at business meetings when women’s ideas were ignored but the same ideas when brought up by men later in the meeting were recognized and even noted as being good. This can negatively impact one’s career self-efficacy when others are being improperly credited for solutions and ideas, as well as likely impacting overall morale. Additionally, not being recognized on multiple occasions could lead to a loss of self-efficacy, loss of promotions, and poorer work evaluations. This is also an example of unconscious sexism, as defined by Cudd and Jones (2005), where men are favored without the supervisor even knowing they are ignoring women employees.

Another participant described experiences that were likely a combination of racial and gender microaggressions, as they described being treated like a second-class citizen in the business class line at the airport. Probably due to identifying as a Black woman, others questioned this participant when in the business class line. This finding is consistent with literature around stereotypes and Black women’s career attainment. Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008) discussed how stereotypes based in sexism and racism may negatively impact Black women in advancing in their careers,

such as the stereotype of Black women being unqualified. Though this example is likely mostly due to racism, this also may be an example of interpersonal sexism (Cudd & Jones, 2005) where people assumed what they perceive as appropriate versus not appropriate for the participant. Though Buchanan and Fitzgerald's (2008) findings were based on sexual and racial harassment at work, it is likely that repeated gender and racial microaggressions in any setting might impact personal well-being. Though not overtly mentioned by the participants, other types of microaggressions that are associated with marginalized identities contribute to an oppressive or hostile work environment. Such microaggressions and discrimination could be connected to disability, class, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, or other marginalized groups to which the individual identifies. Regardless of whether the type of microaggression is based on gender, race, or another marginalized identity, microaggressions can have significant consequences on an individual's well-being, and can lead to stress-related medical issues and emotional distress such as depression (Sue, 2010). Moreover, Sue (2010) identified several additional chronic and negative implications including cognitive and emotional effects such as hypervigilance, hopelessness, fatigue, and anger.

Another participant discussed an experience that is aligned with the sexual objectification form of microaggression, in which they discussed being taken less seriously because of appearance, specifically having blond hair and choosing to wear high heels. Whether or not these experiences were in a work environment, this type of objectification warrants further exploration. Marketing strategies objectify women in so many different and disturbing ways that it becomes commonplace to see it in the media and can then serve to minimize the experiences of women when something "less severe"

occurs such as their intelligence being dismissed because they are blond. Women's appearances are also frequently called into question when it has nothing to do with the topic. For example, women politicians have frequently been criticized by what they look like from the shape of their bodies to the clothes or makeup worn, whereas this is not a focus of news commentators' critiques of men politicians. Women are discredited before the analyst or commentator can even address the actual situation or decision made by the politician. This unfair practice undermines women so they are inappropriately critiqued for something that has nothing to do with their ability to perform a specific job.

### **Issues with Work Fit**

The second subtheme under the adversity theme involved the discrepancies around self-perceived fit with the organization or work. Half, or four of eight participants described issues with their fit in the organization where they were employed or with the type of daily work tasks they were responsible for. This can be better understood when examining through the lens of the TWA, which provides insight in the fit between the organization and the person, and is relevant to the participants' experiences (Dawis, 2005). An individual's needs in addition the skills required and held by the individual are both important to the fit in the TWA. Two participants discussed demographics pieces—one working in an environment of predominately women and the other working in an environment with colleagues who were considerably older. In both of these situations, it did not appear that the needs of the participants were being met. It seemed like the participant who shared that a women-dominated work environment might not be the best fit was probably due to personality characteristics such as colleagues not being as aggressive as the participant and less than ideal relationships with coworkers. Similarly,

the participant who identified that colleagues were older found it challenging to connect. In the TWA, one of the factors associated with successfully adjusting to the workplace and therefore being more satisfied is flexibility (Dawis, 2005). In this case, the participant was flexible by connecting and socializing with coworkers from a previous team. These same participants mentioned issues of fit with their job tasks and two other participants mentioned clashes within the organization's divisions. This is most likely also a case of an individual's needs not being met. In the TWA, perseverance is another factor in whether an individual will adjust or be satisfied in their organization. In the instances where participants reported not being happy with the daily responsibilities, the participants' perseverance in that organization may be in question, with one participant specifically stating they were looking at different work sectors.

### **Underemployed and Passed Over**

The third subtheme of adversity, feelings of being passed over and being overworked or underemployed in their current position was mentioned by three fourths of the participants. The frustration that participants experienced can be better understood when examining their experiences through the lens of Career Construction theory. According to Savickas (2005), "satisfaction people attain from work is proportional to the degree to which they are able to implement their vocational self-concepts" (p. 46). The participants in this study exhibited dissatisfaction with the work they were given compared to their self-concept of their career and qualifications. In fact, two participants noted that they were not using their abilities to the extent they could—one specifically around not utilizing a master's degree and the other not being able to use a wide skill set. These experiences can be attributed to several factors, and do not

necessarily have anything to do with gender. Instead, one reason for this type of experience may simply be due to the geographical area. One participant discussed a lack of fit in terms of how the Type A personality seemed to be the norm in their area and implied that numerous people would gladly take a low paying position just to get into a social justice organization. Washington, DC has a high concentration of people who are interested in nonprofit or social activism work. In addition, the metropolitan area has many highly educated people who are young professionals, which produces high competition and also may require people to take positions they are overqualified for. Another reason for being underemployed is the state of the economy. Abel, Deitz, and Su (2014) discussed the problematic job market for recent graduates and attributed that to the economic recession in 2011. These authors noted that the numbers of new college graduates who are unemployed or working in a position where a bachelor's degree is not required, has risen. Although it is not known whether the participants in this study were in positions that require a bachelor's degree, this could help explain their feelings of underemployment. In addition, this could also provide partial explanation as to why three participants mentioned feeling passed over in terms of a job title or position. An additional explanation for underemployment could be directly attributed to gender dynamics. Through a review of the research, Heilman (2001) suggested that stereotypes based on gender serve as a barrier for women as they work to progress in their careers. Specifically, stereotypes including expectations of behavior can impact performance evaluations through less recognition or lower evaluation of tasks in which they perform at the same level as men (Heilman, 2001).

Feeling passed over or overqualified was a reported frustration for several participants. In addition to frustration, feeling underemployed can have other significant consequences. McKee-Ryan and Harvey (2011) reviewed the underemployment literature and identified an association between low job satisfaction and feeling underemployed. The authors' review of the literature also suggested a relationship between feeling underemployed and not feeling committed to the organization (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011).

### **Unhelpful Supervisors**

Having past or present supervisors whose behavior was negative or unsupportive was the final subtheme related to adversity, and was mentioned by five of eight participants. Having a bad supervisor—whether that is someone who is simply unhelpful or someone whose behaviors are harmful—is not unique to women. Two participants mentioned situations where their supervisor was micromanaging and treating them or others in a negative manner. The implications of this finding can be better understood in light of the research on supervisors' use of verbal aggression by Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey (2010), who found a moderate association to supervisees not feeling committed to the company and a strong association to supervisees not feeling satisfied with their job. Although verbal aggression was not identified by any of the participants of this study, being unsatisfied with one's supervisor could increase the likelihood of feeling unsatisfied or less committed in other realms. This could also lead to employees leaving positions prematurely due to their supervisors instead of for the next step in their careers.

Another two participants discussed supervisors that, despite being supportive in some ways, proved to be a hindrance in others. While these were not specifically



addressed as being gender related, gender may have been influential. These situations involved feeling like the supervisor was controlling and not providing access to the supervisor's network. Issues of gender did come up when it came to supervisors, and one participant specifically described how a supervisor sometimes created an uncomfortable environment because of calling attention to women whom he considered hot or other things identified by the participant as "masculine crap." Gender microaggressions as described by Capodilupo et al. (2010), specifically using language that is sexist and objectifying women, seemed to be at play with this participant's unfortunate experience. Harassment at work can have detrimental effects on an individual's well-being. For example, Houle, Staff, Mortimer, Uggen, and Blackstone (2011) found a positive correlation between harassment experienced and depressive symptoms.

**Empowerment and Authenticity (Theme Emerged from Research Question 5: How Does Your Feminist Identity and Career Influence Each Other?)**

Empowerment and authenticity (fourth theme) primarily addresses the fifth research question: How does your feminist identity and career influence each other? While the overarching research question guiding this entire study was answered in part by the other three themes, this theme captures the overarching research question as a whole: How do feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path? Moreover, the secondary focus of the study was to explore how participants perceive or make sense of their feminism as a social or political identity and how it intersects with their career development. This is evidenced by the four subthemes that support the empowerment and authenticity theme, which include: voice

and self-efficacy, altruistic values, impact of identity on relationships, and confronting sexism.

Although this study relied on participants to personally identify as feminists and did not employ an additional instrument or theoretical model to identify how aligned one was with feminism, the findings of this study can be understood when considering Downing and Roush's (1985) five-stage model of feminist identity development. The first two stages of this model describe people who are not yet aware of sexism or are just beginning to recognize unfair situations; and is followed by the third stage of making new friendships with women. The fourth stage is synthesis, which is seen when one's feminist identity is markedly positive and congruent with their sense of self. The fifth stage is active commitment and is demonstrated when one actively engages in some form of advocacy toward equality. From the interviews and positive identification with feminism, all participants are likely in the latter two stages of Downing and Roush's (1985) feminist identity development model. Related to stage four, each participant projected an authentic and unique sense of self, as evidenced by having a unique personal journey toward feminism as well as possessing a sense of empowerment and confidence. In support of stage five, many participants were involved directly or indirectly with feminist issues through their employment or volunteer work.

### **Voice and Self-Efficacy**

The first subtheme related to the empowerment and authenticity theme was having "voice" and self-efficacy. Overall, participants seemed confident about the skills they possessed and had strong senses of self. The subtheme of voice and self-efficacy was found across all cases, and often came up in interviews more than once. Participants

sometimes connected their confidence to their feminist identity, crediting their feminism as a source of confidence. Other participants did not interpret a connection between the two. Experiences described by participants that fall under this subtheme included experiences in the workplace, during college, and in their personal lives.

One narrative that repeatedly came up was the word, *voice*, which was brought up by four participants. The subtheme of voice is interesting in light of research by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), in their book, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. The cognitive development theory that emerged from the work by Belenky et al. (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) suggested five perspectives that offer different ways in which women might take in and interpret information. Three of the perspectives include *silence* or when individuals have a lack of power, *received knowledge* or when people find truth from those in authority positions, and *subjective knowledge* or when individuals recognize personal knowledge. The fourth perspective, *procedural knowledge* is marked by use of critical thinking skills, empathy, and considering contextual factors. Finally, the fifth perspective, *constructed knowledge* is a culmination of recognizing personal knowledge and using critical thinking and empathy. The fifth perspective is particularly relevant to understanding this study because finding one's voice is a significant component of the constructed knowledge perspective. Thus, participants in this study may have felt a sense of empowerment and were likely operating from the fifth perspective and as such, were more invested in sharing their voice.

In this study, participants talked about voice in different ways, from helping other women find their voice to personally finding one's voice and connected that to being a

leader and being assertive. While this was sometimes connected to one's feminism, one participant did not connect the two. This subtheme was also supported by the self-advocacy that participants engaged in. For instance, two participants mentioned specific examples from their personal lives where they stuck up for themselves—one in reaction to a friend who questioned whether an experience was actually intentional harassment and another in not making excuses or refusing to explain enjoying activities that are stereotypically seen as masculine. Additionally, two participants specifically mentioned negotiating their salary, and four mentioned exerting their presence whether that was in speaking up or physically claiming space in a meeting.

The confidence and self-efficacy that participants held were not surprising and supports what has been found in the existing literature. For instance, Saunders and Kashubeck-West (2006) found that participants in the fifth stage of the Downing and Roush's (1985) feminist identity development model possessed more positive psychological outcomes. The findings in this study also reinforce results from Eisele and Stake's (2008) study with participants enrolled in a women's studies course where the authors found that those possessing a feminist identity or beliefs had higher levels of self-efficacy.

### **Altruistic Values**

Altruistic values were the second subtheme identified that fell under the empowerment and authenticity theme with altruistic values being highly apparent in all eight interviews. Some participants explicitly connected their feminist values to the work they engaged in, and others spoke about it in a more indirect way. While there is not much research to help describe this finding, one aspect can be understood through Duffy

and Sedlacek's (2007) study were they reported that women were more likely to gravitate toward social-oriented career fields and men were more likely to lean toward extrinsic factors such as salary. This is complicated by the fact that children are socialized in highly gendered ways, projecting careers that are more "appropriate" to one gender than the other (Betz, 2005). Thus, careers that are stereotypically seen as "suitable" for women are those in the social or helping-oriented professions. On the other hand, while involved in social-oriented careers, the participants in this study were actively working toward gender equity through paid employment or volunteer activism. Utilizing this lens, it is not surprising that participants often held socially-minded work values or selected careers congruent with intrinsic values as those careers may be more aligned with feminist values. This may have been a finding that is unique to the feminist women who participated in this study and not a finding that can be generalized to all feminist women or women in general.

The connection between feminist identity and career is not one that has been previously researched in great detail; therefore, the findings of this study significantly contribute to a better understanding of how a social identity and career choice could be related. In fact, all participants agreed, often enthusiastically, that the two were connected—one participant described the connection as "extreme" and another stated the influence between the two was bidirectional. Two participants could not imagine themselves in a career that was not compatible with their feminist identity. Further, participants' feminist identities appeared to be so intertwined with their sense of selves, in a way that would be near impossible to disconnect from the rest of their experiences,

including career choices. Participants were interested in “fighting the good fight” and being a part of activism that supported women.

### **Impact of Identity on Relationships**

The impact of one’s feminist identity on relationships was, for the most part, neutral or positive, and was the third subtheme under the overarching theme of empowerment and authenticity. When experiences were not positive, they seemed to still provide participants with a framework to make sense of inequitable and unfair practices toward women. One participant noted that friendships became stronger with feminism; yet, a conflict in beliefs made family relationships more challenging. Of the two participants who mentioned they were married, one associated feminism with the positive and egalitarian relationship they had with their husband, and the other noted challenges according to gender roles at the beginning, only to describe their husband as supportive later on. Although this study did not ask if their partners also considered themselves feminists, this finding seems to be consistent with previous research that has indicated that outcomes in relationships are better when both members are feminists (Rudman & Phelan, 2007). This finding can also be better understood when considering Yoder, Perry, and Saal’s (2007) research where women in the higher stages of Downing and Roush’s model of feminist identity development, specifically the synthesis and active commitment stages, expected more of their intimate partner relationships such as equality in terms of education and childcare responsibilities.

Being around others who identified as feminists or held beliefs consistent with feminism seemed to be important to several participants in this study. For example, two participants specifically noted that they were upfront with their feminist identity in online

dating profiles. This finding demonstrates how important it was for participants to have relationships that are compatible with their feminist identity and is an interesting finding and one that contributes to the field.

The impact feminism had on relationships was also extended into the workplace. Six participants provided one or more examples of how they advocated on behalf of themselves or other women, and three of those specifically noted that they look out for or mentor women in their organization. While women supporting other women and women advocating for themselves is nothing new, this has had more press with the recent book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, where Sandberg (2013) discussed personal experiences with leadership particularly as it relates to gender, and provided encouragement for women to in fact, “lean in.” The “Lean In” movement has become extensive with groups being created in organizations, universities, and communities all across the United States. Based on the vast attention that has been placed on the “Lean In” movement and the increased focus on the wage gap and salary negotiation in social media, it would not be surprising if these were influential for the participants in this study. Within one interview, a participant even emphasized the words, “lean in” when describing supporting other women in the organization. One of the chapters in *Lean In*, entitled “Sit at the Table,” described a time when Sandberg (2013) observed women sitting off to the side of the room while the men sat at the table, and Sandberg made a point to invite the women to the table and shared the observation with them afterward to encourage them to take charge of their careers. Although *Lean In* does not take an intersectional approach and neglects to account for how experiences and opportunities may be different when people have multiple marginalized identities including being a

Woman of Color as well as being from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, where it has excelled is in gaining widespread attention and recognition, and empowering some women to take control of their career progression. Likely as a result of being frequently read in book clubs and by women looking to advance in their careers, a new and perhaps transient culture seems to have arisen where women have space to discuss their experiences and challenge the systems that have held them back.

### **Confronts Sexism**

Finally, the last subtheme that was related to empowerment and authenticity was how participants would not be passive bystanders to sexism or other discrimination. Specifically, five participants either mentioned that they would speak their mind, or provided examples of when they confronted sexism and other discrimination. For example, participants provided examples where they might get into arguments with people if they used discriminatory language or bring attention to sexist practices at work. Confronting sexism might also lead to feelings of empowerment among women. In a study where participants were confronted with a sexist comment in an experimental setting, Gervais, Hillard, and Vescio (2010) found that challenging the sexist comment was related to better psychological outcomes for women participants.

The finding that participants confronted sexism also supports the existing research findings that feminist-identified women are more likely to engage in activism in response to sexism (Ayres, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009). This is also consistent with Zucker and Bay-Cheng's (2010) finding that feminists are less accepting of sexist situations. Thus, participants in this study were more likely to challenge sexism and sexist behavior in the work place, as well as mentor and advocate for other women.



## **Summary of Themes and Findings**

While findings encompassing participants' multiple identities and how their identities intersect to create unique experiences has been documented throughout the discussions presented in this dissertation, not all have been explicitly described. This summary section will delineate additional factors that may have been less prominent or areas that participants did not expand upon, yet at the same time, were identified as salient and warrant further discussion. How identities intersect and play out for individuals is largely complex, and the intricacies of such go beyond the scope of this dissertation. Thus, this discussion of how intersectionality was present in the lives of the participants will not attempt to attribute specific experiences to identities held, but instead focus on aspects other than gender and feminism that may have contributed to the meaning participants have made from their experiences. This section will then triangulate the data and findings from this study to the literature that was reviewed in chapter two.

### **Intersectionality**

All but one participant in this study identified as White or Caucasian; the one participant that identified as African American did note experiences particularly by way of microaggressions that were related to ethnicity and likely based upon the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Moreover, this participant identified that intersectionality, particularly as a Black woman, was crucial to their sense of self. The fact that all participants had a bachelor's degree at minimum likely had an impact on their identity as a feminist as well as experiences with their life and career. Through self-reported socioeconomic status, the majority of participants identified as middle class, two identified as upper-middle class, and one as lower-middle class. A few participants noted

instances where having financial means were a concern. For instance, one participant who immigrated to the United States as a child noted that their family did not have financial means though having parents who were educated. Another participant mentioned being able to attend college because of their grandparents' financial support.

During the interview, participants were asked if there were other salient identities they held that would have likely impacted their experiences. As a response to this question, some responded with multiple identities, while one participant did not share additional identities. Some identities, namely liberal and queer, were brought up in multiple participant interviews, with three and two participants identifying with those identities, respectively. Being liberal or identifying with progressive or social justice minded communities came up in several interviews beyond the simple demographic question, so much so, that it became a subtheme. For one participant, being queer and having a relationship with an ex-partner had a significant impact on their understanding and identity within feminism. Additional identities mentioned as significant to participants' experiences included being an immigrant and refugee, a mother, Jewish, heterosexual and married, cisgender, democrat, pro-choice, and born into a matriarchal family. A number of the identities that were mentioned at the beginning of the interviews did come up later in the interviews. For example, the participant who identified as Jewish, discussed how that identity was connected to the social justice work they engaged in and ultimately, to their feminist identity. Another identity that came up during the interview with one participant was being an atheist, which along with feminism, was important for potential dating partners to know and embrace. Being a part of a single-parent household

was influential for one participant who held great admiration for their mother for exerting confidence and financially providing for the family.

All in all, the various multiple identities held by participants and the ways in which these identities intersect is extremely complex and makes for a unique experience for each individual. Recognizing that analyzing the experiences of feminist-identified women is simplistic and does not holistically encompass the entire narrative of each participant, I found it important to ask open-ended demographic questions where participants could identify how they wished and specifically inquired about identities that I had not otherwise asked for. In some ways, I expected that the identities offered would be explicitly discussed in greater depth during the interview. On the other hand, a number of the identities mentioned during the demographic section of the interview did come up and were interwoven in participants' stories.

### **Triangulation with the Literature**

While there has been a fairly significant amount of research conducted on women's career development and separately on feminist identity development, an area that has been minimally addressed in the research is the connection between the two. This paper examined these two distinct bodies of literature in depth in chapter two to provide a strong foundation for the study; a brief selection of this larger review is highlighted in this section to provide a basis to interpret the study's findings and triangulate the findings.

Much of the research with women's career development has focused on the barriers as well as supportive factors for women along their career trajectories. One of the most startling obstacles is pay inequity and low representation in a number of higher-paying career fields. Comparing compensation among peers, women only earn 81% of

men's salaries (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011, p. 1), and the discrepancy widens when race and ethnicity is considered with Black or African American women and Latina or Hispanic women being more poorly compensated. While it was not within the purview of this study to examine pay equity of participants, two participants specifically discussed how they intentionally negotiated for their salaries. Additionally, a few participants noted issues of other gender inequity in the workplace and advocated on behalf of themselves and other women to have a place and voice during meetings, and all participants discussed being aware of gender discrimination. Some researchers have identified the combination of racism and sexism as having particularly detrimental effects on employment and personal well-being (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). One participant identified as African American, with all other participants identifying either as White or Caucasian. The participant who identified as a Black woman did identify situations where discrimination ensued, specifically where others' words served to invalidate the participant's ability to have a successful and substantial career.

Gender role stereotypes, or believing there are more appropriate work roles for women versus men and believing that raising children should be the utmost priority, has the potential to inhibit career choice for girls and women (Betz, 2005). Due to the subtle nature of some of these stereotypes, it can be difficult to ascertain to what degree stereotypes have influenced people's choices. The participants in the study did not seem to reflect or internalize these messages, which may have been connected to their feminist identity. Moreover, the participants' ages, generation, and geographic location also might be influential; notably, these messages might not be as prevalent as they may be with people in different generations or geographic areas. Social class has also been found to be

a barrier for those from lower socioeconomic classes since those from higher socioeconomic classes are more likely to attend universities and therefore have access to higher-paying jobs (Thompson & Subich, 2006). Due to the small number of participants, this study does not provide support in one direction or the other. All participants in this study had a bachelor's degree, and though self-reported, identified their socioeconomic class as follows: two as upper-middle class, one as lower-middle class, and the remaining five as middle class. Their pursuit of higher education may have been aided by parental support and encouragement, which has been a topic of considerable research. For example, Wojtalik, Breckenridge, Gibson Hancox, and Sobehart (2007) found that parents' aspirational beliefs were found to positively affect women's academic attainment. Parents and grandparents were frequently credited by participants in this study as being very supportive and engaged in various behaviors to aid in participants' self-efficacy of themselves and to demonstrate the value of continuing their education.

Other career research has focused on women's experiences when employed in professional jobs. Mentoring relationships have been an area of substantial research, and mentors have been found to be helpful in providing career advice and learning organizational structure (Gibson, 2004) as well as in dealing with the stress from sexual and racial discrimination (Bacchus, 2008). Participants in this study were not specifically asked about mentors; however, several did discuss those who were helpful in their career journey including supervisors, family members, and friends—most of whom were women. The supportiveness of an intimate partner is also a factor that has been studied in association to women's career satisfaction. For example, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) found that women with partners that showed support, sometimes made personal career

sacrifices, and who shared in household and childcare responsibilities, were better able to manage their multiple life roles. Two of the participants in this study mentioned they were married, one of which, also had a child. Both noted how their husbands were supportive of them. The participant who had a child explicitly credited feminism with having an equal relationship and mentioned that they shared in the responsibilities to provide care for their child.

While more people in the United States are supportive of the women's movement than those who are not (Huddy, Neely, & LaFay, 2000), there are many negative connotations associated with the word "feminism" that are untrue (Valenti, 2007). In fact, in most of the studies reviewed, over half of participants did not self-identify as feminists (Houvouras & Carter, 2008; Liss et al., 2001; McCabe, 2005; Nelson et al., 2008; Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Yakushko, 2007; Yoder et al., 2011). A requirement to participate in the study was to self-identify as a feminist, however, the ages when participants adopted the identity varied. Despite the stigma attached to identifying as a feminist, it is interesting to consider why those who actively adopt the feminist label choose to do so. Feminist self-identification has also been associated with greater participation in the women's movement (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011; Zucker, 2004). This study's findings strongly support the connection between feminist identity and participation in the women's movement. Values of altruism, activism, or participation in the women's movement were present in all participant interviews, with some participants adamantly asserting that their feminism and career were directly related.

Whereas some of the existing research has focused on adopting a feminist identity, other research has explored influential factors behind adopting the identity or developing

feminist attitudes. For example, Leaper and Arias (2011) found that women who took on the label were often introduced to feminism by way of coursework or someone they knew. The findings of this study support the importance of coursework or someone influential to a certain degree. Participants did note certain courses and people in their lives that impacted the way they thought about their feminism, but they also identified media and extracurricular experiences such as involvement in student organizations or participating in study abroad, as being influential. Finally, other research has examined outcomes associated with identifying as a feminist and have found mixed responses (Katz et al., 2004). For example, being more aware and hypervigilant about sexism could bring about psychological distress. On the other hand, having this knowledge coupled with identifying as a feminist can empower people to reject stereotypes and take action against sexism (Ayres et al., 2009). While participants in this study did note frustration or negative feelings around experiences with sexism, they attributed it to its source and were often empowered to challenge the behavior. Thus, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Ayres et al. (2009). Additionally, feminist self-identification has been connected to positive effects on an individual's self worth and better outcomes in intimate partner relationships (Rudman & Phelan, 2007). The connection between feminist identity and positive self-worth was supported in this study in that participants demonstrated empowerment and a strong senses of selves.

In summary, this study has elucidated how feminist women experience and interpret their career journey, feminist identity, and other life experiences. Specifically, through their narratives, participants described their very personal and unique journeys they have taken with regard to their feminist identity development, discussed the value in

having a community of support and, in particular, strong women in their lives, identified adversity they have faced in the personal and career realms, and exuded strong senses of selves as seen through feelings of empowerment and authenticity. While this study has offered confirmation of the existing research as well as new understandings of how feminist women interpret their career and life experiences, this study was not without limitations, which is the focus of the next section.

### **Limitations**

This study provides many meaningful contributions through confirming what has been reported in the existing literature and the new understandings based upon the findings of this study. There are, however, a number of limitations that are important to address and will be discussed in this section. While not considered a limitation, it is important to note that this study had a total of eight participants. This is a small number and as such cannot be generalized to the larger population; however, it is consistent with qualitative research, and particularly with IPA. This is, in part, due to the extensive and rich data that is collected through interviews. Considering interviews generally lasted an hour to an hour-and-a-half, the data that were collected explored the overarching research question in great depth. Moreover, the strategies to ensure quality, which included creating an audit trail and having a peer reviewer conduct an independent audit, provided trustworthiness of the findings. Although strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness, the most significant limitations included: (a) the lack of diversity or identities represented, (b) how participants came to join the study, and (c) the location of participants.



Specifically, regarding the lack of identities represented, it is important to note that the participants' identities were rather homogenous. Participants were relatively young professionals, ranging in age from 22 to 33 years old. The findings are, therefore, only applicable to other young professional women, as older professional women may have experiences that greatly differ based on where they are at in their career and likely have also had more time to experience a wider range of issues. Additionally, there may be generational differences with the current participants falling in the millennial generation or on the cusp between generation X and millennial. The majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian, with only one participant identifying as African American. Race and ethnicity may significantly alter the experiences of women. This may be complicated by the fact that Women of Color have been historically excluded from the feminist movement. Also, Women of Color may have experiences that are significantly different particularly when it comes to identity and adversity experienced. While there was some variety in terms of socioeconomic class, this was self-reported and everyone did identify within the middle class range. Specifically, five participants identified as middle class, two as upper-middle class, and one as lower-middle class. Experiences of those in working class or elite backgrounds would likely experience their career and identities differently. All participants were highly educated with three participants who possessed master's degrees and the remaining five had earned bachelor's degrees. Education has a strong impact on the positions that are available to individuals, and with education comes privileges that are not held by those with less education. While all participants were asked if there were any additional identities they wanted to mention that might have an impact on their experiences, there were several

identities for which there was no inquiry. For instance, some of the identities that were mentioned by participants included sexual orientation, being cisgender, relationship and parent status, immigration history, religion, and political beliefs. All of these identities may impact the way in which participants experience and interpret their experiences, particularly when considering if participants hold multiple marginalized identities. Although the homogenous nature of the sample is mentioned as a limitation, it is rather common with qualitative research and was even mentioned as being favored in IPA research because the findings are digestible and are better able to be applied (Smith et al., 2009). Nevertheless, it does point to the importance of expanding focus to other potential contributions from marginalized identities.

The second limitation is attributable to the way in which participants came to participate in the study. Participants were recruited through a listserv of a women's organization in the Washington, DC area. While this excluded others that were not a part of the listserv, it also provided continuity in the participants that were recruited. Also, considering that participants volunteered and had to actively reach out to express their interest in the study could have impacted the sample and perhaps influenced the findings. Those who were invested in their feminist identity or had strong feelings about the intersection of their feminism and career may have been more likely to participate. On the other hand, consistent with IPA, having participants volunteer may provide for the richest data.

Finally, the geographical location of participants is likely a limitation with regard to how the results are interpreted. All participants resided and worked in or close to Washington, DC. This may be in and of itself limiting because it is a fast-paced city on

the east coast with a large young population, who often are working in political or nonprofit sectors. Several participants mentioned being involved in campaign or political work at some point and many were currently involved in nonprofit work. This occurrence may have been influenced by the location and the qualities for which the area is known. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide a better understanding of feminist women's career development and life experiences, substantially contributing to the field.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study contributes to the gap in the literature around how a social identity such as feminism impacts women's career development. Specifically, this study advances the understanding of how feminist women experience and interpret their life and career experiences. For instance, being surrounded by powerful women, having helpful supervisors, and close family and friends were identified as significant supportive factors for the participants. On the other hand, participants experienced adversity within their career experiences including ill fit with the organization or position, sexist gender dynamics, and unhelpful supervisors. There is room to expand this knowledge even more with increased research in this area. One area for further research includes the intersection of feminist identities with organizational fit and what it is about the organization that creates a successful or unsuccessful fit. Specifically, it would be interesting to explore this through the lens of the TWA (Dawis, 2005) and specifically ascertain how work and personal values impact one's satisfaction in a job or at a workplace. Another area for further research includes more focused research on satisfaction with one's supervisor and how much that impacts job satisfaction, career self-

efficacy, and future career aspirations. Moreover, exploring expectations of a supervisor with particular regard to the relationship developed and how egalitarian it is could be a focus of future research. Yet another aspect that would be important to examine further is gender dynamics that women experience and how that impacts career progression or career self-efficacy, and whether adopting a feminist identity helps protect women from adverse effects.

With respect to feminist identity development, the findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature and also expanded on existing research. This study found that taking courses had an impact, but influential factors also included various experiential factors and varied for each participant. Also unique to each individual was how they defined feminism, though for many, how they described their feminist identity was one that was almost innate to their sense of self. Moreover, several participants made a direct connection between their feminist identity and career choices or personal activism. Additional research could explore the experiential factors that impact feminist identity development in college including how equitable and supportive the campus culture is for women, involvement in extracurricular activities, and participation in study abroad. It would also be interesting to explore the bidirectional influence of activism one chooses to engage in and to how one understands their feminist identity. Moreover, how feminist identities impact relationships, whether they are relationships with friends, intimate partners, family, colleagues, or supervisors would be an additional area of exploration.

Future investigations could focus on the various limitations of this study. Perhaps most significant, future research could look at experiences of feminist women and how

additional marginalized identities intersect and how that might lead to differences in findings. Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct this study in different geographical areas, in less urban areas, with women of varying levels of education, and with women in fields traditionally dominated by men such as careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This study required that participants were employed and relied on the listserv of a women's organization to recruit participants. Therefore, another way this research could be expanded would be to explore the experiences of feminist women's career aspirations while they are in college or even in high school. Conducting this research with feminist women who are more established in their careers could also expand the existing research.

Finally, current research could be expanded by slightly changing other parameters of this study. For example, future research could explore how feminist-identified transgender or genderqueer people, and those who do not identify within the societal binary of women and men, interpret their feminist identity and career experiences. Additionally, it would be interesting to explore how men perceive their career and life experiences through the lens of their feminist identity. A focus of this study was to examine how a social or political identity such as that of identifying as a feminist impacts one's life experiences. Thus, another area of further research could focus on other social or political identities people hold. For example, the feminist identity parameter of this study could be exchanged for related identities including womanist and humanist identities. Other identities to be considered include political identities such as liberal, conservative, democrat, republican, independent, and libertarian, and could be the parameters of future research.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

This study provides a greater understanding of the lived experiences of self-identified feminist, young professional women, particularly with respect to their careers choices and experiences. It also expands the existing literature on the factors influential to the development of self-identifying as a feminist. Based on the findings of this study, there are a number of implications in not only how it contributes to the field, but also in how the findings can inform practice. Specific recommendations are offered for counselors and career development professionals, supervisors who are committed to supporting equitable and empowering workplace environments, and professors in the fields of counselor education and supervision, higher education administration, and gender and women's studies.

The U.S. educational system needs to undergo drastic measures to provide equitable access to education that is comprehensive and in an environment that is empowering and conducive to learning. Banks (as cited in Banks, 1998) suggests five areas to guide educators and administrators to provide more comprehensive education. These aspects include integrating content into the curriculum to reflect diverse narratives and authors, helping students understand how knowledge is created and how that impacts the subject matter, actively taking steps to reduce prejudice, examining and adapting their pedagogy so it provides equitable access, and ensuring the school culture and organizational structure is empowering for everyone (Banks, 1998). Society needs to reexamine the resources available to school districts and how that continues to privilege or oppress some students over others in terms of the resources and opportunities available. Moreover, college environments are fraught with the same types of insensitivity and

discrimination, not to mention the access and retention issues for people with marginalized identities. All education, including curriculum in K-12, must integrate the narratives and work of women and other marginalized communities, including the voices and experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities. Stories that are currently incorporated in textbooks often tell the story from the perspective of the privileged, neglecting and sometimes misrepresenting many significant pieces of history and voices of marginalized communities. When perspectives of marginalized identities are included in the curriculum, they are often isolated to one section or are added at the end (hooks, 1994). Instead, it is important that narratives from people with marginalized identities are incorporated throughout textbooks and curriculum. Additionally, the U.S. educational system needs to object to and challenge discrimination while also examining the overall climate for individuals with marginalized identities. Students need to have a secure environment in which to explore their multiple identities and live authentically. Contrary to some teachers' ideas of safety, "many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all 'safe' in what appears to be a neutral setting" (hooks, 1994, p. 39). More effective pedagogies include creating a classroom where all students feel compelled to participate in class discussion and to foster a sense of community rather than "safety" (hooks, 1994). Students in a culture that allows and supports ableism, classism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other discrimination will not be able to learn as freely. Especially pertinent to this study, everyone could benefit from incorporating a feminist curriculum in our educational system. This would include critically examining gender stereotypes and how systems serve to maintain inequities. Curriculum should include examining personal privilege and teaching about different systems of oppression and how

to break that cycle. Ideally, feminism and the history of the women's rights movement would be taught to everyone from an early age. Considering that the participants in this study all identified as feminists and possessed an empowered sense of self suggests that others could also benefit from learning about feminism.

Professionals in the counseling-related and career development fields can greatly benefit from this study in a few distinct ways. One implication is in recognizing a person's multiple identities and how these interact to impact one's career choices as well as resources available. People may be unaware of how the identities they hold influence them and how societal messages can be internalized to hinder career decisions. Moreover, social identity can impact one's experiences or how one perceives their career and life experiences. Thus, it might be important for counselors, therapists, and advisors to inquire about identities that are not typically considered in conversations about career choices and experiences. While this might not be relevant for everyone who identifies as a feminist, it might be of great importance for some students and clients. Having a career that aligns with one's feminist values might be of importance as well. Likewise, this consideration may also be important for those who hold feminist beliefs but do not identify with the feminist label. Another application of the findings from this study is in asking questions around adversity that one has experienced; whether that is in gender dynamics present in a workplace or academic program, how microaggressions might undermine women's self-efficacy and attainment of leadership positions, and how feeling underemployed or passed over can impact motivation and progression in one's career. If identified as significant in one's life, these factors are also areas to be further explored and addressed through counseling.



Further, the finding that a lot of career support came from relationships with others, suggests that this is another area that needs to be assessed in career counseling or therapy. Moreover, it might be helpful in guiding students and clients in how to find supportive environments or groups that could provide them with some solidarity and sense of community. Yet another consideration for counselors and therapists is how feminist identities and values may clash and lead to discomfort in important relationships in the clients' lives.

The findings of this study are also pertinent to those interested in women's empowerment and those committed to creating an equitable and supportive environment for women to progress in their careers. A specific finding that sticks out is the role of supervisors and the level of support experienced by participants. Some relationships with supervisors were interpreted as less than ideal, or even detrimental to the individual. Other supervisory relationships were interpreted as inspirational and supportive. The difference in these experiences is vast, and seemed to have, in turn, an immense impact on the individual. This can provide supervisors and those in leadership roles with some perspective of how critical supervisory relationships are. The findings suggest that supervisory relationships may not only impact satisfaction with one's job but also may impact future career attainment. This is crucial to support and increase representation of women in advanced leadership roles and powerful positions where women are grossly underrepresented. Further, having supportive supervisors who mentor and are committed to pay equity may also help to lessen the wide gender wage gap.

Finally, academicians in the fields of higher education, counselor education, and gender and women's studies can benefit from this increased understanding of feminist

women's career development. With respect to the field of higher education and counselor education, this expands the understanding of how important personal identities are in other arenas of one's life. Focus in academic programs and textbooks are often placed on a number of student development theories such as cognitive, moral, racial, and sexual identity development models (e.g., Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010); however, philosophical and political identities are often absent from this discussion. In this study, identifying as a feminist was important to participants and was impactful in both the personal and career realms. Although this study explored how participants interpreted their career and life experiences through their feminist identity, other social and political identities may be influential as well. Similarly, the gender and women's studies field as well as any academic program that has courses that are taught through a gender lens can benefit from this study. This study offers some confirmation of how coursework that looks at gender equity can advance the understanding of one's feminism and can have an empowering effect on people. Further, specific to women's and gender studies, the impact of a feminist identity is of interest and adds to the field of existing research on feminist identity development.

### **Conclusions**

This study addressed a gap in the literature focusing on how a social identity such as that of identifying as a feminist impacts women's career development. Based on existing literature finding that those who self-identify as feminists are more apt to participate in activism to advance gender equality (Nelson et al., 2008; Yoder et al., 2011; Zucker, 2004), it was expected that self-identifying as a feminist would likely be related to the values one holds and influence how women interpret their career choices and

experiences. The overarching research question that guided the study was: How do feminist-identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path? More specifically, this was addressed through the following research questions:

1. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
2. How have life experiences impacted your career choices?
3. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
4. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
5. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?

The first chapter focused on providing background of the feminist movement, with attention to employment. Feminism is the movement advocating for women's equity, particularly as it relates to economic, political, and social factors. Various inequities women face include low representation in high-paying career fields such as that in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Corbett & Hill, 2012) and earning 81% of the salaries earned by peers who are men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011, p. 1). While the majority of people support women's equality, few adopt the label of a feminist such as one Internet study that found that 21% of respondents identified as a feminist (Swanson, 2013). The first chapter also provided an explanation of the theoretical framework that informed this study from start to finish. First, feminist theory was a lens to examine gender imbalances and the impact they have on women's lives (Kolmar and Bartkowski, 2010). Second, multicultural theory and more specifically, intersectionality theory was employed to recognize that each individual has multiple identities and how

they intersect will be unique for each individual (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Finally, career development theory and in particular, the TWA was used to explore the fit between the organization and the employee (Dawis, 2005).

To gain a better understanding of the existing literature and provide a basis for the study, chapter two reviewed two distinct bodies of literature: women's career development with respect to the barriers and supportive factors that are impactful for women, and feminist identity development. Factors that were reviewed from the literature on women's career development included gender socialization, personal identity variables, parental relationships, social class, mentoring relationships, partners and motherhood, sexism, and racism. With respect to the body of literature on feminist identity, this part of the literature review examined models of feminist identity development, influential factors to identifying as a feminist, personal outcomes related to adopting feminist beliefs and the label, and factors associated with identifying with feminism such as participation in activism.

Chapter three detailed the research paradigm, design, method, data analysis, and how standards of quality and trustworthiness were achieved. With respect to the research paradigm, postpositivism or naturalism best represents my worldview; a few of the characteristics of this epistemology are that there are multiple truths, researcher values may impact the process, and causal relationships cannot be determined (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). The research design and analysis followed the practices consistent with IPA, which is focused on how participants understand their personal experiences and is informed by the ideologies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Participants include eight self-identified feminist women who

were recruited through a listserv of a women's organization. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed; and both individual and collective analyses followed. Trustworthiness or quality was upheld through a variety of techniques including triangulating findings with existing literature, creating an audit trail, and having a peer reviewer conduct an independent audit.

The findings of the study were the focus of chapter four, where four themes were presented as a result of the data analysis: personal journey to feminism, community of support, adversity experienced, and empowerment and authenticity. Each of these overarching themes were supported by four independent subthemes. The first theme, personal journey to feminism, was supported by an innate sense, challenges related to identity, influential factors such as education and experiential aspects, and feminism being complex to define. Second, the theme community of support was demonstrated by participants' narratives of being surrounded by strong women, having helpful supervisors who were mostly women, relationships with family and close friends, and progressive communities. The third theme, adversity experienced, played out through gender dynamics, issues of fit with organization or field, being underemployed or passed over, and having unhelpful supervisors. Fourth, the theme of empowerment and authenticity was created from the narratives of voice and self-efficacy, altruistic values, impact of identity on relationships, and confronting sexism and other discrimination.

Finally, chapter five provided a discussion of the study's findings, identified limitations of the study, and provided recommendations for practice and future research. This study substantiated some of the existing literature including the supports and barriers women experience in their career development and factors that influence feminist identity

development. Additionally, this study greatly contributes to the field, specifically advancing the understanding of how feminism as a social identity can impact women's career and life experiences. Among many important findings, the participants in the study affirmed that their feminist identity and career choices were connected. Limitations included the diversity and identities represented and the geographical location of participants. Recommendations for future research focused on expanding this study to address the limitations, as well as explore other social or political identities and their impact on career and life experiences. The findings are particularly relevant to counselors and career development professionals, those committed to equitable and empowering workplace environments, and academicians in higher education administration and gender and women's studies.

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated the complexity of women's identities and experiences. Many of the self-help or career advice books fail to address multi-dimensional aspects of identity. Identity development and psychological theories often neglect the concept of intersectionality as well. In addition to recognizing that everyone has multiple identities and the intersections of these will result in a different lived experience for each individual, this study has provided an account of how a feminist identity can impact women's personal and career development. It is hoped that this research will benefit career development practitioners and counselors in how they approach their work with students and clients.

With regard to personal and professional development of women, it is hoped that this research has demonstrated how beneficial and influential others can be in women's success and satisfaction with their career, ranging from supportive and encouraging

family members and friends to empowering professors and supervisors. What was particularly noteworthy about the community of support theme was how deeply felt it was by participants and the crucial role other women played in being supportive to the participants. In this study, women gained confidence through their solidarity with other women who provided support, inspiration, and mentorship in navigating their careers.

This research also demonstrates the high value of taking courses with a gender, feminist, and social justice focus. Such courses often get a bad rap or are considered frivolous, even though they are providing historical and important perspectives that include narratives about and by people with marginalized identities that are often left out of other textbooks and courses such as business, history, medicine, philosophy, political science, and psychology. Moreover, courses in gender and women's studies encompass critical thinking and call for the deconstruction of pervasive oppression, which continues to be a major problem in today's society. Instead of continuing with the status quo where feminism is discredited as a way for dominant groups to maintain control and privilege, it is time to understand the worth of feminism and recognize that there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality. We do not live in a post-feminist world as anti-feminist rhetoric puts forth. Until women have reached social, economic, and political equality, feminism is sorely needed. Thus, it is hoped that people will be able to recognize how sexist dynamics present in organizations along with personally held sexist beliefs can lead to diminished self-efficacy and can hinder career progression for women.

Finally, it is hoped that through this research, feminism and feminist identities will gain more credibility and respect. Instead of being an identity and a movement that is mocked and delegitimized, feminism is still very much needed in this society, leads to

positive outcomes for those who adopt the feminist identity, and seems to have a significant impact on women's career journeys. In examining the experiences and narratives of participants that were in this study, it was clear that their feminist identity was connected to a sense of empowerment and a strong sense of self. It is this sense of self that leads to higher self-esteem and self-efficacy. This in turn, may lead to women feeling empowered to not only achieve their highest career aspirations, but also be role models and support other women in the process.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval



November 8, 2013

Dear Diane Coursol:

Re: IRB Proposal entitled "[461040-2] Feminist Identities: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Women's Career Choices and Experiences"  
Review Level: Level II

Your IRB Proposal has been approved as of November 8, 2013. On behalf of the Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB, I wish you success with your study. Remember that you must seek approval for any changes in your study, its design, funding source, consent process, or any part of the study that may affect participants in the study. Should any of the participants in your study suffer a research-related injury or other harmful outcome, you are required to report them to the IRB as soon as possible.

When you complete your data collection or should you discontinue your study, you must notify the IRB. Please include your log number with any correspondence with the IRB.

This approval is considered final when the full IRB approves the monthly decisions and active log. The IRB reserves the right to review each study as part of its continuing review process. Continuing reviews are usually scheduled. However, under some conditions the IRB may choose not to announce a continuing review. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at [irb@mnsu.edu](mailto:irb@mnsu.edu) or 507-389-5102.

The Principal Investigator (PI) is responsible for maintaining signed consents forms in a secure location at MSU for 3 years. If the PI leaves MSU before the end of the 3-year timeline, he/she is responsible for following "Consent Form Maintenance" procedures posted online.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Hadley".

Mary Hadley, Ph.D.  
IRB Coordinator

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Sifers".

Sarah Sifers, Ph.D.  
IRB Co-Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Auger".

Richard Auger, Ph.D.  
IRB Co-Chair

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB's records.

## Appendix B: Call for Participants

Are you a self-identified feminist woman working in your chosen career? Please consider participating in a short interview where you will be able to learn about yourself and help grow the limited body of research regarding women's feminist identity and career development. My name is Kerry Diekmann, and I am looking for self-identified feminist women who are professionally employed to participate in a study I am conducting for my dissertation research...I am hoping to find feminist women professionals in the DC area that would be willing to volunteer some of their time to discuss their career choices and experiences, and how they came to identify as a feminist. This study is under the advisement of Dr. Diane Coursol (Professor, Counseling & Student Personnel, Minnesota State University, Mankato).

By agreeing to participate, I am asking you to commit to a 60-90 minute Skype interview that would entail questions about your feminist identity, career choices, and life experiences that impacted your feminist identity and career path. While there is no compensation or direct benefit to you through your participation, I hope that the personal reflection during the interview will result in a greater understanding of your own feminist and career development, and help to clarify future goals. Indirectly, by participating in this study, you are contributing to the limited research on feminist women's career development.

Your consideration and assistance is greatly appreciated. Please contact me for more information or to express your interest in being a participant. If you are interested, please provide the following in an email to me: your name, location (city and state only), age, and whether you identify as a feminist woman.

Thank you!  
Kerry Diekmann, Doctoral Candidate  
[kerry.diekmann@mnsu.edu](mailto:kerry.diekmann@mnsu.edu)  
Counselor Education & Supervision  
Minnesota State University, Mankato

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Document

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Page 1 of 2

Project Title: **Feminist Identities: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Women's Career Choices and Experiences**  
Principal Investigator: Diane Coursol, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Kerry Diekmann, M.S.  
IRB Case Number: 461040-2

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This research study is designed to explore women's feminist identities, career choices, and experiences. The overarching aim of this study is to better understand the experiences of self-identified feminist, professional women particularly with respect to how they chose the feminist label, supportive factors and barriers to their career path, and how feminist identities and career experiences interact. This research is being completed to meet the dissertation requirement of the co-investigator's Doctor of Education program in the Department of Counseling and Student Personnel at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form provides information about how the study will be conducted, specifies your commitment as a participant, and identifies the risks and benefits of participating so that you can make an informed decision about your participation. Please read the form carefully and ask any questions you may have about the study or if anything on the form is unclear.

#### WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You have been identified as someone who may meet the qualifications of the study of being a self-identified feminist woman professionally employed in their chosen career. Your participation is completely voluntary.

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

If you choose to participate in this study, the co-investigator will schedule one meeting with you over Skype, which will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Upon request, the co-investigator can provide you with a one-page summary after all participants have been interviewed and the analysis has been completed.

#### WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

There is a low risk of emotional distress that may arise from participating in this study. The study requires you to be reflective about personal experiences you have had throughout your life and career, including both positive and negative experiences. Reflecting on and sharing such experiences may lead you to feel uncomfortable at times. Should you feel that your discomfort is too much or if you decide you no longer want to be a participant, you can stop interview at any point and if needed, a referral to counseling can be provided.

#### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

While there are no direct personal benefits from participating in this study, reflecting upon your life experiences with respect to your feminist identity and career path, you may develop a better understanding of your own development as a feminist and professional. This could potentially lead to greater self-awareness and clarity of purpose and future goals. Indirectly, by participating in this study, you may be contributing to the limited research on feminist women's career development.

PLEASE INITIAL TO INDICATE YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND PAGE 1: \_\_\_\_\_

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

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### WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

No, there is no monetary compensation associated with participating in this research study.

### WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I PROVIDE?

The investigators are committed to maintaining your privacy. However, there are some situations when complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The Minnesota State University, Mankato Institutional Review Board that approves any research with human participants, has the right to examine any research materials including consent forms and transcripts. By law, there are instances where your identity and information you share may need to be reported to the proper authorities, such as abuse or a child or vulnerable adult, or thoughts of harming yourself or others.

To make sure your interview is accurately accounted and to aid in data analysis, the interview will be audio recorded. The audio recording will only be accessed by the investigators, and will be destroyed after interviews have been transcribed. Demographic data and transcribed interviews will not include names, and will be kept separately from consent forms. Any research documents including the transcribed interview, will be stored in an encrypted file on a computer that is password protected. Consent forms will be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed three years after the research study has been completed.

*Please note:* Excerpts from participant interviews including direct quotes from your interview will likely be included in papers and presentations that can be accessed by the public and may be published. However, steps will be taken to ensure anonymity so that it will not include personally identifiable information.

### DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

Yes, your participation is completely voluntary and you can discontinue participation at any point or choose not to answer questions you do not wish to answer without penalty or loss of benefits.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, nor will a refusal to participate involve a penalty or loss of benefits.

### WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact:  
Kerry Diekmann at [kerry.diekman@mnsu.edu](mailto:kerry.diekman@mnsu.edu)  
Dr. Diane Coursol at [diane.coursol@mnsu.edu](mailto:diane.coursol@mnsu.edu)

You also may contact the Minnesota State University, Mankato Institutional Review Board Administrator, Dr. Barry Ries, at 507-389-2321 or [barry.ries@mnsu.edu](mailto:barry.ries@mnsu.edu) with any questions about research with human participants at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

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**Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of Participant, printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)



## Appendix D: Interview Schedule

### **Interview Schedule (signified by numbers) with Possible Prompts (signified by letters)**

1. Demographic information
  - a. Age
  - b. Race and ethnicity
  - c. Socioeconomic class
  - d. Highest degree completed
  - e. Other identities that would help me better understand your experience with feminism and your career
2. Tell me about your current job.
  - a. Title, job duties, sector
  - b. Work environment, colleague relationships
  - c. Challenges, frustrations, rewards
3. What does it mean for you to identify as a feminist?
  - a. Age first identified as a feminist
  - b. Personal definition of a feminist
  - c. Impact on life and personal relationships
4. How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
  - a. Role models, family, or friends who were involved with feminism
  - b. Media (positive or negative), education
  - c. Life events, discrimination witnessed or experienced
5. How have life experiences (such as educational, employment, or personal) impacted your career choices?
  - a. College program, coursework, extracurricular activities
  - b. Internships, volunteer work, part-time and full-time employment
  - c. Life events and personal relationships
6. What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
  - a. Individuals
  - b. Resources
  - c. Personal characteristics
7. What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
  - a. Individuals
  - b. Discrimination
  - c. Life events
8. How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?
  - a. Career choices made
  - b. Aided or hindered opportunities
  - c. Activism or advocating for oneself

## Appendix E: Findings Summary for Participants

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### Feminist Identities: Career Choices and Experiences of College-Educated Women

Kerry Diekmann, M.S.  
Counselor Education and Supervision  
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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#### FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Overarching research question: *How do feminist identified women make sense of their feminist identity, life experiences, and career path?*

Supporting research questions:

- How did you develop your identity as a feminist?
  - How have life experiences impacted your career choices?
  - What supportive factors did you encounter that aided in your career and employment?
  - What barriers did you encounter in your career choices and employment?
  - How does your feminist identity and career influence each other?
- 

#### OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Four themes developed from the individual and collective analyses from interviews with participants and are noted in the image below. These overarching themes included: (a) personal journey to feminism, (b) community of support, (c) adversity experienced, and (d) empowerment and authenticity. Each of the themes identified were supported by four additional subthemes, which are further discussed in the summary of findings.



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## Feminist Identities: Career Choices and Experiences of College-Educated Women

Kerry Diekmann, M.S.  
Counselor Education and Supervision  
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

#### *Personal Journey to Feminism*

- Each participant had a unique path to identifying as a feminist, which seemed to be more **innate** with **no defining moment** that brought them to adopting the label.
- **Challenges related to identity** were noted, such as questioning if they were a “good” feminist, difficulty viewing sexist media, and differences with family or other feminists.
- Participants mentioned varying **influential factors to identifying**, such as courses, media, studying abroad, organizations in college, and seeing men treat their mothers poorly.
- Feminism was **complex to define**. Personal definitions of feminism varied, but commonalities often included equality and choice. Nearly half said it was hard to define.

#### *Community of Support*

- Three quarters of participants mentioned being **surrounded by women** and having **strong women** in their lives, who seemed to act as role models.
- Nearly all participants had a **helpful supervisor** that was inspirational or empowering, and most often the supervisor was a woman.
- **Close friends and family** were identified by participants as being supportive. Women family members were frequently mentioned and were seen as a friend or mentor.
- Over half of participants described a connection to **progressive communities** that they grew up in or were a part of, sometimes describing them as liberal or progressive.

#### *Adversity Experienced*

- **Gender dynamics**, or seeing themselves or other women being treated differently with respect to their career, were noted by three quarters of participants.
- Half of participants mentioned **issues with fit**, either with the job responsibilities or organization.
- Feeling **underemployed or passed over** was mentioned by three quarters of participants.
- Over half of participants had experienced an **unhelpful supervisor**, and sometimes described them as being a micromanager or terrible.

#### *Empowerment and Authenticity*

- **Voice and self-efficacy** was apparent in all interviews and included advocating for themselves and being confident or secure in themselves.
  - All participants exhibited **altruistic values** with respect to their career or activism, sometimes noting a strong connection between feminist identity and career choices.
  - Participants strongly noted that their **feminist identity had an impact on relationships**, including advocating for other women and being upfront about their identity while dating.
  - Just over half of participants recalled specific experiences in **confronting sexism** and were sometimes known as being the person who always speaks up.
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