

EXAMPLE 2/2: Journal Entry on “(Un)conscious”

The theme of this week’s readings is “(Un)conscious.” Over the last two class sessions, I have been challenged by reading and hearing more critiques of feminism and women’s studies (with which I strongly identify) than critiques of sexism and patriarchy. This week’s readings place me on more familiar ground, tackling the oppression of women directly, rather than the imperfections of the understandings of, and struggles against, that oppression. Additionally, these readings addressed how we conceive, understand, and discuss our ideas, and how critical that is: (1) to our conception of the problem of sexism and (2) to creating space for change—both in our conceptions and in our material reality.

Ironically, these more concrete discussions of women’s oppression helped me to engage more fully with the previous readings. MacKinnon’s article spoke to the need for oppressed groups to become visible to themselves in order to grasp their world and create a new notion of themselves in that world. As MacKinnon wrote, “Women’s situation cannot be truly known for what it is...without knowing that it can be other than it is” (p. 101). While I find problematic the post-structuralist rejection of the category of “woman,” as described by Alcoff, and the refutation of women as a marginalized group, as described by Finke, perhaps these ideas can be useful for some women as a way to conceive of their world—and their place in it—differently, and thus open space for alternative movement within it.

Friedan, Frye, and MacKinnon’s articles consider the collective (but not universal) experience of women living within a system of male oppression. I find this vision a compelling place to begin to examine sexism and its influence on society, and a place to begin to think about action—whether that action is conceiving of alternative possibilities or working to change social conditions. Differences, including different conceptions of, or identifications with, gender, sexuality, race, and class become, as MacKinnon states, “facets of collective understanding [that]...constitute rather than undermine collectivity” (p.86).

While “women” does not signify a universal category with universal experiences or goals, women *are* systematically oppressed by a system that privileges males over females and seeks to preserve male power. This does not erase other categories of oppression. Nor is it erased *by* other categories of oppression. I am oppressed as a woman, regardless of being oppressed as queer, being privileged as White, being oppressed as non-Christian, being privileged as middle class, and so forth. Our differences do not erase our commonality, nor our ability to engage collectively. Obscuring that commonality and our capacity for collectivity is a tactic of oppressors to undermine our ability to resist.

MacKinnon describes consciousness, as the “lived knowing of the social reality of being female” (p.90). I believe this lived reality is important to acknowledge—even if we each live this reality differently or reject traditional notions of gender—, because the lived experience of women’s oppression does not disappear through the rhetorical or ontological rejection of gender. Whether or not we recognize or identify with gender as a meaningful category, those of us who are labeled “female” experience a shared set of lived experiences in this culture that may include the threat or reality of sexual violence, physical domination, sexual harassment, discrimination, sexual objectification, minimization of personhood, denial of autonomy, and circumscription into less powerful social roles.

Frye clarifies that being affected by sexism is not the same as being oppressed by it. Thus, stating that everyone is oppressed by sexism, racism, and classism is disingenuous and potentially destructive, in that it obfuscates the power relations inherent in oppression. In MacKinnon’s theories, the opposite of equality is not difference, but hierarchy. She states, “Equality thus requires promoting equality of status for historically subordinated groups, dismantling group hierarchy.” This statement rescues the reader from the concern that he or she might reify categories of gender by recognizing that we are not all equally impacted by a sexist culture. MacKinnon highlights group hierarchy as the central issue, not difference. While certain aspects of sexism, racism, or classism may affect privileged classes (i.e., men, Caucasians, the wealthy), the purpose—and the offense—of these systems is that they

subordinate a particular group and privilege another. While all may be affected by (and participate in) a hegemonic system of oppression, only certain individuals belong to the stratum the system targets for privilege or disadvantage. Women are targeted for disadvantage in sexism, not men. Men are marked for privilege.

This collection of articles is particularly satisfying to me, as it brings to consciousness and validates the assumptions, historical realities, and lived experiences that accompany female oppression. It makes what is *covert* in sexism *overt*. I can understand how previous readings might have reflected other women's lived experiences of gender as a non-real category for them. This identification and validation of lived experience is an important part of the feminist mission and methodology, as MacKinnon, Flax, Lugones, and Spelman would likely agree. Identification with, and connection to, the shared, lived experience of oppression—as women or by the very category of “woman”—is an important piece in the development of a feminist identity, as well as the development of a feminist theory and praxis.