

Ivory tower? Feminist women's experiences of graduate school

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Synopsis

Curiosity about women's experiences in graduate school and interest in learning about feminist methodology led members of our feminist research group to conduct a study that would examine feminist women's graduate school experiences. We detail the progression of this project from initial idea to final manuscript and how our thinking about the research method and the results changed and developed throughout this process. Our method involved a group discussion facilitated by each woman's concrete representation (i.e., objects, words, and pictures) of her time in graduate school. Ten members of our research group served as both researchers and participants. Three of us transcribed and analyzed our four-hour discussion using qualitative methodological techniques to uncover patterns and themes. Our overriding theme "Identity of feminist women in graduate school" encompassed four major themes: Creation of feminist identity; Negotiation of new gender roles; Valuing and devaluing all things feminine; and Interface with the masculine world. These themes illuminated both the positive and negative aspects of our graduate school experience and the unique concerns that we as feminist women expressed.

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Our story began when a group of feminist women in our psychology department sought each other out and organized a feminist research group under the guidance of a feminist faculty member. This all-female group of 15 was born from a need for a safe forum in which we could explore, discuss, and participate in research about feminist issues (in a department that was not always supportive of these types of endeavors). We met regularly to discuss feminist readings and research, and our first group initiative was to plan and host a multidisciplinary conference showcasing feminist works (broadly defined) that were being

created by graduate students across campus. This multidisciplinary conference is now an annual event in its fifth year that has expanded to include graduate research from other universities.

Inspired by the success of the conference and our interest in conducting "feminist research" our discussions turned towards the possibility of a group research project, and different topics and methodology were explored. As psychology students much of our research training had focused on positivist approaches to research methodology. Indeed, many of us knew little about the specifics of feminist epistemology or

methods (e.g., Harding, 1987, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1983). However, we wanted our research to reflect a feminist ideology. To us this meant that women should be at the centre of inquiry and analysis, that research should reflect women's experiences, and that it should benefit and empower women in some way (Agnew, 1998; Mies, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Unger, 1996). Consistent with struggles expressed by many feminist authors, we felt that our voices (as feminist women in psychology) were often not heard and we were concerned about how well we could represent the experiences of other women and groups (see Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996 for review). We recognized that feminist research about other groups of women and men's experiences was also important, but we began where many feminist researchers have, with "the personal", on what was for many of us our first foray into feminist research. As a result, this research focuses on our experiences as Canadian graduate students in psychology, although in our review of the literature we have noted a number of similarities between our experiences and those of academic women in other countries and disciplines.

After a brief period of discussion we agreed to learn more about our experiences as feminist women in graduate school. After all, this topic had provided the very impetus for our feminist research group. By focusing on our own experiences we hoped to ensure that women were at the centre of our inquiry, and that our topic was relevant to each of the participants. Furthermore, each member of the research group was both a researcher and participant. Thus emphasizing the reciprocal nature of our research, and breaking from more traditional psychological research approaches in which the researcher as "the expert" speaks for the participants (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). Through this approach we hoped to reduce this power differential and create a project in which we, the participants, gave our own voice to the research.

The next decision that had to be made was regarding an appropriate research method. For most of us, training in the "scientific method" meant an emphasis on more traditional, quantitative methods of research. We wanted to try a different approach, one that took into consideration that this research was exploratory in nature, and one that would allow for the expression of contextual factors and their impact on our experience. Qualitative methods, which tend to be nonlinear

and support the notion that contextual factors shape our experience (Bohan, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lott, 1985; Sherif, 1992; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1996; Unger, 1992), were the preferred choice. As we saw it, a qualitative approach would give us the chance to see what issues emerged as important to our experience instead of imposing the predefined categories necessary for quantitative methods. Furthermore, a qualitative approach would allow us to talk about our experiences in our own words and from our own perspectives. At this point, we were unaware of complexities in the qualitative/quantitative dialogue with respect to feminist methods (e.g., Letherby, 2004a, 2004b; Oakley, 1998, 2004), and to us, qualitative methods appeared to be inherently more feminist. After considering different options (e.g., semi-structured focus groups, journaling) we decided that we would meet for an afternoon of conversation regarding our experiences as women in a graduate setting and see how the discussion developed. Our only guideline was to bring in a concrete representation of our graduate school experience to help initiate discussion. We made the explicit decision not to read previous work in the area so as not to shape our conversation. This also meant that we had no specific theoretical structure guiding this process.

On the day of our meeting, 10 women in their mid-to late 20's and 30's gathered together with a variety of objects including an onion, a watch, a sponge, a collage of pictures, a candle, and song lyrics. We took turns explaining why we had chosen our object and what the object symbolized, and then let the discussion flow from there. When the conversation waned someone else would revitalize the dialogue by introducing her chosen object. No one person was responsible for facilitating the talk, although we were all responsible for keeping it focused on our experiences as graduate students. Our ensuing discussion included aspects of our experience that were specific to our gender and our feminist views. We tape-recorded our conversation for later transcription and analysis. After our meeting, three of us decided we wanted to write up the results as a manuscript and obtained permission from the others to do this.

Our group was largely comprised of students who had gone directly from high school, to university, to graduate school with only a year or two in between. One woman had entered university as a mature stu-

dent and then continued directly into graduate school. Six women were White, three were South Asian, and one was biracial. Three were junior students in their first or second year of the masters program, five were doctoral students in various stages of completion, and one had recently completed her PhD. All of us were psychology students, eight of us in the applied social program and two in the clinical program. One was married, one was in a long-term relationship with another women, one was engaged, four were in a serious relationship with a man, and three were single. One woman had adolescent children.

At first glance, these demographics reflect a diverse group of self-identified feminist women. However, we would like to warn the reader that the themes that emerge in the results and discussion to follow are shaped by the perspectives of the three women who conducted the analysis and presented the results. This subgroup represented some (but not all) of the diversity of the group as a whole. All three of us were doctoral level students and heterosexual (two in relationships, one single). Two of us were White and one was South Asian. Despite the initial hope that all of us would be researchers and participants, only three of us are now representing the voices of the group. In addition, our analysis is heavily influenced by the fact that four women were the most vocal about their experiences. Of the women who were largely silent, one was the sole lesbian (and mother) and another was the sole biracial woman, and thus their experiences are missing from our analysis. We were at first pleased with the amount of diversity in the group and expected it to be reflected in the analysis, but in reality it is clear that our differing histories, ethnicities, sexualities, and other contextual factors made participation different for each one of us, and some important graduate school experiences are absent in our dialogue and analysis. We have retrospectively given more thought as to why this happened and speak about this later in the paper.

While the authors were in the process of writing the results, attempts were made to contact each of the participants with the request to review the manuscript for accuracy, provide feedback regarding the research process and results, and to provide consent for the use of quotes. This process revealed that the main reason other group members did not participate in the analysis and presentation of the research was time constraints.

However, other factors such as a lack of interest, feelings of uncertainty about how much one could contribute, disappointment with how the project had turned out (e.g., less structured/focused than they had hoped), and a lack of comfort with the research methodology (as being new and unfamiliar) were also reported. We have circulated this manuscript to the others, obtained consent to use specific quotes and taken into account their feedback. We did not include quotes from the only participant who we were unable to track down.

The three authors created a verbatim transcription of our discussion as soon as possible. Attempts were made to follow the participant's own grammatical style during transcription. The transcript was read multiple times by each of the authors in order to get a comprehensive overview of the topics discussed. As recommended by qualitative researchers (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988), we reviewed the transcript for concepts that appeared meaningful for the participant, while keeping in mind the phenomenon of interest, which in this case was an issue related to being a feminist woman in graduate school. During this process, we assigned meaningful sections of the transcript to multiple categories in order to preserve the richness of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We grouped together units with shared meaning and assigned new meaning units to new categories and/or created new subcategories. Categories grew as related information from the transcript was added to them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this process, we labeled categories in as descriptive a manner as possible.

Two of the authors independently analyzed the transcript for issues related to being a feminist woman in graduate school. Major themes were identified based on reading the transcript and summarizing meaningful information. These two authors then met to discuss these initial themes and converge the analysis. Later with the help of computer software, QSR NUD-IST Vivo (NVivo, 1999), the third author reviewed the transcript with intent toward more detailed categorization of the research data. Once this process was completed, all three of us reviewed the categories and agreed on the final themes and descriptions.

The themes that emerged were organized in order to encompass as many of the important elements of the discussion as possible while keeping in mind our goal of explaining feminist women's graduate school

experiences and not simply women's experiences of graduate school. Quotes are presented as transcribed, but with phrases such as "umh" and "like" removed to facilitate clarity. Each person picked a pseudonym or gave us permission to pick one in order to facilitate the discussion of our themes. We named the overriding theme that emerged "Identity of feminist women in graduate school." This theme encompassed four major themes: Creation of feminist identity; Negotiation of new gender roles; Valuing and devaluing all things feminine; Interface with the masculine world.

Creation of feminist identity

My ideas in terms of feminism have been inspired from my experiences here. (Janet)

One of the main ideas expressed in our discussion dealt with how our feminist identity emerged and changed in graduate school as we were exposed to feminism. For some, this exposure was new and the effects were permanent:

In terms of feminist identity, I don't know that's a fairly new thing for me. That's an emergent thing in the last year, and I would just have to say that (pause) the marks on the bag [her objective representation of her graduate experience] are like the marks that feminism is having on me. It's changing me, forever, subtly, sometimes obviously. (Elise)

Although not specific to a feminist identity, Walsh (1996) spoke of the power of education to change students' thinking about themselves, especially for students on the margins. Like Elise, some of Walsh's (1996) student participants described changes in themselves that were attributed to and became intertwined with their education. Some of us already identified as feminist before beginning graduate school, yet our education nevertheless continued to influence our feminist identity.

... So this is the place where I came in to it [her dissertation] thinking I'm a feminist, but I'm not like a radical feminist, and it was really funny in the process of talking to a lot of women who struggled with that, and then having people like [professor's name] be really challenging, and say okay, okay, you're going to rake Andrea Dworkin over the coals, read her in

the, first person. . . or Catherine Mckinnon in the first person. . . I wouldn't, I won't say that my experience is one that I went into it and all of a sudden, oh my God, now my politics are completely consistent with radical feminist thought. . . but it really challenged me to not be so knee jerk about my reaction. . . (Janice)

Similar to Janice's reluctance to identify as a radical feminist, other students have rejected a radical feminist understanding of women's oppression even after taking courses in women's studies (Bignell, 1996; Bulbeck, 2001). Yet higher education that teaches about feminism has also had some influence on students' notions of feminism. Although Bulbeck (2001) was somewhat disappointed with the depth with which her students accepted structural disadvantage in their understanding of feminism, she conceded that "there was some success in imparting feminist theories to [her] students" (Bulbeck, 2001, p. 145). Leggatt (2004) found that undergraduate students who identified with more liberal feminist notions said that these ideas developed through their education, but interestingly students inclined toward more radical notions identified other sources as inspiring their radical feminist beliefs. In our group, graduate school was clearly an important source for many of us in both the creation and development of our feminist identities.

Some of us spoke of the positive experiences we have had in graduate school with respect to our feminist identity. For instance, Elise said her feminist identity had not caused her any problems and she spoke of it as a welcomed "epiphany." However, there was a much bigger emphasis on how that identity had caused problems for others of us in the group. A clinical student said, "one of my evaluations, from a clinical placement, I will never forget this, was that my feminist ideology may get in the way of my clinical practice. That was a weakness, that was placed under a weakness section." (Maya) In contrast, a second clinical student talked about the benefits she had seen, "some of my most effective clinical work. . . the most dramatic changes that I have really seen in people, have actually been when I have brought in [laughing] feminist stuff." (Janet)

We also talked about the lack of safe places to discuss feminist ideas in academe. One of us who had expected graduate school to be a place where students would openly discuss these issues said, "I was think-

ing, hoping, I could bring up issues of gender and not be called a man hater.” (Janice) Janice went on to talk about the importance of our feminist research group, “it has been really cool to see at least a group of other students that are willing to think about these things and engage because that was not my experience with the bulk of other students and faculty...” The importance of finding like-minded peers in academe with which to discuss feminist ideas has been noted elsewhere (Baker’s Dozen, 1997; Butler, 1998).

Experiencing a feminist identity as both a positive and a negative influence is not new. Walsh (1995) notes that a feminist conscience can improve a woman’s well-being, but that it is also “risky” because it can destabilize a woman as the hostility, violence, and unfairness of women’s lives are all the more visible. In their article, exploring feminist graduate’s experience at a feminist conference, the Baker’s Dozen (1997) talked about the struggle to integrate their feminist identity into their professional identity. They talked about personal and professional risks associated with identifying as a feminist, including dealing with the conservative backlash associated with feminism (e.g., Faludi, 1991). This positive/negative divide about feminism’s impact was continued in discussions about our personal lives. For some of us, the positive aspects were not separated from the negative.

I would have to say that the feminist identity, and feminist research interests have changed my personal lives, and is definitely going to have an impact on them in the future... the things I’ve learned about feminism and the experiences I’ve had here, and with my research, and with you women will likely influence my choice of partner, and how I deal with that relationship, and all I can say is, now it’s making those relationships even more tumultuous than they ever were before. (Elise)

There has been some work done on comparing feminist and non-feminist graduate students (Ricketts, 1992) as well as examining the impact of exposure to feminist theories in undergraduates (Bulbeck, 2001). However, the interplay between the development of a feminist identity and the graduate school experience is an under researched topic area. Some of us only came to identify as feminists after arriving in graduate school, but we only briefly discussed the specifics

of that changing identity. Certainly mentoring and direction from a feminist faculty member were key aspects of this experience for many (if not all) of us, as was the ability to discuss these issues with other feminist students.

Despite the added obstacles and challenges that came with a feminist identification, there was also something very rewarding for many of us about beginning to see the world through a feminist lens. There was a clear interplay between a feminist identification and the impact it had on our work and personal lives. Like other women (e.g., Baker’s Dozen, 1997), we struggled to integrate our emerging feminist identity into various areas of our lives. This last point touches on the struggles that developed as we began to negotiate our changing roles.

Negotiation of new gender roles:

I have been working for ten years to have this career, I am damn well not going to take time off [to have kids]. (Janet)

We had a number of discussions around traditional, heterosexual, gender roles for women at home and at school. Some of us, like Moira, spoke negatively of having to postpone marriage:

because of the culture I come from [South Asian], being married is very important. And I think from the feminist perspective, one of the big things in grad school I’ve had to deal with is the fact that I have to put off my marriage for a lot longer than I would have to if I hadn’t decided to pursue my education. (Moira)

But for another South Asian student, graduate school was an acceptable way to avoid marriage, “for me grad school was actually a good way not to have to get married (laughter). It allowed me a little bit more time.” (Maya)

Deciding whether or not to be in a marriage or other long-term relationship is a personal decision, but it can be unwillingly and negatively affected by the constraints and challenges that come with academic work. Bagihole (2002) noted that almost half of her participants (women academics) from a previous study were not in a long-term relationship. This may be because of the pressures of an academic career. A few of us spoke about the strain that graduate school puts on relationships. “I was with [name]] for seven

years and, it is not like [grad school] was the only thing that broke us up, but certainly [there was an] element of ‘how much longer can I wait for you to be done school?’” (Janet)

Some authors have commented that the model of a faculty member is a male one that incorporates a stay-at-home wife, who can enhance a man’s career by allowing him to focus on academic interests (Coate, 1999; Hannah, Paul, & Vethamany-Globus, 2002); however, for a heterosexual woman, a serious partnership likely places more constraints on her career such as limited time and geographical options. We noted that the lack of stability in graduate school contributed to relationship strain because of a desire to continue long distance relationships, and an uncertainty of where one might need to move geographically (e.g., for internships, post doctoral placements, academic jobs, etc.):

when you are in a relationship you have to consider the other person. I’m thinking, I might want a career in academia, well that means moving again, and we are moving next month. . . So that means in a couple of years we may have to move again. (Marie)

Despite the added strain, some of us have chosen to negotiate new roles with partners while incorporating old roles. This often means agreeing to share responsibilities more equally with “what was for the majority of us” our male partners, which was certainly a point of contention for some women in the group. However, the unequal division of labour was not limited to our intimate relationships with men, but was also a concern in our relationships with male peers.

In grad school you have got these educated men that are aware of a lot of these issues. And I will have these parties and it is the women who end up doing the dishes (laughing) the men are sitting around talking. And I am like what the hell. . . (Janet)

A number of authors have commented on the added “women’s work” that falls to female professors and the disregard that male professors (and academe more generally) have for this work. Butler and Landells (1995) have noted an unequal share of pastoral and administrative work (especially on low profile departmental committees). Barnes-Powell and Letherby (1998) talk about their own experiences as new female faculty who were inundated with student demands on

their time. They note that students choose to talk to them rather than more senior male colleagues. This occurred for a number of reasons including, student comfort, students’ perceived ability to get what they wanted, and students’ need to disclose personal problems after hearing lectures on sensitive issues. However, the cumulative effect left the authors with little personal time or privacy while on campus and resulted in little academic reward. This kind of gendered work was not discussed at length in our discussion, perhaps because of our limited role in undergraduate student’s education. After reflecting on this research, we, the authors, began to appreciate how we have also placed these types of pressures on the few women faculty members who are open to feminist issues, even though this was absent in our discussion within the larger group.

When, and whether or not, to have children was also a salient concern for some of us. We talked about the ticking biological clock and the overwhelming amount of work entailed in raising a family. Doing this in graduate school simply did not seem like an option for most of us, while starting a family shortly after finishing graduate school did not seem like an ideal time either, “You are stopping your career before it even starts.” (Elise) This is not a small concern. Chesterman (2002, p. 239) has noted that domestic responsibilities and career breaks do limit women’s academic advancements in what she terms “indirect sexual discrimination.”

For some of us there was a general sense of wonder about how some women did both, and for some there was a definite feeling of “wanting it all.” (Angela) This is not surprising given that many of us grew up being told that women could “have it all” (Hannah et al., 2002). Bron-Woiciechowska’s (1995) interviews with graduate students contained a similar desire for both an academic career and a family, which was expressed by female graduate students, but not by their male peers. Moyer, Salovey, and Casey-Cannon’s (1999) qualitative study of women graduate students found that, like many in our group, women worried about balancing private and professional elements of their lives, although their concerns were broader than the specifics of raising children. Difficulty balancing family and school was also a reason why some women chose to downgrade their degrees (Workman & Bodner, 1996). Cotterill and Waterhouse (1998) have recognized the

difficulty that many women students in women's studies face because of their multiple roles. Pursuing an academic career is just one of the many priorities competing for their time, and it is often not the most important one. Quite a bit has been written about the difficulty of raising children or decisions around having children with regards to women professors (Acker, 2003; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Bagihole, 2002), but relatively little has been written about this challenge for graduate students.

Changes are being made (e.g., allowance for longer pre-tenure periods, maternity and paternity leaves, etc.), but the women in our group still saw wanting a family as a hindrance to a successful career. It is important to note that concerns about wanting children and a career were by no means unanimous. Some of us had already consciously decided not to have children because the emotional and physical cost was not deemed to be worth it, and others did not feel this was a salient issue for them. Nikki had two teenage children, and was asked about her experience when we were discussing this issue. She did not think the topic was relevant to her because she did not have children while in school. When pressed on the issue, she jokingly said, "There is nothing joyful about it."

Valuing and devaluing all things feminine

I am realizing, oh hey there is this thing, femininity. (Elise)

We spoke about the value and undervalued nature of feminine qualities. Some of us wanted to learn more about all things feminine and get in touch with feminine qualities especially as these are not often rewarded within an academic setting. Elise said:

I never feel like I have had the opportunity to develop those feminine kind of traits because, that is what I am trying to get in touch with now. . . like from our conference last year, [a speaker's] talk about how women's way of debating or reasoning is different from men's and hasn't necessarily been rewarded in the past. (Elise)

Related to this is the notion that many of us are now interested in understanding women without necessarily having to consider men's experiences. Maya said:

It is like whenever I am talking about. . . my research, which is entirely about women, for women, and by women. And people will say to me "well if feminism is about equality well then what about men's experiences of whatever". And you know right now, to be honest, my attitude is I don't care! Their experience has been considered, to the exclusion of ours, forever and ever and always.

The two clinical students described the discipline of clinical psychology positively because certain settings (i.e., psychotherapy) allow us to access our intuitive sense, a trait often stereotypically associated with feminine thinking. One of the clinical students said:

there wouldn't be another career that I could choose, . . . it really brings forward the intuitive stuff that I love to do. . . and it challenges my thinking. So I really don't think there could be anything else that I would enjoy more. (Maya)

The other clinical student spoke more generally about finding a connection with clinical psychology:

I love [clinical] psychology. . . Maybe it's because I started in science, 'cause I started in like pretty hard-core neuroscience. I took psychology as kind of like an afterthought right. . . And then I thought. . . this is exactly what I want to do, like this fits so much with the way I think, and you know the way I kind of view the world. (Janet)

However, the discipline of psychology was also described in a negative way in terms of devaluing ourselves. Here psychology was devalued as a lower paying, less prestigious area. Others have commented on the feminization of psychology and the implied downward mobility that comes with that association (Ostertag & McNamara, 1991; Stark, 2001), which may have contributed to our own devaluing of our discipline.

Devaluing also revolved around the idea that many of us tend to minimize our own accomplishments. One woman who had recently completed her PhD said this:

I thought I'd feel really great for a long time and, not that you don't feel great but, the stuff that makes, you doubt yourself, all the stuff, the anxieties of you know, I'm too stupid, I'm too this, I'm too that, they don't stop magically. . . Good God, can't I ever get to a

place where the glass is half full, instead of half empty all the time? (Janice)

Others of us talked about feeling like an impostor who was “going to be [found] out any minute.” (Maya) Women faculty have also felt “not good enough” (p. 15), and described the damage that academic life has had on their self-esteem (Acker & Armenti, 2004). In graduate school, women have reported lower levels of academic self-concept, more negative self-concepts, and less career commitment than men (Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, & Kinlaw, 2000). Some of this may have to do with an unrealistic quest for perfection. Rudy brought song lyrics as her representation of graduate school because they expressed this desire for perfection. The idea came to her as she realized that she was stressed about finding the “perfect” object to bring to the group. She said:

I thought and I thought and I thought and I still hadn't thought of anything that was perfect... the idea that we need to be perfect at everything we need to be perfect... sometimes I feel like I'm trapped... I have to keep reminding myself [of] a quote from a Kinnie Starr song that says: “I am less than perfect. I am more than ideal.” (Rudy)

We not only devalued ourselves through the course of our discussion, but we also talked about how others have devalued us. Some of us described interactions with professors and peers that minimized our research interests as less than “serious.” Janice attributed this directly to her gender, “because of my research, or because of the jokes I tell, ... you are not considered a serious academic, you are sort of a flake and whereas a guy doing that would be considered, ‘a *really* cool prof.’” Many others have also noted that women's academic pursuits, especially when they relate to women or feminism, are undervalued (Bell & Gordon, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Morley, 1996; Packer, 1995; Sandler & Hall, 1986). In addition, the low pay and low prestige jobs in academe are (perhaps increasingly) distinct and feminized in areas such as contract work, teaching, and particular departments (Chesterman, 2002; Davies & Halloway, 1995; Halvorsen, 2002; Heward, 1996; Reay, 2004; Sandler & Hall, 1986).

We also felt devalued and ashamed for expressing our emotions. Janice recounted a story in which a

woman graduate student described crying in her advisor's office. She noted that there was a “real feeling of silliness” and that the student felt like an “idiot” because “any show of emotion is a show of weakness. It is associated with women, or femininity, and that if you are emotional you are somehow not as credible...” Another student talked about being silenced because of her emotions. “One of the ways that I felt silenced was that whole, you know if tears do escape, if I am not able to keep that in, then I feel like, oh God, I did something wrong, that I shouldn't have done that.” (Maya) Being perceived as not coping well with academic stress was also a concern for women faculty (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Coate's participants (1999) talked about how men's personal problems (e.g., divorces, affairs, etc.) were seen as irrelevant to their academic jobs, but that women's problems reflected a more fundamental weakness in their character. She says, “the freedom to have personal problems, and for those problems to interfere into their working lives, was an important privilege for academic men” (Coate, 1999, p. 146). As a result women were left to cope with their problems on their own.

A loss of confidence in self as women move from undergraduate to graduate school has been cited as a reason why women are more likely to downgrade their chemistry degrees from a PhD to an MS (Workman & Bodner, 1996). Ironically, it appears that for some women “succeeding” (getting into graduate school, getting an academic placement) worsens their self-esteem. This may be because as women move up the academic hierarchy they are more often confronted with a mismatch between their lives and the masculine life of academe. It is interesting that although we did devalue our discipline and ourselves, we also countered these assumptions by valuing feminine ways of knowing and feminist research, and challenging or questioning the reasons we were devaluing ourselves. For instance, when we started diminishing the merits of earning a PhD and practicing in psychology, one of us said, “But is that just us sort of minimizing what we've achieved again?” (Marie) A feminist view of the world may have helped us question why we were devaluing ourselves. This may be unique to a group of feminists because we have a critical mass of women with whom we can safely discuss these matters.

Interface with the masculine world

Grad school in a lot of ways focuses on more male traits. (Janet)

We discussed the valuing of masculine traits and the notion that the structure of university is very masculine. For instance, stereotypically masculine traits such as competitiveness are encouraged, while stereotypically feminine traits such as intuitiveness are, in one woman's words "squelched." The observations we made in this respect are certainly not new. Many writers have described the academic world as male-centred or masculine (Chesterman, 2002; Han-nah et al., 2002; Jackson, 2002; Kettle, 1996; Reay, 2004).

We spoke of how the male norm of academe led to changes in our behaviour, our thinking and even in our perception of self. Maya said, "I feel like I've lost a lot of myself through this experience, because before I came here, I was much more in touch with the inner workings of who I was. I used my intuition to really guide my decisions, logic played very little role." We also talked about some specific ways of thinking that are encouraged in school, such as the focus on positivism. As Moira put it, "Science is the truth." She went on to say that science is the truth to the exclusion of all other perspectives including religion. Moira's questioning of absolute truth is consistent with past research findings that feminist psychology graduate students are more likely than other psychology graduate students to reject the positivistic assumptions of much of our discipline (Ricketts, 1992). Our interest in learning about other epistemologies was, in fact, the driving force behind this research study.

We also talked about our inclination toward comparing ourselves to men. This point followed directly from a discussion about men's experiences. The idea was that women's experiences are rarely discussed in isolation to men's experiences. That is, even to talk about women's experiences necessarily implies that they are different from those of men. In our own discussion we spent a considerable amount of time wondering about men's experiences, with one of us acknowledging, "I have almost gotten to a place now where I would love to do work on men's experiences, but from the vantage point of saying, 'hey, really, hello, have you really ever thought about your own

experience?'" (Janice) However, for some of us, the focus on men's experiences was quite negative because it implied that women must always be compared to men, "I sometimes feel, because we do compare ourselves, how do we fare next to the men here? . . . I don't know it feels it minimizes our own experiences." (Maya)

Sexism was discussed at great length. We talked about sexist encounters with students in our roles as graduate assistants, with teaching assistants that were assigned to us, and with professors and peers. One of us talked about the demeaning way that her male teaching assistants would proceed to tell her how she should be teaching her course. Others talked about the overly casual manner with which male students approached their female instructors. One of us put it like this,

I perceived it. . . as a lack of respect. Even though you are my instructor, maybe because you are a woman that brings us to the same level. The female students approach me differently from some, not all, of the male students. And I've had that, you know, arm (gesture of putting arm around a person), and I would never do that to, even to a colleague that I didn't know very well, never mind an instructor. (Marie)

One of us described a situation in which a male faculty member had been hired to consult with students and faculty about statistics, but then proceeded to charge students a consultation fee. When a student complained to the department head, he/she was told to ask a women faculty member who would likely help with the statistics for free. Sexist behaviour in academe has also been well documented by others (Aapola & Kangas, 1996; Butler & Landells, 1995; Packer, 1995; Rozario, 2001; Sandler & Hall, 1986).

We spent a considerable amount of time talking about the notion that women are responsible for men's sexuality. For instance, feeling that others are sexualizing us, and taking extra care to avoid doing anything that could be interpreted as sexual. Elise said this, "We are somehow suppose to control not only our own sexuality, but absolutely everyone else's that we come in contact with. That it is our responsibility to monitor our behaviour and deny any sense of sexuality. . ." Maya summed it up by saying, "well it really bothers me, because that sometimes is used as

the reason not to give us the respect... we are [perceived as] using our bodies as a way to get ahead somehow.” The idea that women are responsible for men’s sexuality is not a new one. Images of women arousing desire (and often evil) in men are apparent everywhere from Christian traditions (e.g., Eve) to contemporary movies (e.g., *Fatal Attraction*) and television (e.g., soap operas) (Bordo, 1993). In this manner men disconnect from their body and its desires, seeing those desires as the results of “female manipulation and therefore is the woman’s fault” (Bordo, p. 6). As such, women are expected to be the “custodians and embodiments of virtue for [a] culture” and are expected to manage their bodies (and their sexuality) more tightly than men (Seid, 1994, p. 11).

The process: strengths and limitations

Designing and participating in this research project was a new experience for us. In the past we had been predominantly involved in more traditional research where the boundary between researcher and participant is clearly defined. Yet a separation between researcher and participant in this study would clearly have been artificial given that our research topic was so completely enmeshed with our lives as feminist graduate students.

One of the goals of our project was to evaluate whether or not our method was feminist research. To meet this goal, we came together again as a group of 10 to talk about the research process. Thus we have a unique perspective on the strengths and limitations of this study. The group wrote down the positive and the negative experiences of the research study on large flip chart paper. Next, we circled everything that we felt was particularly relevant to the research aspect of the experience. Finally we starred the items that were specifically relevant to the experience as a feminist research method (as we understood it).

We noticed that most of the positive things that were circled were also starred. In other words, most of the things we thought were positive about the research method were also particular to it being a feminist method such as: allowing for a variety of experiences to be expressed; creating a very open-minded atmosphere; expanding our idea of what research can be; and the amount of personal introspection involved in participating.

Interestingly, the negative experiences we identified were often circled but not starred, indicating that the negatives were not particular to feminist research (although they are not commonly associated with positivist research either). Some of the negatives spoke more to our comfort with the method we chose: an awkwardness in talking about some topics; a feeling that the discussion was a bit too unstructured and without clear goals; and finally, some of us continued to have problems labelling the project as “research” because it was so different from the research we had conducted and learned about in the past.

Certainly some of these negatives may have affected the quality of the data that we collected. Some women talked less in our discussion. This is perhaps because they did not feel as comfortable or perhaps because our dialogue did not resonate with their experiences. Many of the quotes we used came from four women who were particularly talkative, and it is important to note that three of these women were traditional, White, heterosexual, senior students. In addition, two of the four are authors on this paper. As a result, we realize that we are not likely to have captured the feminist graduate student experience of some of our quieter voices.

We (perhaps naively) began this research project with the assumption that because we were all “researchers” we would not have to worry about status differences. We believed that there would be common experiences and a natural comfort between us that would ensure an open dialogue.¹ However, the fact that three women rarely spoke brings this into question. Nikki said almost nothing and decided not to bring a representative object. She did, however, give us feedback on this paper. She told us our conversation around personal issues made her life experiences (lesbian in a long-term relationship with children) feel so different as to be irrelevant. She said we spent a lot of time on these issues and was surprised and annoyed that this is where our discussion ended up. She was expecting a more in-depth examination of our feminist identities and how they were developing in graduate school. Like others, she also mentioned dissatisfaction with the method we used. Two other members rarely spoke except to describe their objects. Rudy told us that the method was disappointing and that she had hoped she would get more out of the discussion. Like

others, she saw the lack of clear goals as a downside. Unfortunately, the other member of the group who rarely spoke was the only woman we were unable to reach, and we did not get feedback from her about the paper.

What was not discussed is important in understanding the make up of the group, the dynamics of the group, and the comfort level among us. It is significant that although four of us were ethnic minorities and one was a lesbian, issues of racism and heterosexism did not arise. This questions the breadth of experiences that we truly explored in our discussion. Thompson (1998) speaks to the cumulative burden of sexism and racism that Black women face. She notes that White women have had a head start on feminism, and as such Black women have not had input from the beginning. Our discussion did not touch on any of these issues. However, Mirza's (1995) work with Black university students might shed some light on this omission. Her work finds that racism is not at the top of Black students' list of experiences in university, but that learning and knowledge is at the top. Mirza suggests that this is not because racism was not experienced or perceived as important, but rather that dwelling on it would be detrimental to them. Heterosexism has played a role in our discussion and analysis. Nine of the women were heterosexual and many were currently in relationships with men, so we overemphasized relationship struggles with men and family balance problems. And yet the discussions around children and family balance were largely hypothetical as only Nikki had children and she did not speak to this experience. As discussed, it is probably not a coincidence that she was also the sole lesbian.

Some readers may be wondering about a "missing" discussion on the pressures of publishing or finding an academic position. Certainly, the "publish or perish" mentality of academe has been documented (e.g., Thomas, 1998). We likely did not talk about this because few of us were interested in pursuing an academic job upon completion of our graduate studies. This in itself is telling and consistent with past research (Heward, 1996), although it is also likely influenced by the applied nature of our programs (clinical and applied social psychology). In fact, 6 of the 10 women have now graduated and left graduate school (5 with PhDs and 1 with an MA). Of these

women only 2 are tentatively pursuing academic careers.

More structure (i.e., clearly defined goals or topics for discussion) may also have helped us stay focussed. Our lack of structure is apparent at the beginning and at the end of our transcript as we began by wondering how to begin and ended by wondering if we were done. It also became apparent as we analyzed the transcript that even the three authors had not seen the project the same way. Two of us went into the discussion thinking that we were to discuss our general experiences as graduate students, while the other thought the discussion was to be specific to our experiences as feminist students. We realize that this is a somewhat artificial divide because all of us identified as feminist. However, the understanding of feminist theories varied substantially in the group and a feeling of not understanding or a fear about saying the wrong thing may have kept some silent. In addition, some women spoke about graduate school more generally and some of these discussions are not included in our analyses. This is because we chose to analyze the transcript and include quotes that pertained only to our experiences as feminists in graduate school.

Some of our lack of direction may also have had an effect on the discussion because the first few students who described their objects and experiences in graduate school did so in monologues that did not really generate much discussion. It was only as we became more comfortable with the procedure that spontaneous dialogue occurred among us. These women may have felt that their experiences were not shared or interesting and thus later stayed silent. The spontaneous flow of the discussion was a strength, but it would have been helpful to strategize about how to include everyone in the dialogue before we began.

The fact that we (the three authors) were both participants and researchers allowed for a more complete analysis of the data, but it may have also led to an emphasis in the analysis on topics that were personally meaningful to us. We believe that the learning process that has ensued from this research strengthens the final product. The process of analyzing and writing this manuscript has continued our learning process about feminist research. The first draft of this article, which followed a standard positivistic format, is substantially different from the present paper. Our think-

ing about our group discussion, our analysis, and the process is continually changing. In addition, our reading in the area of women and higher education was very limited before we wrote this article, and that reading in itself has increased our knowledge and shaped the final product.

Conclusion

The “statistics” of women in academe are disheartening, enduring, and well documented in many countries. Women earn less than men (Halvorsen, 2002; Sandler & Hall, 1986), are less likely to obtain prestigious positions despite an increasing number of women undergraduates (Bell & Gordon, 1999; Bron-Woiciechowska, 1995; Chesterman, 2002; Clifford, 2002; Rozario, 2001; Schiebinger, 1999), are less likely to receive first class degrees (Francis, Robson, & Read, 2002), and are at risk for sexual harassment (Butler & Landells, 1995) and even rape (Rozario, 2001). While some authors have noted positive changes for women (Acker & Armenti, 2004), others point out that this change has been slower than expected (Prentice, 2000). There are also worrying changes that might further disadvantage women, namely the increased commercialization of higher education (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cotterill & Waterhouse, 1998; Davies & Halloway, 1995; Thomas, 1998). Despite the alarming nature of these facts, it is perhaps even more disturbing that this evidence is sometimes missing for women of colour (Mirza, 1995) and lesbians because their numbers are considered too small to count. These statistics are some of the quantifiable realities of an academic environment for women, and our discussion touches on some of the individual lived experiences of this same reality for women in our group.

Our themes reflect a number of different experiences related to being a woman and a feminist in graduate school. Some of these themes are quite positive, while others are quite negative. It is probably not surprising that negative themes arose from our group discussion, as they reflect some of the reasons for the feminist research group's inception. The development of our feminist research group and the conference that it has generated has certainly been very helpful to many of us in dealing with these

negatives. Other women have also talked about the benefits of finding like-minded peers with whom to discuss research (Butler, 1998; Holliday, Letherby, Mann, Ramsay, & Reynolds, 1993). Butler (1998), a faculty member at an English university, describes a feminist research group that she initiated because she felt isolated in her work, but was increasingly pressured to produce. Holliday et al. (1993) describe a more casual group that arose out of circumstances (shared office space), rather than design. However, their description of interweaving intellectual and emotional topics in discussions among themselves resonated with our own experiences in our discussion and with our group more generally.

We recognize that our feminist research group is somewhat unique. Feminist graduate students in other schools or other departments may have substantially different experiences for a number of reasons including differences in disciplinary openness to feminism, presence or absence of faculty mentorship, and friendships with like-minded peers. Despite this, we hope that other women, like ourselves, are able to capitalize on the strengths of being a feminist in graduate school, and that some may be inspired to create their own feminist group.

Endnotes

¹ Some of the power issues that Butler (1998) describes in her feminist research group (made up of women of various ranks, including students) are relevant in understanding power issues in our own group. In both of our groups knowledge about feminist research and comfort between members of the group were salient issues.

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