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Feminism as a Conceptualization of Lived Experiences

Feminist theory, such as the ideas represented in bell hooks’s *Feminism is for Everybody*, are built upon ideas that are foundational to sociology as a whole. hooks then sets these ideas within a historic narrative of the formation of feminism that largely focuses on the differences between reformist and revolutionary feminism. She points out out along the way the integral intersections between gender, race, and class, which are ideas that are once again firmly rooted in basic premises that the discipline of sociology uses, namely social construction and the distinction between a system and individual. Because hooks does not delve into these foundational concepts in *Feminism is for Everybody*, I will first demonstrate how they connect with the ideas presented in the book. The unspoken use of elementary sociology provides an opportunity to show via the framework of phenomenology how the terms and ideas upon which hooks’s (and many others’) version of feminism are useful but are not inherent conceptualizations of the experiences she is describing.

Sociology explores the foundational language and conceptualization that hooks uses. The difference between systems and individuals is key. To describe this concept, Allan Johnson’s explanation in *The Forest and the Trees* is useful:

We are always participating in something larger than ourselves, and if we want to understand social life and what happens to people in it, we have to understand what it is that we are participating in and how we are participating in it […] The larger things we participate in are called social systems, which come in all shapes and sizes. In general, the concept of a ‘system’ refers to any collection of parts or elements that are connected in ways that coalesce into some kind of whole […] What social life comes down to, then, is a dynamic relationship between social systems and the people who participate in them. (12-13)

Johnson uses the analogy of a forest and trees: the forest represents social systems and the trees represent individuals. In this way, it becomes clear that one individual (one “tree) is not the same as a social system and thus systems cannot be defined just by individual action. People are always influenced by social systems and must interact with them but the systems cannot entirely predict or dictate how an individual acts.

One crucial social system in feminism like hooks describes is the patriarchy. In *Feminism is for Everybody,* hooks does not pause to spell out the definition of the patriarchy, but it is applied widely throughout the book to describe patterns/events/etc. as “patriarchal,” and it clearly refers to a social system in which male domination is the norm and sexist thinking is perpetuated. The concept of social systems becomes even more useful when hooks goes on to explain that women are able to promote and act upon patriarchal thinking, as well. From the beginning, this is clear when hooks states in the introduction that her mother was “the strongest patriarchal voice in [her] life” (xiv) when growing up.

Later on, hooks also points out how women can impose patriarchal shackles on themselves because they had been “socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see [themselves] as inferior to men” (14). Particularly because it is something that we can be socialized to comply with, the patriarchy is very different than simply a bunch of men who dominate women; instead, it is a social system that permeates our social living. While we can consciously choose to fight against the patriarchy, as feminism encourages us to, it is not a choice to be born into a culture in which we must interact in some way with this social system. Furthermore, because this system places men in a position of greater privilege, no matter how much anti-patriarchal action a man my take, he cannot entirely rid himself of that privilege because that privilege is not chosen by him but rather imposed upon him by a larger culture. A change in this culture would require a collective shift that an individual alone cannot accomplish.

There is an immense amount of intersections between basic sociological concepts and hooks’s description of feminism. The social system of the patriarchy is just one way that sociology is useful to understand what hooks is talking about. Note that it is not a coincidence that these intersections exist: sociology as a discipline also uses the term “the patriarchy” (Johnson does himself in *The Forest and the Trees)* and gender/feminist studies are under the umbrella of sociological studies. It is nearly impossible that hooks is not aware that she is utilizing these sociological concepts. I point out these intersections here not because they are unknown but because in this particular book they are not explicitly examined.

Another key idea that shapes what hooks is talking about is the social construction of reality. Johnson defines the social construction of reality as “the social process of interaction using language and other symbols through which people’s perceptions of what is considered to be real are constructed and shared” (179). Gender itself is a social construct, along with the other social divides that hooks refers to, like race and class. This is not to say that these concepts are not useful or that we do not make them “real” through our use of them and actions based on them. Skin color, for instance, is as real as any other type of pigmentation found in the world, but calling it a “race” is only symbolic and relies on social support of that idea.

The social construction described by sociology is another way to describe a key concept in phenomenology: that our conceptualizations of experiences are not inherent in the experiences themselves. A pre-theoretical experience exists and thus we are able to conceptualize about those pre-theoretical experiences in a multitude of ways. The ways in which sociology and phenomenology themselves describe similar things with different terms illustrates this concept. For example, a prominent phenomenologist, Husserl, describes something called “historicity,” which is the quality of being born into a world that already contains meaning and then having to interact with this pre-existing meaning. In sociological terms, this is very similar to being born into a world with pre-existing social constructs and already having to interact with unavoidable social systems (as described in Zahavi, 57-58). One could argue that in this case sociologists and phenomenologists are talking about a nearly identical pre-theoretical experience and pattern and then theorizing about it in different manners. Indeed, simply describing something with language requires a layer of conceptualization that is not inherent in the most basic interaction between the mind and the world.

To expand upon this idea, I would also assert that the ideas presented in *Feminism is for Everybody* are also only one way in which the experiences described could be conceptualized. Examples of this can be found in both academic and non-academic settings. In the academic realm, one conceptual difference between the forms of feminism presented in *Feminism is for Everybody* and other versions of feminism I have encountered in classes that discuss gender theory is whether gender is described as binary or on a spectrum. I understand why hooks uses binary (man/woman) words to describe those of different genders: she is attempting to deliver a message to the masses and our cultural conceptualization of gender in mainstream America is binary. However, non-binary gender identities do exist as social constructs as well and are useful to describe the multitude of ways in which people experience their gender identity. The discussion of gender-based experiences becomes more nuanced and focused on “masculine” in contrast to “feminine,” not just the experiences of people who identify as men in contrast to the experiences of those who identify as women, as these binary identities are not the only determinants of one’s gender-based experience (even before additional factors related to race and class are added into the mix).

Furthermore, it is also possible to talk about the injustices discussed within the context of feminism without the traditional sociological framework as we know it. In a non-academic blog post by Tada Hozumi titled “What quantum physics can tell us about activism: that change is messy,” the author begins by explaining that the fluid neurophysiological and trauma-informed lens that they often use does not seamlessly fit in with the systematic language that is so common within Western social justice discussions. The blog post goes on to discuss “the difference between somatic/energetic approaches and systemic approaches to racism, and think about how they layer on top of each other.” Hozumi does not denounce the validity of the systematic approach and goes on to explain: “The world is ‘both/and’, not ‘either/or’.” What follows is a chart that groups together several associated ideas that separate what they call a “systematic” versus a “somatic” approach to activism. For example, on the topic of experiences of oppression, the somatic side says “focus on the different ways through which we experience oppression as trauma (inclusive of intensity),” while the systematic side says “focus on intensities of oppression on a hierarchy.” The systematic approach in this case is illustrated by the feminist idea that, while men are negatively impacted by the patriarchy, women are oppressed more, and this assertion is not trauma-focused but rather focuses on who is dominating whom.

The blog post only scratches the surface of a broad issue that could be significantly expanded upon. My understanding of and interpretation of what Hozumi says is significantly influenced by my prior encounters with the concepts he discusses; they put into words something that I had already noticed and struggled with because my own worldview (partially unbeknownst to me) already included elements of the “trauma-informed” and somatic lens he mentions. On a personal level, it was useful to know that another way of looking at social justice (including feminism) could be valid and used in conjunction with the systematic approach. This is an example of the pre-theoretical experiences related to social injustices being theorized about in different ways.

The fact that hooks’s feminist theory is a conceptualization of the lifeworld instead of an exact and undeniable explanation of an inherent reality does not invalidate it. Similar to when phenomenology points out that science is not the only way to access reality but rather one of several perspectives and tools that can be used to examine and describe our world, so too can hooks’s description of feminism be regarded as a useful and legitimate tool. The important message is to remember that each framework must be able to reflect back on itself and see that our ideas about experiences are not the experiences themselves and that other conceptualizations can offer access to understanding and a kind of truth as well.

Works Cited

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