Research Proposal in Hashtag Feminism
Penelope Oseguera
CJ 601

Research question: Do intersectional feminist women participate in hashtag feminism at higher rates than they participate in more traditional feminist activities?

Hashtag feminism, defined by Mendes et al. (2018) as "using hashtags (the # symbol followed by a thematic word or phrase) to produce communities of conversation among disparate Twitter users" (237) has exploded in recent years as a form of feminist activism. Beginning with movements like #SafetyTipsforLadies (2013) and #BeenRapedNeverReported (2014), hashtag feminism has grown in popularity, culminating in the #MeToo Movement which first took hold in October 2017 and continues to be present in every day conversation.

#MeToo's development is a quintessential example of the impact that hashtag feminism can have, but it also raises important questions about voice and whose in particular will be heard. #MeToo was first conceptualized by Tarana Burke, a feminist of color, in 2007, but the hashtag did not take serious root until 10 years later when it was used by a white woman in reference to a powerful white man (Kaufman et al. 2019).

The amplification of white cisgender voices over all others has long been a problematic issue plaguing feminist theorizing (Shields 2008: 302-03). It is easy to focus on the promises of #MeToo and other hashtag feminism movements, but their true impact is difficult to measure if one assumes that the views expressed in these movements apply to all women from all walks of life. This may seem obvious, and yet much historical feminist theorizing has done just that—assume that all women are the same and the opinions expressed by those whose voices we hear are the opinions expressed or privately held by all.

The research proposed herein aims to better understand the extent to which and how feminists who occupy spaces at the intersection of two or more marginalized identities use

hashtag feminism. Specifically, the research aims to respond to the following question: do intersectional feminist women participate in hashtag feminism at higher rates than they participate in more traditional feminist activities, such as marching? The structure of the question allows us to compare intersectional feminist women's experiences across two forms of feminist activity rather than comparing intersectional feminist women to their white cisgender counterparts, which would run counter to the theoretical underpinnings of the intersectional perspective (Shields 2008). The research proposed seeks to gain a better understanding of the way that intersectional feminists use hashtag feminism—is it replacing traditional spaces for them, is it complementing traditional spaces for them, is it subsumed by traditional spaces for them, or is the relationship between hashtag feminism and more traditional feminist activism something more complex and difficult to express for intersectional feminists?

This research is important because historically, the voices of intersectional feminists have been white-and-hetero-washed by white feminists. Scholars and activists have expressed excitement about the possibilities of hashtag feminism to better represent the voices of intersectional feminists (Linder et al. 2016). It is important to determine whether this is actually the case or if hashtag feminism continues to marginalize intersectional voices; it is thus equally important that the data collected to either support or disprove this hypothesis comes from intersectional feminists themselves.

The proposed study will focus on two specific intersectional populations: feminist trans women and feminist women of color. The focus on trans women reflects the fact that trans women are categorically underrepresented in feminist studies of crime (Finckenauer and Schrock 2001). Further, virtual activism like hashtag feminism may be especially useful to vulnerable populations such as trans women, who experience physical violence at much higher rates than cis

women do (Human Rights Campaign). However, to mitigate the risk of strongly over-representing trans women in this study and mistakenly generalizing its results, women of color are also identified as an intersectional population to be studied. Indeed, an advantage of looking at different intersectional populations is to highlight and clarify to the reader that feminist issues and ways of being a feminist cannot be generalized to the whole population of women.

This proposal encompasses key criminological theories and sociological perspectives, including pluralist conflict theory, first explicated by Akers in 1985 (Akers et al. 2017), and intersectionality perspective. Pluralist conflict theory argues that criminality—what makes a particular behavior criminal—is normalized through conflict (and not consensus) among society's factions. The tension between the competing interests of different groups leads to the strongest groups having the power to decide what is criminal and who will be prosecuted or otherwise sanctioned for criminal behavior. The key feature of pluralist conflict that distinguishes it from other conflict theories is the idea that

> "Although some groups or alliances maintain considerable power over a period of time and on many issues, no singe group or interest is all-powerful. There are social, economic, and political elites that may have overlapping interests but do not constitute a monolithic, supreme class that perpetually gets its way in the law, economy, and society" (Akers et al. 213).

Pluralist conflict theory is strongly supported by hashtag feminist activities. As relates to sexual assault, the theory would argue that it is as pervasive as it is because it has been normalized by those in power, but also that these power dynamics are constantly in flux. While today it may be straight white men who have the most power to decide what is considered criminal, tomorrow it may be transgender married women, or gay young adults of color, or religious individuals in their 50s or any other combination of social identities. Hashtag feminism speaks directly to and supports that idea, that popular public opinion can be won at virtually any moment by any particular interest group. While the same core groups continue to dominate the overall trend in

the way sexual assault is perceived and sanctioned, these small victories in conflict for hashtag feminists may be signaling a shift towards a conception of sexual assault that is less forgiving of its perpetrators and less blaming of its victims. The ubiquity of these hashtag movements suggests that we are moving away from an understanding of sexual assault as a subjective problem to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis to an understanding that sexual assault objectively hurts our society at large. Hashtag feminism is a form of social sanctioning of individuals who otherwise get away with behavior that large (but relatively powerless) segments of the population may consider criminal.

This study is also rooted in intersectional perspective. Stephanie Shields (2008) describes intersectionality and its importance thus: "…feminist researchers have come to understand that the individual's social location as reflected in intersecting identities must be at the forefront in any investigation of gender" (301) and, indeed, at the forefront in any investigation in power. This is because, as Shields explains, "…an intersectional position may be disadvantaged relative to one group, but advantaged relative to another" (302). Intersectionality thus creates a hierarchy of social identities; Shields gives a succinct example of this in writing, "The White lesbian may be disadvantaged because of divergence from the heterosexual norm and standard, but relative to other lesbians she enjoys racial privilege" (302). As mentioned previously, the voices of intersectional feminists have long been cast aside in favor of those of white cisgender women, whose experiences are then generalized to all women despite the fact that what it means to be a woman is subjective and experienced in different ways for different intersectional populations. This study therefore aims to restore the voices of intersectional feminists, and especially of trans feminist women and feminist women of color. By centering their perspectives and retaining a focus on the experiences of these marginalized women, this study seeks to gain a deeper

understanding of the complexities of hashtag feminism and its efficacy for intersectional feminists.

Two of the earliest hashtag feminisms are #SafetyTipsforLadies (Rentschler 2015) and #BeenRapedNeverReported (Keller et al. 2016), mentioned above. The success in spreading these early exemplars energized feminists and motivated them to continue growing this online movement that served as a space to speak and to listen to personal experiences with sexual violence. #SafetyTipsForLadies and #BeenRapedNeverReported, along with other movements like #YesAllWomen (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer 2016) opened the floodgates of hashtag feminism and set the stage for #MeToo, the biggest hashtag feminist movement to date with more than 53,000 responses in the first 24 hours alone (Kaufman et al. 2019). #MeToo appealed to a broad range of feminists and produced "clear, tangible outcomes" that "evidence[d] that online activism can impact people's daily lives and inform their interests and opinions" (Oseguera 2019: 3). Since then, some scholars (Linder et al. 2016; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer 2016; McCauley et al. 2018) have focused their attention increasingly on how hashtag feminism affects intersectional feminists in particular, paralleling the general trend throughout history of feminist scholars first lending the most weight to the voices of white women and then expanding their theoretical lens to include women at the intersections of marginalized identities. This important work needs to be expanded by further studies addressing the question of hashtag feminism from an intersectional perspective.

To better understand hashtag feminism and its use by intersectional feminists, I am proposing a self-report survey. It will be administered to a sample of students at San Diego State University enrolled in lower-division, general education sociology courses. Because information will be collected directly from human subjects, I will need to obtain approval from the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) at San Diego State University prior to finalizing the research design and implementation. This proposal, along with a detailed consideration of confidentiality for participants and the establishment of the voluntary nature of this survey, will be submitted to the IRB for approval. Once received, I will make any necessary adjustments to the study design based on the recommendations of the IRB before proceeding with implementation.

I will incorporate a pretest of the survey instrument prior to implementing the actual survey. As Rea and Parker (2014) explain, pretests of survey instruments are important because "During the course of the pretest, poorly worded questions will be identified and the overall quality of the survey instrument refined. Based on the experience of the pretest, the questionnaire will be fine-tuned for use in the actual survey process" (31). The survey will be pretested by undergraduate students at San Diego State University who have declared a sociology major and are currently enrolled in upper division courses, which will help eliminate biases and errors made in the formulation of survey questions and will help ensure the study is valid.

My sample will consist of all students enrolled in lower division courses in sociology that meet general education requirements at San Diego State University in Fall 2020. There are three such courses: Sociology (SOC) 101, SOC 102, and SOC 201. This sample was selected for multiple reasons. First, it is important to ensure the survey is not conducted with a sample that is significantly more or less likely to engage in virtual socialization; consequently, we must avoid sampling from groups such as Twitter users, homeless individuals, and/or other groups that are comprised of either extremely high or extremely low users of digital communications. Similarly, it is important to ensure the survey is not conducted with a sample that is significantly more or less likely to engage in activism in general and feminist activism more specifically. Hopefully focusing on students who are enrolled in sociology courses who may or may not be taking the

course to fulfill general education requirements will provide a good mix of social warriors and conformists. Finally, working with the sociology department at San Diego State University is a natural choice because this study aims to better understand a social phenomenon that most sociologists are interested in. This will increase the buy-in from professors encouraging their students to complete the survey and from the students more generally, who theoretically should have a deeper understanding of the importance of this kind of research than individuals who have no background in sociology. Additionally, working specifically with students at San Diego State University (as opposed to students at a different university) affords my study institutional credibility; as Rea and Parker (2014) elaborate, "A great deal of credibility can be gained for the study if the sponsor…in some way represents the respondent" (39). The goal is to have as many students respond to the survey as possible. Survey Anyplace published a blog post earlier this year estimating the response rate for all survey methods at 33% (Lindemann 2019); having the survey be conducted by a San Diego State student among San Diego State students with buy-in from San Diego State professors should increase this response rate.

The survey will be conducted confidentially, as any study collecting any private information is confidential and not anonymous (Moe 2017). After obtaining permission and buy-in from the professor, a brief introduction to the study and its goals will be provided to students in class, as well as an explanation of measures used to protect confidentiality. Following this introduction, a survey will be handed out to and then collected from all students whether they complete the survey or not. This will help to reduce the opportunity for breaches in confidentiality. The survey will be disseminated to all students and not just women to reduce the risk of accidentally excluding feminist women who present as gender-non-conforming or as men. Participation is voluntary, an idea that will be repeated to the students for clarity and

understanding. The survey will not collect personally identifying demographic information, such as name, major and the class in which the survey was conducted, but will collect the following demographic information:

- Age
- Race/Ethnicity
- Gender Identity

- Sexual Orientation
- Socioeconomic Status

Additionally, questions will be asked to assess a participant's identification with feminism as well as their habits and activities regarding feminist activism. All questions will be closed-ended for ease of data coding, manipulation and analysis. Those questions pertaining to a participant's identification with feminism and their feminist habits and activities will have responses in the form of a Likert scale from one to five.

Because the survey will potentially be distributed to students whose responses are not relevant to the goals of this study, the survey will open with two screening questions (Rea and Parker 2004). This should reduce the risk of receiving completed surveys from individuals whose data does not apply to the study, an issue that could be especially problematic if the individual fills out the survey incorrectly with data that indicates they are an intersectional feminist when they are not. These screening questions will be:

1. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Non-binary
   d. Unsure
   e. Decline to state
2. Are you a feminist?
   For the purpose of this study, a feminist is defined as an individual of any gender who seeks equity among all genders.
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Unsure
   d. Decline to state

These two questions should hopefully limit the chance of collecting and reporting on inaccurate data.

For confidentiality purposes, data will be stored on an encrypted hard drive and only available in its raw form to the researcher.

This survey should be disseminated within the first two weeks of the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester depending on professor availability to participate. The advantage of doing so is that students' perceptions of themselves and social justice may evolve over the course of the semester as the student learns more about sociology and their values in relation to the subject. The data I want to collect is an unconscious reflection of student feminist activity before higher education potentially begins to distort an individual's perception of that activity.

Distribution of the survey and collection of the results will work as follows:

1. After obtaining permission from the professor, I will attend a class of their choosing that works with their schedule and syllabus.

2. The professor will allot 20 minutes to me to explain the purpose of the survey, distribute it, and collect responses.

3. I will collect and code responses ensuring careful adherence to all confidentiality considerations.

I will not code or keep responses that indicate the respondent identifies as a man or that indicate the respondent is not a feminist. However, I will keep all data for white feminist women and for intersectional feminist women. Of these responses, I will cull the following:

- Responses from feminist women of color

- Responses from feminist transgender women

- Responses from white feminist women

The responses from white feminist women will help to situate and understand the degree of participation from intersectional feminists at the most basic level of comparison.

The survey design and analysis proposed have several key advantages. One is that in-person surveys have a much higher rate of participation and completion than do telephone or web-based surveys (Lindemann 2019). I will further ensure that I secure this increased rate of participation by working directly with professors in San Diego State University's sociology department to distribute the survey to their students. As mentioned before, the organizational credibility that comes with this is an important advantage in convincing students to complete a survey. Another advantage is the relatively low cost of conducting this research (Rea and Parker 2014). The access afforded by being a student of San Diego State coupled with investments of my personal time and participation by sociology professors should keep costs to a minimum.

There are also several key disadvantages to take into account. One of these is the limit to which the data collected will be generalizable. I believe that targeting college undergraduates for this study in the manner that I have proposed helps to ensure a more representative sample than I would be able to obtain through sampling Twitter users (who are potentially especially high users of hashtag feminisms) or Women's marchers (who are potentially especially low users of hashtag feminisms), but there is still a whole array of intersectional feminist experiences that will not be represented in this study. Two prominent examples are feminist women with lower educational backgrounds and older feminist women. Additional studies should be conducted that specifically reach these and other marginalized populations and clarify their relationship to hashtag feminism. Further, the format of this study does not allow for in-depth responses or clarifications from participants. Because the study should be easy to code and analyze, I will refrain from incorporating open-ended questions. At the same time, this format does not allow

participants to explain further, to expand on why they made a certain choice, or to give a more unique perspective on their perception of hashtag feminism. This is an especially important limitation to keep in mind as one approaches this issue from an intersectional point of view, which values the uniqueness of the individual experience at the intersection of marginalized identities (Shields 2008: 301).

If the idea that intersectional feminists do participate in hashtag feminism at higher rates than they participate in traditional feminist activism is supported upon completion of this study, then we can say that intersectional feminists perceive hashtag feminism as more effective than traditional forms of feminist activism. *Why* this is the case would still need to be explored, but some policy implications may still be proposed. One of these would be the continued expansion of online spaces for feminists to discuss issues. It is important to state, as Bailey at el. (2019) articulate, that

> "…not all feminist hashtags reach, or are intended for, a general audience; women of color, queer, and trans women in particular have built rather insular — at least at first — hashtag communities and debates. Yet the public nature of Twitter means that these subaltern conversations can and do become the focus of public observation and comment, sometimes being appropriated or misrepresented along the way" (6).

To avoid the risk of having Twitter or any online platform become a safe space for straight white cisgender women only, the private platforms and spaces of intersectional feminists must be respected, whether online or in person. At the same time, encouraging participation in hashtag feminism for all while using the appropriate channels and mediums will be crucial to expanding this movement and continuing to disrupt the patriarchal status quo.

If this is not the case, then efforts must be made to understand why intersectional feminists are once again being left out of and/or choosing not to participate in feminist organizing. In order to form a more perfect feminism, we the scholars must identify safe spaces where a broader range of voices can contribute.

Works Cited

Akers, Ronald L., et al. *Criminological Theories: Introduction, Evaluation, and Application*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Barker-Plummer, Bernadette, and Dave Barker-Plummer. "#YesAllWomen, Digital Feminisms, and New Dynamics of Social Change." *International Communication Association Conference*, 2016, www.researchgate.net/publication/298352469_YesAllWomen_Digital_Feminisms_and_New_Dynamics_of_Social_Change.

Finckenauer, James O., and Jennifer L. Schrock. "Report from the Rapporteur." European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, Affiliate with the United Nations (HEUNI), *Women in the Criminal Justice System: International Examples & National Responses*, Edited by Natalia Ollus and Sami Nevala, 2001.

Human Rights Campaign. "Sexual Assault and the LGBTQ Community." *Human Rights Campaign*, www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community.

Kaufman, Michelle R., et al. "#MeToo and Google Inquiries Into Sexual Violence: A Hashtag Campaign Can Sustain Information Seeking." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2019, p. 1–11., doi:10.1177/0886260519868197.

Keller, Jessalynn, et al. "Speaking 'Unspeakable Things': Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016, pp. 22–36., doi:10.1080/09589236.2016.1211511.

Lindemann, Nigel. "What's the Average Survey Response Rate? [2019 Benchmark]." *Survey Anyplace*, published 8 August 2019, surveyanyplace.com/average-survey-response-rate/.

Mccauley, Heather L., et al. "#MaybeHeDoesntHitYou: Social Media Underscore the Realities of Intimate Partner Violence." *Journal of Women's Health*, vol. 27, no. 7, 2018, pp. 885–891., doi:10.1089/jwh.2017.6560.

Mendes, Kaitlynn, et al. "#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2018, pp. 236–246., doi:10.1177/1350506818765318.

Moe, Rolin 2017, *Academic Research Foundations: Quantitative*. Video recording, LinkedIn Learning, LinkedInLearning, viewed 4 December 2019, www.linkedin.com/learning/academic-research-foundations-quantitative/next-steps.

Rea, Louis M., and Richard A. Parker. *Designing and Conducting Survey Research: a Comprehensive Guide.* Jossey-Bass, 2014.

Rentschler, Carrie A. "#Safetytipsforladies: Feminist Twitter Takedowns of Victim Blaming." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2015, pp. 353–356., doi:10.1080/14680777.2015.1008749.

Shields, Stephanie A. "Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective." *Sex Roles*, vol. 59, no. 5-6, 2008, pp. 301–311., doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8.