

# 4 Beyond Victim or Survivor: Sexual Violence, Identity and Feminist Theory and Practice

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In this chapter we examine recent debates about the meaning of sexual victimization. These struggles have implications for feminist praxis; for theory, research and practice. We explore several locations from which challenges to previous feminist re-definitions emerge; specifically, recent popularist publications which use, in a pejorative tone, the term 'victim' or 'victimhood' feminism and academic contestation of prevalence research. In the second half of the paper we connect these themes with a discussion of what we call 'the victim/survivor dichotomy', which represents another element in debates about the extent and meaning of sexual victimization.

Our concerns centre on the consequences of these developments for how feminism is understood and, within this, how sexual violence is explained, researched and responded to. The core of our argument is that there is a complex struggle occurring over the meaning of victimization. This struggle has multiple sites and locations; it is the combination of what, on one level, are disparate unconnected events, but which on another level act as reinforcers of one another. This chapter draws out analytically links between these developments, but we are not suggesting that they are part of a conspiratorial 'backlash'<sup>1</sup> against feminism. In order to develop these themes we have explored changes within feminism, and suggest an *additional way of classifying feminism*.

A central principle of feminism, particularly well-illustrated in work on sexual violence, has been to address the politics of naming. Creating and giving meaning to language in order to document the reality of women's lives has been a constant theme within feminist praxis (Raymond, 1986; Kelly, 1988; Stanley, 1990). Deborah Cameron has analysed the power of language as definer of reality; both setting limits

and opening possibilities of what it is possible to think and say (Cameron, 1985). It is this awareness of the power of meaning which makes 'discourse' such a useful concept within much contemporary feminist theory. It contains a recognition of the material consequences of ideas, that they play a key part in constructing what counts as 'real'; alongside an explicit acknowledgement of the power inherent in what become 'dominant' discourses. It is through naming various forms of victimization, and extending the limited definitions encoded in the law, medicine and research that feminist work has challenged dominant discourses on sexual violence. The resistance to feminist re-definitions and perspectives we explore in this paper are also not just 'ideas'. They are powerful ideas with a range of potential and actual consequences, not least being the possibility of re-working and re-instating pre-feminist meanings and definitions. We draw attention to these consequences for sexual politics, and in the final section for individual subjective identities.

#### RE-DEFINING FEMINISM

The emergence and popularity of a woman academic who has been constructed as, and represented herself as being, both the saviour of, and at the same time the most potent challenge to, contemporary feminism (Camile Paglia),<sup>2</sup> demands serious critical reflection.

The traditional distinctions between liberal, socialist and radical feminism, provide little purchase on this recent history. Neither do identity-based categories of, for example, Black or lesbian feminism. However, each has continued relevance in the ongoing history of the movements for women's liberation. In musing on what distinctions would enable a 'sense-making' of changing times we propose a different way of looking at feminist activity. The categories outlined below refer to the locations and purposes of forms of activity which currently constitute feminism in Western countries. They are neither mutually exclusive of one another (individual women can work in more than one location, although some combinations are more difficult and potentially contradictory than others), nor do we intend them as alternatives to previous distinctions.