The rhetorical practice of consciousness-raising has changed since communication theorists first began to apply its functions and style, as a small group, face-to-face practice, in the early 1970s. In this essay, we argue that in feminist activism and theory, the practice of consciousness-raising has evolved in response to shifting cultural conditions. Our examination of consciousness-raising rhetoric produced by self-labeled “third wave” feminists reveals how contemporary social contexts have generated different rhetorical problems and discursive responses for feminists. Specifically, we show how third wave feminist consciousness-raising instills a critical perspective that focuses on personal and social injustices. We argue that these rhetorical responses raise consciousness in the public sphere, through mass media, popular culture, and college classrooms, fostering both public and private dialogue about gender inequities that aims at self-persuasion.

KEY WORDS: consciousness-raising, third wave feminism, feminist rhetorical theory, social movement rhetoric

“Third wave” feminism is a phrase commonly used among feminist scholars today to distinguish among earlier periods of feminist activism. As an emerging feminist movement, the third wave is still in the process of defining itself and acknowledges that it is both similar to and different from previous waves of feminist thought and activity. For example, consciousness-raising, a rhetorical strategy utilized extensively by feminists in the 1970s to give voice to women’s experiences, remains an important part of developing feminist awareness today. For many feminists and other social critics, consciousness-raising is central to the process of creating a critical awareness of our culture. Although some studies have addressed the rhetorical functions of consciousness-raising, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the process of consciousness-raising has evolved and been adapted by contemporary feminists.

Kathie Sarachild is credited with developing feminist consciousness-raising as a small group process in the early 1970s (Rosen, 2000). Although “second wave” feminists did not invent consciousness-raising, it was a rhetorical strategy that they deliberately cultivated to enable women to share personal experiences of gender discrimination in conversations and meetings designed specifically for these purposes. Sarachild’s (1970) original conception of consciousness-raising entailed women who met in small groups to share their experiences through personal testimony in order to relate to one another and generalize experiences. Consciousness-raising, although conducted in these informal groups, included organizers who encouraged each woman to contribute her own experiences. The groups then discussed forms of resisting oppression, actions, and organizing new consciousness-raising groups (Sarachild, 1970). The Redstockings Collective (1970) argued that this process was a way to unite women so that they could understand that their individual experiences were not...
isolated events and to eliminate self-blame. Kamen describes second wave consciousness-raising as a process where women "learned to ask new questions about themselves, built self-esteem and a sense of entitlement to opportunity, gave names to their common experiences and discovered that they were not alone. Consciousness-raising was a foundation for change." (1991, p. 4). Consciousness-raising for women was rooted in recognizing personal oppression (Sarachild, 1970; Rosen, 2000).

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's 1973 groundbreaking article, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," describes a consciousness-raising process designed to address affirmation "of the affective, of the validity of personal experience, of the necessity for self-exposure and self-criticism, of the value of dialogue, and of the goal of autonomous, individual decision making" (1973, p. 79). Although consciousness-raising usually occurred in small groups, other forms of sharing individual experiences such as essays, articles, and lectures also contributed to the process of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising allowed women to bridge their separation or address the fact that their lives were often under the control of their husbands, fathers, or male employers (Campbell, 1973). Women often had negative self-images, in part because of their lack of voice and subordination to men (Campbell, 1973). Furthermore, Campbell contends "Because oppressed groups tend to develop passive personality traits, consciousness-raising is an attractive communication style to people working for social change" (1989, p. 13).

In most accounts, the rhetorical strategy of consciousness-raising has been defined as a small group process. For instance, Cheseboro, Cragan, and McCullough define consciousness-raising as "a personal, face-to-face interaction which appears to create new psychological orientations for those involved in the process. . . . the personal face-to-face interaction technique is selected because it is consistent with the radical revolutionary's belief that shared personal experience should generate political theory and action" (1973, pp. 136-137). They explain that the process of consciousness-raising results in a group identity where "members often perceive other group members as 'sisters' and 'brothers' of a new 'cultural family' and 'community'" (Cheseboro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1973, p. 137). This group identity for feminists is often referred to as sisterhood. The concept of sisterhood, however, is not without its flaws. Campbell observes that the notion of sisterhood has not appealed to all women, and has "proved false for many and has been attacked by those who felt excluded from much of its talk, action, and organization" (1999, p. 141).

In this essay, we argue that third wave feminist consciousness-raising has evolved in style, substance, and function in comparison to previous conceptions of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising experiences and practices have been called the foundation for social activism and movements (Cheseboro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1973; Gring-Pemble, 1998). Examining how consciousness-raising as a rhetorical option has changed is important for understanding how individuals develop a critical consciousness in contemporary contexts. This study of the evolution of consciousness-raising offers new insight into the process of social awareness and how individuals acquire and enact critical perspectives. Our research centers on the rhetoric of third wave feminists and seeks to expand communication scholars' understanding of the rhetorical function and stylistic elements of contemporary feminist consciousness-raising.

While third wave feminism continues to be an ambiguous concept, it can be generally understood as an area of emerging feminist thought, often embraced by young women and men, that is informed by predecessor feminisms as well as changing
cultural conditions and expectations. Heywood and Drake (1997) argue that, for them, third wave feminism is “a generational perspective, gathering the voices of young activists struggling to come to terms with the historical specificity of our feminisms and with the times in which we came of age (the late 1970s through the late 1980s)” (p. 2). Heywood and Drake also explain that third wave feminism is concerned with:

the development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of a coalition politics based on these understandings—understandings that acknowledge the existence of oppression, even though it is not fashionable to say so. (1997, p. 3)

Dicker and Piepmeier further illustrate what third wave feminism means to them: “We argue that the third wave has less to do with a neat generational divide than with a cultural context: the third wave consists of those of us who have developed our sense of identity in a world shaped by technology, global capitalism, multiple models of sexuality, changing national demographics, and declining economic vitality” (2003, p. 14).

To illustrate the process of third wave consciousness-raising, we examine the rhetoric of third wave feminist discourse. For our purposes here, we have selected excerpts from six influential feminist works. The first text, Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future (2000), was written by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards. The other five sources that we have used are collections of personal essays and critical reflections on third wave feminism. These anthologies include: To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995) edited by Rebecca Walker, Men Doing Feminism (1998) edited by Tom Digby, Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation, New Expanded Edition (2001) edited by Barbara Findlen, Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism (2002) edited by Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman, and Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century (2003) edited by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier. These texts represent an emerging genre of feminist thinking in which the writers identify themselves as third wave feminists or as members of a new generation of feminist thinkers. Furthermore, these texts are commonly recognized as constitutive of third wave feminist thinking. These works were also selected because their writers employ a number of different consciousness-raising approaches and represent the ideas of a diverse group of women and men about the nature, scope, and functions of feminism in the twenty-first century.

As the rhetorical problems surrounding feminism have shifted over the last forty years, feminists have adapted the process of consciousness-raising to address the current rhetorical situation more adequately. Our study of the rhetoric of third wave consciousness-raising begins with a discussion of how third wave feminists define their version of feminism. We then proceed with our examination in two sections: 1) the rhetorical problem and cultural context for third wave feminists and 2) the evolution of consciousness-raising as a response to current rhetorical exigencies. Specifically, we aim to show how third wave feminist consciousness-raising instills a critical perspective that focuses on personal and social injustices. We argue that these rhetorical responses function as consciousness-raising in the public sphere, through mass media, popular culture, and college classrooms, fostering both public and private dialogue about gender inequities and aiming at self-persuasion. We conclude that this rhetoric seeks to increase understanding and to embrace diverse feminist perspectives. Thus, from a communication perspective it provides a new framework in which to understand the rhetorical functions of consciousness-raising.
FEMINISM IN TRANSITION

Third wave feminists are in the process of creating a body of work that speaks to a new generation of feminists. Third wave feminists have benefited substantially from the work of their feminist predecessors, but these successes have also created a high level of expectation. Astrid Henry, in *Catching a Wave*, explains how young women today seem to have a more tenuous relationship with feminism:

To understand feminism as something we inherit rather than create on our own has significant consequences for the ways in which we take on the cause of feminism and identify ourselves as feminists. Because women of my generation often do not experience feminism as a process—that is, as something we actively choose or help to create—we have a much more ambivalent identification with it. Even for those of us who see ourselves as aligned with second wave feminism, our sense of “owning” feminism can still feel tenuous. We own feminism in the sense that it is our birthright, yet in other ways it is not ours. It belongs to another generation, another group of women: second wave feminists. They were the ones who went through the heady experience of *creating* feminism; we just get to reap the benefits. (2003, p. 219–20 italics in original)

Third wave feminism, then, can be understood as an attempt by emerging feminists to make the movement their own. However, there appears to be no universal consensus about how that should happen.

Third wave feminism is an ambiguous and amorphous concept, likely because as an emerging movement, it has yet to develop any sense of collective identity (Renegar & Sowards, 2003). Third wave feminist texts demonstrate the wide experiences that both unite and divide young women and men. Although some third wave feminists actively attempt to distance themselves from previous feminist waves, it is more often the case that third wave feminists see themselves as building on the legacy of feminism (Findlen, 2001). Dicker and Piepmeier explain that,

“Typically, the third wave is thought of as a younger generation’s feminism, one that rejects traditional— or stereotypical— understandings of feminism and as such is antithetical or oppositional to its supposed predecessor, the second wave. The feminism we claim, however, aligns itself with second wave strategies for recognizing and addressing structural inequalities” (2003, p. 5).

In fact, many third wave feminists do not define their ideology as a distinct, new brand of feminism, but rather, they acknowledge their indebtedness and connections to second wave thinking. Roxanne Harde observes “I think you would be hard-pressed to find any idea among third wave thinkers that is wholly unique and distinct from the second wave” (in Harde & Harde, 2003, p. 124). Third wave feminists, then, draw on the experiences of their predecessors and then adapt their rhetorical strategies to new situations and cultural contexts.

RHETORICAL PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES IN CONTEMPORARY CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Consciousness-raising was initiated by many second wave feminist groups as a way to address women’s negative self-concepts, divisions between women, and counter-persuasive social forces, such as fathers and husbands resistant to ideas of feminism and women’s rights (Campbell, 1973, 1999). For third wave feminists today, the rhetorical obstacles of second wave feminist consciousness-raising still exist, but many young feminists have a different sense of self-concept, are no longer divided significantly from other women, and have more supportive feminist-minded women and men in their lives. The rhetorical problem for third wave feminists, then, is how
to address the cultural context of a society that has afforded young women new opportunities, but at the same time, created new barriers. Some of the rhetorical obstacles that third wave feminists encounter in consciousness-raising include a perception that feminist successes have rectified most, if not all, gender inequities, a lack of recognition of contemporary and covert gender inequities, feminist backlash and negative stereotypes of feminism, and a historical understanding of feminism as an exclusive movement. These barriers mean that feminist rhetoric has to address and prove that gender inequities still exist, refute stereotypes and feminist backlash, and create greater identification among those who call themselves feminists.

Legal and political changes have created a different cultural context for feminist thinking and activism. Legal changes, such as the legalization of abortion, more effective birth control methods, laws against sexual harassment and workplace discrimination, and Title IX have created greater protections for women (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Rosen, 2000). Children are raised with a sense of entitlement and empowerment because of legal, economic, political, and social protections and changing attitudes that are both different and similar to women who were raised before second wave feminist thought was widespread. For example, Whitney Walker, in Listen Up, explains that she was raised in an atmosphere of equality: "I was raised on feminist children's books like Free to Be... You and Me, and I knew boys weren't better than girls. I also refused to believe they were stronger. When bullies picked on me or my friends, I hit them in the knees with my Holly Hobby lunch pail and that was that" (2001, p. 127). In numerous accounts, third wave feminists note that they grew up exposed to feminist ideas and actions, but came to realize later in their lives that gender inequities still persisted (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Findlen, 1995). The pervasive rhetoric of equality that these contemporary feminists encountered growing up means that consciousness-raising rhetoric has to address how and why gender inequities continue, a theme that third wave feminists expound on continually in their work.

Gender discrimination and exclusion have, in many cases, become more difficult to recognize, especially because of this unquestioned belief in the success of the women's movement and the presence of gender equality. The failure to realize that not everyone has this same set of assumptions about equality may leave some people ill-equipped to deal with discrimination when confronted with it. Ellen Neuborne, in Listen Up, illustrates how her feminist upbringing left her unable to recognize or address forms of gender inequity that she had been programmed to ignore:

I am a daughter of the movement. How did I fall for this? I thought the battle had been won. I thought that sexism was a remote experience, like the Depression. Gloria had taken care of all that in the seventies. Imagine my surprise. And while I was blissfully unaware, the perpetrators were getting smarter. What my mother taught me to look for--pats on the butt, honey, sweetie, cupcake, make me some coffee--are not the methods of choice for today's sexists. Those were just the fringes of what they were really up to. Sadly, enough of them have figured out how to mouth the words of equality while still behaving like pigs. They're harder to spot. (2001, p. 183)

These more subtle forms of discrimination lure some people into thinking that there is no longer a need for feminism or feminist consciousness-raising. This masking ultimately undermines a collective understanding of discrimination at all levels.

The successes of feminism have also led some people to conclude that feminism is no longer necessary. For example, in a 1998 survey, 48% of women surveyed answered that feminism is relevant to most women, but only 28% of women answered that feminism today is relevant to them personally (Bellafante, 1998). Furthermore,
media portrayals have led women to regard feminists negatively. In the same 1998 survey, only 32% of women answered that they view feminists favorably, while 43% answered that they had an unfavorable impression (Bellafante, 1998). This negative perception appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon since earlier surveys do not reflect the same level of disdain. For instance, a 1986 *Newsweek* survey indicated that, “56 percent of women consider themselves feminists; 71 percent say that the movement has improved their lives; only 4 percent describe themselves as antifeminist” (in Rosen, 2000, p. xxxiii). Although these surveys are only limited samples of the population, the difference in women’s perceptions about feminism between 1986 and 1998 is alarmingly clear. The backlash and perpetuation of stereotypes of feminists undoubtedly contribute to this contrast.

Perhaps the most prominent negative stereotypes of feminists are based on physical appearance and radical personas (Bowleg, 2001; Chernik, 2001). Societal stereotypes cast feminists as hairy, man-hating, lesbian, ugly, radical, and bra-burning, despite that such characteristics may challenge normative thinking. Erica Gilbert-Levin, in *Listen Up*, explains her experiences with publicly declaring herself a feminist, “Students joked about it during classes, calling me a man-hater and warning that radical, hairy-legged feminists were going to take over the school and make all the boys their slaves” (p. 169). Although these stereotypes are not new (Dow, 1999), contemporary feminists must grapple with the fact that these stereotypes have been prevalent for so long that they have become the standard conception of feminists. Additionally, ad hominem attacks, red herrings, and hyperbole such as the media caricature of the “feminazi” construct a rhetorical barrier for consciousness-raising in contemporary American society (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Consciousness-raising as a rhetorical strategy must address these images in order to build a space where audiences are willing to try out feminism as an ideological construct. As Barbara Findlen, the editor of the *Listen Up* anthology, observes, third wave feminists are aware of this rhetorical need to address these stereotypes: “Some young women do fear the feminist label, largely because of the stereotypes and distortions that still abound. If something or someone is appealing, fun or popular, it or she can’t be feminist. Feminists are often assumed to be strident, man-hating, unattractive—and lesbian” (2001, p. xv).

Another rhetorical problem that third wave feminists address in their consciousness-raising efforts concerns the perceived exclusivity in second wave feminism. Second wave feminism has been critiqued as a predominately white, middle-class phenomenon that failed to speak to the experiences of women of color, the working class, and other marginalized individuals (Moraga & Anzuldua, 1983). Third wave feminist texts such as *To Be Real, Listen Up*, and *Colonize This!* focus on diversity as a primary issue, often observing how feminism has failed to include women of color and other diverse aspects of women. For example, Paula Austin explains her perception of what feminism has meant and why she has felt excluded: “I have felt left out of feminism mostly because it leaves out women who looked like my mother—traditionally feminine, of color, poor, powerful despite the impacts of oppression on her psyche. It leaves no room for women who find their power through a perceived powerlessness” (2002, p. 167). In a similar vein, Susan Muaddi Darraj explains how her experiences with second wave feminism created a sense of exclusion:

I realized then that most of the women in the class were upper-middle and middle-class white women—and I felt like a complete outsider. Perhaps they could understand Friedan because her brand of feminism spoke directly to their experience. But it didn’t speak to mine. I didn’t view
housework as a mark of oppression. There was a certain sense of pride placed on a clean, welcoming home, and both my parents had always placed value on it. (2002, p. 296)

Although there is certainly debate about how second wave feminism excluded some and included others (e.g., Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983), these writers demonstrate that how they learn about feminism and their sense of cultural memory is marked by this sense of exclusion.

These rhetorical obstacles, in many ways, are similar to those that second wave feminists faced; they undoubtedly encountered negative stereotypes, backlash, and a variety of other obstacles. However, these rhetorical exigencies in conjunction with changes in contemporary society, work together to create a set of rhetorical problems that are different than what previous feminists encountered. The evolution of these rhetorical problems over time demands a rhetorical response that is adapted to this contemporary situation. The rhetorical features of traditional small-group consciousness raising were designed to overcome a distinct set of barriers, and as these barriers have evolved so must the consciousness-raising designed to address them.

RHETORICAL RESPONSES: FEATURES OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING IN THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

Third wave feminist consciousness-raising draws heavily from the practice of consciousness-raising developed during the second wave. Campbell (1973) argues that the stylistic features of second wave consciousness-raising are the result of strategic adaptation to an acute rhetorical problem. She claims that consciousness-raising is “characterized by rhetorical interactions that emphasize affective proofs and personal testimony, participation and dialogue, self-revelation and self-criticism, the goal of autonomous decision making through self-persuasion, and the strategic use of techniques for ‘violating the reality structure’” (1973, p. 83). These features persist in third wave consciousness-raising, but additional features have become apparent as feminists adapt their rhetorical responses to a changing set of problems and cultural conditions. In this section, we illustrate the rhetorical features, both stylistic and substantive, of third wave consciousness-raising which include sharing personal stories in public venues like books and magazines, sharing experiences and reading feminist theory in classrooms, consuming popular culture, exploring issues of diversity and new audiences, and creating new options for self-expression.

PERSONAL STORIES

In the 1970s, personal testimony in small groups was a key feature of second wave consciousness-raising since it allowed women to recognize the connected nature of their personal experiences (Campbell, 1973). Although third wave feminists tend not to utilize the small group format for consciousness-raising, personal stories continue to play an important role in helping people recognize that their experiences of oppression or discrimination are not isolated. In the third wave, these stories are still very much a part of consciousness-raising, except that these personal stories tend to appear in public venues like anthologies, books, and feminist magazines such as Bitch and Bust. Furthermore, these stories function as a major rhetorical component of consciousness-raising due to the diversity of texts available. Women may engage in consciousness-raising with their female friends and colleagues, but these books allow their readers to engage with a number of ideas they may not encounter in their personal or profes-
sional lives. For example, third wave feminist anthologies contain a number of stories about issues such as relationships with one’s mother or father (Austin, 2002; Lantigua, 2002; Sayeed, 2002), first experiences with sex (R. Walker, 2001), the reflections of a feminist fitness instructor (Valdés, 2001), testing positive for HIV (Luna, 2002; Tiger, 2001), generational differences within families (Shah, 2001), being a feminist super model (Webb & Walker, 1995), having an abortion (Muscio, 2001; Tumang, 2002), and choosing to become a parent (Crews, 1991).

These stories rely heavily on personal experience that often center on a moment when the writers needed feminism, when they came to a feminist consciousness, or when they were able to overcome some personal obstacle. For example, Aisha Hakim-Dyce shares her decision to become a seminude go-go dancer:

I had never thought that my underemployed status would lead me to seriously consider a stint that would require me to shake my breasts and gyrate my hips to the catcalls, whistles, and sexually explicit suggestions of men. I believed that my identity as a politically astute and active woman would somehow protect me from exploitative situations, that having a politically correct worldview would somehow translate into tangible economic benefits. Reality check, anyone? ... The more depressed I became because of my economic situation, the less manipulative such work seemed. After all, I began to reason, if silly men want to give away their money in order to watch my breasts and hips jiggle, why not? (2001, p. 119-120)

This story illustrates how personal testimony can connect the lives of individuals who share the same set of circumstances or reveal personal thoughts and secretive moments to others. Similar stories allow readers to explore diverse feminist perspectives that may not be available to them within their immediate circle of friends and family.

These stories often function as a cathartic mechanism for the writers who can share the private thoughts that may have caused them anguish and agony in the course of determining how to resist oppression, objectification, and exclusion. These stories also function to expose their readers to new ideas and situations and raise consciousness about the diversity of women’s experiences in the world. These stories and personal narratives are similar to those in earlier feminist anthologies, such as This Bridge Called My Back, but focus on contemporary experiences of life for young women in the 21st century. As Angela Davis (1995) explains in the afterward of To Be Real, “in seeking to dismantle this status quo and break free of its strictures, many of these writers attempt to work through their often complex relationships with the notion of social activism as responsibility by recalling embarrassing childhood experiences with radical mothers, or by rejecting the concept of “political correctness,” which so often is assumed to be an activist posture” (p. 281). Sharing personal stories, then, becomes an avenue of consciousness-raising not only for the audience, but also for the individuals who share their personal experiences of oppression and discrimination.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING IN THE CLASSROOM

For third wave feminists, private sphere consciousness-raising may include unorganized and informal conversations that take place among family, friends, and colleagues. However, consciousness-raising is not limited to the private sphere and is now much more likely to be a public experience. For example, women’s studies classes and other classes that include feminist components are responsible for creating a generation well-versed in feminist theory, ideas, and activism. Third wave feminists are exposed to feminist critique and philosophy in college, graduate school, or even sexual harassment seminars in the work place (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This theme
of feminist consciousness-raising in institutional and educational settings appears repeatedly in third wave rhetoric. One woman explains how the college classroom fostered a critical perspective for her:

But during my first year of college, nothing upside-downed my world as much as Women’s Studies 101. I learned that maybe I wasn’t so odd after all, because maybe, just maybe, patriarchal social constructions had caused the various forms of discrimination I’d experienced all my life, both as a woman and as a person of color. The other women in the class connected with me; we had a shared understanding. I was overjoyed. I embraced my new friend feminism. (Mody, 2002, p. 273, italics in original)

Learning feminism and participating in consciousness-raising in the classroom are unique experiences and a direct result of the legacy of feminist successes in the United States, since women’s studies classes and topics were not common in the 1960s and 1970s (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000).

College and high school teachers and students also have a much wider array of feminist texts to choose from, so that individuals can find texts that speak to their experience, expose them to new ideas, challenge their notions of what feminism means, and create new ground for feminist theory. For example, Susan Muaddi Darraj (2002) explains this diversity of rhetorical possibilities:

I had started reading the work of Black feminists, such as bell hooks, who took on Betty Friedan full force. She challenged the relevance of Friedan’s ideas about housewives to Black women, who have always had to work. Her work led me to Gloria Anzaldúa, who led me to Barbara Smith, and the list grew. I was heartened by the fact that Black women and other women of color had the courage to carve a feminism of their own out of the monolithic block that was generally accepted as “feminism.” (p. 306–7)

Similarly, Cristina Tzintzún in Colonize This! explains how she personally connected with feminist texts: “I read all of the feminist literature that I could get my hands on. They gave me the support I needed. They made me feel less alone. They made me proud to call myself feminist and queer. Those books taught me more than my [high] school ever could” (2002, p. 27).

These texts create the possibility of defining feminism for oneself, since an individual must decide which theories explain and resonate with her own experiences, but also bridge experiences and connect women together. The wide diversity of feminist texts creates more opportunities for identification and helps build on the idea that there are many different kinds of feminism and that many different kinds of people are feminists. In today’s cultural context of diversity, economic and social pressure, and individualism, this flexibility is an extremely appealing rhetorical feature of consciousness-raising.

POPULAR CULTURE AND MASS-MEDIATED CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Popular culture has also become a viable forum for third wave feminist consciousness-raising. Women are increasingly visible in television, film, music, and other media outlets. There are growing numbers of feminist role models and cultural icons that girls and women admire and respect. Kristina Sheryl Wong (2003), in Catching a Wave, explains how popular culture functions for young feminists:

“The concept of feminism has become so academic that only a select few understand its new meaning. In spite of this, feminist politics can be shared with the world if it is carefully disguised in the mass media. Popular culture provides an effective vehicle to carry the self-celebrating concepts of third wave feminism” (p. 296).
As Wong observes, popular culture female icons may speak to young women in ways that academic feminism cannot. Many of these female icons represent strong, independent women with whom young women identify.

Some television shows have inspired third wave feminists through the use of empowered female characters; audiences come to believe that women are capable of the same kinds of action packed adventures as men. For instance, Michele Byers explains how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* functions as a vehicle for feminist consciousness-raising for its audiences:

*Buffy*'s redefinition of girlhood and womanhood intersects with the question of feminism. The most explicit link I see between *Buffy* and feminism as a political ideology and practice is that both espouse a belief in the rights of women and, significantly, the right to equality in all things. The series dramatizes the struggle that many young women face to be strong, independent, articulate, ambitious, and powerful. And this is done without erasing women's desire for connection. The feminist inclination of this show also appears in its refusal to make its female characters masculine. (2003, p. 172)

Television shows and movies that include characters like *Buffy* expose viewers to new ideas of female empowerment, and such shows are increasingly common and popular among female (and sometimes male) audiences.

Popular music is another form of popular culture that can serve as an avenue for feminist consciousness-raising. Gwendolyn Pough states that “My development as a Black woman and a Black feminist is deeply tied to my love of hip hop” (2002, p. 86). She further explains that “Another way that hip hop helped me to develop a feminist consciousness was the exposure it gave me to sexual harassment and the attitude it gave me to deal with it” (2002, p. 89). Although Pough acknowledges that hip-hop and rap can have gendered and heterosexist tendencies, her ability to simultaneously enjoy and critically evaluate such music instilled a sense of consciousness. Similarly, other third wave feminists cite Ani DiFranco, Madonna, Courtney Love, or Alanis Morissette as key feminist influences. Erin Harde explains that “For me, some women in music present the most accessible, and therefore influential, feminist agenda of the third wave. Consider the lyrics of Alanis Morissette, who was probably one of the first women rockers to make me consider oppression and emancipation” (Harde & Harde, 2003, p. 131). Popular culture icons have long influenced how young women and others involved in social consciousness become aware of social injustices and their own sense of oppression, yet most academic literature has failed to address the power and influence of popular culture in consciousness-raising. However, this examination of third wave feminist texts reveals that many young women are empowered by female role models and become aware of their own oppression and the possibilities for emancipation through the consumption of popular culture. More importantly, young female audiences take away messages of empowerment from popular television shows and music, even though these texts may be problematic from other feminist perspectives.

**DIVERSE EXPERIENCES AND AUDIENCES**

Many third wave feminist texts deliberately seek to include diverse ethnic, social, and economic perspectives to create a sense of inclusiveness. This practice encourages many third wave feminists to read and know diverse perspectives that extend beyond their own. Furthermore, much third wave literature focuses on traditionally marginalized perspectives rather than more dominant or mainstream feminist perspectives. As JeeYeun Lee explains:
"I want to emphasize that the feminism that I and other young women come to today is one that is at least sensitive to issues of exclusion. If perhaps twenty years ago charges of racism, classism, and homophobia were not taken seriously, today they are the cause of extreme anguish and soul-searching. I am profoundly grateful to older feminists of color and their white allies who struggled to bring U.S. feminist movements to this point" (2001, p. 70).

Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, the editors of Catching a Wave, also explain that “Many of the goals of the third wave are similar to those of the second wave, though some, such as its insistence on women’s diversity, are new” (2003, p. 10). The third wave anthologies, Colonize This!, Listen Up, and To Be Real are predominantly about the experiences of women of color and have made explicit efforts to include a number of diverse perspectives.

Third wave feminists also seek to extend their consciousness-raising efforts to audiences that include men. Hopkins (1998) suggests that feminism would be better understood as a critical strategy made up of a set of beliefs, actions, goals, and positions concerning gender oppression in our culture rather than a movement for and about women. A group of third wave feminists offers a similar definition, “A third wave feminist politics is more properly a politics of gender, which involves critiquing and reevaluating both male and female social roles so that both genders may live in peace with one another” (Cox, et al., 1997, p. 199). These definitions of feminism shift the focus from women’s oppression to the harm that patriarchal oppression does to all people. For many third wave feminists, these inclusive definitions of feminism more closely resonate with their personal experience in a patriarchal culture, the importance of their relationships with men, and the desire to create more inclusive feminisms.

Although consciousness-raising is a difficult process, young men are increasingly joining the feminist ranks. Katz (2001) laments that there is very little consciousness-raising leadership among men since speaking out against other men’s sexism or violence toward women is contrary to the traditional socialization of men. Two feminist texts, Men Doing Feminism and To Be Real, where men share their personal experiences with feminism, seek to expand the realm of feminism. Schmitt (1998) explains that an important rhetorical barrier to feminist consciousness for men is the aversion to relationships that men are taught throughout their lives. Their quest to appear independent and self-sufficient inhibits their ability to share the kinds of personal experiences that lead to a consciousness shift. Like third wave women, some men indicate that they came to consciousness as an undergraduate or graduate student in women’s studies classes or other classes that utilized feminist perspectives. Additionally, feminism increasingly plays an important role in their intellectual formation (Awkward, 1998). Young men are also more likely to have been raised in a feminist household. Men who have a feminist consciousness, or who identify themselves as feminists, are then in a position to encourage other men to rethink their habits and behaviors (Schultz, 1995). Julia Wood suggests that “one rhetorical strategy used by profeminist men is performing a traitorous identity, in which a member of a group criticizes particular attitudes and actions that are common and accepted among members of that group” (2005, p. 84). In fact, this support network is critical since social change happens and feminist consciousness develops when men are challenged by a caring, compassionate community (Cornish, 1999).

OPTIONS FOR SELF EXPRESSION

Consciousness-raising creates numerous options for self-expression. Elements of consciousness-raising found in popular culture, the classroom, or books and magazines
allow individuals to take what they want from the emerging feminist theory and leave what is not useful. These rhetorical functions of consciousness-raising also create new possibilities for voice. Lee explains that her experiences with consciousness-raising allowed her to express herself in new ways: “For the first time I found people who articulated those murky half-formed feelings that I could previously only express incoherently as ‘But that’s not fair!’ . . . So to come to a class that addressed these issues directly and gave me the words for all those pent-up feelings and frustrations was a tremendously affirming and empowering experience” (2001, p. 68). In a more specific example, Kiini Ibura Salaam explains how feminism influenced her consciousness:

“Today I can identify exactly what catcalling is and how it functions in women’s lives. At its most basic level catcalling is sexual harassment. Verbal assaults, invitations and compliments are opportunities for men to demonstrate who is predator and who is prey. One catcall yanks a woman out of the category of human being and places her firmly in the position of sexual object” (2002, p. 340).

These women observe that a feminist consciousness enabled them to build a new set of vocabularies that originated from their critical consciousness that then fostered consciousness or critical thought in other areas. Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz similarly explains her connection to consciousness and expression: “I did not have the language to articulate why these feelings were so personal to me until I started exploring feminism. Feminism awakened my commitment to fighting injustice. Feminism challenged me to see how deeply I had internalized my own assimilation” (2002, p. 33). Not only does feminist consciousness-raising provide women and men with a vocabulary to describe their experiences, but it also helps illuminate the interconnected nature of oppression and inculcate a more critical perspective on the world. Lourdes-marie Prophete describes this kind of experience:

I get a lot of the “aha” factor when I think about how gender roles and sexism framed my life and my mom’s. The “aha” factor is when you have always felt something but couldn’t articulate it until someone gives you a naming system that allows you to point at all the pieces. While in Gambia a couple of years after college, I was criticized at a market by a female merchant for being too aggressive when I negotiated the price. She said I acted like a man and I should remember that I am just a girl. I felt horrible and wondered if I had been rude when I realized her criticism that “I wasn’t acting like a girl” came from her acceptance of gender roles and male privilege. By analyzing the incident this way, I was also creating a mental world where things can be different. (2002, p. 178)

Critical consciousness, then, not only leads to more avenues of self-expression but may also spur personal activism because once something has been named and described, it can become the target of social change.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIRD WAVE FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AS A RHETORICAL OPTION

In this essay, we argue that third wave feminists have employed consciousness-raising in ways both similar and different to the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s. In essence, third wave feminists still use consciousness-raising for the same reasons that Campbell (1973) and Cheseboro, Cragan, and McCullough (1973) have identified, yet third wave feminists have also used consciousness-raising to address new demands and have employed different rhetorical features of consciousness-raising, both in terms of style and substance. While third wave feminists may encounter a different set of rhetorical problems, it remains to be seen if their use of stories, popular culture, and version of feminism will successfully address these rhetorical problems. As an emerging movement, third wave feminism is still in the process
of determining its rhetorical character and its rhetorical needs. Third wave feminist consciousness-raising, then, provides an expanding framework for understanding the functions of consciousness-raising as a rhetorical option. Third wave consciousness-raising rarely occurs in the organized, small group setting that was often the hallmark of consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s that Campbell (1973) describes. Instead, consciousness-raising has changed, expanded, and adapted to new social contexts.

One of the ways in which third wave consciousness-raising has adapted to the changing cultural climate is that it seeks to address larger and more public audiences. In addition to traditional private sphere settings, consciousness-raising now occurs in semi-public settings, such as classrooms, or in mass media venues, such as anthologies and books that are widely available. Third wave feminists have responded to the rhetorical exigencies of their time through writing and story telling, as a way to explain how feminism has succeeded in creating greater opportunities for women, but also observing that gender inequities still exist. They also have used these public venues and mass media outlets to address diversity issues within feminism, which would not be possible in the same way within a small group of people who share a particular geographic proximity. In a small group consciousness-raising session, a limited number of people participate in consciousness-raising activities for a limited amount of time. However, consciousness-raising in books and popular culture can provide a wider array of perspectives than any one small group. The books and anthologies that we examined in this essay contain essays from writers who differ across a range of identity categories including social and economic class, ethnicity, geographical location, sexual orientation, and gender. Third wave consciousness-raising also resists the demands of a structured time for consciousness-raising, and instead allows individuals to read stories, watch movies, or participate in popular culture whenever and wherever it is convenient for them. This increases the flexibility of consciousness-raising and emphasizes the individual nature of consciousness shifts.

The expanding forms of third wave feminist consciousness-raising also create new avenues to an individual’s own consciousness-raising because a person may engage in self-dialogue and persuasion to a greater extent than if she were participating in a small group consciousness-raising session. In small group consciousness-raising, individuals share their experiences interactively with personal revelations, questions, answers, and group discussion (Cheseboro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1973). When individuals read third wave anthologies or consume popular culture, consciousness-raising is produced via internal dialogue rather than a small group interaction. For example, reading essays is a process of conversing with the writers of those texts, but the writers cannot actively respond to the reader’s questions and ideas. Instead, readers must engage in their own self-dialogue and self-persuasion that may lead to building one’s self-esteem, recognizing gender inequities, or developing a critical perspective. Similarly, in consuming popular culture, a viewer may converse with other audience members while watching a show or listening to music, but ultimately must engage in internal dialogues that may be either subconscious or conscious forms of self-persuasion. For instance, an individual might watch Buffy the Vampire Slayer and have a conscious internal dialogue about Buffy’s strength and independence or women’s empowerment. Conversely, this same individual may seek to emulate the characters in the show without ever consciously deciding that there are certain characteristics she wants to embrace for feminist reasons. Third wave feminism enacted in popular culture and through the mass media serves to raise consciousness by allowing individuals to engage in mo-
ments of identification and private reflection, even when these texts are consumed in public settings. Furthermore, many of these feminist-minded audiences are able to focus on messages of empowerment, while simultaneously rejecting messages of sexualization or objectification. Consciousness-raising, then, provides a critical framework where audiences problematize texts rather than passively accept their messages.

A better understanding of third wave feminist consciousness-raising rhetoric also contributes to research on rhetorical movements because this third wave rhetoric is both self- and other-directed. Richard Gregg (1971) discusses how the ego-function of social protest rhetoric revolves around the self-directed need to affirm one’s ego and sense of self. Charles Stewart (1999) identifies several features of this self-directed rhetoric, where individuals realize oppression, establish self-esteem, search for new identities, and locate social standing and status. Sharing and relating to experiences found in third wave anthologies or in women’s studies classrooms create space for individuals to develop self-esteem and fulfill this ego-function of rhetoric. Third wave texts are self-directed in that they are cathartic for the writers, but they are also other-directed because readers learn about new experiences or relate to the writers’ experiences. Stewart, using animal rights activists as an example, observes that other-directed rhetoric that addresses disenfranchised groups is also possible. According to Stewart, these individuals seek self-affirmation, location of status, and development of self-identity, but these goals are part of helping others rather than helping themselves; these individuals are not marked by despair or a sense of inferiority. Third wave feminist rhetoric also reflects this other-directed focus because these feminists are focused on the oppression of all people, as their emphasis on diverse audiences indicates. Their rhetoric employs both self and other-directed motives. In essence, the rhetorical practices of third wave feminist consciousness-raising blur the distinctions between the self and other-directed ego functions that Gregg (1971) and Stewart (1999) outline.

A final implication of third wave consciousness-raising rhetoric is that it does not directly seek to generate social activism, protest, sisterhood, confrontation, or movement. Third wave feminist consciousness-raising may have this effect, but that is not the primary goal. Rather, third wave feminists share their stories, listen to others’ stories, consume popular culture in ways that they find empowering, and create new vocabularies to enhance their own lives, but these activities do not necessarily lead to social activism in its traditional forms. While many third wave feminists openly embrace various forms of activism, they do not want to force individuals to take an activist stance or assume that certain forms of activism are appropriate for all people (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). In contrast to Cheseboro, Cragan, and McCullough’s (1973) definition of consciousness-raising and Campbell’s (1973) description of second wave consciousness-raising, third wave feminists offer their stories and experiences, but do not necessarily expect a social movement to develop as a result. This offering of perspectives without the demand of audience action or change embodies what Foss and Griffin (1995) term “invitational rhetoric.” In fact, this feature of third wave feminist rhetoric may be precisely what is so confounding to those attempting to understand the third wave by measuring it against traditional notions of feminism and feminist consciousness-raising. The absence of a shared feminist agenda, set of goals, or well-defined purposes makes interpreting third wave feminist rhetoric all the more difficult. Yet, in many ways, this is precisely their objective. The writers present their ideas and let the audience decide what to do with them, rather than overtly building a platform for social movement.
In essence, third wave feminist rhetoric creates space for sharing experiences, reading stories, and developing a critical perspective. Third wave consciousness-raising rhetoric simultaneously reaches a large, public audience, but also sparks private, internal dialogue and self-persuasion. Campbell suggests that second wave feminism employed oxymoronic rhetoric in that it was “a genre without a rhetor, a rhetoric in search of an audience, that transforms traditional argumentation into confrontation, that ‘persuades’ by ‘violating the reality structure’ but that presumes a consubstantiality so radical that it permits the most intimate of identifications” (1973, p. 86). Third wave feminist rhetoric can also be described as oxymoronic for many of the same reasons, but new oxymorons continue to emerge as consciousness-raising rhetoric is adapted over time to respond to shifting rhetorical situations. For instance, new oxymorons might include public rhetoric that is designed for private reflection rather than public movement, and a growing number of individuals who are united in name but who do not have a shared agenda for change. Third wave consciousness-raising rhetoric, like the second wave rhetoric that Campbell (1973) describes, resists explanation by traditional rhetorical standards because it is persuasive, but it is not aimed at any particular outcome.

Rhetorical scholars should strive to better understand the ways in which rhetorical problems and situations both persist and shift over time. Many of the aspects of the rhetorical problem of feminist advocacy that Campbell identified over thirty years ago are still present today, but there have also been substantial changes in that rhetorical situation as it currently exists. We have examined some of the ways that third wave feminists have adapted traditional consciousness-raising techniques to reach a wider, more public, and more diverse audience. Other social movements that have rhetoric designed to overcome a particular set of exigencies may be well served by a careful examination of the ways that these exigencies have changed in light of emerging cultural conditions. Consciousness-raising that takes into account the evolving nature of rhetorical problems and the audience it is designed to reach will certainly be more effective than strategies that have become outdated or obsolete.

NOTES

1Feminist activism is often discussed as a series of “waves.” The first wave is thought to begin in 1848 at the women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York and culminated on or about 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). Dicker and Peipemier explain that “the central goal of this wave was gaining a legal identity for women that included the right to own property, to sue, to form contracts, and to vote” (2008, p. 9). The term “second wave” is used to describe the resurgence in feminist awareness and activism that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. This wave tended to focus on “gaining full human rights for women: some of its central demands were equal opportunities in employment and education, access to child care and abortion, the eradication of violence against women, and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment” (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003, p. 9). The term “third wave” feminism first appeared in 1992 in an essay by Rebecca Walker in Ms. magazine, and was used to describe a new kind of feminism that was born out of the second wave but also adapted to the needs of a new generation of feminists. Dicker and Peipemier explain, “Third wave feminism represents a reinvigorated feminist movement emerging from a late twentieth-century world. Many of the goals of the third wave are similar to those of the second wave, though some, such as its insistence on women’s diversity are new” (2003, p. 10).

2See, for example, Campbell, 1973; Campbell, 1989; Campbell, 1999; Campbell, 2001; Cheseboro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1973; Gring-Pemble, 1998; and Hogeland, 2001.

3See Campbell, 1989; Hansche, 1970; Rosen, 2000; and Sarachild, 1970.

4The purpose of this essay is not to distinguish third wave feminism as a distinct entity or wave, but rather to explore how third wave feminists are using consciousness-raising in similar and different ways to how rhetorical scholars have defined consciousness-raising (e.g., Campbell, 1973; Campbell, 1989; Campbell, 1999; Campbell, 2001; Cheseboro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1973; Gring-Pemble, 1998; Hogeland, 2001). We recognize that third wave feminism is a controversial term, but we use the term to reflect a growing number of feminists who self-identify as third wave feminists (Findlen, 2001; Walker, 1995). A number of essays have explored at length the similarities and differences between the “waves” of feminism (e.g., see 1997 special issue of Hypatia). Because
our argument centers around the rhetorical practices of consciousness-raising rather than the distinct qualities of the third wave, we do not address the contentious issues surrounding definitions of third wave feminism.

5For example, see Howry & Wood, 2001, for a discussion of Listen Up.


7For instance, Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Findlen, 2001; and Hernández & Rehman, 2002.

8See Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; Lee, 2001; Brooks, 2002; Martínez, 2002; Austin, 2002; Mody, 2002; Hurdis, 2002; and Jones, 2002.

9See Erin Harde in Harde & Harde, 2003; and Rehman & Hernandez, 2002.


11See also May, 1998; and Trujillo, 1991.

12See Cox et al., 1997; and Hopkins, 1998.

REFERENCES


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