

THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF WOMEN'S STUDIES ON STUDENTS' PERSONAL LIVES AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

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Stake, Roades, Rose, Ellis, and West (1994) reported that women's studies classes led to more feminist activism and greater personal course-related changes than nonwomen's studies classes. The present study tested the durability of the positive changes observed in women studies students 9 months following the last week of class. Comparisons between students who participated at follow-up (26.3%) and students who did not participate indicated that the follow-up participants were representative of all students who completed the courses. In the follow-up sample, class impact reported in the last week of class was sustained at follow-up. Women's studies students continued to report substantial changes in their interactions with others and willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors. Ratings of positive effects were significantly higher than ratings of negative effects ($p < .0001$). Students' responses indicated they were using their women's studies learning as a framework for understanding their experiences and making lifestyle changes.

Improving the lives of women by empowering them to make personal and social changes has been one of the major goals of women's studies (Boxer, 1982; Ruth, 1990). The extent to which women's studies has achieved these goals has been the focus of much research. Comparisons of students' attitudes and behaviors at the beginning and end of women's studies classes provide evidence that these courses lead to greater awareness of

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sexism in society (Brush, Gold, & White, 1978; Howe, 1985; Stake et al., 1994), fewer gender stereotyped attitudes (Scott, Richards, & Wade, 1977), fewer gender stereotyped relations with others (Stake et al., 1994), greater confidence and assertiveness (Howe, 1985; Lee, 1989; Stake & Gerner, 1987; Stake et al., 1994), and greater interest in working for feminist causes (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Stake et al., 1994). Changes on these measures have been substantially greater for women's studies students than for comparison students in nonwomen's studies classes (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Brush et al., 1978; Stake & Gerner, 1987). In a study that examined the source of change in women's studies, Stake et al. (1994) found that women's studies teachers were more effective in producing these changes than nonwomen's studies teachers only within the context of the women's studies curriculum. In sum, it appears from measures taken at the completion of women's studies classes that women's studies has a strong impact on students' personal lives and feminist activism.

Although these findings are certainly promising, it is possible that measures of the effects of women's studies classes are inflated when assessments are made at the time a class is ending. Students are likely to be aware of how their instructors would prefer them to respond and may exaggerate changes to please their teachers and to conform to the norms of their women's studies class, especially if class impact measures are administered during class sessions. Moreover, feminist commitment may be at a peak at this time, prompted by the immediate influence of the class experience, and may not be sustained after the class is completed. Therefore, follow-up studies, conducted separately from women's studies classes and instructors, are necessary to investigate the long-term impact of women's studies.

The few follow-up studies of the impact of women's studies courses that have been reported suggest that women's studies has a long-term impact on the personal lives of students. Students reported in follow-up evaluations that their courses had improved their self-confidence (Brush et al., 1978; Elovson & Cockcroft, 1977; Finke, Maveety, Shaw, & Ward, 1992), increased their awareness of gender discrimination (Elovson & Cockcroft, 1977; Neitz & Gadbois, 1992), affected their interactions with significant others (Johnson, 1982), and led to more positive attitudes toward women (Brush et al., 1978; Elovson & Cockcroft, 1977; Neitz & Gadbois, 1992).

These studies had two methodological shortcomings, however, that cast doubt on the validity of the results. First, response rates at follow-up were low or unreported, and no information was provided about the extent to which follow-up samples were representative of students who completed the courses. It is possible that students who agreed to participate in follow-up evaluations were more affected by and satisfied with their women's studies experience than were students who completed the courses but did not participate at follow-up. Furthermore, the follow-up studies did not measure class impact at the time the women's studies classes ended.

Hence, there was no basis of comparison to assess possible changes in class impact that may have occurred between the end of courses and the follow-up evaluation. The primary purpose of the present study was to test the durability of the impact of women's studies courses by comparing measures of impact taken during the last week of class to parallel measures taken 9 months later. The impact measures were administered at the end of class to all students who completed the classes, which allowed for a test of the representativeness of the follow-up sample.

A special focus of this study was the relative amount of positive and negative impact of women's studies classes. No previous follow-up studies have made this comparison. A few anecdotes of negative effects on social relationships have been reported (Fellman & Winstead, 1992; Howe, 1985; Rose, 1989), but most studies have yielded positive findings only. Because negative effects have not been directly assessed in follow-up studies, and because follow-up groups may have included a disproportionate number of satisfied students, long-range negative effects may be more prevalent than appears from previous research. We explored this issue in the present study by measuring positive and negative impact at the close of women's studies classes and again at follow-up, testing for the representativeness of the follow-up sample.

Lastly, this study examined the meaning of students' predictions of their future participation in feminist activities. Women's studies students often state at the end of their class that they intend to become more active in feminist causes as a result of the class (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Hertz & Reverby, 1992; Shueman & Sedlacek, 1977; Stake et al., 1994). However, no study has investigated whether, or to what extent, students carry out their activist intentions. In the present study, we explored the relation between students' intentions to participate at the time their women's studies class ended and their subsequent reports of feminist activism 9 months later.

METHOD

Participants

Usable follow-up questionnaires were received from 47 students who had participated in a women's studies evaluation during the spring or fall semester of 1990 (Stake et al., 1994). The follow-up sample was 26.3% of the total sample of students who had been tested in the last week of their women's studies class. The follow-up sample was predominantly female (93.6%); the ethnic composition of the sample was 6.7% African-American, 91.5% White, and 2.2% Native American; and the ages ranged from 18 to 49 years, with a median age of 23 to 24 years. The sample included students from nine undergraduate women's studies classes in an urban, midwestern university. Academic disciplines represented

were art history, biology, literature, psychology, and interdisciplinary studies. None of the classes had women's studies course prerequisites, and the majority of students (68.9%) had taken no other women's studies classes.

Measures

Personal change was assessed by asking participants to rate on 5-point scales (1 = *no effect* to 5 = *a very strong effect*) the extent to which their women's studies class had affected: (a) their interactions with others and (b) their willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors. Students used 5-point scales to rate the importance of these changes (1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *very important*), positive effects of these changes (1 = *no positive effect* to 5 = *a very strong positive effect*), and negative effects of these changes (1 = *no negative effect* to 5 = *a very strong negative effect*). Students who indicated that the courses had led to changes in their interactions with others and/or their willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors (i.e., gave a rating of 2 or higher on these scales) were asked to write a description of these changes.

Feminist activism was assessed by asking participants to indicate on a checklist whether they had participated in any of the following activities: (a) kept informed of women's rights issues, (b) talked with others to influence their attitudes about women's rights issues, (c) signed a petition related to women's rights, (d) attended a march, rally, or protest related to women's rights, (e) wrote letters to politicians or newspapers about women's rights issues, (f) contributed money to a women's rights cause or to politicians who supported such causes, (g) worked for a phone bank, letter writing campaign, or political campaign in the cause of women's rights, and (h) participated in other activity related to women's rights. During the last week of class, students reported their activities for the semester that they were enrolled in the class. At follow-up, students reported activities for the period since the class had ended. Students also rated the likelihood that they would participate in any of the activities in the future.

Procedure

All measures were administered in the last week of class during class sessions by one of four female researchers. One was African-American and three were White non-Hispanic. Nine months later, a follow-up questionnaire, which included all measures, was mailed to the students. Participants were instructed to return the questionnaires directly to the researchers in postage-paid envelopes. A second wave of follow-up questionnaires was sent 2 weeks later with a reminder cover letter. To maintain students' confidentiality, questionnaires were matched by the last four digits of

students' phone numbers. Because students resided in a large metropolitan area that has many telephone prefixes, this coding system allowed us to match participants' questionnaires across time periods without determining the identity of the participants.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Ratings of class impact on the 5-point scale at follow-up yielded an alpha coefficient of .82. Responses to the feminist activity checklist items yielded a KR-20 coefficient of .70. Thus, both sets of measures showed an adequate level of internal consistency.

To test the representativeness of the follow-up sample, students who returned follow-up questionnaires were compared to students who had not. The responders and nonresponders were not significantly different on any variable for which information about both groups was available. The two samples were not significantly different in age, ethnic composition, college-year level, gender, number of feminist activities reported when class ended, stated intention to engage in feminist activities after class ended, ratings at the end of class regarding class impact on interactions with others and willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors, ratings of the importance of these changes, or ratings of the positive and negative effects of these changes. Hence, the follow-up sample appears to be representative of all students who completed the women's studies classes.

Personal Change

Ratings. Students' ratings of personal change made at the end of class and at follow-up were compared in a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance. Four ratings were included in the analysis: amount of effect on interactions with others, amount of effect on willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors, and the importance of each type of change. Ratings at follow-up on the 5-point scales ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.11$) were slightly higher and not significantly different from ratings at the end of class ($M = 3.62$; $SD = 1.24$).

To assess relative amounts of positive and negative effects in the two time periods, these ratings were analyzed in a 2×2 (Effect type by Time) repeated measures analysis of variance. Effect type was highly significant, $F(1, 31) = 160.10$, $p < .0001$. Ratings of the amount of positive effect on the 5-point scale were much higher ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 1.20$) than ratings of the amount of negative effect ($M = 1.35$; $SD = 0.63$). Time and the interaction of time and effect type were unrelated to impact ratings.

Thus, high positive ratings and low negative ratings were reported at the end of class and were maintained during the follow-up period.

Qualitative responses. Responses to the open-ended questions concerning the effect of classes on students' personal lives were subjected to a content analysis, using the procedures for coding and data clustering specified by Miles and Huberman (1984). First, all responses were studied to determine the content of recurring themes. Two independent raters then coded each response by the theme or themes expressed (coded themes are described below). The same set of themes was identified in responses from both the last week of class and the 9-month follow-up. Further information about responses from the last week of class is given in Stake et al. (1994).

Written responses were provided by 80.9% ($n = 38$) of the follow-up sample. In coding the follow-up responses, agreement between independent raters was 94.6%. Raters resolved discrepancies in their judgments through discussion. The follow-up responses indicated that the women's studies experience was continuing to have an impact on students' interactions with others 9 months after class had ended. These themes were as follows:

1. *Increased awareness of discrimination:* 44.7% of the follow-up sample ($n = 21$) wrote that they were more aware of negative attitudes and discriminatory treatment of women in society. For example, "I am more aware of how oppressed women of all colors are," and "(I am) a lot more conscious of how women are depicted in the media, through advertising, videos, television."
2. *Enhanced self-confidence:* For 29.8% of the sample ($n = 14$), responses reflected increased self-assurance. Examples include, "I feel more confident since my Women Psych class about myself, my feelings, my opinions," and "Since I took my course I have been very aware of who I am and that I am important."
3. *Greater tolerance of others:* 10.6% ($n = 5$) indicated that they had become more tolerant of others who are different from themselves. An example is, "I am much more open-minded—less judgmental of others."
4. *Able to educate others:* 34.0% ($n = 16$) wrote that they were applying what they had learned in class to teach others. For example, "I have shared with many women my changes in attitude, which has in turn helped other women," and "I take the time to explain in depth the discrimination of women when someone is misinformed about an issue."

Students' descriptions of new roles and behaviors reflected the following themes:

1. *Adoption of nontraditional behaviors:* 36.2% ($n = 17$) described changes toward a less gender stereotyped, more feminist lifestyle. One woman wrote, "I attended the march in DC on abortion rights. I would never have even considered such a thing before the Women's Studies class. Also, I don't be-

lieve I would have ever joined NOW prior to the class." A man wrote, "I try to help my wife with household duties such as cooking whereas before the course I would have seen this as her job."

2. *Enhanced assertiveness*: 23.4% ($n = 11$) reported that they had become more willing to express their views to others. Examples are, "(The class) helped me to communicate my rights more. To be more assertive towards people. To say what I mean without worry I'll hurt someone," and "I am more willing to defend my right as well as others for being a woman."
3. *Wanting to learn more*: 8.5% ($n = 4$) indicated that their class had prompted them to learn more about issues related to the class. For example, "I am a lot more involved in racial issues and have furthered my studies in that area because of the class in women's studies."

Feminist Activities

Comparisons between time periods. In the follow-up sample, comparisons were made between the number of students who reported feminist activities on the checklist in the last week of class and at follow-up. Chi-square analysis for repeated measures yielded one significant finding: fewer students checked the miscellaneous category, "other activity related to women's rights" at follow-up (26.1%) than in the last week of class (41.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 4.11, p < .05$. Reports of participation in the seven categories of feminist activities that were specified on the checklist were not significantly different in the two time periods. The percent of students who reported these activities averaged 33.0% in the last week of class and 32.3% at follow-up.

Predictions of future activities. Predictions of the likelihood of future feminist activities at follow-up were not significantly different from predictions in the last week of class. The meaning of students' ratings of likelihood of future feminist activities was tested in two ways. First, likelihood ratings given at the end of class were correlated with the number of feminist activities reported at follow-up, $r(46) = +.59, p < .0001$. This relationship indicates that students who gave higher likelihood predictions subsequently reported a greater number of activities in the follow-up period.

Although this correlation indicates that students could predict their level of participation relative to other students fairly well, it does not tell us whether the proportion of students who participated in the activities was at a level consistent with the likelihood predictions. To make this determination, likelihood predictions given at the end of class were compared to proportions of responders who reported participation at follow-up. At the time classes ended, 69% of the follow-up sample had indicated a 50% chance or greater that they would engage in one or more of the checklist items. At follow-up, 85% endorsed one or more checklist items, and 71% endorsed two or more items. Thus, the number of students who reported

feminist activities was higher than would be expected from the likelihood predictions.

DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that the impact of women's studies reported by students at the close of their class was sustained over the subsequent 9-month period. Students' ratings of the amount, importance, and positive quality of personal changes attributed to their women's studies class were as high at follow-up as they had been at the end of class. Students described in their written responses how they were applying what they had learned to their understanding of their everyday experiences and lifestyle choices. In addition, with the exception of the miscellaneous category, students were as likely to report feminist activities during the follow-up period as during the semester, and their predictions of future commitment remained high. *Our findings provide evidence that students' feminist enthusiasm does not peak at the time their women's studies class ends but instead, that women's studies learning provides a framework for understanding women's issues that has a long-term influence on students' personal lives and feminist activism.*

Students rated their reported changes as having far more positive than negative effects on their lives. Consistent with these numerical ratings, virtually all written responses to the open-ended questions described positive changes. Previous follow-up studies also yielded positive results, but no information is available about the representativeness of those follow-up samples. In our study, the follow-up participants appear to have been equivalent to the nonparticipants. The two groups had similar demographic characteristics, rated the positive and negative effects of their class equally, reported equivalent levels of feminist activity, and had similar intentions for future activism at the end of class. Given the close correspondence between the two groups, it is likely that, had the nonresponders returned their follow-up questionnaires, they would have reported the same amount and quality of changes that responders reported.

One could argue that students' evaluations were highly positive because they wanted to please their women's studies teachers and therefore approached the questionnaire with a positive response bias. Although the possibility of a positive response set cannot be ruled out, our follow-up methodology was designed to minimize these effects. Our follow-up questionnaire was sent by, and returned to, the researchers rather than the women's studies teachers. Questionnaire responses were not reported to teachers, participants completed the questionnaires privately at home, and the coding system used to match questionnaires across time periods did not allow us to determine participants' identity. Furthermore, the open-ended responses described such specific, individualized examples of

positive change that they appear to be genuine. Hence, it is likely that the students' responses represent their honest appraisals of class impact.

In a number of women's studies evaluations, students have predicted that they would become involved in feminist activities in the future (e.g., Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Hertz & Reverby, 1992). Our findings provide evidence that students fulfill these promises. The proportion of participants who reported feminist activities at follow-up was somewhat higher than would be expected from their predictions in the last week of class, and there was a substantial relationship between likelihood predictions in the last week of class and later reports of activities. It was encouraging, therefore, to find that the likelihood predictions at follow-up were as high as earlier predictions. Given our findings, it is probable that the follow-up participants continued their feminist activities beyond the follow-up period. Moreover, given the equivalence of the responders and nonresponders, it is reasonable to infer that the nonresponders were also continuing their participation in feminist activities well past the time class ended. However, our measures of participation were based exclusively on self-reports. Further research, using corroborative sources of information about students' postclass behaviors, is needed to substantiate the impact of women's studies on students' continuing feminist activism.

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