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What makes a (third) wave? How and why the third wave narrative works for contemporary feminists

Abstract

The wave narrative has come to frame academic and popular discussions of western feminist activism. Yet there are overlapping and contradictory ways of interpreting 'third wave feminism' which has resulted in much confusion surrounding its use and relevancy within western feminist praxis. Hence the need for a greater understanding of the term 'third wave feminism'. This article sets out a framework for understanding third wave feminism, highlighting the importance of political context. The article, drawing upon interview data generated with activists in the US and UK argues that whilst chronology is the most prevalent way in which feminist activists interpret third wave feminism, many also cite age and intersectionality as indicators of third wave feminism. Moreover, differing interpretations influence the extent to which it is seen as a positive development. Whilst third wave feminism is more developed in the US, many within the UK recognise and use the term.

Keywords: Third wave feminism, intersectionality, US and UK feminism

Introduction

There now exists a burgeoning popular (i.e. largely non-academic) literature in the US, and increasingly in the UK, exploring feminism's third wave (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Redfern and Aune, 2010), indeed, some have even begun to consider what a fourth wave might look like (Munro, 2013). However, it is far from clear what the third wave actually constitutes, or the extent to which feminists accept or engage with the term. Gender scholars have sought to identify, chart and explore the key issues and themes associated with the third wave (Gillis and Munford, 2004; Zack, 2005; Dean, 2009; Bobel 2010, Budgeon, 2011) even whilst some question its existence (Maddison and Sawyer, 2013). Whilst much of the extant scholarly literature observes that there are multiple, competing and contradictory ways of assessing feminism's third wave (Dean, 2009), there has been little academic consideration of how feminist activists interpret and engage with the term. In short, it is not clear what contemporary grassroots feminist activists think about third wave feminism and how their feelings about this speak back to the academic study of contemporary feminism. Accordingly, this article builds upon the existing literature to develop a typology of third wave feminism; empirical research was then undertaken with US and UK feminists to explore the extent to which this typology – and the dimensions that make it up - made sense to what the academy would call 'third wave feminists' on the ground. Hence, the article seeks to (1) clarify the concept of third wave feminism whilst (2) evaluating its 'real world' utility through engaging with feminist activists. The research finds that the third wave of feminism is most frequently understood through a chronological approach, one that is closely linked to a younger generation of feminists. Although certainly interconnected, chronology and generation differ, insofar as they each seek to stress temporal moments and specific cohorts of feminists respectively. The article highlights that

third wave feminism is for many inextricably linked to the concept of intersectionality, although there exists a difference in emphasis between US and UK feminists.

Due to the multi-faceted nature of the term 'third wave feminism' it can be difficult to get a sense of the specific issues it speaks to or its underpinning values; this is further complicated by the temporal overlap with second wave feminism. Although it is relatively straightforward to identify the period during which the third wave emerged, in the early 1990s for the US and the early 2000s in the UK (Walker, 1992; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Redfern and Aune, 2010), it is not clear whether we are still in the third wave or if we are currently in a fourth wave of feminism (Baumgardner, 2012; Cochrane, 2013). Third wave feminism has moreover, been viewed as both a neoliberal brand of feminism (Wlodarczyk, 2010) and as a more explicit feminist engagement with global social justice agendas (Heywood and Drake, 1997; Dicker and Piepmeir, 2003; Labaton and Lundy Martin, 2004; Redfern and Aune, 2010). Whilst some note that third wave feminism seeks to reclaim and subvert traditional notions of femininity (Groeneveld, 2009: 179; Lorber, 2010), others consider it to be a polemical defence of girlieness (McRobbie, 2009). Whilst frequently associated with women of colour and with an emphasis on diversity amongst women (Walker, 1992; Henry, 2004; Labaton and Lundy Martin, 2004), the dominance of white middle class heterosexual voices has also been observed (hooks, 1994). Moreover, the self-declared anti-academic nature of the third wave (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002; Bobel, 2010) is at odds with the obvious influence of anti-essentialist post-structuralist and post-colonial theories (Dean, 2010; Budgeon, 2011). The confusion surrounding what constitutes third wave feminism is in some respects its defining feature (Walker, 1992; Siegal, 2007);

indeed, many celebrate its polymorphic nature (Finley and Reynolds Stringer, 2010), hence, the call to avoid presenting third wave feminism as monolithic.

If we accept that there are a multiplicity of approaches to understanding and defining feminist waves, then it is inevitable that the third wave escapes easy definition. Eschewing the wave narrative altogether would certainly make it easier to think through some of the debates within contemporary feminism; however, identifying and fleshing out what actually constitutes a third wave is an important scholarly task, not least because so many feminists define themselves in relation to the second/third wave binary (even if this is simply to reject the wave narrative altogether). Much of the popular third wave texts are now, at least in the US, almost a decade old (e.g. Walker, 1992; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000); hence it is useful to explore whether or not earlier stages of third wave development make sense to activists of the third wave in the contemporary period.

The multiple ways of defining the third wave (explored in greater detail below) lend weight to the claims of Dicker and Piepmeier that the third wave has 'not coalesced into a larger, easily definable movement.' (2003: 11) Thus, Jonathan Dean, drawing on Laclau, has considered the third wave to be an 'empty signifier' (Dean, 2009:335), a concept which identifies the impossibility of the signifier to fully represent the 'totality' of the signified; a signifier without signified (Sumic, 2004:192). The polymorphic nature of the third wave is in and of itself something that many early self-identified third wavers embraced, resisting attempts to provide concise definitions of the term. In short, there is no uniform or total third wave feminism, something many consider to be a 'good thing' (Kaplan, 2003:47). This article seeks to explore whether this lack of unity regarding what constitutes the third wave still holds true for contemporary activists today.

Of course, some are already discussing a fourth wave of feminism. Whilst some feminists have sought to portray fourth wave feminism as a post 9/11 response to the global inequalities (Baumgardner, 2012) others have conceived of it as an inevitable consequence of the perceived failures of third wave feminism (Schacht and Ewing, 2004). In a UK context the term has been used to refer to post 2010 activity which in the eyes of many is the point at which there occurred a resurgence of feminists activism (Cochrane, 2013), coinciding with the economic crisis and the election of a Conservative-led government. It is in many respects unsurprising that there should be debates concerning a new wave of feminism at this very moment, after all it has been nearly twenty years since the start of the US third wave and in certain sections of the UK, the term third wave was not fully associated with the re-emergence and popularity of feminism in the early 2000's. Whilst the focus of this article is on exploring the ways in which contemporary activists understand third wave feminism, this does not to deny that a fourth wave exists.

Applying the wave narrative to feminism is, then, and critically, neither a neutral nor uncontested strategy. Indeed, there are many who ultimately consider it to be an unhelpful and divisive metaphor: setting up false divisions where there are none, and suggesting periods of inactivity that obscure continuity (Gillis and Munford, 2004). The wave narrative appears to be unique to the feminist movement, we don't for instance talk about 'socialist waves' (even though we may divide the intellectual history into classical Marxism, Euro-Communism, Post-Marxism etc); the one exception to this appears to be the environmental movement which has, at times, been structured by a wave narrative, although this has not had the same purchase as the feminist wave label (see Thiele, 1999). Certainly, the use of

the wave metaphor can be seen as a way for some feminists to impose a teleology on feminism, one that subsumes the multiplicity of diverse (and sometimes competing) feminist goals and aims.

These concerns, along with specific and legitimate criticisms regarding the focus on white western women (Henry, 2004; Springer, 2002), are important. Indeed, it is worth stressing that whilst calls for a third wave of feminism originated in the US amongst women of color (Orr, 1997), it quickly became synonymous with white, middle class women (hooks, 1994; Hurdis, 2004). Despite scholars highlighting the coterminous rise of the third wave with black feminist jurisprudence, it is typically an area largely ignored by key third wave texts (Taylor, 2001). However, this tension is instructive as it allows us to explore the multiple ways in which hierarchies and patterns of dominance come to emerge from within movements that have at their core a commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Accordingly, critical reflection on the wave narrative is important, not least because of its dominance within feminist discourse but also in order to evaluate the extent to which new feminist waves speak to issues of inclusion and diversity (Evans and Chamberlain, forthcoming 2014). Despite the seemingly crude application of the term 'wave' to denote a diverse and, at times, fragmented feminist movement, understanding the use of the term is important given its purchase on popular and academic analyses of feminism and because it does, at least on some level, reflect the peaks and troughs of feminist activism (Whelehan, 1995), others note its divisive nature, specifically the ways in which it is used to separate generations of feminists (Gillis and Munford, 2004).

Methods

Including the voices of feminist activists, whether through survey analysis or by undertaking qualitative research, is an important way in which scholars can ensure that intellectual debates remain grounded in the reality of feminist activism. This is particularly important in order to bridge the academic-activist divide noted by some feminist writers who observe the academic/activists divide between white middle class women who interpret and younger, black women who are at the cutting edge of feminist activism (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002: xxii). Moreover, when analysing a 'wave' of feminism, it is important to consider how and in what ways contemporary activists identify with the ideas and approaches promoted in earlier popular feminist debate. Interviewees were asked what they understood the term third wave feminism to refer to and whether or not they identified as such.

In order to explore how feminist activists understand the term third wave feminism, interviews were conducted with 66 feminists who had set up small grassroots campaigns or who were part of local networks. The research adopted a comparative approach by focussing on the US and UK. These two countries were selected for a number of reasons: 1) they have a good deal in common, culturally and economically; 2) Anglo-American feminism has become a commonly used term as scholars seek to draw parallels between feminist activism across the two countries; and, 3) third wave feminism is both recognised and part of feminist discussions and writings in both countries (Rowbotham, 1997). The interviews were conducted between January 2012 and August 2013 in four cities: London and Bristol (UK), and New York and Portland (US) (see Appendix A for further details of the interviews). These four cities were selected in order to provide a contrast not just between the UK and

US but to ensure the inclusion of voices from smaller cities; Bristol and Portland were selected as well known 'hubs' of feminist activity and to provide a contrast with the metropolitan and diverse populations of London and New York. Following other gender scholars (see Scharff, 2013) in depth interviews were undertaken with feminists in two different countries in order to provide an opportunity to consider feminist issues and debates within two different political and social contexts.

Participants were recruited via initial email contact with local feminist groups and organisations. In some instances a 'snowballing technique' was adopted, this was especially important in terms of ensuring diversity amongst the interviewees. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were all fully transcribed. The nature of qualitative research is such that interviewee responses are not intended to reflect the voices of feminists *en masse*, nor indeed can they be understood as being 'fully representative' of feminist views in the US and UK; rather they provide a rich and illustrative account of the ways in which feminists define and engage with the term third wave. Interviews were undertaken with both women and men, (although 62 of the interviewees were women), not all of whom identified as third wave. Many of those interviewed for this research did not explicitly identify as third wave, at least not prior to the question emerging during the interviews; thus, the participants' views on third wave feminism were not known before the interview. Particular care was taken to ensure that interviews were undertaken with feminists from a range of ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds. The participants were asked what they understood the term third wave to mean and if they personally identified as such.

Defining the third wave

To make the task of fleshing out the various themes and issues that third wave feminism represents somewhat more manageable, the article sets out a typological approach (see Table 1 below); the approaches highlighted in Table 1, and developed further below, represent the dominant themes and ideas associated with third wave feminism in the extant literature both popular and academic from the US and UK. Such a typology enables us to grasp the various concepts and issues associated with the third wave and to understand the extent to which feminist activists engage and define their feminism through these approaches. Of course, the multiple approaches to feminist waves interact; indeed, reflecting upon the wave narrative does require a willingness to engage with at least one or more terms of reference. The different approaches interact with one another to varying degrees; it is this very interaction that is central to understanding the third wave, a focus on just one strand would provide a misleading account of the third (or indeed any) wave. Certainly, we should assume that people's understanding of the third wave is influenced by their views or experience of second wave. It is also worth noting that the various interpretive approaches to the third wave differ in the US and UK, again this is helpful as it allows us to understand more fully how a term like third wave feminism is contingent upon political, cultural and historical context.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Chronological: This has become perhaps one of the more 'objective' and straightforward ways of viewing feminist waves; it simply notes that a new wave marks a moment in time when feminist activism is resurgent after a perceived lull in activity. A chronological

approach tends to stress continuity over oppositional wave framing, situating each new wave (at least in part) as a development of the previous, this is a theme that can be identified in both US and UK popular feminist texts (Heywood and Drake, 1997; Banyard, 2010; Redfern and Aune, 2010). Whilst it is important to differentiate between the starting points for third wave feminism in the US and the UK, which are separated by nearly a decade, it is worth stressing the increasingly neoliberal political structures that existed in both the UK and US from the early 1990s onwards, thus creating a similarity vis-à-vis the macro-political milieu. This political context facilitated by the neoliberal turn is important as it provided a facilitator for engaging (particularly) younger people in broader social justice campaigns, of which feminism is a constituent part (Walby, 2011).

Oppositional: An oppositional approach to the wave narrative situates a new wave in relation to that which has gone before. Whilst often born out of a chronological understanding of feminist waves, this approach differs slightly in that it often defines itself against (rather than as a continuation of) the previous wave. The oppositional framing is particularly popular amongst those US feminists who write as self-declared third wavers (Dicker and Piepmeyer 2003); indeed, this is where much of the noted tension between the second wave and third wave can be identified, as some proponents of specific waves seek to situate the 'other' wave in a particular (usually negative) frame (Jervis, 2006). There has been much written about the apparent tensions between the second and third wave generation, not least because of the 'temporal overlap' (Budgeon, 2011: 6). Moreover, some second wavers reject third wave critiques that characterise their politics as dogmatic and exclusive (Bobel, 2010: 18; Zack, 2005: 6). An oppositional approach is perhaps more developed in the popular writings of those US identified third wavers, who are, naturally,

somewhat invested in the idea that the third wave brings something new and is manifestly different from the second wave (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Findlen, 2001; Walker, 1994). In the UK much of what we might consider to be third wave feminism has actually sought to stress the points of continuity between the waves, rather than constructing an oppositional framework (Banyard, 2010; Redfern and Aune, 2010).

Generational: A generational approach to the waves has been driven mainly by the initial writings of (US) based feminists who have sought, at least in part, to define third wave feminism explicitly in terms of age. Specifically, the third wave has been seen as synonymous with Generation X (Shugart, 2010), those born between 1961 and 1981 (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Dicker and Piepmeir, 2003). Focussing on the *age* of those who constitute the third wave develops an aspect of the chronological approach, all feminists who happen to be active at any given moment (and fall within the specific age category) might well be classified as a third wave feminist. Such an approach obviously has ramifications in terms of who is explicitly included and excluded from this wave; indeed, establishing such explicit generational barriers can be a means by which to pursue an oppositional framing of third wave feminism. Accordingly, feminists have criticised the ways in which the third wave has seemingly sought to divide generations of feminist activists through the use of a rather arbitrary age distinction, which in many instances simply reinforces a perceived authority on the part of second wavers (Henry, 2004).

Conceptual: Coterminous with the emergence of US third wave feminism, intersectionality, the recognition of multiple and overlapping points of oppression, has come to dominate much of the gender scholarship in recent years (Davis, 2008). The rejection of essentialist

and white heteronormative assumptions have been key to the development of the third wave. Intersectionality is regularly cited as being one of its defining features; this has enabled third wave feminists to articulate what they see as the significant contribution of third wave feminism to the feminist movement. Conceptualised by Kimberle Crenshaw, a US black feminist legal scholar, intersectionality denotes the multiple and overlapping layers of oppression that affect an individual's life (1989, 1991, 1993). As a concept it chimed with work being done by scholars in the UK that sought to explore how certain identities, typically those most commonly associated with identity politics, can only be understood within the narratives of other identities (Yuval-Davis, 1992). Intersectionality presents a number of challenges for feminists, not least in accounting for multiple and intersecting points of oppression (1993). Although it has been argued that the US and UK do share an approach to intersectionality, one that is grounded in a rejection of essentialist notions of identity (Prins, 2006: 278), as a conceptual approach it is more advanced in the US than in the UK; this may, at least in part, be due to the greater provision and inclusion of women's studies programmes in US colleges and Universities, now largely absent from the UK, and of course the specific racial legacy of slavery in the US. Furthermore, intersectionality as feminist praxis has been a source of much tension within UK feminist circles in recent years.¹

Activist: An activist approach has two specific foci: the types of people engaging with feminist activism and the modes of activism. As previously noted the third wave has been closely associated with intersectionality, as such, inclusion of specific groups who had

¹ See Eleanor Robertson 'In defence of intersectionality'

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/23/in-defence-of-intersectionality?CMP=tw_t_gu

previously felt excluded from feminist activism has been key; we might look at the inclusion of women of colour, trans-women and men as being particularly salient when it comes to exclusionary or inclusionary discourse. Many third wave groups, texts and online sites have been vocal in ensuring that women of colour aren't side-lined from feminism (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002). Indeed, for those who also think in terms of oppositional framing, one of the key 'failures' of the second wave was not to include more men in the struggle against gender inequality and oppression. Alongside changes in terms of who is explicitly targeted to be included in feminist activism there has also been a change in terms of how feminists are directing their feminism. Principally, developments in feminist activism have involved an increasing use of online modes of campaigning (Shaw, 2013), this shift to online forms of campaigning has significant implications for feminism with many of those who may not be able to attend rallies or meetings now able to participate in the debate. The use of and increasing power of online activism is also something associated with the emerging fourth wave feminism (Cochrane, 2013) and it is perhaps this part of the typology where we see most scope for overlap between the two waves.

The article now turns to the empirical analysis: considering how contemporary activists view the term third wave feminism. The research finds that whilst awareness of third wave feminism is more obvious in the US, there are some points of commonality between the two countries, notably the reliance on chronological definitions of third wave feminism and an emphasis on intersectionality. Moreover, other approaches, such as oppositional and activist appear to be less relevant during discussions of the third wave.

Feminist Activists on Third Wave Feminism

Table 1 set out five interconnected and overlapping approaches to defining third wave feminism: chronological, oppositional, generational, conceptual and activist. In order to see how well these categories and ideas shape feminist understandings of third wave feminism, the interviewees were asked what they understood the term third wave feminism to mean. Their responses are discussed below, as is an attempt to code the responses by category. As the quotations indicate there was little consensus surrounding the definitions of the third wave, this is, in and of itself, unsurprising given the difficulty within the scholarly community regarding definitions:

To me the third wave speaks to a specific agenda that *prioritises intersectionality*, it's about diversity and recognising how our multiple identities oppress us (NY, US)

The third wave is about being a feminist how I want to be a feminist. Obviously nothing exists in a vacuum and *you have to be critical about some choices but you know it's about saying I choose to wear makeup, I choose to do this*. I have a feminist Barbie necklace on, my bedroom is bright pink, for me it's about defining your own feminism a little bit. (London, UK).

I guess *I think about the third wave as being about a specific moment, starting in the early '90s* when there was this backlash against feminism and then you suddenly have all these people like Rebecca Walker saying feminism's not over. (Portland, US)

Third wave feminism suggests a number of things to me; *young women who are having their first experience of feminist activism, the importance of intersectionality*, linking up with other social justice issues. It's about contemporary feminism, here and now. (Bristol, UK)

As the quotations above illustrate, for the interviewees there were a range of different issues and ideas that were highlighted in response to the term third wave feminism. In particular, conceptual, generational and chronological approaches were the most prevalent. Whilst the interviewees provided a range of different definitions, virtually all of them mentioned the centrality of intersectionality to the third wave. Although some interviewees stressed that the second wave had also addressed diversity, intersectionality was seen as one of the core defining features of the third wave.

The interviews revealed the extent to which US feminists were more at ease discussing third wave feminism than their UK counterparts; this was evidenced in at least a quarter of the UK interviews whereby respondents appeared to be less confident in how they were defining the third wave. Moreover, several interviewees specifically identified third wave feminism with American feminism and with certain authors in particular:

Well, *I'm not 100% sure what third wave means* but I think for me it suggests contemporary feminism, younger feminists in particular, *I'm not really sure when it started though...* (London, UK)

I suppose I associate third wave feminism with American authors like Naomi Wolf and people like that, *I'm not sure what it means in the UK* but I suppose it refers to the recent resurgence of feminist activism here? (Bristol, UK)

The above quotations reinforce the relative newness of third wave in the UK compared with the US. Furthermore, the association of the wave with a form of American feminism is telling, particularly when considered alongside critiques of the third wave (discussed below). For some interviewees at least, there was a degree of uncertainty in the discussion concerning third wave feminism, this can perhaps partly be explained by the relative lack of popular feminist texts that explicitly identify as third wave in the UK, but it is also worth noting that there may have been some hesitation in providing a definition of third wave feminism when asked by a feminist academic.

Conversely, there was noticeably less hesitation on the part of the US interviewees in defining third wave feminism. Although there were a range of different interpretations, the vast majority of the respondents noted its place in the chronology of feminism and were able to cite and identify a range of authors and ideas that the third wave spoke to:

I took this class on third wave feminism at college and I loved it; I found ManifestA² really inspiring and motivating when I read it. I love the fact that it helped regenerate feminist discussion and activism and it really appealed to me and my friends at college (Portland, US)

Third wave feminism is all about intersectionality and you can see that when you go back to what Rebecca Walker was saying within the context of the Clarence Hill-Anita Thomas hearing³. It's about reclaiming feminism from the backlash and doing it

² Self-identified third wave feminist book by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000)

³ The Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas trial concerned the former's accusation of the latter's sexual harassment. This captured the nation's attention as Thomas had been nominated to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States and both were African Americans, thus bring up questions of sex and race.

in ways that respond to the global challenges that have emerged since the 1990s.

(NY, US)

As the quotations underscore, for US feminists third wave feminism can be temporally located, in terms of its emergence, and is understood within wider political debates. Identifying specific authors reinforces the extent to which for the US interviewees the third wave had a clear sense of emergence, leadership and series of issues and priorities. This was underpinned by reference to specific cultural trends, in particular to the Riot Grrrl movement, and modes of communication, such as zines⁴:

When I think of third wave I think of Riot Grrrl, you know that whole thing about girls reclaiming their bodies and their right to do what they want to do with them.

Kathleen Hanna and people like that really inspired me (Portland, US)

I used to write a zine! Me and my friends used to love reading zines it was so much fun and it really felt like we had a wider community which was really important to us

growing up in a small town where there weren't many feminists (NY, US)

For the US interviewees the third wave was associated with wider cultural shifts and trends. This association was not evident in the interviews with UK-based feminists, who, whilst sometimes name-checking specific authors, did not define third wave feminism in terms of cultural trends.

⁴ Zines are homemade publications that became very popular amongst US feminists the early 1990s, usually highly personal zines were often traded or sold for small amounts of money. For a full account of the history of zines and the feminist movement see Piepmeyer, 2009.

Returning to the typology set out in Table 1, the interviewees engaged with those five categories to varying degrees; with UK and US feminists stressing slightly different aspects. The responses of the interviewees to the question of third wave feminism were coded according to the categories in order to see which of the ways of defining third wave feminism were most useful. Table 2 below sets out which of the various categories were most prominent in the responses.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

The table above indicates that a chronological approach was the category most frequently used by US feminists in defining third wave feminism; interviewees regularly noted the media backlash against the second wave of feminism and specifically identified the early 1990s as the key starting point for the third wave. For US feminists it was a clear way of defining the third wave, even whilst some went on to explain it further through the use of different categories. Conversely, UK feminists were less likely to explain the third wave in terms of chronology, this is unsurprising in the context of UK feminism given that the resurgence of activism occurred nearly a decade after that in the US and is less well known and used as a term. UK feminists were also more likely to note the generational characteristic of third wave feminism, in part this is linked to chronology but for many UK feminists without a clear sense of when the UK third wave started, this meant that greater emphasis had to be placed instead on the role of younger women in the movement. UK feminists understanding of third wave feminism was based more on a thematic definition, with many of them citing the objectification of women as a key concern of the third wave. In sum, what the interviews with the feminists in the US and UK confirm is that there is no single definition of third wave feminism. Moreover, feminists in the UK were comparatively

less confident in defining the third wave, again unsurprising given the purchase the term has in the US. It is worth noting that very few of the interviewees highlighted the oppositional framework, this is in line with some third wave texts that have been careful to stress the points of commonality between the waves.

Self-defining as third wave?

Feminist subjectivities have attracted considerable attention from feminist scholars who are keen to explore feminist identity through ideological or geographical lenses. It is also true that many feminists when seeking to explain their feminist politics will also identify as second wave feminists. Defining as a third wave feminist whilst the third wave is, arguably, ongoing obviously raises problems and it may only be with the passage of time that we see feminists in greater numbers seeking to identify the third wave as the moment during which they identified as feminists. During the interviews participants were asked whether or not they identified as third wave. Given the plurality and diversity of definitions, for the vast majority of interviewees this did not result in a straightforward yes or no:

Well, I'm too young to have been involved in second wave feminism but *I'm not sure if that makes me third wave*. I'm definitely in favour of intersectionality so I suppose I could be? (Bristol, UK)

Yeah, *I guess I would describe myself that way but probably not unless someone asked me* that very question. I'm a feminist first and foremost (NY, US)

So for the above quotations, the first could be classified as a 'yes, but' third wave feminist whilst the second would be classified as a third wave feminist, even whilst noting that the prefix 'third wave' isn't central to her feminist identity. There was more hesitation evident

in the answers of UK feminists in both cities compared with feminists in the US. Again, this shouldn't be surprising given the fact that third wave feminism has been around for longer in the US and is better established. Others explicitly rejected a third wave label:

I identify with the strand of feminism that's most obviously linked to the radical element of second wave feminism (Bristol, UK).

No, I don't consider myself third wave. I consider myself to be a radical, socialist feminist (NY, US).

Those who rejected a third wave label tended to be those who explicitly identified as radical feminist, this was true for feminists in the US and UK and across all four cities. Others offered criticisms of third wave feminism, particularly those who viewed third wave feminism as synonymous with a conservative-leaning post-feminism. Moreover, it was clear that for some UK interviewees the third wave represented a particular type of American feminism that did not represent their own beliefs:

I think of third wave as an American theoretical trend of feminism which I don't see as particularly feminist at all. If you take texts like ManifestA say which I think is a pretty good example of feminism being de-politicised. (London, UK)

To me third wave is about individuals. *It's about individual choice and empowerment* and I don't see what's feminist about that if you believe in collectivism. (Bristol, UK)

Despite these critiques of third wave feminism, most of the interviewees who did not identify as third wave recognised its value in a chronological framework as articulated by one Bristol feminist: 'I think it's useful to think about the third wave historically it does

suggest we're in a moment of resurgence.' Thus, the value of the label shifts when using different interpretive approaches: where chronology is stressed, feminists appear more willing to identify with it, but, for instance, when the third wave is associated with attempts to reclaim certain aspects (or performances) of femininity, such as burlesque dancing, then it tends to become a pejorative term.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

The data in table 3 indicates that US feminists were overall more willing to identify as third wave than their UK counterparts. As third wave feminism is less well developed in the UK this is unsurprising. Furthermore, the individualism that the Bristol interviewee highlights in the above quotation reflects a more obvious attachment to the idea of collectivism that was not always present in the discussions with American feminists. Moreover, UK interviewees were less confident about whether or not they were third wave and were more likely to provide caveats for describing themselves as such. The most frequently cited reason for being third wave in both the US and UK was down to chronology and generation; those interviewees who had not been born or active in the second wave identified more strongly with the third wave. Conversely, those who did not identify as third wave were much more likely to cite ideological differences, specifically the failure of the third wave to provide an adequate radical socialist critique of the current patriarchal and capitalist nexus. To their minds, third wave feminism had accepted the main tenets of neoliberalism surrounding the importance of individual empowerment and achievement which had led to a subsequent failure to properly engage in collective struggle.

The data from these interviews suggests a number of important caveats when considering the utility of the term Anglo-American feminism, particularly when couched within a wave narrative. It is clear that there is a greater sense of what actually constitutes the third wave in the US than in the UK context. However, the term third wave feminism clearly does have some purchase with feminists in the UK. Whilst for the US feminists the third wave is inextricably linked to specific modes of activism (e.g. zines) or cultural trends (e.g. Riot Grrl) this is missing from UK reflections on feminism. To that end it is not surprising that there was greater criticism of the term third wave feminism amongst the UK interviewees as they did not have the same frames available to them for explaining their vision of what a UK third wave might look like. Intersectionality featured prominently in both sets of interviewees but again US feminists were more comfortable talking about how their feminism explicitly engaged with intersectionality in practice (e.g. holding fat feminist awareness sessions or specific women with disability conferences).

During the discussions with the feminist activists it became clear that a more neutral chronological approach lessened the chances of critique of the third wave for those who might otherwise be hostile to, or at least sceptical of either the use of the wave narrative or what the third wave has come to symbolise in the minds of, particularly radical, feminists. Hence, the way in which third wave feminism is interpreted can have a significant influence on whether or not feminists may choose to self-define as such. This problem of interpretation becomes even more important when considering the rise in discussions concerning a fourth wave of feminism. Although the term appears from time to time on feminist blogs, and also in some feminist writings (see Cochrane, 2013, Baumgardner, 2012),

there is still little consensus concerning what it actually refers to. This is unsurprising given the confusion still surrounding third wave feminism and the emergent discussions surrounding the fourth wave.

Scholars have long since argued that there need to be feminisms (plural) rather than feminism (singular) (Humm, 1992) and for this reason the temporal overlap of the waves of feminism is perhaps an inevitability as we move away from the arguably restrictive 'socialist' 'liberal and 'radical' prefixes. Given that the wave term can act as an umbrella under which varying feminisms and feminist campaigns can coalesce, it is natural that perhaps new generations of feminists should seek to highlight the popularity of feminism by heralding a new wave.

Conclusion and discussion

Third wave feminism is a term much used in academic circles and in popular writings in the US. Despite a relative lack of clarity regarding the term it is important to appreciate how and what the term signifies to contemporary activists, moreover a comparative approach allows us to better evaluate which aspects of third wave feminism have particular purchase. Whilst a chronological approach dominates both US and UK feminist uses of the concept of the third wave this is obviously mediated by an emergence time-lag which spans around a decade in terms of emergence points in the US and UK. This is important as the political climate and especially the post 9-11 context has influenced most forms of political activism and engagement in recent years. Thus, for the US feminists the term third wave can clearly

be temporally and culturally located, whereas for the UK feminists there was more uncertainty although all acknowledged the current resurgence of feminist activism.

This article has sought to demonstrate the value of concept-clarifying for academics, particularly when the terms become part of the popular lexicon. The term third wave does have some significance for feminists in the UK but given the differences in terms of approaches it is important to caution against the use of the blanket term Anglo-American feminism to denote a brand of feminism when significant differences exist between the two. Around half of the UK interviewees either clearly or less clearly identify themselves as third wave feminists, this is important as it demonstrates the importance for scholars to both engage with the term and not merely dismiss it as a tool of division amongst and between feminist activists. This article has highlighted that when a 'neutral' approach to defining feminism's third wave is adopted (one based on chronology) then this dampens hostility to the concept. Intersectionality is a concept that also appears to be a positive marker of third wave feminism, despite feminists often observing that the idea is not new to feminism. For those who seek to use the wave narrative to signify continuity between and across the feminist movements, the lack of emphasis placed upon an oppositional framing of third wave feminism should be good news.

Appendix A:

The data for this research was gathered as part of a broader project exploring third wave feminism and political engagement in the US and UK. The number and timing of the interviews undertaken with feminists are set out in table 1 below. Interviews were conducted in public spaces, such as coffee shops, or, less frequently, in the interviewee's office.

[INSERT APPENDIX TABLE HERE]

Semi-structured interviews were conducted which allowed for a degree of flexibility in the direction of the discussion. Interviewees were asked what the term third wave feminism meant to them and whether or not they identified as third wave, if they hadn't already addressed this point. Those who did not identify as third wave were asked how they would describe their feminist identity. Full anonymity was guaranteed to the interviewees, hence no biographical data regarding age, sex, sexuality or ethnicity, *inter alia*, is provided here as participants (particularly from the smaller cities) might be easier to identify.

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