

Hopefulness, solidarity, and determination for *Me Too*: Impacts of a globalized social movement on female post-secondary students' emerging professional identities and aspirations

Kaela Jubas, Christine Jarvis & Grainne McMahon

Introduction

Like Raymond Williams's description of the late 20th century, these 'are not only confusing and bewildering [times]; they are also profoundly unsettling' (Williams, 2015, p. 218). The antidote proposed by Williams is hope: 'It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope' (2015, p. 219). Hope is a core value in the field and practice of adult education. As Stephen Brookfield notes, adult educators take up their work because they 'want to create a better world. They want to help people get a fair bite of the cherry, increase political participation, promote activism in marginalized communities, and help the exploited and homeless make a living wage' (2016, p. 27). In many ways, the MeToo social movement exemplifies Williams' ideas, not only about hope but also about the pedagogical potential of culture. The people at the centre of MeToo — female actors based in Hollywood — are engaged in the cultural work of story-making and story-sharing. As they stepped out of the fictional stories familiar to audience members and told their own stories, they contributed to a real-life story of marginalisation, abuse, and demands for justice, and illustrated that hope can continue to be a cultural and a pedagogical commitment.

Written in the decades before computers were common and before the Internet became a conveyor of everyday information, Williams's texts focus on culture and community at and beneath the level of the nation-state. With border-crossing cultural texts and practices now ubiquitous, it is tempting to agree with those who argue that national borders have become irrelevant and that global society has replaced national societies (Beck, 2006). Our study of learning about and from the MeToo movement indicates that, on the contrary, local and national specifics continue to matter. It is not a matter of *either* local *or* global circumstances; rather, the local *and* the global are apparent in a dynamic Gramscian dialectic.

In drawing on and updating Williams's important theoretical insights, we situate our work at the juncture of two scholarly streams: social movement learning, which views social movements as sites of learning about inequitable social conditions and resistance (Cunningham 1998; Finger 1989; Welton 1993), and public pedagogy, which likewise views cultural products and processes as pedagogical (Jarvis, 2012; Jarvis, 2015; Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas, 2015; Jubas et al., 2020, Sandlin & Walther, 2009; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Consistent with the tension between hope and despair, we elaborate three tensions experienced by study participants. First, and least surprisingly, MeToo exposes the reality that prevalent discourses of equality diverge from practices and behaviours that continue to demean women. Second, the global MeToo movement manifests local and occupational nuances. Third, there are benefits and pitfalls to having celebrities at the centre

of social movements. After providing an overview of MeToo and our study, we move to a discussion of our findings.

MeToo: Emergence of a movement

The MeToo hashtag was introduced in this context in 2006 by Los Angeles community activist Tarana Burke to convey the idea that those who experience gender-based or sexual mistreatment are not alone (Langone, 2018). It came to widespread public attention in 2017, after female Hollywood-based actors used it to make public their experiences of harassment and assault by powerful male producers and colleagues. Although some of those experiences include criminal assault, many others exemplify ‘the kind of inappropriate sexual creepiness that men just feel entitled to’ (Perkins, 2017, p. 3). In the months since actors tweeted about their experiences and encouraged other women to do the same, the movement spread well beyond Hollywood celebrities and their fans, exposing the use of ‘sexualized violence ... [and] misuse of positions of power in all social sectors [and] work situations ... and against all those who threaten to disturb the heteronormative order, including women, men, and LGBTQ* [people]’ (Neumeier, 2018, p. 1). *Time* magazine even selected MeToo activists as ‘2017 Person of the Year’ (Langone, 2018).

Witnessing the messages about and alignments with MeToo, we — three scholars who self-identify as feminists — became interested in how it might help ordinary women who are preparing to enter career life learn something about their burgeoning sense of professional self and opportunity. We acknowledge three points at the outset: First, there are different strands of feminism; second, an exploration of the specific form(s) of feminism apparent in MeToo and our own work exceeds the scope of this chapter; third, although we acknowledge that gender is a non-binary construct, we stick to a binary male/female division which reflects much of the discussion in and around MeToo.

Study overview

This chapter details the first phase of a qualitative multi-case study, a flexible methodology suited to investigations of new questions and complex, real-world social phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Simons, 2009). We are exploring how and what women are learning from MeToo about gender and patriarchy, the ongoing importance of locality, and how contemporary hallmarks of public pedagogy—celebrities and social media—are changing social movements’ shape and function. For this phase, the three of us—two based at England’s University of Huddersfield and the third at Canada’s University of Calgary—delivered in-class presentations to recruit participants, female-identified students in professional courses in Huddersfield (i.e., education, law, media, allied health fields). We limited eligibility to female students in professional education because we are interested in how a social movement focused on overcoming sexism, often in the workplace, encourages women to think about themselves and the professional pathways that lie ahead. Sixteen participants completed a semi-structured interview and a short demographics questionnaire, used to generate participant profiles.

Findings

As noted above, we have organised this discussion according to three tensions that emerged in analysis. We articulate these tensions as being between equality and discrimination, the local and the global, and benefits and costs of celebrity engagement.

Tension 1: Equality/Discrimination

Participants generally agreed that gender discrimination is less common or extreme than it used to be; nonetheless, most reported gender-based disparities in their professional fields, especially because top-level decision-makers often are men. Alex, a journalism student shared this comment about music journalism:

[I]t portrays itself as a gender fluid industry [and] ... I would like to think ... that the same opportunities are open to both [women and men], but you've got such clearly segregated, like, male journalists only talking to each other. Then the higher up journalists ... [with] these opportunities ... are obviously only going to offer them to those they talked to first, on kind of a name-to-name basis ... although ... they might not have meant to close it off to female journalists. ... [I]t becomes that way because they were only interacting and socialising with other male journalists who they see as equal or better than them.

Another journalism student, Annie, hoped for equal opportunity in her field but realised that senior-level reporters and editors influence assignments and media content. 'I feel there is quite still a stigma of what is published and what is not published in terms of ... females', she noted. Thinking about her prospects in an allied health field, Emily wondered, 'Will a male get a job instead of me? And whenever I do go for a job interview, I think, will there be a female or male interviewer?' Law student Bella said, 'I know that a lot of females are trying to work a lot harder so that they are more noticed'.

Several participants noted that their understanding of sexism was enhanced as MeToo helped them learn about nuances, extent, and impacts of gender harassment. Alex even discussed 'micro-aggressions', 'like men going on and explaining things [to women], ... using a lot of endearing terms like calling them hon or love. ... [W]hen it's in a professional workplace it becomes kind of, not creepy, but loaded'. Interested in music, she went on to caution about 'predatory behaviour' in the music industry that can be directed towards young female fans or artists.

Participants also learned about the importance of MeToo in providing a space for women to speak up and modelling the possibility to do so. Kay thought that 'this is about awareness for females to speak out'. Katie noted, 'Many people *do* go through this and they do not mention it to anyone. ... [Because of] the MeToo incident, they do talk about it, more freely'. Alex noted the importance of the movement for validating personal experiences, for herself and other women: '[E]ven if people are telling you that it's not valid ... only you can know what you went through. ... It's valid and did happen no matter what people want to try to say'.

Although women appear as the primary activists and beneficiaries of MeToo, Elaine noted its importance in educating both men and women:

I think it has made people more aware. I mean, even before I had heard of MeToo, I know that women do deal with all sorts of things and they do go through all sorts of things in their work or just out and about.

Despite beliefs that MeToo exemplified the potential for social movements to help people learn important lessons, participants also identified limitations. Some thought that the lack of organisational heft behind the movement would jeopardise its momentum or that MeToo's lessons were taken not seriously. Roxy, a participant training to teach early years workers, discussed her efforts to speak to her trainees about professional communication and their inclination to dismiss offensive comments as the innocent cultural practice of 'banter'. Also studying in education, Harriet thought that the impact of MeToo was diminished by powerful interests:

As much as MeToo is a fantastic thing in a grassroots level, in places like this [workplace], it is not happening. There is somebody, the powers that be, who don't want to know or are turning a deaf ear and it's frightening. ... I think it's a wonderful thing, but I just feel it will be a fad.

A few echoed critiques of MeToo and older critiques of feminism. Harriet, who was studying in education, sympathised with White men: 'I believe in us all being equal, nobody being racist, sexist, whatever, but I do feel that the White man especially is being persecuted for a lot of things at the moment'. Similarly, Lucy concurred with family and friends who thought that MeToo 'is maybe taken too far and I do feel a lot of women have gone above and beyond. ... I feel sometimes that when some people make a comment it just gets blown out'.

Tension emerged, then, in participants' hope for widespread awareness-building and change and their apprehension about persistent inequality and discrimination. As students in professional education, they directed their hope and apprehension to the workplace, as well as to public spaces such as clubs and streets. Supportive of MeToo and related discourses of gender equality, they were nonetheless measured in their endorsement of the movement's viability and impact, and—sometimes—purpose.

Tension 2: Somewhere/Everywhere

MeToo is developing globally precisely because patriarchy and sexism operate across the world and, nationally, across sectors. Kay, a law student participant, explained, 'I think, like, from a guy's perspective, they always think they are more superior than a female. ... I see it in work practice a lot. ... I think it happens everywhere'. Sabrina, a student in education, reflected on the aim of MeToo, saying, 'It was such a big thing and it is common. There is gender discrimination everywhere'. Pharmacy student Linda said simply, 'I mean all over the world, I bet there are loads of MeToo protests everywhere'.

Still, local and personal circumstances affected how participants understood and experienced MeToo. Annie, a participant in media studies who came from Eastern Europe, found that her education and the social mores in England did not mesh with her home country's more conservative attitudes. She struggled to overcome the belief that women who are harassed or abused bring it on

themselves—a view that remains the cultural norm in her home country and continues to appear as a trope in England, despite rhetoric of gender mainstreaming and equality. In her words,

Maybe because you are wearing a more revealing skirt or shirt or whatever, you are kind of almost asking for it. And [I] would have thought that before but after MeToo ... it made me realise that it isn't really about that. It's still men not, I don't know, I don't want to say it's really their fault because it's not fully, but I still feel like it is their responsibility. ... In my head I think that it's their fault, I just feel bad saying that.

Annie conveyed the ease with which people, regardless of gender, can revert to the view that gender-based or sexual abuse is provoked by women's attire or demeanour rather than by the permissions that men acquire through cultural norms and allowances that assume local specificity even as they resonate globally. She also conveyed the importance of MeToo in helping her learn to problematise that view.

Interviewees' courses and placements were based in specific micro-environments, which did not always reflect official professional or national values. Racialised as South Asian and studying in an allied health field, Katie described the barrage of harassment meted out by one male practicum supervisor, also South Asian. On top of touching her inappropriately, 'talking about sexual stuff', and asking for contact information, he routinely dropped papers behind her, instructing her to pick them up so that he could watch her bend over. She explained that, because South Asian women often are seen as docile, they can become easy targets in places of work or study, especially in small organisations with few supports and recourses. She was upset that many of her own friends minimised and normalised the harassment. 'But to me, it's not normal', she said. Although she initially found rumours about that manager hard to believe, through a combination of her experience and research into MeToo, Katie learned that even after reaching high-level jobs, some people 'jeopardise their career because they do foolish stuff'.

Some pharmacy student participants described the predicament they faced if managing (typically male) pharmacists held strong views about sexuality, leaving them to handle complex, sensitive medical matters for female clients. They felt isolated in their struggles to balance personal and espoused professional values with those encountered at the placement.

Participants preparing to enter other fields and with other racial identities also reflected on lessons from MeToo. Although many acknowledged a persistent cultural expectation for women to enact a pleasant demeanour, White participants seemed most comfortable asserting themselves in the face of gender-based or sexual harassment or abuse. Kathleen, a White, British-born trainee teacher preparing students to enter the beauty industry, where they might work in small salons with male clients and bosses, took the risk of gender-based or sexual abuse in the workplace seriously. She commented, 'If I had my own salon or spa, I would probably have it written on the wall: 'If you feel the need to kick them out, kick them out;'.

Often, interviewees moved seamlessly between discussing not just local but intimate experiences of harassment and abuse *and* discussing global, systemic discrimination in recruitment and the lack of women at the top even of female dominated professions. Some had ideas for tackling abuse in professional cultures, which are embedded within *and* move across local contexts. Some participants preparing to work as educators spoke about ensuring that their students understood harassment and how to tackle it. Media students interested in becoming journalists

noted how they could use their work as a platform to speak out about bad practices associated with MeToo and more generally. Overall, participants believed that, as it spread globally, MeToo could help women *and* men become more aware of gender-based and sexual abuse in their local and professional contexts. Hearing women speak about their experiences and stories of perpetrators being held to account gave them reason for hopefulness, regardless of where and what they would practise.

Tension 3: Benefits/Costs of celebrity involvement

Most participants were members of the millennial generation who came of age and were living in a culture characterised by social media and celebrity. Regardless of field of study, participants knew the name Harvey Weinstein, not as a Hollywood producer but as a sexual predator. Roxy articulated the experience of many participants who might have heard anecdotes about sexual abuse but ‘never really paid attention to it until the Harvey Weinstein thing came out and then it was just plastered all over the media. ... I found myself googling what it was and where it had sort of stemmed from’. Some, such as Rachel, indicated that it was only when we spoke to their classes that they attached the names of famous people whose stories were circulating to MeToo:

Rachel: I only heard about it when you came to our lecture and promoted it. I had seen the MeToo hashtag on Instagram. ...

Kaela: Okay. When I said some of the other names, had you heard those names before, like Harvey Weinstein?

Rachel: Yes.

Kaela: So you heard about some of the stories, you just didn’t realise they were connected?

Rachel: To MeToo, yes.

Several participants were fans of celebrities whom they followed on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Interestingly, although many indicated that they did not rely on mainstream media, some continued to watch the news on television and a number remembered reading reposted or retweeted articles, suggesting that mainstream media might be retaining an educational function that is downplayed. Others, notably journalism students, did consult mainstream outlets such as the BBC regularly and were, not surprisingly, relatively familiar with MeToo and its background.

Regardless of their information source, participants agreed that coverage of celebrities’ stories was vital in the movement’s development. Media students were especially savvy in appreciating how celebrities’ stories gave the movement prominence. As Talia explained, ‘right in my lectures ... we learn about the newsworthiness value of news. And it is basically, like, this theory that you only care about elite people, ... so could you imagine it happening to you’. Participants in courses outside media also recognised the sway that celebrities hold. In Kathleen’s words, ‘I think celebrities and what they say is [considered] the be all and end all’.

The celebrities central to MeToo might even have an inspirational effect. Brenda pondered whether hearing about difficult experiences of famous people 'can make other people come out and say, Oh this happened to me too, and make them feel better about what happened to them and know that it is not their fault'. In feeling drawn and connected to celebrities, participants thought that the accounts of well-known, admired women and the show of support for them online, in the media, and on the red carpets clarified that material and cultural privilege is not an escape route from abuse. In Bella's words, 'Everyone is in it together'.

For MeToo, though, celebrities are both 'good' and 'bad' guys. From performers with major label contracts, such as R. Kelly, to YouTube sensations such as Austin Jones, examples of male performers who exploit female fans abound. Interested in music journalism, Alex recognised that there are 'a lot of male lead singers of bands using their authority to kind of pressure young fans or ... any female fans into doing what they want'. Moreover, participants recognised that even well-meaning celebrities have agendas and are vulnerable to scandal and trivialisation. Although she followed actor Rose McGowan online, Lucy had little regard for what other celebrities have to say: 'A lot of other celebrities, ... I can't listen to them because I feel like ... what [those] people say is pointless sometimes'. In order to maintain momentum and build credibility, movements established by or engaged with celebrities might want to look elsewhere in recruiting leaders and activists.

Closing thoughts

This chapter contributes to the scholarship of social movement learning and public pedagogy and illustrates how both inform lifelong, life-wide learning careers. Our analysis indicates that MeToo contributes to female trainee professionals' formulation of and reflection upon their emerging work-related identities, anticipations, and hopes. At the same time, MeToo competes with powerful sexist or misogynistic discourses that remain prominent, whether in news and entertainment media or among teachers, managers, family members, and peers. The hopefulness conjured up by hearing famous people who are at a geographic and social distance share their experiences comes into tension with personally, professionally, and locally contextualised messages and encounters. Likewise, rhetoric of change and measures to promote respect and equality are in tension with a reality that many female students and workers will be supervised by men and that gaps in gender-based privilege remain apparent in work-related education and workplaces. Hope is fostered, promoted, cautious, and, sometimes, dashed. Like learning, hope and contemporary social movements are, simply, complicated.

References

- Beck, U. (2006) Living in the world risk society. *Economy and Society* [Online], 35 (3), pp. 329-345. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140600844902>
- Brookfield, S. (2016) The future of social justice in adult education. *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal*, 1(1), pp. 27-30.
- Cunningham, P. (1998) The social dimension of transformative learning. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 7, pp. 15-28.

- Finger, M. (1989) New social movements and their implications for adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly* [Online], 40 (1), pp. 15-22. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171368904000102>
- Jarvis, C. (2012) Fiction, empathy and lifelong learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* [Online], 31 (6), pp. 743-758. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2012.713036>
- Jarvis, C. (2015) How to be a woman: Models of masochism and sacrifice in young adult fiction. In: Jubas, K., Taber, N. & Brown, T. eds. *Popular culture as pedagogy: Research in the field of adult education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishing, pp. 135-150.
- Jarvis, C. & Burr, V. (2011) The transformative potential of popular television: The case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 9 (3), pp. 165-182.
- Jubas, K. (2015) Giving substance to ghostly figures: How female nursing students respond to a cultural portrayal of “women’s work” in healthcare. In: Jubas, K., Taber, N. & Brown, T. eds. *Popular culture as pedagogy: Research in the field of adult education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 83-101.
- Jubas, K., Johnston, D. & Chiang, A. (2020) Public pedagogy as border-crossing: How Canadian fans learn about health care from American TV, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* [Online], 35 (1), pp. 41-54. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2017.1367319>
- Langone, A. (Mar. 22, 2018) #MeToo and Time’s Up founders explain the difference between the 2 movements – And how they’re alike. *Time* [Online]. Available from: <https://time.com/5189945/whats-the-difference-between-the-metoo-and-times-up-movements/> [Accessed 13 February 2020].
- Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016) *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Neumeier, B. (2018) Editorial. *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* [Online], 70, pp. 1-3. Available from: <http://genderforum.org/metoo-and-its-ambivalent-repercussions/>
- Perkins, L. (2017) Introduction. In: Perkins, L. ed. *#MeToo: Essays about how and why this happened, what it means, and how to make sure it never happens again*. Riverdale: Riverdale Avenue Books, pp. 1-6.
- Sandlin, J. A. & Walther, C. S. (2009) Complicated simplicity: Moral identity formation and social movement learning in the voluntary simplicity movement. *Adult Education Quarterly* [Online], 59 (4), pp. 298-317. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609334137>
- Simons, H. (2009) *Case study research in practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Welton, M. (1993) Social revolutionary learning: The new social movements as learning sites. *Adult Education Quarterly* [Online], 43 (3), pp. 152-164. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713693043003002>
- Williams, R. (2015) Resources for a journey of hope. In: McGuigan, J. ed. *Raymond Williams: A short counter-revolution — “towards 2000” Revisited*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, pp. 195-219.

Wright, R. R. & Sandlin, J. A. (2009) Cult TV, hip hop, shape-shifters, and vampire slayers: A review of the literature at the intersection of adult education and popular culture. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59 (2), pp. 118-141.