# Femi-Nazis and Bra Burning Crazies: A Qualitative Evaluation of Contemporary Beliefs about Feminism

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**Abstract** Despite data demonstrating a substantial gender gap in the United States, many women do not self-identify as feminist. An evaluation of the literature suggests four potential reasons for the lack of identification, 1) a negative connotation associated with the term "feminist," 2) the dichotomous presentation of feminism (e.g., the lack of grey area between feminism and non-feminism), 3) a belief that feminism may no longer be necessary, and 4) a perceived lack of cultural relevance. Previous research on feminism has not adequately addressed the dynamic and contextual factors that can influence a woman's decision of whether to self-identify. Therefore, the goal of this project was to use qualitative methodology to allow for the identification of potential personal barriers for women associating with the feminist movement. The data suggest that feminism is viewed as an obsolete entity with largely negative connotations associated with the term. The implications of these barriers and several suggestions for change in the movement are discussed.

**Keywords** Feminism · Gender roles · Self-identification · Qualitative data

The term "feminism" represents a wide variety of movements and ideologies. Among the most prevalent feminisms are liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist, psychoanalytic, care-focused, multicultural/global/colonial, ecofeminist, and postmodern/third wave (Tong 2009). While these movements share many perspectives, including a belief that women are treated inferior to men in society, they differ in their goals and specific mechanisms for achieving these goals. For example, generally speaking, liberal feminists seek to gain political and social equality for women by modifying the existing systems in place. Conversely, radical feminists believe that patriarchy's grasp on society runs too deep to be reformed, thus calling for a complete reconceptualization

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of social and cultural systems (A full analysis of the various forms of feminism goes beyond the scope of this paper; thus see Tong 2009 for a complete review). Nonetheless, from a lay perspective, it appears that feminism is conceptualized as an umbrella term encompassing many of the aforementioned movements and ideologies. As such, the focus of this paper is to speak about the feminist movement as a whole, in order to understand contemporary women's identification (or lack of) with feminism.

Feminisms share an overarching belief that the gender imbalance is due to patriarchy, the system of social structures and practices that facilitates men's ability to dominate women in society (Walby 1989). Thus, feminist movements attempt to combat this oppression by working for gender equality in various social arenas. In general, these feminisms maintain three tenets: 1) the need for wide spread documentation and dissemination of the historical exploitation, devaluing, and oppression of women; 2) the commitment to changing the conditions of women through empowerment and education while attaching equal value and respect to all genders and groups; and 3) the active criticism of traditional intellectual pursuits and an embracing of new traditions (Acker et al. 1983; Singh 2007; Walker and Thompson 1984). Despite major gains over the last century, gender inequality is still widespread; thus, the goals fostered by feminisms are still necessary.

Although some people in the United States believe that gender equality has been achieved, statistics indicate otherwise. On average, women earn nearly 18 % less than men with a substantial gender gap within specific occupations. That is, only 8 % of women are employed in the relatively high-paying fields of computers and engineering, compared with 44 % of men. Similarly, 69 % of female professionals work in the lower paying fields of education and healthcare, compared with 30 % of male professionals (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Also, women comprise only 25 % of publicly elected positions and spend an average of 11 more hours each week engaged in unpaid labor relative to men (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Clearly, there are still large gender discrepancies in social, political, and economic arenas that need to be addressed.

There are numerous psychological benefits associated with self-identification as a feminist (see Yakushko 2007, for a review). Specifically, female feminists have increased self-esteem and self-efficacy compared to women who do not self-identify as feminist (Eisele and Stake 2008). Additionally, compared to those with traditional values, women who report feminist values maintain higher levels of overall well being (Yakushko 2007). Engagement in feminism has also been associated with increased empowerment (Downing and Roush 1985), higher educational attainment and income (Walsh and Heppner 2006), and lower levels of psychological distress when confronting sexist events (Zucker and Bay-Cheng 2010). However, despite the many benefits associated with a feminist identification, the number of women who actually identify remains discouragingly small with some national estimates hovering around 21 % (McCabe 2005).

Although data suggest that women are in a subordinate position relative to men, many women find it difficult to identify with feminism. The research literature suggests several explanations for this lack of identification. One reason may be the negative connotations and stereotypes, which have become associated with feminism because of the stigma attached to both the term and the movement (McCabe 2005). Labels such as "femi-nazis," "man-haters," and "bra burning crazies" may lead traditional-minded women to shy away from self-identification, despite their agreement with the tenets of the feminist movement. For example, 76.5 % of female college undergraduates did not outright identify as feminist although 56.5 % agreed with the ideals of feminism

(Ramsey et al. 2007). Similarly, women who read a vignette containing positive stereotypes about feminists were twice as likely to self-identify as women who read a vignette containing negative stereotypes or those in the control group who read a neutral vignette (Roy et al. 2007). This suggests that the connotations of feminism may play a significant role in whether or not women self-identify as feminist.

A second reason suggested for the lack of self-identification with feminism is a tendency to dichotomize identification into categories such as "feminist" or "non-feminist;" however, identification may be more dynamic and continuous rather than categorical. For example, there may be women who identify with some principles of feminism but dislike the label (Duncan 2010). Similarly, the ideals of feminism may be unique and personal to each individual as they experience their psychosocial climate (Berryman-Fink and Verderber 1985). While there has been an increase in support for egalitarian gender roles since 1970, support for the feminist movement has remained stable or decreased slightly in the same time span (Houvouras and Carter 2008). There appears to be more public support for a term such as "women's movement" compared to "feminism" (Hall and Salupo Rodriguez 2003) suggesting that there may be a problem with the term "feminism" rather than the tenets of the movement. It is possible that specific attempts to define feminism have alienated women who may identify with some components but not others. Thus, the use of research strategies that do not seek to impose a predetermined definition of feminism on women may assist in understanding the specific reasons for women's disassociation with feminism (Aronson 2003).

A third reason for a lack of feminist identification may be that contemporary women feel empowered given the shift away from "traditional" gender roles. This empowerment may foster a belief that feminism is obsolete while simultaneously blinding many women to continued gender discrimination (Liss and Erchull 2010). In line with the fundamental attribution error, these women may recognize that gender inequalities exist, but create rationalizations to explain them (Aronson et al. 2007). For example, a woman who does not receive a promotion at work may attribute her failure to her biased boss. However, upon seeing a female coworker fail to receive a promotion, the same woman may attribute this failure to a poor work ethic rather than an external source. Thus, although some women are exposed to gender discrimination, they may not view the societal systems as the cause.

A fourth reason for women not identifying with feminism may be the perceived lack of cultural and/or social relevance. There are several explanations for this perception which may contribute to a difficulty self-identifying as feminist, especially for minority women. First are the conditions within mainstream feminism; specifically the tendency to focus on the experiences of White, middle-to-upper class women, making those who do not fit this narrow description feel marginalized and excluded (Crenshaw 1989, hooks 2000). In other words, the mainstream feminism movement may exclude minority women by minimizing their experiences, leading them to believe that they are not "part of the group." For example, women of low socio-economic status are often "silenced" and excluded from the overall discussion of feminism (Reid 1993). Also, African-American women may face specific challenges in the form of "double jeopardy," where they are forced to choose between their racial and gendered identities (Reid 1984). Thus, while African-American women may support some of the tenants of the feminist movement, the broad focus on "sexism" as a whole, rather than "racism

*and* sexism" may prevent many African-American women from joining the mainstream feminist movement (Hemmons 1980; Myaskovsky and Witting 1997).

A second explanation for the perceived lack of relevance and subsequent lack of minority self-identification within feminism is the specific conditions within cultural groups. For example, African Americans are often taught to view feminism as disruptive to their racial identity and group solidarity (White 2006). Women of color who self-identify as feminists may be ostracized by their non-white peers for being "White-washed," or overly influenced by the feminism of a White American culture (White 2001/2002). Taken together, these explanations highlight the difficulties that minority women face from both without (mainstream feminism) and from within (pressure from their own ethnic/cultural groups) which may influence their decision of whether or not to self-identify with the feminist movement.

Self-identification with feminism may be a complex and multi-faceted concept for women, requiring research methodology that examines how women experience feminism on a subjective level and captures relevant nuances. Qualitative research provides a contextual and dynamic perspective with which to analyze women's feminist identities (Wilkinson 1999). In fact, some research fails to differentiate between feminist attitudes and a feminist identity (Eisele and Stake 2008). While feminist attitudes refer simply to beliefs in the common tenets of the feminist movement, a feminist identity requires the individual to self-identify as a member of the collective social group (Eisele and Stake 2008). Although similar, these two constructs represent different goals and mindsets of the individual and therefore must be considered separately. Additionally, the majority of the existing research has focused on college samples, potentially limiting a comprehensive understanding of women in general.

Personal identity can be shaped by one's environment (Aronson et al. 2007); therefore, the contextual and dynamic factors that influence one's decision of whether or not to identify as feminist are critical. While assessing the reasons why women *do* identify as feminist may also be valuable, this particular project focuses on the factors associated with a non-feminist identity. As such, the goal of this project was to qualitatively examine why feminism, as both a movement and a term, is irrelevant to some women in the United States. To do so, a relatively large and diverse sample of women was asked to describe their experiences with feminism. Following the guide of Aronson's (2003) work, we asked women to tell their own stories in their own words rather than providing a precise definition of feminism and asking women whether or not they agree with it. Given the exploratory nature of this project, specific hypotheses were not made; rather, we simply provided women with an opportunity to share their thoughts, stories, and experiences regarding feminism.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

IRB approval was sought and attained from the authors' university. A total of 494 women who reported living in the United States completed an online survey. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling through social networking (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit) and e-mail contacts. Snowball sampling is a recruitment

technique, in which existing participants recruit additional participants from among their own network of acquaintances; thus leading the sample to grow like a "rolling snowball." Additionally, women's organizations were provided with a survey link to be forwarded to their group members. While some of the women's organizations may have been feminist in nature, feminist groups were not specifically targeted. Rather, the authors focused on groups that had primarily female members (e.g., women's roller derby teams, book clubs, mother's groups).

The majority of respondents were below the age of 35 (53.6 %) and identified as White (82.0 %). Demographic information is displayed in Table 1. A total of 97 (19.6 %) women reported that they did not identify as a feminist and their reasons are the focus of this paper. Of the remaining participants, 347 (70.2 %) identified as a feminist and 50 (10.1 %) were uncertain of their feminist identity. Of the women who did not identify as feminist, the majority were below the age of 35 (53.6 %) and White (81.4 %).

## Measure

The survey consisted of six demographic questions and three open-ended queries assessing participants' views on feminism: 1) do you identify as a feminist? If so, why. If not, why not? 2) What does your feminism or lack of feminism mean to you? Are you still in the process of figuring it out? What has the journey been like for you? 3) What experiences led you to your decision? Questions were deliberately broad in order to maximize the variety of responses. Since feminist identity is the product of one's social environment and unique individual experiences (Berryman-Fink and Verderber 1985), we were particularly interested in examining the reasons why women did or did not identify as a feminist. In the current study, participants were asked whether they consider themselves to be a feminist and to describe the reasons for their lack of self-identification.

## Coding Procedure

A thematic analysis was conducted and consisted of several stages. During the first stage, four raters (the lead researcher and three trained research assistants) independently read all responses to query 1 (do you consider yourself a feminist? If so, why? If not, why not?) and coded the response as "yes," "no," or "maybe." Since this study was primarily concerned with whether women self-identified as feminists, raters were instructed to interpret the response as little as possible. In other words, if a respondent wrote "no, but…," it was coded as a "no." All raters were trained to be as objective as possible, and each rater's data were kept private during the coding process so as to minimize bias and pressure from research assistants to agree with the lead researcher. Additionally, all coders (including the first author) were students in the same research lab, which minimized the potential of research assistants feeling coerced to agree with a lead researcher who was in an authoritative position. Next, the lead researcher evaluated the rater's codes for each response, and assessed overall agreement. At least three out of four of the raters agreed on 72 % of responses in which case the response was coded with the majority. Agreement was unable to be reached for 37 responses; thus a fifth rater (another trained research assistant) was used as a tiebreaker. For those 37

**Table 1** Demographic information

|  | Non-feminists | Percent | Feminists | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age |  |  |  |  |
| 18–25 | 29 | 29.9 % | 119 | 30.0 % |
| 26–35 | 23 | 23.7 % | 94 | 23.7 % |
| 36–45 | 16 | 16.5 % | 76 | 19.1 % |
| 46–55 | 19 | 19.6 % | 43 | 10.8 % |
| 56–65 | 8 | 8.3 % | 38 | 9.6 % |
| older than 65 | 2 | 2.1 % | 25 | 6.3 % |
| Total | 97 |  | 397 |  |
| Ethnicity |  |  |  |  |
| African American/Black | 1 | 1.0 % | 8 | 2.0 % |
| Asian/Islander | 1 | 1.0 % | 7 | 1.8 % |
| Indian | 0 | 0.0 % | 1 | 0.3 % |
| Middle Eastern | 0 | 0.0 % | 1 | 0.3 % |
| More than 1 | 2 | 2.1 % | 18 | 4.5 % |
| Spanish/Latina/Hispanic | 3 | 3.1 % | 5 | 1.3 % |
| White | 79 | 81.4 % | 326 | 82.1 % |
| N/A | 11 | 11.3 % | 31 | 7.8 % |
| Total | 97 |  | 397 |  |
| Religion |  |  |  |  |
| Agnostic/Atheist/None | 33 | 34.0 % | 181 | 45.6 % |
| Christian | 55 | 56.7 % | 126 | 31.7 % |
| Islam/Hindu/Muslim/Buddhist | 2 | 2.1 % | 7 | 1.8 % |
| Jewish | 5 | 5.2 % | 31 | 7.8 % |
| More than one | 0 | 0.0 % | 7 | 1.8 % |
| Other | 1 | 1.0 % | 13 | 3.3 % |
| Spiritual | 0 | 0.0 % | 13 | 3.3 % |
| Unitarian/Universalist | 0 | 0.0 % | 11 | 2.8 % |
| N/A | 1 | 1.0 % | 8 | 2.0 % |
| Total | 97 |  | 397 |  |
| US Region |  |  |  |  |
| Midwest | 17 | 17.5 % | 69 | 17.4 % |
| Northeast | 43 | 44.3 % | 154 | 38.8 % |
| South | 6 | 6.2 % | 79 | 19.9 % |
| West | 15 | 15.5 % | 38 | 9.6 % |
| more than 1 | 3 | 3.1 % | 44 | 11.1 % |
| N/A | 13 | 13.4 % | 13 | 3.3 % |
| Total | 97 |  | 397 |  |

cases, the fifth rater's response was compared to those of the original four coders and at least three out of five agreement was reached for all codes.

After establishing the identification code, the second stage consisted of three raters (the lead researcher and two different trained research assistants) independently reading the "no" responses and identifying themes for each response. Next, the lead researcher evaluated these responses and consolidated them into nine themes. Once the themes were established, the raters then discussed and confirmed each theme to ascertain agreement. Any discrepancies with the wording or the content of a theme were discussed until 100 % agreement was reached. Following these discussions, the codes were used to summarize the content of participants' responses.

The third stage consisted of the same three raters from stage two independently assigning each participant's response into one of the aforementioned nine themes. While a small number of responses offered more than one reason for their rejection of a feminist identity, the majority of responses contained one clear reason, thus each response was assigned to only one theme with no overlap. Next, these three raters discussed the assignment of themes in order to reach consensus. In order to categorize a response into a theme, two of the three raters needed consensus. If consensus could not be reached, a fourth opinion was obtained. After all responses had been assigned to a theme, the three raters examined each theme separately to determine whether the responses were appropriately assigned. Further, the themes were reexamined to determine if the names were appropriate and representative. Criteria for reassigning themes were identical to the initial procedure and none were removed.

## Results

Of the 494 women who responded, nearly 20 % of the sample reported that they did not identify as a feminist ($n$=97). All responses of women who did not identify as feminist were placed into one of the nine established themes. These themes were divided into three broad organizational categories. These categories and associated themes are summarized in Table 2 with examples and discussion provided below.

I.   Negative Stereotypes of Feminism

Approximately 45 % of the responses indicated an aversion to the stereotypes of "feminism" as the reason for not identifying as a feminist.

1.   Feminism equals extremism. About 21 % of the responses reflected participants' acceptance of the negative connotations associated with feminism.

For example, a middle-aged, White homemaker wrote:

*Most current, common description of feminist is [sic] too severe and exclusionary for me.*

A young, White woman from the Northeastern United States wrote:

*I don't call myself as [sic] a feminist not because I'm against equality, but because I want to avoid any association with the toxic wing of feminism, the radical*

**Table 2** Categories and themes representing reasons for the lack of self-identification as feminist

| Category | Theme | Percent | Overall |
|---|---|---|---|
| I. Negative stereotypes of feminism | | | 45.4 % |
| | 1. Feminism equals extremism | 20.6 % | |
| | 2. Feminism is destroying society | 12.4 % | |
| | 3. Men and women are just different | 5.2 % | |
| | 4. Feminists advocate female supremacy, not gender equality | 4.1 % | |
| | 5. Feminism is incongruous with my moral or religious beliefs | 3.1 % | |
| II. Feminism is unnecessary | | | 29.9 % |
| | 6. I don't need feminism | 22.7 % | |
| | 7. Equality has been achieved | 7.2 % | |
| III. Other | | | 24.7 % |
| | 8. Feminism means activism | 7.2 % | |
| | 9. I'm not sure what it is | 6.2 % | |
| | 10. No reason given | 11.3 % | |

Due to rounding error the total responses may not add to 100 %

feminists. I'm sure you've read their blogs, I can barely stomach their batshit insane thoughts…

A young, White research coordinator wrote:

I do not identify with many feminist perspectives - generally find it to be too extreme and associated with a negative stereotype.

A White woman from the Northeastern United States had a similar response, writing:

I believe in equal rights for men and women, and that we all should have the same choices to be made and opportunities to take advantage of. When I think of feminism, I remember the women I went to undergrad with: they hated men, generally were lesbians, didn't shave, and would not ever consider any sort of gender-stereotypical role for women. I understand that all feminists are not like that, but I definitely [sic] do not fall into a feminist category. For example, even though I am pursuing a great education so that I am self-sufficient in sustaining my own well-being, I would have no problem being a stay at home mom and taking care of children all day, cooking, and cleaning.

Overall, responses in this theme suggested that both the tenets of the movement and the feminist label are associated with the lack of identification with feminism. Of note, one woman endorsed gender equality but rejected the feminist label because of the

stereotypes surrounding it. She names her undergraduate colleagues as the reason for not identifying with the feminist label, because they perpetuated stereotypes that were inconsistent with how she viewed herself (i.e., she suggests that being a "stay at home mom" is inconsistent with feminism). Interestingly, this participant is representing her colleagues in a particular way; thus producing a negative stereotype about feminists herself.

2. Feminism is destroying society. This theme encompassed 12 % of responses and represents beliefs that feminism is a source of problems for women and/or society.

   For example, a White, middle-aged engineer wrote:

   *Feminists I believe [sic] promote women's total equality or even superiority without regard for the unique roles and strengths women and men have in society - to the detriment of society.*

   A young, White stay-at-home-mother wrote:

   *I think that feminism really hurt our gender and wish that we could go back to the way of thinking before all of it started.*

   While these responses blame feminism for harming society, it is interesting to note that very few responses provided explanations as to *why* or *how* feminism is harmful. While this omission may be attributed to the use of an online survey as a data method collection (as opposed to an interview where a researcher could probe for additional information), it is also possible that the absence of these data was due simply to participants responding based on social stereotypes.

3. Men and women are just different. Approximately 5 % of responses fell into a third theme, representing beliefs that feminism advocates androgyny. Responses in this theme suggested that there should be gender equality, but differences between men and women are important and should be embraced rather than trivialized.

   A middle-aged, White Midwestern woman wrote:

   *I do believe that women are no less important than men, that [women] in general should be treated as equals. But I also believe that the husband should be the leader of the household. Wives should submit to their husbands and husbands should love and value their wives. So, in that respect, I don't necessarily believe the man and woman are equal, but have different roles to play.*

   A White mother of five responded similarly:

   *I have an appreciation for traditional male and female roles. While I believe all people were created EQUAL, we were not created the SAME. Acknowledging [sic] that there are differences between males and females is not a bad thing and I*

*feel that often the label of "feminist" implies that one is trying to make females the SAME as males, which I just can't agree with.*

Taken together, the women whose responses fell into this theme report a desire for gender equality, but suggest there should be distinct gender roles. In fact, one woman believes that wives should be submissive to their husbands. This response implies that while women should not be oppressed, there are distinct gender differences that should be upheld. Similarly, the second response indicates a belief that feminists advocate for men and women to maintain androgynous roles and behaviors rather than equality.

4.  Feminists advocate female supremacy, not gender equality. This theme comprised 4 % of responses, which indicates a desire for equality, but implies that feminists want women to be superior to men.

One telling response was from a middle-aged, White woman from the Northeast:

*I am not a feminist in the true sense of the word as defined in modern terms. I believe in equality in job pay and right to vote. But I draw the line at becoming the dominant sex. I think that there should be an equal share in household decisions with the husband & [sic] wife. I believe both parents should help raise the children but still feel the Mom should stay home if that were an option.*

A young, Hispanic real estate agent agreed, writing:

*[I] do not consider myself a feminist or sexist, I believe in equality of conditions and that all are equal.*

While the women whose responses fell into this theme believe that there should be equality in certain aspects (equal pay and voting), they clarify by saying women should not be dominant over men. These responses demonstrate a belief that feminists want women to become more socially powerful than men. Both women express a desire for equality, but go on to say that they are not feminists because to them, "feminist" does not imply equality.

5.  Feminism is incongruous with my morality. This theme comprised 3 % of responses and represented beliefs that moral factors inhibit self-identification as a feminist.

A White, Midwestern mother of nine wrote:

*If the definition of feminism is that I believe it must be morally acceptable to kill the child in the womb, then I am most definitely not a feminist.*

A middle-aged, White homemaker from the Midwest wrote:

*Not when that means being pro-abortion.*

The responses in this theme reveal a viewpoint that that advocacy for women's reproductive rights runs counter to their religious/political beliefs; thus feminism may be viewed as unethical or immoral.

II.   Feminism is Unnecessary.

Approximately 30 % of the responses fell into a second category indicating that feminism is unnecessary, either on a personal or a social level.

6.   I don't need feminism. This was the most prevalent theme in the category, encompassing 23 % of responses. The theme represented beliefs that feminism is irrelevant on a personal level.

For example, one older, African-American woman responded:

*Never felt inferior to men. Always felt that success was the result of individual accomplishments.*

A young, White student wrote:

*Although I can definitely appreciate feminist ideals, I've never really experienced any oppression as result of being female, so I've never exactly connected with feminism.*

The responses in this theme support the existing literature suggesting that women view personal and situational characteristics as the source of oppression (Liss and Erchull 2010). These responses imply that feminism is not relevant to their personal lives and suggest that feminism would not be necessary if women just worked harder.

7.   Equality has been achieved. This theme includes 7 % of the responses and represents beliefs that social gender equality has already been reached; thus feminism is no longer needed.

A middle-aged, White food service worker wrote:

*I dont [sic] think feminism is really necessary in this day and age. Women have equal opportunities.*

A young, White restaurant server wrote:

*I feel that the word feminist is more of the 70's generation filled with women being underminded [sic] by men… I think feminism is an idea that is quite outdated as we have plenty of women who have paved the way for women now a days [sic]. I think that in today's culture we are not as overshadowed or passed over for jobs as we (women) once were and that to me is what a feminist fought for. Now I do realize that there is still an inequality, but not nearly as much as there was*

*40 years ago and for bridging that gap I consider the idea of being a feminist irrelevant. There is no longer a battle of the sexes of the magnitude there once was and for that I believe the larger concept of feminism is gone and issues that arise now are more on a individualistic prejudice manner and thus as a whole diminished.*

These responses suggest that some women may believe the feminist movement to be outdated and unnecessary. Despite the recent labor statistics and census data noting otherwise, this theme highlights a belief that feminism is obsolete.

III.   Other Themes

While the majority of themes fit into one of the two overarching categories described above, the remaining two, which comprised 24.7 % of responses, are noteworthy.

8.   Feminism means activism. Approximately 7 % of women believed that since they are not actively involved in the movement, they cannot claim to be a feminist.

A student from the Northeast wrote:

*I agree with the ideas but I don't call myself one because I don't do anything for the cause. I feel it would be hypocritical [sic] calling myself one since I don't work toward the goals of feminism.*

A young, White student from the Western United States responded in a similar fashion:

*I think it's insulting to women who are actually feminists to say that I'm a feminist. I'm not doing anything to further the feminist cause. Advancing women's rights is so low on my priority list it's not even really on there. Although I'm all about the feminist struggle, it would be a lie to say I were [sic] participating in it.*

These responses suggest an agreement with the ideas of feminism, but note that the feminist label is reserved for people who are active in the movement. It is suggested that using the label could be insulting to those women who are active in the movement. However, it may actually be fairly common for women to be "internal feminists" who believe in the movement but are not active in their support. Such women may support feminism, but feel uncomfortable claiming the term because they do not believe they are working hard enough.

9.   I'm not sure what it is. Another 6 % of women failed to identify as feminist because they claimed to not have enough knowledge to make a decision. Responses in this theme were more tentative; for example, a young, White special education teacher wrote:

*I do not really know much about it truthfully*

A young, White social worker wrote:

*I don't really, mainly because I don't really know what it means. I've heard the term tossed around a bit, and listened in on conversations that were more confusing than illuminating.*

The women whose responses fell into this theme might agree with many of the tenets of feminism, but do not self-identify because they do not have enough information about the movement. It also appears that some women may be confused and overwhelmed by discussions about feminism.

## Discussion

The existing literature on women's self-identification with feminism suggests four potential reasons for women failing to self-identify: 1) the negative connotation associated with the term "feminism", 2) the dichotomous nature of the term, 3) the belief that feminism is no longer necessary in today's society, and 4) a focus on the experiences of White upper-to-middle class women. The findings from the current study provide some qualitative support for these reasons and offer insight into contemporary women's experiences with feminism. No specific hypotheses were made; however it was generally believed that the responses of the women surveyed would align with the existing literature. Interestingly, approximately 80 % of the women in the overall survey identified as feminist, a number inconsistent with recent prevalence rates (McCabe 2005). Despite expectations that the pool of women who do not self-identify would be larger, the reasons they provided for their status warrant discussion and may provide an avenue for educating women about the movement.

Almost half of the women who rejected a feminist identity did so because of the stigma surrounding feminism. Of note, these qualitative data go beyond the existing literature to suggest that women are reacting to both the term *and* the tenets of the movement. Nonetheless, this finding is alarming because it indicates a misunderstanding of general feminist goals (Acker et al. 1983; Singh 2007; Walker and Thompson 1984). Some factions of feminists do advocate for female superiority over men, or for the elimination of gender differences altogether. However, generally speaking, no matter the individual beliefs of the specific faction, the main goal of feminism is gaining gender equality (Tong 2009).

It is also possible that their responses demonstrate a tendency for the most salient views to personally resonate. That is, similar to all social movements, feminism does have extreme factions and some women may latch on to the specific ideologies of a much smaller group of feminisms. Unfortunately, these more radical and potentially more interesting groups are likely to receive the greatest media attention. Thus, contemporary women who fail to identify as feminist may do so because of the increased visibility of more "extreme" groups, which leads to a blanket distaste for the movement as a whole.

Although there was no direct support for the notion that a feminist identity exists on a yes-no dichotomy, there was some modest indirect support. For example, many women reported believing in some tenets of feminism, but rejected the label for

different reasons. In this sense, the dichotomous nature of feminism was more a compliment to the other reasons rather than a stand-alone viewpoint. While a full analysis of the reasons why women did identify as feminist goes beyond the scope of this paper, an interesting direction for future research would be to determine whether the women who did report self-identification as a feminist also showed hesitation when discussing their reasons for identification. For example, women indicating, "I identify as a feminist, but…" and going on to further clarify that they believe in some of the tenets but not others, would suggest that both ends of the continuum (those who do identify and those who do not) report variation in their identification (or lack thereof). Such findings would suggest that it might be most accurate to consider and foster feminist ideals as existing on a continuum. This conceptualization would allow individuals to identify with some tenets of feminism but not others and decrease the "all or nothing" approach (Duncan 2010). Changing the way feminism is defined may have the benefit of appealing to women who may identify with feminism to a degree, but not entirely. Additionally, this perspective could foster a comfort level for women who believe in the ideals but are less than active in the movement.

The women who rejected the label because of a belief that feminism is no longer needed or relevant in society demonstrate a lack of awareness about the gender discrepancies that still exist. They report not needing to self-identify as feminists because it is unnecessary when in reality they simply may not have been trained to notice sexist situations through a societal lens. Overall, many of the responses in this category demonstrated an acknowledgment that inequality may still exist, but that any disparity is due to individual issues rather than a gender gap associated with the overarching social system. The notion that women's subordination is a result of personal failures rather than environmental factors could also have negative implications. In fact, identifying personal factors as the downfall of women may support the perpetuation of the glass ceiling effect. For example, women who hold these beliefs and are unable to advance in a male dominated society may be less likely to hold society responsible for allowing oppression to continue, thus creating a scenario in which women blame other women for their situation. In other words, if equality has been achieved, then women who struggle do so as a result of their own weaknesses, flaws, or errors.

Similarly, there was no direct qualitative support for the idea that a lack of feminist identity is associated with the perceived focus on White, middle-to-upper class women. However, the lack of evidence may simply reflect the demographics of the women sampled (81.4 % of this sample identified as White). The fact that so few ethnic women chose to complete the survey may in itself speak to the idea that minority women did not consider feminism relevant enough to warrant completion of the survey. That said, there is evidence to suggest that many women in this study do not believe feminism is personally relevant. Suffice to say, women of color and lower socioeconomic status may similarly respond that feminism is not personally meaningful as the movement does not support their cultural concerns. One avenue for future research could be to explore differences in women by ethnic, occupation, economic and other relevant demographic variables. After oversampling diverse women, a thorough analysis and comparison of their reasons for their feminist identity (or lack of) can be conducted.

The socio-political inequalities that exist would suggest that feminism is a social movement that is still quite necessary. However, women in the United States are failing

to identify with the movement for a variety of reasons. The current data suggest that there may be several mechanisms to solve this problem. First, it is critical to continue efforts to educate women and society regarding the goals and ideals of mainstream feminism. Until people fully understand the platform of feminism and the types of women who self-identify, the pushback will likely continue. A second possibility is to abandon the term "feminism" in favor of something less stigmatizing and more acceptable to a larger audience. While it could be argued that doing so would play into the negative stereotypes surrounding feminism, the response is that women's disassociation needs to be addressed. Almost half of the women who failed to self-identify did so because of the stereotypes surrounding the term, so it follows that changing the term may help to "jump start" the movement by providing a clean slate.

The current study categorized women using a dichotomous approach in order to remain consistent with the previous research literature. However, the use of qualitative methods assisted our understanding of the issues and concerns with this approach. Feminism is not a solitary, singular construct; rather, there is heterogeneity in feminist beliefs which should be embraced instead of splitting women into "feminist" or "not." Thus, it would appear that a continuum approach to feminist identification may end the practice of isolating women who believe in some tenets but not others. In future research endeavors, identification with feminism should be viewed as a continuous variable and questionnaires should be developed and tested in that regard. Similarly, feminist organizations would do well to encourage active participation across a variety of "levels" so that support for the movement need not be an "all or none" endeavor. This minor change may increase the engagement of women who maintain ideological support despite not being "active" in the movement.

While this study represents a relatively wide and diverse sample, caution should be used when generalizing the data for a number of reasons. The low number of responses in some themes resulted in conclusions being drawn from only a few participants. Additionally, online data collection methods invariably exclude those without the resources or experience necessary to access them; therefore, these data likely under-sampled women with less education, those with low socioeconomic status, and the elderly. In fact, in order to preserve privacy and to not limit the women's responses by making them feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, data were not collected on the women's level of education or socioeconomic status. Similarly, the survey was offered in English to American women who primarily identified as White. Taken together, these factors suggest that the responses may ultimately represent the experiences of white, middle-class, American women. As noted, the tendency to exclude the experiences of marginalized women is a critique of the feminist movement as a whole (hooks 2000) and this omission serves as a major limitation of the current study. Future research should attempt to sample a wider range of women to replicate and expand these findings and allow for generalization across race, class, culture, and age.

Other potential limitations include a use of questions that were deliberately broad and vague in order to increase the creativity of the responses. This may have led to some misunderstanding of the questions or for women to provide a broad response that could not be interpreted. An additional consideration, although not necessarily a limitation, is that this study only assessed the experiences of women. Men's self-identification with feminism is an equally important topic of study, but was excluded from this project in order to gain a more thorough picture of women's experience. In

addition, despite an effort to oversample groups that would be non-feminist or neutral (e.g., church groups, general women's groups) the title of the survey (How do you feel about feminism?) may have precluded non-feminist women from completing the survey.

Further, the use of snowball sampling may have led to a higher percentage of women who identify as feminist in the overall pool. In fact, when compared to previous research estimates, the data from the current study represent a substantial oversampling of women who self-identify as feminist: 70.2 % as compared to much lower numbers (21 %) in previous studies (McCabe 2005). As the goal of this project was to simply identify the reasons that women do not identify as feminist, this does necessarily represent a limitation; however, it necessitates further caution when generalizing these data. The use of snowball sampling also creates potential bias since it is impossible to determine how many respondents were acquainted with the researchers and participants involved with this project. Finally, the use of the lead researcher as a coder may have influenced some of the research assistants to feel compelled toward agreement, thus potentially creating bias during the coding process. While safeguards such as independence of coding were included, there is little information about the level of coercion the research assistants felt during the face-to-face discussions. Future research should address these methodological issues and omissions by attempting to garner a wider pool of diverse individuals who do not self-identify as feminist and enhancing the rigor of the coding process.

Despite these potential limitations, this study represents an attempt to qualitatively examine the reasons some women may not identify as feminists. It also highlighted potential misconceptions about feminism and provided some clues to potential changes that may be necessary to foster the ideals of feminism.

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