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Equality, empowerment, and choice: what does feminism mean to contemporary women?

Jill M. Swirsky^a & D.J. Angelone^a

^a Department of Psychology, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ, USA
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Equality, empowerment, and choice: what does feminism mean to contemporary women?

Jill M. Swirsky and D.J. Angelone*

Department of Psychology, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ, USA

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Feminisms work to correct the social gender imbalance, necessitating women's continued self-identification as feminist. There are several reasons noted for women choosing to identify: (1) exposure to feminist beliefs through education, (2) personal influences such as strong feminist role models, and (3) awareness of gender discrimination. The current research literature on feminism has largely omitted the dynamic and contextual factors that may influence this decision. This study sought to fill this gap by utilizing qualitative methodology to evaluate reasons why contemporary women choose to self-identify as feminist. Overall, the data indicate that a general desire for equality, empowerment, and the freedom to make choices are instrumental in the decision-making process. Further, exposure to feminism, both through education and personal role models, has also led to their self-identification. The implications of these findings, as well as suggestions for the continuation of the feminist movement are discussed.

Keywords: feminism; gender roles; self-identification; qualitative data

Introduction

A feminist perspective acknowledges a social hierarchy between men and women. This imbalance is attributed to the social system known as patriarchy, in which women are oppressed and exploited (Walby, 1989). Patriarchy describes the lack of social power that leads to the subordination and oppression of women. While there are many different factions of feminism (liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist) that differ in their specific goals, generally speaking the feminist movement works to end the social dominance of women and supports gender equality in social, political, and economic arenas (see Tong, 2009 for a complete review). Feminisms maintain three general ideologies: (1) the need to recognize and disseminate the historical exploitation, devaluing, and oppression of women; (2) the goal of improving women's social standing while working toward equality for all genders and groups; and (3) the active criticism of traditional intellectual pursuits and gender ideologies (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Singh, 2007; Walker & Thompson, 1984). Feminism has been conceptualized by the general public as an umbrella term encompassing many of the aforementioned factions and ideologies; as such, the focus of this paper is to speak about the feminist movement as a whole.

There are a number of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the feminist movement leading many women who self-identify to simultaneously combat both continued patriarchy and negative social labels. In addition, a 'feminist paradox' whereby women support the general tenants of the movement but dissociate with the term 'feminist'

*Corresponding author. Email: angeloned@rowan.edu

has been highlighted in the literature (Abowitz, 2008; Leaper & Arias, 2011), and despite support for gender equality, some women reject the feminist label as a result of the negative connotations accompanying the term (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). As such, there is a need for continued research regarding the decision to identify (or not) as feminist, as well as into the relationship between feminist self-identification and membership of the feminist movement. Some women see feminism as synonymous with activism (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014), indicating that there may be women who reject the label due to failing to fit the definition of the 'movement,' rather than disagreeing with the ideals of feminism. For example, a woman who agrees with all tenants of feminism may reject the label because she does not actively speak out for women's rights. However, feminism may be less of a universal construct and more personal to the individual (Berryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985), suggesting that 'feminism' may be more subjective than previously considered. Taken together, there is a need for research to clarify the way 'feminism' and 'feminist movement' are interpreted by contemporary women.

Despite major gains over the last century, gender inequality is still widespread, suggesting that the goals fostered by feminisms remain relevant (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). For example, women earn about 18% less than men and are less likely to be employed in higher paying fields such as computer science and engineering (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). However, since 1970, support for the feminist movement has remained stable and has even decreased, despite an increase in support for less-traditional and more egalitarian gender roles (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008). Additionally, about 63% of women support feminist goals while only 25% accept the label of feminist (Williams & Wittig, 1997), with recent estimates suggesting that 21% of American women currently identify as feminist (McCabe, 2005). The low rates in feminist self-identification warrant further investigation. Given the importance of facilitating the forward progression of the feminist movement, it is crucial to determine the factors that promote feminist self-identification.

The research literature suggests several such factors that may promote such identification; the first is broad-based exposure to feminism (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Nelson et al., 2008; Reid & Purcell, 2004; Williams & Wittig, 1997). More specifically, exposure to feminist beliefs and ideals through education may contribute to a woman's decision to self-identify (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Nelson et al., 2008). In addition, research on women and gender studies (WGS) courses has demonstrated increases in a variety of feminist self-efficacy variables (such as self-esteem, empowerment, intent to engage in feminist activism) throughout the semester, underscoring the role of feminist education in promoting feminist self-identity (see Eisele & Stake, 2008; Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 1999; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1997; Katz, Swindell, & Farrow, 2004).

Self-identification may also be facilitated via personal contact with feminist ideals through friends or family members who identify as feminist (Nelson et al., 2008; Reid & Purcell, 2004). Social identity (intergroup) theory posits that belonging to a group can influence an individual's attitudes and behavior by aligning them with like-minded individuals (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Cotting, 1999; Leaper & Arias, 2011; Tajfel, 1982). Specifically, a woman who is surrounded by feminist influences is immersed in a way of thinking which she may begin to emulate. For example, mothers can have a particularly strong influence, since they are often the closest and most significant female influence in their daughter's lives (Boyd, 1989). In fact, maternal influence is related to the development of girls' gender role attitudes, such that more egalitarian mothers tend to raise more egalitarian daughters (Ex & Janssens, 1998). Given that gender role attitudes

are directly linked to feminist identity (Kane, 2000; Reid & Purcell, 2004; Robnett, Anderson, & Hunter, 2012), maternal influence likely plays an important role in the development of feminist identity as well.

Women who self-identify as feminist may have personally experienced sexism or been exposed to gender discrimination in others (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1997; Nelson et al., 2008). These women may gravitate toward the feminist movement as a way to validate their experiences, as well as a means of seeking support in combating discrimination (Jackson, Fleury, & Lewandowski, 1996; Jagger, 1983; Leaper & Arias, 2011). In other words, feminism may be more relevant to those with acute awareness of patriarchy in everyday life, thus empowering them to take a stand. However, this relationship is bidirectional; it has been noted that women with a strong feminist identity may be more likely to notice and respond to sexism compared to women with a weaker feminist identity (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Nelson et al., 2008). Nonetheless, while there is a lack of research providing causality in this regard, a positive relationship has been well established between experiencing sexism and feminist self-identity.

Although the literature clearly identifies a variety of reasons for feminist self-identification, it provides a specific definition of feminism and simply asks women whether or not they endorse the definition. As a result, there may be a paucity of research regarding women who believe in feminist ideals, but may not fully agree with the specific definition provided. Each individual's personal identity is impacted by the unique factors of their environment (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2007) and these factors are important to consider when examining women's decisions of feminist self-identity. However, the self-identification process may be complicated and involved for many women, facilitating the need for researchers to capture the subtleties and nuances of this multifaceted concept. Qualitative methodology allows researchers to examine the contextual and dynamic perspective of each woman's unique life experiences, providing a useful tool to assess feminist identity (Wilkinson, 1999). Following the guide of Aronson's (2003) research, this project queried women's personal experiences with feminism in their own words, rather than asking them whether or not they agree with a predetermined definition.

For the current manuscript, the data are presented with regard to women who self-reported feminist identification, while the data with regard to women who *do not* self-identify as feminist are presented elsewhere (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Although the study of self-identified feminists allows for the exploration of similarities in these women's experiences, there are limitations to any self-reported data. For example, it is likely that more self-identified feminists than non-self-identified feminists completed the survey. In addition, critics have characterized feminism as a White, middle-class woman's movement, thus marginalizing minority women and excluding their experiences (hooks, 2000). Although these limitations warrant caution when generalizing, the focus on self-identified feminists provides a snapshot of the life experiences that enabled some women to accept the feminist label. Given the exploratory nature of this project, specific hypotheses were not made; rather, the goal was to qualitatively examine the potential reasons American women choose to self-identify as feminist.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Prior to the start of data collection, IRB approval was sought and obtained from the authors' affiliated university. Participants were recruited to complete an online survey via

snowball sampling through social networking (Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit) and E-mail contacts. Additionally, women's organizations throughout the USA were contacted and asked to forward a survey link to their group members. Some of the women's organizations may have been feminist in nature; however, care was taken not to specifically target feminist groups. Rather, the authors focused on groups with primarily female members (such as women's roller derby teams, book clubs, mother's groups). A total of 494 women who reported living in the USA completed the online survey. The 347 (70.2%) women who identified as a feminist are the focus of this paper. Of the remaining participants, 97 (19.6%) women reported that they did not identify as a feminist and 50 (10.1%) were uncertain of their feminist identity.

The majority of the self-identified feminists in this sample were between the ages of 18–25 (31.7%, $n = 110$), and were students (29.1%, $n = 101$), health care workers (13.5%, $n = 47$) or in the field of education (13.5%, $n = 47$). While women from all over the country participated in the online survey, most lived in the Northeastern USA (36.3%, $n = 126$), followed by the South (21.9%, $n = 76$) and the Midwest (17.6%, $n = 61$). A total of 214 respondents (81.8%) identified as White or Caucasian, and most reported not identifying with a religion (47.6%, $n = 165$) or Christianity (30.5%, $n = 106$). Complete demographic information is displayed in [Table 1](#).

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. For the current study, the responses of women who answered 'yes' to question 1 were analyzed for themes relating to their choice to self-identify as feminist.

Coding procedure

A thematic analysis was conducted, consisting of several stages that have been detailed previously (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). In short, during the first stage, trained raters independently coded responses to the question 'Do you identify as a feminist?' as 'yes,' 'no,' or 'maybe.' Next, the lead researcher evaluated the rater's codes for each response, and assessed overall agreement. The second stage consisted of three raters independently reading the 'yes' responses and identifying themes for each response. The lead researcher evaluated and consolidated these themes by identifying overlap and providing each with a single encompassing label. Seven labels were established, and the raters then discussed and confirmed the label and content of each theme until 100% agreement was reached. The third stage consisted of the same three raters independently assigning one of the aforementioned themes to each of the participants' responses. 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 were assigned to a theme, the three raters examined each theme separately to determine whether the responses were appropriately assigned, and discussed any discrepancies until 100% agreement was reached.

Table 1. Demographics of self-identified feminists.

	Frequency	Percent
Age		
18–25	110	31.7
26–35	83	23.9
36–45	68	19.6
46–55	35	10.1
56–65	29	8.4
Older than 65	21	6.1
No response	1	0.3
Total	347	100.0
Religion		
No religion	165	47.6
Christian	106	30.5
Jewish	26	7.5
Spiritual	11	3.2
Other	39	11.2
Total	347	100.0
US region		
Midwest	61	17.6
Northeast	126	36.3
South	76	21.9
West	32	9.2
Other	52	15.0
Total	347	100.0
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	6	1.7
Asian/Islander	5	1.4
Indian	1	0.3
Middle Eastern	1	0.3
Spanish/Latina/Hispanic	5	1.4
White/Caucasian	284	81.8
Other	45	13.0
Total	347	100.0
Occupation		
Civil service	12	3.5
Corporate	45	13.0
Customer service/sales	13	3.7
Education	47	13.5
Fine arts	13	3.7
Health care	47	13.5
Law/politics	8	2.3
Math/science	13	3.7
No response	11	3.2
Not working	6	1.7
Stay at home mother/caregiver	31	8.9
Student	101	29.1
Total	347	100.0

Results

The responses of the 347 women who identified as feminist were placed into one of the seven established themes. While a small number of responses offered more than one reason for identifying as a feminist, the majority contained one clear reason, thus each response was assigned to only one theme with no overlap. Interestingly, the majority of

Table 2. Themes representing reasons for self-identification as feminist.

Theme	Number	Percent
1. General desire for gender equality	190	54.8
2. Empowerment	30	8.6
3. Freedom of choice	21	6.1
4. Activism	21	6.1
5. Exposed to feminism	20	5.8
6. Breaking from traditional gender roles	15	4.3
7. Equality in context of gender differences	10	2.9
8. No reason given/no response	40	11.5
Total	347	100.0

the responses provided spoke to a single overarching category about equality; however, for the current study, the subtle differences have been summarized to focus on individual nuanced themes. By far, the most prevalent reason women identify as feminist is a general desire for equality (54.8%). Of the remaining women, the reasons were divided into more specific themes with relatively smaller, yet mostly equivalent endorsement. Women reported identifying as feminist for reasons such as empowerment (8.6%), freedom of choice (6.1%), activism (6.1%), exposure to feminism (5.8%), break from traditional gender roles (4.3%), and equality in the context of gender differences (2.9%). These themes are summarized in Table 2 with examples and discussion provided below. Descriptive demographic data within each theme are summarized in Table 3.

General desire for gender equality

As stated, the most popular reason women reported identifying as feminist was because of a desire for equality, with 190 women (54.8%) falling into this theme.

A retired college administrator wrote:

How could I not be interested in and supportive of women?! It's who I am.

A psychologist from Minnesota, wrote:

Of course! It is difficult for me to understand how you can be a woman in these times and not subscribe to feminist principles.

A PhD student in Anthropology wrote:

Of course. Feminists believe that men and women should have the same opportunities, that no one should be discriminated against because of their gender, that men and women should be treated equally under the law. I believe in this kind of equality ...

A young student from Texas wrote:

Obviously women are equal to men, and therefore should be treated equally.

A stay at home mother from the Northeast wrote:

I think women should have all the rights and benefits that men have. The law should protect men and women equally. Pay should be equal work for equal pay. It still doesn't happen the way it should all the time.

Taken together, the responses were fairly general, encompassing a belief that women and men should be equal in all ways. The responses were also quite straightforward with many respondents seeming astonished that not all women identify as feminist. The sheer

Table 3. Demographics of self-identified feminists by theme.

	Activism (%)	Breaking from traditional gender roles (%)	General desire for gender equality (%)	Exposed to feminism (%)	Empowerment (%)	Freedom of choice (%)	Equality in context of gender differences (%)	No reason given/no response (%)
Ethnicity								
White	78.9	92.3	89.4	78.9	88.5	94.7	100.0	85.7
Non-white	21.1	7.7	10.6	21.1	11.5	5.3	0.0	14.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age								
18–25	14.3	40.0	36.5	55.0	20.0	19.0	40.0	17.5
26–35	9.5	26.7	24.9	15.0	33.3	28.6	30.0	20.0
36–45	23.8	20.0	19.0	20.0	16.7	28.6	20.0	17.5
46–55	9.5	6.7	9.0	5.0	13.3	9.5	10.0	17.5
56 +	42.9	6.7	10.6	5.0	16.7	14.3	0.0	27.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Religion								
Religious	66.7	57.1	50.8	41.2	66.7	38.1	70.0	41.0
Non-religious	33.3	42.9	49.2	58.8	33.3	61.9	30.0	59.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Region								
Midwest	14.3	13.3	18.4	10.5	17.2	14.3	50.0	20.0
Northeast	47.6	40.0	37.4	47.4	31.0	28.6	30.0	40.0
South	4.8	20.0	22.9	21.1	31.0	38.1	20.0	20.0
West	14.3	6.7	9.5	21.1	0.0	4.8	0.0	15.0
More than 1	19.0	20.0	11.7	0.0	20.7	14.3	0.0	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: Percentages were calculated 'within theme'. All responses of 'N/A' were removed.

simplicity of these responses speaks to the idea that many self-identified feminists consider gender equality to be an obvious right, and that they do not understand why equality is still an issue.

Empowerment

The next most prevalent theme contained 30 responses (8.6%) and focused on feminism as a source of empowerment and liberation.

A college professor from New York wrote:

I consider myself a feminist because I am personally empowered. I am in charge of my life and no one tells me how to live or what to do. I believe women have the capability to do whatever is in their hearts; however, I do believe that gender discrimination is alive and well in our society and many of us are not even aware it exists.

A Northeastern physician wrote:

I believe in empowering women and by doing so, I believe men are empowered as well.

A graduate student studying interior design wrote:

Feminism to me means empowering yourself, other women, and men to support women. It means women having the opportunity to make their own choices about their life as a natural right.

A theater student wrote:

I believe in liberating women's minds so that they understand that they have options and power. Even though women have rights in America, there is still a pressure to be "polite" and to subdue our wants and needs and desires and to feel good and guilty. I try and resist that, and help others do so.

In opposition to the general concept of equality highlighted earlier, these women specifically identified feminism as a source of empowerment. They are not only aware of the need for feminism, but they also recognize the movement as a source with which to combat discrimination. Further, some noted that contrary to stereotypes of being a 'women's movement,' feminism may be a useful tool for men as well. Thus, feminism represents a source of support for the rights of all humankind.

Freedom of choice

A total of 21 (6.1%) responses highlighted this theme specifically centered on feminism representing choice, rather than empowerment as a gender.

One young, queer-identified woman wrote:

I believe in a woman's right to choose whatever lifestyle she deems fit for herself. If she wants to be a successful businesswoman or a doctor, that's awesome. But if she wants to be a housewife and/or mother; that's great too. Women need to be treated with respect, and so I respect every woman's right to choose her lifestyle.

A nanny from Texas wrote:

I believe that women should have the right to choose what they want to do in their lives, so yes. But I also believe that includes if women aspire to be a stay at home mom that is okay as well. I know some feminists who want to limit women into traditional male roles, and I think that is just as bad as the ones who want to force women into baby-making trophy wives.

A respiratory therapist from Massachusetts wrote:

I believe woman can do anything they choose.

It is important to note that several participants discussed the importance of women having the freedom to choose a variety of lifestyles. While this has historically been viewed in terms of occupation, these responses expand this concept to include a traditional gender role rather than a career outside the home. The fact that the specific caveat needed to be added implies the strong influence of gender roles in our society. In other words, these respondents are challenging the assumption that feminism and stay at home motherhood are mutually exclusive, supporting the notion that feminism allows women to make whatever choice best supports their lifestyle.

Activism

A total of 21 women (6.1%) reported that their feminist identity was related to their activism in the feminist movement. Specifically, responses in this theme indicated that their feminist identity was derived from being active in the fight toward gender equality.

One woman, who was raised by her father in Arizona, wrote:

I actively promote success and opportunities for other women. I do my best to help remove barriers preventing women from advancing.

A middle-aged marketing and communications professional wrote:

I advocate for women's rights to be equal to mens [sic].

A self-identified lesbian from the Northeast wrote:

I believe in and support the fight for women's liberation.

A Catholic woman from California wrote:

My definition of feminist is some one [sic] who actively supports, models behavior and leads by example to promote equity, particularly for women. By that definition I am a feminist.

Taken together, these responses indicate that at least a small percentage of women believe feminist identity to be synonymous with activism. They imply that for some women, simply supporting feminist beliefs is not enough; further action is required.

Exposed to feminism

A total of 20 women (5.8%) reported that their feminist identity came from exposure to feminism through a variety of sources. Specifically, responses in this theme involved a life experience or strong female influence which impacted their self-identification.

A communications student wrote:

I would consider myself a feminist. I was raised by a single mother, who taught me the value of being a woman. My parents went through a divorce when I was very young, and since then I have been preached to by my mother about politics, and how I need to rely on no one but myself. She has taught me that as women, we cannot rely on a man for anything, and must love ourselves in order to being in a loving partnership.

A piano teacher living in Tennessee wrote:

I do. After taking a Sociology of Gender course in college, I became very interested in women's rights and would like to be even more active in actually doing something about them ...

Consistent with the literature, these two women credited exposure to feminism for their feminist self-identity. The first woman described the strength of her single mother as the catalyst for forming her identity, while the second woman mentioned a gender class as impetus for her self-identification.

Breaking from traditional gender roles

A total of 15 women (4.3%) fell into this theme. These responses indicated a desire for equality by specifically noticing and moving away from gender role stereotypes.

A librarian who 'grew up in a conservative patriarchal republican family' wrote:

I think women are just as capable as men. That people should be evaluated on their personalities and their accomplishments and not their genders. I try to raise my daughter to be strong and kind and funny and not to fall into gender stereotypes. She plays with all toys not just "girl" toys or "girl" colors. There will be NO BARBIES' ...

A school social worker from the Midwest responded similarly, writing:

I never believed I shouldn't/couldn't do something because of my gender, embrace being a woman who is taller than my husband (gasp, the stereotype) and am proud to parent both a boy and a girl who hopefully will grasp that they can do whatever they want.

An aerospace engineering student who was raised by a stay at home mother wrote:

My parents raised us without specific gender roles. The boys learned to sew and the girls mowed the lawn and went target shooting etc. They always taught me that I could be anything I wanted to be. I want other women to feel like they can be exactly the woman they want to be the way I do. I see the inequality both in my own work place and in society at large and I am moved to do my best to change what I can within my sphere of influence.

In contrast to the women who believed that women can choose any lifestyle, these women believe that gender role stereotypes are problematic in society and that feminism means specifically fighting to break free of these molds. These women described the ways in which gender norms manifest in their lives, as well as the ways they seek to combat them.

Equality in context of gender differences

The responses of 10 women (2.9%) comprised this theme. These responses indicated a desire for equality, with concerns that feminism not become synonymous with androgyny. In other words, while these women identify as feminist and embrace gender equality, they believe that it is important to embrace the natural and biological differences between men and women.

A woman from Wisconsin wrote:

I view it more in terms of how the unique demands on women (socially and biologically) can be better understood and appreciated by all. I do view it more as a rights and treatment issue to seek balance, not male-bashing and not as a superiority agenda.

A white data analyst from New Jersey wrote:

I do consider myself a feminist, mainly because I believe in equality, no matter what gender someone identifies with. I believe in equal rights, equal pay, equal autonomy. But I also believe in embracing differences – feminism isn't about women being like men – it's about femininity being valued as much as masculinity. And gender-neutral and androgynous identities as well.

A Northeastern customer service worker wrote:

I believe in equal pay for equal work – I don't believe I must "obey" my husband (neither does he except in jest) but I also see that there are physical differences which may make it difficult for some women to perform some tasks as well as men. (example – most women cannot compete against men in sport-men are physically stronger than most women – generalizing here I'm sure there are exceptions).

A young, lesbian camp counselor from New Jersey wrote:

... I think it is important to acknowledge fundamental differences between men and women, as well as the potential for fluidity between the two, and to honor and validate those differences and fluidities.

These responses share a great deal of similarity in that the participants specify a belief in equality, but note that society should embrace the differences between men and women. The caveats speak to a stereotype surrounding feminism, specifically that feminists advocate gender androgyny or female superiority.

Discussion

The current literature suggests several reasons for feminist self-identification; specifically exposure to feminist beliefs through education (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Nelson et al., 2008), personal influences such as strong feminist role models (Nelson et al., 2008; Reid & Purcell, 2004), and awareness of gender discrimination (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1997; Nelson et al., 2008). The findings from the current study provide some qualitative support for these factors, as well as contributing new reasons for women's self-identification as feminist. No specific hypotheses were made, but it is not surprising that these findings mirror those already established in the literature. Although the literature has largely focused on factors that *predict* feminist identity, the current study instead sought to analyze the *reasons* behind women's decisions to identify. While studying predictive factors is important, they tend to be less salient or conscious to women; thus, there is value in directly assessing the reasons women actively chose to self-identify. Targeting the rationale behind women's individual decision-making contributes important information to the literature on feminist self-identification.

Interestingly, the overall rate of feminist self-identity in the current study was quite high (i.e., 70%), suggesting some promise for the movement. In line with previous work, the women in this sample reported exposure to feminism, both through classes and personal feminist role models, as reasons they chose to identify. Several women noted that certain courses in psychology, sociology, and WGS sparked their interest in gender issues. Other women wrote about the strength of their mothers in raising a family, including descriptions of how they were taught the importance of self-reliance and independence. While some women did not specifically label their mothers as feminist, the strong ideals and values of being a woman clearly led these women to self-identify. Similarly, some respondents described relationships with other influential women, lending support to the idea that strong female role models are a highly salient influence on self-identification. Over half of the responses in this theme came from women aged 18–25, potentially indicating a generational effect on exposure to feminism. This may be due in part to contemporary young women growing up with mothers and grandmothers who were active in earlier waves of feminism.

The overwhelming majority of responses spoke to a need for feminism as a response to combat discrimination. Women in the 'empowerment' and 'activism' themes described feminism as the source from which they derived strength to live their own lives, make their own choices, and empower themselves and others to defy gender stereotypes. The fact that

this source is necessary indicates that these women are aware of the discrimination and inequalities which still exist. One woman mentioned that while she believes gender discrimination to be problematic, many people do not notice its existence. Inadvertently, she seems to be describing a ‘chicken or the egg’ scenario whereby there is a lack of clarity about whether her feminist identity opens her eyes to discrimination or discrimination necessitates her feminist identity. The majority of women who endorsed ‘activism’ were above the age of 56, lending further support to the idea of a generational effect. Perhaps these are the mothers of the 18- to 25-year-olds who are exposing their daughters to feminism. Additionally, two-thirds of the responses in the ‘empowerment’ theme came from women who identified as religious. While some researchers suggest that feminist self-identity is negatively associated with engagement in organized religion (Chakravarty, 2011), it is possible that religiosity/spirituality may contribute to the feeling of empowerment that accompanies feminism.

The responses in the ‘freedom of choice’ theme highlight the social pressure on women to adhere to traditional gender roles and the use of feminism as a tool to break free of these bonds. Several responses noted that women should be able to do whatever they want, even if that means being a traditional woman. This added caveat speaks to the stereotypical viewpoint that feminists scorn women who choose to embrace traditional gender roles. Interestingly, there appears to be three distinct stances on the intersection of feminism with traditional gender roles. Women in the ‘freedom of choice’ theme and the ‘breaking from traditional gender roles’ theme directly opposed one another, with the ‘equality in the context of gender differences’ group falling in the middle. As noted earlier, women’s viewpoints on ‘acceptable feminist behavior’ in regard to traditional gender roles varied widely, providing support for feminism as a personal, rather than universal, construct.

Of note, many of the women who reported identifying as a feminist because of a desire for equality did so in an extremely broad sense. Many of the responses were vague and lacking in specificity, with a tone suggesting obviousness. For example, some responses were ‘I believe that women should have equal rights as men’ or ‘there should be equality for all women.’ Of the responses that fell into the ‘general desire for gender equality’ category, the overwhelming majority (93%) were highly simplistic in nature. One possible explanation for this trend is a tendency toward socially desirable responding. The women who reported being self-identified feminists may have lacked an in-depth understanding of feminism on a personal level, instead responding with what they believed to be the ‘correct’ answer. Many women view ‘feminism’ as synonymous with ‘women’s rights.’ Thus, when asked if they identify with feminism, they may have felt compelled to affirm so as not to appear sexist or as a ‘bad woman.’ Relating to this concept, these vague responses may speak to a ‘blind following’ of feminist ideologies. In other words, women who report identifying as feminist out of a sense of duty may lack depth in their support for the movement, and raise the question of whether just identifying is enough or some sense of further activism is necessary.

Interestingly, the stereotypes associated with the feminist movement were noticeable in other ways as well, even among those who did embrace a feminist identity. Responses in both the ‘breaking from traditional gender roles’ and ‘quality in context of gender differences’ categories highlighted a common misconception that feminists desire androgyny, and wish to eradicate all gender differences. The women whose responses fell into these categories endorsed many aspects of the feminist movement, but were wary of being lumped in with the negative connotations associated with the term. Previous research has found dissent among women who did not self-identify; specifically finding

that those who answered 'no' to the forced-choice question 'are you a feminist?' may have felt more comfortable responding with 'I'm not a feminist, but ...' (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). The current data suggest similar dissent among those women who do identify, highlighting a mirroring effect of 'I'm a feminist, but ...' Taken together, the evidence suggests that both women who self-identify and those who do not, are struggling with a dichotomous presentation of feminism. As such, the current paradigm used by researchers may be inadequate to capture and account for the full range of women's experiences. That both of these themes were highly endorsed by 18- to 25-year-olds further suggests a need to reevaluate the way feminist self-identity is conceptualized and measured, so as not to lose the support of younger women.

The current data suggest that there are several potential avenues that the feminist movement can pursue to maintain or potentially increase women's self-identification with feminism. For example, many women who fail to self-identify as feminist do so because of the negative connotations associated with the movement (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014) and many of these stereotypes were highlighted in the current study. Thus, working toward changing these stereotypes via ongoing education about the goals and ideals of mainstream feminism may be a first step to increase support for feminism. A second, and related step, may be to eliminate the tendency to dichotomize feminist identity into 'yes' or 'no.' Forcing women to choose between 'yes I am a feminist' and 'no I am not a feminist' fails to account for the shades of gray in which some women identify with some aspects of feminism but not others (Duncan, 2010). Putting such a question also fails to confirm to the person answering it, that the understanding of the term feminism is shared with the person who put the question. A dichotomous presentation necessitates a decision that may or may not be synonymous with women's true beliefs. Conversely, a continuum approach, like that developed by Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992), allows women to identify as much or as little as they choose, which may have the benefit of creating a 'safe space' within the movement for women who believe in the ideals of feminism but are not active. While the current study used a dichotomous approach to determine feminist identification, this was done in order to remain consistent with the existing literature. Steps were taken to mitigate some of the concerns with utilizing this approach, such as using a qualitative methodology which allowed for in-depth analysis of responses. Future research should work to further conceptualize feminism as a continuous variable, and encourage researchers and activists to discuss feminism as such.

There are several limitations in the current study that should be considered. First, in order to encourage a wide and diverse range of responses, the survey questions were deliberately vague. While this approach did provide rich and complex data, it is possible that some women misunderstood or felt uncomfortable responding fully due to the broad nature of the questions. Second, the use of a snowball sampling technique may have led to bias in responding, in that there is no way to determine which participants belong to the authors' personal and social networks. Further, it is possible that the title of the survey (*How do you feel about feminism?*) may have led some non-feminist women to pass over the link rather than completing the survey. Thus, despite efforts to contact groups that may be non-feminist or neutral (such as church groups, general women's groups), it is possible that this project oversampled self-identified feminists, and may not be representative of women as a whole. In fact, compared to previous research studies (McCabe, 2005), the current sample contained a much higher percentage of self-identified feminists (70% vs. 21%). While this does not necessarily serve as a major limitation, care should be taken before generalizing these results.

Relatedly, although actions were taken to obtain a wide and diverse sample, the majority of respondents were non-minority women. Also, the use of online data collection may have restricted the sample to those women with the resources or experience to access the survey; therefore, any conclusions likely exclude the experiences of women with little or no education, low socioeconomic status, and elderly women. Similarly, there was no measure of education level or socioeconomic status. While this was done in an attempt to maximize responses by making the women feel comfortable, as well as preservation of the privacy of the respondents, this omission limits the ability to draw conclusions about these descriptors. Nonetheless, some of the responses intimated their socioeconomic status, educational, and social class, suggesting a somewhat restricted range. Taken together, it is likely that the responses from this sample are only representative of the experiences of white, middle-class, American women. The under-representation of minority and marginalized groups within the feminist movement has been a major critique of the movement as a whole (hooks, 2000), making it an important area for further study.

Another limitation concerns the methodology, specifically that the lead researcher was one of the data coders. This factor may have led some research assistants to feel compelled to agree with the lead researcher, potentially creating bias during the coding process. Several precautions were taken in an effort to mitigate this, such as independence of coding and thoroughly training the undergraduate research assistants in the procedure; however, it is still possible that the research assistants felt coerced to respond in agreement. While not necessarily a limitation, an additional consideration is that this study only assessed the experiences of women. Men's self-identification with feminism remains an important area for future research; however, this project was specifically interested in assembling a snapshot of contemporary women's experiences. Future research should not only further examine and replicate these findings, but could expand our understanding of feminisms by assessing men's experiences. Similarly, while the bulk of the existent literature has examined factors predictive of a feminist identity, the focus of this study was simply to identify post hoc reasons for choosing to self-identify as feminist in a cross-sectional manner and must be interpreted in that context. Finally, while some conclusions were drawn from the demographic data of the participants, it should be noted that appropriate quantitative analyses examining the relationship between such descriptors and the themes was not feasible, given the small number of responses within each group. While attempting to answer such inferential questions was not the focus of the current study, future researchers should be encouraged to design such appropriate methods to quantitatively assess these differences, as they may yield valuable information regarding on which demographic groups feminism should focus its efforts.

In the end, this study represents an attempt to qualitatively examine the reasons that some women identify as feminist. While a large number of responses mimic the factors that are predictive of feminism, many of these women appear to engage a more 'generic' approach. The potential lack of specificity can have a host of negative consequences, including a perpetuation of the stereotypes surrounding the movement which dissuade many women from taking on a feminist self-identity. On the other hand, several additional and more specific reasons were identified. These reasons were both interesting and informative, suggesting that the feminist movement is growing and changing as women search for their own unique identification within the larger umbrella category of 'feminist.' For women in the current study, feminism does not simply represent advocacy for gender equality; rather the movement represents action, education, and the breaking of traditional norms. Nonetheless, proponents of the feminist movement would do well to incorporate such knowledge into educational and public relations materials in order to continue to foster the goals of feminism; ultimately combating patriarchy and achieving gender equality.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jill Swirsky, B.A., received her bachelor's degree in Psychology and Women's/Gender Studies from Drew University, and is now working toward her Ph.D. in developmental psychology at Temple University. Her primary research interests include the perception of nonphysical violence, specifically among adolescent girls, and prevention and intervention programs to decrease bullying.

D.J. Angelone, Ph.D., is an associate professor of psychology at Rowan University. His primary research interests include risk and consequences for victims and perpetrators of sexually aggressive behavior. This work includes the development of laboratory analogues to examine the relevant person and situational factors associated with such behavior. He also examines factors that may influence observers' perceptions of sexual assault.

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