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## Feminist Women's Attitudes towards Feminist Men in the Canadian Atheist Movement

In: [Religion and Gender](#)

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Online Publication Date: 19 October 2020

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Keywords: [nonreligion](#); [atheism](#); [feminism](#); [gender](#); [masculinity](#)

## 1 Introduction

Women are underrepresented in atheist activism. In particular, atheist, skeptic, and secular humanist organisations struggle to attract and keep female participants. Recent contributions to nonreligion and atheism research highlight this gender imbalance and point to some potential causes of these gender difference, including misogyny and sexual harassment within the atheist movement (Guenther 2019; Trzebiatowska 2018). Critics of recent manifestations of atheist activism in the United States argue that atheist activists embrace a discourse that denies the existence of sexism and misogyny within the movement (Guenther 2019; Trzebiatowska 2018; Amarasingam and Brewster 2016). Atheist activists' denial of sexism and misogyny plays out in negative responses to the emergence of feminist currents within the movement such as the social justice-oriented Atheism Plus (LeDrew 2015a; Amarasingam and

Brewster 2016). If the culture of atheist activism is hostile towards feminism while claiming to embrace feminist goals such as women's autonomy, empowerment, and economic justice, then women may continue to face unrecognised or little understood constraints on their participation in the movement (Guenther 2019).

This article contributes to understanding how atheist activists navigate gender issues, feminist activism, and some challenges that feminist men face because of their feminist identification. Several scholars have examined atheist activism's relationship with gender equality and the movement's failure to attract women, but little research has focused on the role of feminist discourses and attitudes in the atheist movement. To address this gap in the literature, I focus on both men's adoption of the feminist label as well as women's attitudes towards men's identification with atheist organizations. Although men's adoption of the feminist label in organized atheism is important, understanding women's attitudes towards men who identify as feminists may also help illuminate how activists involve men in feminist organizing. My participants viewed feminism positively, but I found an apparent contradiction. Atheist women wanted atheist men to conform more to hegemonic masculinity, which Robert Connell defines as a heterosexual form of masculinity that subordinates all others (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). But atheist women also wanted men to support social justice efforts to challenge hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, and inequality. In particular, feminist women in my sample praised feminist men's political choices while characterizing the same men as either less masculine than non-feminist men or disingenuous. My findings help expand conceptualisations of feminist identities in the atheist movement and contribute to understanding why some men may be hesitant to adopt a feminist identity.

## 2 Background

Despite the increasing inclusion of men in feminist organizing and leadership, many people hold negative views regarding male feminists (Breen and Karpinski 2008; Slowik 2015). Some of these negative views include perceptions that feminists are too strident, aggressive, and politically radical (Roy, Weibust, and Miller 2007). Because of these negative views, the role of men in feminism has become an ongoing subject of contention among scholars (Conlin and Heesacker 2018a, 2018b; Gundersen and Kunst 2018; Peter M. Jansson & Christian Kullberg 2017; Silver, Chadwick, and van Anders 2018). Although many feminists argue that men's participation in feminism is necessary, some remain skeptical of men's adoption of the feminist identity marker (Tienari and Taylor 2018; Baily 2015).

Some of the most prominent controversies regarding men's participation in feminism today concern whether men can be

allies when feminism seeks to challenge male power (Cobb 2015; Wiley and Dunne 2018b; Peter M. Jansson & Christian Kullberg 2017; Precopio and Ramsey 2017). Regardless of how one views men's participation in feminism, men take part in feminist social movements and frequently engage with the challenges and opportunities such participation involves (Tienari and Taylor 2018).

With men becoming more involved in feminism, and the increasing inclusion of men and masculinities in the feminist discourse, we can expect male feminism to have a significant impact on contemporary feminism (Precopio and Ramsey 2017). Men's increasing participation in feminist activism, however, does carry some risks for male feminists. One risk is that feminist women may see feminist men as inauthentic because they will only adopt feminist agendas in certain situations (Alilunas 2011). A second risk is the potential erasure of male victimhood within feminist spaces given feminism's emphasis on women's experiences (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012). A third risk is that men may be reluctant to adopt the feminist identity marker because of the perceived feminisation of feminist men (Anderson 2009). Regarding this third risk, Michael Kimmel (1998) describes several reactions to men embracing feminism (Kimmel 1998). Some reactions are closely tied to women's suspicions of men's participation in feminism for often sensible reasons, such as the complicated dynamic of men challenging male power. Other reactions have less to do with the challenges of ally-development. When some men embrace feminism, they may face hostility from others because of their perceived softer masculinity (Kimmel 1998; Jordan 2019).

Women's attitudes regarding men's feminist identification normally coincides with boundary work regarding who should be included in the feminist movement, especially if that inclusion risks prioritising men's experiences and voices (Kretschmer and Barber 2016; Conlin and Heesacker 2018b). We see some exceptions to this boundary work, however, when women accept feminist men as allies but react negatively to men's participation on other grounds. Although studies of women's attitudes towards male feminists are rare, the existing literature suggests that some women perceive feminist men as less masculine than non-feminist men, possibly impacting men's participation in feminism. For example, Veanne Anderson (2009) found that the term 'feminist man' suggests 'stereotypically feminine characteristics (i.e., weak, emotional, submissive)' (Anderson 2009, 211). Similarly, some women stigmatise male feminists as feminine and gay (Rudman, Mescher, and Moss-Racusin 2012; Kranz, Pröbstle, and Evidis 2017; Goldstein 2017). The association of feminist men with reduced masculine potency could have significant consequences for men's participation in feminist activism,

especially when one considers the broader impediments of stereotyped feminism on feminist identification (Twenge and Zucker 1999; Anderson 2009).

Most research regarding the relationship between feminism and atheist activism concerns the gender politics of the atheist movement (Stinson et al. 2013; Finger 2017). Some scholars, however, have discussed the struggles of integrating feminism into atheism, arguing that atheist activism has a blind-spot regarding sexism within the movement (Schnabel et al. 2016; Guenther 2019). Beyond this relatively small literature, most contemporary research on atheism and feminism touches on recent developments within the atheist movement, such as the emergence of feminist voices in the community and broader issues of social movement dynamics (Schnabel 2016; Trzebiatowska 2019; Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017).

### 3 Method

This article concerns men's adoption of the feminist label in organised atheism and women's perceptions of feminist men within those same organisations. My data for this study, however, emerged from a larger project that looked at the intra-movement dynamics of atheist activists in the Canadian province of Alberta. This article draws from interviews concerned with gender equality in the atheist movement. Canadian atheist activists regularly introduced and then returned to issues of gender representation within atheist organisations and the broader movement's struggles to attract women and minorities to atheist groups. Although I did not initially intend to discuss feminism and atheism in my interviews, given my participants' concerns about sexual harassment at atheist conferences, I began introducing prompts related to gender and nonreligion and feminist participation in the movement.

Between 2014 and 2016, I conducted thirty-five semi-structured, in-depth interviews with atheist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. I also spent over a hundred hours in the field, but this article is primarily based on my interview data. My interview sample included sixteen women and nineteen men, with ages ranging from twenty to sixty-three. I had little access to diversity given the relative homogeneity of atheist organizations. Consequently, most participants were white and of Christian background, which is a limitation of this study but could be grounds for future study. Two participants did, however, identify as Indian and grew up within Muslim households. Some interviewees have since updated their interviews, with two of my formerly white-identifying participants now identifying as Métis, celebrating both European and Indigenous ancestry.

I focused my interviews on self-described atheists involved in three organisations: The Society of Edmonton Atheists (SEA), the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics (UAAA), and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics' Society (GESS). Each organisation had majority female executives at the time I conducted my research and SEA had almost reached gender parity in membership. To gain access to each organisation and its membership, I primarily relied on Facebook, informing the organisers of each organisation about my research goals and my desire to interview members of each group. I provided each participant with a consent form that outlined the goals of my research, and I informed my interviewees of their confidentiality. I use pseudonyms throughout this article.



I found participants by contacting Edmonton-area atheist organizations over social media. I standardised my interview questions with potential prompts depending on my participants' responses. I often changed questions and prompts on the fly, a decision that often provided more valuable data. Since I posed my research questions at the individual level of analysis, being flexible allowed me to unpack complex processes such as my participants' life histories. In semi-structured interviewing, analysis and interpretation are ongoing processes that allow the researcher to 'alter the questions and topics raised in subsequent interviews to reflect the understandings garnered in early wave of interpretation interviews' (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002, 110). Consequently, my interviews were like guided conversations but with a purpose.

I identified themes from key interview transcripts that appeared to best represent the views of my participants. I then used this rough template of codes to guide my open coding process. Open coding entails the organisation of data into a hierarchy of interrelated but distinct categories or codes (Charmaz and Belgrave 2015). Once I identified codes referring to the same content, I grouped them into categories. As much as possible, I attempted to maintain the language of my participants during the process. This process worked particularly well with semi-structured interviews because my participants often discussed similar topics but at different junctures in their interviews. My goal with the initial round of coding was to identify and categorise every relevant indicator to ensure I had a broad spectrum of codes. The hierarchy of the resulting codes included relatively broad categories (parent codes) and smaller, more specific ones (child codes) within them. After the initial phase of coding, I then categorised open codes into a more structured coding scheme, identifying relationships among categories. In the final round of coding, I used this more structured coding scheme to refine all the in-depth categories.



## 4 Feminist Men and Atheism

Men's experiences with feminism are multifaceted and have historically led to significant questions and concerns about the role of men within feminism. For example, some scholars question male feminists' commitment to dismantling institutional sexism and male privileges (Cobb 2015). Others argue that too much attention has been given to the novelty of men's advocacy (Flood 2017). The literature has recently turned to how male allies can contribute to feminism, including their adoption of the feminist label (Drury and Kaiser 2014; Wiley and Dunne 2018a). This section provides the context for the rest of the article, examining how male atheist activists think of the feminist label and their participation within feminism. As I noted in the method section, I interviewed nineteen men and sixteen women. Of those nineteen men, ten broadly identified with contemporary feminism.

Although only ten male atheists from my interviews self-identified as feminists, my non-feminist-identifying participants claimed to support women's rights even if they chose not to label themselves as feminists. I distinguish between those men who identified as feminists and those who chose not to use the label because the latter group felt that feminism had succeeded and that it was: (1) no longer necessary in the Western world; (2) disproportionately radical compared with the issues facing women in the Western world; or (3) that it required other commitments that my participants did not share, such as an adherence to political and economic socialism. Regarding male feminism, my non-feminist-identifying participants were ambivalent about male feminism, often distinguishing between the sensible support for "dictionary" feminism and more "radical" currents in feminist activism.

Men's uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the feminist label is well-established in the literature, which typically identifies men's skepticism of the severity of gender inequality as playing a major role in this avoidance (Olson et al. 2008). Although the non-labellers in my sample had some interesting things to say about their refusal to self-identify as feminists, I will focus my attention on the views of the ten men who did 'own' the feminist label and shared views consistent with the goals of contemporary feminism, such as ending sexism and sexist exploitation. Additionally, my participants expressed the importance of protecting rights for women that grant them equal access, the elimination of the 'glass ceiling,' and ending various forms of discrimination against women.

My participants' views regarding gender and justice were consistent across interviews but my participants' adoption of the feminist label did not prevent them from criticising some trends in feminist activism, especially the emergence of the social justice-oriented Atheism Plus (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016; LeDrew 2015b). Atheism Plus gained prominence

during my fieldwork for bringing an intersectional and feminist viewpoint to the North American atheist movement. It was, however, contentious within the community because of its focus on collectivist values and for wanting to change the focus of atheist activism away from critiquing religion to promoting social justice.

Despite having 'some issues' (as one participant put it) with certain feminist trends within atheism, my male participants reported being interested in gender issues, and they were focused on creating safe and inclusive spaces for women in the community. The lack of women in the broader atheist community was a frequent topic in interviews, and my male participants understood that as individuals, they needed to 'check themselves and other men' to not alienate women. For example, Connor, age 28, expressed concerns about male behaviour in atheist spaces:

A lot of men in the community are awkward or they were never taught how to communicate with women. This leads to interactions that make women uncomfortable. Even worse, a lot of them use atheism to try to hook up and being the "token" women makes [those women] subject to unwelcome advances.

Although this observation that male atheists were awkward sometimes came across as a defence of the resulting behaviour (as if women needed to be more accepting), often it was a condemnation of male atheists' 'poor socialisation' and a 'lack of understanding' of how men can impact women and other marginalised groups within the atheist community.

Many interviewees described organised atheism as generally welcoming to women, but several participants talked about men's sexual objectification of women in the community. Sean, age 34, described the problem as follows:

I think men get a pass here because they are "nerdy," so that allows them to excuse all kinds of behaviour because they don't know any better. I don't buy it. I know how these men talk, and it's the same as what you'd find any locker room: Who is hot? Who isn't? Who would you like to fuck? Etcetera.

Similarly, Dennis, age 37, described atheist groups as 'mating pools' for 'assholes': 'Every time a new guy shows up [to a drinking event], it's only a matter of time before he makes a go at someone. You can see it a mile away because only three or four women are ever at the pub anyway.' Although my participants did not explicitly label this observed behaviour as sexual harassment, their impression of men's attitudes toward

women in atheist settings is consistent with research identifying pervasive sexual harassment in the movement (Guenther 2019).

My participants' emphasis on inappropriate male behaviour was timely because as I was doing my interviews, sexual misconduct allegations at several American and European atheist events lead major conferences and other formal events to implement sexual harassment policies (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016; Schnabel et al. 2016). Consequently, my participants felt that atheists had a 'sexual harassment problem' and that conference policies did not address the issue. Igor, age 34, felt that male atheists should undergo sexual harassment training, akin to what he received at his workplace:

Based on what I've seen at conferences and even just locally, a lot of men could use the same training. They don't really know what sexual harassment is or what they're doing to make women uncomfortable. They think if they're not slapping someone on the butt or making lewd comments that they're in the clear. And that's just not how it works.

Besides their concerns about sexual harassment and misconduct within the atheist community, many of my male participants also expressed their frustration with other male atheists' approaches to gender, particularly their stubborn attachment to gender stereotypes and refusal to acknowledge male privilege. My participants often felt alone when trying to voice their concerns and spread their more egalitarian values to the rest of the community. For example, Max, age 22, talked about the impact of feminism on his life and his difficulty in educating other men about social justice issues within the atheist movement:

Learning more about feminism has really changed my life, how I interact with women, and I have become increasingly aware of gender imbalance—how the cards are really stacked against women in certain contexts. I've tried to bring that viewpoint to [atheist groups] but I can see the other men rolling their eyes. It's ironic because we always criticise religion for being sexist, but we repeat some of the same behaviours here. As a rationalist, I must take notice of that and do something when I can.

Max's observation that atheists critique religion without seeing the same problems in the atheist movement is consistent with previous research that links this contradiction with women's underrepresentation in atheist organisations (Guenther 2019).

Atheists like Max ruminated on these sexual misconduct allegations and emphasised the need for more female speakers



and his desire to hear more 'women's voices' at events. Liam, age 33, shared Max's perspective, but he also emphasised the positive benefits of feminism for men:

I watched this documentary series with a guy names Jackson Katz (I think that's his name), and it really opened my eyes to not only how prevalent sexual assault is but also how screwed up men are. We're the violent ones. We're the ones that are causing so much pain, and it's in our power to stop it (well, to help stop it). I think if men viewed it that way, they'd embrace feminism.

Liam also mentioned the cultural enforcement of a narrow range of masculinity and its impact on the atheist community, focusing specifically on the 'strident and aggressive' speaking style typical to many male atheists.

In summary, my feminist-identifying male participants emphasised the importance of addressing sexual harassment and misconduct allegations within atheist organisations (and at atheist events), and some took responsibility for creating a more welcoming environment for women. What I have offered in this section is not exhaustive of all feminist attitudes among my male participants, but it provides a snapshot of the most common views I encountered in interviews.

## 5 Feminist Women's Attitudes towards Feminist Men

Compared to my male participants, a greater number of female atheists identified as feminists. Of my sixteen female interviewees, twelve identified as feminists, that is, they specifically used the label 'feminist' without qualification. Although my focus here is on participants who embraced the feminist label, all women in my sample had nuanced views regarding feminism and were concerned about issues related to sexual consent, rape myths, and sexist discourses. The feminist label, however, struck some participants as inappropriate given their 'secular humanism' and their broader focus on human rights issues. This hesitancy among women to self-label despite otherwise supporting feminist ideologies is well-trodden ground (Maurer 2016; Williams and Wittig 1997; Aronson 2003; Calder-Dawe and Gavey 2016). Instead of emphasising how my female participants viewed the feminist label, however, this section will focus on how feminist women viewed feminist men within atheist organisations.

My female participants' attitudes towards male feminists are consistent with some previous literature showing that women perceived male feminists as less masculine, asexual (or less heterosexual), less attractive, and lacking in confidence (particularly sexual confidence) (Anderson 2009; Gundersen



and Kunst 2018). Despite perceiving male feminists as less masculine, they thought men's adoption of feminist goals was essential to achieving gender equality. This apparent contradiction is reflected in previous literature where women both perceive male feminists positively while attributing less masculine characteristics to those same men (Anderson 2009).

Understanding the feminist women's feminisation of feminist men is important for understanding men's obstacles to adopting the feminist label. To better understand feminist women's stereotypes of feminist men, I have grouped their attitudes into two categories that are consistent with my interviewees' language. The two categories are 'betas' and 'sneaks.' Each category brings its own baggage regarding stereotypically masculine characteristics.



## 5.1 Betas

The terms 'alpha' and 'beta' originate in studies of animal behaviour (Taylor and Jackson 2018; Jack 2017). In other animals, we sometimes see examples of formal hierarchies where one individual animal—the 'alpha'—occupies a position of leadership or authority. With humans, the term 'alpha' has been controversially used to describe men with masculine traits that enable them to occupy leadership positions. Betas males are 'other' males characterised by a subordinated and marginalised masculinity. The term 'beta' is employed as part of an antifeminist discourse but this crude usage has slipped into other circles (Middleton 2017; Ging 2017; Gundersen and Kunst 2018). My female participants distinguished between 'betas' and 'alphas,' regarding the latter group as more confident, 'high-test' (referring to high-testosterone), and more sexually/physically attractive than betas:

I think geeks in general are kind of beta. They don't ask girls out, are kind of awkward, and they don't really do anything with their bodies (except sit). A lot of men [in atheist organisations] are like that, especially those who are interested in feminism.

TRACY, age 21

Like Tracy, many of my female participants saw male atheists as more beta than alpha, even in the absence of feminist identification, but some interviewees like Sasha, age 31, thought male atheists' adoption of feminism made them particularly less masculine:

Most men who are involved in atheism tend to be brainy, right? They're intellectual. They like thinking about ideas. They're not going to be into sports. But male feminists are almost worse because they're kind



of 'soft' in all areas of their life. Like, they're just passive, you know.

One could link women's use of beta and alpha to organisational dynamics, that is, the gender parity of Edmonton-area atheist organisations. For example, Lisa, age 32, said that 'women have the power here [in atheist organisations]. Men hardly talk. It's the weirdest thing.' Lisa's perception that women oversee atheist organisations bucks the trend of male-dominated atheist organisations. My participants struggled to explain this anomaly given the gender dynamics of American atheist organisations (Guenther 2019). Explaining women's greater participation in Edmonton-area atheist organisations is beyond this article, but some participants hypothesised that Canadian atheist activism was more amenable to female leaders because of its greater focus on atheist community-building instead of attacking religion.



During my interviews, I did not spend much time discussing 'alpha' behaviour among male atheists, but some of my participants mentioned what they would like to see more masculine behaviour from men in the community. Kelsey, age 24, hoped for more assertiveness and described her problem with men in the community as follows:

I don't need men to agree with me all the time. I'm not sure how so many men got it in their heads that being a feminist meant 'agreeing with the womyns,' but that's what they do. If they get challenged by another guy, look out! They almost behave like normal human beings, but if a woman challenges them. They curl up in a little ball.

In addition to publicly agreeing with women, Tina, age 42, noted that many male feminists in the community 'have relationships with "strong" women, and by 'strong,' I mean controlling.' The notion that women 'are the alphas' in the atheist community also had some purchase among my interviewees.

In summary, my female participants viewed male atheists in the community as being 'beta,' that is, lacking self-confidence and sometimes being dominated by women in the community because of their passivity. Although some participants thought feminist men were just less masculine than non-feminist men, others suspected beta male atheist passivity, linking their behaviour to geek and gamer communities, which they saw as disingenuous in their association with marginalised masculinity (Ging 2017; Lumsden 2019). Some participants felt that feminist men adopted a beta disposition to earn victim status for not matching up to women's expectations:



There's definitely a subset of atheists that are a bit cry babyish about not automatically getting women's attention. They don't put any work into themselves and then they hold it against women for not noticing what they have to offer. They then blame this on the patriarchy—like they have been excluded from the big men's club in the sky where men hold all the power over women.

ANGELA, age 27

Although most of my participants were understanding regarding betas in the community, recognising that male feminists were genuine about their interest in challenging male privilege, some had doubts about men's authenticity. These doubts extended primarily into a category of male feminists that I refer to as the 'sneaks'.

## 5.2 Sneaks

I use the term 'sneak' to refer to those feminist men in the community that my female participants described as 'sneaky' or 'weasel-like'. Another term or phrase associated with sneaks was 'nice-guys' (often said with air quotation marks). One of my participants described this style of the sneaky feminist man as follows:

I think some male feminists are genuine. They arrived at feminism through a process of critical thinking (whether you agree with them). But I would say that most male feminists in atheism are just "virtue signalling" to get women to like them.

KELSEY, age 24

In this context, virtue signalling referred to the conspicuous expression of moral value, but often with false, misleading, unethical goals. For my participants, virtue signalling meant adopting an ideology like feminism to further one's status. Behind this status-seeking behaviour, however, stood other tactical aims.

Speaking about 'fake feminists,' Angela, 27, referred to virtue signalling as the default position among sneaks: 'Essentially, these guys can't get women's attention without turning into sycophants. The way they get around that is by holding the right positions on issues like gender.' Similarly, Lisa, age 32, saw some feminist men in the community as disingenuous: 'Whenever I see a guy playing the "feminist card," I immediately think to myself "Oh, I know what you're doing. Someone's trying to get laid!"' The notion that male feminists were 'trying to get laid,' struck some of my participants as a poor strategy for earning women's approval, but this was consistent with their broader

conceptualizations of men in the atheist movement is 'clueless' regarding women.

The 'nice guy' component of the sneaks included those male feminists who attempted to gain female friendship by being supportive, only to become resentful when their friendship did not turn into a romantic relationship (Urbaniak and Kilmann 2006). The nice guy stereotype has its roots in the notion that women do not date the men they claim to want to date:

There's this idea that women say they just want a nice guy: someone who is supportive and agreeable, but in the end, they end up dating an "asshole"—your typical alpha who isn't so nice, that just kind of does what he wants. Male feminists complain about this all the time: "Why won't anyone sleep with me? I agree with everything women say [baby sounds]"

LISA, age 32

Despite the masculinist language regarding alpha and beta males, the problem of nice guys in the community brought out values consistent with contemporary feminism, such as pushing back against stereotypes that women crave attention from 'bad boys' (Hill 2007). My participants were especially critical of the notion that women 'owe' men sex once men have 'worked' for it (Jozkowski, Marcantonio, and Hunt 2017).

The sneak category also applied to men who sexually harassed women within the community while hiding behind feminism. Four participants had negative experiences with one feminist man in the community who constantly 'pushed for sex':

I remember telling him "no" before we started drinking. I thought I was safe, but sure enough, as the night went on, he got much more aggressive. I had to tell him "no" like a dozen times. Eventually, I just made an excuse that I had to go to the bathroom and left. And this guy is the biggest feminist. He's constantly talking about it online.

TRACY, age 21

Similar stories had long circulated throughout my fieldwork about this particular atheist, who was also described as 'handsy' by participants. Although no formal action was taken against him, interviewees assured me that he was 'known to the community':

Yeah, you just know that you can't be out drinking with him. He's not "dangerous," exactly, but he's persistent. But hey, it's worked for him because I'm pretty sure half of [one of the atheist organisations]

has slept with him. Probably pity sex if I'm being honest.

SASHA, age 31

Beyond what one participant described as their 'local problem,' that is, the male feminist in question, my female atheists knew of other more prominent members of the atheist community who appropriated the term 'feminist' without embodying feminist values (Cobb 2015; Feasey 2017).

Conferences came to be the primary arena for engaging with and identifying sneaks. Most of my female participants had negative experiences with feminist men at atheist conferences, and they frequently expressed their irritation with strident feminists in the community who rewarded these same men for their activism: 'That same guy who is helping to draft your sexual harassment policy just grabbed my ass earlier in the night' (Tina, age 42). Despite having some misgivings with feminist women who may have provided cover for sneaks, most participants were primarily concerned with 'fake' feminist men who received advantages for claiming to support feminist politics.

## 6 Conclusion

This article contributes to understanding how atheist activists navigate gender issues, feminist activism, and some challenges that feminist men face because of their feminist identification. My research conforms with past research on feminist men that shows women perceive them as feminine and less attractive than non-feminist men (Pierce et al., 2003; Anderson, 2009). Consistent with this prior literature, I found that feminist men face questions regarding their masculinity. My female participants acknowledged the importance of successful male allyship of feminist movements, but they stereotyped feminist men as 'betas' and 'sneaks.' They felt that men's embrace of a feminist identity in the organized atheism was driven either by weakness and passivity or a desire to win the favour of women in the movements. The responses of my female participants suggest that male atheists' participation in gender equality activism may face several obstacles in adopting pro-feminists' ideas, namely perceptions of weakness and a loss of masculinity.

Identity politics has become a major source of division in organized atheism, especially with the emergence of social justice activism, including feminist activism within the atheist movement. Although my male participants expressed liberal values and beliefs and they supported feminist objectives, my female participants' tendency to describe them in feminine terms made some participants feel threatened by feminism and excluded from participating in feminist activism. As Connor, age

28, put it, 'It's kind of hard to identify as a feminist when the very people you're trying to support make you feel like you're somehow unworthy.' Because some women and men view feminist men as having feminine characteristics, participants who do not wish to be seen as being less masculine may consider their pro-feminist activism as a risky divergence from prescriptions of traditional masculinity.

My results regarding feminist identity among male atheists and women's views regarding male feminists are based on a small sample of atheist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. My results may not apply to other social contexts. Importantly, my sample was limited to white, educated, and middle-class atheist activists (in organisations with majority female executives). It is possible that men and women in other social locations may have different experiences with feminist-identification. Additionally, an intersectional lens was not the focus of this article, consequently limiting the generalisability of my findings.

Given the persistence of gender inequality in the atheist movement, further research is required to understand feminist identification in men and what this may mean for strengthening male allyship with organized atheism. Researchers might also want to explore how feminist identity is associated with particular views of masculinity and how those views impact their participation within atheist communities. Also, my female participants raised concerns about 'fake feminists,' which is itself a category worth examining, especially regarding how certain men in the community may use feminist identification as a shield for their sexist and predatory behaviours. In concert with feminist identification of men, future research should also examine women's perceptions of feminism within the atheist movement. My study shows that some feminist women praise men's involvement in feminism while failing to create positive portrayals of feminist men, which may negatively impact men's solidarity with social justice activism in the atheist movement.

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