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From Political to Personal: Forming Feminist Identities

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From Political to Personal: Forming Feminist Identities

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Abstract

Many young women are reluctant to claim a feminist identity although they hold feminist beliefs. Why and how do some women begin to identify as feminist while other young women reject a feminist label? Knowing the way people identify with political and social movements contributes to an understanding of what makes a movement successful. I use interviews with nine young women who are college students at a small, urban, Midwestern liberal arts college, to determine the events and influences of feminist identification and the processes of developing these identities. While I find that feminist identification is situational, contextual, and changing over time, I conclude that positive opinions of feminism and feminists in social networks, such as families or peer groups, encouraged feminist identification. Women who rejected a feminist identity attributed this rejection to a lack of knowledge and activism. While historical negative connotations to the feminist label remain prevalent today, their effect on identification was minimal.

Nearly everyone in the United States has heard of feminism or the women's movement. Centered on the belief that inequality exists between women and men socially, economically, and politically, feminism attempts to critique and change the systems that reinforce inequality, namely patriarchy. Feminists share these beliefs and act on behalf of them. Most people agree that women's equality is a good thing; yet, society does not hold feminism and feminists in similar light. Many women are reluctant to claim the title of feminist but hold the belief that women are discriminated against and hope for change. What prevents some people from identifying with feminism and what draws others to claim it as part of their identity? What does the process of forming a feminist identity tell us about why young women embrace or reject it?

It is important to research such contradictions among beliefs and identity to find out what contributes to the formation of identities. Understanding how young women connect or disconnect with the larger political and social movement of feminism provides insight into this identity formation. In the case of feminism, association with a political movement or set of beliefs does not necessarily lead to a personal identity as feminist; however, it does in some cases. To understand this shift, it is important to study events and influences as well. Many social movements require a personal commitment to the set of beliefs associated with the movement, such as environmentalist movements, anti-war movements, and feminist movements. Expanding the knowledge of the way people identify with political and social movements is important for understanding what makes a movement successful.

To explore this topic, I interviewed nine female college students at a small Midwestern liberal arts college. These women were juniors and seniors. I used a

purposeful sample and selected specific areas to explore. I interviewed these women about this beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of feminism and feminists. To explore their opinions, I asked them about sex roles, discrimination, reproductive choice, and feminism and feminists. Lastly, I determined whether they self-identified as feminists. I used the answers to find patterns, similarities, and differences among the women interviewed.

Little difference in feminist beliefs existed between the women who identified as feminists and those who did not. Belief in feminism or feminist goals did not relate to identification for the women included in my study. I find that there are certain key mechanisms that encouraged feminist identification; however, they did not guarantee it. Family members' and peers' positive opinions of feminism and feminists significantly influenced the feminist identifiers. Feminists saw their beliefs and their exposure to feminism as instrumental mechanisms; however, non-feminists believed the same things as feminists and had similar exposure to feminism as well. While historical negative connotations to the feminist label remain prevalent today, their effect on identification is minimal. The non-feminists saw their lack of knowledge and activism but not lack of feminist beliefs, as holding them back from feminist identification. Some women lacked the desire to be feminists while others felt a strong personal connection to feminism. I find identification was situational and contextual.

Before exploring the identification process, I begin with a review of previous social survey research on contributing factors for feminist identification and identification theory. The influence of socioeconomic status, age, race, and gender is questionable. Many researchers found that feminist attitudes and beliefs correlated with feminist

identification. While I find this research limited due to the nature of survey research, I use their findings to help identify areas of focus for my in-depth interviews. My own interviews with young women focused on their experiences with, beliefs about, and perceptions of feminists and feminism. I examine this data to find the identification processes and the differences between feminists and non-feminists. I conclude with a discussion of the remaining knowledge gaps and suggest future research paths.

Literature Review

In understanding feminist identity formation, researchers often place emphasis on who identifies as a feminist. Much research demonstrates what personal characteristics were similar among those who claimed a feminist identity. Examining those who do not identify as feminists is just as important as examining those who do. An understanding of identity as non-linear, ever changing, and contextual is the basis for my research. Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992) describe the complex process of identification as including "attitudes toward the communicators, the message of the movement, and the content in which the message occurs" (323). I used this understanding of the identification process to form the questions for my interviews. Since multiple factors contribute to identity formation, I included questions about social contexts, experiences, and personal beliefs. The significance of college as a transitional period where identities are explored and solidified supports my rationale for researching women in college. Much other research supports this claim by conducting feminist identity studies among college women (Myaskovsky and Wittig 1997; Williams and Wittig 1997; Cowan et al.1992; Henley et al. 1998). Some previous research attempts to understand variation in

identification by examining differences in interests and beliefs while others explore socialization. I use a combination of these factors and find social networks, such as family or peers, to provide the most influence for feminist identification.

Predicting Factors

Exposure and Beliefs. Women's exposure to feminism comes from several directions and influences them in many ways. To understand how negative connotations attributed to feminism affect women, it is important to understand from where these representations come. Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) found that positive opinion of the feminist movement, exposure to feminism, and support for feminist goals significantly increases identification whereas positive evaluation of feminists, recognition of discrimination against women, and belief in collective action were not significant factors in feminist identity. Williams and Wittig (1997) explored five of the six contributors mentioned above, excluding positive opinion of the feminist movement, in their social survey. They found similar results—positive evaluation of feminists, support of feminist goals, and exposure to feminism correlated with feminist identification. Recognition of discrimination and belief in collective action were not significant factors for feminist identification.

Negative Connotations. In a social survey of 229 racially diverse college women ages 19-36, Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) found that while many women support the feminist movement's goals, few publicly identify as feminists. They suggested that this gap between support and identity could be because of a perceived negative view of feminists by others even while they positively view feminism themselves. Williams and

Wittig (1997) also discovered the contradictions between belief and identity and attributed them to a number of factors ranging from "knowledge-based to strategic" where knowledge-based factors include the misconception that feminism is anti-male (p. 902). Other explanations for the resistance of feminist identification are a woman's fear of the negative connotations associated with feminists. The women most affected by this fear of feminist identification are "young, single, heterosexual, college women" (Williams and Wittig 1997:902). They reference previous research on college women in the United States and feminism finding that, "[A]mong those who support the goals of the American women's movement, and related feminist values, a small proportion consider themselves feminists, and even fewer are willing to call themselves feminists among their associates" (886).

Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992) suggest that women who are reaping the benefits of feminism do not associate these opportunities with the struggles of the past; they may also forget that continual sexism requires constant struggle by the feminist movement. Huddy et al. (2000) suggests that those opposed to the women's movement accuse feminism of disregarding women who choose family over career, ignoring women of diverse backgrounds, and leaving behind average women and men. They also explain that polls from the 1990s found many Americans continue to view the label of feminist as an insult even though they personally consider it a neutral label. While the women's movement is generally embraced, feminists garner mixed reviews.

Other Variables

Generation and Age. Generational differences among feminist identification do not seem to exist as young women are self-identifying as feminists about as often as women in their 40s (Huddy et al. 2000:317). Schnittker et al. (2003) claim that young adulthood is a significant and essential period in the formation of political ideology (608). However, they suggest that the meaning of feminism identification is different among those whose "political coming-of-age" has occurred during different generations (608). They explain that the period in which one begins to link themselves to political causes has a strong influence depending upon in which era that occurs. Someone who became politically aware during the 1970s has a different understanding of feminism than someone who became politically aware in the 1990s.

Sex and Gender. Much research suggests that women are more likely to accept a feminist identity than men (Cowan et al. 1992; Williams and Wittig 1997; Huddy et. al 2000; Schnittker et al. 2003). Schnittker et al. (2003) found when considering generation that both men and women whose "political coming-of-age" occurred during the emergence of the women's movement more likely self-identify as feminists than both older or younger men and women (614). According to Huddy et al. (2000), women are nearly twice more likely than men are to self-identify as a feminist and twice as likely to join in movement activities; however, there is little gender difference in one identifying as a women's movement supporter (316). They attribute the lack of male feminist identification to the belief that the feminist movement has not benefited men, as many Americans view the movement as negatively affecting men's jobs, thoughts about themselves, and their relationships with women (Huddy et al. 2000:315).

Race. Myaskovsky's and Wittig's (1997) evaluation of African-American women and feminist social identity found that support for feminist goals is the only significant predictor of feminist identification among black women (881). Hunter and Sellers (1998) found that African American support for feminism connects to both gender and racial experiences. Income, education level, political activism and experience with welfare agencies influence women's support of feminism while men's support of feminism was influenced by education, marital status—being married increased support of feminism—greater empathy for African Americans, less church involvement, experience with unemployment agencies, and having mothers who worked in clerical/retail positions (92-96). Schnittker et al. (2003) found that African Americans are neither significantly more nor significantly less likely to self-identify as feminists than whites are (612).

Development of Identity as a Process

Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) suggest that future research study developmental processes of feminist social identity. Citing Downing and Roush (1985), they describe a five-stage model of feminist identity development (864):

> Stage 1 (Passive Acceptance) describes the woman who is either unaware of or denies the individual, institutional, and cultural prejudice and discrimination against her. Stage 2 (Revelation) is precipitated by one or a series of crises or contradictions that causes women to experience feelings of anger and guilt over the way they have participated in their own oppression in the past. Stage 3 (Embeddedness-Emanation) refers to the tendency to withdraw from the general culture and to find and embed themselves in a "female is beautiful" subculture. Emanation marks the beginning of an openness to alternate viewpoints and to a more relativistic as opposed to dualistic perspective. In Stage 4 (Synthesis), women increasingly value the

> positive aspects of being female and are able to integrate these qualities with their unique personal attributes into a positive and realistic self-concept. Stage 5 (Active Commitment) involves the translation of the newly developed consolidated identity into meaningful and effective action...people may recycle through these stages, the may stagnate in a specific stage, or they may revert to earlier stages when their skills are insufficient to respond to the demands of current life stresses (864).

Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992) present different predictors of feminist identity using a broad range of participants of varying socioeconomic status, ages, and racial/ethnic backgrounds, half male and female students and half women from community settings. They did not find these sociodemographic variables above significant with feminist identity, except political association; democrats were more likely to identify as feminist. They also found that women's experiences with gender discrimination were not a significant predictor of feminist identity. They allowed for varying degrees of feminist identity by using a scale for feminist self-labeling finding that few participants, 12%, considered themselves to be feminists to the strongest degree, however the majority, 66%, fell into the middle categories of a small degree to a moderate degree of feminist self-labeling (Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek 1992:326). This finding may provide insight into why some people do not identify as feminists when asked in social surveys. Perhaps a degree of self-labeling would give respondents more room for feminist identity.

Grotevant (1987) describes a general model of identity formation. He describes the probability of identity formation for one as involving multiple factors—family, age, life events, current satisfaction, and college environments. He determines five interacting

processes during formation—expectations and beliefs about the particular domain, exploration into an identity, investment of time and energy, the influence of competing forces, and evaluating the process. He also names the social contexts where identity formation occurs, culture and society, family, peers, and school and work environments. Grotevant concludes that identity formation is developmental, contextual, and lifelong.

Previous research indicates that gender, race, and age are not always significant factors for determining feminist identification (Huddy et al. 2000; Schnittker et al. 2003: Myaskovsky and Wittig 1997). The researchers highlight the continuing importance to feminist identification of negative connotations to the word feminist. The studies described above also found correlations between attitudes about feminism and feminist identities. To understand the shift from supporting a political ideology to forming a personal identity, it is important to study events and influences as well. Research has attempted to understand this relationship through a description of feminist identity stages; however, like Grotevant (1987), I approach the process of identification as ever changing, contextual, and non-linear. This process can begin to be studied through conversations with feminists and non-feminists.

I follow previous research by continuing to examine negative connotations and their effect on feminist identification. I exclude gender, race, and age as variables since their significance is debatable and my sample size is small. I also continue to explore the link between beliefs and identity. I believe previous feminist identity research neglects the important factors of influential events and people, as mentioned in Grotevant (1987). Therefore, I include those variables in my study. I explore the relevance of the model of feminist identification presented by Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) and consider feminist

identity changing and contextual. Time and space locate social movements and therefore have different effects on different people. However, I attempt to understand the way these specific women relate to the feminist movement and either accept or reject a feminist identity.

Research Design

Study Population

I interviewed nine female college students who were either 21 or 22 years old. Six participants identified as Caucasian, two as Asian, and one as Hispanic. Considering the previous research, men can and do identify as feminists, although, not in the same numbers that women do. While there appear to be few differences between men and women with respect to the factors that contribute to feminist identity (Schnittker et al. 2003), men may have a different process of feminist identification. To control for gender, I exclude men from this research. The participants were college juniors and seniors at a small Midwestern liberal arts college, thus controlling for education as a factor. This population gives insight into the women's understandings of feminism and feminists decades after the mainstream emergence of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Because of their possible exposure to feminism or feminists from an earlier age, these women may have different perspectives than women of previous generations.

Sampling

I conducted a purposeful sample of participants because it is improbable to study all women who have views of feminism. Instead, I selected specific characteristics to

explore. I chose to include only female juniors and seniors in college because of the significance of identity formation during college years. I expected that these women have explored and solidified many of their personal and political opinions. Through contacts at a nearby liberal arts college, I sent an e-mail message to sociology majors and a few specific women who were acquaintances of a fellow student. I suggested that women who were juniors or seniors volunteer to participate in a study about feminism. This method did not yield only sociology majors. Four of the women responded to the e-mail message sent to sociology majors and five of the women responded to the e-mail message sent to a fellow student's acquaintances. The majors included sociology, biology, criminal justice, English, education, religion, and women's studies. I expected these women to have a variety of opinions on feminism and feminists.

Method

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to understand the process of feminist identification. These taped interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and took place in a public space suggested by the participants to ensure ease for them. Previous research has used social survey data, which excludes the sequence of feminist identification. By conducting interviews, participants were able to voice what they thought was most important, along with the sequence of identification, and not what I perceived as a contributing factor and process

Participants knew that this study was on the subject of feminist identification. By conducting a purposive sample, the occasion of participants to be on the extreme ends of either feminist identification or rejection of feminism was a concern. However, I did not

acquire any participants who viewed feminism negatively. I cannot speculate whether the nature of my research discouraged participation by women who negatively viewed feminism or whether the selection of women whom I contacted all positively viewed feminism. While interviews are limited by their analysis in that they cannot be quantified in the same way as social surveys, comparisons can be made between participants who identify as feminists and those who do not. Using interviews of a small sample of women at one liberal arts college in the Midwest limits the representativeness of my findings. Nonetheless, the benefits of interviewing a small sample outweigh the relevance of representativeness. Interviewing is a strong method for finding unanticipated evidence, such as events, allowing for narratives, and understanding elements of human development that occur overtime, such as processes.

Operationalization

I examined the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of the participants on the topics of feminism, feminists, and feminist identities. I asked participants their views of inequalities between sexes, positive or negative associations with feminism and feminists, and feminist identification. To gain an understanding of their feminist beliefs, I asked the women about traditional sex roles and reproductive choice. I tried to identify the type of family they grew up in to gauge the influence of that environment. I asked if they ever heard about feminism, where did this occur, when, and what was said about it. I explored negative and positive perceptions of feminists. Finally, I asked whether they would call themselves a feminist and their relationship with feminism and feminists. I formulated my research design to examine the multiple factors of the feminist identification process.

The variables from previous studies that I included did not lead to important findings in the process of identification. My own findings suggest that previous social survey research limits the range of responses

Findings

Social survey data has suggested that demographic variables are not consistently significant factors associated with feminist identification. Rather, they show that beliefs correlate with identity and suggest that identification is a linear progression. However, previous research does not include the events and influences that affect the identification process. I analyzed my interview data to find the important processes that underlie young women's feminist identification with or rejection of a feminist identity. I find that feminist beliefs are not significant factors. Family and peer influence were key mechanisms for young women who identified as feminist. They mostly credited their upbringings for instilling values that they would later define as feminist views; however, I interpret this data to suggest that the environment encouraged identification through positive opinions of feminists. Education about gender discrimination by peers also played a significant role in the identification process. The women who identified as feminists believed that anyone could be a feminist, even those who do not think they are.

Feminists saw their beliefs and their exposure to feminism as instrumental mechanisms to their developing feminist identities; however, non-feminists held the same opinions as feminists and had similar exposure to feminism. The women who rejected a feminist label were concerned about their level of commitment, participation and knowledge about feminism. Two women had strong feminist beliefs but chose not to

voice them and therefore felt they were not feminists. The other two women felt that they did not know enough about feminism nor were they active enough in the feminist movement to consider themselves feminists.

Shared Beliefs

All nine participants labeled themselves "pro-choice" and advocated less strict gender roles and more egalitarian partnerships than their parents had. They were frustrated by gender discrimination, especially mentioning the wage gap between women and men, lack of opportunities, and the differing expectations for women in the workplace. Most women also mentioned that they see the world changing and although it is occurring slowly, they attributed many of the gains of women to the feminist movement. Although Williams and Wittig (1997) found support for feminist goals to be significant, all of the young women supported feminist goals, and just over half of my participants identified as feminist.

The young women acknowledged the negative connotations associated with the label of feminist. They most commonly blamed these associations on the media portrayal of feminists as out-of-line, loud, lesbian women of the 1960s. They mentioned insecure men who attack anything that attempts to remove their power as another cause of negative images of feminists. Other women saw negative portrayals of feminists in middle and high school history classes, which represented them as "braless bitches" who "went against what women should be." Nonetheless, these women—both those who identified as feminists and those who did not—acknowledged that these dominant images were false.

Although all of the young women had some idea of feminism prior to college, most recalled learning the negative side of feminism first, mostly in the context of high school history, if they learned about feminism at all. Women's rights were not associated with the term feminism and were only discussed during civil rights curriculum where feminists were represented as negative. The few women who learned of positive images of feminism attributed this to their mothers, aunts, and female teachers. Six of the nine young women could confidently identify feminists they knew but most were inside of the academy as either students or professors.

The influence of negative images of feminists is significant because accepting a feminist label, according to Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992), depends upon a positive view of feminists and seeing them as more "...heterosexual (rather than homosexual) and liberal (rather than radical)..." (329). Kelly, a 21 year old senior, highlighted that positively viewing feminism is associated with embracing a feminist label. She thought that if others knew the multiple images of feminists, they would embrace the identity. She said:

> I think that being educated and just knowledgeable about, you know, that feminists aren't like bra-burners, don't shave their legs...I think there's still that, like, stigma or stereotype that that's all you can be. Or, like, I truly think that, like, everyone could potentially be a feminist as long as you think that there should be equality, we should be paid the same... So the more you know, the more you'd be more accepting... It is different than it used to be portrayed and how it used to be, like, really bad to be called a feminist.

Because there were so many similarities between feminists and non-feminists, it is difficult to determine where the line is drawn between those who identify as feminists

and those who do not. The women who identified as feminists believed that anyone could be a feminist, even those who do not think they are. Their level of commitment, participation, and knowledge about feminism concerned the women who rejected a feminist label. Why are these women so alike in their beliefs but divided on their personal identification as feminists? Perhaps the distinction is where Williams and Wittig (1997) place it, "Many young women perceive themselves as effectively working to achieve equal status with men on their own and do not feel it necessary to join in collective action toward obtaining equality for women" (891).

Feminist Identity as a Process

Five of the nine young women interviewed completely identified themselves as feminists. Kelly, Judith, and Emily slowly adopted feminist identities as they grew up and became more conscious of gender inequality. However, Emily was different in that she rejected her feminist identity for a few years because of negative connotations. These three formed feminist identities at a younger age than the other feminists did and attributed much of their feminist identities to how they were raised. They did not notice a significant difference between themselves before and after they "became" feminists because they felt that they were always feminists, only lacking the label. Sarah and Michelle did not embrace a feminist identity until they entered college and were exposed to feminism. Sarah's roommate and advisor played a role in her identification while Michelle's professor and her own increased interest in gender issues contributed to the process. These feminists felt that they either grew up to be a feminist or learned a feminist identity.

Always a Feminist, Family Influence. Kelly, a 21-year-old Caucasian senior, felt that she has always been a feminist and just discovered the label that fit with her previously established opinions. One particular instance of gender activism contributed to Kelly's feminist identity. Kelly was an athlete in high school and wanted to play intramural basketball. However, the school restricted Kelly and her female teammates to the non-competitive co-ed teams. Competitive basketball was reserved for boys' teams only. Kelly said, "If we want to go get beat up or whatever that should be fine and that was kinda like the first 'no' that I was ever told." Feeling discriminated against, Kelly took the issue to the athletic director and other school administrators and she established a competitive basketball league for girls at her high school.

When Kelly began dating during her high school years, she also developed more of a sense of a feminist identity. She said she would get angry with young men who opened doors or catered to her. She felt that these young men were perpetuating stereotypes of women as weak and dependent. Activism was what drew Kelly to the label but she does not believe that activism is a required quality of feminists. Kelly was also peculiar in that she believes the feminist movement is dead. She said that older women no longer care about gender issues and younger women reject feminism. However, she felt that the struggle between work and family might revive feminism.

Similarly, Judith (a Caucasian, 22-year-old senior Women's Studies major) who self-identified as a feminist said:

> I don't think I did change anything because it was who I already was. I was just, not like, you know, a lot of the people I knew, and I didn't make a conscious decision like "oh I'm a feminist now so I have to dress this way" or anything like that I was just myself and I was a feminist, so.

Judith was not exposed to feminism outright. Judith's aunt was the only feminist she met before going to college. Her aunt took a women's studies course when Judith was in 9th grade and shared her knowledge with Judith. Judith's aunt contributed to her feminist identity but she also remembers two events when she noticed gender discrimination and that her reaction to it was different. Judith remembered:

> When I was in either 7th or 8th grade, over Christmas once, after dinner, all the men went and sat in the living room to watch football or whatever and all the women stayed and washed the dishes. And for some reason, that year really infuriated me, and I was crying I was so mad..."why is it like this every year?" So that was one thing. The other thing was I had a cousin that had just gotten married and I was talking about the wedding with my aunt or something. And I said when I get married I wouldn't take my husbands name and they just had this look, I don't know exactly what the look was... But those two things made me realize I was kinda seeing things differently from a lot of people.

Judith said that she has always been a feminist and embraced the label after these two moments of consciousness. Even though her family reacted to her feminist beliefs, she thought that her parents raised her to see events differently and to want gender equality.

Family Influence, Peer Influence. Emily, a 21-year-old Caucasian senior, described her feminist identity as one she embraced and rejected throughout her life. She reflected:

> I think there is a negative connotation to feminism and being a feminist and I think people, I think why I rejected it was because of that. You know, I was afraid that people were gonna think that I was, whatever, label me butch or something, you know, like, those terms that are derogatory and really have no basis... I think other people are afraid of that too, they [young women] don't

> want to be considered too independent, too forward, promiscuous, or any of those things that can sometimes go along with the term feminism.

Emily said she began to identify as a feminist in middle school. As she grew up, she became more conscious of gender issues and gradually took on a feminist identity. When she entered high school, she felt pressure to avoid a feminist identity because she was afraid of what people would think of her and that she would be labeled butch. Emily said:

> When I was younger, I was really into feminism and what it meant and then as I got older there was more pressure that, you know, feminists were "man-eating bitches" and all this stuff. So I kinda, when I was in early high school, I didn't want to identify as a feminist and then junior and senior year of high school I again began identifying as a feminist.

Emily felt that a feminist identity made her more confident in who she is and what her opinions are. She viewed feminists more positively and she even stands up to her husband's family, who would like her to stay at home when she has children.

Contextual Identity, Peer Influence. Identity formation appears to be contextual. This is evident in the stories of Sarah and Michelle, who both claimed a feminist identity in college. For Sarah, a 21-year-old Korean senior who began identifying after entering college, her location at the time of identification had a significant impact. She referenced her level of education as a significant influence on her; however, the participants attended the same school and had completed similar levels of education. This pattern suggests that something other than the formal education at college cause the shift in Sarah's identity, notwithstanding her association between the location where she adopted the identity and the process itself. Sarah reflected:

> [F]or example, kids that I went to high school with that didn't go to college, like, a lot of them are starting to settle down and they're doing, like, the traditional thing; they'll stay home and things like that. But, like, my friends here, they're all, like, we're both gonna go to work and we'll figure out, like, childcare... So I think it, um, it's an interesting parallel between like level of education and then how you believe in gender stereotypes and gender roles and things like that.

Sarah's first encounter with feminism occurred when she arrived at college. Her roommate labeled herself as a feminist and pointed out gender inequality. Sarah initially felt ignorant but feels that both her roommate and then her academic advisor pushed her to change her ideas about gender inequality. Both women taught Sarah about the positive aspects of feminism. Sarah remembered:

> When I first came to school, I...would say I was fairly ignorant when it came to, like, women's issues and gender stereotypes or gender roles, and just, like, kinda how in some cases, they are very strict, strict roles and to cross over is sometimes kind of seen as taboo... But um, [my roommate] was always, like, pushing that and being like, "No!" and pointing out, like, inequality. And then, the more she would point it out, the more I would look for it and the more I would look for it, the more I would see it and then I kind of, like, went from there.

Sarah felt that she changed a lot about herself as she became more conscious of gender discrimination in the United States. With her addition of a feminist identity, Sarah began using more gender-neutral vocabulary; she gained greater confidence in herself and her opinions, and became friends with more open-minded people. She felt that realizing a feminist identity took a push from others to change her ideas and leave behind her comfort level.

While Sarah's peers influenced her, Michelle now remembers the impact of her mother. Michelle, a 21-year-old Caucasian senior, explained her identification as a process over time, "It kinda was my own personal growth but now that I have come to where I am, I can see that my mom has always had a part of that. But I didn't see that until I ventured into that myself." Michelle felt that she was more of a feminist a few years ago when she expressed of interest in gender issues, but she still considered herself a feminist. Michelle's first memory of feminism occurred in college. One of her professors was involved in the 1960s feminist movement and gave Michelle an idea about who feminists were at the time. Michelle cannot remember ever meeting a feminist outside of academia although she put a feminist label on her mother. She considered feminism to be more of an academic issue and found that a feminist label is not as useful for women now. Michelle recognized that the feminist movement had to happen to get women to where they are now but she thought that women can be strong without a feminist label.

To Michelle, adopting a feminist identity is a strategic move; one can claim the label to get through discrimination. While specific times in life may require a feminist label other times the label is not useful. Michelle said:

> A feminist is a label, just empowerment, you know, women need that at different times in their lives. I was a feminist a couple years ago, I would consider myself to be one a couple years ago but now I'm kind of backing off from that, it's not useful for me right now.

Michelle did not claim a feminist identity until about her second year of college. She said that at this time she became more conscious of discrimination and inequality. She saw that her mother influenced her feminist identity but this is only noticeable in

hindsight. Michelle may not have continually claimed a feminist identity but she continued to stick up for women and became more verbal since first identifying as a feminist.

These women formed identities differently and had different influences yet they all claimed a feminist identity. The influence of family was important for Kelly, Judith, Emily, and Michelle; on the other hand, peers and social context played a role in Emily's rejection of feminism, and Michelle and Sarah's embracing feminism. While a feminist identity can be seen as a process, it is also contextual and these women's location determined their acceptance of a feminist identity. Establishing what aspects of their social relations were influential in the process of forming a feminist identity, though, requires comparison with individuals who did not adopt the identity.

Non-Feminists

Four of the nine young women interviewed did not identify themselves as feminists. Christina and Tiffany both acknowledged their feminist views but both said that they did not voice them all the time. Christina said that it was difficult to defend feminism constantly and, therefore, she could not be a feminist because she was not always a feminist. Tiffany believed that people need experiences before forming beliefs. Because she did not tell others what to believe, she did not consider herself a feminist. Karen felt that she has feminist views but lacks the activism and knowledge required to be a feminist. She said that feminists were more extreme than she. Melinda's positive exposure to feminism only occurred since she came to college. As a result of this exposure, she viewed feminism in a positive light but she said that she did not know

enough about feminism to defend it and that she was not involved in activism. Thus, she could not identify as a feminist. Their lack of knowledge and activism attributed to their lack of feminist identification.

Sometimes Feminists. Christina saw feminist as a pure label that she might spoil without constant accountability to the belief. Christina said that she was not certain if she could put that label on herself. She felt like others place most labels on her. Although Christina's positive exposure to the idea of feminism occurred early, she remained conflicted about her feminist identity. When I asked Christina whether she would call herself a feminist she replied, "I don't know" and concluded that she was a feminist half of the time. She described this idea of being half a feminist as a switch; sometimes she enters "feminist mode" and she discusses the oppression of women and stands up to someone who disagrees. However, she recognized this as a difficult task that takes energy and sometimes she has to let people say sexist comments without debate. Consequently, she no longer felt like a feminist because—in her mind—a feminist would not back down from arguments.

While Tiffany, a Caucasian 21-year-old junior, was surrounded by friends who call themselves feminists, she said that she is not a feminist but she leans toward it. She was in the United States Army and because of her military participation, she took gender discrimination very personally. Tiffany was not vocal about her opinion that women and men are not treated equally, because she did not want to force her views onto others. She said that experience creates opinions and that it is not her place to tell others what to believe in. Tiffany's experiences in the Army made her feel like she could do anything she wants to, but she was less enthusiastic about attaching a feminist label to herself. She

said she does not label herself a feminist because she sees no chance that inequality will change in her lifetime and she does not share her feminist opinions. Tiffany said:

> If I were pushed far enough to be upset by the treatment of male versus female or that genre, I guess I would be more inclined to call myself a feminist...but I guess I still see it as there's a chance that people, they aren't so segregated in male versus female so I don't call myself [a feminist].

Lack of Activism, Lack of Knowledge. Karen, a Caucasian 21-year-old junior, said she is "pro-women" but has no real knowledge about feminism and cannot tell who is a feminist. She felt that feminists are extreme; and, while Karen could talk about gender discrimination and shared similar views with feminists, she did not actively participate in changing the situation for women. Her lack of activism was one reason why Karen did not see herself as a feminist. Karen explained:

> I would put a feminist more extreme, out there, and rallying out there and doing things to change laws and change things and things like that. Compared to me, I can talk the talk but I'm not doing anything about it. I can research about it but I'm not, like, changing anything and I'm not going out there and writing to my senators. I'd say that's more of a feminist.

Unlike the 1960s images of "extreme feminists," bra burning, anti-feminine, "girls going on a rampage" that the participants described as historical representations, Karen saw extreme actions as writing to her senators and rallying.

Karen acknowledged the negative connotations to the feminist label. Although she did not explicitly name them as a reason for her non-feminist identification, she suggested their influence on others prevented their adoption of the feminist label. Karen said the threat of feminism to men in power led to the negative stereotypes that emerged

about feminism. While Karen thought that this pattern should be changed, she just let it be, compared to others who fought for what should be changed. According to Karen, her lack of feminist knowledge and activism prevented her from claiming a feminist identity.

Melinda, like Karen, felt her lack of feminist education and activism gave her no right to call herself a feminist. Melinda, a 21-year-old Hispanic senior, had no encounters with feminism until college and even then, she could only think of one feminist she has met. Although before college she did not care about feminism and used to turn away from feminists, she said she now has respect for feminists. Melinda helped with a women's retreat and learned a little about feminism. She said that personal experience with gender discrimination or being raised in a feminist family creates feminists. At any rate, Melinda still felt that she is not familiar enough in feminist ideals to engage in dialogues about gender. She suggested:

> I guess the reason I don't call myself a feminist is because I'm not really that well versed in, you know, feminist ideals or anything, um, and I guess I've always thought that if I label myself a feminist...I might ostracize myself, I might be seen differently by other people... I guess I never really want to put more labels on myself because I'm already, you know, like, a Mexican-American, Hispanic... I don't want to put more labels on myself to separate myself even more so.

Predicting Factors

Identities are contextual, non-linear, and changing. For those who identified as feminist, their families, peers, and school environments shaped their identities as Grotevant (1987) suggests. As Judith said:

> ...it was who I already was, I was just, not like, you know, a lot of the people I knew, and I didn't make a conscious decision...I was just myself and I was a feminist...Probably something to do, like, in the way that I was raised...

Even when they did not recognize it at the time—Michelle, for example, only realized the influence of her mother in retrospect—these women were influenced by their families and friends.

Feminist identification changes over time. Emily, who began identifying as a feminist very early, felt pressure by her peers to reject the label. Eventually her confidence in her feminist identity allowed her to embrace it. Michelle felt like more of a feminist a few years ago but still considers feminism a part of her identity. While Kelly did not reject her feminist label, she did doubt the feminist movement, stating "I think [the feminist movement's] dead. Like, I don't think, I mean, old ladies, I don't know that they are worrying about anything anymore."

For Sarah, who began identifying as a feminist in college, escaping her high school friends and entering a new environment where she could surround herself with new friends allowed her to take on a set of ideas. She said:

> ...[I]t's also who you surround yourself with... probably would help you ease into that comfort level of being like, 'I am a feminist' and then the more you become comfortable with it, then you can push past, like, your comfort zone. You can be like 'yeah, [I am a feminist]' around everyone... Just as you start to become comfortable with yourself you even change who you're hanging out with, so then change your surroundings, which changes your environment, which changes, like, which makes you more comfortable with, like, everything I guess.

Sarah's comfort allowed her to identify as a feminist. By being in a social network that held positive views of feminists, her identification was encouraged.

The five-stage model of feminist identity development as described in Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) suggests that identity is a linear progression. The women in my study who did identify as feminists, did not follow this linear progression. Were these women not truly feminists? The progression of forming an identity based on a social movement may have changed as the movement has been well established. These women may represent a new understanding of feminism. They have been aware of the movement since they were younger and do not necessarily associate the feminist movement with their feminist identity.

Family and peers influenced those who did self-identify as feminist, but one woman was surrounded by feminists yet did not consider herself one. There were anomalies to every influential factor. Identification was not a simple occurrence—once a woman experienced a certain precondition, she became a feminist; rather, identification was a process. Three women felt that they grew up to be feminists, but still one of them rejected feminism for a few years. One woman felt like more of a feminist a few years ago and less of one now. Another just began considering herself a feminist and made broad changes in her life to accommodate new ways of thinking. One woman leaned toward feminism and another had a feminist switch. One woman recently began to respect feminists while another called herself "prowoman" but not feminist. These cases demonstrate that the process of feminist identity formation was situational, strategic, and contextual and influenced by social network opinions of feminists.

The negative perception of feminism by others did seem to influence those who did not identify as found by Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997). The women themselves may not have had many misconceptions about feminism but they felt the 1960s

stereotype continued to be presented by others. Some of the women who rejected a feminist label may have done so in order to avoid negative connotations for themselves. Nearly all of the women had negative exposure to feminism, which they learned through their peers, the media, and history class. As Christina reflected:

> I didn't learn more about the feminist movement until I got into high school… Then at that point it was just like, 'oh feminists are bad, you know they are trying to stir up trouble, like, they don't know what they are talking about and, like, if they had to do everything that men had to do they probably couldn't handle it and stuff.' I just remember going over it really briefly in one of my history classes and then it was never ever touching on that subject ever again.

Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992) found that women's experiences with gender discrimination were not significant factors contributing to the formation of feminist identities (326). However, some of the women who were not feminists thought that experiences may be what make someone take on a feminist label. Melinda suggested:

> It seems like people who become feminists or label themselves as a feminist it seems like a lot of them kinda become that way through personal experiences, maybe discrimination or just something in their past or maybe if they were raised in a certain type of family or whatever. It seems like, it doesn't seem like a lot of people become that way after taking like women's studies courses, at least not that I know of. It seems like something more spread by a strong personal experience.

In my sample, personal experiences with feminism did contribute to the process of feminist identification and discrimination did not.

I find that the contradictions between belief and identity continue to exist for these young women. While they all had positive views of feminism, even the feminist

identifiers did not completely connect a feminist identity with the larger social movement. The events and influences I find most important for feminist identification are family and peer positive opinions of feminism. Additionally, these women's situations were an important factor as well. To understand this shift, it is important to explore the events and influences. Expanding the knowledge of the way people identify with political and social movements is important for understanding what makes a movement successful.

Conclusion

My research questioned the significant mechanisms that prevent young women from identifying with feminism and those that draw others to claim it as a part of their identity. The process of forming this identity highlights the importance of negative connotations and family and peer opinions, which are influential in certain situations and contexts. I find that for all of these women, a feminist label may at times apply; however, their changing situations require them to embrace of reject it.

I found the women mostly shared the same feminist beliefs, but that these beliefs did not relate to whether the women self-identified as feminist. Family and peer positive opinions of feminism and feminists were key mechanisms of feminist identity formation yet they did not guarantee it. While feminists recognized their beliefs and exposure as importantly influencing them, non-feminists shared their feminist beliefs and had similar exposure to feminism as well. Non-feminists attributed their rejection of a feminist identity to a lack of knowledge and activism, yet, the feminists claimed that anyone could be a feminist. Some women seemed to lack the desire to be feminists while others felt a

strong personal connection to feminism. Regardless, their feminist identification was situational and contextual and these identities will change over time.

These seemingly contradictory findings reflect the situational and contextual nature of feminist identification. In contrast to social survey research, which examines factors associated with feminist self-identification, my analysis of my interview data focused on the processes through which some young women came to identify as feminist while others did not. This process-focus highlights why family and peer support were not sufficient to lead to feminist identification, but were important determinants of it. These social networks provided the women with a level of support and encouragement to enable them to feel comfortable with a feminist identity in the particular social context. This level of comfort allowed the women to understand that the negative stereotypes that they presumed others will apply to them if they feminist-identify would not affect them. This understanding of feminist identity formation can also explain why some of the women that I interviewed shifted identification, since a change in the social context may also bring with it a change in the support and comfort available in the situation.

My research opens new paths for continuing the study of feminist identification. Few researchers examine influential events and tend to focus on demographic, educational, and social factors contributing to identification. However, my research is limited by its scope. With few participants and a single interview with each one, it is difficult to reflect on the process of a contextual identity. The participants were not a representative sample; therefore, one cannot draw generalizations from my data. Future research may want to use longitudinal, qualitative studies to portray accurately an identity

that is strategic, contextual, and changing. Others research could incorporate variables that examine immediate social networks and their influence on feminist identification.

Future research could also develop more nuanced approaches to measuring feminism. The use of a scale to determine degrees of feminist self-labeling may be needed to portray women's relationship with feminism accurately. While five of the nine women were confidently feminists, one non-feminist leaned toward feminism and another felt like she was a feminist half of the time. Without a complete commitment to a feminist identity, they were coded as non-feminist identifiers; however, a scale for feminist self-labeling may lead to a greater understanding of how women relate to the feminist movement and to feminist identities. Although college students are an accessible population where identity formation most likely occurs, future research may want to move beyond studying students to separate age and institutional effects. This research could also examine whether the effects of the long-established nature of the feminist movement has resulted in a shift of understanding of feminism among younger cohorts of women and whether such a shift represents a separation between the identity of feminist and the feminist movement.

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