FEMINISTS OR “POSTFEMINISTS”? 
Young Women’s Attitudes toward 
Feminism and Gender Relations

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In contrast to popular presumptions and prior research on women of the “postfeminist” generation, this study found an appreciation for recent historical changes in women’s opportunities, and an awareness of persisting inequalities and discrimination. The findings reveal support for feminist goals, coupled with ambiguity about the concept of feminism. Although some of the women could be categorized along a continuum of feminist identification, half were “fence-sitters” or were unable to articulate a position. There were variations in perspectives among those with different life experiences, as well as by racial and class background.

Keywords: feminism; postfeminism; young women; identity; gender relations

A late 1990s cover of Time magazine with the caption “Is feminism dead?” featured photos of prominent feminist activists, including one of the flighty television lawyer character, Ally McBeal (Bellafante 1998). Such media pronouncements of the “death” of feminism rest on widespread presumptions that young women do not appreciate gains made by the women’s movement, are not concerned about discrimination, and do not support feminism. These suppositions have rarely been tested.

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How do young women view their own opportunities and obstacles, particularly when compared to those faced by women of their mothers’ generation? How do they perceive and experience gender discrimination? How do they identify themselves with respect to feminism, and how can we make sense of their seemingly contradictory perspectives? Finally, what are the impacts of racial and class background and life experience on attitudes toward feminism? Although prior studies have considered aspects of these questions, my research examines them through interviews with a diverse sample. This diversity reveals the importance not only of race and class, but also life experience, in the development of attitudes toward feminism. Furthermore, by not imposing a set definition of feminism but letting it emerge from the interviewees themselves, my study reveals great ambiguity in the meanings of feminism today and suggests that we need to rethink some of the assumptions about young women’s identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW: GROWING UP IN THE SHADOW OF THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Since the mid-1980s, 30 to 40 percent of women have called themselves feminists, and by 1990, nearly 80 percent favored efforts to “strengthen and change women’s status in society” (Marx Ferree and Hess 1995, 88). Although the media often question why so few women call themselves feminists, Marx Ferree and Hess (1995) pointed out that the number of women who do so represents the same percentage of people who label themselves as Republicans or Democrats. Addressing the same concerns, Gurin (1985, 1987) distinguished between four components of gender consciousness: identification (recognizing women’s shared interests), discontent (recognizing women’s lack of power), assessment of legitimacy (seeing gender disparities as illegitimate), and collective orientation (believing in collective action). Although women historically have become more critical of men’s claims to power, women’s gender consciousness has been weaker than the group consciousness of African Americans, the working class, and the elderly. At the same time, women, especially employed women, are often conscious of women’s structural disadvantage in the labor market (Gurin 1985). However, an average woman may have somewhat vague understandings of political labels such as “feminism,” as activists and political elites are generally more consistent and coherent in their positions (Converse 1964; Unger 1989).

In the early 1980s, the media began to label women in their teens and twenties as the “postfeminist” generation (Bellafante 1998; Bolotin 1982; Whittier 1995). Twenty years later, the term continues to be applied to young women, who are thought to benefit from the women’s movement through expanded access to employment and education and new family arrangements but at the same time do not push for further political change. Postfeminism has been the subject of considerable debate, since its usage connotes the “death” of feminism and because the equality it assumes is largely a myth (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995;
Overholser 1986; Rosenfelt and Stacey 1987; Whittier 1995). The term has been used by researchers to reflect the current cycle and stage of the women’s movement (Taylor 1989; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Whittier 1995). Indeed, Rossi (1982) has written of a cyclical generational pattern in the women’s movement, with each feminist wave separated by roughly fifty years, or two generations. “Quiet periods” (Rossi 1982, 9) see diminished political action, but continued progress in private arenas, such as education and employment. Because movement stages greatly influence how women identify with the movement (Taylor 1989; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Whittier 1995), women’s individual attitudes toward feminism are likely to vary.

The second-wave women’s movement has simultaneously experienced great successes and backlash. Successes include the maintenance of movement organizations (Marx Ferree and Yancey Martin 1995; Whittier 1995), as well as a “broadly institutionalized and effective interest group,” with an institutional base in academia, particularly women’s studies programs (Brenner 1996, 24). Backlash is evident in a decline in grassroots mobilization and negative public discourse by antifeminist organizations and media figures (Faludi 1991; Marx Ferree and Hess 1995; Schneider 1988).

Scholars have found that young women tend to be depoliticized and individualistic and that few identify as feminists (Rupp 1988; Stacey 1987)—they typically focus on individual solutions (Budgeon and Currie 1995) and express feminist ideas without labeling them as such (Henderson-King and Stewart 1994; Morgan 1995; Percy and Kremer 1995; Renzetti 1987; Rupp 1988; Stacey 1987; Weis 1990). Many of these apolitical women assume that discrimination will not happen to them (Sigel 1996). The lack of grassroots mobilization results in no framework for understanding individual experiences in politicized terms (Aronson 2000; Taylor 1996) and limits “postfeminists” to viewing gender disparities as illegitimate, rather than in collective terms or in terms of women’s shared interests (Gurin 1985, 1987). Their attitudes are also influenced by the media, which have supported the antifeminist backlash (Faludi 1991; Marx Ferree and Hess 1995) and have implied that “no further feminist action is needed” (Schneider 1988, 11).

This generally negative picture of contemporary feminist consciousness is occasionally countered by researchers who have been discovering a “third wave.” They point to more than one micro cohort within the postfeminist generation, noting that women who came of age in the 1990s more frequently support feminist goals and are more politically active to achieve these goals (e.g., abortion rights activism) than women who came of age in the 1980s (Whittier 1995). From activists who seek to represent a diversity of young women’s experiences (Walker 1995), to the Riot Grrrl movement in music (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998; Wald 1998), third-wave feminism is said to explicitly embrace hybridity, contradiction, and multiple identities (particularly “connections between racial, sexual and gender identities” (Heywood and Drake 1997, 7, 8, 15). However, this new emphasis is questioned by scholars arguing that African American and Chicana feminists have focused historically, and continue to focus, on organizing not only in terms of gender but also
along racial lines (Hurtado 1998; Springer 2002). In addition, the third wave is sometimes perceived as nonactivist in nature (Heywood and Drake 1997).

Although not explicitly defining themselves as feminists, other women are said to have the “potential for feminist critique” (Weis 1990, 179). Stacey (1991, 262) argued that young women have “semiconsciously incorporated feminist principles into their gender and kinship expectations and practices.” This approach includes “taking for granted” many recent gains: women’s work opportunities, combining work with family, sexual autonomy and freedom, and male participation in domestic work and child rearing (Stacey 1991, 1987). This “simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization” (Stacey 1987, 8) of feminism indicates that worldviews include more feminist principles while being less explicitly feminist.

The negative as well as the positive prognosis of these studies should be taken with a grain of salt. They tend to operate with uniform definitions of feminism, ignore generational differences, and/or study groups that are too homogeneous to provide conclusions about the full diversity of today’s young women. My study seeks to correct each of these limitations and hopes to provide insights that are more nuanced, complex, and attentive to diversity.

Some research has assumed that when women are asked their views of feminism, they react to a common, uncontested definition. For example, Renzetti (1987) asked college women to respond to an attitudinal inventory survey and found that about a quarter agreed with the statement “I consider myself to be a feminist.” Similarly, Boxer’s (1997) survey found that three-quarters of women of all ages agreed that the status of women has improved in the past twenty-five years, although only about a third considered themselves to be feminists. By requiring women to define themselves as either for or against feminism, these studies are not likely to tap into the highly complex and contested meanings of feminism today and the ways these diverse meanings influence people’s reactions to the term itself. In contrast, my study did not impose a uniform definition of feminism when probing or interpreting interviewees’ attitudes but instead left this term for the women themselves to define. In so doing, I did not assume that feminism’s meaning is commonly understood or agreed upon.

Research that has recognized feminism’s multiple meanings has either focused on a broad age span of women or has centered on homogenous groups of young women. Focusing on more than one cohort, Taylor’s (1996) study (with women aged 18 to 43 who were active in the postpartum depression movement) found that feminist identification can be classified on a continuum: Some women call themselves feminists, others reject the label “feminist” but support its principles, while some reject feminism altogether. In her study of women of all ages,3 Sigel (1996, 113) observed that feminism was often characterized by ambivalence: Women felt that the movement had been positive but that it may have “gone too far” and negatively affected relations with men. The women in Sigel’s study called themselves feminists, endorsed feminist goals but rejected the label, or were uncertain about their positions. Neither of these studies explored the potential generational differences in these attitudes. However, a generation has common experiences that
structure its worldview (Mannheim 1952). A political generation—persons coming of age in a particular historical period—shares a similar consciousness (Schneider 1988, 6). Despite such a “a common interpretative framework” (Whittier 1995, 16), an individual’s place within the social structure and the extent to which she or he is aware and involved in politics can influence her or his belief systems (Converse 1964).

Studies based on homogenous samples may obscure important differences in feminist orientations. For example, Renzetti (1987) surveyed college students at a predominately white, Catholic university—a very privileged sample. Similarly, Stacey’s (1987) insights about “postfeminist consciousness” are based on her interviews with two “kinship networks.” Kamen (1991), a journalist, reports a similar continuum of identification as Taylor (1996) described, yet she did not examine the perspectives of women with diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

In fact, no prior studies examine differences in the attitudes of young women with diverse life experiences. We might expect, however, that varying life experiences or class backgrounds will lead to divergent ideas about feminism. Women of some backgrounds have greater supports for the development of feminist identities than others, especially those who have taken women’s studies courses in college and have thus been exposed to the institutional legitimization of feminist ideas. Other women are limited to conceptions of feminism advanced by their family and friends and institutions such as the media. These life paths can be tied to class differences. Many middle-class feminist issues, such as the “glass ceiling” and alienation from the housewife role, are far from the daily struggle to make ends meet that is faced by working-class women. Even feminist activists develop different feminist identities as a result of their social class backgrounds (Reger 2002).

In addition, women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds may develop varying views of feminism and gender relations. Women of color have argued that the women’s movement has put white, middle-class concerns at its center and ignored the ideas of women of color (Hill Collins 1991). Historically, women of color have not been “full participants in white feminist organizations,” despite these organizations’ claims that their concerns are universal to all women (Hill Collins 1991, 7). For women of color, racial identities might also be more salient and politicized than gender identities, constituting barriers to the development of feminist identification (Hunter and Sellers 1998). At the same time, prior studies suggest that African Americans are more likely than whites are to support feminist positions, to have egalitarian gender role attitudes, and to engage in collective action (Hunter and Sellers 1998).

This article explores young women’s attitudes toward feminism in relation to differences in background and life experience. In contrast to prior research, I recognize the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory orientations of the women who have grown up in the shadow of the women’s movement. While prior research has given some attention to the contexts within which feminist attitudes develop (Sigel 1996; Stacey 1987; Taylor 1996; Whittier 1995), many studies have not directly considered women’s perceptions of some key goals of feminist organizing, such as
advancing women’s opportunities, and the obstacles and discrimination that feminism addresses. To discern the context of young women’s attitudes toward gender relations, I begin my analysis with an examination of perceptions of women’s opportunities, obstacles, and discrimination. I continue the analysis by considering young women’s attitudes toward feminism and the impact of race, class, and life experience on these attitudes. Taken together, this article reveals support for feminist goals and complexity in attitudes toward the term feminism.

METHOD

This study is based on in-depth interviews with members of a panel study of young people, the Youth Development Study, an ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent development and the transition to adulthood (Jeylan Mortimer is the principal investigator). The larger survey sample ($N = 1,000$) was randomly chosen from a list of enrolled ninth-grade students in St. Paul, Minnesota. Respondents completed surveys annually, with the first year (ninth grade) in 1988. Of the original 1,000 panel members who took part in the first year of data collection, the Youth Development Study retained 77.5 percent through 1995, the last year of the survey before my interview study.

For my in-depth interviews, I followed Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) suggestions for theoretical sampling and interviewed women with varying trajectories of life experience and background, as reported in surveys during the four years following high school (1991 to 1995). I focused on differences in education, parenthood, and careers and interviewed nearly equal proportions of women in each group. Obviously, these categories of experience are not mutually exclusive. However, the groups were defined as nonoverlapping categories for this reason. A “school” group had attended a four-year college or university for at least eight months annually in three of the four years following high school. A “parent” group had become mothers by the eighth year of the study and could also be engaged in school and/or work. A “labor force” group did not have an extensive school trajectory, nor had they become mothers. Instead, they typically worked full-time or moved between postsecondary school and work after high school.

By mail, the Youth Development Study invited 138 women to be interviewed; 42 consented by returning a postcard indicating their interest. Interviews took place in 1996 and 1997. Of the 448 Youth Development Study women who responded in the eighth year of the larger study (1995), I interviewed 9.4 percent. The women were aged twenty-three or twenty-four at the time of my interviews. Among them, 33 percent were women of color (11.9 percent African American, 9.5 percent Asian American, 9.5 percent biracial and multiracial, and 2.4 percent Latina). Their socioeconomic backgrounds included 31 percent from working-class families, 48 percent from the middle class, and 21 percent from upper-middle-class backgrounds. At the time of the interviews, two-thirds of the women were working full-time (28), 3 were working part-time, 7 were in school full-time (and not working),
and 4 were out of the labor force for other reasons (2 were caring for their young children, 1 was not working as a result of a severe disability, and 1 was in prison). Slightly more than one-third had completed a bachelor’s degree.

Half of the interviewees were involved in committed relationships: 10 were married, 3 were engaged, 8 were in exclusive relationships, and 1 was divorced and involved in a new relationship. Although none of the women directly labeled themselves as lesbians, 2 suggested this possibility. One woman was questioning her sexuality, although she had never had an intimate relationship. The other (who had been in prison since she was a teenager) suggested that her intimate relationships had been with women, although she was looking forward to having a relationship with a man. Although it would be interesting to examine whether young lesbian and bisexual women would report different perceptions of feminism than heterosexual young women, this issue cannot be adequately addressed with my sample.

One-third (14) of the interviewees had become mothers by the time of the interviews. Ten of these women were single parents, while 4 of them were married. However, nearly all had previously been single parents; only 1 woman was married prior to becoming a parent.

Interviews were conducted face to face, in a place chosen by each participant, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. They ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours long, although most lasted 1½ hours. The interviews were “structured conversations” (Taylor and Rupp 1991, 126) and allowed space for participants to bring up issues they found to be important. After each interview, I wrote field notes, including the main themes, my reflections, and emerging research questions. A qualitative data analysis program (QSR NUD*IST 1996) facilitated the identification and organization of emergent themes.

The interview guide covered a range of themes related to education, work, family, and feminism (Aronson 1998, 1999). The study relied on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This inductive approach served my purpose well as I left open the possibility of multiple meanings of feminism. In the analysis that follows, using pseudonyms for my respondents, I examine several key issues that emerged during the interviews. First, to provide a context for attitudes toward feminism, I consider two themes about women’s treatment by society: perceptions of opportunities and obstacles, and experiences with gender discrimination. I then explicate the five approaches to feminist identification that came out of my analysis of the interviews.

**PERCEPTIONS OF OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES**

My interviews revealed a general optimism about women’s expanded opportunities, coupled with a realization that older women have struggled to create these new opportunities. At the same time, most (35 out of 42) of the interviewees were quite aware that gender-based obstacles still remained. These perspectives were shared by women of all racial and class backgrounds and life experiences.
A majority (36) of the interviewees discussed women’s current opportunities in terms of expanded educational and career choices, which have in turn led to women’s independence from men and new family arrangements. For example, Hoa, a middle-class Vietnamese American woman who was in law school at the time of the interview, said that women used to think “‘I will marry a doctor. I will marry a lawyer.’ It was never: ‘I will become one.’” Nora, a working-class Hispanic woman, saw this issue in generational terms:

When my mom was growing up, men pretty much ruled it. . . . [Men] decided what would happen when and where you were going to go and where you’re going to live. Nowadays men have an opinion, but that’s all it is. . . . Women have their opinions and can go with what they want to do. . . . They can make their own decisions without men.

There was widespread awareness that changes resulted from the struggles of older women, who helped to create new opportunities. Although most of the interviewees attributed these changes to an aggregate of individuals who became “fed up” or “got sick and tired” of gender inequalities, a number credited the women’s movement directly.

At the same time, 35 of the interviewees also observed that women continue to face many obstacles, including sexism, difficulty balancing conflicting work and family demands, greater responsibility than men for child rearing and domestic work, and violence against women. For example, Esther, a working-class white woman, said, “Although it’s changing, I think that there’s a lot of things that are still real male dominated.” Nine of the interviewees mentioned that new opportunities have produced new strains, particularly balancing work and family. As Linda, a middle-class white woman working in a traditionally male field, put it, “Companies aren’t supportive yet of working mothers.”

This recognition of the need for further social change diverges from prior research on the postfeminist generation in two ways. While the micro cohort of women I interviewed here may be more aware of obstacles than prior postfeminist micro cohorts (Whittier 1995), my respondents were more diverse in background than prior studies and thus may have been more apt to perceive obstacles. At the same time that this recognition of inequalities and their illegitimacy suggests significant gender consciousness, my interviewees stopped short of a collective orientation focused on women’s movement activism (Gurin 1985, 1987).

**EXPERIENCES WITH GENDER DISCRIMINATION**

Have these young women experienced discrimination? Although only 6 (14 percent) of the 42 interviewees felt they had experienced blatant instances of gender discrimination, nearly all had experienced what they considered to be minor instances of discrimination or were aware of its possibility in the future. Specifically, a third (14) were concerned about workplace inequality and
discrimination. Nearly a quarter (10) approached discrimination somewhat paradoxically: They did not expect that gender discrimination would have an impact on their lives, despite the subtle instances of discrimination that they had experienced. The final quarter (12 out of 42) of interviewees focused on individual solutions to discrimination, such as confronting their perpetrator. In all, these findings reveal a substantial awareness of gender discrimination.

Of the six women who recounted instances of blatant gender discrimination, the main problem was workplace discrimination and sexual harassment. For example, Shonda, a working-class African American woman, experienced both gender and racial discrimination on the job. Although she was aware that she could have filed a lawsuit, her more immediate concern of financially supporting her two children took precedence.

One-third of the women were concerned about future discrimination, including pay equity, hitting a “glass ceiling,” and career advancement. Reflecting the career trajectories that these women anticipated, most of those with this approach were middle-class white women with college educations. For example, Linda, a middle-class white woman who worked in the field of accounting, said, “I can see being a woman coming in the way. I work for a company that does still have a little bit of the old boy’s club at the upper management.”

Nearly a quarter of the interviewees did not originally label their own experiences “discrimination” but realized through telling their stories that gender inequalities were, in fact, part of their life experience. For example, when I asked Sherri, an upper-middle-class white woman who worked in a hospital, whether she had experienced discrimination, she said, “I never thought about it. Probably because in my field it’s mostly women.” She went on to say the following:

The highest paid people around here are men. I do think that’s a big obstacle for women—that it’s a male, white, male-dominated world, and they’re the ones who make the rules... It’s not something that I worry about, but I think that’s a big obstacle for women.

Similarly, Hillary, a working-class Korean American woman, never felt less “capable” as a result of being a woman, yet she described women’s second shift with regard to household responsibilities and her anger at feeling afraid to walk alone at night. Illustrating both an awareness, and the minimizing, of gender discrimination, she said, “Other than the constraints that I felt being a woman, I really don’t think that I’ve... missed out on opportunities... because I’m a woman, luckily.” This paradoxical approach indicates that some women are reluctant to label their experiences with inequality as “discrimination” because they define discrimination narrowly in terms of blatant workplace harassment.

The remaining quarter of the women in this study focused on individual solutions to the problem of discrimination, such as confronting the perpetrator. For example, Felicia, a middle-class white woman, said she wouldn’t “tolerate” discrimination: “I feel... like I can take care of myself. Some man might want to put
me back in my place, but I think I’m a tough little bitch . . . ! Take some karate classes!” Here, individual resistance to discrimination resulted in feelings of personal strength, yet it is important to note that this approach is based on an assumption that individuals must be strong enough to defend themselves against discriminatory actions. Other women focused on the impact of their own choices, particularly choosing female-dominated careers. For example, Kelly, a middle-class white woman who worked in female-dominated retail, said that discrimination “definitely hasn’t affected me. . . . I haven’t been in a situation where it’s been more of a man’s field. . . . I’ve never, ever felt discriminated [against].”

In sum, although only a small proportion of the interviewees felt that they had experienced blatant gender discrimination, most of the women had known it in minor ways and expressed some concern about it in the future. These findings run contrary to past studies, which imply that young women are unrealistic about the forces that have the potential to hold them back (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995; Sigel 1996; Stacey 1987). At the same time, the term discrimination was itself often defined in a narrow way, to include only blatant instances of workplace inequality. This low level of awareness may result from the successes of the women’s movement, which have made discrimination less pronounced than in the past. It may also reflect arguments made by other scholars: Women partially accept discrimination as a given because they try to protect themselves from its negative effects (Sigel 1996), or they may feel helpless when thinking of themselves as victims (Gurin 1987). The extent of gender consciousness observed here does not include a collective orientation (Gurin 1985, 1987) since the emphasis was on individual responsibility rather than a broader framework of inequality. It may be that such a political vision, based on social movement involvement, is not available to these women.

ATTITUDES TOWARD FEMINISM

When asked about their attitudes toward feminism, nearly half of these women’s responses could be categorized on the continua developed in previous studies (e.g., Kamen 1991; Taylor 1996) including those who identified as feminists, those who called themselves feminists but qualified their support, and those who said they were not feminists but supported a range of feminist issues. However, suggesting ambiguity in the term feminism and its negative connotations, more than half of these women did not want to explicitly define themselves in relation to feminism at all. Most of these interviewees were, in the words of one woman, “fence-sitters”: They embraced a number of feminist principles yet rejected others and failed to classify themselves as either feminists or nonfeminists. In addition, nearly a quarter had never thought about feminism as a concept and were unable to articulate an opinion altogether. Despite this ambiguity, nearly all of the interviewees were supportive of feminist issues.
Racial and Class Background and Life Experience

Attitudes toward feminism were differentiated by racial and class background and life experience (see Table 1). In the interviews, nearly a quarter of the women (10 out of 42) identified themselves as feminists. Among this group, 6 defined themselves as feminists without qualifying what they meant by the term feminist, while 4 qualified their support by outlining the specific aspects of feminism with which they agreed and disagreed. Those who did not qualify their support were nearly all white or middle class; all were college educated and came to feminism as a result of their experiences with women’s studies courses. The women who qualified their feminist identities were women of color or white working-class women who had nearly all attended college but had no experience with women’s studies courses.

As young women are most commonly characterized in other research, eight of the interviewees (19 percent) defined themselves as not being feminists but agreed with many of the principles of feminist ideology. Nearly all of these interviewees were from quite privileged backgrounds—close to 90 percent were white and middle to upper-middle class. However, unlike the nearly all-white and middle-class group who called themselves feminists, only two of these women had attended college and neither had taken women’s studies courses.

One-third of the interview sample (13 out of 42 interviewees) were what one woman called “fence-sitters” since they would not position themselves in relation to feminism as an identity. These women were evenly divided in their life experiences and proportionally divided along racial lines, although a greater proportion were from working-class backgrounds.

One-quarter of the interviewees (11 out of 42) were uncertain about their attitudes toward feminism yet endorsed an ideology of equality. Among these women who never thought about feminism, the majority (7 out of 11) were young parents—typically single parents—while the others were focused on the full-time labor force; none had completed a four-year college degree. In addition, a disproportionate number of these interviewees were women of color. A number of these women experienced great stress in daily living, leaving little time for reflection about such issues. This suggests that not only racial and class background but also life paths and life experience in early adulthood may be linked to attitudes toward feminism. I will now consider each of these approaches in turn.

“I’m a Feminist”

Among those who identified as feminists without qualifying their support, feminism was viewed primarily as an ideology of equality. The women in this group were supportive of equal opportunity, abortion rights, equality in childhood socialization, and “social justice” and were concerned about issues such as sexual assault. These interviewees largely came to see themselves as feminists as a result of taking women’s studies courses. Tina, a working-class white woman, said that a woman’s...
TABLE 1: Attitudes toward Feminism by Background and Life Experience

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<tr>
<th>Attitudes toward Feminism</th>
<th>Interviewees in Group</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Life Experience</th>
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<tr>
<td>I'm a feminist</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>I'm a feminist, but . . .</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>I'm not a feminist, but . . .</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>I'm a fence-sitter</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>I never thought about feminism</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16.7</td>
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studies course “started the whole movement for me. . . . If I hadn’t taken that class . . . I could be married with 60 children right now!” Involvement in women’s studies courses reveals that young feminists are not only highly educated but also exposed to feminist ideologies through an institutional location that supports and legitimates feminist perspectives.

“I’m a Feminist, But . . .”

Those who defined themselves as feminists but qualified their support came to their views not through women’s studies courses but through assumptions of equality inherent in the attitudes of their families when they were growing up. Although they called themselves feminists, they also distanced themselves from certain negative associations of feminism. For example, Esther, a working-class white woman, said, “Feminism has gotten a bad rap . . . that it’s sort of this angry, radical [viewpoint]. . . . I consider myself a feminist, definitely. I consider myself a strong feminist, but I’m not someone who is always needing to assert it.” Although she endorsed an ideology of equality and supported diversity in men’s and women’s work and family arrangements, Esther distanced herself from two negative associations with feminism: those who “always assert” their viewpoints and those who “want to alienate men.”

These women grew up with an assumption of equality in their families, yet this may itself explain why they qualify their feminist identities. As Esther put it,

Feminism isn’t something that I’ve had to discover on my own. . . . People who just discover . . . activism or feminism . . . are . . . more vocal about it and . . . champion it because it’s new and different. And I feel like it’s just a given that everyone should be treated equally. It’s just a given that . . . because I’m a woman, that doesn’t stop me from doing whatever I want to do.

“I’m Not a Feminist, But . . .”

Nineteen percent of the interviewees distanced themselves from feminism while endorsing many of the principles of feminist ideology. One example of this perspective comes from Betsy, a middle-class white woman, who said, “I’m not a feminist, I would say. Probably a lot of feminists wouldn’t like me. But, well, I mean I guess it depends on what feminism. . . . I think everybody should be treated equally at the base.” These women gave several reasons for distancing themselves from the identity of “feminist.” A number of interviewees felt that feminism goes “too far.” Whitney, a middle-class Korean American woman, said that “a lot of feminism goes overboard,” yet she suspected that she had this view because she herself had never faced discrimination: “Maybe people who are a little bit older or have been discriminated against [call themselves feminists] and I haven’t really experienced that. So, I mean if I had, maybe I would become a feminist, but I either don’t see it [or] haven’t been” discriminated against. Here, feminism is seen as a place where
grievances against discrimination can be voiced, rather than a perspective that sees power inequalities influencing every domain of gender relations.

Other interviewees distanced themselves from activism and political engagement. Dawn, an upper-middle-class white woman, appreciated the benefits of the women’s movement, particularly educational and occupational opportunities, and was supportive of equality more generally. At the same time, she said, “I don’t believe that I would consider myself a feminist.” Implied that it was activism from which she distanced herself, she said, “I don’t go out every day and say ‘women’s rights and more opportunities for women.’ . . . I don’t think about it on a day-to-day basis.” Similarly, Linda, a middle-class white woman, said of feminism: “Folks should just live their lives and not get so caught up in everything.” Clearly, these women’s gender consciousness does not include a collective orientation (Gurin 1985, 1987).

These women also distanced themselves from feminism as a result of negative perceptions of feminists, particularly lesbianism and separatism from men. For example, although Alice, a middle-class white woman, said, “I just think that everybody is equal,” she did not want to distance herself from men: “I don’t go around bashing men. . . . I like men.” Linda thought that being a feminist meant that she could not live the type of life she wanted to lead:

I have a couple of feminist friends that have very different views than I do. . . . My boyfriend’s sister is a feminist, and she will never have children. She will probably never get married. And that’s fine, but that’s not what I want to do. That’s not the life that I want to lead. I want to raise a family.

This perspective reflects the antifeminist movement and the media’s construction of feminists as lesbians and militants (Faludi 1991; Marx Ferree and Hess 1995). As was also the case in previous eras (e.g., Marshall 1997), the media have perpetuated “the social climate of antifeminism and thwart[ed] the possibility of mobilizing discontented women” (Rupp and Taylor 1987).

“I’m a Fence-Sitter”

The fence-sitting approach (taken by one-third of the women) reveals a paradox: support for feminist issues, as well as the ambiguous connotations of “feminism” today. Rather than identifying themselves in relation to feminist identity, these women focused on evaluating the ideologies and stereotypes associated with feminism. This group is distinct from the others because they would not classify themselves as either feminists or nonfeminists. In embracing ambiguity, they truly remained “on the fence.” In some respects, they evaded the interview questions and chose instead to support and critique aspects of the term feminism.

One woman who took this approach was Ann, who is working class and white. When I asked her thoughts about feminism, she said, “I’d be supportive,” yet she
stopped short of calling herself a feminist. She went on to call herself a fence-sitter and said, “I would still be reserved about some things.” When asked to elaborate, she discussed only her support of feminist issues: eradicating the “perpetuation” of stereotypes about women, violence against women, governmental cuts in welfare, and sexual harassment and favoring comparable worth and gay rights. Likewise, Susan, a middle-class white woman, said that “a lot of feminism is lesbianism” and she did not want to “go hate men.” She also recognized this stereotype as a “big generalization” about feminists. In fact, she had enjoyed taking women’s studies courses in college: “As far as identifying similar experiences and . . . feeling like you’re not alone, that’s what I like about feminism.”

Other studies have also found that some women reject feminism because they are worried about creating “male antagonism” (Sigel 1996, 114). These views may reflect a general reluctance to express anger over discrimination because some women accept unfairness, see discrimination as realistic, or want to protect themselves from recognizing inequality (Sigel 1996). Stereotypes against feminists have been powerfully advanced by the antifeminist movement and the media, which may have influenced these women’s views.

“I Never Thought about Feminism”

The remaining quarter (11 out of 42) of the interviewees expressed a great deal of uncertainty about their attitudes toward feminism, had no opinion on the topic, or had substantial difficulty defining the term itself. Of these women, most felt that they were unable to comment because they did not know enough about feminism or had never thought about it in enough depth to express an opinion. One interviewee who was unable to articulate an opinion was Kelly, a middle-class white woman. Although she felt that “women should have the same rights as a man does,” she said that she had “never been a real strong activist.” Kelly went on to explain her view as follows: “I don’t really have a lot of feelings on that because I kind of take it as it is.... I don’t really think about that kind of stuff.” Kim, a middle-class white woman, said, “I don’t even really know what [feminism] is.”

Why were these women unable or unwilling to articulate an opinion of feminism? Some of the interviewees were simply confused over the definition of feminism. For others, feminism was implicitly defined as an activist approach that addressed discrimination and thus did not have personal relevance. For example, when I asked Caroline, an upper-middle-class white woman, about her view of feminism, she said that “nothing has happened to me that I would have to be that way.” Here, being “that way” connotes that feminist perspectives go along with discrimination: without it, there was no need to think about feminism. Other women also saw feminism as irrelevant to their everyday lives. Jill, a middle-class, white, single parent of two children, was explicit that she had more pressing daily issues to worry about than feminism:
I don’t care. No big thing. I’ve never been treated unfairly by a man. I don’t think I have. . . . I blow off things, because I’m an easy come, easy go [person]. I’m already stressed out with kids and a job. . . . I don’t need to be stressed out about things like that. So [in terms of] feminism, I don’t care. Who cares?

To Jill, feminism is irrelevant, perhaps even frivolous, when compared with the struggles of combining work and single motherhood. Feminism is primarily a way to redress workplace discrimination, in contrast to confronting issues that are central to basic survival as a woman. Ironically, both Caroline and Jill (in another part of the interview) also recounted their own experiences with domestic violence, suggesting that some of the women who would benefit the most from a feminist political perspective or agenda see it as the least relevant to their own lives.

At the same time, these women were supportive of equality between men and women. For example, Yolanda, a working-class biracial (African American and white) single parent said,

I can change a tire. I can change oil . . . and I don’t have a problem with it. And I can move my own furniture, pregnant or not, you know?! . . . When a guy tells me I can’t do something, I’ll tell him to prove it. . . . I’ll tell a guy off real quick if he tells me that [I can’t do something] because of my gender.

As I explore elsewhere (Aronson 1999, 2001), the young women in this study (even the engaged and married women) emphasized the importance of their own independence from men in many areas of their lives—career, finances, childbirth and child rearing, and self-development. In fact, marital status does not seem to make any difference in attitudes toward feminism, as women with different relationships to men were evenly dispersed among the groups examined here.

CONCLUSIONS

My findings about the widespread awareness of the extent of gender inequality run contrary to prior studies of the postfeminist generation (Renzetti 1987; Rupp 1988; Sigel 1996; Stacey 1987, 1991). And while many of the interviewees fit on a continuum of feminist identification previously defined by other researchers (Kamen 1991; Sigel 1996; Taylor 1989), more than half of the young women in this study approached feminism even more ambiguously than previously reported, especially the fence-sitters who embrace some aspects of feminism while rejecting others and avoid defining themselves in relation to the identity of feminist.

My findings also extend prior research by illustrating that attitudes toward feminism are shaped by racial and class background, and also by life experience. No prior studies have examined the role of diverse types of life experience in developing particular attitudes toward feminism. I have shown that the feminist identification without qualification and the “I’m not a feminist, but . . . ” approach are
associated with more privileged racial and class backgrounds. The feminists were more likely to be college educated, and most had taken women’s studies courses. Those who qualified their feminist identities and those who had never thought about feminism were disproportionately from less privileged racial and class backgrounds, but their life experience differentiates them from the other groups as well. The “qualified” feminists were college-educated, working-class women and/or women of color who came to feminism as a result of assumptions of equality when growing up. Among the women who had never thought about feminism, two-thirds had become parents early in life, and none had pursued a college degree.

My findings also indicate that young women’s development of a feminist perspective and identity is tied closely with institutions that support and nurture such a perspective—particularly women’s studies programs. This institutionalization of feminism has occurred at the same time as antifeminist organizations and media figures have advanced negative stereotypes that have become incorporated in some young women’s conceptions of feminism. In addition, although the women of color that I interviewed were supportive of equality, most distanced themselves from the identity of feminist, suggesting that the institutional supports for feminism may be more appealing or available to white women.

This study also suggests that having the space to think about political issues such as feminism may be a luxury that some young women, especially single mothers, cannot afford. For these women, feminism was seen as lacking personal relevance and viewed primarily as a place to redress workplace discrimination. Many of these women had never thought about their positions on feminism or saw it as frivolous when compared with the struggles of supporting and raising their children. Obviously, this is a broader problem than simply creating better public relations within feminist organizations, as it involves developing new initiatives and expanding institutional power. A new wave of political organizing might in turn lead to new personal understandings of feminism at later points in the life course (Aronson 2000).

Most important, whether or not young women call themselves feminists, they support feminist goals. In fact, the young women I interviewed were more supportive of feminism than had been found in past research, and none expressed antifeminist sentiments. The fence-sitting stance, while not as politicized as in previous generations, is not entirely individualized and apolitical either. Although most researchers and the media have painted a pessimistic view of young women’s ambivalence, I believe that my results offer some promise for feminism. Many of these young women may be passive supporters rather than agents of change, but they are supporters nonetheless. Their endorsement may represent the seeds of change, which, under the right historical conditions, and in interaction with the growth of grassroots feminist organizing, could blossom into the next wave of the women’s movement.
NOTES

1. I would like to thank Karen Lutfey for the origination of this phrase.
2. This term had also been used after the first-wave women’s movement (Taylor 1996).
3. The exact age range is not specified in her book.
4. Social class background was based on parents’ income and education as reported in the parent surveys in the first year of the study (1988). “Working class” includes those whose parents had less than a bachelor’s degree and earned less than $30,000 per year in 1988. “Middle class” includes four subgroups: parents who had high educational attainment (at least a bachelor’s degree) and low income (less than $30,000 per year in 1988), low educational attainment (less than a bachelor’s degree) but high income (at least $50,000 per year in 1988), high education (at least a bachelor’s degree) and middle income (between $30,000 and $50,000 per year in 1988), and low education (less than a bachelor’s degree) and middle income. “Upper-middle class” includes those parents who had high educational attainment (at least a bachelor’s degree) and earned a middle to high income (more than $50,000 per year in 1988).
5. This lack of salience of gender discrimination within female-dominated occupations is supported by Slevin and Wingrove’s (1998) findings that African American women do not find race to be extremely salient when working in African American organizations.
6. It is possible that the differences between my study and prior findings result from historical shifts—that this micro cohort of young women is more aware of inequalities than prior micro cohorts of the postfeminist generation (Whittier 1995).

REFERENCES


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