

The Relationship Between Gender Social Identity and Support for Feminism

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This study is an application of social identity theory to feminist consciousness and activism. For women, strong gender identifications may enhance support for equality struggles, whereas for men, they may contribute to backlashes against feminism. University students (N = 276), primarily Euroamerican, completed a measure of gender self-esteem (GSE, that part of one's self-concept derived from one's gender), and two measures of feminism. High GSE in women and low GSE in men were related to support for feminism. Consistent with past research, women were more supportive of feminism than men, and in both genders, support for feminist ideas was greater than self-identification as a feminist.

For many feminists working as part of the American women's movement, feminism is an important group identity. For instance, members of the National Organization for Women generally identify themselves as feminists. Negative stereotypes of feminism may threaten involvement in the women's movement. People may agree with goals of the movement, but may avoid labeling themselves as feminists for fear of being associated with this socially stigmatized label. This fear may interfere with the development of the group identification linked to collective action.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SUPPORT FOR FEMINISM

Research in the United States finds that terminology affects support for feminism (Breinlinger & Kelly, 1994; Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Jacobson, 1981). In general, people respond more negatively to the term “feminist” than they do to “women’s movement,” even when they are sympathetic to the aims of feminism (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). In the United States, anti-feminist groups and the media portray feminists as unrepresentative of American women, anti-mother, man-hating, and lesbian (Burn, 2000; Pharr, 1988). Consequently, many women’s activists and organizations avoid the feminist label because of the perception that it reduces public support for women’s policies and programs. In developing countries, the feminist label is avoided because the term is associated with a narrow, Western view of women’s issues and strategies (Basu, 1995).

Nontraditional gender-role attitudes and beliefs and nontraditional gender role experiences also influence support for feminism (Andersen & Cook, 1984; Banaszak & Plutzer, 1993; Morgan, 1996). Support for feminism is also related to negative experiences such as sexual harassment and gendered violence (Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Komarovsky, 1985; Renzetti, 1987).

Group consciousness, an awareness of group membership combined with an evaluation of the group’s current status and desire for collective action, also appears to be a primary element in the development of feminism (Breinlinger & Kelly, 1994; Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Cook, 1989; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Gurin & Markus, 1989; Skevington & Baker, 1989; Williams & Giles, 1978). According to social identity theory, social identity is that part of an individual’s self-concept derived from his or her membership in some social group, along with the value and emotional significance of that membership (Tajfel, 1981). Research based on social identity theory suggests that taking pride in the very group qualities used as a basis for discrimination and embracing their identities as members of a disadvantaged group justifies equality struggles and motivates group activism (Dion, 1986; Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Smith & Tyler, 1997; Walker & Mann, 1987). Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) call that part of one’s self-esteem derived from group memberships “collective self-esteem.” Individuals from traditionally discriminated groups frequently score higher on measures of collective self-esteem than do individuals from socially dominant groups (Bat-Chava, 1994; Crocker & Major, 1989; Ellemers, 1993).

Burn (1996) proposed that gender as a social identity may stimulate gender equality efforts on the part of women while simultaneously triggering backlashes from men against these efforts. This may occur because

awareness of women's gender pride and of gender equality efforts may increase the salience of males' sex-category membership and contribute to an in-group-out-group dynamic (us-them enemy perceptions). Indeed, some research indicates that gender category salience increases the salience of gender to the individual's self-image (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Swan & Wyr, 1997), and that such salience is correlated with greater acceptance of traditional sex roles (Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 1990).

This project examined the role of gender self-esteem (GSE) in support for feminism. Adapting the concept and measurement of collective self-esteem (CSE; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1992) to gender, gender self-esteem is defined as that part of an individual's self-concept derived from being female or male (Burn, 1996). In the case of females, the identity component is how important being female is to their self-concept. The public component is how socially valued they view females to be. The private component is how proud they are of females as a group, and the membership component is how "worthy" and "useful" they are to their gender group. For women, we predicted that higher scores on the identity and membership subscales and lower scores on the public GSE subscale would predict greater support for feminism. For men, high identity, membership, and public GSE scores were expected to be associated with decreased support for feminism.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred seventy-six general education students from 44 different majors at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo served as research participants. Of the students, approximately 31% were first year, 9% second year, 14% third year, 20% fourth year, and 25% fifth year or greater. There were 181 females and 95 males. Age ranged from 17 to 47 years with a mean of 21 years and a standard deviation of 4.48. Participants were predominantly Euroamerican (77%); approximately 1% of the sample was African American, 7% Asian, 9% Latin American, 0.4% Arab, 1% Native American, and 3% checked more than one ethnic category.

Materials

Gender self-esteem was measured with an adapted version of Crocker and Luhtanen's (1990) collective self-esteem scale (CSES). The CSES has high internal consistency, construct validity, and test-retest reliability. Al-

tering the instrument for a specific group does not appear to compromise its psychometric properties (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). A different version was constructed for female and male participants. For instance, an item which read "In general, I'm glad to be a member of the social groups I belong to," became, "In general, I'm glad to be a member of the female/male gender." A 7-point Likert scale was used to rate items.

Support for feminism was measured with the short form of the Liberal Feminist Attitude and Ideology Scale (LFAIS). The LFAIS reflects the three general themes of women's discrimination and subordination, collective action for women's equality, and sisterhood. The LFAIS has good convergent, divergent, and known-groups validity and demonstrated reliability (Morgan, 1996). The 11-item short form has high internal reliability and correlates significantly with behaviors such as writing letters in favor of women's rights, responses to sexist insults, and the recognition of sexism in a commercial. The LFAIS appears to be a subtle measure of feminism. It does not use the words "feminist" or "women's movement" and therefore represents a more "covert" type of feminism.

A closed-ended question from Morgan (1996), "To what extent do you consider yourself a feminist?" was used to measure self-identified feminism. This question was answered by choosing one of eight options ranging from "Committed feminist currently active in the women's movement" (8) to "I do not consider myself a feminist at all and I believe that feminists are harmful to family life and undermine relations between men and women" (1). This item pointedly refers to feminism and requests that the individual self-identify in regards to feminism. It represents a more "overt" feminism.

Procedure

Two undergraduate seniors, one female and one male, collected the data during class time. They read the instructions aloud, emphasizing that the questionnaires were anonymous and that participation was voluntary. After collection of the completed questionnaires, the study purpose was explained.

RESULTS

Due to ordinaly scaled data, Spearman's rho was used instead of Pearson's *r*. The perception that females are socially devalued (measured by the public subscale) was significantly associated with "covert" feminism

Table I. GSE Subscales and Feminism Correlations

| GSE subscale | Liberal Feminism Attitude and Ideology Scale (Covert) | | Self-Identified Feminism (Overt) | |
|--------------|--|--------|--|--------|
| | Females | Males | Females | Males |
| Identity | .19* | -.16 | .09 | -.25 |
| Public | -.19* | -.21* | .14 | -.07 |
| Private | .09 | -.16 | .04 | -.19 |
| Membership | .30** | -.21* | .16* | -.33** |
| Overall GSE | .15* | -.28** | .05 | -.32** |

Note: For females, *n* ranged from 162 to 180, for males from 82 to 95.

p* < .05; *p* < .01.

(support for feminist policies as measured by the LFAIS). In general, results supported the hypothesis that for women, high GSE would be associated with greater support for feminism (see Table I). For female participants, expressing support for the idea that they were “worthy” and “useful” members of their gender group was significantly associated with higher scores on the two feminism variables. The hypothesized relationship between the identity subscale and the feminism measures was partially supported. Scores on the GSE identity subscale and the LFAIS were significantly positively correlated.

For men, a strong GSE was associated with reduced support for feminism (see Table II). The perception that males are socially valued (public

Table II. Participants’ Responses to: “To What Extent Do You Consider Yourself a Feminist?”

| Item Option | Females | Males |
|--|---------|-------|
| A committed feminist currently active in the women’s movement | 1.7 | 0 |
| A committed feminist | 4 | 0 |
| Feminist | 10.9 | 3.7 |
| I agree with all of the objectives of the feminist movement, but do not consider myself a feminist | 8 | 4.9 |
| I agree with most of the objectives of the feminist movement, but do not consider myself a feminist | 36.2 | 31.7 |
| I agree with some of the objectives of the feminist movement, but tend to be somewhat traditional | 32.2 | 30.5 |
| I do not consider myself a feminist at all. I am quite traditional | 5.7 | 20.7 |
| I do not consider myself to be a feminist at all and I believe that feminists are harmful to family life and undermine relations between men and women | 1.1 | 8.5 |

Note: Numbers refer to the percentage of respondents choosing that option. Items are from Morgan (1996).

subscale) was associated with decreased support for feminist policies using the covert feminism measure. Feeling that one is a worthy member with much to offer his gender group (membership subscale) was negatively associated with both covert and overt feminism. High scores on the identity subscale were associated with low self-identification as a feminist.

As predicted, females scored higher on the identity GSE subscale than did men as indicated by a Mann-Whitney U test, $z = -2.23$, $p < .05$. Females had a mean rank of 145.27 and a mean of 20.21. Males had a mean rank of 122.87 with a mean of 19.03.

Females were also significantly more supportive of feminism. A Mann-Whitney U comparing males and females on the LFAIS covert feminism measure yielded for females a mean rank of 152.72 with a mean of 61.64, and for males a mean rank of 88.05 and a mean of 53.60 ($z = -6.63$, $p < .001$). Higher scores indicated greater support and respondents could receive a maximum score of 77. Likewise, males and females differed on the overt feminism measure, an 8-point measure where lower scores indicated greater feminist self-identification. Females' mean rank was 142.32 with a mean of 4.01, and males' mean rank was 99.16 with a mean of 3.14 ($z = -4.52$, $p < .001$).

Table II gives the percentage of respondents that chose the various overt feminism categories. The percentages of respondents checking the various categories of the overt feminist measure differed significantly, $\chi^2(df = 1, 7) = 29.81$, $p < .001$. Phi (.34) was also significant at $p < .001$. The percentages reveal males' lower support for feminism and how few respondents of both genders call themselves "feminists." Only 29 of 174 females (16.6%) and only 3 of the 82 males (3.7%) checked one of the three options with a self-described feminist label. The largest percent of both females and males checked either the "I agree with most of the objectives of the feminist movement but do not consider myself a feminist" item or the item, "I agree with some of the objectives of the feminist movement, but tend to be somewhat traditional."

DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that gender group identity is associated with support for feminism. The results corroborate past research finding that collective self-esteem is higher among members of disadvantaged groups. Like other recent research on support for feminism, we also found greater support for "covert" than "overt" feminism. In other words, participants were much more willing to agree with feminist ideas than they were to identify themselves as feminists.

We found that gender self-esteem (GSE, or gender social identity) is related to support for feminism and that the direction of the relationship varies by gender. In the case of women, covert feminism was associated with agreement with statements indicating that being female was central to the individual's identity. Surprisingly, however, overt feminism was not significantly correlated with scores on the identity subscale. Overt feminists may see themselves as fighting against the notion that gender should dictate one's identity; however, further explorations are needed. Ideally, gender social identity should be measured in a broader array of feminists such as members of the National Organization for Women, members of the American Psychological Association's Division 35, women's studies majors, etc. One flaw of this study was the lack of diversity in the sample. The feminist identities of women of color may differ from those of Euroamerican women since their struggles as women are often connected to the struggles of their communities against racism and economic exploitation (Collins, 1990). In other words, their identities as women are shaped by race, class, and gender, and these identities mold their particular experiences of gender oppression (Kemp, Madlala, Moodley, & Salo, 1995). More research on this complexity is needed.

Covert feminism was associated with the perception that females are socially devalued. This lends further support to the idea that a disadvantaged group identity motivates equality struggles. Similarly, support for both feminisms was correlated with feeling like a worthy member of the female gender. We suspect that females may feel that being a good or loyal group member means supporting their group's struggle for equality. Of course, the relationship could be bidirectional. It is also possible that females feel like good female-group members when they support women's equality efforts.

For males, the research findings suggest that a strong gender social identity may interfere with support for both overt and covert feminism. Beliefs that one is a good male-group member was associated with reduced support for both overt and covert feminism. Additionally, the more central being male was to the self-concept, the less support there was for overt feminism. Perhaps men who strongly identify with the group "male" perceive overt feminism to be particularly threatening, especially if they stereotype overt feminism as involving the vilification of males.

Although our research should be replicated with larger and more representative samples, our results point to the paradoxical nature of social identities—these identities may simultaneously enhance and erode support for equality struggles. Strongly identifying with one's gender may be a powerful source of meaning and belonging and, in the case of women, forms the basis of a collective movement which has made great strides in

increasing women's status (Burn, 1996). However, the gender identities of men who view feminism as attacking males may be enhanced, since, ironically, they may see themselves as unfairly oppressed. Consequently, they may respond by being less supportive of the social changes needed for women's equality. Indeed, this dynamic may be an important part of the current backlash against feminism. Our results suggest that feminists seeking to increase women's support for feminism should continue to emphasize women's status as an oppressed group. For males, support for feminism would be enhanced by definitions of feminism and masculinity that do not view support for women's equality as at odds with a masculine identity.

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