WHAT IS A FEMINIST?

Evaluations and Stereotypes in Closed- and Open-Ended Responses

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This article outlines the evaluation and stereotype of feminists, based on responses to closed-ended semantic differential traits as well as open-ended, projective responses to a hypothetical male or female feminist. Consistent across both methodologies, undergraduate respondents (Study 1: N = 210; Study 2: N = 135) viewed feminists as politically liberal, assertive/career oriented, and more likely to be heterosexual than lesbian. Most evaluations were neutral to slightly positive, with a few negative areas. However, feminists were seen in less positive terms than the typical woman and were described as much more assertive and politically liberal. Gender, race, birth cohort, gender of target, and feminist-attitude differences are presented. Despite the neutral to slightly positive evaluation, most respondents did not personally identify as feminists, possibly because they misperceive others’ attitudes toward feminists as more negative than they actually are.

A large body of research in psychology has established the human tendency to make inferences based on group membership. Simply labeling someone as being part of a specific group may evoke a stereotype or an evaluation (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Miller & Turnbull, 1986). One group of researchers (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993; Zanna, 1994) has argued that prejudicial evaluations are influenced by several factors, including stereotypes (valenced evaluations of group attributes), affective responses, value dissimilarity, and symbolic beliefs (how much

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the group in question violates cherished traditions or values). The social group "feminists" is likely to elicit several of these factors, possibly leading to prejudicial evaluations. However, little research has addressed stereotypes and evaluations of feminists, and some of the research that exists is conflicting.

Several studies have concluded that feminists are often evaluated negatively (e.g., Haddock & Zanna, 1994; Kamen, 1991; Noseworthy & Lott, 1984; Six & Eeckes, 1991). For example, Kamen (1991) interviewed young people around the country and found a generally grim picture of feminists as ugly, aggressive, and man-hating. Many scholars have noted that part of the stereotype of feminists is that most feminists are lesbians (Fox & Auerbach, 1983; Griffin, 1989; Kamen, 1991), and this is usually assumed to be part of a negative evaluation of feminists. These negative attitudes are especially interesting when compared to the generally positive evaluation of women as a group (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991; Haddock & Zanna, 1994; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994).

Berryman-Fink and Verderber (1985) performed a more extensive study of the stereotype of feminists, factor analyzing a 1979 sample's responses to 54 semantic-differential items. These authors found a fairly positive evaluation of feminists as good, knowledgeable, and flexible; however, respondents also described feminists as opinionated, domineering, and aggressive. Overall, feminists were seen as politically liberal, more likely to be heterosexual than homosexual, more likely to be women than men, and more career oriented and assertive. They found no differences between men's and women's evaluations.

However, these respondents completed the measure 20 years ago, before the so-called "backlash" against feminists (Faludi, 1991). Although attitudes toward women's roles have become steadily more liberal over time (Twenge, 1997), contemporary young women often eschew the label "feminist" and sometimes have negative views of feminists (Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Fox & Auerbach, 1983; Griffin, 1989; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Kamen, 1991; Renzetti, 1987). The perspective of the two cohorts is also different; although college students in 1979 experienced the second wave of the feminist movement firsthand as adolescents, most contemporary undergraduates were not even born during the early-to mid-1970s peak of feminist activism. These different experiences most likely had strong effects on each group's attitudes and views of the world (e.g., Lambert, 1972; Ryder, 1965; Stewart & Healy, 1989), including their views of feminists. Thus it is not clear if current cohorts of students will also evaluate feminists positively, as Berryman-Fink and Verderber (1985) concluded for their 1979 participants. Different attributes (beyond the 54 in their study) may now be important to the stereotype. Gender differences in the evaluation of feminists may also have surfaced over this time.

In addition, Berryman-Fink and Verderber (1985) did not examine the correlations between attitudes toward feminists, measures of stereotyping, and attitudes toward women's roles. As Buschman and Lenart (1996) noted, young women today do not necessarily see a clear link between "nontraditional" attitudes toward women's roles and identification as a feminist; thus they may agree that women should have equal rights even if they have a negative view of feminists. The relationship between gender stereotyping and evaluations of feminists is also not clear. These questions are especially important given the influence of value dissimilarity on evaluations of attitude objects (Haddock & Zanna, 1994; Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993). Thus Study 1 seeks to update and expand the data on
stereotypes and evaluations of feminists, as well as to determine cohort, gender, and feminist-attitude differences in these evaluations.

However, closed-ended data can only go so far in delineating the stereotype and evaluation of feminists. Closed-ended responses can tell us how respondents rate feminists on a variety of traits and characteristics, but these responses do not necessarily indicate which characteristics are most important to the stereotype/evaluation. Furthermore, Eagly, Mladinic, and Otto (1994) have argued that rating scales have less validity than free-response measures in estimating the evaluative content of beliefs and affect. Open-ended responses, in which participants must write their own evaluation of an attitude object, are more likely to indicate these salient components. In addition, Study 1 (like most previous studies of the topic) did not differentiate between male and female feminists as attitude objects. Thus Study 2 participants were asked to write a story/description to the prompt "Michelle (or Michael) calls herself (himself) a feminist." Together, the two studies seek to outline the stereotype and evaluation of feminists, their most salient characteristics, their correlates, and whether they differ for male and female feminists.

STUDY 1

Study 1 examined closed-ended responses to 95 semantic-differential items. These items included a general evaluation category as well as four categories of stereotypical attributes: assertiveness/career-mindedness, political orientation, sexual orientation, and gender. Fifty-four items were identical to those used in Berryman-Fink and Verderber's (1985) sample, permitting a comparison between a cohort of college students from 1979 and a cohort tested in 1995. Because Berryman-Fink and Verderber's sample also consisted of college students attending a state university in the Midwest, their data provide an excellent analog to our current sample of undergraduates from the University of Michigan. In addition, Study 1 participants completed measures of attitudes toward women's rights, attitudes toward the feminist movement, and gender stereotyping. A separate sample of respondents completed the same semantic-differential items for the "typical woman," allowing a comparison between stereotypes of women and of feminists.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Respondents for the main portion of Study 1 were 210 undergraduate students (120 women, 90 men) who participated in the study in winter semester, 1995, for credit in introductory psychology at the University of Michigan. The students were 76% White (160) and 24% racial minority: African American (14), Asian (29), and Hispanic (7). Average age was 19.1. These participants completed the semantic-differential items in response to the prompt "What is a feminist?" A second, separate sample (also from the introductory psychology subject pool) was selected to roughly correspond to the first in gender composition (24 women, 20 men) and completed the same semantic-differential items in response to the prompt "What is a typical/
average woman?” These prompts were given to separate samples to prevent any priming effects or direct comparisons between the two attitude objects. Respondents for the second sample were 70% White and 30% minority, with an average age of 19.3. Both samples filled out the questionnaires during scheduled sessions outside of class.

Measures

Two researchers (one White man, one White woman) administered the questionnaires. Fifty-four semantic differential items were taken from Berryman-Fink and Verderber (1985). In order to include current attributions, a pilot sample (15 women, 12 men) was asked to respond to the prompt “What is a feminist? Please write ten words or phrases below.” The pilot sample’s responses formed the other 41 items for the semantic-differential scale; opposites were generated to be as close to the original word as possible (for example, the opposite of “masculine” was given as “not masculine” instead of as “feminine”). Words and their opposites were given at the left or right of the scale an equal number of times (e.g., about half the items placed a negative word first, whereas the other half placed a positive word first). The main sample then responded to the 95 semantic-differential items following the prompt “What is a feminist?”

The 54 items from the Berryman-Fink and Verderber (1985) scale were retained in the five factors found in their factor analysis (general evaluation, behavior, political orientation, sexual orientation, and gender). Two raters classified the remaining 41 characteristics (generated by the recent pilot sample) into one of these categories. Initial reliability was .91; disagreements were settled by discussion. (We relied on the previous authors’ categories because the current sample of 210 was too small to permit a factor analysis of 95 individual items.) The 95 responses were then coded (or reverse coded) so higher responses would indicate a positive evaluation, an assertive/career-oriented behavior pattern, a liberal political orientation, a heterosexual orientation, and a female gender (the ratings were on a 1 to 7 scale; therefore, ratings below 4 are negative/uncharacteristic and ratings above 4 are positive/characteristic). Coefficient alphas for each scale for the main sample were as follows: general evaluation (43 items, alpha = .95), behavior (29 items, .91), political orientation (17 items, .76), sexual orientation (4 items, .79), and gender (2 items, .85). With the exception of political orientation, these alphas were similar for the respondents rating the typical woman: general evaluation (.89), behavior (.88), political orientation (.49), sexual orientation (.73), and gender (.95).

Participants also completed the 15-item Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), which measures attitudes toward women’s rights and roles in society (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989); for example, “Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men.” Because the scale discusses feminist values without using the word “feminists,” the AWS serves as a useful measure of actual value similarity between respondents and feminists. Alpha reliability for the AWS scale in this sample was .71; Spence and Helmreich (1978) reported a reliability of .89.

In addition, participants completed the 10-item Attitudes Toward Feminism and
the Women's Movement Scale (FWM; Fassinger, 1994), which is concerned more with the women's movement itself than specific rights; for example, "Feminist principles should be adopted everywhere." This scale is a more direct measure of attitudes toward the women's movement, though not necessarily toward feminists as people. The FWM scale had an alpha reliability of .86 in this sample; Fassinger (1994) reported a reliability of .89.

As a measure of gender stereotyping, participants described the typical woman and the typical man on the items of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), a measure consisting of two scales of gender-stereotyped personality traits. For each scale (the PAQ-M and the PAQ-F), the average rating for the typical man was subtracted from the average rating for the typical woman. The absolute value of these two gender-difference ratings were added to obtain a measure of overall gender stereotyping; the more differences the respondent assumed between men and women, the higher their score on gender stereotyping. Alpha reliability for the gender-stereotyping measure was .62 in this sample. Correlations among the three measures (the AWS, FWM, and gender stereotyping) showed a moderate to high correlation between the AWS and FWM (.64, p < .001) and a small negative correlation among gender stereotyping and the AWS (r = -.17, p < .05) and FWM (r = -.17, p < .05).

RESULTS

We used the stereotype differential technique (Gardner, Lalonde, Nero, & Young, 1988; Gardner, Wonnacott, & Taylor, 1968) to determine which attributes were judged the most typical of feminists. This method computes a t-statistic for each item to determine if it differs significantly from the midpoint of 4. Positive attributes judged typical of feminists (t-values over 15) were serious, intelligent, knowledgeable, productive, and of the present. On the other hand, feminists were also judged as stubborn, angry, and nontraditional. Positive attributes somewhat typical of feminists (t-values over 10) included secure, responsible, sane, and important. Respondents also judged feminists as tense and egotistical. Most mean ratings fell between 4 and 5, however, indicating a neutral to slightly positive evaluation.

In the behavior category, feminists were seen as assertive and career oriented, with most ratings above 5. The highest ratings (with t-values over 30) were for assertive, opinionated, active, and outspoken. Other typical ratings (with t-values over 20) were busy, talkative, strong, aggressive, motivated, energetic, activist, dominant, ambitious, confident, strong personality, and intellectual.

Left-leaning political beliefs also received high ratings, with many t-values over 20 (for reform, for equal wages, for liberation, liberal, radical, prochoice, for equal rights, prowoman, and challenging "the system"). Respondents did not believe, however, that feminists necessarily thought women were superior to men. On the other hand, they did describe feminists as "antimale" and radical (both with t-values over 15). Respondents were neutral on the sexual orientation of feminists, with all three items falling very close to 4. Feminists were judged as slightly more likely to be single than married. Most also thought feminists were more likely to be female than male, though this was not judged an absolute requirement (ratings were 5.76 for "female" and 5.66 for "woman").
The t-value technique can also be applied to the overall categories using their means and standard deviations. Based on this test, political beliefs \((t = 39.75)\) and assertive/career-oriented behavior \((t = 39.93)\) are the categories judged most typical of feminists. Gender is also highly significant \((t = 26.11)\), followed by general evaluation \((t = 5.19)\) and sexual orientation as closest to neutral \((t = 2.50)\).

Unlike the participants in Berryman-Fink and Verderber’s (1985) study, this sample showed significant gender differences on two dimensions of ratings: general evaluation and behavior. Women evaluated feminists more positively than men did; \(M\) for women = 4.45, \(M\) for men = 3.96, \(t\) (210) = 5.26, \(p < .001\). Women also saw feminists as more assertive and career oriented than men did; \(M\) for women = 5.78, \(M\) for men = 5.45, \(t\) (210) = 4.27, \(p < .001\). The average rating for general evaluation shows that men view feminists in a neutral to slightly negative way \((M = 3.96)\) and women view feminists in a neutral to slightly positive way \((M = 4.45)\). Women and men did not differ in their ratings of feminists’ political orientation \((M = 5.69\) and 5.62, respectively), sexual orientation \((M = 3.90, 3.83)\), or gender \((M = 5.71, 5.87)\).

Cohort differences were more difficult to address. Berryman-Fink and Verderber (1985) did not report standard deviations for the items (although they did report means for each item). Unfortunately, the standard deviations from the original data are no longer available (K. Verderber, personal communication, September 11, 1995). However, the means can be compared for the two samples’ responses on the original 54 items (the 41 items generated for the current study were not included to allow comparison with the original data). An estimated t-value was computed for each category by substituting the standard deviations from the current study for the missing values from the 1979 data. These results should only be interpreted in showing the most probable direction of change; only the (estimated) \(p\)-value is reported. With this caveat, it appears that current undergraduates (compared to the 1979 sample) view feminists as more assertive/career oriented \((M = 5.65, \text{compared to } 5.30 \text{ in } 1979, p < .001)\) and more left-leaning in their political beliefs \((M = 6.12, \text{compared to } 5.99 \text{ in } 1979, p < .01)\). Current undergraduates also see feminists as less heterosexual \((M = 4.10, 4.78, p < .001)\) and less exclusively female \((M = 5.71, 5.78, p < .01)\). However, the current cohort did not evaluate feminists any more positively or negatively than the 1979 students.

A second current sample of students \((n = 44)\) rated the “typical woman” on 93 of the semantic differential items (leaving out those referring to gender). Table 1 compares the ratings of “feminists” to the ratings of a “typical woman.” Significant differences emerged on all four categories, with the typical woman described as more positive/good overall, less assertive/career oriented, less left-leaning in political beliefs, and more likely to be heterosexual. These differences between feminists and the typical woman were similar between men’s and women’s ratings. These results suggest that the four categories of attributes distinguish well between “feminists” and “women” as attitude objects.

How are evaluations of feminists correlated with feminist beliefs and gender stereotypes? Table 2 displays the correlations between the five evaluation categories and measures of attitudes toward women’s rights, attitudes toward the feminist movement, and level of gender stereotyping. For both men and women, attitudes toward the feminist movement was the best predictor of respondents’ general evaluation of feminists. Attitudes toward women’s rights showed a moderate positive
Table 1

Ratings of “Feminists” Compared to Ratings of the “Typical/Average Woman”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>“Feminists” (n = 210)</th>
<th>“Typical woman” (n = 44)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive evaluation</td>
<td>4.25 (.69)</td>
<td>4.76 (.50)</td>
<td>4.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive/career oriented</td>
<td>5.64 (.59)</td>
<td>4.57 (.55)</td>
<td>10.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal political orientation</td>
<td>5.66 (.48)</td>
<td>4.83 (.39)</td>
<td>10.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual orientation</td>
<td>3.87 (.76)</td>
<td>5.18 (.86)</td>
<td>9.96***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

***p < .001.

Table 2

Correlations Between Evaluations of Feminists and Attitudes Toward the Feminist Movement, Attitudes Toward Women’s Rights, and Level of Gender Stereotyping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Attitudes toward the feminist movement (FWM)</th>
<th>Attitudes toward women’s rights (AWS)</th>
<th>Level of gender stereotyping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive evaluation</td>
<td>.73***</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive/career oriented</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal political orientation</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual orientation</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female gender</td>
<td>-.40***</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive evaluation</td>
<td>.76***</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive/career oriented</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal political orientation</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual orientation</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female gender</td>
<td>-.35***</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

correlation, higher for women than for men (the difference between the correlations—.54 for women and .37 for men—is borderline significant at p < .08). This suggests that both sexes (but men in particular) may overestimate their value dissimilarity with feminists and thus evaluate them more negatively (Haddock & Zanna, 1994). Respondents with more positive attitudes toward the feminist movement and women’s rights were also more likely to believe that feminists could be either male or female (the correlation appears as negative in Table 2 because a higher rating is coded toward “female”). Small correlations with the sexual-orienta-
tion category suggest that those with more feminist attitudes rated feminists as more likely to be heterosexual. Level of gender stereotyping, however, was not highly correlated with any aspect of the stereotype of feminists.

**STUDY 2**

As noted previously, closed-ended data can give only a partial picture of the stereotype and evaluation of feminists. Respondents may emphasize different themes and opinions when given the opportunity to freely express their thoughts. Although the magnitude of closed-ended ratings may give some indication of the strongest parts of a stereotype/evaluation, only open-ended data reveal which characteristics are most frequently mentioned and therefore the most salient. The open-ended data collected in Study 2 allow us to determine the most salient characteristics in a stereotype and evaluation of feminists as well as confirming the clusters of traits in the closed-ended responses of Study 1. In addition, little research has addressed differences in the stereotypes and evaluation of male and female feminists, a question also examined in Study 2. Thus this study measured salient evaluations and stereotypes of male and female feminists using an open-ended, semiprojective measure. Responses were content coded for the themes from Study 1 and analyzed on a variety of dimensions, including relationships with demographic characteristics.

**METHOD**

Participants and Procedure

Participants for Study 2 were 135 undergraduate students who participated in winter semester, 1995, for credit in introductory psychology at the University of Michigan. To acquire a diverse sample and allow for cross-race comparisons, we oversampled for people of color by using a prescreening questionnaire. The final distribution by race was approximately 50% Asian or Asian American (n = 67), 10% African American (n = 12), and 40% Caucasian (n = 49). The sample was evenly divided between men and women, and the average age was 19.5 (note that demographic data for seven participants was not available).

Participants completed a variety of measures during a prescreening session held during class time at the beginning of the semester (participation in prescreening is optional, although most students decide to complete the questionnaire). During prescreening the participants' own level of feminism was measured. Approximately 3 weeks later, the respondents met outside of class for a 1-hour session, where they completed more measures concerning feminism and other social issues. Several sessions were conducted, sometimes by two White women and sometimes by one White woman and one Latina woman.
Identification as a feminist, measured at prescreening, simply asked participants if they considered themselves to be feminists on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (no, definitely not) to 4 (yes, definitely). Stereotypes and evaluations of feminists were assessed with a semiprojective measure developed for this study. Each participant received a sheet of paper, with one of two statements: “Michelle calls herself a feminist,” or “Michael calls himself a feminist.” The instructions then read: “In the space below, please write a story about Michelle’s (Michael’s) life. Topics you can discuss include her (his) beliefs and values; her (his) friends, family, and romantic relationships; her (his) daily activities; any other relevant information. There are no right or wrong answers. Please write down the first thoughts that come to your mind. This should take about 5 minutes.” On the assumption that more themes would be codable for a female feminist, two thirds of the participants received the Michelle cue and one third received the Michael cue; an equal number of men and women and Whites and people of color received each cue.

The Michelle and Michael cues were content coded for four of the thematic factors used in Study 1: general evaluation, behavior, political orientation, and sexual orientation. Two coders rated each sentence for mentions of any of the words or concepts from the list in Study 1. For example, mentions of “equal rights” were coded as “political orientation—liberal”; statements such as “Michelle is strong and independent” were coded as “behavioral-assertive.” More than one theme could be coded per sentence, but each theme was scored only once per sentence, even if words from that theme occurred more than once. Interrater reliability ranged from .87 to .89; all disagreements were discussed and resolved. Coders were unaware of the gender or race of the participants at the time of coding, and all data were typed before coding in order to avoid inferences about the gender of the participant based on handwriting. The number of themes coded for each participant’s story ranged from 1 to 12, with a mean of 5.09 and a standard deviation of 2.22.

RESULTS

This sample of undergraduates did not strongly identify as feminist. Over half the sample indicated that they were not feminists (60.7% with a score of 0 or 1), some were not sure (14.8% with a score of 2), and the remainder identified as at least partially feminist (24.5% with a score of 3 or 4). A two-way analysis of variance revealed significant differences in level of feminism by gender and race, but no significant interaction. The main effect for gender showed that women ($M = 1.83$) scored significantly higher than men ($M = 1.04$) on the measure of personal feminism, $F (1, 121) = 16.44, p < .001$. The main effect for race showed that students of color ($M = 1.64$) scored significantly higher than White students ($M = 1.13$) on the measure of personal feminism, $F (1, 121) = 6.42, p < .05$. There were no significant differences in personal feminism between African Americans and Asian Americans when examined within gender.

As for the responses to the “Michelle/Michael is a feminist” targets, there was
a good deal of variability in how frequently each theme was mentioned in the open-ended data. Approximately half (50.4%) the participants gave positive evaluations; fewer (but still a sizable minority) made negative statements (35.7%). A number of respondents made both a positive and a negative evaluation in their response (19.4%). As for behavior, more than half the sample indicated that Michelle or Michael was assertive (55.8%); a much smaller percentage indicated that Michelle or Michael was passive (5.4%). In the political-orientation category, the vast majority mentioned liberal political behaviors or beliefs (85.3%); only a few mentioned a conservative political orientation (2.3%). For sexual orientation, almost half of the respondents mentioned indicators of heterosexuality, for example, that Michelle is married to or dating a man (45%), and only a few mentioned indicators of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientation (4.7%). Thus a liberal political orientation was the most frequently mentioned characteristic, followed by assertive behavior, a positive general evaluation, and a heterosexual orientation.

Many participants wrote about Michelle and Michael as “normal” and quite similar to themselves. One participant, who was a typical representative of this stance, wrote, “Michelle leads a normal life. She grew up like any other normal child. She went to the same public schools like you or I until college. Then in college she went to some public ‘U’ like U of M. All this time she had been a feminist which did not make her any different from anyone else.” Others mentioned positive qualities such as loyalty (“When her friends are in trouble, they can always count on Michelle”), intelligence (“Michelle is a very smart girl”), or sociability (“He is friends with a wide variety of people”).

However, other respondents developed a picture that was more extreme and often went against gender norms. For instance, one person mentioned that Michelle worked in a gun store; another said she “probably worships Satan”; and a third noted that Michelle “decided to stop caring for her feminine hygiene.” Derision of masculinity was a common topic in negative evaluations of Michael; one respondent claimed that Michael is a cross-dresser by night (wearing “nothing else but red high heels and pink bikini thong underwear”). In a similar vein, another wrote that “Michael probably denounces his manhood. . . . This Michael I would just as soon punch in the face as listen to his misguided mouth jabber, jabber, jabber, repeating slogan after slogan with no intelligence at all, no facts.”

Several mentioned that Michelle was quick to get angry and express a strong opinion; one respondent wrote that whenever Michelle “sees something on television about women being wronged, she flips out and starts preaching to the nearest person.” A few others described Michelle or Michael as “defensive,” “unyielding,” “bitter,” “touchy,” or “pushing . . . to the point of annoyance.” These findings mirror the results of Study 1, where respondents described feminists as “stubborn” and “angry.” This opinion was countered by others, who specifically mentioned that Michael is “very open-minded and accepting of many things” or that Michelle “doesn’t try to shove her ideals on her friends.” A similar range of views emerged in the realm of romantic relationships: although some participants mentioned Michelle’s bad luck with men (“She can’t seem to keep a boyfriend”), others described her as having a steady boyfriend or a stable marriage.

Some students offered explanations for why Michelle or Michael became a feminist. Popular reasons included being raised by strong mothers as role models, experiencing sexism in one’s family of origin, or having/witnessing particular experi-
ences such as rape or sexual abuse and becoming mobilized around them. For Michael, respondents often mentioned growing up with many sisters or being close to girls in childhood. This type of story is best exemplified by one participant’s response:

Michael grew up with four older sisters. They were all strong-minded individuals, taking after their mother who was the state governor. Michael had great relationships with all of his sisters and had the utmost respect for all of them. Throughout his life, he watched the daily struggles his sisters went through simply because they were women. He witnessed their disappointments and tears. Michael developed a strong sense of feminism due to all of these factors. He doesn’t want to see his own daughters have to struggle like his sisters did. Michael spends his free time at school working to gain equal opportunities for the women. Michael calls himself a feminist.

In summary, although the majority of the respondents described a “normal” young person, a sizable minority offered stories that were biting negative and sometimes bizarre. In addition, about a fifth of the participants made both negative and positive evaluations.

It was possible to examine the relationship between demographic characteristics of the participants and the frequency with which they mentioned the different themes in their stories about Michelle and Michael. Participants’ gender did not relate to mentioning any of the themes. However, race was related to making general evaluations: compared to students of color \((M = .43, SD = 1.36)\), White students \((M = -.35, SD = 1.68)\) made significantly fewer positive general evaluations, \(t(121) = 2.74, p < .01\). Participants’ level of feminism was inversely related to making negative general evaluations \((r = -.24, p < .01)\); thus respondents higher in feminist identity were less likely to ascribe negative traits to Michelle or Michael. The cue that the participants received (either Michelle or Michael) was related to mentioning assertive behavior: students with the Michelle cue \((M = 1.36, SD = 1.50)\), as compared with students with the Michael cue \((M = .22, SD = .76)\) made significantly more attributions that were behavior assertive, \(t(127) = 5.68, p < .001\). No other categories showed differences by the gender of the feminist target.

DISCUSSION

In both Study 1 and Study 2, the most salient stereotype of feminists was that they have a liberal political orientation and an assertive/career-oriented personality style. Both methodologies revealed a slightly positive evaluation of feminists, although there were several negative dimensions to the evaluation as well (for example, one third of the Study 2 respondents mentioned at least one negative attribute, and the Study 1 respondents saw feminists as angry, tense, egotistical, and stubborn). This complex pattern is typical of previous research (e.g., Berryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985; Jacobson, 1979). Neither study found support for the supposedly common stereotype that “most feminists are lesbians” (Fox & Auerbach, 1983; Griffin, 1989; Kamen, 1991); the students in Study 1 rated feminists as equally likely to be heterosexual or lesbian, and Study 2 respondents usually assumed that the feminist target was heterosexual. This result may be due to a general assumption of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), in this case extended to feminists. However, it is
interesting to note the strong differences between participants’ ratings of the “typical woman” and their ratings of feminists. Although feminists are seen in a slightly positive light, they are still perceived as less positive and more likely to be lesbian than the average woman. They are also viewed as markedly more assertive in their personality characteristics and more liberal in political orientation (and thus as less traditional than the typical woman). Thus compared to women in general, feminists are evaluated more negatively and in more explicit behavioral terms.

Both studies found few individual differences in the evaluation and stereotype of feminists. In the closed-ended format, women evaluated feminists more positively than men did, but there were no gender differences in positive or negative attributions in the open-ended data. The open-ended data also showed that people of color made more positive statements about feminists than Whites. Although some scholars (e.g., Giddings, 1984) have suggested that women of color, particularly African Americans, have been alienated by racism in the women’s movement, these data indicate that students of color evaluate feminists more positively and are more likely to identify as feminists themselves.

Cohort comparisons show that the stereotype of feminists has become more explicit over the last 20 years, with feminists now seen as more politically liberal, more assertive/career oriented, and more likely to be lesbian than they were in the past. This may be related to the life experiences of each cohort (e.g., Lambert, 1972; Stewart & Healy, 1989): students in 1979 grew up hearing about feminist protests and successful changes of institutions, whereas the 1995 cohort was born after the peak of feminist activism. Thus the 1995 students may not know as much about feminists and feel more removed from them; because of an ingroup-outgroup bias (e.g., Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989) and a lack of familiarity, they may see feminists in more rigid and homogeneous terms. However, current students do not evaluate feminists any less positively or negatively.

Feminist orientation, measured in two different ways, consistently related the most strongly to the respondents’ general evaluation of feminists and showed only weak relationships with other types of attributions. This suggests that feminists and nonfeminists are similar in stereotyping feminists as liberal and assertive/career oriented, but differ in their overall evaluation of feminists. The absence of correlations with gender stereotyping indicates that perceptions of feminists are not related to personal stereotypes about men and women. In Study 2, the gender of the feminist target made little difference in the stereotype outside of personality characteristics (the female feminist was described as more assertive, similar to the results of Rickabaugh [1995]). Thus the stereotype and evaluation of male and female feminists appears to be fairly similar.

Despite the slightly positive evaluation of feminists, the respondents in Study 2 did not describe themselves as feminists. Most recent studies have also found young people unlikely to use the label “feminist,” despite espousing feminist beliefs (Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Griffin, 1989; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Kamen, 1991). This raises an interesting question: If the stereotype of feminists is actually positive, why do so few women and men self-identify as feminists? There are a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy. First, social desirability and demand characteristics may play a role in respondents’ slightly positive evaluations of feminists. Discrepancies with other beliefs may also play a part; Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992) found that attitudes toward the feminist movement are
more important for feminist self-labeling than perceptions of feminists themselves. In addition, respondents might misperceive others’ attitudes, assuming that most people do have a negative opinion of feminists. Media portrayals may contribute to the belief that many people evaluate feminists negatively (Faludi, 1991; Kamen, 1991). It is instructive that the majority of respondents in Study 1 described feminists as “not like me.” Future research might compare respondents’ self-ratings on the semantic differential items to their ratings of feminists to determine the largest areas of difference. It would also be interesting to ask respondents the reasons behind their identification or nonidentification as a feminist and to determine whether the evaluation or stereotype plays any role in this decision.

Another future direction for stereotypes of feminists might include a more concise determination of the essential elements of the stereotype. The N in Study 1 (210), although adequate for the purposes here, was not large enough to allow a factor analysis of the data. Such a factor analysis with a larger sample might determine if the major domains of the stereotype are the same as reported in Berryman-Fink and Verderber’s (1985) article. It might also pare down the items to a shorter questionnaire, which could be used as a quick measure of respondents’ evaluation and stereotyping of feminists. In addition, it would be interesting to determine other correlates of evaluations of feminists; for example, do experiences of gender discrimination improve these evaluations (e.g., Renzetti, 1987)? On the other side of the coin, what experiences might lead to having a low opinion of feminists? Another exciting direction might be to test the accessibility and strength of these traits to the stereotype/evaluation of feminists, measuring the response time to each as they are presented. Last, this study should be followed up in a more representative sample of adults, a group that might report a different opinion about feminists than the current college sample. The diverse sample of Study 2 is another possible limit to generalizability, because it includes a higher number of people of color than are found in the general population.

In summary, the two studies reported here have found evidence for a consistent stereotype and evaluation of feminists. A liberal political orientation is most salient to the stereotype, followed by an assertive and career-oriented personality. Feminists are judged more likely to be heterosexual than homosexual, but are still seen as much more likely to be lesbian than the average woman. The evaluation of feminists emerged as slightly positive in both the closed- and open-ended responses, although there were several negative attributions. Perhaps these few negative views continue to prevent people with feminist beliefs from calling themselves what some label “the other f-word:” feminist.

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NOTES
1. Research has demonstrated that many undergraduates hold a negative stereotype of lesbians and gay men (e.g., Page & Yee, 1985); thus the belief that feminists are more likely to be lesbians may add to a negative stereotype of feminists. However, the authors do not intend to endorse this stereotype of lesbians and gay men in any way.
2. A copy of an Appendix listing the mean responses to each item is available from the first author.
REFERENCES


