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# Gender Role and Feminism Revisited: A Follow-Up Study

By: Elizabeth A. Suter and Paige W. Toller

## Abstract

In this follow-up to our earlier study (Toller, Suter, & Trautman, Gender role identity and attitudes towards feminism, *Sex Roles*, 51, 85–90, 2004) we examine the interrelationships among gender role, support for feminism, and willingness to self-label as feminist. Ten percent of college students previously surveyed participated in qualitative interviews, which elicited characterizations of feminists, whether students self-identified as feminist, suggestions for garnering support for feminism, and for interpretation of the initial study's findings. Students were asked to speculate why we found that highly masculine men and highly feminine women were neither likely to self-identify as feminist nor to support the feminist movement and why more feminine men and more masculine women were found to be more willing to self-label as feminist and more likely to support the feminist movement.

## Keywords

Gender identity Feminism Masculinity Femininity Labeling

Within the past few decades, a number of scholars across a variety of disciplines have examined support for feminism and the feminist movement. Many have found that the majority of the participants in their studies have positive attitudes toward feminism in general. Yet, these same participants are often hesitant or unwilling to self-identify or label themselves as feminist (e.g., Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Arnold, 2002; Aronson, 2003; Burn, Aboud, & Moyles, 2000; Cowan, Mestlin, & Masek, 1992; Renzetti, 1987; Twenge & Zucker, 1999; Williams & Wittig, 1997). For instance, Burn et al. (2000) found that, although the majority of their participants agreed with feminist ideas, only 29 (16.6%) of 174 women and 3 (3.7%) of the 82 men in the study were willing to label themselves as feminists. Similarly, Williams and Wittig (1997) found that, although more than one-half of a sample of 141 students viewed the feminist movement favorably, only 25% were willing to identify as feminists. Likewise, Cowan et al. (1992) reported that, although 54% of participants were at least mildly in favor of the feminist movement, only 12% of the 105 individuals considered themselves feminists.

Studies such as the ones cited above highlight the discrepancy between participants' support for feminism and their willingness to self-identify as feminists. Scholars have attempted to understand why this inconsistency exists, and they have posited reasons that range from lack of prior exposure to the feminist movement to personal experience with sex discrimination to connotations of the word "feminist" (e.g., Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Reid & Purcell, 2004; Renzetti, 1987; Williams & Wittig, 1997).

Prior exposure to the feminist movement has been found to influence support for feminism and willingness to self-label as a feminist. In a study of female college students, Reid and Purcell (2004) found that women who had had previous exposure to feminism and feminist ideologies reported stronger feminist identities than did women who had had no such exposure. Women who had had greater exposure

to feminists and feminism also reported feeling a greater sense of collective identity or “we-ness” with feminists, and they were less likely than those with less exposure to describe an “average feminist” with negative terms such as “ugly,” “frigid,” or “man-hater” (p. 766). Exposure through higher education has also been found to influence support and willingness to self-label. Bargad and Hyde (1991) and Aronson (2003) found that taking a women’s studies course directly influenced college women’s conceptions of themselves as feminists. Likewise, in a study of female students in a women’s studies course, Henderson-King and Stewart (1999) found that women’s levels of feminist self-identification increased over the course of the semester; similar increases were not found in a comparison group of students who were not enrolled in women’s studies. Whereas the feminist attitudes of the male college students decreased, the feminist attitudes of the female students increased in Thomsen, Basu, and Reinitz’s (1995) study of students enrolled in a women’s studies course.

In addition to exposure, scholars have found a link between support for feminism and the degree to which individuals think that the feminist movement affects them personally. For instance, Renzetti (1987) argued women may be unwilling to identify as feminists because they believe they can succeed without the collective efforts of feminists or feminism. Both Aronson (2003) and Alexander and Ryan (1997) found that women did not identify with the collective efforts of the feminist movement because they did not believe the movement would help them to achieve success in both the work and family spheres. Alexander and Ryan argued that the women in their study viewed feminism as pertaining to more social and controversial issues, such as abortion, rather than to the everyday lives of working women.

Scholars also have reported that college students who define feminism as a belief rather than an action are more likely to self-identify as feminists. Arnold’s (2002) findings suggest that some students reject the label because they fear that adopting it will require activism. Similar to Arnold, some participants in Aronson’s (2003) report did not adopt the label because they were not actively working in the women’s movement. Also in support of Arnold’s findings, a few researchers have found that participants with favorable attitudes toward collective action are more likely to identify as feminists (Cowan et al., 1992; Liss, O’Conner, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001; Williams & Wittig, 1997).

Scholars also have reported that individuals may not identify with feminism because the words “feminist” and “feminism” have negative connotations (Arnold, 2002; Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Noland, Daley, & Drolet, 2004; Williams & Wittig, 1997). For example, college women have been found to respond more positively to the phrase “women’s movement” than to the word “feminist” (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). In a study of men’s and women’s attitudes toward “feminists” and “housewives,” Haddock and Zanna (1994) found that men evaluated feminists more negatively than housewives. The men Haddock and Zanna classified as “highly authoritarian” provided the strongest negative attitude toward feminists, perhaps, as the authors suggested, because the value systems of feminists contradict the value systems of highly authoritarian men.

Other scholars have suggested that women reject the feminist label because they fear that it may somehow portray them as anti-men (Aronson, 2003) or as radical, socially undesirable, or lesbian (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Liss et al., 2001; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Williams & Wittig, 1997). Men, on the other hand, may reject the label due to the gendered nature of the word “feminist” (Williams & Wittig, 1997), which they think cannot refer to men.

Williams and Wittig’s (1997) argument that the feminist label is associated with images of radical women speaks to the research of other scholars on how media portrayals of feminists may negatively affect support for the women’s movement (Bell, 1997; Faludi, 1991; van Zoonen, 1994). Distorted media images may result in individuals viewing feminists as looking or behaving in unfeminine, or masculine,

ways (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Twenge & Zucker, 1999). In a related study, Bullock and Fernald (2003) found that college women who self-identified as feminists responded more favorably to a feminist message when it was delivered by a woman with a feminine appearance than when it was delivered by a woman with a more masculine appearance. These women also rated the more feminine looking speaker as more persuasive, and they identified more with her message than they did with that of the speaker who was more masculine looking. Bullock and Fernald's findings suggest that even self-identified feminist women may prefer femininity over masculinity in terms of feminists' appearance. Their findings also speak to the notion that cultural performances of masculinity or femininity may somehow influence support for the feminist movement and willingness to self-identify as feminists.

A handful of scholars have examined how individuals' perception of their own masculinity or femininity influences their support for feminism. Burn et al. (2000) found that women who viewed femininity as central to their identity agreed more with statements that indicate covert, rather than overt, feminism. Burn et al. also found that highly masculine men supported neither covert nor overt feminism. Taken together, these findings suggest that open identification with feminism may pose a threat to gender role orientation for both men and women.

An early study of feminism and gender role identity showed that both feminist and non-feminist men and women described an ideal man as highly masculine (Mezydlo & Betz, 1980). It is interesting that an ideal woman was described as possessing masculine characteristics not only by feminist men, but also by feminist women. More recent research has extended the findings of Mezydlo and Betz (1980). For instance, Jackson, Fleury, and Lewandowski (1996) found that, for women, labeling oneself a feminist was related to masculinity, but not femininity; in other words, more masculine women were more likely to adopt the feminist label. Jackson et al. also found that more feminine men were likely to support the feminist movement; however, more feminine men were not likely to label themselves as feminists.

(Toller et al., 2004) found results similar to those of Jackson et al. (1996) in that women who rated themselves as more masculine also were more likely to self-label as feminists. Likewise, men who rated themselves as more feminine were likely to self-label as feminists.

Although the findings of Jackson et al. (1996) and of our previous research (Toller et al., 2004) provide insight into the relationship between gender role and support for feminism, many questions remain unanswered. For instance, why are highly masculine men and highly feminine women hesitant to support the feminist movement? The findings of Jackson et al. (1996) and others indicate that individuals who support feminism view their performance of masculinity or femininity as more non-traditional in nature. Is it possible that highly feminine women and highly masculine men do not support feminism for fear that feminism constrains their performances as "girly girls" or "manly men"? In other words, do they believe feminism demands that they perform their gender roles non-traditionally?

In order to address questions such as these, we conducted the current study to follow-up the findings of our initial study (Toller et al., 2004). The purpose of the current study was to examine, in more depth, the relationships among gender role, support for feminism, and willingness to self-label as feminist. More specifically, we conducted this follow-up study to try to understand better why individuals who enact more non-traditional gender roles supported the feminist movement and why individuals who enact traditional gender roles did not. The following research questions guided our study:

RQ1: How do students characterize feminists?

RQ2: How likely are students to self-identify as feminists?

In order to explore how performance of gender role may influence support for feminism and willingness to self-label as feminist, we asked participants to reflect upon the findings of our initial study. After summarizing our findings, we asked students the following questions:

RQ3: Why do you think that highly masculine and highly feminine women are neither willing to self-label as feminists nor to support the feminist movement?

RQ4: Why do you think that more feminine men and more masculine women are more willing to self-label as feminists and more likely to support the feminist movement?

We then asked participants for suggestions for how feminists might increase support for the movement:

RQ5: What do you think feminists could do to garner support among college students for the feminist movement?

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Participants**

We recruited participants by sending out a mass email to the 301 students who had participated in our previous study. We recruited participants using purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), as we wanted to interview only students who had participated in our initial study. Our sample should also be considered a convenience sample (Patton, 1990), as we interviewed any student that responded to our email request regarding participation in the current study.

In the e-mail we reminded students of their participation in the previous study and told them about the pending follow-up study in which they were eligible to participate. We informed them that they were under no obligation to participate in the present study and that participation was completely voluntary. In order to keep participation voluntary, we provided instructions on how to initiate contact with one of us if they were interested in participating. Thirty of the original 301 participants, or 10% of the initial sample, responded to our e-mail and agreed to participate in the current study. Twenty-four of the interviews were conducted face to face with one of the authors, and six of the interviews were conducted over the telephone.

Participants were 30 undergraduate students at a large, midwestern university. All 30 participants had participated in the initial study, which was verified by their signatures on informed consent forms on file from the initial study. The samples in the current and previous study were similar in terms of sex, age, race, majors, religion, and whether or not the student's mother worked outside the home.

Fifteen of the participants were female, and 15 were male. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 47 years, with a mean age of 24.37. Twenty-seven of the participants were White (90.0%), one was Black (3.3%), one was Bi-racial (3.3%), and one was Latino (3.3%). Twenty-two of the participants were Communication Studies majors (63.0%), four were Advertising/Marketing majors (13.3%), one was an English major (3.3%), and one was an Education major (3.3%).

Thirteen (43.3%) students were raised by mothers who worked full-time outside of the home. Five (16.7%) mothers had a business within the home, four (13.3%) mothers worked part-time outside of the home, four (13.3%) mothers worked full-time after the student began school, and four (13.3%) mothers did not work outside of the home during the time the student was growing up.

Seven (23.3%) participants were raised as Catholics, six (20.0%) were raised as Lutherans, and four (13.3%) were raised as Methodists. Five (16.6%) reported that they were raised in non-denominational churches, six (20.0%) reported that they were raised in other denominations, and two (6.7%) reported that they were not raised in any particular religious denomination.

## **Procedure**

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of the same demographic questions asked in our previous study (Toller et al., 2004), followed by open-ended questions. Each student was asked the following questions: (a) what they thought the feminist movement was about, (b) where, and from whom, they first learned about the feminist movement, (c) how they would describe a feminist, (d) whether they were willing to self-identify as a feminist, (e) how the feminist movement had affected them or would affect them in the future, and (f) how supportive they thought their peers were of feminism and the feminist movement. This first set of interview questions paraphrased items from Renzetti's (1987) Sex Role Attitudinal Inventory (SRAI), which was used in our previous study. The findings of our previous initial study were then summarized for the students as follows: "The study found that neither highly masculine men nor highly feminine women were likely to support feminism. By contrast, more feminine men and more masculine women were found to be more likely to support feminism." Students were asked to interpret the findings. Finally, students were asked what they thought feminists could do to garner support among college students for the feminist movement.

Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, which yielded 30 individual transcripts for a total of 323 single-spaced pages of talk. Participants' real names were changed to pseudonyms (fake names), which are used throughout the report.

## **Data Analysis**

Smith (1995) suggested that researchers begin with one transcript and employ these five steps: (1) read the transcript several times and use one side of the margin to note important findings; (2) use the other margin to document emerging themes; (3) list the emerging themes and look for connections between them; (4) produce a master list of themes; and (5) indicate instances of each master theme in the transcript. Once a master list of themes is produced from the analysis of the initial transcript, Smith suggested that researchers use the master list to analyze an additional five transcripts. For researchers working with a data set larger than five to six transcripts, Smith suggested producing a code for each theme and then continuing to identify instances of these themes in the remaining transcripts.

In accordance with Smith (1995), we began independently to analyze the initial transcript in-depth by writing important findings on the left margin and emerging themes on the right. However, analysis of one transcript did not produce a master list of themes. We then independently analyzed transcripts 2–5. We then met to develop our master list of themes. We then independently analyzed interviews 6–10. We met again to verify our master list of themes. Based on this master list of themes, we analyzed the remaining 20 interviews.

Given that we had 30 transcripts, we followed Smith's (1995) suggestion to produce a code for each theme. He noted that this process might lead to a more integrated organization of connections across the data. In order to produce a code for each theme, we used Strauss and Corbin's (1998) process of diagramming to visualize emerging relationships among themes. We used the codes to analyze the remaining transcripts. Our analysis produced 130 pages of instances of the codes. In order for a code to be included, the code had to have been discussed at the very minimum by four different participants and, both of the researchers independently had to have identified the same instances as exemplars.

## Results

### Characterizing Feminists

#### *How feminists act*

When asked to characterize how feminists act, participants described feminists as activist women, as independent, as extremists, and/or as simultaneously feminine and feminist.

The characterization of feminists as activists had a positive valence. Although activists were perceived as enacting a wide range of behaviors, the central defining characteristic emerged as someone who “takes initiative and doesn’t just sit back” (Ginny) and as someone who is “actually trying to do something to change society” (Randy). Activists were identified as building awareness of issues: “women are getting abused all the time in relationships, and they want people to be aware of that and try to do something about it, whether it’s raise money or contact somebody that can do something about it” (Tad). Activists picket: “going to these marches, like the Million Woman March or whatever, out there with their signs” (Hannah). Activists advocate for inclusive language: “for example mailman... a feminist would be trying to help people change their vocabulary so that they are not using words like that kind of automatically make people think about the male gender” (Aaron). Overall, an activist is “someone who is really involved, is going to take a stand, and is going to try to get out there and make difference, rather than just reading about something and moving on” (Trent).

Participants characterized feminists as independent. “They don’t lean on other people for support” (Susan) and they are “not afraid to be alone” (Ginny). Participants also portrayed feminists as independent thinkers, as “having a different way of thinking” (Emily). Feminists were also seen as independent actors: “women that are able to go out and do what they want to do, work where they want to work, and be able to do their own thing and not have to worry about oh the repercussions from their choices” (Monique).

The characterization of feminists as extremists had a negative valence. Extremists were depicted as “bra burners... femi-nazis” (Monique), as “man haters” (Jake), or as “militant” (Bobby). It is interesting that all of the participants who characterized feminists as extremists talked about this characteristic as their initial view, which has since changed via education and/or a personal relationship with a feminist:

I had always thought of feminists as being weird people that lived off in the forest, kind of by themselves or whatever. But you come to college and you realize that there are professional women who are feminists and this is just part of who they are, it’s not an all-compassing thing. It’s like “Yes, you are a person, but you also are a feminist” (Anne).

Participants also characterized feminists as simultaneously feminine and feminist. One man described his ex-girlfriend in this way: “She would wear heels and lipstick, things like that, but she’s very confrontational, very aggressive in the way she deals with things” (Brandon). Other participants said: “You can be a girl without like oppressing women” (Margaret); “A woman can still be soft and nurturing but, you know, we can still stand up for what we want (Carrie). One woman spoke of this duality in terms of career and family:

Whenever people talk about a feminist, it’s usually, you know, the ball busting woman that’s the executive of some big company, and then other people will get mad and say, “You know they don’t want a family, they don’t want to go home and raise babies.” And I think nowadays feminists can have both and can find that middle ground where they can have both lives (Jessica).

### *How feminists look*

When asked to characterize how feminists look, participants described feminists as looking like regular women, as butch, and/or as having “no one look.”

A few participants characterized feminists as looking like regular women: “I don’t think a feminist would look any different than any other woman” (Ginny); “I think feminists are like you and me, nobody could know on the street if you were a feminist or not” (Hannah); Feminists “come in every race, creed, color” (Tyrone); Feminists “don’t look different than anybody else” (Randy).

Yet, the majority of participants characterized feminists as either butch or as having “no one look.” Those who perceived feminists as butch reflected stereotypes of feminists as lesbians with “butch” hair cuts, who look masculine, and who neither wear makeup nor shave. They are “tree huggers, wear khaki clothes, combat boots, and hairy arm pits” (Crystal) or, as one man said, are clearly not a “natural woman” (Luke).

In part, having “no one look” means that feminist women today have a choice in how they appear and that appearance doesn’t affect an individual’s views, as one man explained:

There could be a lot of feminists out there who look like just other females, and who get dolled up and wear high heels and, you know, do very feminine things that are trendy and popular that you would see on commercials and advertisements, yet they still have a lot of those same beliefs. I think a feminist can look very different today, depending on who is being feminist, who is playing that role. I don’t know if I could describe what a feminist really looks like because I think probably they can look very different today (Aaron).

Having “no one look” also meant that male feminists complicated participants’ ability to conceptualize a particular look: “Men also agree with feminists... so I don’t think you can actually put a look on feminists” (Joe). Or, as another man said, “I really don’t think that there is a specific look, or a specific voice or anything that has to do with physical appearance... Because obviously it can be female or male” (Bobby).

### **Labeling Self as a Feminist**

Seven women and six men labeled themselves as feminist. Eight women and nine men did not accept the label. Most participants did not accept the label for identity reasons. They thought that the label either contradicted or challenged their identity. A few participants resisted the label given a stated objection to labels in general.

#### *Label contradicts identity*

In part, participants thought that labeling themselves as feminists contradicted their identity. Some thought that the label contradicted their religious identity. Both men and women resisted the label because they perceived feminism as a threat to the roles prescribed to women and men by their churches. As one participant said:

I mean it [feminism] kinds of disagrees with what I feel is an appropriate role, a wife, a female, and a mother and, ah, I don’t know that may sound very traditional and holding bars on women, but I know a lot of like Christian women friends that you know that they love the fact that God made them women and they have specific roles in marriage, and as a mother (Luke).

Others spoke similarly: “That’s how I was raised too in the Christian sense of, you know, the man is kind of the dominant person” (Jessica). Others resisted the label because issues supported by feminists contradicted their religious identity:

There are things I consider right and wrong. I think people make their choice. I don’t think abortions right, personally. And ah, so some feminist that’s probably the feminist bend is to think that is correct. Think that’s acceptable behavior. So that would probably be a big deterrent for me. Another thing is just the whole that it’s okay to have multiple partners thing (Nick).

Beyond contradicting religious identity, others resisted the label because their life choices ran counter to feminism. Many women thought that they did not live up to the label because they “would like to get married someday. You know, I would not mind at all being able to have the option of actually staying home and raising my family and not having to work” (Monique). Another woman explained:

I’m exactly what the feminist[s] kind of work against... I want to have a family, and I would really want to be a stay-at-home mom and work out of my home and be with my children. And I think that’s kind of step backwards maybe in what the feminist[s] were initially trying to go for. I compete in pageants, and I do a lot of different things like that, and I think that is also something that they probably would be, ah, stepping away from, so I think I would probably be the opposite of a feminist (Jodi).

#### *Label challenges identity*

Other participants thought that labeling themselves as feminists would challenge their sense of identity. Some resisted the label in order to distance themselves from perceived negative stereotypes:

“Feminist” can get a lot of negative reaction, it can be very, you know, “You hate men,” and I’m not a man hater, and I wouldn’t want to be stereotyped that way, and I guess right now I’m just not comfortable enough to say that, to stand up strong and say, “I’m a feminist”... without wondering what people are thinking of me as one of the butch, tree hugging, fairy lesbians (Crystal).

Others resisted the negative connotations of the label: “It has just a negative connotation that they’re stuck, you know, like you know, if you say, ‘Oh I’m feminist,’ then you are stuck in that role that society has and that preconceived notion of what a feminist is” (Monique). Men made comments such as: “I think that that’s a difficult label to put on myself because I think of the negative connotations I think some men would have toward it” (Aaron).

#### *Problems with labels*

A few participants did not want to self-label as a feminist because, “I’m not a big labels person” (Ginny). Participants admitted that this position is a “cop out” (Randy). Ironically, after eschewing all labels, some participants claimed alternative labels, such as “realist” (Randy) or “equalist”:

I’m for the equality but, regardless of men or women, regardless of gender. I do believe in you know everybody should have the same rights and privileges. So I would say I’m an equalist (Joe).

### **Reactions to Results**

Participants were then asked for their reaction to the results of our previous research.

#### *Highly masculine men*

Participants reasoned that highly masculine men were not likely to support feminism because of traditional gender roles, which participants perceived to be very beneficial for highly masculine men:

“They get their way” (Hannah); “They are macho, and it going to be my way or the highway” (Amy); “They don’t waver, they don’t compromise” (Daniel); “Highly masculine men then, obviously, they are very set in the way things are, you know, they believe in the traditional gender roles, and if they are obviously fairly comfortable, so why would they want to change it?” (Margaret).

Participants also reasoned that highly masculine men, the “alpha males” (Bobby), were not likely to support feminism because they perceived feminism as a threat to their masculinity: Feminism “scares macho guys” (Emily); “If women can do what makes, what makes us macho... if women start to invade our sports world, you know, what do we have?” (Tad). As another man stated:

It [feminism] scares them, I think. It helps them struggle with their own identity, and so I don’t know if something they are really trying to necessarily inhibit women from getting opportunities, I think it is more of a conflict they have with their own identity (Aaron).

### *Highly feminine men*

Participants reasoned that highly feminine men were more likely to support feminism because they are more open-minded. Participants seemed to define open mindedness as a feminine trait, so if a man is more feminine (e.g., “more in touch with his emotions”) (Ginny), he was more likely to be open minded, and thus more likely to be supportive of the feminist movement. “More feminine men would... have those qualities of being open minded and being caring and nurturing, and so they would care for, you know, and be open to the feminist ideas movement” (Monique). Perceived troubles with gender identity were also viewed as creating openness to changing society:

I believe that kind of man could see that there maybe needs to be change, you know, in the world, and so he would be more willing to be open minded to the concept and listening to the idea. He may not be comfortable in his own masculine position because, you know, since he doesn’t fit into this stereotypical, you know, male dominant role (Carrie).

### *Highly masculine women*

Participants reasoned that highly masculine women were more likely to be supportive of the feminist movement because they were more likely to have non-traditional gender roles. They are “more concerned with their career” (Ginny), more willing to “overpower men” (Jodi), and more likely to have masculine traits, such as “drive” (Trent). Such traits were used to explain why highly masculine women were more likely to “come up and say, ‘I do support this, and I will do things about it’” (Madison), and “be proactive” (Carrie).

### *Highly feminine men and highly masculine women*

Although participants speculated that highly feminine men were more likely to be supportive of the movement because they were open-minded, this reason was only provided for highly masculine women when participants were characterizing feminine men and masculine women simultaneously. Some very interesting arguments were put forth, such as “they’ve grown up, sort of, against many of the norms of society I suppose. And so, they’ve maybe thought about it from both view points” (Greg). “It makes sense that people who find themselves in the middle tend to be supportive. Because I think feminism has masculine and feminine views” (Randy). Or, as another participant said:

If you got a female who has taken on a masculine role, she’s already trying to make the change into the male dominant society. And if you got a male taking on a feminine role, he’s put himself, he’s taken himself out of the male dominant society which he’s grown up, put himself in the shoes of the female...

So they are both looking at it from the opposite, or the opponents' side so to speak. They've put on the other person's shoes (Daniel).

Participants also reasoned that highly feminine men and highly masculine women were more likely to be supportive because the feminist movement provided them a "safe place":

Those who jumped across the other side are looking for more acceptance in a movement, such as the feminist movement. Like, you know, if women are trying to move over to this masculine side, and then all of sudden reach this room where there is not a traditional label to put on them, and they are kind of like fighting for new ground and acceptance at the same time and being more equally in a masculine realm (Brandon).

### *Highly feminine women*

Highly feminine women were perceived as unsupportive of the feminist movement because, like highly masculine men, they were seen as having traditional gender roles. "Very feminine woman, I would say, they would more correspond to traditional gender roles. And that traditional gender roles normally don't correlate with the feminist movement" (Anne). Participants viewed traditional gender roles as a product of socialization. A few men saw conforming to conventional gender roles as positive for interpersonal relations between men and women "The really feminine women maybe understand what their place might be and what they were kind of built for" (Trent). Or, as another male stated:

My girl friend is a real girly girl, and then she will conform to the patriarchal society you know, she's a girly girl, and I'm a manly man, and I take care of her, and she does the things that are expected, she conforms to the role that's set by society for you know gender within the last hundred, two hundred years (Joe).

Others spoke of women's socialization into traditional gender roles more critically: "They are probably raised to believe that they are supposed to fulfill those traditional women roles" (Aaron); "Here's what I'm supposed to do" (Max); "Everyone is supposed to know their place" (Scott); "They kind of grew up with maybe ultra-traditional family values and where the women were just meant to be more passive and the man just kind of has always sort of made the decisions" (Greg).

### **Garnering Support for the Movement**

Participants were then asked what they thought feminists could do to garner support among college students for the feminist movement. In response, students suggested two key ways to increase support and one key way, in their words, to stop losing support.

### *Increasing support*

To increase support, students suggested that general awareness of the feminist movement be increased: "They [feminists] just need to speak out about it [feminism] and inform, because I don't think it's going to get out and around if people don't know what it is" (Hannah); "What it [feminism] does mean is ambiguous so what it could mean is what should be talked about in the general population (Alicia); "I don't think a lot of people even know necessarily where to find information on it... half the people are scared away from it, just by pure, 'I don't know anything about and it sounds so extreme'" (Randy). One member of a sorority suggested:

If a feminist were to come to my sorority house on a Monday night and speak, there is 120 more people that are understanding your cause a little bit better, have an idea about what a feminist movement really is, and what a modern feminist looks like, and is, and does (Crystal).

Many students suggested that one way feminists could increase general awareness of the feminist movement is via educational efforts. However, they made clear that they did not mean formal education. Rather, students advocated that education by example would best generate support: “Not just teaching it [feminism], but people that have experienced it first hand... how it affected them... and it truly does affect you, even if you don’t see it” (Madison); “Not necessarily classes, but speeches and talking, so others have an idea about what a feminist movement really is, and what a modern feminist looks like” (Crystal); “Just have everyday people show their support for and kind of let their thoughts get behind them” (Jake); “I’ve seen very determined female athletes who say, ‘Well, I know what society told me but, my mom or my dad said you can pitch this softball, you can swim faster than these boys’” (Tad); One participant said:

People that live a life that is appealing is the biggest thing though. If you want people to come to you, your movement or group, whether this has with your church group or whatever it is, show me a life I want to live, and I would say, ‘Wow that’s appealing, I’d like that.’ The biggest way and the most affective way of getting people to join or subscribe to a belief system or a movement is showing that it will improve their lives, and that’s what they want (Nick).

Second, students called for an increase in role models. Students called specifically for more positive feminist role models in the public eye. Hillary Rodham Clinton was cited across the data as an example of the type of role model that society needs more of in order to increase support for the movement:

She [Hillary Rodham Clinton] is a good role model today... she’s probably the most person that has done anything for women’s rights anytime soon... she was just supposed to be this Governor’s wife and now she’s has a seat in Congress (Susan).

Beyond public role models, students believed that positive personal role models of highly feminine female feminists and highly masculine male feminists would increase support: “Taking someone that conforms to their category of girly girl, manly man, and actually show that person actively involved in the feminist movement” (Joe); “People like feminists who are like me, who are very feminine, yet very feminist. It makes a big difference when a body builder with spiky hair says, ‘I’m a feminist’ than if I get up and say, ‘I’m a feminist.’” (Alicia); “Say, you know, ‘Men you don’t have to lose your masculinity... you don’t have to be called feminine to become a feminist,’ or ‘You don’t have to lose your masculine identity’” (Aaron). Others tempered this claim and simply called upon men to come forward and support feminism given a belief that male, rather than female, voices advocating feminism might be more persuasive: “A man getting up and saying, ‘I’m a feminist,’ just educating people more what it could mean, ‘It doesn’t necessarily have to be negative, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be radical.’” (Alicia):

If a group of men can look at another man who is not afraid to say, ‘I’m a feminist. This is what I believe. This is why I believe this,’ you know, and ‘This is such a great attitude to have.’ Then other men are going to be like, ‘Oh, well, I won’t be ridiculed if I think that way’ and ‘I’ve got to catch up on the times’ (Ginny).

### *Stop losing support*

In addition to providing suggestions for garnering support, students also chose to answer this question by advocating how feminists could stop losing support. It is interesting to note that the question was worded in the positive and it was the students who turned the question around and also answered in the negative.

The message was that, in order for the feminist movement to stop losing support, feminists need to tone their message down: “You don’t get a great deal accomplished with that big vinegar stick, they need to tone it down... There are ways to go about gaining support and it’s not through throwing a fit or

intimidation” (Daniel); “I think they should not be too extreme, don’t have a huge protest, don’t put out fliers that you know talk about how horrible their situation is” (Trent); “Any kind of radical movement kind of just turns my ears off and I’m not interested” (Luke); “More public friendly... because when you are trying to market something, you need to make sure it’s marketable to a variety of people and not just one specific group” (Jodi); “Don’t make it quite as scary... when I think of a protest it’s just crazy, like signs and people picketing and I mean that kinds of turns people away maybe from what they are trying to get their point across to everyone” (Amy); “Try to communicate to make it seem, ‘Hey it really isn’t this radical’” (Bobby).

Students expressed frustration by what they perceived to be alienating, extremist appearances by feminist figures: “People who are leading, you know, maybe have people that aren’t so extreme about it, that maybe that’s not their entire life, you know, that’s not all they are doing. Or, that are just intellectuals, always writing books” (Jake); “If they want people to be more receptive to their ideas and their opinions, then perhaps it would a better approach to take, especially when they are in the public eye to maybe not come on so strong” (Jodi). One participant said:

Read your audience and see what’s going to work there, because if you try something, even if it’s for the shock value and kind of open people’s eyes, that’s not exactly very easy. It may be a great tactic in New York, California other places like that. But that’s not going to work here (Crystal).

Finally, students called for female feminists to soften their image (i.e.,: to act/look less masculine): “Portray themselves as not being, ah, not being like masculine, but, but being determined” (Randy); “[Don’t] make their appearance so drastically different from feminine females” (Luke); “Portraying feminism as like, not as, ‘Why to become more macho,’ but as ‘Just look, I can do this too, but I’m still a girl’” (Tad).

## **Discussion**

Our first research question addressed how students characterized feminists. In terms of how feminists act, students characterized feminists as activist women, as independent, as extremists, and/or as simultaneously feminine and feminist. In terms of how feminists look, students characterized feminists as looking like regular women, as butch, and/or as having “no one look.” Our second research question addressed students’ self-identification as feminists. Slightly more than one-half did not take the label, citing either identity reasons (label contradicted or challenged their identity) or a resistance to labels in general. Our third research question asked participants to offer explanations as to why, in our initial study, highly masculine men and highly feminine women were neither likely to self-identify as feminists nor to support the feminist movement. Participants reasoned that both were resistant due to a belief in traditional gender roles. In addition, highly masculine men were seen as viewing feminism as a threat to their masculinity. Our fourth research question asked participants to offer explanations as to why, in our initial study, more feminine men and more masculine women were more willing to self-label as feminists and more likely to support the feminist movement. Participants speculated that more feminine men were open minded, more masculine women held non-traditional gender roles, and that the movement provided both feminine men and masculine women a “safe place” to perform unconventional gender roles. Our fifth research question asked participants what they thought feminists could do to garner support among college students for the feminist movement. To increase support, students suggested increased education and increased efforts to make the general public aware of the movement. Students also suggested that in order to stop losing support for the movement, feminists need to tone their message down.

Our finding that some students characterized feminists as simultaneously feminine and feminist may have been influenced by the self-labeling women's view of themselves as simultaneously feminine and feminist. Women who saw themselves as both feminine and feminist often remarked that they were counter to media portrayals of feminists (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Faludi, 1991; Twenge & Zucker, 1999; van Zoonen, 1994). Participants' characterizations of feminists were often first derived from media images, such as the masculine caricatures of feminists depicted in the satirical film *PCU* or in Rush Limbaugh's notion of the femi-nazi. Many spoke of how higher education had debunked their previously held stereotypes about feminists. It is interesting that although higher education had a corrective function for distorted media images, education often did not influence support for the movement nor self-identification as feminists, particularly for men.

Our findings also suggest tensions among religious ideologies, feminist ideologies, and appropriate enactments of gender roles. It seems that students' religious ideologies strongly influenced their views of proper performances of gender roles. Feminist ideological positions on gender roles often conflicted with students' religious ideologies' proscribed roles for wife, husband, mother, and father. For some participants, this conflict ignited intense internal struggles.

Our findings further suggest that highly masculine men's felt threat to their masculinity may be due to both relational and structural constraints on non-traditional gender role performances. In an attempt to understand why men are sanctioned more than women for transgressing socially prescribed gender roles, McCreary (1994) found that, unlike women who display masculine behaviors, men who display feminine behaviors are viewed as homosexual. Herek (1984) supported this implicit assumption that men's transgressions of gender roles are symptomatic of a homosexual orientation. Similarly, our finding that the feminist movement provides a "safe place" for more feminine men and more masculine women seems to reflect a heteronormative ideology (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2005; Yep, 2002). The sense that the feminist movement encourages unconventional gender role performances has a positive valence as it provides a depiction of the feminist movement as a safety net for square pegs trying to fit into round holes. At the same time, participants often assumed that more feminine men and more masculine women were gay or lesbian, respectively. Participants in the present study did not convey a sense that heterosexuals might perform unconventional gender roles, which, in effect, continues to marginalize non-traditional gender role orientations.

Our findings also contribute to discussions about choice for women (Faludi, 1991; Hochschild, 1989; Suter, 2004). As the US society changes in ways that seem to provide more choices for women, opposing forces simultaneously complicate women's ability to take advantage of those choices. This is reflected in female participants' comments about stay-at-home wives and/or mothers. Most women framed staying at home as an active choice, ignoring structural constraints, such as money and family livelihood. Most women also viewed work-family as an achievable balance, reflecting an idealistic optimism and a lack of understanding of the insidious and unrelenting nature of work-family tensions (Greenstein, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; Wood, 1994). Womens' idealistic view of the competing demands of work-family was often fueled by their mothers. Several stay-at-home mothers had engendered in their daughters a view that, given women's gains in the workplace, their daughters could literally have it all. Across women who did not label themselves as feminists, there was a strong sense that due to the achievements of second wave feminists, the feminist movement was no longer needed today. They could now achieve whatever they wanted in both work and family spheres. Thus, our findings lend support to Renzetti's (1987) conclusion that women may be unwilling to identify as feminists if they believe that they can succeed without the collective efforts of feminists or feminism.

Our findings speak to and extend the work of earlier researchers who reported a link between self-identification as a feminist and the degree to which individuals believe that the feminist movement affects them personally (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Aronson, 2003; Renzetti, 1987). Unlike Alexander and Ryan's (1997) participants, 24 of our 30 participants saw the feminist movement as affecting them in the past, present, and/or future. It is interesting that of the six who did not see the feminist movement as affecting them, two still labeled themselves as feminists. Both were male students, one of whom worked in a male-dominated field that requires hard physical labor, and the other is poised to enter a male-dominated area of the sports-information field. Both said that, although they self-labeled as feminists, given the nature of their jobs, the feminist movement would not affect them.

Our participants' comments speak to the findings of Arnold (2002) and Williams and Wittig (1997), who both found that a belief in the need for collective action influenced the willingness of college students to label as feminists. For instance, Arnold speculated that students may not identify as feminists because of a belief that feminism requires activism. Two of the participants in the present study specifically stated they did not think that they could call themselves feminists because they were not engaged in collective action.

Our findings also partially support those of Thomsen et al. (1995), Bargad and Hyde (1991), and Henderson-King and Stewart (1999) that female college students' enrollment in a women's studies course increased self-identification as feminist. Twenty of the 30 participants in our study had taken a college course that deals with issues of gender. After having taken the course, 11 were willing to self-identify as feminist. However, for nine participants, enrollment in the courses did not increase self-identification. Given that our study includes men, our results further complicate and extend the findings of Bargad and Hyde and Henderson-King and Stewart. Of the 11 participants who took a college gender course and self-identified as a feminist, all but one were female. In other words, with one exception, taking a college gender course did not influence the willingness of the men in our sample to identify as feminist.

## **Conclusion**

In the initial study (Toller et al., 2004), we were able to establish significant relationships among gender role, support for feminism, and willingness to self-label as feminist. One contribution of the current study is here we went beyond these relationships by giving a voice to some of the participants behind them. In essence, by interviewing 10% of the participants from the initial study, we were able to explore the reasons behind the statistical findings. Furthermore, at the conclusion of our previous study, we speculated on possible ways to garner support for the feminist movement. One contribution of the present study is that we asked participants directly how feminists might increase support for the movement.

One limitation of this study is that the sample included only college students. It remains possible that perceptions of feminists vary by generational cohorts. Future researchers need to move beyond the opinions of college students by asking similar questions to their parents and grandparents to see how perceptions may vary by generation. Given that the university at which this study was conducted has a predominantly White student body, the sample was 90% White. Application of these findings to students of color is thus limited. Future research ought to be conducted at universities with more racially diverse student bodies. Our study is also limited because it did not measure religiosity. Religious ideology surfaced as an important factor. Yet, our interpretations of the meaning of this finding were limited without results from a measure of religiosity. Given that feminist ideologies often conflict with or challenge religious and other traditional ideologies, future research on the interrelationships among

gender roles, support for feminism, and willingness to self-label as feminist ought to include measures of religiosity.

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