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## Exploring Collegiate Perceptions of Feminism Through Bem's Gender Schema Theory

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### Abstract

Utilizing framework analysis (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000) and Bem's (1981) gender schema theory, this study provides results from eight focus groups wherein an interdisciplinary team met with seven student organizations to discuss the interplay of feminism and interpersonal relationships. Findings suggest the more confident students feel in their conceptualization of feminism as promoting equality, the more likely they were to report comfort with friends and romantic relationships. Programming and policy implications for college campuses are explored.

*Keywords:* college students, relationships, feminism, gender schema theory



What is feminism? Who are feminists? Is feminism still relevant today? These are questions feminist scholars have been asking since the height of the second wave of feminism in the 1970's (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Houvouras & Carter, 2008; Jesser, 1974; Leaper & Arias, 2011; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Reid & Purcell, 2004; Rosell & Hartman, 2001; Toller, Suter, & Trautman, 2004; Williams & Wittig, 1997). These studies documented and explored how students' felt about feminism or how they perceived their own feminist identities, but only a few explored how feminist beliefs and the manifestations of those beliefs in action affected their relationships (Bettencourt, Vacha-Haase, & Bryne, 2011; Jackson, Fleury, & Lewandowski, 1996; Kelly, 2012; Suter & Toller, 2006). We sought to gain a deeper understanding of this interplay of feminism and interpersonal relationships through gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) for the purpose of creating programs and policies to increase gender equity on campus.

We sought to gauge perceptions of feminism, its effect on relationships (broadly defined), and identify areas of gender inequality in relationships as seen by students. This proved to be a timely study given the introduction of the Security and Financial Empowerment (SAFE) Act as well as the recently proposed Campus Accountability and Safety Act. Before behaviors and attitudes towards sexual assault and gender equity can be modified, it is necessary to first assess existing attitudes and perceptions and understand the cultural context in which they exist. By meeting students where they are, we can then begin to engage in meaningful dialogue, change campus culture, and design more effective university policies and programming for tangible and sustainable institutional changes towards gender equity.

### Literature Review

Definitions of feminism are varied. Taylor (1992) suggested that feminism has moved more towards a general viewpoint that women can either hold a traditional view or a more radical view, as long as they are making choices for themselves; they are considered feminists. Scholars searching for a consensus meaning have failed to find a single definition (Offen, 1988; Hogan, 1993; Jackson et al., 1996; Arnold, 2000; Houvouras & Carter, 2008). Hogan (1993) noted that "'feminism' and 'feminist' seem frequently to be used more as vague terms of praise or blame than as predicates with specific meaning" (p. 45). Feminist scholar, bell hooks (1984), has noted this lack of consensus to be a "central problem with feminist discourse" (p. 37). In *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks asserts that the basic definition of feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (2000, p. 1) and those working for that



movement as feminists. In this study we were not looking for a definition or an action of feminism per se, but rather at perceptions and beliefs of whether feminism plays a role in undergraduate students' relationships.

Contemporary media is full of examples of stereotypical portrayals of feminists as unattractive, sexually unappealing, butch woman (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). These perceptions of feminists embodying unfavorable gender roles are present in research with college students as well (Arnold, 2000; Jackson et al., 1996; Jenen, Winqvist, Arkkelin, & Schuster, 2009; Suter & Toller, 2006). Both men and women are more likely to judge an unattractive woman than an attractive woman as a feminist (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). A very common misconception is that men and women who identify themselves as feminists, and therefore support feminist causes, are perceived to be incompatible with heterosexual romantic relationships (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007).

Regardless of sexual orientation, many factors go into creating and maintaining a healthy relationship. Some of the individual traits that factor into romantic relationships can include socio-demographic characteristics, previous relationship experiences, and self-esteem (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). Values also play a role in commitment, investment, self-disclosure, and sexual attitudes (Hendrick, Hendrick & Adler, 1988). Rudman and Phelan (2007) found that in heterosexual relationships, feminism was positively related to sexual satisfaction for both genders. For instance, both feminist men and women reported greater relationship quality, equality, and stability (Rudman & Phelan, 2007).

Scholars have studied feminist attitudes through mixed gendered groups of students utilizing quantitative methodologies (Bettencourt et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 1996; Rosell & Hartman, 2001; Toller et al., 2004; Williams & Wittig, 1997). Only one study used mix methods (Houvouras & Carter, 2008) and another used qualitative methods to study college students' perceptions of feminism (Suter & Toller, 2006). Quantitative studies were unable to provide the detail of qualitative studies concerning both definitions of feminism and feminism in practice. Few studies looked at the intersections of feminism and relationships (Bettencourt et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 1996; Kelly, 2012; Suter & Toller, 2006) and those that did were quantitative and used attitudes scales (Bettencourt et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 1996; Suter & Toller, 2006). In a recent qualitative study, Kelly (2012) explored feminism and the hook-up culture as a way to avoid relationships as opposed to the dynamics of relationships. Even less is known about

students' perception of feminism based on their families of origin, and how they see their relationship to the world around them. To fill this gap in the literature, we chose to conduct a qualitative study utilizing Bem's (1981) gender schema theory to understand feminism as it relates to students of all genders relationships in the broadest sense.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Gender schema theory proposes that we organize our thoughts and experiences schematically, creating categories and groupings based on similarities or differences. Bem (1991) noted that gender-linked associations that create a gender schema are intrapersonal or begin with the self. We are socialized from a young age to associate certain traits with our own gender, and from that categorization of self, we construct the other. Rather than existing on a continuum, traits are placed in one gender schema or the other (Bem, 1981). Bem proposed that children self-select traits not from a wide variety of human characteristics, but from their own narrow gender schema, thus "cultural myths become self-fulfilling prophecies" (1981, p. 355-356). This schema is then reinforced by society through interpersonal relationships, communities, organizational structures, and the media (Ridgeway, 2009). We wanted to answer the specific question of how the students perceived feminism to inform their choices about their relationship to others, including familial, relational, and platonic.

### **Sample**

Between November 2012 and May 2014, the research team collected data at a midsized research-intensive university in the northeast. The team recruited undergraduate students through existing student organizations. Eight focus groups were conducted with seven different student organizations including two fraternities; a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) advocacy organization; a feminist group; a social justice activist network; a minority student leadership council; and the leadership of the Black student alliance. One focus group was held with each of the groups except for the LGBTQ advocacy organization, which was split into two groups because of size. Groups ranged from 3-22 participants per group, with 73 participants in total. Two participants were non-students, but belonged to one of the student organizations. Ages ranged from 17-37. The average participant age was 19 (s.d. 2.4). Table 1 shows self-identified participant demographics compared with demographics of the 2014-2015 university full-time undergraduate student population. Table 2 shows the focus group number and the student organization it corresponds to.



Table 1

*Self-identified Demographics of Study Participants (73) vs. University Full-time Undergraduates (5,942) in 2014-15*

<b>Demographic</b>		<b>Participants n/%</b>	<b>Undergraduates n/%</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Male	28 (37.8)	2976 (50.1)
	Female	45 (60.8)	2966 (49.9)
<b>Race</b>	White	47 (63.5)	2974 (54.2)
	Black	10 (13.5)	284 (4.8)
	Asian	7 (9.5)	641 (10.8)
	Hispanic/Latino	4 (5.4)	356 (6.0)
	Other	2 (2.7)	464 (7.8)
	Multiple selected	3 (4.1)	178 (3.0)
<b>Education Level</b>	GED/HS Diploma	4 (5.4)	
	Some college	67 (90.5)	
	College degree	2 (2.7)	

Table 2

*Focus Group Numbers and Student Organization Type*

<b>Group Number</b>	<b>Student Organization Type</b>
<b>G1</b>	Feminist organization
<b>G2</b>	Fraternity
<b>G3</b>	Fraternity
<b>G4</b>	Minority student leadership council
<b>G5</b>	Social justice activist network
<b>G6</b>	Black student alliance
<b>G7</b>	LGBTQ advocacy organization

### **Data Collection**

The team conducted focus groups at a time and location the student organizations chose, and compensation was provided in the form of a \$5 gift card per participant. Focus group participants



answered a series of open-ended questions on their perceptions of feminism. Prompts included, but were not limited to:

- What does the word feminism mean to you?
- Does feminism inform the decisions you make?
- Does feminism play a role in your relationships?

The definition of relationships was intentionally left open-ended to allow participants to self-define the term. As a result, a range of relationships came up in discussion, most notably: friendships, romantic relationships, familial relationships, and relationships in academic settings (i.e., professor-student). In addition, participants shared examples of how gender inequities still exist and whether they have witnessed or experienced these examples personally.

### **Data Analysis**

The focus groups were transcribed and then coded and analyzed utilizing a framework approach (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000) and Bem's (1981) gender schema theory. In qualitative research, data analysis is a continuous process, beginning during data collection (Pope et al., 2000). Focus groups transcripts were coded throughout the process. Bem's (1981) gender schema theory was ideal for this analysis; as part of the focus group protocol students were provided with new information or scenarios and were able to recalibrate their perspectives on feminism, gender, and relationships. For the purpose of coding, Bem's (1981) theory was reduced to a visual map shown in Figure 1.



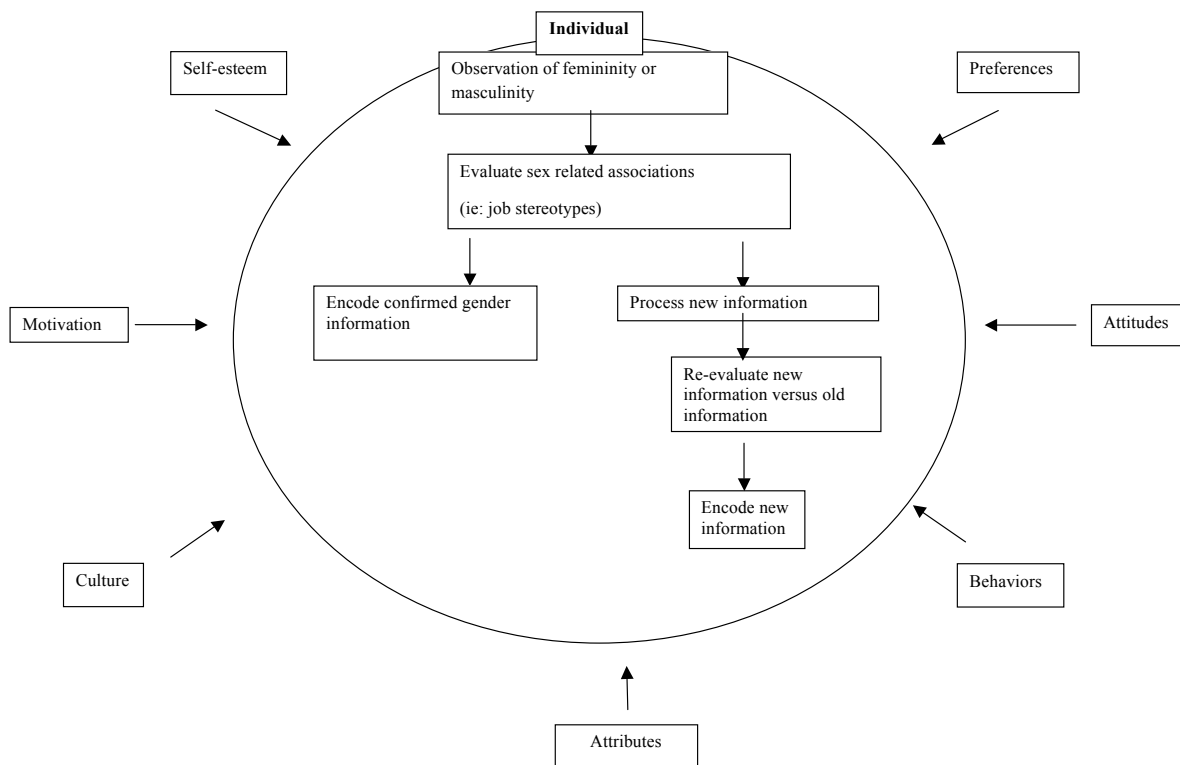


Figure 3. Virtual map of Ben's (1981) gender schema theory used for coding focus group data.

The framework approach to analysis was developed for the purpose of applied or policy relevant qualitative research (Pope et al., 2000). In the framework approach, analytical categories are created using both induction and deduction. The analysis starts deductively through consideration of the predetermined objectives for the study which influences the way data is approached throughout the study (Pope et al., 2000). The five stages of framework approach include: familiarization with the data, identifying a theoretical framework, creating a system of organizing the data, charting it on the framework map, and interpreting the findings (Pope et al., 2000). In this study, the initial objective was to assess students' perceptions of feminism among undergraduates (of all genders) affiliated with student organizations. While considering the a priori aims of the study, framework analysis allows for the raw data to influence the hypothesis and determine analytical categories (Pope et al., 2000). Categories are fluid; they can change as new data is considered, and they are inclusive. New categories are constantly created for data



that are not relevant to other categories. These categories form the thematic framework and highlight reoccurring or robust themes and key ideas (Pope et al., 2000).

Pope et al. (2000) noted that framework analysis requires immersion and careful contemplation of the data. In this study, that data encompassed observations and recordings from the focus groups and transcripts of the interviews. Multiple analysts increased the inter-rater reliability, or consistency in categorization of the data (Pope et al., 2000). Like the creation of analytical categories themselves, mapping is also a fluid process that is influenced by initial research objectives and the raw data (Pope et al., 2000). During analysis, the process of mapping the thematic categories was essential to find associations and interpret findings among the focus groups.

### **Findings**

Three major themes emerged from the data: (a) attitudes towards or beliefs about feminism; (b) identities or how students see feminism fitting into their own identity or those around them; and (c) culture or how feminism is perceived in the larger social context in which students operate including social norms and expectations. Intercoder reliability confirmed that these themes were consistent across all groups, though their interpretations varied. It was clear that student understandings of feminism and its impact on relationships could not be understood without examining these three themes. Attitudes, identities, and culture, as further defined below, are key to the context in which student relationships exist. These themes are consistent with Bem's (1981) gender schema theory. Participant's experiences created categories and groupings based on their own attitudes on the similarities and differences in gender roles. These gender-linked associations were intrapersonal and strongly linked to participant's own identities. Participants' attitudes and identities were then reinforced by society through interpersonal relationships, communities, organizational structures, and the media (Ridgeway, 2009). Given the nature of this project (to develop educational programming for a college campus) we sought to understand the interplay of participants' attitudes, identities, and cultures to move forward in promoting gender equity.

#### **Attitudes**

Most students defined feminism using the words equality, empowerment, and social justice. The majority of focus groups defined it with some degree of intersectionality and multiple dimensions of identity beyond gender such as race, sexual orientation, religion, and



class. This lens resulted in feminist participants defining feminism as of equality for all; “I don’t think of it as, like, female I just think of it as equality” (G4). Some related feminism to a lifestyle and movement, and others to an identity (i.e., “the feminist train” (G7)). In this sense feminism was active, whether it involves positive action or a more aggressive, negative connotation, “[feminists want to] take down things like men opening the door for women” (G3). Feminism was also reciprocal; feminists have responsibilities as much as they have rights (G1, G5, G6). It requires one to practice what they preach and shape individual behaviors. Behaviors in personal relationships, including showing respect, varied depending on the type of relation (i.e., platonic versus romantic, authority figure versus peer). For example, a man might escort a girlfriend home after a party whereas a female friend may not get the same treatment, though both women are equally vulnerable to external threats (G2, G3).

In particular, romantic relationships seemed to draw the most interest. Participants in male-only groups expressed a desire to hold on to traditional gender roles and stereotypes, such as not dating a woman taller than themselves (G3). Additional areas where traditional roles were discussed in reference to dating included taking the initiative to ask someone on a date and paying for a date. One male participant noted, “It’s our role . . . to be the man to walk up and introduce ourselves and, like, ask the women out” (G3). A participant in another focus group stated, “It feel like weird when I can’t pay for something for a girl like it’s, I just do it naturally” (G2). Overall participants in these groups felt this behavior by women was “emasculating” (G2).

These gender role stereotypes continued through ideas about marriage and family. A male participant stated, “it would be kind of weird socially if a girl walked up to a guy and proposed” (G3). Despite many of the participants in male-only groups being raised by mothers who worked outside the home that they described as “feminist mothers”, the men still held onto traditional gender roles. A male participant noted, “Yeah, I would [feel uncomfortable] of thinking my wife might earn more than me or might maintain the family while I stay at home” (G3).

At the same time, economic interests influenced these roles. When the men were provided with an alternative vision (i.e., what if the woman earned more money?), many reconsidered their stance. One participant stated, “I’m cool with being a stay-at-home dad. I just would prefer a parent home. If my wife is making double the salary, then by all means woman go

work” (G2). Another participant noted, “I want my wife to go be a doctor or a lawyer and I stay home and it’s awesome” (G2).

Behaviors also depended on the potential for reciprocity rather than the person’s gender (G2, G3, G5). A female participant stated, “So I think of it as I’ll cook for him because I know that he’ll cook for me” (G5), while a male participant in another focus group noted, “If I cook you wash dishes because I cooked, I shouldn’t wash dishes” (G5). Overall, domestic work was a divided issue. Some women expressed internal conflict because domestic labor is gendered and valued less in society and associated with those who perform it being typically seen as less valuable (G4). A participant in a male-only group seemed to equate feminism with working outside of the home, “my feminist side makes me push [my sister] and tell her to do something more demanding [than be a stay-at-home mother]. Do something else. Do something harder like try to get better things. I don’t know” (G3). This also indicated the perception of domestic labor as not as hard and not an ambitious pursuit. While domestic work is still a gendered form of labor, a male participant in a mixed gender group shared his conscious efforts to break down that stereotype:

I’ve started noticing at family parties in my family it’s always a bunch of women in the kitchen cooking and a bunch of men in the living room watching football and so I’ve had to make a conscious decision to go and help with the women in the family cook to try and break that down” (G5).

Participants noted that it was possible to subvert such gender roles if one belongs to a certain socioeconomic class where they can hire domestic assistance. One participant noted that “because with the affluence [of WASP families], there’s not as much [gender roles]” (G2).

The idea that attitudes around feminism are learned, particularly from family members, was consistent across all groups. When children are younger, one male student commented that it was easier when babysitting to treat the children more by their age than by their gender. Yet, when asked about women their own age or older, the context became more complicated and depended on if they were a superior, teacher, friend, or a potential partner. The space mattered as well, using as an example a tutoring or classroom interaction verses a party. In the classroom context male participants believed women were often treated with more sensitivity from faculty due to their gender. A male participant noted that “A lot of girls don’t like competitive learning, it’s like a male thing” (G2). Yet when women were seen as competitive academically it was



perceived as unattractive. “I sometimes feel uncomfortable with going out . . . with girls who are really smart who are a lot more smarter than me” (G3).

### **Identity**

Explanations of feminist identity encompassed rights as well as responsibilities (G1, G5, G6). There was discrepancy between groups when it came to defining those rights, though equality in a broad sense was a constant response. One responsibility was the requirement of constant vigilance to uphold the feminist identity and to speak up in all social circles and scenarios. One missed opportunity to stand up for social justice could lead to the label of “bad feminist” from others (G1). Speaking up included calling out stereotypes, and thinking twice about decisions and their impact on oneself and others, especially women (G6). Participants had consensus in believing that it is important to take multiple perspectives into account when making decisions.

The responsibility to speak out can cause tension for women as being outspoken, independent, and “headstrong,” can come off as a negative quality, “I don’t wanta be intimidating, I wanta be approachable” (G4). Female participants were aware that this perception of outspokenness has an effect on their relationships, particular romantic relationships. For example, one female participant noted, “I’m really outspoken and like things that some the guys consider is okay with other girls is not okay with me . . . and it’s something that kinda has them running away” (G4). Similarly, being an outspoken woman comes with a struggle for balance between a collective and individual identity. One participant stated, “when you speak as a feminist you don’t speak as an individual” (G1). A fellow participant added, “There is this collective voice that you’re, like, living the life of a feminist and its more than about you” (G1). There is a sense that identifying as a feminist means you are representing all women requiring you to be hyper conscious of your actions and decisions (G6).

On an individual level, many participants of color ranked their race above their gender in terms of their identity, “I think that people look at me first as Black then female” (G4). This tension was also environment-dependent. For example, one participant noted:

Whereas right now I feel like I’m kind of on this journey to figure out what is first, being a woman or being black for me. But I do feel in certain spaces I’m a woman first, and Black second, if that makes sense” (G5).



For some women feminism was a very personal identity. A participant shared that it gives her the freedom of expression to dress and act as she chooses, noting that

I think that feminism kind of just effects like how I see myself sometimes, and without feminism, without changes to what we think of how we think of people, I wouldn't be able to be myself I guess. And I understand that feminism has allowed me that ability to walk around and lead meetings and go to work and to speak in class. (G5)

### **Culture**

Cultural expectations were a key theme in the focus groups. Cultural expectations for women such as showing emotion, safety being an issue when living alone, and biology playing a bigger role in women's moods and decision making capabilities were mentioned as being unfair, as was society's over sexualization of women (G1). A double standard between men and women was mentioned directly by a participant in Group 7; "Well I think immediately if a woman is being assertive, it's aggressive, but if a man's being assertive it's assertive."

Within the LGBTQ community participants spoke about heteronormative culture barriers. For example, the ineffectiveness of placing heteronormative gender roles on non-heterosexual relationships was discussed at length. A participant noted that the heteronormative assumption about gender roles in LGBTQ relationship was a constant tension. Participants in particular noted the irrelevance of asking same-gender-loving couples about who plays the role of the man or the woman, "It's asking which chopstick is the fork" (G7).

Mixed gender groups acknowledged male camaraderie in the workplace and in school as a barrier to women's inclusion and achievement (G7). There was the perception that women are criticized much more harshly than men. One female participant used women in academia as an example; "[women] have to work harder and that if you're not at least equal to like what a male professor is that they're gonna criticize you 10 times the amount" (G4). Women, and minority groups in general, are held to higher standards because individuals are called on to be a representative of their larger social group (G4). One participant shared, "I feel like anytime we have a negative experience [with women and other marginalized groups], people generalize that" (G4). On the other end of the spectrum, participants in male-only groups generally believed the opposite, that women get preferential treatment with jobs, in school, and even healthcare (G3) noting, "professors are a little more gentler towards women" (G3) and "I don't think our tax dollars should pay for sex" (G3).



Participants saw gender roles as historic and generational (G5, G7) stating that “it’s implying that wearing the pants is being in control and being superior, and historically, I mean the implication is pretty clear” (G7). Men paying for dinner was still seen as a cultural norm to impress women. Despite the persistence of these stereotypes there still appeared to be the potential for change if a conscious effort was made. A participant stated that in “The organizations that I work with, we try to make sure women are in positions of leadership in an institutionalized way. And really, it should be a conscious part of everything we do” (G5). In another focus group one student noted that “equality would go into the decisions I make. Like am I being fair to everyone around me? And I giving everyone an equal chance, but I don’t think like is this a decision that a feminist would also make?” (G2).

### Discussion

The findings suggested that attitudes, culture, and identity were fluid and related concepts influenced each other. All groups discussed the complexity around the word feminism as used to describe both a political movement as well as a type of person. Participants reflected on how their family of origin either influenced them towards feminism through positive modeling or polarized them against stereotypical male-dominated households and prompting them to seek more gender-parity in their familial, platonic, and romantic relationships. This fluidity between their own identity and attitudes influenced by their families and communities was consistent with Bem’s (1981) gender schema theory.

In the male-only groups, the answers tended to trend towards describing a person rather than a movement, with a few of the male participants describing themselves as being a feminist. Similar to the work of Rudman and Fairchild (2007), the general consensus of the male-only groups was that although they believed feminism to be about women gaining equality, independence, and equal rights with men, they believed that women often achieve this by being “crazy” and “radical” and “pushing their beliefs on others.” Women were in one category and feminists were in another (Arnold, 2000; Dion et al., 1972; Jackson et al., 1996; Jenen et al., 2009; Suter & Toller, 2006). Many of the men said they did not know any feminists and one commented that they wouldn't know “the top five feminist issues.” The feminist movement today was equated to the Black power movement of the 1960's and 1970's. The men equated their attitudes on and information about feminism to depictions in the media and on social media. This

suggested that the way we view cultural influences within gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) must expand to a more modern conception on culture.

When it came to their own relationships, the male-only groups believed that they were “fair” and believed in “equality,” yet they did not believe they treated men and women equally in all contexts. They stated men and women are “different species.” Their preference was to be in all male groups, as they believed it was easier to communicate with men. The male-only groups conveyed that context was important to how they interacted with women. While they believed in fairness and equality, many had already placed women and men in separate schemas. With this construction of gender come attitudes on how these men prefer women to behave (Bem, 1981).

The men in male-only groups described some of these beliefs as coming from their family of origin. The impact of family on individual’s gender schema was consistent with Bem’s (1981) theory. Perceptions of their families greatly influenced participants’ attitudes toward gender, which all of the participants acknowledged in the focus groups. From familial experiences they noted the belief that women could be more emotional than men and that it is more acceptable for them to go to the aid of women over men. The men’s preferences and attitudes around dating were attached to this perception of emotional weakness, exemplified where the men in male-only groups felt like it was emasculating for a woman to pay for a date. They wanted to pay for the date to impress women. They also discussed the power of success and control that came with paying for a date. This line of conversation began to reveal that men also treat women differently if they have more power. A woman that is more educated or professional women in a powerful role immediately are granted respect as opposed to a female peer; power trumped gender. The role of power in feminist theory (hooks, 2000) and gender equity on campus is well documented (Arnold, 2000; Jackson et al., 1996; Jenen et al., 2009; Suter & Toller, 2006). Findings from this study can expand on this area of gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) that does not take into account the role of power in the process of gender-linked associations.

It is important to note mixed gender groups tended to discuss issues in a different manner, pointing out that the complex issues facing undergraduate students today as relevant to their perceptions of feminism. For instance, race being more relevant in Black students’ lives than their gender based upon the context they were in at the moment. This finding places feminism into a different place in the lives of students of color, suggesting that initiatives to drive gender





parity must be intersectional, addressing race and gender in partnership with multiple aspects of each student's identity (hooks, 2000). The bifurcation of the racial equality and the feminist movement throughout history plays out here. Feminist activities and organizations on a college campus have a responsibility to change course here and become more inclusive, focusing on aspects of identity beyond gender if they truly believe in ending oppression (Linder, 2011). It is important as universities move forward in addressing gender-based violence and other forms of oppression on campus that leadership be sensitive to the different experiences of students of color with institutional racism on campus and within feminist movements.

### **Limitations**

To increase the likelihood of participation and maximize student voices, we hosted focus groups during the organization's normal meeting time, often on weekday evenings, and offered gift card incentives. Voluntary participation resulted in uneven focus group sizes, as small as three students and as large as 22. While a range of student organizations were invited to participate, this was not representative of the campus population nor do we make conclusive claims about the entire student body.

Because this project was initiated by faculty and staff to direct campus programming and policy it is possible that students' responses were influenced by their authority. To counter this, we tried to make prompts as open-ended as possible to avoid guiding responses in specific directions. We conducted some of the later focus groups with a student facilitator or student co-facilitator to lessen the influence of staff-student hierarchy.

Finally, by allowing participants to interpret the meaning of feminism and self-describe the type of relationships within the focus groups we were unable to create a consensus definition for either. Though we were not seeking a consensus definition this was a limitation in discussing the complexity of student experiences within this study. In the end, we agree that by allowing students to create their own definitions we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay of feminism and interpersonal relationships in students' lives.

### **Implications**

Universities play a unique role in being able to inform and change collegiate perceptions for the better. The findings suggested that it is possible to increase gender equity on college campuses through student-centered events that promote dialogue with diverse student voices on gender stereotypes and injustices. Change will only happen if we provide students with new and





alternative ways of thinking about gender and gender roles. Exploring personal identity and culture can change individual's attitudes. Critically examining these issues can have a transformative impact on student relationships and could lead to change on a larger scale. It is imperative that our students go beyond the labeling exercise of feminist or not to understanding discrimination and gender-role stereotyping.

An example of such programming took place following the study. A forum hosted by a campus sorority and co-sponsored by a fraternity was held with approximately 80 students in attendance. A facilitator presented the students with the Bem's (1981) model and walked the students through three scenarios gleaned from the focus groups in this study. The three scenarios included: (a) Who pays for dinner when a heterosexual couple goes on a date? (b) Would you provide assistance to one of the following two drunk party guests when they leave the party? A petite woman and/or a male wrestler; and (c) Upon marriage and children, who stays home if the father makes \$40,000 and the mother is a surgeon? The students were able to walk through visual map of Bem's (1981) gender schema theory (see Figure 1) and have an important dialogue that led to increased understanding between the men and women. Following the event, male students reached out asking to become more involved with similar activities on campus and invited the facilitator to organize an additional event with their fraternity.

This is an example of programming based on working with college students to better understand the topics important to them around important issues. Based on the findings of this study on feminism and student relationships, additional dialogues could focus on heteronormativity in LGBTQ student relationships, navigating multiple identities, and gender in the classroom. Additional findings of this study and similar internal investigation can and should be shared with relevant campus partners. In this study those partners include Greek life, student activities, career services, minority student services, and STEM departments and faculty.



### **Conclusion**

This study contributes toward filling a gap in the literature exploring both undergraduate men and women's perceptions of feminism in the context of how they see themselves (identity) in their social environment (culture) and how their attitudes impact their relationships. Findings suggest students are open to dialoguing about gender equity and recognize the need to explore their own biases and how their perceptions can impact their relationships. As these dialogues continue on college campuses, we may be able to move the field forward on gender equity issues that disproportionately affect college age women through an intersectional lens that includes race, class, sexual orientation, and other intersecting aspects of student multiple identities.



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