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Black and White Women's Perceptions/Attitudes Towards The Feminist Movement



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Abstract

It has been nearly two decades since Bell Hooks argued that "Feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually- women who are powerless to change their condition in life" (Hooks, 2000). Her critique of the feminist movement which had been almost entirely lead by White women in it's first and second waves helped inspire the intersectional emphasis of the feminist movement of today. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five White and five Black women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, this study explores White and Black women's perceptions of the most recent third wave of the feminist movement. While the initial hypothesis of the study was that Black women would have a more negative outlook on the feminist movement, findings indicate that young White and Black women in this study both have equally negative attitudes towards the feminist movement, but for different reasons. Black respondents were more likely to cite the oppression, denial and segregation that Black women have historically faced within feminism, reflecting an intersectional critique of the movement. White women, on the other hand, appeared to engage in dimensions of the patriarchal bargain where they were more likely to be critical of feminism in an effort to gain leverage with the men in their lives.

Background

The presumed inferiority of women is built into the fabric of our society, physically, institutionally, and morally. These different ranges of ways that women are viewed as inferior to men in the home, workforce, or any other public setting has only led to this widespread notion that women are subordinate beings. The feminist movement was organized to address sexism and inequalities that shaped the experience of women in America. However, Black women experience multiple sources of oppression through racism and sexism, where their assumed ally is also their oppressor. While both Black and White women share the fact that they navigate the world as inferior individuals in comparison to men, the feminist movement ignored the existence and very needs of Black women.

The first wave of the U.S Feminist movement began in 1848 with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Seneca Falls Convention address, which promoted voting rights for women (Lee, 2016) and Millicent Fawcett founding the National Union of Women's Suffrage. The Suffragettes, having been led by White women asked that women of color walk separately in the back of their marches. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s where sexuality and reproductive rights were addressed in ways that primarily benefitted white women. The majority of the second wave's energy was fixated on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed social equality regardless of sex (Rampton, 2015). The third wave of the feminist movement started in the mid 90s and is still ongoing today. Norms, values, and social constructs are being challenged in this third wave of the feminist movement (intersectionality).

Theory

Conflict theorists suggest that these deep divisions in society are intricately related to class oppression. Conflict theory is able to explain why movements like feminism have occurred, along with its widespread influence that has lasted decades. The answer lies within the fact that society is being held together by a group in with access to wealth, power and prestige that uses their power to coerce and force the subordination of less powerful groups. However, after some time those that are suppressed will eventually fight back and create conflict against their oppressor, Feminist theory is an offshoot of conflict theory where men are the dominant group and women are the subordinates. It recognizes the oppression that women face as they are submerged by the domination of men in society. Intersectional feminism is the overlapping or intersecting of social identities and their relation to systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Kimberle Crenshaw, 1989). It is the recognition that the voices of all oppressed women need to be heard in order to have a true and successful fight for women's equality. Throughout the history of the United States, the intersection of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle- a struggle to survive in two paradoxical worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed (Collins, 1991). Without intersectionality, there would be a serious failure to address and combat the other pieces of a woman's identity that contribute to her subjugation

Methods

My hypothesis is that Black women will have a more negative outlook on the feminist movement in comparison to White women. This is due to the oppression, denial and segregation that Black women faced within the feminist movement.

The independent variable:

Race- Whether the women interviewed are Black or White

The dependent variable:

Attitudes and Perceptions towards the feminist movement- which was measured as positive or negative

Control variable:

Education Level- Each participant had some form of higher education

Research Methodology

Ten interviews were conducted and Grounded Theory was used in the analysis of my findings by creating codes to interpret the data. These codes were generated based off repeated ideas, concepts and elements that have become ostensible throughout the interviews. The data was collected beginning on September 2017 and lasted through April 2018.

Sample

5 Black and 5 White women with some form of higher education.

Results

Mistreatment/oppression

When asked whether the participant felt oppressed or unfairly treated as a women all of expressed mistreatment in the form of another male making sneer comments, or treating them differently because they were women. Mistreatment didn't occur based on race, it was a phenomenon that occurred across all my interviews.

Oppression because of race

When asked whether or not the Black respondents felt this oppression/mistreatment because they are Black or because they are women only 2 respondents stated some form of oppression or mistreatment that was experienced and equated it with their race (Black women only).

Knowledge of Feminist movement

As I asked the respondents about their knowledge of the feminist movement they associated it with being a movement that is centered on "equal rights," "free the nipple," "too body liberating," or "the wage gap. These are all ideas the feminism seeks to fight, however they are not the central Idea of feminism according to the definition Bell Hooks provided. It is the fight to end sexism, which the presumed inferiority of women. Only one of the participants out of 10, a Black woman, captured a central idea of feminism, in which she stated, "Feminism is also breaking down constructs that are built to oppress it." This finding implies that the participants in my study had little knowledge of the feminist movement or even so, knowledge that was off the basis of their social media networks. There was a common thread of women stating that what they see on social media are White women broadcasting these notions of overly sexualizing their bodies taking away from other issues within womanhood.

Negative/Positive perceptions/attitudes towards the feminist movement

The Black women that I interviewed had a hard time connecting with feminism. They either saw the movement as not necessarily including their needs and interests or saw White women dominating this movement. "I think the feminist movement that has the most power to incite change is the White feminist movement, and as such it does not account for any aspect of my identity. Where the post-gender, intersectional, sex-positive feminist pockets exist, are where I feel I am truly fought for," stated Marcie, a Black respondent. Victoria, another Black participant stated, "I would make it more inclusive, if were going to keep fighting things with this whole movement lets fight things for other cultures as well. You don't see so much of that on the news, no ones ever highlighting that? It definitely doesn't fight for the needs of black women." However, there were still some Black women that did not critique feminism because of feelings of exclusion and if they did it took them awhile to draw that conclusion because of their limited knowledge of feminism in the past and today.

Conclusions

Bell hooks closely examined this phenomenon that I saw in my findings of women having issues with defining feminism or having knowledge of the movement. She states that it indicates, "a growing lack of interest in feminism as a radical political movement. It is a despairing gesture expressive of the belief that solidarity among women is not possible. It is a sign that the political naiveté which has traditionally characterized woman's lot in male-dominated culture abounds" (Hooks,2000).

The negative attitudes from Black women were expected as my theoretical framework had suggested. However, the White women in my study also had negative attitudes and perspectives of the feminist movement, which I did not expect. In fact, both of my white respondents claimed that they do not consider themselves feminists. They agreed that some aspects of the feminist movement included their needs, however they did not necessarily agree with feminism as a whole. This is partially due to the minimal amount of knowledge most respondents had of feminism as well as the role that social media played. Although, both women shared that have experienced oppression or mistreat as a women they still were not completely in favor of the feminist movement.

These negative scripts that are attached to feminism are floating around social media and more so, the fact that there are so many definitions of feminism leaves women unclear of exactly what it is they are fighting for. On the other hand, it is hard to connect and identify with a movement that you have little to no knowledge of. Many women are reluctant to advocate feminism because they are uncertain about the meaning of the term

Further Studies

My research design is limited in proving cause and effect due to extraneous variables. Qualitative interviews are exploratory and are not designed to proved cause and effect relationships. The measures in my study are also limited to the demographics of the women. My sample size is small and was not drawn randomly; consequently, I cannot generalize my findings. I also encountered problems with reactivity of respondents because some of my questions were personal during the face- to- face interviews, which could have hindered the respondents from feeling comfortable enough to answer. Therefore, I had to repeatedly provide assurance that the study was anonymous, and that the setting was safe and comfortable.

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