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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 is in the hands of women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually, are the women who are powerless to change their condition in life” (Hooks, 2000). Her critique of the feminist movement which had been almost entirely led by White women in its 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 discussions of the patriarchal bargain where they were more likely to be critical of feminism in an effort to leverage 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 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 intersectionality of race and class 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, oppressed, 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.

Theory
Conflict theorists suggest that where 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 for 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 submission 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 subjugated 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 whole of White and Black woman’s power and self-identity is interconnected, and has manipulated Black women in the United States. It is a struggle for Black women’s liberation and self-determination.

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 the basis of my research.

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 woman all the ideas the feminism seeks to fight, however 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 indicates that the participants in the study had little knowledge of the feminist movement or even so, knowledge that was off the basis of their social media networks. That is not to say that all of the 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 in the study did not feel that feminism had a hard time connecting with feminism. They either saw the movement as not necessarily including their needs and interests or saw White and Black feminism as different. 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, intersexual, 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 we 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 is an aspect of my identity. There were 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 interviews were confidential.

Conclusions
Bell hooks clearly 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 naïveté 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 some 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 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. Of course, 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 prove causal and effect relationships. The measures in my study are also limited to the demographics of the women are small and was not drawn randomly; consequently, I cannot generalize my findings. I also encountered problems with Reactivity of respondents because some respondents felt 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 interviews were confidential.

References