Feminist Consciousness: Perspectives on Women's Experience

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Research on feminist consciousness has often relied on feminist self-identification as an indicator of women's group consciousness. In this study, several measures of group consciousness including group evaluations, political beliefs about gender relations, and sensitivity to sexism were used to predict women's self-identification as feminist. This set of variables was also used to predict four stages of feminist identity: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness/emanation, and synthesis. Findings emphasize the importance of not relying simply on self-identification in research on feminist consciousness. A view of feminist consciousness that goes beyond a dichotomous approach is recommended, as is further work on assessments of the phenomenology of consciousness.

Research on group consciousness, including feminist consciousness, has taken a relatively narrow and often dichotomous approach. Gender, race, and class consciousness are often viewed as simply present or absent. For example, a common assumption in early research was that most women were prefeminist and that through consciousness-raising they acquire a static and unitary feminist consciousness (Stanley & Wise, 1983). This study attempts to go beyond a narrow approach to feminist consciousness by addressing the question of what it means, psychologically, to be feminist.

Conceptualizations of group consciousness as a process have produced models of consciousness associated with race (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Cross, 1971; Helms, 1984; Thomas, 1970, 1971), gender and sex roles (Moreland, 1976; O'Neil, Egan, Owen, & McBride Murry, 1993), and sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). The present study draws on several perspectives to consider the utility of a similarly complex model of feminist consciousness.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

Social Identity and Political Beliefs

Tajfel (1978a, 1982) specified the adoption of an evaluative stance toward one's group membership as a component of group consciousness. In addition to recognizing one's group membership, Tajfel argued, group consciousness necessarily involves group evaluations. In the case of feminist consciousness, this could include feelings toward and perceptions of feminists, women, and men.

Gurin, Miller, and Gurin (1980) advanced the notion that group consciousness encompasses a set of political beliefs regarding the status of one's own social group and the relationships among groups. For example, referring specifically to groups low on the status hierarchy, they identified two particular components of consciousness: power discontent, which refers to the degree to which individuals experience a sense of discontent or grievance about the relative position of their group within the status hierarchy; and rejection of legitimacy, which refers to the belief that this relative position is illegitimate because it is the result of structural forces rather than individual failings or deficiencies. The social identity per-

spective, then, emphasizes group identity, evaluations, and political beliefs related to the group as key elements of group consciousness.

A Phenomenological Perspective

Bartky (1975) offered a different perspective by asserting that to have a feminist consciousness is to apprehend the world in a radically different way. A central theme in Bartky's work is the idea that feminist consciousness is founded on a recognition that social reality is deceptive. Because expressions of sexism are often ambiguous and subtle, feminists face the constant task of interpreting social reality from a perspective that is not commonly shared. Bartky calls this recognition of deception and social construction "double ontological shock" because it involves "first, the realization that what is really happening is quite different from what appears to be happening; and second, the frequent inability to tell what is really happening at all" (p. 29).

As women recognize the pervasiveness of sexism, they find themselves frequently in a state of wariness. Bartky (1975) characterizes this state as one in which emotions such as anger are close to the surface. Although anger might be experienced as positive and powerful, Bartky suggests that feminists may be concerned "lest their own anger be transformed explosively into behavior too hostile to be prudently or safely displayed" (p. 30). Furthermore, feminists' experiences of everyday events may be transformed into occasions for resistance. What was once a relatively mundane activity or simple decision becomes a political act and a test of one's commitment to change. Constantly being faced with the chance to resist may create a state of confusion, because a woman must repeatedly decide whether to act and how to respond to any given event. At least early in the development of feminist consciousness, a woman must continually question who she is and how she should act.

This phenomenological perspective is not inconsistent with a social identity approach but, rather, adds to our understanding of the experience of feminist consciousness; we would expect all of these aspects of consciousness to be interrelated. The group evaluations and political beliefs described above should be reflected in the phenomenological experience of feminism. However, we have yet to consider questions about whether feminist consciousness can best be described as the presence or absence of these aspects of consciousness, or might these aspects of consciousness vary among feminists? Downing and Roush's (1985) model of feminist consciousness would suggest the latter.

A Developmental Perspective

Using Cross's (1971) five-stage model of the development of Black identity as a template, Downing and Roush (1985) formulated a similar model of positive feminist identity. The first stage in their developmental model of feminist identity is *passive acceptance*. In this stage a woman "is either unaware of or denies the individual, institutional, and cultural prejudice and discrimination against her" (p. 698). She does not question the perspective of the dominant ideology; rather, she embraces traditional sex roles and sex role stereotypes and the notion of male supremacy.

With the shift to *revelation*, the first stage of positive feminist identity, women come to see the world in quite a different way. Dualistic thinking remains characteristic; however, in revelation women are seen as positive or superior, whereas men generally are viewed as negative. Women in this stage may feel they have been betrayed into accepting what they now perceive as a sexist view of the world. Feelings of anger, and guilt over their previous participation in the perpetuation of sexism, predominate.

The following stage, *embeddedness/emanation*, involves two phases. During the first phase, embeddedness, a woman withdraws from the larger society and embeds herself in a female subculture. During the second phase, emanation, she experiences "the beginnings of an openness to alternate viewpoints and to a more relativistic versus dualistic perspective" (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 701). In this phase, men are no longer seen in strictly negative terms.

In the next stage, *synthesis*, women are able to transcend stereotypes and take an individualistic perspective, both in their views of themselves and in their evaluations of other women and men. They have formed a flexible truce with the world, which "allows them to channel their energies productively but also to respond appropriately to experiences of oppression and discrimination" (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 702). The final stage of the model, *active commitment*, is characterized by a realistic and active commitment to social change.

The Downing and Roush (1985) model takes us beyond a dichotomous approach to consciousness by clearly distinguishing among several stages of positive feminist identity. It is, of course, possible that the different experiences of feminist identity delineated in the Downing and Roush model are just that: qualitatively different experiences or states of feminist consciousness, rather than sequentially related stages of development. Although Rickard (1989) reports a pattern of ascending positive correlations between successive stages of feminist identity, this is the only empirical evidence that supports a truly developmental model. However, whether or not group consciousness is most accurately viewed as a developmental process, we contend that the Downing and Roush model, at the very least, takes us beyond the conception of feminist consciousness as a

singular experience by offering a model of qualitatively different experiences of feminism.

Overview of the Current Study

The current study addresses the question of what it means, from a psychological standpoint, when a woman says she is feminist. It examines the degree to which particular group evaluations, political beliefs, and phenomenological descriptions of group consciousness can be said to characterize feminist experience.

This study goes beyond a dichotomous approach to feminist consciousness, first, by viewing feminist self-identification as a continuous variable. Further, it incorporates Downing and Roush's (1985) model of feminist identity development into a broader, more heterogeneous view of feminist consciousness. Women's self-identification as feminist is clearly an important consideration in the assessment of feminist consciousness (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994); however, the use of self-identification as the only measure of feminist consciousness fails to take into account different experiences of feminism. Moreover, the tendency for women, particularly young women, to reject the label *feminist* despite their agreement with feminist values and beliefs (Griffin, 1989; Kamen, 1991) makes the use of feminist self-identification as the only indicator of feminist consciousness problematic. These problems are exacerbated when self-identification is limited to an either/or proposition.

Thus, in part, this study considers the question of whether feminist consciousness is adequately assessed by measuring feminist self-identification. If feminist self-identification and Downing and Roush's (1985) stages of feminist identity can all be characterized by the same aspects of feminist consciousness, then measuring self-identification may be an adequate approach to studying feminist experience. However, if different configurations of various aspects of consciousness characterize the stages of feminist identity, it may be worthwhile to use measures of consciousness that reflect different psychological profiles or experiences.

Hypotheses

We expected to find different patterns of relationships among each of the stages of feminist identity and the political beliefs, evaluative, and phenomenological aspects of feminist consciousness. Although social identity theory does not distinguish among different stages or experiences of group consciousness, Downing and Roush's (1985) model of feminist identity suggests that stages of feminist identity may be characterized by differing relationships with various aspects of feminist consciousness. This model leads to several specific predictions.

First, in terms of the evaluative aspect of feminist consciousness, Downing and Roush's (1985) charac-

terization of the stages of feminist identity suggests that whereas passive acceptance should be related to positive feelings about men, we should then find a pattern of diminishing negative relationships between women's positive feelings about men and the stages of revelation, embeddedness/emanation, and synthesis. The revelation experience, because it is characterized by a reversed (though still dualistic) view of the world, should be negatively related to evaluations of men. Furthermore, more negative evaluations of men as a group should result from the anger about men and sexism that is supposed to infuse this stage. As women move toward a more complex view, however, the negative relationship with evaluations of men should diminish.

Furthermore, because embeddedness is characterized by a withdrawal into a feminist/female subculture, we expected that women's feelings about feminists would be most strongly associated with this particular stage of feminist identity.

In addition, the phenomenological experience of questioning oneself and one's reality should be particularly germane to the early development of feminist consciousness. According to the feminist identity model, we would expect to find a particularly strong relationship between the phenomenological aspect of consciousness and the feminist identity stage of revelation.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 234 female undergraduate students at the University of Michigan who had registered for either a history course (29%), an English course (13%), or one of two introductory women's studies courses (58%). Participants spanned all four years of undergraduate education, with a mean of 2.4 years. Their mean age was 19.7. Approximately 75% of the participants indicated that they were White; 7% were Asian American; 5% were African American; 3% were Hispanic; 7% were of another or mixed racial heritage; and just fewer than 4% did not indicate their race or ethnicity. Although approximately 20% of the respondents were women of color, there were too few women in any given racial or ethnic group (other than White) to run separate analyses, and all groups were combined for all analyses. Hence, although women of color were included in these analyses, we are unable to say whether the results from this study would hold across homogenous samples within various racial or ethnic groups.

Materials and Procedure

Prior to the beginning of a semester, questionnaires were mailed to the homes of 506 undergraduate women who had registered for one of four courses. To maximize

response rate, return postage-paid envelopes were provided, a $1 bill was attached to the first questionnaire (Biner, 1988), and students were told that if they completed this and a later questionnaire (which was subsequently mailed at the end of the semester), they would receive feedback about the study.

Dependent Variables

Feminist identification. A measure similar to that used in National Election Study (NES) surveys was used to measure feminist self-identification. Respondents were asked to consider a number of social groups (including students, workers, gays/lesbians, consumers, women, feminists, people of color, men, sororities/fraternities, and conservatives) and to write down the names of the groups to which they felt they belonged. They were then asked to indicate how much they identified with each of the groups they had mentioned on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). For this study we were interested in group identification with feminists rather than with women, because feminist identification more adequately taps women's group consciousness (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994). The possible range for each group was from 0 (the group was not specified as one to which they felt they belonged) to 5 (the group was specified and they identified very much with that group). Test-retest reliability for feminist identification across two administrations of the questionnaire at a 4-month interval was .75.

Stages of feminist identity. Rickard (1987) developed a 99-item Feminist Identity Scale (FIS) to assess women's levels of the first four of Downing and Roush's (1985) stages of feminist identity: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness/emanation, and synthesis. The last stage, active commitment, was assumed to be a behavioral manifestation of synthesis rather than a further stage of identity. The current study used a version of the FIS that was shortened to 37 items following cluster analysis (K. M. Rickard, personal communication, May 1990). FIS items can be found in Appendix A.[1] Responses to each item are based on a 5-point scale (*disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*). For each of the subscales, higher scores indicate higher levels of passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness/emanation, or synthesis. Test-retest reliabilities over 4 months were .72 for passive acceptance, .68 for revelation, .74 for embeddedness/emanation, and .65 for synthesis. Cronbach alpha coefficients derived from first-wave data for each identity stage were .55, .80, .72, and .59, respectively. The Cronbach alpha coefficients indicate that internal reliability for passive acceptance and synthesis is relatively weak and could be problematic in making predictions for individuals or small groups. However, Thorndike, Cunningham, Thorndike, and Hagen (1991) demonstrated that reli-

abilities greater than .50 allow for dependable conclusions about groups of substantial size (e.g., larger than 100). Thus, although the results for passive acceptance and synthesis should be interpreted with some caution, with an N of 234 we can be relatively confident of the accuracy of the present results.

Predictor Variables

Evaluative measures. A feelings thermometer (Miller & Miller, 1977) was used to measure group evaluations. Using a scale of 0 (cool) to 100 (warm), respondents were asked to indicate how they felt about several social groups, including men and feminists.[2] Feelings about these two groups were uncorrelated ($r = .01$). Test-retest reliabilities were .46 for feelings about men and .65 for feelings about feminists.

Political beliefs. Two variables designed to assess political beliefs were created from a number of different attitudinal measures of consciousness. The first, power discontent, was based on a measure that has been used in NES surveys (Gurin et al., 1980). Respondents were asked to indicate how much influence they think is held by a number of social groups. Each group was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from –2 (*far too little influence*) to 2 (*far too much influence*), with a score of zero indicating that the group had just about the right amount of influence. Groups of particular relevance for this study were women, men, and feminists. Data were recoded so that a high positive score meant high power discontent for the groups women and feminists, but low power discontent for men. In order that each of these components was equally weighted, each of the individual power discontent scores was then transformed into a z score, and an overall score for power discontent was calculated by adding together the three z scores. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for power discontent was .71, and test-retest reliability was .58.

A second political beliefs variable, feminist analysis, was a compilation of measures used to measure several attitudinal dimensions of feminist consciousness. All items can be found in Appendix B. Two items used to measure rejection of the legitimacy of traditional gender roles were borrowed from NES surveys (Gurin & Townsend, 1986). Participants were asked to respond to each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly;* 7 = *agree strongly*), and an average score across the two items was obtained.

Three additional NES (Gurin & Townsend, 1986) items were used to measure rejection of the legitimacy of reasons for disparities (see Appendix B). An average score for these items, which were scored on the same 7-point scale, was obtained. In both cases, variables were recoded so that high scores indicated a stronger

rejection of traditional roles or the reasons used to support them.

To assess the perception of social instability (Tajfel, 1978b) with regard to gender relations, we constructed two items (see Appendix B). Using a 7-point scale, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements about their belief that change in gender relations is possible. Thus, the feminist position is taken to be one in which social change can be imagined. The scale for one item was reversed, and an average was taken for the two items so that a high final score reflected high levels of perceived instability.

Finally, we also included Gurin and Townsend's (1986) measure of a sense of common fate with other women. Participants were asked to respond either positively or negatively to two statements about the relationship between what happens to other women, the women's movement, and what happens to them personally. Scores of 1 for no and 2 for yes were averaged across the two items, so that higher scores reflected a heightened sense of common fate with other women.

Because these dimensions of consciousness were measured on different scales, and because we wanted each dimension to be weighted equally, z scores for each of these four attitudinal measures were added together so that an overall score for feminist analysis was obtained. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for feminist analysis was .65, and test-retest reliability was .59.

Phenomenological measure. To assess the more phenomenological aspect of feminist consciousness (Bartky, 1975), we developed a 10-item index. Items designed to tap the particular phenomenological experiences described by Bartky (1975; double ontological shock, wariness, experiencing everyday events as an occasion for resistance, and confusion about one's response to sexism) were used to measure the general concept of sensitivity to sexism (see Appendix C). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly;* 7 = *agree strongly*). An average score across this set of items was used as an overall score for sensitivity to sexism, with higher scores indicating higher levels of sensitivity. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was .84. Test-retest reliability was .68.

Factor Analysis

All of the measures that were to be used as predictor variables were entered into a principal components factor analysis, with a varimax rotation. For the most part, these measures loaded on factors that were conceptually separate. All of the phenomenological variables loaded on one factor; these were combined to create a single measure of sensitivity to sexism for subsequent analyses. The political beliefs measures loaded on two separate

factors reflecting power discontent across several different social groups (women, men, and feminists) and another reflecting a feminist analysis of gender roles and relations; thus, we created two different predictor variables related to political beliefs, one for power discontent and another for feminist analysis. The two evaluative variables did not comprise a single, separate factor. The variable measuring feelings about feminists loaded with the power discontent items, whereas the variable measuring feelings about men did not load highly on any single factor. Because each of these evaluative variables was conceptually important, the two were uncorrelated, and each was expected to relate differentially to other variables, we decided to maintain each of them as separate variables.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for evaluative and phenomenological variables, as well as for feminist identification and the four stages of feminist identity, are shown in Table 1. Pairwise correlations between the independent variables ranged between .01 and .51 (the latter between power discontent and feelings about feminists); thus, although there were significant relationships among most of these variables, the intercorrelations were not so large as to indicate that these variables all measure the same thing. As has been found in past research (Rickard, 1989), correlations between the stages of positive feminist identity were highest among successive stages (r [revelation and embeddedness/emanation] = .49; r [embeddedness/emanation and synthesis] = .31; r [revelation and synthesis] = .20). Correlations among all stages of feminist identity are in Table 2.[3]

To examine the hypotheses, five separate multiple regression analyses were conducted; the dependent variables were feminist identification and each of the stages of feminist identity (passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness/emanation, and synthesis). In each analysis the set of predictor variables, which included feelings about feminists, feelings about men, feminist analysis, power discontent, and sensitivity to sexism, were entered simultaneously. Pearson correlation coefficients, partial correlations, and betas associated with each dependent variables are shown in Tables 3 through 7. Indicators of significant differences between betas for different dependent variables are also shown in each table.

Patterns of Relationships

We expected to find that the pattern of relationships between the various aspects of feminist consciousness and feminist identification would not simply be mirrored in the findings for each of the stages of feminist identity. In other words, we expected to find different configurations of variables predicting feminist identifi-

TABLE 1:   Means and Standard Deviations for Aspects of Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Identity Stages

	M	SD
Feelings about feminists[a]	61.71	23.75
Feelings about men[a]	71.41	18.39
Sensitivity to sexism[b]	4.40	1.08
Feminist identification[c]	1.36	1.78
Passive acceptance[d]	2.86	0.72
Revelation[d]	3.00	0.61
Embeddedness/emanation[d]	3.30	0.66
Synthesis[d]	3.87	0.46

NOTE: Feminist analysis and power discontent are not included in the table because scores for these variables were based on summed z scores.
a. Ratings were made on a feelings thermometer; mean ratings could range from 0 (cool) to 100 (warm).
b. Mean ratings could range from 1 to 7; higher numbers indicate higher levels of sensitivity.
c. Mean ratings could range from 0 to 5; higher numbers indicate greater degree of variable.
d. Mean ratings could range from 1 to 5; higher numbers indicate greater degree of variable.

TABLE 2:   Pairwise Correlations for Feminist Identity Stages

	Revelation	Embeddedness/ Emanation	Synthesis
Passive acceptance	−.25**	−.29**	−.20*
Revelation		.49**	.20**
Embeddedness/ emanation			.31**

NOTE: The minimum pairwise $n = 189$.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

was predicted primarily by evaluative and phenomenological aspects of feminist consciousness. Specifically, feelings about feminists ($\beta = .43$, $p \le .001$) and sensitivity to sexism ($\beta = .26$, $p \le .001$) were both positively related, whereas feelings about men ($\beta = -.15$, $p \le .01$) were negatively related to feminist identification.

TABLE 3:   Feminist Identification Regressed on Aspects of Feminist Consciousness

Predictor	r	Partial r	β	Different From[a]		
Feelings about feminists	.55**	.41	.43**	PA	R	S
Feelings about men	−.21**	−.19	−.15*	PA		S
Feminist analysis	.37**	.08	.07	PA		
Power discontent	.37**	−.04	−.03		R	
Sensitivity to sexism	.49**	.26	.26**	PA	R	
R^2	.41**					

a. This column refers to differences between betas for feminist identification and each of the other dependent variables. PA = passive acceptance; R = revelation; S = synthesis.
*$p \le .01$. **$p \le .001$.

TABLE 4:   Passive Acceptance Regressed on Aspects of Feminist Consciousness

Predictor	r	Partial r	β	Different From[a]			
Feelings about feminists	−.39**	−.23	−.26**	R	E	S	FI
Feelings about men	.21**	.21	.19*	R	E		FI
Feminist analysis	−.41**	−.25	−.26**	R	E	S	FI
Power discontent	−.32**	−.03	−.03				
Sensitivity to sexism	−.27**	.01	.01	R			FI
R^2	.25**						

a. This column refers to differences between betas for passive acceptance and each of the other dependent variables. R = revelation; E = embeddedness/emanation; S = synthesis; FI = feminist identification.
*$p \le .01$. **$p \le .001$.

cation and the stages of feminist identity. The results support our expectations. Each of the patterns of relationships is summarized below.

Feminist Identification

Although we made no specific predictions about the exact pattern of relationships regarding feminist identification, findings from the regression analysis for this dependent variable indicate that feminist identification

Passive acceptance. Findings from the regression analyses indicated that three of the five predictor variables significantly predicted passive acceptance. Feelings about feminists ($\beta = -.26$, $p \le 001$.) and feminist analysis ($\beta = -.26$, $p \le .001$) were both negatively related to passive acceptance. Feelings about men ($\beta = .19$, $p \le .01$) were positively related to passive acceptance.

Revelation. Four variables were also significant predictors of revelation: feelings about feminists ($\beta = .21$, $p \le$

TABLE 5:   Revelation Regressed on Aspects of Feminist Consciousness

Predictor	r	Partial r	β	Different From[a]			
Feelings about feminists	.44**	.23	.21**	PA	E		FI
Feelings about men	-.34**	-.27	-.21**	PA		S	
Feminist analysis	.32**	-.04	-.05	PA		S	
Power discontent	.47**	.15	.14*				FI
Sensitivity to sexism	.62**	.45	.44**	PA	E	S	FI
R^2	.49**						

a. This column refers to differences between betas for revelation and each of the other dependent variables. PA = passive acceptance; E = embeddedness/emanation; S = synthesis; FI = feminist identification.
*$p \le .05$. **$p \le .001$.

TABLE 6:   Embeddedness/Emanation Regressed on Aspects of Feminist Consciousness

Predictor	r	Partial r	β	Different From[a]		
Feelings about feminists	.46***	.33	.37***	PA	R	S
Feelings about men	-.22***	-.20	-.18**	PA		S
Feminist analysis	.25***	-.03	-.03	PA		S
Power discontent	.37***	.08	.09			
Sensitivity to sexism	.38***	.14	.15*		R	
R^2	.29***					

a. This column refers to differences between betas for embeddedness/emanation and each of the other dependent variables. PA = passive acceptance; R = revelation; S = synthesis.
*$p \le .05$. **$p \le .01$. ***$p \le .001$.

TABLE 7:   Synthesis Regressed on Aspects of Feminist Consciousness

Predictor	r	Partial r	β	Different From[a]			
Feelings about feminists	.33***	.14	.17*	PA		E	FI
Feelings about men	.01	.06	.05		R	E	FI
Feminist analysis	.35***	.19	.21**	PA	R	E	
Power discontent	.25***	.02	.03				
Sensitivity to sexism	.27***	.10	.11		R		
R^2	.16***						

a. This column refers to differences between betas for synthesis and each of the other dependent variables. PA = passive acceptance; R = revelation; E = embeddedness/emanation; FI = feminist identification.
*$p \le .05$. **$p \le .01$. ***$p \le .001$.

.001), power discontent ($\beta = .14$, $p \le .01$), and sensitivity to sexism ($\beta = .44$, $p \le .001$) were all positively related to revelation, whereas feelings about men were negatively related ($\beta = -.21$, $p \le .001$) to this stage of feminist identity.

Embeddedness/emanation. The same three variables that predicted feminist identification were also significant predictors of this stage of identity. Feelings about feminists ($\beta = .37$, $p \le .001$) and sensitivity to sexism ($\beta = .15$, $p \le .05$) were both positively related, and feelings about men ($\beta = -.18$, $p \le .01$) were negatively related to embeddedness/emanation.

Synthesis. There were only two significant predictors of synthesis. Feelings about feminists ($\beta = .17$, $p \le .05$) and feminist analysis ($\beta = .21$, $p \le .01$) were both positively related to this stage of identity.

Feelings About Men Across the Stages of Feminist Identity

Downing and Roush's (1985) model suggests that there ought to be a positive relationship between feelings about men and passive acceptance, and a pattern of diminishing negative relationships between feelings about men and the other three stages of feminist identity. Our results support this model. Feelings about men were positively related to passive acceptance, but negatively related to revelation and embeddedness/emanation, and unrelated to synthesis. Of particular relevance to this hypothesis, there were significant differences between the betas for passive acceptance and revelation, $t(218) = 5.05$, $p < .0001$; passive acceptance and embeddedness/emanation, $t(220) = 4.01$, $p < .0001$; revelation and synthesis, $t(218) = 3.52$, $p < .001$; and embeddedness and synthesis, $t(220) = 2.91$, $p < .004$.

Feelings About Feminists
and Embeddedness/Emanation

The Downing and Roush (1985) model also suggests that feelings about feminists should be most strongly related to embeddedness/emanation. The present results support this idea. The beta for embeddedness/emanation regressed on feelings about feminists was significantly larger than the betas for passive acceptance, $t(220) = 5.71$, $p < .0001$; revelation, $t(219) = 2.08$, $p < .05$; and synthesis, $t(220) = 2.03$, $p < .05$.

Sensitivity to Sexism and Revelation

We expected that sensitivity to sexism would be most strongly related to the stage of revelation. The present results support this hypothesis. The beta for revelation regressed on sensitivity to sexism was significantly larger than betas for passive acceptance, $t(218) = 4.67$, $p < .0001$; embeddedness/emanation, $t(219) = 3.48$, $p < .001$; and synthesis, $t(218) = 3.66$, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Self-Identification as a Feminist

Results from this study indicate that it is the evaluative and phenomenological aspects of consciousness, rather than political beliefs, that most clearly predict women's endorsement of the label *feminist*. These findings are consistent with Tajfel's (1978a, 1982) observations concerning the importance of group evaluations as a defining characteristic of group consciousness. That feelings about feminists, in particular, predicted feminist identification concurs with a similar finding by Cowan, Mestlin, and Masek (1992). Although they asked respondents their opinion of the feminist movement rather than feminists specifically, evaluation of the feminist movement did emerge as a significant predictor of feminist self-labeling. That political beliefs did not predict feminist identification is not, in one sense, surprising; others (e.g., Griffin, 1989; Kamen, 1991) have emphasized that many women who espouse clearly feminist beliefs nevertheless reject the feminist label. This should, however, alert researchers to the need for clarity in operationalizing feminist consciousness. If the intent is specifically to distinguish among women on the basis of self-labeling, it makes sense to ask directly about feminist identification. If, however, the researcher is actually interested in tapping women's political attitudes and beliefs, asking about feminist identification alone will not suffice.

Alternate Forms of Feminist Consciousness

Data from this study support the notion of multiple experiences of feminist consciousness and further raise doubt about the validity of viewing feminist consciousness as dichotomous. The experiences of revelation, embeddedness/emanation, and synthesis are differentially related to the political beliefs, evaluative, and phenomenological aspects of feminist consciousness considered in this study. Furthermore, although passive acceptance can best be characterized as the presence of negative feelings about feminists and positive feelings about men, as well as an absence of feminist analysis, it is not clearly the reverse of any of the other experiences of feminist identity nor of feminist self-identification.

The pattern of results for embeddedness/emanation was similar to the pattern for feminist identification. Thus research that focuses on feminist self-identification as an indicator of consciousness may be particularly pertinent to women who are experiencing embeddedness/emanation but less so for women who have a different experience of feminism. We emphasize that feminist self-identification is neither synonymous with embeddedness/emanation nor wholly distinct from revelation or synthesis. Women from any of these experiences of feminism may identify as feminist; in fact, feminist identification was significantly correlated with embeddedness/emanation ($r = .50$, $p < .001$), but also with revelation ($r = .41$, $p < .001$) and synthesis ($r = .36$, $p < .001$). However, the psychological experience of identifying as a feminist seems to most closely resemble the experience of embeddedness/emanation.

Differentiating Stages of Feminist Identity

The pattern of results regarding women's feelings about men fits perfectly with Downing and Roush's (1985) model of feminist identity. According to this model, women in the stage of passive acceptance hold men in high regard, whereas women in revelation see men in a negative light. In embeddedness/emanation, women first withdraw into a world that centers on women and then gradually begin to interact cautiously with men. By the stage of synthesis, women no longer base their judgments of people primarily on group membership but instead see people first as individuals. Our findings reveal that women's evaluations of men are positively related to passive acceptance but negatively related to revelation. The relationship with embeddedness/emanation is also negative, though somewhat weaker; and there is no relationship between feelings about men and the stage of synthesis.

We hypothesized that feelings about feminists would be most strongly associated with embeddedness/emanation. Although feelings about feminists significantly predicted each stage of feminist identity, tests of differences among the betas for each dependent variable indicated that feelings about feminists were indeed most strongly related to embeddedness/emanation. As expected, feel-

ings about feminists were also strongly related to women's self-identification as feminist.

Our findings regarding feelings about men and feminists partially support Brewer's (1979) argument that intergroup bias is the result of in-group favoritism, not out-group derogation. The results of the present study indicate that some women may experience negativity toward men early at one stage of feminist consciousness; other forms of group consciousness have little or no bearing on a woman's feelings about men as a group. In contrast, women's positive feelings about feminists, though most strongly related to embeddedness/emanation, are an important element across different experiences of feminist consciousness.

As expected, sensitivity to sexism was most strongly related to revelation. This phenomenological aspect of consciousness includes the tendency to question reality, wariness both of sexism and of one's own response to it, confusion about how to respond to sexism, and yet seeing everyday events as opportunities to take a stand. These experiences seem particularly intense among those who are just coming to recognize sexism.

Phenomenological Aspects of Feminist Consciousness

Other phenomenological dimensions of feminist consciousness have probably not been tapped with existing measures. Myers et al. (1991) make an important point about the general nature of stage models of identity development; because such models emerged in the wake of social movements, they may be particularly germane to a particular period of social history. Similarly, what Bartky (1975) described as the phenomenology of feminist consciousness seems a particularly accurate characterization of revelation, perhaps precisely because this was the dominant mode of feminist consciousness at the time of her writing. In other words, her description, and hence our measurement, of phenomenological aspects of feminist consciousness may have been grounded in the social context of a relatively early point in the contemporary women's movement. Had Bartky been writing 10 or 15 years later, her description of the phenomenology of consciousness may have reflected a shift toward embeddedness or synthesis as dominant experiences of consciousness.

Future work on group consciousness should consider other possible phenomenological experiences. For example, women with an embeddedness orientation, more than women in other stages of feminist identity, may experience a sense of being part of a group with enormous creative potential and power. When faced with an opportunity to take a stand against sexism, women with a synthesis orientation may not experience confusion about whether and how to act but, rather, ambivalence due to their commitment to act combined with a recog-

nition of the sluggishness of the process of social change. Furthermore, as increasing amounts of information about both organized and individual strategies for social change become available through the popular media (e.g., Faludi, 1991; Wolf, 1991), women may perceive a greater range of options in terms of their own roles as activists. They may, therefore, be experiencing less pressure to respond to each and every incidence of sexism in their everyday lives, and less confusion about how to respond in any given situation.

In addition, Bartky's (1975) concept of wariness may describe one type of response to the experience of intense emotion on the part of feminists; however, other responses seem possible. For example, rather than feeling guarded with respect to their emotional reaction to sexism, some women might experience a relative sense of freedom of emotional expression as they become feminist. They might realize a sense of power in being able to channel their feelings toward combatting sexism. Indeed, some women's groups or organizations may view women's emotional expressions against sexism as an important strategy in working for social change. Additionally, the degree to which individuals do respond emotionally, not to mention the specific type of emotional response (e.g., anger, guilt, or sadness), most certainly varies among women.

Feminist Consciousness: A Developmental Process?

We return to the question of whether group consciousness can accurately be thought of as a developmental process in the way that Downing and Roush (1985) have suggested. Our data provide mixed support for the notion of stages of feminist identity. There is some evidence that aspects of consciousness wax or wane across stages that appear to be sequential. For example, women's feelings about men and their sensitivity to sexism both diminish across the stages of positive feminist identity, consistent with the linear progression expected with such a model. However, the classification of women as situated in particular stages is not so straightforward. Downing and Roush assert that women may recycle through these stages of identity, and it may be that, because of this recycling process, assessment of where an individual woman is situated becomes muddied, and the stages of feminist identity are not so clearly delineated. Myers et al. (1991) propose a model of group identity development that is conceptualized as neither linear nor categorical. Instead, they describe the development of group identity as an expanding spiral, a process through which continually deeper knowledge of the self and social relationships is gained. If identity does develop through such a nonlinear process, progression will, by necessity, be difficult to capture empirically.

It may also be that we are simply tapping different experiences, rather than stages, of feminist consciousness. Perhaps other, more global, individual differences contribute to women's differing experience or expression of feminist consciousness. For example, women who are more analytical in their orientation to the world may be more likely to experience feminism as what we have referred to here as the stage of synthesis. It could be that the experience of women whose general orientation is more affective will mirror Downing and Roush's (1985) stage of revelation.

Although our evidence for a developmental model per se is limited, an approach that allows for a range of feminist experience seems clearly warranted. Certainly, tapping particular domains of feminist consciousness, such as group evaluations or political beliefs, is important in exploring particular questions about group consciousness. However, to make sense of women's varied experience of feminism across these conceptually distinct domains of feminist consciousness, it is also useful to employ a model that can capture the psychological reality of the simultaneous experience of varying degrees of these multiple dimensions of feminist consciousness. Downing and Roush's (1985) model of feminist identity provides a set of meaningfully different experiences of feminist experience, whether these are best conceptualized as developmental or qualitative differences. Although we have found that the Downing and Roush model provides a useful heuristic in going beyond a unidimensional, dichotomous approach to feminist consciousness, it may also be fruitful to think about additional forms of feminist consciousness. Future research should continue to pursue the question of what it means, psychologically, to have group consciousness and the ways in which psychological experiences of group consciousness differ across individuals and over time. Further, although the focus in this article has been on differential experiences of feminist consciousness, it would also be useful to explore differences among women who are not feminist. Although passive acceptance may accurately describe the experience of some nonfeminist women, there is probably also variation in the experience of consciousness that, to date, has typically been described only as the absence of feminist consciousness.

Conclusion

We conclude with a reminder that the present research is limited by the particular sample of women included in this study. Keeping in mind that the current results are based on a predominantly White sample of young women, we assert that simply asking women to report their level of identification with feminists may assess one experience of feminist consciousness; however, this may not capture other, qualitatively different experiences of feminism. This is not to say that feminist self-identification is not an important aspect of feminist consciousness. For example, asking about feminist identification may be tapping the one component of a feminist consciousness that is pertinent to each of the stages of feminist identity: evaluations of feminists. Feminist identification and feelings about feminists were strongly related in this sample ($r = .55$, $p \leq .001$). However, to focus solely on feminist identification is to ignore other aspects of consciousness that define the psychological reality of women's varied experience of feminist consciousness and that may bear importantly on research questions and assumptions.

APPENDIX A
Feminist Identity Scale

1. It is especially important to me to feel accepted by the men in my life. (PA)
2. I feel like I have blended my female attributes with my unique personal qualities. (S)
3. My female friends are like me in that we are generally angry at men and the ways we have been treated as women. (R)
4. I am very interested in women artists. (E)
5. I choose my "causes" carefully to work for greater equality for all people. (S)
6. I never realized until recently that I have experienced oppression and discrimination as a woman in this society. (R)
7. I enjoy the pride and self-assurance that comes from being a strong female. (S)
8. I like to refer to my female friends as "girls." (PA)
9. It is more important that I feel good about the choices I make for my lifestyle than that I make the "right" choice. (S)
10. Relationships with most men stunt my personal growth. (R)
11. As I have grown in my beliefs I have realized that it is more important to value women as individuals than as members of a larger group of women. (S)
12. Gradually, I am beginning to see how sexist society really is. (R)
13. Regretfully, I can see ways in which I have perpetuated sexist attitudes in the past. (R)
14. I like to look up to the person with whom I am romantically involved. (PA)
15. I am very interested in women musicians. (E)
16. I have incorporated what is female and feminine into my own unique personality. (S)
17. Women's ways are much superior to men's ways of living. (E)

18. I owe it not only to women but to all people to work for greater opportunity and equality for all. (S)
19. I am very interested in women writers. (E)
20. I like being a traditional female. (PA)
21. I feel like I've been tricked into believing society's perceptions of me as a woman. (R)
22. Only women can truly understand what it means to be a woman in this culture. (E)
23. I presently experience a much greater understanding of the connectedness of the women's movement and other movements against injustice and oppression than I once did. (S)
24. I believe my consciousness is being raised about what it means to be a woman in this society. (R)
25. Women earn less than men in this society because of discrimination. (R)
26. In my interactions with men, I am always looking for ways I may be discriminated against because I am female. (R)
27. I find myself much more willing to trust my perception of events than I have been in the past. (S)

28. I am very interested in women's studies. (E)
29. I am concerned that if we become less vocal about women's oppression and more vocal about oppression in general, women will suffer. (R)
30. I feel less conflicted about my role as a woman than I used to. (S)
31. I am proud to be a competent woman. (S)
32. Women have less political and personal power than men. (R)
33. Men believe and act as if they are superior, but women are really the superior gender. (R)
34. I prefer to think of myself and my female peers as "girls" as opposed to "women." (PA)
35. Discrimination is one cause, but not the only cause, of women's lower pay rates in the workforce. (S)
36. I feel angry when I think about the way I am treated by men and boys. (R)
37. Men receive many advantages in society and because of this are against equality for women. (R)

SOURCE: Rickard (1987).
NOTE: PA = passive acceptance; S = synthesis; R = revelation; E = embeddedness/emanation.

APPENDIX B
Feminist Analysis Items

1. A woman's place is in the home.
2. Men and women ought to have an equal role in running business, industry and government.
3. Men are born with more drive to be ambitious and successful than women.
4. In general, men are more qualified for jobs that have great responsibility.
5. By nature women are happiest when they are making a home and caring for children.

6. When it comes to sex roles and relations between males and females, things will always be pretty much the way they are now.
7. In the future relations between males and females could be quite different from the way they are now.
8. Do you think that what happens to women generally in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?
9. Do you think that the movement for women's rights has affected you personally?

SOURCE: Items 1 to 5 from Gurin and Townsend (1986, p. 142); Items 8 and 9 from Gurin and Townsend (1986, p. 143).
NOTE: Items 1 and 2 measure the rejection of legitimacy of traditional gender roles; Items 3, 4, and 5 measure rejection of the reasons for gender disparities; Items 6 and 7 measure perceptions of instability; and Items 8 and 9 measure a sense of common fate.

APPENDIX C
Sensitivity to Sexism Scale

1. Sometimes I see things that I think are sexist but that other people don't.
2. Sometimes I'm not sure if what I'm seeing or hearing is sexist.
3. Everyday occasions sometimes turn into situations in which I feel I should confront sexism and take a stand.
4. I sometimes feel tense because I might be confronted with something that is sexist.
5. Sometimes I feel bad when I don't confront someone or something that is sexist.

6. In certain situations I am tense because I'm expecting someone to say or do something sexist.
7. Sometimes I'm afraid that I'll get upset or angry if I'm caught off guard by something that is sexist.
8. I'm not always sure if I should confront sexism when I encounter it.
9. I'm not always sure how to confront sexism when I encounter it.
10. When I am dealing with other people, I sometimes wonder if they react to me the way they do because I am female.

NOTES

1. We used a revised measure of synthesis, dropping 4 of the original 12 items from the original subscale, which seemed ambiguous in the sense that a woman who was in the stage of passive acceptance could also have scored high on them. We retained Items 5, 7, 9, 11, 18, 23, 27, and 30. Our findings indicated that relationships with other dimensions of feminist consciousness were strengthened with the revised synthesis subscale.

2. Respondents were also asked to indicate their feelings about students, women, and people of color.

3. Using data from both this and a subsequent wave of the study, we were able to ascertain whether participants' stage of feminist identity changed across time. Participants ($n = 134$) were classified in a specific stage of feminist identity according to their highest score across the subscales at each point in time. The majority (62%) showed no shift from one stage to another. Of particular relevance were students who took a women's studies class over the duration of the study. Despite an increase in this group's mean score on revelation, most of the women in the women's studies group (60%) did not show a shift from one stage to another. Thus findings from this study fall short of providing strong evidence for a truly developmental model of consciousness.

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