

## **A Rose by Any Other Name: Attitudes Toward Feminism as a Function of Its Label**

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*Male and female subjects were asked to rate one of the following labels on a variety of evaluative dimensions: "equal rights for women" (ERW), "feminism" (FEM), "women's liberation" (WLN) and "women's lib" (WLB). It was found that there were differences among the labels, with ERW being the most positively evaluated and WLN being the most negatively evaluated. Furthermore, there were sex differences on some of the dimensions wherein females made more favorable evaluations than males. Subjects' ratings were mixed, being favorable on some dimensions and unfavorable on others. Interpretations and implications of the results are discussed.*

The concept of women's political, economic, and social rights goes by various names. The four most common labels for this concept are "equal rights for women," "feminism," "women's lib," and "women's liberation." While the four labels denote basically the same thing, they do not necessarily connote the same thing, and as a result people may have differential attitudes toward them.

Consider, for example, the words "steadfast" and "stubborn." They both refer to not changing one's position, but the former is perceived to involve an element of strength and is seen as a positive quality, while the latter is seen as being unreasonably unyielding and is considered a negative quality. In the same vein, "adventurous" and "foolhardy" both denote risk taking, but the former is seen as being positive because of its association with glamor, while the latter is viewed in a negative light because it implies imprudence and recklessness. Clearly, then, concepts that are denotatively similar can be connotatively quite different.

It has been empirically demonstrated that concepts with similar levels of meaning can take on different meanings by being associated with other concepts that have a positive or negative affective tone. Staats and Staats (1958) paired national names (e.g., "Swedish" and "Dutch") and men's names (e.g., "Tom" and "Bill") with positive words such as "happy," negative words such as "ugly,"

and neutral words such as "chair." They found that names paired with positive words were rated as being more pleasant than names paired with neutral words; the latter names, in turn, were rated as being more pleasant than names paired with negative words.

Similarly, Nunnally, Duchnowski, and Parker (1965) conditioned children's attitudes toward nonsense syllables through use of a roulette wheel. If the wheel stopped on one syllable, the child won two pennies, if it stopped on the second syllable, the child lost one penny, and if it stopped on the third, the child neither won nor lost. They found that the children most frequently attributed positive qualities to the syllable associated with winning and most frequently attributed negative qualities to the syllable associated with losing.

In a series of papers, Asch (1946, 1948, 1952) has shown that the context in which a concept is presented affects its meaning. Asch (1946) presented one group of subjects with a description of a person as being kind, wise, honest, calm, and strong. Another group was told that the individual was cruel, shrewd, unscrupulous, calm, and strong. Both groups were asked to write synonyms for "calm" and "strong." The subjects given the first description took "calm" to mean peaceful, gentle, and tolerant, while subjects given the second description interpreted "calm" to mean cold, calculating, and conscienceless. Similarly, subjects given the first description interpreted "strong" to mean just, forceful, and courageous, while subjects given the second description saw it as meaning ruthless, overbearing, and overpowering.

Lorge (1936) has shown that a given quotation is more readily agreed with when it is attributed to a prestigious source than when it is attributed to a less admired source. Asch (1948) discounts the prestige effect and says instead that subjects interpret a given quotation differently depending on the author to whom it is attributed. For example, Asch (1952) presented subjects with the following quotation used by Lorge: "I hold it that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms are in the physical." Some subjects were told that it was written by Thomas Jefferson (who actually did write it) and some that it was written by Lenin. All subjects were asked to write what the statement meant. Subjects who thought Jefferson was the author indicated that he was referring to peaceful political changes, rather than preserving the status quo. On the other hand, subjects who thought the writer was Lenin assumed that he was referring in general to outright revolution and in particular to the Russian revolution.

In the present study, males and females are asked to rate the concept of women's political, economic, and social rights on a variety of evaluative dimensions. The concept is presented under the four different labels referred to earlier. Given the experimental findings described above, it is expected that there will be differences in how the four labels are evaluated by the subjects, although the author has no a priori basis for predicting the direction of the differences.

As for possible sex differences, various authors have found that women tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward the concept of women's rights than men do (e.g., Albright & Chang, 1976; Doyle, 1976; Sarup, 1976; Spence & Helmreich, 1972). However, in analyzing each of the 55 items that constitute their Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS), Spence and Helmreich found that men had more liberal attitudes than women on several of the items. Thus, it is expected that women will indicate more favorable attitudes toward the concept on some, but not all, of the evaluative dimensions.

## METHOD

### *Overview of Design*

A 2 × 4 between-subjects factorial design was used, with two levels of Sex and four levels of Label.

### *Subjects*

Sixty-four males and 64 females served as subjects. They were recruited from classes in introductory psychology at the University of Dayton as part of a research participation requirement.

### *Rating Scale Dimensions*

Ten dimensions were chosen as dependent measures. Others could also have been used, but in the interest of time it was decided to limit the number to 10. The following dimensions were chosen because they seemed relevant to the concept under study: (1) moderate-radical, (2) friendly-hostile, (3) right-wrong, (4) objective-biased, (5) rational-irrational, (6) feminine-masculine, (7) peaceable-argumentative, (8) good-bad, (9) warm-cold, and (10) beautiful-ugly.

Each dimension was presented on a 7-point rating scale. It was determined at random that dimensions 3, 4, 8, and 9 were ordered from positive to negative, while dimensions 1, 2, 5, 7, and 10 were ordered from negative to positive. It was also determined at random that the sixth dimension was ordered from feminine to masculine.

### *Procedure*

The male experimenter told the subjects that the purpose of the study was to assess their attitudes on ideologies of current interest. Each subject was

then given a five-page booklet. On the top of each page was the name of the ideology to be rated (written in capital letters) and below it were the 10 rating scales described above. The first (CAPITALISM), second (ASTROLOGY), fourth (RACISM), and fifth (CHRISTIANITY) ideologies were included as fillers.

The third page in each booklet referred to the concept under investigation and was headed by one of the following labels: EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN, FEMINISM, WOMEN'S LIBERATION, and WOMEN'S LIB. Each label was presented to 16 males and 16 females.

## RESULTS

To simplify the presentation, we designate equal rights for women as ERW, feminism as FEM, women's liberation as WLN, and women's lib as WLB.

Table I shows the mean ratings on each dimension by sex and by label. Given that a rating of 4.00 represents the midpoint of the scale, it appears that, regardless of sex or label, the subjects have mixed feelings about the concept. On the one hand, they tend to perceive it as somewhat right, rational, feminine, good, and beautiful, while on the other hand, they tend to perceive it as somewhat radical, hostile, biased, argumentative and cold.

As expected, there are differences in how favorably the four labels are evaluated. Analysis of variance shows a significant main effect of Label for moderate ( $F(3, 120) = 6.45, p < .01$ ), friendly ( $F(3, 120) = 3.39, p < .05$ ), right ( $F(3, 120) = 2.78, p < .05$ ), objective ( $F(3, 120) = 3.89, p < .05$ ), rational ( $F(3, 120) = 2.82, p < .05$ ), good ( $F(3, 120) = 4.04, p < .01$ ), warm ( $F(3, 120) = 6.19, p < .01$ ), and beautiful ( $F(3, 120) = 3.82, p < .05$ ).

It is interesting that the direction of the differences is always the same. ERW is evaluated most favorably, followed by WLB and FEM, with WLN evaluated most negatively.

Analysis of variance also shows a main effect of Sex for right ( $F(1, 120) = 6.67, p < .05$ ), rational ( $F(1, 120) = 5.72, p < .05$ ) peaceable ( $F(1, 120) = 3.28, p < .10$ ), good ( $F(1, 120) = 3.68, p < .10$ ), and beautiful ( $F(1, 120) = 5.19, p < .05$ ). The females give the concept higher ratings on right, rational, good, and beautiful, but perceive the concept as being more argumentative than the males do.

There were no significant Sex  $\times$  Label interactions.

## DISCUSSION

While feminism is by no means a new concept, it is currently enjoying a rebirth and thus seems new to those who are unfamiliar with its history. This

Table I. Mean Ratings of Dimensions by Sex and by Label<sup>a</sup>

Dimension	Sex	Label				Combined
		ERW	WLB	FEM	WLN	
Moderate	M	4.13	2.75	2.81	2.19	2.97
	F	3.69	3.81	3.00	2.56	3.19
	Combined	3.91	3.28	2.91	2.38	3.12
Friendly	M	4.75	3.31	3.13	2.94	3.53
	F	3.69	4.00	3.94	3.25	3.72
	Combined	4.22	3.66	3.53	3.09	3.63
Right	M	5.06	4.56	4.19	4.06	4.47
	F	5.63	5.38	5.06	4.56	5.16
	Combined	5.34	4.97	4.63	4.31	4.81
Objective	M	4.25	2.94	2.81	2.44	3.11
	F	3.31	3.44	3.13	2.44	3.08
	Combined	3.78	3.19	2.97	2.44	3.09
Rational	M	4.63	3.88	3.94	3.69	4.03
	F	5.31	4.94	4.44	4.06	4.69
	Combined	4.97	4.41	4.19	3.88	4.36
Feminine	M	5.31	4.38	5.31	4.94	4.98
	F	4.44	4.75	4.69	4.81	4.67
	Combined	4.88	4.56	5.00	4.88	4.83
Peaceable	M	3.19	2.31	2.25	2.31	2.52
	F	2.31	2.19	2.19	1.75	2.11
	Combined	2.75	2.25	2.22	2.03	2.31
Good	M	5.06	4.63	4.25	3.88	4.45
	F	5.56	5.19	4.94	4.19	4.97
	Combined	5.31	4.91	4.59	4.03	4.71
Warm	M	4.69	3.81	3.63	3.13	3.81
	F	4.69	4.50	3.88	3.25	4.08
	Combined	4.69	4.16	3.75	3.19	3.95
Beautiful	M	4.94	4.00	3.63	3.56	4.03
	F	4.69	4.81	4.56	4.06	4.53
	Combined	4.81	4.41	4.09	3.81	4.28

<sup>a</sup>The higher the rating, the more positive the rating. In the case of feminine-masculine, high ratings indicate femininity.

may, in part, account for the subjects' mixed feelings about feminism. That is, they may not know enough about it to form a definite opinion one way or the other. Another possibility is that feminism is a controversial concept, and that subjects have been exposed to conflicting and contradictory information about it; hence, their own mixed feelings. A third possibility is that feminism is not generally perceived as the panacea some of its proponents assume it to be, but is seen as having both strong and weak points. Whatever the case, the subjects neither view the concept through rose-colored glasses nor reject it outright. They see it as being positive in some ways and negative in others.

Subjects' attitudes were found to be influenced to a significant degree by the label the concept is given, and these labels seem to operate the same way

regardless of the dimension; i.e., ERW gets relatively positive ratings, while WLN gets relatively negative ratings. Perhaps ERW is perceived in a relatively favorable light because of the word "equal," which connotes fairness, whereas the other three labels may be seen as trying to tip the scales in favor of women. Subjects may also interpret ERW as having relevance only to the law, whereas they most probably perceive the other three terms as being more pervasive and having more of a potential effect on their interpersonal relationships and daily lives.

The author's experience has been that most feminists eschew the term "women's liberation" and prefer instead "feminism." It is ironic that neither term was evaluated very positively, although FEM was evaluated somewhat more favorably than WLN. It may simply be that FEM suffers from its suffix; i.e., words ending in "-ism" sound dogmatic and doctrinaire. As for WLN, it was mentioned earlier that terms can take on meaning through association with other terms. While "liberation" per se possesses a positive affect, it has been associated in recent years with groups that have negative connotations for most Americans, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and the North Vietnamese National Liberation Front.

A further irony is that WLN and WLB received different ratings, although they are essentially the same term; one is merely a nickname for the other. However, that very fact may have brought about the difference. Nicknames tend to create an aura of familiarity and informality, perhaps even friendliness, so that compared to "women's liberation," "women's lib" sounds less threatening and militant and more innocuous and cute.

While the sex differences were not as consistent as the label differences, females had more positive attitudes toward the concept than males on four dimensions. This suggests that women may see more potential benefit from the concept than men do. However, the females rated the concept as being more argumentative than the males did. This may be because women's existing attitudes and values regarding sex roles are more often challenged and questioned by their peers, professors, and the media than those of the males, causing females to be somewhat defensive.

In sum, then, it is no wonder that so much controversy surrounds the concept of women's political, economic, and social rights when differential attitudes occur within the individual, between individuals, and as a function of the label the individual uses in reference to the concept. The present results suggest that proponents of women's rights who wish to gain more support for their position would do well to stress the equality aspect of the concept in their public appearances and, not unrelatedly, to emphasize the relevance of the concept and its potential benefits to men. The results also suggest that proponents of the concept attempt to alter their public image so as not to appear as radical, hostile, etc.

The author has observed that the mass media often (if not usually) refer to the concept as "women's liberation." The results show that this label consistent-

ly receives the most negative evaluations. Therefore, the media may be engendering negative attitudes toward the concept in the general population through the use of that term. (Of course, the subjects may also have had negative feelings about the concept and rated WLN unfavorably because it is the term they most often hear used in reference to the concept; i.e., they perceive WLN to be the concept's rightful name.) In deference to the wishes of Blacks and Chicanos, the media (for the most part) no longer refer to them as Negroes and Mexicans, and that is as it should be. However, the question arises why the mass media do not generally use the term "feminists" when the individuals to whom the term applies seem to prefer it to other terms more commonly in use.

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