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Identity in Action: Predictors of Feminist Self-Identification and Collective Action

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Abstract The present study sought to explore how women's life experiences influenced their beliefs, and how those beliefs in turn influenced feminist self-identification. Additionally, we sought to determine whether feminist self-identification led to increased collective action on behalf of women. Female participants ($N=282$) from two US college campuses and online listservs completed an online survey assessing feminist self-identification, collective action, and life experiences. Conservative, liberal, and radical beliefs were assessed as were evaluations of feminists. A structural equation model was used to explore these relationships; life experiences were found to influence women's beliefs, which in turn influenced feminist self-identification, which influenced collective action. We found that life experiences may serve as a catalyst for both feminist self-identification and collective action.

Keywords Feminist identity · Collective action · Women's studies · Experienced sexism · Feminist beliefs

Introduction

What are the precursors of calling oneself a feminist in today's society? Previous research in this area has pointed to a variety of factors that predict feminist beliefs and holding a feminist identity. The present study utilized an online sample in order to clarify this literature by combining a number of variables in a single structural

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equation model. We expanded on previous literature that has conceptualized a path towards collective action that involves life experiences and political beliefs being filtered through having a feminist consciousness (Duncan 1999). However, we build upon this literature by postulating that life experiences influence feminist beliefs which in turn influence feminist consciousness. Important to this paper is the notion that holding feminist beliefs does not necessarily lead to a feminist identity and these variables must be examined separately. Must you specifically call yourself a feminist to engage in collective action on behalf of women's rights? Data on this topic has been contradictory (e.g., Liss et al. 2004; Zucker 2004). This paper attempts to clarify the relationship between feminist self-identification and collective action. We sought to examine women who clearly defined themselves as feminists when given a forced choice option.

Predictors of Feminist Self-Identification

Studies that have predicted feminist self-identification have focused both on life experiences and beliefs. A variety of life experiences have been found to be related to feminist self-identification. Previous studies have shown that exposure to feminists and feminist ideas can lead to a more positive view of feminists and promote self-identification (e.g., Myaskovsky and Wittig 1997; Reid and Purcell 2004; Williams and Wittig 1997). One way in which women can be exposed to feminist ideas is through taking a women's studies class. This variable has been specifically shown to be related to a heightened feminist consciousness (Bargad and Hyde 1991). Another way to be exposed to feminist ideas is through personal contact with feminists, such as having friends or family who consider themselves to be feminists. These exposure variables have been found to

increase the likelihood of feminist self-identification (Liss et al. 2004; Reid and Purcell 2004; Williams and Wittig 1997; Zucker 2004). Being exposed to feminism, either through coursework or through direct interaction, may directly increase feminist self-identification (e.g. Liss et al. 2004; Williams and Wittig 1997). However, it may also increase feminist self-identification through a variety of intervening variables. For example, Reid and Purcell (2004) found that exposure to feminism led to decreased negative perceptions of feminists and an increased sense of common fate with women, which, in turn, led to increased feminist self-identification. Thus, life experiences may change beliefs about gender issues and perceptions of feminists, which, in turn, may lead to feminist self-identification.

One could argue that exposure to feminists may be a result of feminist beliefs rather than a cause of these beliefs. Indeed, feminists may be more likely to choose women's studies classes or become friends with feminists. Longitudinal research is necessary in order to tease apart the direction of these relationships. In the one longitudinal study that has been conducted (Bargad and Hyde 1991), all women in the study were interested in taking a women's studies course to begin with (the control group was on a waiting list); thus, it is impossible to know whether these women were more feminist than those who were uninterested in taking such a course. Nevertheless, those enrolled in women's studies courses showed greater changes in feminist consciousness than those who were not enrolled, supporting the notion that women's studies courses do lead to changes in beliefs and identity.

Similarly, we believe that some exposure to friends and relatives who are feminists may be a result of feminist self-identification, as feminists may choose to affiliate with those who share their beliefs and identity. However, it is also likely that exposure to feminism through friends and family members may lead some individuals to take on a feminist identity. We believe that having a mother who one perceives to be a feminist is more likely to be a precursor to feminist self-identification than a result of it, since women's world views are more likely to be influenced by their mothers' than vice versa. Thus, in our study, we chose to assess whether a woman reported that her mother was a feminist (rather than a friend or relative more broadly) in order to increase the likelihood that our hypothesized progression of life experiences leading to changes in beliefs and identity is a sensible interpretation of the data.

Another life experience variable that has been found to be related to feminist self-identification is the experience of sexism. Self-identified feminists are also more likely to report having experienced sexist discrimination (Henderson-King and Stewart 1997; Reid and Purcell 2004), although not all studies have found this (e.g., Cowan et al. 1992). It has been posited that feminists may be more likely to report

experiences of sexism for two reasons (Klonoff and Landrine 1995). First, experiencing sexism may cause young women to realize that there is gender inequality, and thus, they may take on a feminist ideology. Second, feminists may have a heightened awareness to more readily notice sexism. We have chosen to conceptualize the experience of sexism as a precursor rather than a result of feminist self-identification as it is usually conceptualized this way in the literature (e.g., Liss et al. 2004; Williams and Wittig 1997).

A variety of beliefs have been shown to be related to feminist self-identification. Data has frequently shown that women who self-identify as feminists have a positive view of feminists (e.g., Liss et al. 2001), while women who have a negative evaluation of feminists are less likely to self-identify (Reid and Purcell 2004) even if they support feminist goals. As discussed above, exposure to feminists and feminist ideas through coursework has been shown to lead to more positive evaluations of feminists (Reid and Purcell 2004). On the other hand, exposure to sexism should not inherently change one's evaluations of feminists, and no previous research has suggested this relationship.

A variety of ideological beliefs have been found to be related to feminist self-identification. One study found that women who did not hold conservative beliefs were more likely to call themselves feminists (Liss et al. 2001). This was true even when other belief variables (e.g., liberal and radical beliefs) were included in the equation. On the other hand, other studies have pointed to the importance of liberal feminist beliefs when predicting feminist self-identification (e.g., Reid and Purcell 2004). Peltola et al. (2004) found that among women born before 1978, those who were more likely to self-identify as feminists had liberal political views and more egalitarian gender attitudes than those women less likely to self-identify. Although liberal feminist beliefs has often been related to feminist self-identification, these beliefs have been consistently increasing over time (Twenge 1997), while a corresponding rise in feminist self-identification has not been seen. Thus, liberal feminist beliefs may no longer be sufficient to distinguish feminists from non-feminists. Therefore, radical beliefs may prove useful in differentiating these two groups.

There has been a great deal of inconsistency with how feminist self-identification has been measured. Some studies have extrapolated feminist identity through women endorsing beliefs consistent with the later stages of feminist identity development (e.g., Bargad and Hyde 1991). This is problematic as there is evidence that later stages of feminist identity development (e.g., synthesis) are not related to feminist self-identification (e.g., Zucker 2004). Even studies directly assessing self-identification use a variety of measures. Many such studies utilize a continuous measure of feminist self-identification where individuals

must indicate where along a continuum of self-identification they lie (e.g., Reid and Purcell 2004; Williams and Wittig 1997). The problem with these measures is that it is difficult to interpret whether or not individuals truly call themselves feminists. As we will discuss below, clearly identifying as part of a social group is theoretically an important predictor for participating in collective action on behalf of that group. Thus, we feel that it is important to encourage women to clearly indicate whether or not they call themselves feminists by using a forced-choice, dichotomous measure.

Predictors of Collective Action

In addition to exploring the predictors of feminist self-identification, we were interested in predicting collective action on behalf of women. Social identity theory suggests that, for a variety of social groups, self-identification is strongly correlated with activism on behalf of that group (e.g., Simon et al. 1998). In the context of women's rights, previous studies have concluded that feminists are more likely to engage in collective action on behalf of women than non-feminists (e.g., Zucker 2004). Duncan (1999) found that feminist consciousness directly predicted collective action on behalf of women. The study also found that experiencing sexual harassment and higher levels of education led to an increase in feminist consciousness and feminist consciousness led to an increase in collective action. Duncan (1999) viewed feminist consciousness as a composite measure involving a continuous measure of feminist self-identification, power discontent, system blame, and collective orientation. While understanding women's group consciousness is useful and informative, social identity theory (Tajfel 1982) indicates that the relationship to action would be stronger when self-identification as a member of a social group is specifically assessed.

Despite the theoretical link between feminist self-identification and collective action, the data on the relationship between these variables is mixed. One study (Liss et al. 2004) reported that while having a feminist mother, taking a women's studies course, and experiencing gender discrimination did predict collective action, feminist self-identification did not predict collective action above and beyond these variables. On the other hand, studies (e.g., Zucker 2004) have found that feminist identification is, in fact, a key variable for predicting collective action. Additional data is needed to determine whether feminist self-identification is a necessary catalyst for collective action on behalf of women. Furthermore, women who have experienced sexual harassment or other sexist events may be spurred to collective action because of a realization of injustice without necessarily taking on the feminist label. Thus, there may be more than one pathway

to collective action, which may or may not involve feminist self-identification.

The Present Study

In the present study, we tested a structural equation model (see Fig. 1) in order to clarify the existing literature on predictors of feminist self-identification as well as predictors of women's activism. Only one other study (Duncan 1999) has tried to model the interrelationships between these variables. We hoped to expand on this model by teasing apart the contributions of life experiences, feminist beliefs, and self-identification. Although these variables have been studied before in relationship to collective action (Liss et al. 2004), they have not been studied in such a way as to allow an understanding of how life experiences may lead to beliefs, which in turn may lead to self-identification as a feminist. As detailed above, self-identification as a feminist should lead to collective action on behalf of women (Zucker 2004). This study provides an opportunity to present a clear conceptualization of how these variables are interrelated. We hope to bring together the literatures on predictors of feminist self-identification and collective action into one coherent model.

The following hypotheses were simultaneously tested in one structural equation model.

1) Exposure to feminist beliefs through having a mother perceived to be a feminist and taking a women's studies class would predict a more positive evaluation of feminists, increased liberal and radical beliefs, and decreased conservative beliefs.
2) Experiencing sexism would increase liberal and radical beliefs while decreasing conservative beliefs.
3) Having less conservative beliefs, more liberal beliefs, more radical beliefs, and a positive evaluation of feminists would predict the adoption of the feminist label.
4) Self-identifying as a feminist would predict greater participation in collective action on behalf of women.
5) Experiencing sexist events may directly predict an increase in collective action, bypassing feminist self-identification.

Method

Participants

Participants were 282 women recruited from general psychology courses at a liberal arts college ($n=54$), psychology courses at a community college ($n=113$), and from online mailing lists ($n=115$). In order to obtain additional participants, we posted a brief description of our study on a variety of academic listservs including
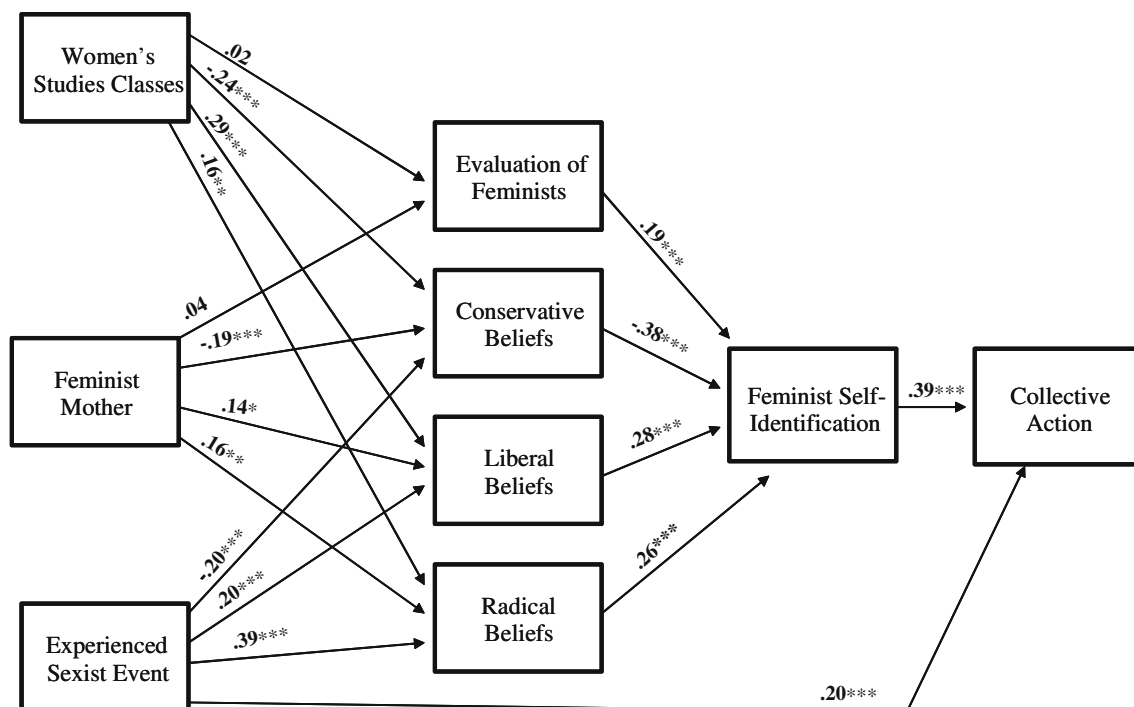
Fig. 1 Initial model of the relationships among the variables of interest, χ^2 (10)=62.91, p<.001; CFI=.88; and RMSEA=.14. Standardized path coefficients are reported; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001. Correlations among the four belief variables were estimated but are not depicted in the model.

POWR-L (an academic listserv focused on the study of gender) and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology listserv. Individuals were asked to participate in the study and were encouraged to provide the link to others whom they thought might be interested. The students received some form of course credit for completing the survey, while the online community participants were entered into drawings for retail gift certificates. The combined sample had an average age of 25 (SD=9.8), and participants were primarily heterosexual (91.0%) and Caucasian (81.9%). Most participants considered their socioeconomic status to be middle or upper-middle class (83.5%) and were either currently enrolled in college classes (67%) or had completed some form of higher education beyond college (25.2%).

Procedure

All participants completed the survey on-line through a secured server. The survey homepage included a copy of the informed consent and prompted participants to enter their e-mail addresses in order to receive a unique link to the survey generated automatically via e-mail. Participant e-mail addresses and the unique survey links were not connected with survey responses, ensuring that the responses were kept anonymous. Once participants accessed the survey through the e-mailed unique links, they were able to complete the questionnaire.

Measure

Feminist Mother

Participants were asked to provide their perception of whether or not their mother considered herself to be a feminist. They indicated their agreement to this statement on a scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Perception rather than identity was assessed because while individuals may not know for certain whether their mothers would self-identify as feminists, they would be able to provide an opinion as to whether or not their mothers were feminists.

Women's Studies Classes

Participants were asked whether or not they had ever taken a class that focused on women's issues. This was coded yes or no; 43% of the sample had taken at least one women' studies class.

Experience of Sexism

The Schedule of Sexist Events was used to assess personal experience of sexism (Klonoff and Landrine 1995). This 20-item scale asks individuals about the frequency with which various sexist events have occurred during both the past year and during their entire life on a scale ranging from 1 = never to 6 = almost all the time. For example, one item asks: "how many times have you heard people making sexist jokes, or

degrading sexual jokes?" For the purposes of this study, only the lifetime subscale was used. Cronbach's alpha of the lifetime subscale in the current study was .92.

Evaluation of Feminists

A nine-item scale developed by Reid and Purcell (2004) was used to assess evaluations of feminists. This scale consists of nine pairs of opposite adjectives (e.g., beautiful – ugly, traditional – radical) covering a range of stereotypical attributes about feminists. Items were coded on a five-point scale so that 1 = socially undesirable trait (e.g., ugly, radical) and 5 = socially desirable trait (e.g., beautiful, traditional). Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the current study was .85.

Conservative Beliefs

The conservative subscale of the short form of the Feminist Perspectives Scale was used to assess conservative beliefs about gender (Henley et al. 2000). This is a five-item scale in which participants are asked the extent to which they agree with a statement on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree (e.g., "A man's first responsibility is to obtain economic success, while his wife should care for the family's needs."). Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .74.

Liberal Beliefs

Liberal beliefs were measured using the 25-question short form of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence et al. 1973). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with items such as "women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men" on a scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Items were coded so that higher scores reflected more liberal beliefs. Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .91.

Radical Beliefs

Radical beliefs were assessed using the radical subscale of the short form of the Feminist Perspectives Scale (Henley et al. 2000). This is a five-item scale in which participants are asked the extent to which they agree with a statement on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree (e.g., "The workplace is organized around men's physical, economic, and sexual repression of women."). Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .77.

Feminist Self-Labeling

Participants were given a forced-choice measure to determine if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "I consider myself to be a feminist" (Liss et al. 2001).

Collective Action

Collective action was measured using the Collective Action Scale from Liss et al. (2004). Participants were asked how often they engaged in a variety of collective behaviors, posing questions such as "I have taken part in an internet discussion group on political, legal, or social issues facing women" and " I have participated in a rally or movement for women's rights." Reponses ranged from 1 = never to 5 = more than 5 times. Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .83.

Results

We had high levels of feminist self-identification compared to other studies (e.g., Liss et al. 2001) due to our recruitment methods. Of the women who responded to this question (91%), 44% self-identified as feminists, while 56% did not. In our sample, we found generally low levels of participation in collective action and experience of sexist events (means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1). We found high levels of liberal beliefs, low levels of conservative beliefs, and moderate levels of radical beliefs. Overall, participants had positive evaluations of feminists.

Correlations were run between all of the modeled variables and are presented in Table 2. There were positive correlations with a moderate effect size between both having a mother perceived to be a feminist and experience of sexism with having taken a women's studies class. Among the belief variables, there was a strong negative relationship between liberal and conservative beliefs and a moderately negative relationship between conservative and radical beliefs. There was also a moderately positive relationship between liberal and radical beliefs. There were small correlations between evaluations of feminists and both radical and conservative beliefs. Both feminist self-identification and collective action had moderate to strong relationships to all measured variables in the expected directions, except for evaluations of feminists, which had

Table 1 Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	Possible Range
Feminist mother	3.21	1.83	1–7
Experienced sexist event	45.38	13.45	20–120
Evaluation of feminists	3.29	.63	1–5
Conservative beliefs	2.25	1.12	1–7
Liberal beliefs	3.42	.43	1–4
Radical beliefs	3.34	1.26	1–7
Participation in collective action	17.18	6.66	11–55

Table 2 Inter-correlations among study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Women's studies	–								
2. Feminist mother	.31***	–							
3. Experience of sexism	.28***	.11	–						
4. Evaluation of feminists	.09	.08	.11	–					
5. Conservative beliefs	−.36***	−.31***	−.30***	−.16*	–				
6. Liberal beliefs	.39***	.25***	.26***	.10	−.76***	–			
7. Radical beliefs	.30***	.27***	.49***	.23***	−.42***	.40***	–		
8. Feminist self-identification	.45***	.41***	.33***	.25***	−.57***	.56***	.46***	–	
9. Collective action	.37***	.32***	.42***	.21**	−.34***	.32***	.43***	.44***	–

Note. n=213; *$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

small effect sizes. Given the strong correlations among some belief measures, we tested for multicollinearity using both the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance. The largest VIF (for conservative beliefs) was 2.5, well below the value of 10 suggested as a level for concern by Myers (1990). The smallest tolerance level (for conservative beliefs) was .41, above the .20 value recommended as a marker for concern (Menard 1995). Thus, although these variables are conceptually related, they can be analyzed as distinct variables.

A structural equation model was estimated among the 275 women who completed relevant parts of the survey using M-plus version 3.12 (Muthén and Muthén 2005). Data was missing from 62 women on one or more variables, and one of the endogenous variables was categorical. Thus, weighted least squares estimation employing a missing data modeling procedure was used. Life events (taking women's studies classes, having a mother perceived as feminist, and experiencing sexism) predicted beliefs (conservative, liberal, and radical beliefs; and evaluations of feminists), which, in turn, predicted feminist identity, which then predicted collective action. An additional direct path from experiencing sexism to collective action was also modeled, χ^2 (10)=62.91, $p<.001$; CFI=.88; and RMSEA=.14 (see Fig. 1). The model did not have good fit; modification indices suggested the addition of a direct path from having mother perceived to be a feminist to feminist self-identification, $\chi^2_\Delta(1) = 26.37$, $p<.001$, χ^2 (9)=36.54, $p<.001$; CFI=.94; and RMSEA=.11. This model still did not have adequate fit; thus, an additional direct path was added from taking women's studies classes to feminist self-identification (see Fig. 2). In the final model, both having taken a woman's studies class and having experienced sexist events significantly predicted having fewer conservative and more liberal and radical beliefs. Having a mother one perceived as being feminist predicted having fewer conservative beliefs and more radical beliefs. Neither taking women's studies nor having a mother perceived as being a feminist predicted positive evaluations of feminists. Feminist self-identification

was predicted by holding positive evaluations of feminists, having more liberal and radical beliefs, and not having conservative beliefs. Additionally, feminist self-identification was directly predicted by having taken a woman's studies class and having a mother perceived as being feminist. Collective action was predicted by feminist self-identification. It was also directly predicted by the experience of sexist events. Our final model had adequate fit, $\chi^2_\Delta(1) = 16.94$, $p<.001$, χ^2 (8)=19.60, $p<.01$; CFI=.97; and RMSEA=.07.

Discussion

The current study sought to clarify the existing literature on predictors of feminist self-identification as well as predictors of women's activism. As expected, life experiences, including exposure to feminism and experience of sexism, predicted beliefs, which, in turn, predicted feminist self-identification. Feminist self-identification predicted participation in collective action. Self-identified feminists in this study, as compared to non-feminists, held less conservative, more liberal, and more radical beliefs, and had a more positive view of feminists. Thus, the model broadly supported our five hypotheses.

This study also supports the literature on the powerful effects of life experiences on feminist self-identification. Not only do life experiences indirectly predict feminist self-identification and participation in collective action through changing beliefs, but they directly predict feminist self-identification as well. Specifically, we found a direct path between having a mother perceived as being a feminist and feminist self-identification as well as a direct path between taking a women's studies course and feminist self-identification. This is consistent with the limited previous literature that has examined the importance of having a feminist mother or other immediate family member on feminist self-identification (e.g., Liss et al. 2004; Zucker 2004).
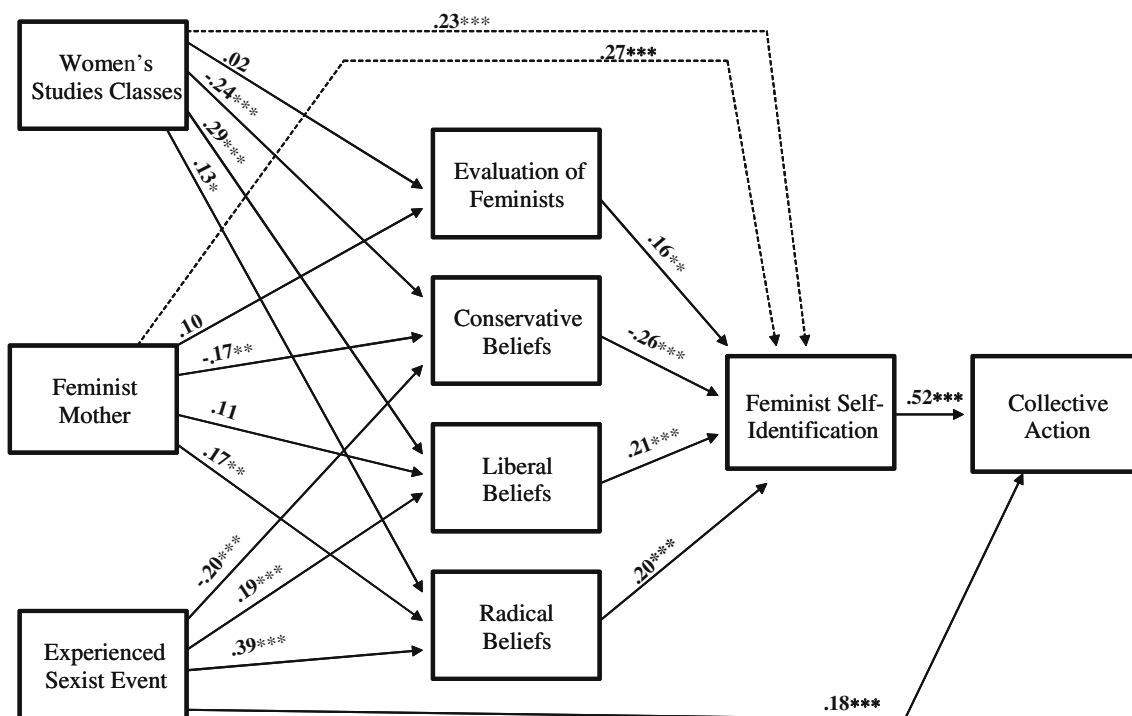
Fig. 2 Final model of the relationships among the variables of interest, $\chi^2(8)=19.60$, $p<.01$; CFI=.97; and RMSEA=.07. Standardized path coefficients are reported; * $p<.05$; ** p<.01; *** $p<.001$.

Solid lines represent hypothesized paths, and dashed lines represent paths added post hoc to improve model fit. Correlations among the four belief variables were estimated but are not depicted in the model.

It is of interest to note that, contrary to our expectations (expressed in hypothesis one), the paths between both having a mother perceived as feminist and taking a women's studies course to having a positive evaluation of feminists were non-significant. This is in contrast to the findings of Reid and Purcell (2004), who found that prior exposure to feminism led to more positive evaluations of feminists. It is unclear why we were unable to replicate this finding. On the other hand, a positive evaluation of feminists meant women were more likely to self-identify as feminists. This is consistent with a large body of literature that has found this relationship (e.g., Liss et al. 2001; Reid and Purcell 2004).

Although some research has suggested that taking on a feminist label is not an important predictor of collective action above and beyond holding feminist beliefs (Liss et al. 2004), we found a strong relationship between identity and action, consistent with the work of Zucker (2004). Additionally, we found a direct path to collective action from experiencing a sexist event, bypassing feminist self-identification consistent with hypothesis five. While feminist self-identification may be a very important and powerful predictor of collective action for women's issues, it is clearly not necessary as some women may participate in collective action because of their experiences with sexist discrimination. This is consistent with Duncan's (1999) conceptual bidirectional model in which she hypothesized

that it is possible for life experiences, such as the experience of sexism, to directly lead to collective action, which could then lead to the development of group consciousness.

While our tested model had adequate fit, it is still possible that some of the pathways may run in a reverse direction or be bidirectional. For example, as noted above, collective action may lead to changes in beliefs or identity. The interrelationships between feminist identity, beliefs, and life experiences would need to be examined using longitudinal methods in order to truly understand the directionality or bidirectionality of these relationships.

So is adopting the feminist label important? Despite the notion that feminism is obsolete (e.g., Bellafante 1998), our study indicates that those women who do self-identify as feminists are more likely to work towards implementing social change collectively. Thus, feminism still has a role to serve in society.

Our study has several limitations, including the length of the survey, which was part of a larger study. Participant fatigue may have led those not invested in the subject to self-select out of the study. It is also important to note that the online sample was recruited through mailing lists that targeted feminists and other well-educated women, resulting in a higher than average rate of feminists in the current sample. Additionally, our sample may not be representative of the general population because our participants were predominantly well-educated and Caucasian.

The current paper adds to the literature on the relationships between experiences, beliefs, identity, and action. Future research should continue to explore these relationships in greater detail. For example, are the beliefs held by self-identified feminists today considered more or less radical than those in previous generations? Have women's understanding of what constitutes collective action changed? Future research in this area would benefit from combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as from further cohort-specific research to assess generational effects.

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