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## “I'm in this for real”: Revisiting young women's feminist becoming

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### SYNOPSIS

Feminist identity development theories, advanced by Bartky (1975), Downing and Roush (1985), and others, have been operationalized and studied extensively for the last two decades. In this transnational qualitative study, the authors revisit the process by which young women come to and embrace the mantle of feminism, in order to reveal its contemporary contours. Thirty-four women, current and former university students from the United Kingdom and United States were interviewed, and their narratives analyzed, revealing several common features of their journeys to feminism: That feminism is considered common sense by participants, a realization they come to gradually. University experiences figure prominently in their identity development, locating sources of support to cope with peer diminishment of feminism. Their identities are solidified through a complex interplay of debate, deliberation, and community-building with other feminists. These newly emerging signposts of “feminist becoming” invite further research and possible revision of existing theories.

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### Introduction

After a period of some dormancy, feminism appears to be making a reappearance, particularly in the lives and politics of young women (Bellafante, 2013; McVeigh, 2013; Sheehy, 2013). While continued debate abounds about the relevance of the notion of ‘feminism’ to the values and goals of women today, 65% of women in one large scale US survey identified as a feminist when it was described as “someone who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes” (CBS News, 2005). Although this may describe many feminists, feminism itself resists singular definition, and includes liberal (Eisenstein, 1993), radical (Echols, 1989), Marxist (Vogel, 2014), womanist (Phillips, 2006), postmodern (Butler, 1990), and postcolonial (Mohanty, 1988) perspectives, among others.

Recent events, such as the occurrence of ‘slut walks’ (Armstrong, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Valenti, 2011), activism around declining reproductive rights and access (Badham, 2013; Culp Tressler, 2013; Wyatt & Botton, 2012), and recent debates about women’s persistent struggle to negotiate work and family life (Sandberg, 2012; Slaughter, 2012) suggest that feminist activism is visibly shaping public culture in the United States and the United Kingdom today. Feminism’s long history of naming and naming and challenging gender oppression has rendered it essential for advancing the cause of liberatory social change (Collins, 2010). Toward that goal, it is important for those committed to this kind of social change to understand how feminists come to feminism, and to better grasp the cultural, political, and social factors driving their motivations.

Despite the resurgence in feminist visibility and salience, mining the textures of young feminist attitudes and consciousness is not a straightforward undertaking. Scholars and cultural commentators have identified several conflicting forces acting to obscure the complex nature of young feminist engagement.

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**Table 1**  
Demographics of sample group.

Location	Race/ethnicity	Age	College level	Sexual orientation
UK = 18	White: 17	19–21: 6	Undergraduate: 9	Heterosexual = 11
	Black African: 1	22–26: 11	Graduated in last 12 months: 2	Bisexual = 3
US = 16	White: 11	19–21: 13	Masters: 2	Lesbian = 2
	African-American: 1	22–26: 3	PhD: 5	Prefer not to say = 1
	Asian American: 2		Undergraduate: 14	Heterosexual: 11
	Latina: 1		Graduated in last 12 months: 2	Bisexual: 2
	Biracial: 1			Lesbian: 1
				Queer: 2

Neoliberal economic forces have reduced young women's agency to their purchasing power (McRobbie, 2009), further amplified by the rampant commodification of their sexuality (Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010). Young feminists' standpoints, particularly in western contexts, are mistakenly conflated by older feminists with those of all young women, resulting in a tendency to dismiss their contributions (Lewis & Marine, *in press*; Brown, 2013; Chiu, 2011). These forces are further reinforced by the alluring assertion of a post-feminist present, coupled with popular sentiment that the ongoing project of feminist social change is now unnecessary (Douglas, 2010). Numerous other social forces – the stereotype of being labeled 'unattractive' or lesbian, or of being viewed as strident and humorless – compel many young women to repudiate the label of feminist (Roy, Welbust, & Miller, 2007; Scharff, 2012). And yet, young women across time and space continue to engage affirmatively with both the label and the ideology of feminism.

This study was conducted in order to better understand the influences that bring young women to feminism. Through capturing and analyzing the lived experiences of young feminists as they define and describe their experiences, we hope to add depth and dimension to the evolving understanding of what makes a feminist. We aim to identify avenues of "feminist becoming" that can be readily cultivated in both educational and community settings, so that the ranks of feminists may be continually replenished. We concur with Taylor, Whitter, and Pelak's (2000) assertion that "feminism is not simply a form of received wisdom" but instead, "one that evolves as each new generation embraces and embodies it" (p. 571). An additional reason to seek understanding of feminist becoming is because an allegiance to feminism has been associated with a variety of positive life attributes and outcomes, including increased sense of well-being (Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006), being less likely to espouse attitudes associated with eating disorders (Hurt et al., 2007), and to have higher levels of self-esteem (Weitz, 1982) and a sense of well-being and satisfaction with one's life (Yakushko, 2007).

Feminist becoming, also described as feminist identity development, has been a lively subject of inquiry over the last three decades, particularly in the psychological research. Theorists (see, e.g., Downing & Roush, 1985; Flores, Carrubba, & Good, 2006; Moradi & Subich, 2002) have typically studied feminist becoming as a step wise process of coming to consciousness, grappling with and negotiating one's embeddedness in patriarchy, and emerging with a renewed sense of commitment to resistance. Social psychologists (Griffin, 1989; Tajfel, 1978; Williams & Giles, 1978)

posited the communal nature of group identity and consciousness in response to discrimination, and expanded our thinking about the ways that others' responses to feminists and feminisms affect their identity formation. It is our contention that these primarily quantitative measurements of feminist identity do not adequately reveal complexities in the lived experience of young feminists, nor do they enable understanding of the cultural, social, and political forces currently at play in women's nascence as feminists.

Our contribution to this line of inquiry is grounded in the capture and analysis of young feminists' personal narratives of feminist becoming. By returning to the original source – feminist voices – we hope to illuminate the pathways that current-day young women take to feminist becoming, and to add depth and dimension to our collective understanding of this process.

## Literature review

Scholars in several interrelated disciplines have developed various theories of the emergence of one's sense of self as feminist. Philosopher Sandra Bartky (1975) first described the process of becoming feminist as a "profound personal transformation" (p. 425), wherein a woman's behavior and consciousness shift, hastened by the contradictions in society and the emergence of conditions necessary for change. Bartky grounded her analysis in the seismic shifts in the US society in the late 1960s and 70s, including the availability of birth control, rapid expansion of the US workforce, and other material realities. Feminists' awareness of themselves as victims of societal contradictions gives way to strategizing to address them, transforming "day to day living into a series of invitations to struggle" (p. 436). The end result, through a maze of ethical ambiguities, is to "know the truth about oneself and one's society...the scales fall from our eyes" (437), and a sense of solidarity with other women emerges.

Psychology's concern with understanding the development of social identity in adulthood led to the emergence of theories of feminist identity. Downing and Roush (1985) proposed the original model of feminist identity development, theorizing that women pass through five successive stages: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness/emanation, synthesis, and active commitment, as they move from ignorance of gender inequality, to direct experiences with it, to forming alliances with other women. In the later stages, feminists integrate their newly politicized sense of self in community with others, including men, and in active commitment, and are described as embracing individual movement toward social

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