Feminism and the Wish for a Child

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The present study investigated the relationship between feminism and the intensity of the wish for a child, as well as the costs and benefits of having children in a sample of 184 female undergraduates. Feminism was negatively related to motivation for motherhood, and the perceived costs of child raising rather than perceived benefits accounted for this finding. Perceptions of mother's—not father's—level of nurturance and happiness of childhood seemed to influence eagerness to assume the role of mother in pro-feminist women.

In historical context, the growth of feminism in the last 15 years has dovetailed with a striking drop in the birthrate (Chafe, 1977). Although parenting issues have been prominent in feminist writings—stressing shared husband-wife responsibilities and greater public support for child care (Kearney, 1979)—feminist attitudes toward the experience of motherhood or the prospect of motherhood have been generally unexplored in psychological research (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979). To explain the paucity of empirical investigations, Hare-Mustin and Broderick (1979) state: “The fact that attitudes toward motherhood, that most sacrosanct and idealized of women's roles, may not have kept pace with attitude changes toward women's other roles reflects the conflicting ideas which have been part of the myth of motherhood” (p. 114).

Thus far, researchers have found a generally negative relationship between feminism and motherhood. (Gerson, 1980, Lott, 1973; Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979).
It seems particularly important to investigate the attitudes of young feminist women toward prospective motherhood. Those who view these attitudes as basically negative have voiced concern about the loss of a group of potentially autonomous, energetic, and assertive mothers (Lott, 1973). Moreover, investigating attitudes towards motherhood in young feminist women is an important part of the process of understanding identity formation in young women today.

The term "feminism" is problematic because of its generality. Studies devoted to feminism have derived a constellation of demographic and psychological characteristics which are congruent only to a degree (Cherniss, 1972; Johnson, Stockard, Rothbart, & Friedman, 1981; Stoloff, 1973); recent research has emphasized the importance of an adult developmental or life-cycle perspective (Rapin & Cooper, 1980; Travis, 1976). The focus of feminist commitment is important, since feminism can encompass attitudes toward work, social relationships, and legal issues. An important question is whether the label "feminist" should be reserved for those committed to programmatic action (e.g., through membership in women's groups) or should include any woman (or man) who is supportive of feminist goals.

In this study feminism is defined in terms of receptivity to and approval of feminist goals, since our sample contains young college-aged women whose opportunity for political and social commitment is generally restricted. We chose attitude towards equality in the workplace as the criterion of feminist commitment, since it is the most consensual and most unambiguous focus of feminist reform.

**METHOD**

_Participants and Procedures_

Subjects were 184 female undergraduates at New York University; 113 subjects were recruited from the introductory psychology course and participated as part of a course requirement; 42 additional subjects were recruited from four other undergraduate courses. Subjects were restricted to presently unmarried women (1 subject was divorced) without children; 87% were 21 years of age or younger. Their religious affiliation were as follows: 17% Protestant, 41% Catholic, 23% Jewish, and 16% other. Subjects completed the material anonymously in sessions averaging one to one-and-a-half hours, in groups of approximately 20.