Feb 08, 2019

What Does “Feminist” Mean to You?

Written by: Adrianna Tassone

What do you think of when you hear the word “feminist?” To some, this term elicits images of political, social, and economic equality for men and women. To others, this term elicits images of man-hating women plotting to steal power from men. As PhD student Victoria Parker (Wilfrid Laurier University) points out in her talk entitled “Diverging Definitions: How the Conceptualization of “Feminism” Engenders Dislike and Obscures Common Ground Across Party Lines” at the SPSP Annual Convention, these diverging definitions are problematic. They can alienate women from identifying as feminists, and lead people to falsely believe that when it comes to gender equality, our work is done.

But what do women who identify as feminists and those who do not identity as feminists actually believe? Are their beliefs really that different? Parker’s research suggests that there is a lot more common ground than generally thought, and false portrayals of feminism can have negative consequences for gender equality. Participants were asked whether or not they identify as a feminist. Next, they read various feminist statements that were either extreme (e.g., “men have long had more power and rights than women, it is time that women had more power and rights than men”), or more moderate (e.g., “Men and women should have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life, both legally and socially”). While as a group, the participants who identified as feminists agreed slightly more with the extreme statements than non-feminists, overall, the vast majority of both feminists and non-feminists agreed with the moderate statements and disagreed with the extreme statements. When Parker looked at what statements the non-feminists think the feminists support, the story is very different. Non-feminists overestimated the percentage of feminists who agreed with the extreme statements and underestimated the percentage of feminists who agreed with the moderate statements. So, while feminists tend to agree with moderate and fair ideals, non-feminists believe that they agree with extreme and unfair ideals.

What consequences do these diverging definitions of feminism have? A second study found that when exposed to extreme versus moderate definitions of feminism, participants were less supportive of feminist issues such as implementing a parental leave policy that would ensure fairness for new mothers and fathers. Participants also reported being less willing to interact with feminists and reported lower liking of feminists compared to participants exposed to the moderate definitions of feminism. Now that we know feminists and non-feminists have common ground, the question remains how can we encourage them to work together for equality?