Women Talking: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and the Requirements of Womanhood

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Abstract

The 2000s have been termed a postfeminist and neoliberal era (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Media culture, social discourses, and personal beliefs continue to be heavily influenced by values of independence and personal responsibility. Within this culture, women are expected to exert total agency within their relationships and sex lives in order to be perceived as ideal neoliberal subjects. Using thematic analysis, we examined 15 interviews about sex and relationships conducted with college women in 2006. In these interviews, we found four main themes which included (1) women's place in society has changed, (2) women must be strong and independent, (3) women are responsible for having the right type of sex and relationships, and (4) women must monitor their own treatment. In this paper, we contextualize these themes within neoliberalism and postfeminism and provide an illustrative account of how women in the early 2000s enacted judgment on other women. These interviews help us to understand what discourses young women were engaging in at the time and how they conceptualized women's roles and responsibilities within society.

Women Talking: Postfeminism and The New Requirements Of Womanhood

From body ideals to marital roles to sexual behaviors, societal expectations for women in the United States have steadily shifted over time (Botkin et al., 2000; Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Wiseman et al., 1992). Currently, we find ourselves in what scholars have termed a "neoliberal" and "postfeminist" era in which individual choice, agency, and responsibility are prized above all else (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). These values have dominated our ways of thinking and shaped how we view the role of women in society, and since the late 1990s and early 2000s have also dominated our popular media, creating what Gill (2007) termed a "postfeminist media culture." Within this context, women's perceptions of themselves and their peers are influenced by a patriarchal, male gaze (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1993). They may adopt what Winch (2012) called the "girlfriend gaze" and enact systems of mutual governance on each other through their friendships with other women.

In the present study, we sought to explore how young women discussed and passed judgment on other women. To do this, we examined interviews conducted with college women in the 2000s that covered sex, relationships, and gender socialization. Our aim was to examine the ways in which these young women conceptualized gender roles and policed gendered boundaries throughout their discussions of parents, peers, and the media. Our analysis seeks to contextualize these discussions within scholarly discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism; we review these discourses below.

Neoliberalism

Within the realm of economics and politics, neoliberalism is commonly equated with a "radically free market" that seeks to maximize competition and free trade (Brown, 2003, para. 3). But, as Brown (2003) discussed, neoliberal rationality goes beyond the economic market and

permeates all institutions and social actions under this system. Market values are taken beyond the market itself and infused into the everyday lives and thoughts of neoliberal subjects. These neoliberal subjects are constructed as fully independent and rational agents, responsible for all of their own actions. The ideal neoliberal subject is not community-minded, but rather fully self-possessed and motivated to focus on and improve their own life. If they "mismanage" their life, no matter their economic, educational, or systemic circumstances, the blame is placed solely on them as an individual.

Extending this neoliberal market rationale into the realm of women's sexual activity, Bay-Cheng (2015) offered an intervention into the Virgin-Slut continuum. She proposed the addition of an "agency line" as an evaluative measure of female sexuality. She explained that, if women's sexual activity is traditionally measured and morally judged along a spectrum from abstinent to active, then the agency line incorporates a new, neoliberal axis of judgment. Women as neoliberal subjects must prioritize choice, self-interest, and personal responsibility within their sexual encounters. Sexual autonomy, agency, and women's independence from men are highly valued and expected within this system. A woman who adheres to these requirements is seen as having control over herself and is judged more favorably because of it. A woman who does not adhere to these requirements is judged negatively and seen as lacking control over herself. Sexual agency becomes a key distinguisher between accepted and not-accepted sexual behavior. Sexual agency also becomes a requirement for neoliberal personhood and womanhood within this regime (Bay-Cheng, 2015).

Postfeminism

Coined in the wake of second-wave feminism, the term postfeminism has become a staple of scholarly discourse since the late 80s and into the early 2000s (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Intimately related to neoliberalism and encompassing some of the same values, postfeminism emerged as a way to describe media and popular thought in the current era. Although scholars have debated the exact definition of the term, most agree that it "[has] to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (McRobbie et al., 2007, p. 1). This "pastness" may manifest, for example, in the way popular media portrays women and feminism, frequently depicting the goals of feminism as no longer necessary or already achieved. Shows like *Friends, Ally McBeal,* and *Sex and the City* have been termed postfeminist works, lending themselves to a depoliticization of gendered, systemic oppression and a promotion of total individualism (Hamad, 2018; McRobbie 2004; Oullette, 2002).

In her 2007 essay, Gill characterized postfeminism as a sensibility rather than an analytic perspective in and of itself. She wrote that, within this phenomenon, the media promotes the individualism, choice, empowerment, and autonomy of its female subjects. As positive as this may initially sound, postfeminist sensibilities ultimately ignore gendered systemic oppressions in favor of placing full responsibility on women to monitor their own behaviors and appearances. Within this framework, women are also constructed as independent sexual actors rather than as sexual objects. Again, while this may sound outwardly positive, the transformation of women into completely agentic sexual subjects renders them responsible for their treatment within patriarchal systems. This transference of responsibility onto the individual effectively "reprivatizes" political issues, directly contradicting second-wave feminism's construction of the personal as political (Gill, 2007; McNay, 1992).

While this reprivatization of politics does not directly condemn feminism, it does make the assumption that collective feminist activism and consciousness are no longer needed. The

individual, not society collectively, is positioned as the ultimate determiner of equal treatment. It becomes the individual's responsibility to ensure, by adhering to postfeminist norms, that they receive the treatment that they want, rather than society's responsibility to ensure equal treatment to all of its members (Gill, 2007). Women, specifically, must transform themselves physically and behaviorally into ideal postfeminist and neoliberal subjects in order to retain not only their womanhood but also their personhood. If they are unable to achieve subjecthood and independence within society, the blame is placed squarely on them as individuals rather than on the systems within which they are operating. As Gill (2007) describes, a male, societal gaze is turned inward and women are expected to police and monitor themselves and their peers.

Women Monitoring Each Other And Themselves

Many scholars have discussed internalized misogyny as a way in which misogynistic, patriarchal culture is incorporated into women's perceptions of themselves and other women (Ellis & Bermúdez, 2020; Piggot, 2004; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1993; Szymanski et al., 2009). For the purposes of this paper, I will use the definition of internalized misogyny articulated by Saakvitne and Pearlman (1993) and further elaborated by Piggot (2004). These authors posit that misogyny can be perpetuated by women who have internalized and thus enact a central male culture that devalues women and girls. This internalized misogyny may appear in the form of placing capital value on women in relation to their male counterparts or generally favoring men as having more agency and/or competency. Expectations from patriarchal culture may be turned inward as women begin to monitor themselves and others, ensuring that they meet the requirements for womanhood as laid out by society. Women become active enforcers of their own oppression and that of other women.

This mutual oppression may be embedded and enacted within female friendships. As Winch (2012) posited, a "girlfriend gaze" has been created within our current cultural landscape. Speaking specifically about the attainment of ideal bodies, Winch (2012) argued that friendships between women and girls can act as a form of mutual governance. In addition to or perhaps rather than a male gaze, women are expected to seek the approval of other women within their social circle through their maintenance of an ideal body. Modern news and celebrity media also create a culture in which women's bodies become public spectacles and are continually monitored by outside observers. The "democratization of celebrity" means that all women's bodies have the potential to be visible and commented on by a wider public (Winch, 2012, p. 23). Women are expected to be critical observers of each other, offering advice and encouragement directed towards the attainment of an ideal body. While Winch (2012) examined only body ideals in her theory of the "girlfriend gaze," the idea of mutual governance could potentially be expanded into the realm of behavior and adherence to neoliberal, postfeminist ideals of womanhood.

Present Study

The current study seeks to explore how women spoke about their friends, families, and themselves within the context of the early 2000s and neoliberal postfeminism. What kinds of judgments did they make? How did they speak about other women and girls? What definitions of womanhood did they value and what boundaries of womanhood did they enforce? Rather than offering sweeping generalizations about the way women talk about each other, this project intends to provide an account of young women in this time period while contextualizing their attitudes and comments.

Method

Participants

The current study examines 15 interviews and questionnaires selected from a larger 2005-2006 mixed-methods study about sexual socialization. The original study was conducted over the course of two years and is comprised of 266 first-year students from a California public university. Participants were interviewed twice during their first two years of college: once in 2005 during their first year and once in 2006 at the beginning of their second year.

In the current study, 15 interviews were randomly selected from 105 women-identified participants who participated in the 2006 round of data collection. Of the participants selected for the current study, all were 19 years old at the time of the interview and all self-identified as heterosexual. Nine of the participants self-identified as white, 3 as Latina/Hispanic/Chicana, 2 as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 as biracial.

Procedure

Participants in the original data collection phase were recruited through on-campus flyers and tabling events. The recruited students were given information about the study and asked to sign consent forms before completing a computer task, questionnaire, and semi-structured interview. After each round of data collection, participants were debriefed. They received compensation of $20-$25 for participation in the first wave and $25-$40 for participation in the second.

The interviews were divided into four main sections: (1) parental socialization, (2) peer socialization, (3) media socialization, and (4) the participant's own experiences and preferences. Questions in the first three sections of the interviews focused on messages that participants received about power, gender, sexuality, and dating throughout the year from each respective source of socialization. Participants were asked questions like "What are some messages you

received in the past year about sexuality and dating from [parents, friends, the media?" and "What did [your parents, your friends, the media] communicate to you about power dynamics in relationships?" Female participants were also asked about how their friends, parents, and the media defined womanhood and male participants were asked about definitions of manhood. In the personal preferences section, interviewees received questions about what they thought was sexy, what they found attractive, what potential partners would find attractive about them, and about any dating or sexual experiences.

Data Analysis

The 15 randomly selected interviews were analyzed using Braun & Clark's (2006; 2021) thematic analysis. According to this inductive approach, no coding scheme was created before reading the interviews. Rather, a codebook was created based on the selected interviews. After random selection, we familiarized ourselves with all 15 interviews by reading them and coming up with potential qualitative codes. The first and second authors met weekly to discuss the data, clarify potential confusion, and generate more codes to fit the data. Once a cohesive codebook was created and agreed upon by the first two authors, the first author used NVivo to apply the codes to the interviews. During the coding process, the first two authors continued meeting weekly in order to refine codes and address problem areas. After coding was completed for all 15 interviews, themes were generated to fit and encapsulate the data. The first two authors clarified and refined themes together, working to group codes together under these broader categories.

Results and Interpretations

While the interviewees varied greatly in their views on womanhood, four main themes were repeated throughout the interviews: (1) women's place in society has changed, (2) women

must be strong and independent, (3) women are responsible for having the right type of sex and relationships, and (4) women must monitor their own treatment.

Women's Place in Society Has Changed

When defining womanhood throughout their interviews, participants reflected on the idea that women's place or role in society has changed over time. Most participants neglected to provide a specific temporal range for this change, referring more generally to variations of "now", "before now", and/or "way before now." Despite their vague temporal statements, participants distinguished between what we might call "modern womanhood" and what they considered to be "old-fashioned" or "traditional" womanhood. When "traditional" womanhood was mentioned, participants consistently described it negatively and spoke critically of the women who they thought exemplified it. Whereas their ideas of what constitutes modern womanhood consistently included independence and strength, they thought of old-fashioned, stereotypical, or traditional womanhood as being based in housework, a lack of independence, and feminine beauty norms. These ideas sometimes emerged as participants spoke about their mothers, seemingly reflecting on their parents belonging to what they viewed as bygone eras of stereotypical gender presentation.

Our Mother's Generation and Traditional Roles

While participants usually described "traditional" femininity and female stereotypes in negative terms, they sometimes complicated their opinions when speaking about their mothers. While they acknowledged that their mothers inhabited this traditional femininity, they also antithetically resisted describing their enactments of womanhood negatively. One participant's response exemplifies this tension as she discusses her mother's definition of what it means to be a woman:

> Um, very old-fashioned and stereotypical, kind of but like a little bit modern. She's really into like femininity, like high heels, she wears fake eyelashes every day, always dying her hair, but then she's also strong so not old fashioned in the sense of like stay in the kitchen but like she is very, very feminine but she definitely wears the pants in most relationships.

This participant constructed her mother as simultaneously old-fashioned and modern. She judged that her mother conformed to traditional feminine aesthetics, but distanced her from the "old-fashioned" woman who stayed in the kitchen all day. The phrase she used to describe her mother's role in relationships, "wears the pants", implies a gendered shift in her agency. Rather than staying in the kitchen all day, this participant's mother exerted her modern womanhood through the occupation of a traditionally masculine role, one that, presumably, is more agential than a traditionally feminized one. In this occupation, her mother was almost excused for her traditionally gendered presentation because of her exertion of agency and strength. Her feminine aesthetics were portrayed as intentionally chosen rather than assigned to her by patriarchal beauty standards. This participant, by reframing her mother as an active agent in her relationships and aesthetics, expressed leniency in her otherwise condemnatory opinion of traditional gender norms.

Other participants described women in their families similarly to the one above, and we termed these women "equal housewife." While the equal housewife completed the more stereotypical tasks of femininity (caring for children, husband, etc.), she nevertheless was equal to the man in her life by virtue of choosing to fulfill gendered expectations. This emphasis on choice seemed to allow the "equal housewife" to fulfill postfeminist expectations of simultaneous agency and docility and allowed participants to justify their mothers' traditional

roles without compromising their desire to position themselves as equity-minded (Gill, 2007; Hirshman, 2005). The roles they inhabited were understood as potentially belonging to the past, but their *choice* to inhabit them complied with the agential ideal that neoliberal postfeminism demands. Because parents were positioned as belonging more to the past than participants' peers, participants also seemed less willing to critique their choices to occupy traditional gender roles.

Our Generation and Traditional Roles

The idea of an "old-fashioned" woman was also brought up as women spoke about their peers and was usually used in comparison to what the participants viewed as newer, more positive enactments of womanhood. As described above, while they usually expected women of a previous generation to inhabit traditional roles such as that of housewife or caretaker, participants expressed skepticism when their contemporaries inhabited these same "old-fashioned" roles. For example, one participant describing the power dynamics in her friend's romantic relationship said:

> I think she's more of, like, the old-fashioned like, 'I want to be a stay-at-home mom, and have the man support me.' Just because, if she ever talks about you know when she gets married, she said, 'I want to have the guy who's strong, and ha[s] a really good job, so he can support the family.'

When the interviewer asked for elaboration on her friend's definition of strength, the participant called her friend's perspective "weird", going on to describe how her friend wants a man to be able to pick her up on her wedding day. This participant's statements raise a metaphorical eyebrow at a peer having such stereotypical desires. Both the participant and her friend belong to a generation steeped in a postfeminist sensibility: patriarchy has supposedly ceased to dominate the lives of women and they are not relegated to the role of subservient housewife (Banet-Weiser,

2018). So, while participants like this did not explicitly condemn their friends' choices to adhere to traditionality, they seemed to express uncertainty as to why someone of their postfeminist generation may make that choice. Her friend is explicitly described as "old-fashioned" and thereby distanced from more modern peers, with her desires seen as belonging to a bygone era of womanhood. A choice to adopt traditional gender roles, which participants may have viewed as justifiable in their mothers' generations, now merited commentary when it appeared in their own.

Women and Media

Other participants noted a shift in women's roles through their commentary on media, sometimes explicitly reflecting on how media has improved or sometimes worsened its portrayals of women. One participant, when asked about women in the media, said,

> I think it's really changing… from what I've seen in the past . . . it's changing a lot. The power dynamics for women, um, are kinda getting switched, but they're still keeping that like classic, um, the men initiate, like, in asking out or going on dates and stuff. And you're seeing more of a turn in the sexual initiation.

This participant explicitly comments on what we coded as a "progress narrative" within the media. She tells the interviewer that power dynamics are getting "switched" and that women are getting to occupy the traditionally masculine role of initiating romantic or sexual contact. While she doesn't assign an explicit valence to this shift, her commentary on it aligns with many other participants' descriptions of the changing roles of women.

The participant above described a progression from "classic," "old-fashioned" gender roles to more modern roles that allow women agency. Other participants mentioned similar progressions and usually did so extremely positively. When describing the media, several women mentioned that TV shows were doing "better" or were portraying women as less sexualized and

more independent. Some participants, however, noted disappointedly that advertisements and music videos still portrayed women as sexual objects existing only for a male gaze. Among the women who commented on a shift in women's rights, roles, and portrayals in modern culture, most agreed that giving women more agency was positive while sexualizing and objectifying them was negative and regressive.

Women Must Be Strong And Independent

When asked for definitions of womanhood as understood by their parents and friends, participants primarily listed the traits "independence" and/or "strength" and repeated these qualities throughout the rest of their interviews. Participants also seemed to endorse their friends' and parents' definitions of womanhood more readily if they included these values. Additionally, in almost every instance that strength and independence were mentioned in the interviews, these characteristics were given a positive or neutral connotation. For example, when asked what she thought was attractive about herself, one participant immediately responded, "I'm pretty strong", denoting strength as an attractive characteristic. Some participants viewed strength and independence as so essential that they would criticize their friends for not exerting them enough.

Independence And Strength In Relation To Men

While many participants agreed that strength and independence were important qualities for women to have, not all of them agreed on how to define these attributes. One way that participants defined them was through a comparison to masculinity. For example, a participant described her mother's definition of womanhood, saying, "You can be a very independent, strong, like … male figure, as society would say." She went on in her interview to describe her mother as "wearing the pants" in her family and taking care of things like the household bills and money. In this section of the interview, all of her conceptualizations of strength and

independence came from her mother's ability to inhabit traditionally masculine roles. In contrast, this participant painted her father as somewhat limited, not doing much for the family besides going to work every day. But in her definition of strength and independence, which she extrapolated from her mother's example, she explicitly tied womanhood to societal definitions of masculinity. There was no construction of a separate "feminine" independence in her description, but rather a masculine independence that women can map themselves onto.

Participants also sought to define independence and strength through women's relation to men. These qualities were articulated through their lack of dependence on men and their ability to stand without a male figure in their lives. Commonly, participants would describe fiscal autonomy as essential for feminine strength or independence. For example, when speaking of her aunt, a participant said,

> she would like talk to me and tell me you know, . . . 'you can be independent, you can be strong on your own, you need to go make sure you get a degree you know, find a good job, be financially stable before anything else so you don't have to depend on men.'

In this statement, independence and strength are built around an imperative that women not be dependent on the men in their lives. Several other participants echoed this sentiment, outlining non-reliance on men as essential to their conceptualizations of women's independence and strength. Like the participant above, many other participants mentioned pursuing a career or getting a degree as essential to their constructions of the independent woman.

The Right Amount Of Independence And Strength

While participants generally agreed on the importance of possessing the attributes of strength and independence, there was also a danger in having too much of either. One participant talked about how she was generally a very "bossy person" because of the values taught to her by

her mother, but that sometimes she might boss her boyfriend around too much. She spoke about being told to "let off on [her boyfriend]" and be less bossy. And, despite personally feeling like she has the most power in her own life, she said she was told to be "nicer." Even while emphasizing her fervent desire to have strength and power in her life, this participant moderated her statements by describing other people's opinions on her strength. Even her mother, who was described as sharing these values, seemed to view this participant as exerting too much strength, commenting on her relationship with her boyfriend. So, while strength was described as desirable by this participant and her mother, too much of it merited commentary and was censured by those around her.

But, whereas one participant was being told not to be so bossy or to "be nicer" to her boyfriend, other participants described their friends as being too "passive", "inferior", or otherwise not meeting their expectations of strength and independence. When asked about her friends' definitions of womanhood, a different participant described it as "similar to mine, and my mom's. Just about being strong and not being passive or inferior. And being respected…That's basically it." In this definition of womanhood, it is once again the woman's responsibility to *not* be passive or inferior in any way; she must exert strength in her relationships or risk being criticized. But, as in the other example, too much strength also invites scrutiny. Essentially, if a woman swings too far to either end of the strength or independence spectrum, she risks opening herself up to criticism.

Women are Responsible for Having the Right Type of Sex and Relationships

Many women in this sample tried not to enforce what they viewed as "stereotypical" gender roles; however, they still provided clear guidelines as to what women's relationships should look like. According to them, women must not be too boy-obsessed, must retain control

in their relationships, and must "handle" themselves in sexual situations. They expressed these guidelines through judgments of their peers' actions and commentary on the power dynamics of their friends' relationships.

At times, there was a tension between traditional and contemporary views of women's sexuality. Traditional opinions about female sexuality (focusing on dangers of sex and women's role as gatekeepers), were relatively rare; many of the women in our sample focused more on women's sexual desire and pleasure. Yet even though participants seemed to actively accept and promote what they viewed as sexual empowerment for women, many of their statements nevertheless advocated for self-restraint and limitation within women's sexual lives. One participant captured this tension, saying, "Like you do it and you don't. Just don't go around and give it around to everyone, but if you're in a relationship, it's ok. It's ok to have sex with more than one partner before marriage." Although this participant rejected the view that sex should be saved for marriage, her statements still constructed boundaries around what type of sex is acceptable in women's lives. Yes, you can have more than one partner throughout your life, but you should also be in a relationship with your partner before having sex with them. Yes, sex before marriage is okay, but you can't "give it around" too much. In this way, participants refrained from using explicitly condemnatory language, while still carefully circumscribing women's sexual lives and providing guidelines for what a modern sex life should look like.

Handling Oneself [MOU1] ***in Sexual Encounters***

One tenet of a modern sex life that was repeated throughout the interviews was the idea that women should be able to "handle" themselves in sexual situations. To participants, this usually meant their friends shouldn't have to reach out for help or shouldn't get too emotionally attached when hooking up or sleeping around. In relation to Bay-Cheng's (2015) agency line,

they were expected to retain high agency and autonomy throughout their sexual encounters. When asked about messages she received from her friends about sex, one participant described receiving "the messages of just being mentally prepared [for] what you're getting yourself into." She also described "having to deal with my friends being really upset over situations that they shouldn't be upset about and shouldn't have gotten into if they would be upset about it." This participant describes "dealing with" her friends as a chore, expressing frustration that they "had gotten themselves into" situations that they were then upset about. Her friends seem to be expected to weigh possible consequences before engaging in sexual situations so that they don't have to be "dealt with" when they reach out to their peers for emotional support.

This thought process makes the neoliberal demand that women should be fully agentic, non-emotional actors in these scenarios (Brown, 2003). They are held responsible for the consequences of their relationships and are not expected to request support or help in the case of poorly-managed feelings. There seems to be an expectation of independent, rational, and agentic action within romantic and sexual situations despite the emotions one might expect these situations to engender. This participant goes on to draw a contrast between friends who "do know what they want and can handle things mentally" and "a lot of my other friends [who] couldn't." The women who are able to "handle things mentally" are described more positively by this participant while her other friends are described in patronizing terms and looked down upon. Her statements embody a neoliberal mindset that is described in Bay-Cheng's (2015) conceptualization of agency as a new dimension in the postfeminist judgment of women. This assumption of female agency avoids any examination of the realities of living in a patriarchal society in addition to the emotionality inherent in sex and relationships.

Handling the Self Relationally

Beyond sex, women in this sample also carefully defined what they thought of as an acceptable relationship in the modern era. Here we saw a co-occurrence between this and the theme of change over time, with participants usually defining ideal relationships as not having traditional gender roles. As seen previously, these participants tended to disparage their friends if they saw them adopting what they thought of as "old-fashioned" relationship roles or viewed them as "weird" for talking about marriage at a young age. Participants also criticized friends who seemed too obsessed with their boyfriends or with boys in general. One participant described her "boy-obsessed" friend in childlike, juvenile terms that distanced her from more mature peers. Other participants described their friends as "losing themselves" in their relationships or making their relationship their entire personality. Neither of these behaviors was ever described positively.

When speaking about messages she had received from her friends about sexuality and dating, one participant described her friend's relationship as an example of what not to do:

> [O]ne of my friends from high school is in this relationship with this guy and she's, like, basically obsessed with him, and . . . she just wants to marry him and is just very consumed… that's kind of her personality . . . And so I guess the message that I got from that is like, 'Whoa, like calm down. You're 19. It's ok . . . ' I don't know. Like even, like just not jumping to conclusions or just like . . . *being rational instead of just emotional* [emphasis added]

The participant depicted her friend's relationship negatively, using words like "consumed" and "obsessed" or describing her relationship as taking over her personality. This reaction to a friend's "obsession" illustrates Bay-Cheng's (2015) conceptualization of the agency line. According to a neoliberal sensibility, this friend would be expected to retain her personal

autonomy and not become "consumed" by her relationship, as the participant described (Bay-Cheng, 2015). She did not describe her friend as having agency in the relationship but rather judged her negatively for her lack of it. This neoliberal sensibility can also be seen in this participant's emphasis on rationality over emotionality (Brown, 2003). She interprets her friend's emotional response to the relationship, wanting to marry her boyfriend and becoming "obsessed", negatively and wants her to "calm down." Even within the context of romance, she expects her friend to deemphasize her feelings in favor of a rational, logical exchange that an ideal neoliberal subject might be expected to have (Brown, 2003). Other participants similarly described boy obsession as non-agentic and either expressed concern or disgust with their friends who they thought had lost themselves in the pursuit of relationships.

Equality in Relationships

Almost every participant, when asked about ideal power dynamics in a relationship, mentioned equality or said something along the lines of "there should be no power in a relationship." We interpreted the latter phrase to mean that they believed that no relationship partner should wield power over the other. Participants frequently emphasized and reemphasized their values of equality. They described how they, knowingly or not, enforced these values in their friendships with other women. One participant, when describing a friend's relationship, said, "It was never an issue of power, and with most of my friends that's the way their relationships are, and if they're not then I'm probably not hanging out with them." She described her friend's relationship as laid back, with minimal fights, and no issues of power. To this participant, this kind of relationship is ideal. But she continued beyond this point, saying that she probably wouldn't even hang out with people whose relationships aren't equal. Beyond the mutual governance of Winch's (2012) girlfriend gaze, which occurs within already-established

friendships, this participant uses romantic relationships as a metric for who might or might not merit her friendship at all. This participant collapses relationship dynamics into individual identity and uses them as a judgment of whether a woman merits her attention and attachment. Women are expected to be totally agentic actors within their relationship in order to qualify as valuable potential friends to this participant.

Another participant used respect as a tool to enforce her view that relationships should have equal power. She described laughing at how her friends think that a woman should be the one to have all the power in a relationship, deriding their opinions that she disagreed with. When the interviewer asked her about what her friends have communicated to her about dating, she responded, "Um, well, nothing, because I don't respect them . . . I guess it means nothing to me because I don't respect that opinion." While most participants found themselves defending their opinions of equality against male dominance in relationships, this participant had the opposite experience. Nevertheless, she used these women's opinions on relationships as a metric by which to give or withhold her respect of them. In this example, she chooses to withhold her respect, making fun of her friend's opinions to a third party all the while strengthening her perspective that total equality must come before all else.

Women Must Monitor Their Own Treatment

Finally, one theme that we saw repeated throughout the interviews was the idea that women should be and are responsible for their own treatment within their relationships. This idea appeared no matter the participant's views on strength, feminism, independence, or feminine identity. When describing what they viewed as unhealthy or unbalanced relationships, participants tended to focus on how their female friends were taking/not taking power, "letting" themselves be controlled, or being too passive. They rarely described the behavior of the male

counterparts in these same relationships or, if they did, blamed their friends for putting up with their behavior. For example, one participant described a relationship in which her friend's boyfriend took charge of planning, and her friend "went along with it." About her friend, she said, "she just really doesn't give herself any choices in the relationship." This participant's description of her friend makes it appear as though she was fully in control of "giving herself choices", but actively decided not to do so. Her relationship was judged along the agency line and her perceived passivity was described as being actively chosen. Rather than reflecting on both partners in the relationship dynamic, this participant painted a picture wherein her friend was capable of and obliged to "give herself choices" in her relationship, but elected not to. Her failure to do so seems to annoy this participant and she describes her friend's perceived choices negatively.

Another way that we conceptualized this theme was through what we called the "language of let." When participants described female friends, relatives, or public figures, they would often speak about how they "let" men act towards them in certain ways. If men were mistreating them, participants described how the women had not taken power when they should have or how they let themselves get walked all over. For example, one participant reflected on what she had learned from her mother, saying, "Yeah, never never let a man hit you. Never let a man disrespect you … never let a man cheat on you." In this example, this participant seems to expect women to be responsible for relationship abuse and violations committed against them. Rather than it being a man's responsibility to *not* do these things, this participant has learned that it is a woman's responsibility to *not let him* do these things to her. Bay-Cheng's (2015) agency line seems to be applied to the extreme in this and other examples, creating a discourse in which

women are expected to be so agentic and responsible that they are even blamed for allowing the bad behavior of their partners.

In another example of the "language of let", a participant told the interviewer that her feminist friends say, "Don't let [a man] have the power. He doesn't have all the power. Like it's mutual. If you're upset, you need to talk to him, not be passive or reserved about it." In this example, it once again becomes a woman's responsibility to ensure that her relationship is balanced and that the power is equally distributed. Despite her friends claiming a feminist identity, they don't conceptualize this power dynamic through patriarchal systems of oppression, but continuously reframe it through a neoliberal lens of personal responsibility. Another participant had an even more visceral reaction to her friends' relationships, saying, "I was like, really like offended. And I was like, why would you let yourself be controlled like this? And then like, they wouldn't know they would be like, 'cause I love him.' Stuff like that you know." This participant not only criticizes her friend's behavior but is actively offended by it. The idea that a woman would "let" herself be controlled by a man becomes a personal affront. In a postfeminist world, women have supposedly achieved total equality and agency over themselves. Any evidence to the contrary may be seen as regressive and threatening to other women's equality status.

Once again, we see a participant construct relationships through a lens of personal responsibility rather than patriarchal systems of power. Within a postfeminist and neoliberal landscape, participants like this seemed to expect women to have fully achieved agency. When women did not operate with the expected agency, participants described them negatively. These negative descriptions were usually directed at individual women and did not contain any mention

of broader systems of power. The enactment of agency seemed to be a very salient topic for participants and they seemed to react effusively to their friends' relationship dynamics.

Conclusion And Future Directions

This study sought to examine the ways in which women spoke about other women as contextualized within a neoliberal and postfeminist landscape. While many of our participants claimed that times had changed, mostly for the better, they expressed complicated and sometimes contradictory feelings about what they described as old-fashioned gender norms. Throughout their interviews, they discussed many facets of womanhood, adopting some traditional language while simultaneously enforcing and describing new roles and expectations for the modern woman to fill. We found that women were expected to have the right type of relationships, exert independence and strength, and monitor their own treatment in their relationships. This paper does not aim to give a full account of how all women speak about other women but rather captures a moment in time in which neoliberalism and postfeminism were in full swing as young women were seeking to redefine their roles. This study gives insight into the mindset of young college women in 2006 and illustrates various discourses of women's independence, strength, responsibility, sexual agency, and place in society. Through our examination, we participate in an expansion of academic discussions on women judging and commenting on other women. We hope this study shows that these discourses and commentaries go beyond simple "slut-shaming" and internalized misogyny, but also include a renegotiation of women's roles and perceived responsibilities in society.

Due to the nature of the data, it was difficult to extrapolate information beyond the scope of romantic and sexual partnerships. A future study may seek to widen this frame and examine how women speak about each other in different aspects of their lives. The participants in this

data also represent[MOU2] a specific population of women in emerging adulthood: straight, cisgender, relatively highly educated, and mostly white. It would be informative to recreate this study with participants from a wider range of gendered, racialized, and classed identities in order to get a broader picture of how womanhood and femininity are spoken about in society. Finally, repeating the study in the present historical moment might provide us with interesting insights into how views and discourses about womanhood have changed or stayed the same over time. Although some topics of conversation may have shifted, we expect that researchers would continue to find instances of contradiction, redefinition, and fluctuation in discourses of womanhood.

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