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Carnal Knowledge | Sex with a feminist is great, survey finds

By Faye Flam
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And I thought I was the only 12-year-old girl to have a crush on Alan Alda.

A new survey out of Rutgers University finds there's something sexy about feminists - the girl versions and, more notably, the guys.

This comes just in time for the future of feminism, as it followed on the heels of a University of Pennsylvania survey on "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness" - a title that led many a pundit to declare that women were better off stuck at home in front of the stove.

One problem with the feminists-make-better-lovers study is increasing confusion about the meaning of the word. After I floated the question to various men, some wanted to know what I meant by feminist. Others said they believed in equality but not preferential treatment.

Haverford College senior Brian Johnson - he called to ask me about science-writing careers - says he hadn't been too sure either until he signed up for a class taught by a feminist professor. "I would call myself a feminist," he says now, "in the sense that I am interested in how decisions/policies/ethical systems affect viewpoints, and how those viewpoints affect groups, women or otherwise."

I didn't have anything nearly that sophisticated to say about my own feminism. No matter. When I reached the study's main author, Rutgers psychologist Laurie Rudman, she said my beliefs in equal rights and the obligation to help tomorrow's women enjoy the same freedoms that I did meant I qualified.

Rudman says she launched the study to examine negative stereotypes of feminists. She and a graduate student asked 242 undergraduates and 289 adults to indicate their level of agreement with the statement "I am a feminist."

The volunteers were also asked to rate their agreement with the statement "My partner is a feminist." Then they got questions about physical attractiveness, the quality of their relationships, and their sexual satisfaction.

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The result: Whether or not you were a feminist had no effect on the quality of your sex life, but Rudman says she found a connection between having a good sex life and having a *partner* who was a feminist. That held whether your feminist partner was male or female.

The finding was met with scorn from right-wing bloggers, she says, some making the assumption that she and her colleague weren't hot enough to be taken seriously on the issue.

As awful as that sounds, still more anti-feminist barbs followed the Penn report on female happiness, which was based on periodic surveys over the last 35 years.

The upshot of that research: Women in the 1970s reported being happy or very happy slightly more often than did men, but that's not the case now.

The authors of the paper, Wharton economists and romantic partners Justin Wolfers and Betsey Stevenson, don't specifically blame the women's movement or feminism, but they raise it as one possible cause.

That prompted hundreds of comments on blogs, many casting blame on women for wanting to "have it all," being too whiny, or defying their "true natural calling" to stay home and nurse babies.

The trouble with all these responses is that the Wharton study never claimed to show women were unhappy. When surveyed in 2006, for example, 85.6 percent of women respondents said they were happy or very happy, vs. 87.2 percent of the men.

Penn linguist Mark Liberman stepped in earlier this month to try to quell the misunderstanding, which started after the New York Times wrote about the study. "What people take away from the journalistic description of this study," Liberman wrote in his blog, Language Log, "is that women used to be happier than men, and now men are happier than women - and they think of this as a fact about all men and all women."

Liberman invited readers to examine a graph that accompanied the happiness paper, in which female responses zigzagged along surprisingly close to male ones, with a few mysterious spikes in female happiness around 1974 and 1976. Perhaps the real question is what women were so happy about back then.

Alan Alda?

Let me know on *my* blog.

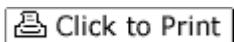
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Read the happiness study: <http://go.philly.com/health>

Contact staff writer Faye Flam at 215-854-4977 or fflam@phillynews.com - or post to her blog: <http://go.philly.com/sexscience>.

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