Conceptualizing Backlash: (UK) Men's Rights Groups, Anti-Feminism, and Postfeminism

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Il est important de préciser les concepts de « ressac » (backlash) et de « post-féminisme » pour comprendre la politique des genres des mouvements masculinistes et des groupes de défense des droits des hommes. En m'inspirant du travail d'universitaires pertinentes (féministes), je défends une compréhension particulière du ressac et du post-féminisme, et je propose une typologie pour aider à situer les différents mouvements masculinistes. La typologie fait une distinction entre ressac, post-féminisme et féminisme au regard des affirmations empiriques et des jugements de valeur propres à chaque perspective. Le ressac se fonde sur l'allégation que la société défavorise plus les hommes que les femmes. Le genre est alors perçu comme une question politique, nécessitant un discours collectif antiféministe. Le post-féminisme est une perspective fondamentalement ambivalente, où l'on présume que l'égalité des genres est déjà établie (dans l'ensemble). Certaines idées féministes sont tenues pour acquises, tandis que le féminisme lui-même est présenté comme un anachronisme. Le genre est dépolitisé et le féminisme devient un choix de vie personnel. Enfin, le féminisme, comme le ressac, part du principe qu'il existe encore des inégalités criantes dans la société contemporaine, mais le groupe désavantagé serait plutôt celui des femmes. Ici, le genre est politisé et les inégalités de genre nécessitent un discours collectif féministe. Afin d'illustrer les différentes perspectives présentées par les groupes de défense des droits des hommes, je cite le groupe britannique pour les droits pour les pères (Real Fathers 4 Justice), en démontrant qu'ils alternent entre les récits du post-féminisme et du ressac.

Conceptualizing "backlash" and "postfeminism" is important to understanding the gender politics of men's movements and men's rights groups. Drawing on the work of relevant (feminist) scholars, I argue for a particular understanding of both backlash and postfeminism and map out a typology intended to help situate different men's movements. The typology distinguishes between backlash, postfeminism, and feminism in terms of the different empirical claims and value judgments relevant to each perspective. Backlash is based on the claim that society disadvantages men rather than women. Gender is seen as political and as requiring a collective,

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anti-feminist politics. Postfeminism is a fundamentally ambivalent perspective that assumes that gender equality has already been (mostly) achieved. Some feminist ideas are taken for granted, while feminism itself is cast as anachronistic. Gender is depoliticized and feminism becomes an individual lifestyle choice. Finally, feminism, like backlash, assumes that significant gender inequalities exist in contemporary society but sees women as the disadvantaged group. Here, gender is politicized, and gendered inequalities necessitate a collective feminist politics. To illustrate the different perspectives articulated by men's rights groups, I discuss UK fathers' rights group (Real) Fathers 4 Justice, arguing that they alternate between postfeminist and backlash narratives.

Introduction

Men's rights groups are only one strand of the wider men's movement, which incorporates a multitude of organizations with disparate agendas, from pro-feminist men's groups to Christian evangelical groups.[1] Common features of men's movements are that they organize around the identity of being "men"; that they assume that there are distinctive "men's issues" and "men's interests'; and that they all articulate a standpoint on feminism. Attitudes towards feminism depend on the perception of what "feminism" is and how it has affected men's status as well as assumptions on ideal gender roles.

This article focuses on illuminating the relationship between men's movements and feminism. I illustrate the conceptual framework through the use of a case study of a UK fathers' rights group (FRG), (Real) Fathers 4 Justice (RF4J). I explore the concepts of "backlash" and "postfeminism" since it is often claimed that men's movements represent a backlash against feminism.[2] However, the concept of backlash and its counterpart, postfeminism, are too frequently inadequately defined. Distinguishing between them is central to understanding the nature of men's movements and their varying responses to feminism, whether these are negative, ambivalent, or positive. My approach is to draw on the ideas of key feminist scholars through a close reading of the work of Susan Faludi, Ann Braithwaite, Stéphanie Genz, and Angela McRobbie. Although there are many other valuable

1. Kenneth C Clatterbaugh, *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity: Men, Women, and Politics in Modern Society*, 2nd ed (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Ana Jordan, "'Every Father Is a Superhero to His Children': The Gendered Politics of the (Real) Fathers 4 Justice Campaign" (2013) 62:1 Political Studies 83 [Jordan, "Superhero"]; Michael A Messner, *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000); Judith Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men's Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
2. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, 2nd ed (New York: Doubleday, 1992) [Faludi, *Backlash*].

feminist discussions of backlash and postfeminism (some of which are cited in this article),[3] this in-depth analysis enables a nuanced discussion and enhances the clarity of the conceptual aspects of the argument.

Building on this analysis, I argue for a particular understanding of both backlash and postfeminism and map out a typology to situate different men's movements. Backlash is defined as being explicitly hostile to feminism, either because (1) gender equality is not a desirable goal or (2) although gender equality is a worthy aim, feminism actually works against equality by privileging women over men. Gender is seen as political and as requiring a collective, anti-feminist, politics. Postfeminism, in contrast, is a fundamentally ambivalent perspective that assumes that gender equality is a valid goal but that it has already been achieved. Basic feminist ideas are taken for granted, while feminism itself becomes embarrassingly anachronistic, a product of a firmly bygone social and political era. Gender is depoliticized, and feminism becomes a lifestyle choice. Finally, the equally complex concept of feminism with which the first two are (implicitly) contrasted, like backlash, assumes that significant gender inequalities still exist. However, women are argued to be disadvantaged overall compared to men. Gender equality is seen as a socially and morally desirable goal, and feminism is seen as the best hope for achieving this goal. Here, gender is again politicized, and gendered inequalities necessitate a collective feminist politics.

The typology advanced is intended to illuminate the nuances between the different perspectives on feminism within the various men's movements. In the case of men's rights groups, it may be useful in determining whether such groups are explicitly hostile to feminism or whether there is a more subtle (albeit still problematic) postfeminist narrative in use. Understanding the constructions of feminism employed by different men's rights groups is vital to understanding how best to respond to such groups. The first section of this article engages with debates around postfeminism and backlash through a detailed reading of feminist texts. The second outlines my typology of feminism, postfeminism, and backlash. Finally, I use the case study of FRGs to illuminate and extend the theoretical discussion.

Postfeminism or Backlash?

There is frequent confusion around, and slippage between, the contested concepts of "backlash" and "postfeminism."[4] Jonathan Dean characterizes academic accounts

3. See, for example, Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra, eds, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) for a collection of chapters on post-feminism. See also Dorothy E Chunn, Susan B Boyd & Hester Lessard, eds, *Reaction and Resistance: Feminism, Law, and Social Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), which showcases Canadian scholarship on backlash.
4. Ann Braithwaite, "Politics of/and Backlash" (2004) 5:5 Journal of International Women's Studies 18 at 18 [Braithwaite, "Politics"].

of contemporary feminism as either "melancholic" or "celebratory."[5] Accordingly, a useful starting point for mapping academic debates around backlash and postfeminism is to categorize them along a spectrum of pessimism to optimism. Of course, none of the conceptions of backlash or postfeminism completely inhabit either polarity of absolute gloominess or unqualified cheerfulness.

Backlash theorists are at the pessimistic end as they perceive anti-feminist trends as being entrenched, persistent, and omnipresent.[6] Backlash is conceived as a response from powerful groups to changing gender relations. While there is evidence of this response, morose representations of backlash take feminism to be already dead or at least dying. Such accounts exaggerate the extent of backlash, presenting a simplistic view of the landscape of contemporary (anti)-feminist narratives and activism. Susan Faludi's 1992 book is a key example of this perspective.[7]

Postfeminist academic accounts, by contrast, tend to be more optimistic. They contest narrow conceptions of feminism and femininity inherent to backlash accounts. Postfeminist theorists argue that narratives seen as representing backlash are not necessarily anti-feminist. Instead, they potentially constitute a "new" feminism, embracing elements of "traditional" femininities erroneously considered inherently oppressive by second-wave feminists. For these theorists, Faludi and the like underestimate women's agency. Stéphanie Genz's and Ann Braithwaite's work are, respectively, representative of the postfeminist approach. I also draw on Angela McRobbie's more sceptical account of postfeminism.

First, I analyze backlash. Backlash is used to describe hostile responses to the (perceived) impact of feminism, but there is little clarity or consistency beyond this.[8] Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames define backlash as resistance from "those in power to attempts to change the status quo."[9] Backlash, for them, is "a reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power" to "threats" to their privileged position.[10] The classic commentary *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* by journalist Susan Faludi documented such responses to feminism.[11] Despite limitations, her account is worth interrogating as it remains

5. Jonathan Dean, *Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) at 9–10.
6. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4; Stéphanie Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
7. Faludi, *Backlash*, *supra* note 2.
8. Elaine J Hall & Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, "The Myth of Postfeminism" (2003) 17:6 Gender and Society 878.
9. Jane Mansbridge & Shauna L Shames, "Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power" (2008) 4:4 Politics and Gender 623 at 625.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Faludi, *Backlash*, *supra* note 2.

one of the most in-depth characterizations of backlash.[12] Faludi describes the 1980s as being defined by "a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women."[13] The "fundamentalist ideology" of backlash became influential in government and dominated the media and popular culture.[14] The central claim was that feminism had been bad for society, including the very women it was supposed to liberate.[15] Backlash, Faludi claimed, successfully delegitimized feminism by representing it as anachronistic and misguided because (1) women were already equal; (2) equality had damaged women (and men); and (3), consequently, women themselves have now rejected feminism.

Despite Faludi's emphasis on unfavourable representations of feminism, she is less despondent than is sometimes suggested. Her claim was neither that backlash was an entirely new phenomenon nor that feminism was entirely defunct. Noting that there was always resistance to assertions of women's rights, she characterizes "fear and loathing of feminism" as "a sort of perpetual viral condition in our culture" that "is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside and resurface periodically."[16] The points at which the virus becomes "acute" are "backlashes." Backlashes do not spring from the void, they feed on undercurrents of antipathy towards feminism and are symptomatic of its (perceived) successes.[17] Backlash is, by definition, parasitic on feminism and only becomes necessary when feminism is strong, rather than declining.[18]

Various empirical and conceptual criticisms have been levelled at Faludi. Empirically, the dominance of backlash in the US media has been questioned.[19] Further, Sylvia Walby suggests that Faludi's extension of her analysis from the United States to the United Kingdom in the 1992 edition of *Backlash,* obscured

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12. Faludi has since published books that complicate the views presented in *Backlash*. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern American Man*, Faludi suggests that men are as much victims of entrenched gender norms as women. See Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Modern Man* (New York: W Morrow and Company, 1999). She went on to argue in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* that the response to 9/11 precipitated a return to restrictive gender ideals and a new attack on feminism/women's rights. See Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007). However, I do not discuss these texts as it is the detailed articulation of backlash in Faludi's earlier book that is most useful here.
13. Faludi, *Backlash*, *supra* note 2 at 12.
14. *Ibid* at 13.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid* at 14.
18. *Ibid* at 15.
19. Hall & Rodriguez, *supra* note 8.

important differences between these contexts.[20] Moreover, there is a tendency in her book(s) to conflate the United States with the whole of "the West." Most pertinent here are conceptual problems, which fall into three categories: first, Faludi's reductionist view of feminism; second, her inadequate acknowledgment of women's agency; and, finally, her essentialist assumption that men are agents of backlash and women of feminism. The first two critiques are central to what I call postfeminist academic analyses. The third emerges out of these issues and from Faludi's simplistic equation of men's movements with anti-feminism. In this article, I outline these criticisms and analyze alternative postfeminist accounts.

First, Faludi treats "feminism" as being uncontested.[21] To understand what constitutes backlash, we need to understand the object of backlash. Critiquing Faludi, Ann Braithwaite argues that "backlash" has been used uncritically to sideline contentious questions about feminism.[22] Changes in feminist theory and cultural representations of feminism are ignored, neglecting how examples of backlash "might alternately be seen as illustrations of how much something about feminism has instead saturated pop culture, becoming part of the accepted, 'naturalized,' social formation."[23] Braithwaite's analysis suggests that what Faludi characterizes as simply backlash is more complex than a straightforward rejection of feminism.

Stéphanie Genz similarly accuses Faludi (and others) of ignoring feminism's mainstreaming, inscribing false binaries between 1970s feminism and 1980s backlash—between "authentic" and "inauthentic" feminism.[24] In painting a one-dimensional portrait of "new" feminism, backlash accounts are premised on a similarly flattened picture of "old" feminism, presenting "a homogeneity that is not and never was there" and obscuring the possibility of alternative feminisms.[25] If there are only two available responses to feminism—for or against; feminist or backlash—then postfeminist narratives that upset this either/or framing become automatically anti-feminist. While not all definitions of feminism are plausible,[26] there is no one "true" feminism and feminisms are always subject to contestation.[27]

Second, self-identified feminists who do not subscribe to authentic feminism are portrayed as necessarily complicit in backlash. Faludi suggests women's consent is subtly engineered so that even purportedly "feminist" women unwittingly promote

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20. Sylvia Walby, "'Backlash' in Historical Context" in Mary Kennedy, Cathy Lubelska & Val Walsh, eds, *Making Connections: Women's Studies, Women's Movements, Women's Lives* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1993) 79.
21. Dean, *supra* note 5; Genz, *supra* note 6.
22. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4.
23. *Ibid* at 19.
24. Genz, *supra* note 6 at 72.
25. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4 at 19.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Sandra Kemp & Judith Squires, "Introduction" in Sandra Kemp & Judith Squires, eds, *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 3.

backlash.[28] Framing "anti-feminist" women's voices as the result of "backlash brainwashing" is problematic as it dismisses dissenting women as merely deluded instruments of backlash. The false dichotomy between feminism and anti-feminism maps onto a further binary opposition between feminism and femininity. Faludi positions "traditional" femininities as being inherently antagonistic to second-wave feminism.[29] If traditional femininity is automatically anti-feminist/anti-women, by definition, women performing such femininities must be "gender dupes."

Further, Faludi portrays the media as monolithically oppressive in promoting backlash.[30] Her commentary does not leave much room for defiant voices. This simplistic view of the media, together with Faludi's restrictive conception of feminism and dismissal of (traditional) femininity, results in a neglect of women's (or men's) agency in resisting backlash. Finally, backlash accounts are "essentialist," eliding differences among women and men[31] and relying on problematic ideas of gender as "transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences."[32] For example, Walby suggests feminism has been resisted by "patriarchal forces" as "[g]ender politics includes not only the actions of women, but the reactions of men," thereby equating women's action with feminism and men's reaction with anti-feminism.[33] The assumption that backlash is perpetrated by men against women also dominates Faludi's work, despite her recognition of women's role in consenting to backlash. The construct of backlash has also been criticized as being based on white, middle-class women's experiences of (anti)-feminism. Parminder Bhachu states that "the multiplicity of women's agencies and "feminisms" was never adequately represented in "the" feminist movement ... the present moment of backlash does not relate to the cultural position of many groups of women."[34] Not only is the simplistic male/female binary in Faludi's approach flawed, the assumption that these women and men are all in privileged racial and economic categories is equally problematic. Gender is intertwined with other social identities[35] and operates as part of "a

28. Faludi, *Backlash*, *supra* note 2 at 16.
29. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4 at 18; Genz, *supra* note 6 at 70.
30. Genz, *supra* note 6 at 72.
31. Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?": Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1988).
32. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989) at xi.
33. Walby, *supra* note 20 at 79.
34. Parminder Bhachu, "Dangerous Design: Asian Women and the New Landscapes of Fashion" in Ann Oakley & Juliet Mitchell, eds, *Who's Afraid of Feminism? Seeing through the Backlash* (New York: New Press, 1997) 187 at 189.
35. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991) 43:6 Stanford Law Review 1241; Patricia Hill Collins, "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation" (1998) 13:3 Hypatia 62; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2000).

matrix of other forms of oppression relating to 'race', ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, disability and health status."[36]

Contrastingly, those whom I label postfeminist theorists emphasize the diverse available responses to feminism. They operate with broader conceptions of feminism/s and femininity/ies, along with more nuanced ideas of changes in both. McRobbie suggests postfeminism "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved," distinguishing it from Faludi's backlash, "a concerted, conservative response."[37] Postfeminism is not, then, explicitly hostile to feminism. Rather, postfeminism is deeply ambivalent, taking some feminist ideas very much for granted.

This ambivalence manifests in debates over the "post" in postfeminism.[38] First, "post" means "after." Postfeminist narratives here signal the loss or end of feminism. This partly explains the slippage between postfeminism and backlash. Second, "post" suggests a continuity with, rather than a rupture from, feminism. This meaning is invoked where postfeminism is seen as an alternative feminism, adapted to a changed social world. On such accounts, gloom about postfeminism arises from anachronistic understandings of gender and power.[39] Finally, Genz highlights, "post" signals "a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows," situating her own perspective in this "precarious middle ground."[40] McRobbie also captures this tension between the two apparently oppositional meanings.

I follow Genz and McRobbie in understanding postfeminism in terms of both continuity and disjuncture, rather than as either pro- or anti-feminist. Postfeminism suggests a troubled relationship that acknowledges feminism, while always being distanced from it. Differences over postfeminism also derive from how scholars think feminism is "acknowledged." This, in turn, shapes perceptions of the extent of the departure from feminism, from its adjustment to current social realities, to a complete overhaul of its fundamental tenets.

This complexity is exacerbated by the fundamental open-endedness of the "feminism" in postfeminism noted earlier. Responses to feminism are as multifaceted as feminism itself. Genz argues that this recognition, together with the ambiguity around "post," means that any attempt to "fix" a single meaning of postfeminism is "futile and misguided."[41] She therefore suggests a fluid conception of postfeminism as "a network of possible relations that allows for a variety

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36. Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) at 25.
37. Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" (2004) 4:3 Feminism Media Studies 255 at 255.
38. Genz, *supra* note 6 at 18. See also Ann Braithwaite, "The Personal, the Political, Third-wave and Postfeminisms" (2002) 3:3 Feminist Theory 335; Dean, *supra* note 5; Gill, *supra* note 36.
39. See Dean, *supra* note 5.
40. Genz, *supra* note 6 at 19.
41. *Ibid.*

of permutations and readings."[42] For Genz, it is more productive to insist on the inherent heterogeneity of postfeminism than to (arbitrarily) choose one meaning. This understanding of postfeminism as new and old, feminist and anti-feminist, does not, however, sidestep the problem of critically interrogating the politics of narratives around feminism and gender. This is evident in Genz's account as she warns that postfeminism's "appropriation of its feminist origins is more complicated and insidious than a modernization or rejuvenation."[43] This caution reveals some of the tensions in Genz's position. To evaluate what constitutes "appropriation" of feminism, it is necessary to make some claims about what is (or is not) being co-opted. It is important to recognize the fluidity of feminism and correlatively of postfeminism (and backlash), but it is not possible in doing so to avoid drawing any boundaries around "feminism."

As noted, McRobbie shares ground with Genz in her analysis of postfeminism in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*.[44] However, she is also critical of Genz and those who write in a similar vein. McRobbie's concern is to "differentiate between this longstanding hostile activity [the backlash of the 1970s and 1980s] and the practices of disarticulation in evidence today."[45] She argues that there has been a "complexification of backlash" as feminism (in the United Kingdom) from the 1990s "had achieved the status of common sense, while it was also reviled, almost hated."[46]

In contrast to Genz, McRobbie sees postfeminism as "*a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment.*"[47] Although postfeminism means that "[e]lements of feminism ... have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life," feminism has been co-opted into a "much more individualistic discourse," employing impoverished understandings of "choice" and "empowerment."[48] McRobbie situates postfeminism in broader neo-liberal politics and the dominance of the neo-liberal subject.[49] The ascendancy of neo-liberalism has become central to the maintenance of the gender order as the "neo-liberal individual ostensibly has no gender, and, as a result, social justice initiatives for women can be jettisoned," in effect, this means that "men's still more dominant positions are empowered to

42. *Ibid* at 20.
43. *Ibid* at 23.
44. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009) [McRobbie, *Aftermath*].
45. *Ibid* at 30.
46. *Ibid* at 6.
47. *Ibid* at 1 [emphasis added].
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid* at 28–29.

some degree, while women's interests are rendered increasingly invisible."[50] This "substitute for feminism" or "faux-feminism" shuts down challenges and resistances to gendered inequalities (we already have equality).[51] Feminist ideas, then, have ironically become part of the "undoing of feminism,"[52] in what McRobbie calls a "double entanglement."[53]

The implications of McRobbie's analysis seem ambiguous. On the one hand, feminism is seen as still having disruptive potential. McRobbie suggests she does not have a linear understanding of history where feminism has been stalled by post-feminism, nor is she "implying that feminism is now quite extinguished."[54] On the other hand, she comments: "[I]t requires both imagination and hopefulness to argue that the active, sustained and repetitive repudiation or repression of feminism also marks its (still fearful) presence."[55] This tension arises from McRobbie's sharp separation between "real" feminism and "faux" (post)-feminism, where the former still exists alongside the latter, but the two are quite distinct. For example, McRobbie critiques Baumgardner and Richards' brand of postfeminism based on a reclamation of "girlieness," femininity linked to make-up, "sexy" underwear, and individual consumer pleasures.[56] She argues that in relying on caricatures of "old" feminism,[57] ultimately, the authors present "an anti-feminist argument [by] casting elders as implicitly unattractive and embittered."[58] Postfeminism is a "complexification of backlash," then, only in that it represents backlash in a slightly different guise, a new manifestation.

Although Genz's work is less hostile to "old" feminism, McRobbie argues that she is similarly overly celebratory and simplistically equates postfeminism with "third-wave" feminism. In her eagerness to embrace the ambivalence of post-feminism, Genz seems reluctant to evaluate the implications of postfeminism for gender politics, minimizing the individualizing aspects that curtail an analysis of gendered social, political, and economic structures. As Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests,

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50. Dorothy E Chunn, Susan B Boyd & Hester Lessard, "Feminism, Law, and Social Change: An Overview" in Dorothy E Chunn, Susan B Boyd & Hester Lessard, eds, *Reaction and Resistance: Feminism, Law, and Social Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007) 1 at 4. See also Raewyn Connell, *Confronting Equality: Gender, Knowledge and Global Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Gill, *supra* note 36; Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture" in Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra, eds, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 1.
51. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, *supra* note 44 at 1 [emphasis removed].
52. *Ibid* at 5.
53. *Ibid* at 6.
54. *Ibid* at 150.
55. *Ibid* at 15.
56. *Ibid* at 157.
57. There are interesting parallels with Faludi's portrayal of feminism here.
58. McRobbie, *Aftermath*, *supra* note 44 at 157.

"the political focus of postfeminism is vastly different from that of third-wave feminism for the former eschews gender politics as rather old-fashioned and dreary and the latter refigures gender politics."[59] An enlarged understanding of feminism(s) does not mean accepting that "anything goes."[60] Conceptions of postfeminism that accept all claims to feminism at face value are of no real analytical value.

The boundaries between postfeminism and feminism are not clear cut. However, I maintain the distinction, rather than dissolving it altogether, to ensure analytical focus on the less promising and ambiguous elements of postfeminism. Postfeminism is distinctive in acting as a "thought-stopper," closing off questions about the nature of feminism and feminist activism before they can even be asked. As McRobbie argues, everyday postfeminist accounts present certain feminist ideas as inherently unreasonable and/or irrelevant. Feminism and gender are depoliticized through the representation of gender (and sexuality, race,[61] and so on) as a matter of individual

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59. Sarah Banet-Weiser, "What's Your Flava? Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture" in Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra, eds, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 201 at 207. Also, the distinction between post-feminism and third-wave or post-structuralist feminism can be illuminated through the example of post-structuralist feminist takes on backlash. See Davina Cooper, "'At the Expense of Christianity': Backlash Discourse and Moral Panic" in Leslie G Roman & Linda Eyre, eds, *Dangerous Territories: Struggles for Difference and Equality in Education* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 43 at 45; Didi Herman, "'Then I Saw a New Heaven and a New Earth': Thoughts on the Christian Right and the Problem of 'Backlash'" in Leslie G Roman & Linda Eyre, eds, *Dangerous Territories: Struggles for Difference and Equality in Education* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 63 at 65, 66, 69. Both problematize simplistic victim/perpetrator binaries in liberal accounts of backlash. See, for instance, Ann E Cudd, "Analyzing Backlash to Progressive Social Movements" in Anita M Superson & Ann E Cudd, eds, *Theorizing Backlash: Philosophical Reflections on Resistance to Feminism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 3. Cooper and Herman also highlight the complex, dynamic operation of power that is at best difficult and at worst impossible to capture through the backlash metaphor. Cooper and Herman are inspired by post-structuralist ideas of power as shifting, contingent, and productive as opposed to "zero-sum". See also Chunn, Boyd & Lessard, *supra* note 50. However, along with other third-wave feminists and unlike post-feminists, Cooper and Herman do not therefore construe gender as merely an individual lifestyle choice unconstrained by broader power relations.

60. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4 at 28.

61. See Banet-Weiser *supra* note 59 at 208 on how post-feminism situates not only gender, but also race, as "just a flava, a street style, an individual characteristic, and a commercial product". See also Kimberly Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil-Rights Popular Culture" in Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra, eds, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 249 for a discussion of the intersections between post-feminism and "post-civil-rights" discourses in the United States.

style. Feminist scholars have objected to this curtailment of critique before it is articulated.[62] Postfeminism lacks a critique of gendered power relations and any conception of the necessity for social and political change. As Ann Braithwaite argues, feminisms must precisely be about structural change: "[T]hey cannot just be about individual women's empowerment without exploring how that empowerment is defined and achieved."[63]

This point is significant for evaluating differences between backlash and postfeminism. Backlash narratives cast neither feminism nor gender as apolitical. Instead, backlash re-politicizes gender as an axis for mobilization and feminism as a social force. Although there is, of course, fundamental disagreement with feminist characterizations of both gender and feminism, backlash, like feminism, entails active resistance to what is perceived to be the current gender order. While postfeminist accounts seem more celebratory of feminism and "feminine" subjectivity, then, it may be that from a feminist perspective they are more pernicious than the superficially more negative backlash discourses. Backlash narratives, in their explicit hostility to feminism, raise questions about feminism and gender. Postfeminism, however, renders gender, and therefore feminism, invisible.

In summary, the conflation of all aspects of postfeminism and post-femininity with anti-feminism in backlash accounts is problematic. However, upbeat views of postfeminism are also flawed and ultimately sidestep important questions about agency and power. In their anxiety to advocate enlarged notions of feminism and to emphasize women's agency, postfeminist theorists do not adequately address the implications of "new" forms of feminism. Just as some of the more dire-sounding aspects of backlash accounts are unduly pessimistic, the more jubilant elements of postfeminist accounts are overly optimistic. Commentators "often seem to find feminist politics everywhere (e.g. new and some third-wave feminisms) or nowhere (e.g. McRobbie's postfeminism)."[64]

Feminism, Postfeminism, and Backlash: A Typology

Although there can never be a single, uncontested concept of feminism, of postfeminism, or, indeed, of backlash, it is nonetheless useful to outline some general criteria for recognizing each. Drawing on the earlier analysis, I therefore outline a typology for mapping particular men's movements in terms of their response(s) to feminism. I advance my typology for the sake of clarity as well as to facilitate a nuanced understanding of men's movements and, in this case, men's rights groups.

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62. Gill, *supra* note 36; McRobbie, *Aftermath*, *supra* note 44; Christina Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012); Tasker & Negra, *supra* note 50.
63. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4 at 28.
64. Dean, *supra* note 5 at 21.

My intention here is not to make claims about the overall "state" of feminism and the part men's movements play in promoting or undermining feminist goals. Instead, the aim is to construct a framework—a starting point—the usefulness of which can only be fully determined through wider empirical research on how different men's movements construct and react to feminism in different contexts. However, I give a sense of how this typology can be applied to specific groups in the next section.

All such typologies must be partial and to some extent simplify matters. However, disentangling the ambivalence of postfeminism from more directly pro- or anti-feminist narratives (however feminism is perceived by specific men's movements) reveals in itself the multiple available responses to feminism by these movements. Using only either backlash or postfeminism as an umbrella term encompassing these various responses can lead to indirectly reinscribing a false sense of a single unified view. The broad definitions of feminism, postfeminism, and backlash offered here allow for some internal fluidity within each category. Following Dean, it is important to explore how representations of feminism actually play out in specific contexts, in this case, in specific sections of the men's movement.[65] Although my typology does not remove problems of definition since judgment is still required on whether groups are feminist, postfeminist, or part of a backlash, it opens up room for a discussion of the complexity of attitudes towards feminism.

Inspired by my analysis of debates around postfeminism and backlash in the feminist academic literature, I argue that it is useful to distinguish between everyday (as opposed to predominantly academic[66]) feminist, postfeminist, and backlash perspectives in terms of the differing empirical and normative claims integral to each. Of course, empirical accounts are value laden, and normative positions rely on "factual" premises, so that the boundaries between the empirical and the normative are inevitably blurred. However, it is instructive to separate them for analytical purposes. Empirically speaking, feminism, postfeminism, and backlash relate to different assumptions about the nature of gender equality in society and the part that feminism has played, and will play, in bringing about gender equality. Normatively, they can be separated in terms of the perception of the value of gender equality and of the positive or negative value of feminism in creating a better (or worse) society.

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65. *Ibid.*

66. I see the distinction between everyday/popular and academic narratives of post-feminism and backlash in terms of the arenas in which they are articulated, rather than in terms of a hard-and-fast difference between them regarding theoretical rigour. Popular and academic versions of post-feminism are mutually constitutive.

First, it is important to give a working definition of feminism. Of course, there is no stable, unitary conception of feminism that all feminists would agree on.[67] However, as argued above, implicit assumptions about what is, and is not, "feminist," seep through at various points in accounts of backlash and postfeminism, revealing that an often unilluminated version of feminism underpins them. Some commentators (for example, Faludi) assume a fairly narrow view of feminism that leads to the dismissal of any departure as being automatically representative of backlash. In contrast, writers who object to this imposition of an unfeasibly restricted idea of feminism, such as Genz, tend to operate with an extremely broad understanding. This leads to all and any constructions of gender or discussion of equality issues being perceived as automatically (post)feminist. The definition presented in this article is intended to allow for the diversity of feminisms but, at the same time, to avoid becoming implausibly open ended.

In order to make analytical headway, I define feminism as being premised on the empirical claims that (1) significant gender inequalities exist in contemporary society—women are generally disadvantaged compared to men and (2) feminist theory and activism are necessary to bring about gender equality.[68] This view is accompanied by three normative assumptions: (1) gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal; (2) feminism is conceived of as a necessary and benevolent force for social change; and (3) gender is political and there is a need for collective feminist politics. Gender must be understood as intersectional with cross-cutting identities, as noted earlier. However, gender movements themselves vary considerably on how far they are concerned with inequalities related to race, class, and so on. Since the definition of feminism here is designed to apply to such movements, only counting movements that recognize intersectionality as feminist would be too restrictive. However, in analyzing conceptions of gender articulated by these movements, it is nonetheless crucial that feminist scholars pay attention to these complexities. The construction of masculine identities by RF4J, for instance, is acknowledged to be premised on white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity (and femininity).

Feminisms have in common the argument that gender is "a difference that makes a difference."[69] Gender is seen as a social and political category as opposed to merely biological or natural. Gendered social structures are therefore understood

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67. Kemp & Squires, *supra* note 27.
68. Although there is a long-standing "equality versus difference" debate in feminist theory, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. See Michèle Barrett, "The Concept of 'Difference'" (1987) 26 Feminist Review 29; Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
69. Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism" in Linda J Nicholson, ed, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 63 at 78.

in terms of power relations rather than as a matter of genetic destiny or of individual choice.[70] While the boundaries between the personal and the political are not fixed,[71] feminisms resist the complete reduction of the latter to the former. Feminist perspectives actively seek to understand the relationship between the personal and the political or to disrupt the boundaries between the two. This leads to a third common aspect of feminisms, which is the need for collective action to bring about social and political change. Whether this change is to amend the existing system to make it less hostile to women and other marginalized groups or to stage a gender revolution that would necessitate the radical transformation of society and politics, action to remove gender inequality must nonetheless be central to any plausible definition of feminism.

Postfeminist perspectives should be understood as making the empirical claims that (1) no important gender inequalities remain in current ("Western") societies and (2) feminism is no longer necessary as any minor gendered inequalities will disappear "naturally" over time. These claims underpin a normative position that gender equality is not only socially and morally desirable but also that feminism is anachronistic and lacks legitimacy since it has already been largely successful. As a consequence, gender becomes depoliticized, and feminism becomes an individual lifestyle choice rather than a focus for collective politics.

Backlash characterizes the "facts" of gender (in)equality in two ways. Either, it is claimed, contrary to postfeminism, that significant gender inequalities do exist in society—men are generally disadvantaged compared to women—or the argument is that there is rough gender equality but that this equality has led to a damaged, dysfunctional society as women and men are not "naturally" meant to be equal. The normative position that goes with the first account is that gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal but that feminism is negative as it has led to (men's) inequality. The second account, instead, is premised on the view that gender equality is not a desirable end and that feminism is therefore bad for both men and women. Here, gender is once again conceived of as political and as the basis for a collective anti-feminist politics.

Overall, postfeminist perspectives are deeply ambivalent about feminism, whereas the logic of backlash is explicitly hostile to feminist projects. Table 1 gives

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70. Although liberal feminism may be founded on (liberal) individualism, gender inequalities from this perspective still have a structural element—they are not simply an "accident" but, rather, the outcome of socially constituted institutions that have generally favoured men over women. For example, liberal feminists have challenged the way in which the line between private and public spheres has been drawn and demonstrated how the relegation of women to the private is a structural issue that hampers their equality. See, for example, Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Anne Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

71. Braithwaite, "Politics", *supra* note 4.

Table 1: Summary of Feminism, Postfeminism, and Backlash Typology

	Feminist	**Postfeminist**	**Backlash**
Empirical claims on the nature of gender (in)equality in society and feminism	(1) Significant gender inequalities exist in society—women are generally disadvantaged compared to men (2) Feminism (ideas and activism) is necessary to bring about gender equality	(1) Gender inequalities are non-existent or minimal—women and men are equal (2) Feminism is no longer necessary—any remaining minor inequalities will disappear naturally over time	(1) Significant gender inequalities exist in society—men are generally disadvantaged compared to women *or* women's equality has led to a damaged society (depending on the normative position, see below) (2) Feminism has been bad for men and women—anti-feminist action is necessary to bring about gender equality *or* an unequal but better society
Normative position on gender, (in)equality and feminism	(1) Gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal (2) Positive view of feminism—it is a necessary and benevolent force for change (3) Gender is political, there is a need for collective (feminist) gender politics	(1) Gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal (2) Ambivalent view of feminism—it has brought about (near) gender equality, but feminism today is anachronistic or no longer legitimate (3) Gender is not political, there is no need for collective (feminist or anti-feminist) gender politics	(1) Gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal *or* gender equality is not desirable (2) Negative view of feminism—it has brought about gender inequality *and/or* is a damaging force (3) Gender is political, there is a need for collective (anti-feminist) gender politics

an overview of the differences between feminist, postfeminist, and backlash perspectives.

These analytical distinctions are not conceived of as being mutually exclusive nor as fully defined/definable in advance. The broad definitions of feminism, postfeminism, and backlash allow for some internal fluidity within each category. For example, in the first case, I have not specified a particular version of feminism. In addition, one of the key starting points of my outline of postfeminism is that it is precisely marked by its ambivalence towards feminism, meaning that recognition of ambiguity and complexity is built into the definition itself. In addition, as the boundary between the categories is not rigid, movements may also employ dual narratives, slipping between backlash and postfeminism or perhaps from feminism to postfeminism.

Men's Rights, Fathers' Rights, and RF4J: Postfeminism or Backlash?

The application of the typology must, at least in part, be examined on a case-by-case basis. To illustrate, I conclude with some remarks on the UK fathers' rights group RF4J. RF4J's narrative straddles postfeminist and backlash narratives in a manner that reveals the complex nature of responses to feminism by men's movements. Founded in 2002, Fathers 4 Justice (F4J) is by far the most well known of the FRGs in the United Kingdom. The F4J brand has spread to the United States and Canada[72] and has had international influence on FRGs' aims and protest strategies.[73] Individual FRGs appear and disappear as international and national movements fluctuate.[74] It is therefore not possible to give a wholly accurate representation of groups or the movement at any one point in time. However, it is clear that on the whole the numbers of FRGs are rising and that they are becoming "increasingly vocal."[75] Groups have been reported by scholars in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzer-

72. See Richard Collier & Sally Sheldon, "Fathers' Rights, Fatherhood and Law Reform: International Perspectives" in Richard Collier & Sally Sheldon, eds, *Fathers' Rights Activism and Law Reform in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Hart, 2006) 1 at n 1, 3. Collier and Sheldon point out that there were F4J websites for Australia, Italy, and the Netherlands, but it is not clear whether these were sanctioned.

73. *Ibid* at 6.

74. Jocelyn Elise Crowley, "Fathers' Rights Groups, Domestic Violence, and Political Countermobilization" (2009) 88:2 Social Forces 723 [Crowley, "Countermobilization"].

75. Richard Collier, "Fatherhood, Law and Fathers' Rights: Rethinking the Relationship between Gender and Welfare" in Julie Wallbank, Shazia Choudhry & Jonathan Herring, eds, *Rights, Gender and Family Law* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010) 119 at 120 [Collier, "Fatherhood"]. See also Richard Collier, "On Masculinities, Law and Family Practices: A Case Study of Fathers' Rights and Gender" in Martha Albertson Fineman & Michael Thomson, eds, *Exploring Masculinities: Feminist Legal Theory Reflections* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013) 251 [Collier, "Masculinities"]; Jocelyn Elise Crowley, "Taking Custody of Motherhood: Fathers' Rights Activists and the Politics of Parenting" in Martha Albertson Fineman & Michael Thomson, eds, *Exploring Masculinities: Feminist Legal Theory Reflections* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013) 267 [Crowley, "Taking Custody"]; Crowley, "Countermobilization", *supra* note 74; Daphna Hacker, "Men's Groups As a New Challenge to the Israeli Feminist Movement: Lessons from the Ongoing Gender War over the Tender Years Presumption" (2013) 18:3 Israel Studies 29; Leora N Rosen, Molly Dragiewicz & Jennifer C Gibbs, "Fathers' Rights Groups: Demographic Correlates and Impact on Custody Policy" (2009) 15:5 Violence Against Women 513.

land, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[76] Although there are differences between these groups, even within specific national contexts, there are also often striking similarities. A common organizing idea is that fathers are disadvantaged by a family law system that favours mothers over fathers in child contact disputes.[77] F4J, for example, claims that the UK family law system is financially punitive for those engaged in contact disputes and that, either in not awarding fathers (enough) contact,[78] or in failing to enforce contact orders, the courts fail to operate in the "best interests of the child."[79] This purported failure of the system to maintain contact between children and fathers is seen as contributing to the "breakdown" of society. The group therefore campaigns for a legal presumption of shared parenting, a transparent family court system,[80] and the enforcement of contact orders.

The claims made in this article derive from previous research based on interviews with members of RF4J, although this research was not specifically concerned with their responses to feminism.[81] At the time of the interviews (2006), the branch the interviewees were based in had formed a splinter group from the original F4J called "Real Fathers for Justice" (RFFJ).[82] I refer to the group as (Real) Fathers 4

76. Srimati Basu, *The Trouble with Marriage: Feminists Confront Law and Violence in India* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Robbie Busch, Mandy Morgan & Leigh Coombes, "Manufacturing Egalitarian Injustice: A Discursive Analysis of the Rhetorical Strategies Used in Fathers' Rights Websites in Aotearoa/New Zealand" (2014) 24:4 Feminism and Psychology 440; Collier & Sheldon, *supra* note 72; Crowley, "Taking Custody", *supra* note 75; Hacker, *supra* note 75.

77. Carol Smart, "Preface" in Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon, eds, *Fathers' Rights Activism and Law Reform in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Hart, 2006) vii.

78. The evidence suggests that "most non-resident parents who apply for contact get it". See Joan Hunt & Alison MacLeod, "Outcomes of Applications to Court for Contact Orders after Parental Separation or Divorce" (UK Ministry of Justice Report, Family Law and Justice Division, 2008) at 189.

79. The phrase echoes the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989*: "[I]n all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration" (cited in Nigel Lowe & Gillian Douglas, *Bromley's Family Law*, 10th ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) at 454). In UK family law, there is a similar emphasis on the rights of the child: "[T]he child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration" (*Children Act 1989*, cited in Lowe & Douglas at 450). Matt O'Connor, Gary Burch & Michael Cox, *A Blueprint for Family Law in the 21st Century* (2005), Fathers 4 Justice <www.fathers-4-justice.org>.

80. UK family courts have been open to the media since 2009.

81. Ana Jordan, "'Dads Aren't Demons, Mums Aren't Madonnas': Constructions of Fatherhood and Masculinities in the (Real) Fathers 4 Justice Campaign" (2009) 31:4 Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law 419 [Jordan, "Dads Aren't Demons"].

82. In 2008, yet another UK splinter group, "New Fathers 4 Justice" was formed that purports to be in no way affiliated with F4J but uses the trademark superhero costumes favoured by the original group. Once again, the aims are largely continuous with RFFJ and F4J. See New Fathers 4 Justice <www.newfathers4justice.co.uk>.

Justice to signal that the aims, methods, and membership remained largely constant when the fieldwork was conducted. At the time of writing, both RFFJ and F4J continue to actively protest and participate in UK politics, although they tend to receive less national media coverage than at the height of their fame a decade or so ago.

The one-off, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of nine group members, eight male and one female. All of the interviewees self-identified as "White British," most had a professional occupation or background, and their ages ranged from early thirties to mid-sixties. This fits with the average demographics of FRAs reported by other researchers.[83] While it is not possible to simplistically claim anything about race, class, and how they intersect with gender from the participant's self-identified characteristics, analysis of the interview data suggest that the masculinity/ies constructed were represented as white, middle class, and heterosexual/heteronormative.[84] Although the small sample (limited by access and resources) means that the perspectives analyzed are not necessarily representative of all members of the group, the interviews resonated with the official group narrative produced through their literature, website, and campaigns. Moreover, as noted, there were commonalities with broader fathers' rights discourses, and these continuities are highlighted where relevant. As in-depth analyses of the interview data have been published elsewhere,[85] summaries are provided rather than directly quoting the interviews. The case study is extended through reference to studies of FRGs produced by other researchers in other national contexts.

FRGs are often situated within the broader category of "men's rights" groups.[86] The men's rights strand is defined by a starting point of antipathy towards feminist movements, claiming that men, not women, are underprivileged in society and that this is a result of the "excesses" of feminism.[87] Given this definition, it might be expected that RF4J (and other FRGs) inevitably occupy the "backlash" frame as identified above. However, the picture is slightly more complicated than this. Below, I comment briefly on how RF4J fits (or does not fit) within each of the categories of feminism, postfeminism, and backlash.

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83. For example, Jocelyn Elise Crowley, "On the Cusp of a Movement: Identity Work and Social Movement Identification Processes within Fathers' Rights Groups" (2008) 28:6 Sociological Spectrum 705 [Crowley, "Cusp of a Movement"]; Crowley, "Taking Custody", *supra* note 75; Molly Dragiewicz, "A Left Realist Approach to Antifeminist Fathers' Rights Groups" (2010) 54:2 Crime, Law and Social Change 197 [Dragiewicz, "Left Realist"].
84. Jordan, "Superhero", *supra* note 1.
85. *Ibid*; Jordan, "Dads Aren't Demons", *supra* note 81.
86. Clatterbaugh, *supra* note 1; Messner, *supra* note 1.
87. Messner, *supra* note 1.

First, there is, unsurprisingly, little evidence of a feminist frame in the narratives of RF4J. There was no suggestion that the group could find allies in feminist organizations, for example, and the word "feminism" itself was never mentioned in a positive light. Interestingly, however, there was some co-option of feminism. For example, the term "suffragent(s)" was used to refer to F4J activists in direct reference to the suffragettes, depicting activists as modern-day gender equality crusaders. In addition, the phrase "the personal is political" with its well-known feminist heritage is used on the F4J website.[88] The appeal to feminism and the use of feminist language is not uncommon among FRGs more broadly. For example, groups in New Zealand have been shown to use "egalitarian discourse explicitly and implicitly engaged to constitute the sexes as ideally equal—under the law and in their social rights, responsibilities and obligations," explicitly claiming that what they called "masculinism" was simply about redressing inequalities "against men as well as women" and therefore complementary to feminism rather than antagonistic to it.[89]

The assimilation of feminist language and ideas by F4J members was not accompanied by a feminist analysis of gendered power relations. In terms of their empirical assumptions, there was no recognition of women's unequal position in society overall. For example, there was no consideration of women's unequal assumption of primary caretaking roles in relation to children in discussions of who "gets" residency after separation. Susan B Boyd notes a similar failure to acknowledge inequalities in caring duties (along with other gendered divisions that disadvantage women) among the Canadian FRAs she researched who "did not offer a structural analysis" and whose "strategies did not address the material underpinnings of gendered roles in heterosexual families."[90]

Further, although there was some indication of a desire to be a new, caring father that might be considered implicitly "feminist" in that it challenges essentialist views of women/mothers making the best parents,[91] there was little focus on what might be needed in terms of shifting social structures to encourage more involved fatherhood before separation.[92] Michael Flood has suggested that this is also true of Australian

88. See Fathers4Justice, "People Not Politicians" <www.fathers-4-justice.org/people-not-politicians>.

89. Busch, Morgan & Coombes, *supra* note 76 at 445–46 [emphasis removed].

90. Susan B Boyd, "Is Equality Enough? Fathers' Rights and Women's Rights Advocacy" in Rosemary C Hunter, ed, *Rethinking Equality Projects in Law: Feminist Challenges* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2008) 59 at 71 [Boyd, "Equality"]. See also Susan B Boyd, "Demonizing Mothers: Fathers' Rights Discourses in Child Custody Law Reform Processes" (2004) 6:1 Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering 52 [Boyd, "Demonizing Mothers"]; Collier, "Fatherhood", *supra* note 75.

91. See also Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90; Crowley, "Taking Custody", *supra* note 75.

92. Jordan, "Dads Aren't Demons", *supra* note 81.

FRGs.[93] Overall, the parameters of the group's focus on fathers' rights in itself stifled any potential for sustained (pro)-feminist analysis of the gendered issues at stake. The default was to downplay women's inequality rather than to see it as being interlinked with some of the barriers to men taking on more of the caring load around children. To the extent that feminist ideas were incorporated in the group rhetoric, this ultimately tended to fit more with a postfeminist narrative, to which I now turn.

Postfeminist ideas were more prominent in the group to the extent that, as noted above, the issues were framed as gender neutral. This resonates with wider FRG discourses that are often framed in terms of gender-neutral, formal equality/rights claims.[94] Many members of RF4J suggested that they were campaigning for non-resident parents' rights, or children's rights, as opposed to fathers', or men's, rights per se.[95] On the F4J website, the following statement is attributed to Matt O'Connor: "We stand for the human rights of mothers, fathers and children."[96] This appeal to an apparently inclusive set of rights is common among FRGs and is often used as a defence against accusations that they are anti-feminist and/or anti-women.[97]

Some interviewees seemed to see raising questions of gender as being almost distasteful, preferring to focus on issues that were less explicitly gendered, at least in their perception. For example, they were more likely to claim that "injustices" in the family court system are driven by lawyers motivated to make money from conflict between clients, as opposed to being the result of gendered ideas about parenthood. Where members have recognized that most "non-resident" parents

93. Michael Flood, "Separated Fathers and the 'Fathers' Rights' Movement" (2012) 18:2–3 Journal of Family Studies 235 [Flood, "Separated Fathers"].

94. Busch, Morgan & Coombes, *supra* note 76; Collier, "Fatherhood", *supra* note 75; Susan B Boyd, "Backlash against Feminism: Canadian Custody and Access Reform Debates of the Late Twentieth Century" (2004) 16:2 Canadian Journal of Women and the Law 255 [Boyd, "Backlash"]; Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90; Boyd, "Demonizing Mothers", *supra* note 90; Richard Collier, "Men, Gender and Fathers' Rights 'After Legal Equality': New Formations of Rights and Responsibility in Family Justice" in Robert Leckey, ed, *After Legal Equality: Family, Sex, Kinship* (London: Routledge, 2014) 59 [Collier, "After Legal Equality"]; Jocelyn Elise Crowley, *Defiant Dads: Fathers' Rights Activists in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008) [Crowley, *Defiant Dads*]; Crowley, "Cusp of a Movement", *supra* note 83; Molly Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance: Men's Rights Groups, Battered Women, and Antifeminist Backlash* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2011) [Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance*]; Flood, "Separated Fathers", *supra* note 93; Rosen, Dragiewicz & Gibbs, *supra* note 75.

95. Jordan, "Superhero", *supra* note 1.

96. Fathers4Justice, "Our Mission" <www.fathers-4-justice.org/our-campaign/our-mission> [F4J, "Our Mission"].

97. Collier & Sheldon, *supra* note 72; Jordan, "Superhero", *supra* note 1.

are fathers and most "resident" parents mothers,[98] this is seen as an unfortunate "accident," as a result of individual choices on the part of men and women, rather than as reflecting a gendered pattern in the division of parenting labour. In this aspect of the group narrative, UK society was seen as broadly gender equal, and the application of revised "gender-neutral" laws in the area of the family was presented as the solution to removing any remaining inconsistencies. The logic of this position casts feminism as a relic of the past, a necessary stage in society's evolution, but one that is no longer necessary.

In short, there were some postfeminist ideas in terms of the depoliticization of gender and the assumption that gender inequalities are non-existent. Of course, the very nature of participating in a pressure group/social movement suggests a collective politics. However, in this strand of the group perspective, this collective politics was not one that centred around gender, let alone feminism. There was a focus on individual rights and a neglect of the social structures (beyond family law institutions) that underpin gendered issues.

Backlash narratives were only infrequently directly articulated by members and are often less obvious than postfeminist ideas in the group literature and publicity materials. FRGs frequently draw on broader men's rights claims that society is dominated by feminism and that this is damaging to men, leading to their inequality.[99] Men's rights groups are groups that are explicitly hostile to feminism and, therefore, clearly identifiable with backlash. Many FRGs, such as the Australian "Black Shirts," openly ally themselves with men's rights groups. At the time of the fieldwork, however, RF4J (at least publically) distanced themselves from such groups. In 2012, after the fieldwork was conducted, individuals involved in RFFJ set up an explicitly anti-feminist political party called Justice for Men and Boys.[100] Their manifesto for the 2015 general election states that "the British state has become ever more hostile towards men and boys ... the state disadvantages men and boys in many areas, usually to advantage women and girls."[101] The leader, Mike Buchanan, has been openly vitriolic about feminism and feminists—

98. Fathers' rights groups tend to make heteronormative assumptions about the nature of families, whereby all (pre-separation) families are assumed to consist of a woman ("the mother") and a man ("the father").

99. Boyd, "Backlash", *supra* note 94; Boyd, "Demonizing Mothers", *supra* note 90; Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90; Susan B Boyd & Claire FL Young, "Feminism, Fathers' Rights, and Family Catastrophes: Parliamentary Discourse on Post-Separation Parenting, 1966–2003" in Dorothy E Chunn, Susan B Boyd & Hester Lessard, eds, *Reaction and Resistance: Feminism, Law, and Social Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007) 198; Crowley, "Cusp of a Movement", *supra* note 83; Dragiewicz, "Left Realist", *supra* note 83.

100. Justice for Men and Boys <https://j4mb.wordpress.com>.

101. Justice for Men and Boys, "General Election Manifesto" (2015) at 2, Justice for Men and Boys <https://j4mb.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/141228-v7-general-election-manifesto.pdf>.

for example, prominent feminists including academics and politicians have been targeted for a "Whiny Feminist of the Month Award."[102] The party fielded two parliamentary candidates in 2015 in Nottinghamshire constituencies—Buchanan himself and Ray Barry, the founder of RFFJ.[103]

The original F4J, however, has been less explicit in aligning itself with a broader men's rights or anti-feminist agenda. Although the official rhetoric of UK FRGs tends to be more moderate than that of Justice for Men and Boys, there are nonetheless clear resonances and common themes. Further, there is some evidence that members of FRGs are active in men's rights groups and vice versa,[104] as the example above illustrates. Although it was a minority view, there was some evidence of these commonalities in that some members saw the issue of post-separation child contact as very definitely gendered in a way that is indicative of wider discrimination against men. This view is also expressed on the F4J website directly alongside the "gender-neutral" framing discussed earlier. For example, one of their aims is "to end the demonisation and denigration of men and boys in society" and what they refer to as "anti-male discrimination" against fathers "on the basis of their gender."[105] Men are framed as lacking equal rights and as being the real victims of the gender order. Claiming that negative constructions of men have "become acceptable in advertising, the media and society in general," the website states that "this 'reverse sexism' is not only as unacceptable as discrimination against women but profoundly damaging to young men and boys who increasingly feel isolated and disconnected from their families and society."[106] The "father as victim discourse"[107] is a familiar theme in FRG narratives more broadly.[108]

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102. Mike Buchanan, "The Whine Club" (2013), A Voice for Men <http://www.avoiceformen.com/mens-rights/activism/the-whine-club>.
103. Neither of the candidates were successful, Barry receiving sixty-three votes in Ashfield and Buchanan 153 votes in Broxtowe. Buchanan stated that the intention was not to win but to build up support with the aim of fielding over fifty candidates in the 2020 general election in marginal seats with Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat members of parliament to damage their chances of re-election, "thereby forcing their party to drop its anti-male policy directions in subsequent elections". See Justice for Men and Boys, "2020 Election Strategy" <https://j4mb.wordpress.com/2020-2025-general-election-strategies>.
104. Jordan, "Superhero", *supra* note 1.
105. Fathers4Justice, "Our Mission", *supra* note 97.
106. Fathers4Justice, "Our Campaigns" <www.fathers-4-justice.org/our-campaign/our-campaigns/#keeping-families-together>.
107. Collier, "Fatherhood", *supra* note 75 at 133.
108. See also Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90; Busch, Morgan & Coombes, *supra* note 76; Collier, "After Legal Equality", *supra* note 94; Collier, "Fatherhood", *supra* note 75; Crowley, *Defiant Dads*, *supra* note 94; Crowley, "Cusp of a Movement", *supra* note 83; Crowley, "Countermobilization", *supra* note 74; Crowley, "Taking Custody", *supra* note 75; Flood, "Separated Fathers", *supra* note 94; Rosen, Dragiewicz & Gibbs, *supra* note 75.

The group's mission, on this perspective, is to bring about true gender equality by removing the oppression of men caused by feminism and reasserting a slightly amended version of men's traditional roles as father figures. Slightly amended because, in the interviews, the importance of fathers as disciplinarians and (male) role models was stressed equally with the importance of men doing the hands-on caring for children that is often associated with mothering. In contrast with the purported gender neutrality of the postfeminist view, the "need" for fathers was premised on an essentialist notion of men's differences from women in terms of parenting styles. The presence of essentialist notions of fatherhood in fathers' rights narratives has been documented in empirical studies and has been argued to reinscribe patriarchal authority along with heteronormative visions of "the family."[109] This was apparent in the idea of the "breakdown" of society that is claimed to be caused by fathers being "prevented" from seeing their children. On the F4J website, a "fatherless Britain" is claimed to be at the root of, and embodied in, social "problems" such as high divorce rates, high teenage pregnancy and abortion rates, youth crime, self-harming, and poverty.[110]

Feminism was seen as the root of men's oppression, and feminists were constructed as man-hating and as trying to institutionalize women's privilege at the expense of men. Although such ideas were at the extreme end of the group rhetoric, negative constructions of feminism were not uncommon, including references to "feminazis." Some of the F4J literature also explicitly blames feminism for perceived injustices against fathers. For example, one advertisement, featuring a baby boy, "Matthew," covered in derogatory "anti-male" statements (including "abusive," "feckless," "deadbeat," "cashpoint," "hated") claims that "organisations like the Labour Party, the Fawcett Society and the NSPCC have become dominated by a militant form of feminism which will condemn Matthew to a lifetime of discrimination."[111] Other FRGs have, similarly, voiced vitriolic attitudes directed at feminism and feminists.[112]

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109. Boyd, "Backlash", *supra* note 94; Boyd, "Demonizing Mothers", *supra* note 90; Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90; Collier, "Fatherhood", *supra* note 75; Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance*, *supra* note 94; Michael Flood, "'Fathers' Rights" and the Defense of Paternal Authority in Australia" (2010) 16:3 Violence Against Women 328 [Flood, "Defense of Paternal Authority"]; Rosen, Dragiewicz & Gibbs, *supra* note 75.
110. Fathers4Justice, "Fact Sheet" <www.fathers-4-justice.org/about-f4j/fact-sheet/#child-support>.
111. Fathers4Justice, "F4J Visual Archive" <http://www.fathers-4-justice.org/our-campaign/f4j-visual-archive/>.
112. Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90; Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance*, *supra* note 94; Michael Flood, "Defense of Paternal Authority", *supra* note 109; Hacker, *supra* note 75; Robert Menzies, "Virtual Backlash: Representations of Men's 'Rights' and Feminist 'Wrongs' in Cyberspace" in Dorothy E Chunn, Susan B Boyd & Hester Lessard, eds, *Reaction and Resistance: Feminism, Law, and Social Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007) 65. (Or, at least, that is, against the "wrong kind of feminism". See Boyd, "Backlash", *supra* note 94.)
113. Boyd, "Equality", *supra* note 90 at 60.

A backlash perspective, then, was present in terms of the negative view of feminism, in the claim that men are generally disadvantaged as opposed to women, and in the perception of the group as organizing around a collective, anti-feminist politics of gender. There was also some sense that women's equality in itself (alongside active discrimination by feminists) has led to a crisis of masculinity and men's roles, which has also been damaging for women. Overall, a postfeminist perspective dominated the group's discourse. There was also some indication of a backlash narrative, but this was less prominent in the interviews than the post-feminist framing it existed alongside. Finally, the framing of the issues in terms of fathers' rights restricted any sympathy with feminist understandings of debates around post-separation child contact disputes.

Conclusion

This brief illustrative analysis of the different responses to feminism evident in the perspectives of RF4J demonstrates why it is important to differentiate clearly between postfeminist and backlash narratives. It is not adequate to see postfeminist ideas as merely a masquerade for an anti-feminist backlash perspective. Although, to some extent, the postfeminist/feminist elements of the group rhetoric seemed to derive from a desire to be seen as more legitimate and to not just be engaged in "special pleading" for men, the analysis has underlined the importance of "taking fathers' rights discourse seriously."[113]

It would be naive to take all appeals of men's rights groups to feminist or egalitarian ideals at face value, as the points raised earlier about the problematic implications of formal equality demonstrate. However, rhetorical strategies are more than mere lip-service. They have the potential to shape, challenge, and/or reinforce dominant constructions of specific issues (for example, fathers' rights) as well as broader norms around gender and gender politics. The challenge is to treat these narratives not merely as instrumental statements but to also maintain at the same time a critical awareness of the uneasy coexistence of some of the more appealing frames of meaning employed by FRGs with deeply conservative backlash perspectives and of the power-laden, problematic nature of apparently egalitarian aims. Reducing the diverse strands of meaning to simple "backlash" does not enable such a careful but critical engagement. The studies of FRGs and MRGs cited above provide thoughtful, detailed, and nuanced examinations of their perspectives. I hope that disaggregating postfeminist from backlash perspectives will go some way to building on existing research and presenting a helpful framework for further studies that move beyond dichotomous theorizing about backlash. Moreover, this framework is intended to facilitate thinking beyond problematic "dualistic patterns

114. Genz, *supra* note 6 at 24.

of (male) power and (female) oppression" as it could be applied to the gender politics of any given movement/group.[114]

Future research is needed to flesh out how backlash and postfeminist perspectives operate in relation to different men's and fathers' rights groups (and other social movements) as well as in different national contexts. In addition, the application of the framework to transnational movements is important to understanding international commonalities/disjunctures around men's and fathers' rights, given the interconnectedness and global nature of many of these groups.[115] I have made some preliminary suggestions above about common themes based on parallels drawn with other studies in the case study section above. A full consideration of the overall development of FRGs' rhetoric is beyond the scope of the present article, partly because the existing research I draw on did not apply the framework I develop here. However, the possibility of developing such a large-scale overview is another avenue for investigation.

The importance of further study is illustrated through claims that fathers' and men's rights groups employing what I have suggested here to be a postfeminist perspective have been more influential than those employing backlash arguments.[116] Of course, this shift in discourses has itself been a response to changing social and political landscapes and to dominant trends in political and legal arenas where there has been movement away from substantive equality and towards "gender-neutral" formal equality. Neoliberalism lends itself more to a "gender-neutral" framing than a backlash, "gender war"[117] framing, which may partly explain the apparently greater impact of FRGs using postfeminist frames. At the same time, it has been argued that neoliberalism is not always a safe strategy for anti-feminist men's rights groups and that "[n]eo-conservativism is the fail-safe ideology of men's rights pundits."[118] Further research would help to illuminate the relationship between neoconservatism and backlash and between neoliberalism and postfeminism to appreciate how broader contexts enable and constrain feminist and anti-feminist politics.

The relationship between gender identities and the gender politics of specific movements is at present underexplored. Christina Scharff argues that responses to feminism are intricately entwined with representations of gender and sexuality.[119] Although Scharff's claim is made in relation to a case study of young women in the United Kingdom and Germany and their self-identification (or otherwise) as feminists, this point raises possibilities for understanding the gendering of social

115. For example, via online activism. See Menzies, *supra* note 112.
116. Boyd, "Backlash", *supra* note 94; Boyd & Young, *supra* note 99; Collier, "Masculinities", *supra* note 75.
117. Boyd & Young, *supra* note 99 at 199.
118. Menzies, *supra* note 112 at 77.
119. Scharff, *supra* note 62.

movements and how narratives around feminism intersect with performances of gender (and other) identities in this context. Further research is needed to understand how these processes play out in social movements, both in general and in specific men's movements.

Taking FRG narratives seriously is also important in thinking about how to respond to such groups. Whereas an entrenched backlash narrative might mean that it is simply a waste of feminist energy to engage with fathers'/men's rights groups, the less hostile aspects of their narratives could suggest possibilities for dialogue. On the other hand, given the potential for postfeminism to shut down debate around gendered social structures, feminists should be cautious about assuming that postfeminist perspectives are more promising than backlash narratives.

The distinctions I outlined between feminist, backlash, and postfeminist narratives enable a more nuanced understanding of the complex narratives around feminism present in specific men's movements. The implications of none of the categories are straightforward in terms of their actual effects on gender equality in any given context. Such questions are inherently open, and must, at least in part, be examined on a case-by-case basis. As discussed, backlash narratives can be an indicator of the strength of feminist activism at any given time and also serve at least to politicize gender. Postfeminist ideas, by contrast, tend to depoliticize gender and to take feminism for granted in a way that can cast feminism as dismissible and as an irrelevant relic. Further, feminists cannot control the reception of their interventions, especially in the light of contrasting narratives of gender and post- or anti-feminism. However, understanding the positioning of such groups is important to thinking about how feminists can respond to their constructions of feminism and of gender (in)equality in particular cases. Although the proposed typology does not remove problems of definition as judgment is still required on whether groups are feminist, postfeminist, or part of a backlash, it opens up room for a discussion of the complexity of feminism and attitudes towards feminism and rests on a non-static, non-predetermined view of the categories proposed.