

**Original Article:**

**THE FABRIC OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM**

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**Abstract**

Sexism consists not only of exceptional incidents, but also of mundane practices within everyday interactions. Internalized sexism, which occurs when women enact learned sexist behaviors upon themselves and other women, also takes everyday forms. This study analyzed conversations between 45 pairs of female friends to assess in what forms and how often internalized sexism appeared. Dialogic practices of internalized sexism fell into 4 categories: assertions of incompetence, which express an internalized sense of powerlessness; competition between women; the construction of women as objects; and the invalidation or derogation of women. On average, 11 such practices occurred per 10-minute conversation, suggesting that internalized sexism can be a routine social practice in women's dialogues. By understanding which aspects of sexism seem most susceptible to internalization through mundane dialogic practices, we can better understand how the effects of sexism come to pervade women's everyday experiences. We may also learn how to intervene in this generative process.

**Keywords:** internalized sexism, everyday sexism, conversation,  
women, grounded theory

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexism is the systematic inequitable treatment of girls and women by men and by the society as a whole. Incidents of sexism occur on a spectrum. On one end are prominent sexist events such as sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual harassment, job discrimination, and the passing of legislation to limit women's rights. On the other end are the mundane, often subtle occurrences of sexism that comprise the background of our day-to-day interactions and experiences (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Events on the prominent end of the spectrum stand out clearly against the background of everyday sexism, but less outstanding interactions, over time, can have just as profound an impact on women's experiences. For instance, women and girls may learn to have low expectations of their capabilities, may be subtly channeled by teachers or parents into gender normative fields and away from traditionally male-dominated roles, may lack female role models in professions of interest, may be treated as if they need to be taken care of, may paradoxically be expected to be caretakers, to serve men, and put the needs of others before their own, may be criticized or ostracized for being assertive, visible, or outspoken, may find their opinions discounted, may be disliked as leaders unless they fit female stereotypes by acting nurturing, may be valued and appreciated primarily for their looks, bodies, or sexualities, may face expectations that they will spend considerable time and money modifying their physical appearance, may need to manage unwanted sexual attention or physical contact from men, may be expected to act passive in sex, dating, and relationships, may lose their names when they get married, and may be excluded from written or spoken discourse by the default use of male pronouns and other male-centric language constructs. Because of the variability of sexist practices, it is no surprise that sexism is often unintentional; both the agents and the targets of sexism are often unaware of the sexism in their interactions. Regardless of whether sexist acts are intentional, however, the cumulative effects of sexism are pervasive, impacting how women shape their personalities and identities, negotiate their relationships, feel about themselves, make meaning out of their experiences, and make choices about their lives over the short and long term. Internalized sexism refers to women's incorporation of sexist practices, and to the circulation of those practices among women, even in the absence of men. With rare exceptions (Szymanski, 2005; Szymanski & Kashubeck-West, 2008), internalized sexism has not been explicitly addressed in empirical research.

Everyday conversation is woven from the conventions, motivations, and negotiations that make up life in cultural communities. When sexism is part of a culture, sexism, and the internalized sexism that accompanies it, becomes one of the threads out of which conversations are woven. The present study examines the practice of internalized sexism as it is enacted in everyday conversations.

Consider the following mundane examples of sexist talk. These examples emerged in casual conversations between undergraduate friends:

“They were up in their room with Bill and Lorraine, or whatever her name is – the blonde chick who’s not really a blonde.”

“Jenny would say that to me cuz she was four days older than me. But I said, yeah, you’re also a bitch, too, so.”

“Like, she’s married and shit, but she looks like a total goof nerd. She’s just like . . . she’s cute.”

“My mom has done nothing but talk about it, so now that it’s coming, me and my dad are like, ‘Thank God, maybe she’ll shut up.’”

The first excerpt demonstrates the kind of mild objectification wherein speakers identify women by physical appearance rather than based on their behaviors or relationships. The diminutive term “chick,” and the reduction of a woman to her hair color strengthen the objectification. In the second excerpt, the term “bitch” is used as a specifically sexist form of invalidation. “Bitch” is often utilized as a form of gender role policing, insulting women for being assertive or vocal, qualities that defy female gender norms. The third example demonstrates an evaluative objectification, measuring the woman in question against external standards of how she is supposed to look. In the fourth case, the speaker’s mother is invalidated for her expressive enthusiasm and desired to “shut up,” which is the more gender role normative position for women to take. These examples demonstrate common, relatively mild conversational practices of objectification and invalidation.

You may have noticed that the gender of the speakers quoted above is unspecified. Perhaps you assumed the speakers to be male. It is certainly easy to imagine men inserting such mundanely sexist comments into their everyday speech. You may also have guessed, correctly, that the examples listed are all excerpted from conversations between female friends. Try the experiment of rereading the excerpts, first imagining the speakers to be male, then imagining them to be female, to find out whether the meaning of the statements changes. Do the objectifying statements become any less objectifying if they are made by women? Do the critical statements become any less invalidating or derogatory? Are these objectifying, invalidating statements, spoken by women, any less sexist?

The existence of sexist talk amongst women when no men are present poses important questions about the nature of sexism. Why would women say and do to one another the hurtful things that men say and do to them? Worse, even though the examples above are all of women speaking to each other about a third party not present, women also make objectifying and invalidating statements about themselves. Why do women

hurt themselves and each other in seemingly sexist ways? An explanation (or at least a description) of the phenomenon is offered by the concept of internalized oppression, and more specifically, internalized sexism.

### **Internalized Oppression**

Some people have more power than others, easier access to social and physical resources, greater safety, and more freedom to envision and pursue the lives they choose. At the level of the individual, people's unique personalities and propensities play a role in who gets more or less of these desired resources. At the group level, members of different social classes differ systematically in the sources of support and sources of stress they encounter in their daily lives. These group level inequalities are established and maintained by systems of oppression, the interpersonal and institutionalized mistreatment of people on the basis of their group membership (Cudd, 2006; Freire, 1970; Engels & Marx 1848/1977; Memmi, 1965). Nearly any difference between people seems to serve as sufficient justification to divide us into groups, one of which maintains more social power than the other via oppression (Jackins, 1997).

The effects of oppression are often invisible or taken for granted. Most everyone has been born into an oppressive society, so we have never experienced anything different. Oppression targets individuals insofar as they are considered to be members of targeted groups, though individual group members differ in their exposure to oppression and their strategies for responding to it (Hill & Thomas, 2000; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Our identities are formed and our lives are lived in ceaseless negotiation with oppressive forces.

Internalized oppression (Allport, 1954; Cudd, 2006; Freire, 1970; Jackins, 1997; Lewin, 1941/1977; Roy & Steiner, 1994; Tatum, 1997) consists of oppressive practices that continue to make the rounds even when members of the oppressor group are not present. For instance, a girl growing up poor might receive the message (in school, on television, from employers), "people like you never amount to anything." This is an example of external class oppression. If, after multiple repetitions of that message from the outside, she begins to say to herself, "I will never amount to anything," and if her behavior aligns with this belief, she will have internalized the oppression. She might then pass the message on to others in her socioeconomic stratum, perhaps to her children or her neighbors. Passing the message along is another sense in which she may enact internalized oppression, in this case internal to her group, a group that is a target of class oppression (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Internalized oppression is the genus of which internalized sexism is a species (Chesler, 2001; Cowan, 2000; Cowan, Neighbors, DeLaMoreaux, & Behnke, 1998; Wiseman, 2002).

A key feature of sexism, as with oppression against any group, is that there is an institutionalized power differential between the oppressor group (men in the case of sexism) and the oppressed group (in sexism, women). Oppression is popularly described by the formula: oppression = prejudice + power. Though oversimplified, this formula corrects the often mistaken belief that prejudice by itself is oppressive, giving rise to misinformed notions such as “reverse racism” and “reverse sexism.” While individual women or women as a whole may enact prejudicial biases toward specific men or toward men as a group, this is done so without the backing of a societal system of institutional power. If all U.S. presidents were women, if our economic and political infrastructures were run predominately by women, and if men’s shelters were required to protect men from widespread abuse by their female partners, perhaps “reverse sexism” would have the required institutional power to make it a meaningful phrase.

Similarly, internalized sexism is not merely sexism perpetrated by women upon women. Sexism involves two distinct groups, one of which is systematically denied power by the other. In contrast, internalized sexism involves the internal dynamics within an oppressed group. It helps to maintain sexism as a whole via a system of social expectations and pressures enacted between women. Though internalized oppression is a key piece in the puzzle of oppression, it has received inadequate attention within psychology. Internalized sexism is rarely discussed as a coherent framework for understanding women’s experiences, though many of the practices that comprise internalized sexism have been investigated individually. Several of these practices are summarized below, following a brief discussion of dialogic practices in general.

### **Dialogic Practices of Internalized Sexism**

Sexism, though it is built into the institutional structures of a culture, does not persist on its own. To persist, it must be practiced, and so it may be productive to consider internalized sexism to be a set of practices (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). These practices vary from one cultural context to another (Bonvillain, 2001) and are not universal or essential to gender.

Adolescence is a primary site of socialization into gender related practices, including the practices of internalized sexism. Pipher (1994) has identified the period between the ages of 11 and 14 as a time when girls in the U.S. become particularly vulnerable to the internalization of sexism. Pipher suggests that during the elementary school years, girls tend to be more confident, bold, and androgynous than in later adolescence. Over the course of early and middle adolescence, girls “lose their assertive, energetic, and ‘tomboyish’ personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed” (pg. 19). Throughout high school, young women experience increasing pressure to conform to adult female norms (Alfieri, Ruble, & Higgins, 1996; Hill &

Lynch, 1983). In late adolescence and early adulthood, womanhood (and its accompanying internalized sexism) is rehearsed and mastered in a range of social arenas, including day-to-day interactions with peers (Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003). Everyday conversations between late adolescent female friends are thus a valuable site for observing the development of internalized sexism practices.

The microanalysis of everyday dialogue makes it possible to move research on internalized sexism close to the ground, to the kinds of commonplace interactions that constitute the fabric of everyday life (Erickson, 2004; Speer, 2002b). Conversation is comprised of acts through which speakers construct their identities and navigate the social world as they dynamically negotiate their relationships (Billig, 1989; Bruner, 1990; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Searle, 1962). The pragmatic analysis of everyday talk has yielded valuable insights about how gender and sexism are socially constructed across social interactions (Coates, 1996; Speer, 2002a; Korobov & Thorne, 2006; Korobov & Thorne, 2009). Research into several aspects of internalized sexism provides clues about how internalized sexism might manifest in everyday conversation.

*Feelings of powerlessness and incompetence:* All forms of oppression accumulate power for one group at the cost of reducing power for another. Internalized oppression helps to maintain the power asymmetry by keeping members of oppressed groups feeling powerless and therefore acting powerlessly (Freire, 1970; Jackins, 1997). For instance, due to sexism, girls are provided with few female role models in the sciences and may meet with low expectations or discouragement on the part of adults about their mathematical and scientific abilities, even about their intelligence in general (Eccles, Barber, Jozefowicz, Malenchuk, & Vida, 1999; Jacobs, Davis-Kean, Bleeker, Eccles, & Malanchuk, 2005). A girl in such conditions may internalize the inequity and declare that she's just no good at math and science. Feelings of powerlessness may be expressed as assertions of incompetence which may in turn reinforce the sense of powerlessness and powerless behavior.

In the absence of internalized sexism (and its intersection with other forms of internalized oppression), girls would learn that they are capable of striving for whatever they choose and achieving even highly challenging goals. A byproduct of an internalized sense of power is the assumption that women need not accept relationships, careers, or life circumstances that they do not desire. In contrast, internalized sexism, and its accompanying internalized sense of powerlessness, reinforces low expectations women may have learned about what they deserve in life and what they are capable of working toward.

A very specific way some young women express a sense of incompetence is by claiming ignorance, not about something specific, but in general, by uttering the words, "I don't know." The phrase "I don't know" may be used as a means of filling space,

changing the subject, weakening an otherwise clear statement, or contradicting a specific claim of knowledge. Some discourse theorists have claimed that “I don’t know”, used in these ways, serves a politeness or social leveling function. By liberally peppering speech with these non-conventional uses of the phrase, a speaker mitigates against the possibility that she might seem arrogant, and she can hedge statements of fact so as not to appear positional or argumentative (Caffi, 1999; Diani, 2004; Fraser, 1980; Holtgraves, 1997; Lakoff, 1973). A recent study challenges the politeness interpretation, however, showing that speakers who use “I don’t know” in such non-conventional ways are not regarded as any more polite than speakers who don’t mitigate (Schrock, 2002). Even if “I don’t know” does serve the cause of social harmony, we argue that it is a non-coincidental choice of phrase to fill this function. As an often repeated claim of general ignorance with no specific referent, uttering “I don’t know” may function as yet another way to assert perceived incompetence.

***Competition between women:*** As Michie (1992) has observed, the words “other” and “woman” have a long history of association. On the surface, competition between women is often competition for ostensibly limited resources, such as favored social positions, desired male partners, regard, worth, and other forms of social capital (Eckert, 1990; Guendouzi, 2001). Such competition may take the forms of malicious gossip, social exclusion, zero-sum comparisons with other women, and women putting one another down or maneuvering each other into lower status positions in an attempt to make themselves look or feel better (Goodwin, 2002; Underwood, 2003; Wiseman, 2002).

People compare themselves with others in their ingroups more readily than they make comparisons with people in relatively privileged outgroups (Crosby, 1976; Walker & Smith, 2002). As a result, we are more likely to resent and compete with those who are only slightly advantaged relative to us, sufficiently similar to warrant social comparison. From a Marxian perspective, in order for inequitable power structures to hold, it is necessary for disadvantaged groups to remain internally divided. If oppressed groups were able to achieve sufficient solidarity, they might pose a threat to the groups in power. Thus, internalized sexism divides women. Rather than pooling their efforts to act against the true source of inequity, sexism perpetrated by men and backed by societal power, internalized sexism leads women to act against one another in competition.

***Objectification:*** In their self-objectification theory, Frederickson and Roberts (1997; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Hebl, King, & Lin, 2004) describe the process by which external experiences of objectification can become internalized. Due to the omnipresence of media images of women, and through the direct gazes of men, women are immersed in social environments in which they and other women are regularly looked at, evaluated on the basis of their appearance, and treated as if their bodies and looks represent something essential about their personhood. Under

these conditions, girls and women quickly learn the social importance of physical appearance and furthermore learn to adopt the stance of an outside observer in understanding their own bodies. The outside (sexist) observer becomes internalized, and women may come to experience their bodies primarily as they are seen from the outside and compared against external standards rather than as they are felt and inhabited from within (de Beauvoir, 1961; Tolman & Porche, 2000). Self-objectification has been found to reduce well-being and the sense of flow and to contribute to depression and disordered eating (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Szymanski & Henning, 2007). Objectification provides one of the clearest examples of the internalization of a sexist practice.

It is perhaps true of all practices of internalized oppression that their enactment seems to serve, at least superficially, as a buffer against external oppression. For instance, many women self-objectify, regulating their appearance in an attempt to conform to external standards. Doing so can lead to forms of external objectification that feel validating (Breines et al., 2008). Validating objectification may be preferable to the derogatory objectification or social invisibility women risk when they do not engage in appearance regulation. Women may therefore consider self-objectification to provide social benefit. If preoccupation with looks, body image, and weight seems to protect against sexism, women may enforce the same preoccupation on other women and girls, ironically attempting to use internalized oppression as a shield against external oppression.

***Invalidation and derogation:*** Language can help to maintain the power imbalance between groups by keeping the targets of oppression feeling bad about themselves and devaluing their experiences of the world. Derogation and criticism generate social stigma (Goffman, 1963; Major & O'Brien, 2005), which is internalized as the targets of derogation become critical of themselves and of their ingroups (Gilbert, Clarke, Hempel, Miles, & Irons, 2004; Thompson & Zuroff, 2004). A related means by which language can derogate members of oppressed groups is to invalidate their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, preferences, feelings, desires, and choices. Systematic invalidation plays a particular role in internalized sexism, encouraging women to silence their voices, mistrust their own judgments, and yield their thinking to that of men and other women (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Jack, 1991).

### **Goals of the Study**

Our study's goals were to assess whether internalized sexism is apparent in casual conversations between young women, to distinguish some of the forms by which it is dialogically enacted, to determine the frequency of such practices, and to describe the



characteristics of each type of dialogic practice. In short, we sought to build an understanding of the dialogic mechanisms by which sexism is internalized.

## METHOD

### Participants

As fulfillment of a requirement in an undergraduate psychology course at a public university in Northern California, 45 female undergraduates signed up for a study of “friendship dynamics.” Each of these women was asked to bring a female friend to the study that she had known for at least 6 months, resulting in 45 dyads. The large majority of the invited friends were also undergraduates, and the ages of participants ranged from 18 to 25 ( $M = 19.4$ ). Participation was restricted to native English speakers, most of the sample (90%) were White, and dyads reported knowing each other for a median of one year.

### Catch Up Conversations

Upon arrival, the dyad was seated on couches at a right angle to each other in a comfortable room with children’s art on the wall. They were fitted with lapel microphones and asked to have a 10 minute, audio-recorded “catch up” conversation. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to understand how friends talk to each other, and asked to use the 10 minutes to simply “catch up” and talk about anything at all. No other instructions were given, no researchers were present during these conversations, and directions were deliberately vague to minimize the impact of researcher expectations. While the presence of a recording device no doubt contributed to the context for the conversation (Speer & Hutchby, 2003), conversations quickly became natural sounding, making use of everyday discursive elements such as slang, interruptions, inside jokes, storytelling, and talk about problems.

Conversations were transcribed and transcriptions used for further analysis. The total length of conversation transcribed was 45 dyads times 10 minutes per catch-up conversation, for a total corpus of 450 minutes, or seven and a half hours, of conversation.

### Constructing Coding Categories

We adapted an informal version of grounded theory method (Charmaz, 1983) to help us explore the territory of our participants’ transcripts. Grounded theory method assumes that existing theory may not be adequate to locate and frame all of the phenomena of interest within ecologically complex data. Instead, by alternating between

deductive and inductive passes over rich data, it is possible both to confirm the presence of expected phenomena and to allow for the discovery of unanticipated events.

In initial readings of transcribed conversations, the three authors of this article perused the transcripts with an eye for instances of what might be internalized sexism. We expected, based on research and personal experience, to find evidence of internalized sexism in such forms as self-objectification, feelings of powerlessness, competition between women, women prioritizing the needs of men over their own needs, gender role policing, etc. We did not know, however, what forms these phenomena would take, whether each would manifest itself in the particular context of informal conversation, or whether other, unexpected practices might emerge from the data. We brought our observations back to one another, discussed them, and then returned to the transcripts, collectively refining over several iterations our assessments about the types of internalized sexism practiced in the conversations. Out of these discussions, a set of practices was settled upon as our coding categories and a detailed coding manual was developed (available upon request; Bearman, Korobov, & Thorne, 2005). Each of the categories of practices is summarized below, followed by a discussion of the unit of analysis we used for coding and some notes about how inter-rater reliability was determined.

### **Definitions of Practices**

Six different categories of practices were identified: assertions of incompetence, general ignorance claims, competitive banter, construction of women as competitors, construction of women as objects, and invalidation and derogation. Each of these six practices is one of many possible ways in which internalized sexism can be enacted. We coded only for the presence of each practice, not its intensity. Below are concise definitions of each practice along with very brief examples from our data as parenthetical illustrations. All names have been changed. Extended examples, with accompanying analysis, can be found in the Results and Analysis section.

*Assertions of incompetence* consist of suggestions that something a woman desires cannot be achieved or acquired due to lack of skill, experience, or power (“I’d be very bad at that”) or that assume she is powerless to change her circumstances or to act any differently in the face of circumstances (“I could have done something else, but he just didn’t give me the chance”). The target of the assertion is often portrayed as being given no option but to settle.

*General ignorance claims* were taken to be a special case of assertions of incompetence, but were counted and reported separately. This practice takes the form of the phrase “I don’t know” (or “I dunno”), when used for any purpose other than the traditional use of claiming ignorance about a specific referent. Compare the traditional

use (“I don’t know how that’s gonna turn out”) with, for instance, specific claims of knowledge immediately contradicted by a claim of ignorance (“It was a good conversation. I don’t know; it’s weird”). Though other means of performing general ignorance do occur in spontaneous speech (e.g., “I’m not sure,” “. . . or something like that” at the end of a sentence, and so on), we focused only upon the use of the colloquial “I don’t know,” as its high frequency of use suggests it plays a unique role in conversation.

*Competitive banter* is comprised of interchanges between speaking partners that are characterized by attempts to one-up each other, put each other down, or push their conversational partners into lower status positions (“You’re putting words in my mouth. That’s it, Dara! I’m gonna have to beat you up.”). Competitive banter is usually playful in nature.

*Construction of women as competitors*, like competitive banter, is an aspect of competition between women, but the two types of practices had sufficiently different dialogic forms that they were counted and reported independently of one another. Construction of women as competitors nearly always consisted of the narrative placement of third parties (women not present in the room) into the role of outsider and competitor (“It was either you or Janelle, and you know I’m closer to you.”). Unlike competitive banter, this narrative construction is accomplished via statements of competition between women for ostensibly limited resources or comparisons between women in which one woman loses in the comparison.

*Construction of women as objects* occurs in references to self, conversational partner, or another woman on the basis of how her physical person is or might be seen by another from the outside. Women may construct themselves as objects from the perspective of an external observer (“If I wore it, I would have to wear it without a bra and then it might get cold and then that’s bad”: a reference to nipples becoming visible in cold weather), but may also serve the role of external observer for their speaking partners (“Why don’t you get your hair kind of layered a little bit?”), and along with their speaking partners, construct other women not present as physical and visual objects (“She still looks kind of anorexic.”). These instances frequently sexualize the bodies spoken of or compare them to an external standard of appearance. Often, women are referenced by their appearance alone when other descriptors, such as the woman’s personality characteristics, behavior, or relationship to the speaker would serve just as well.

*Invalidation and derogation* were initially examined separately but eventually combined as they are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Instances sometimes consist of suggestions that a woman’s thoughts, opinions, interests, feelings, reactions, or responses are invalid. These may be self-invalidating statements (“I keep going through my head, ‘What did I do wrong?’”), invalidation of conversational partners (in response to a speaker’s concern about being objectified: “Oh God. Who cares?”), or invalidation of

other women appearing as characters in conversational narratives (“Why the hell does she always fucking hang out with him?”). Mild derogation and outright criticism may also be directed at self (“I was so pathetic.”), speaking partner (as a euphemism for weird or abnormal: “You always say stuff like that; you’re so funny.”), or other women (“The girl that Mike might live with: the crazy, evil, cold-hearted, psycho bitch girl.”). Derogation includes identification of negative traits or characteristics, and epithets that would be considered sexist coming from a man.

### **Demarcating Episodes of Practices**

When coding audio or transcribed conversations, arbitrary segments (such as pages of transcript, 10 second intervals, speaking turns, or individual utterances) are often used as the unit of analysis, where each segment is evaluated for the presence or absence of phenomena of interest (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997). As we examined an increasing number of dialogic practices, however, it soon became clear that the practices of interest had their own natural unit of occurrence, which we referred to as an episode. An episode was defined as a range of speaking turns of any length during which one of the above practices was enacted. With the exception of general ignorance claims, which are addressed below, all practices were counted by episode. As an example of how episodes were demarcated, consider the following transcript excerpt:

1. **Anna:** And then I finally get to class and I was like, sorry, sorry I’m late, sorry.
2. **Brooke:** Hahaha, I hate walking into class late.
3. **Anna:** It’s not like a big lecture. It’s a section, so it’s like he knows my name and he knows everybody and they’re like, uh-huh, you’re late.
4. **Brooke:** I hate it. With Colin I could never go to class on time. We were always late, every time, our lab, or I mean our lecture we always walked in late, like 5 minutes late. We tried to get there on time, like 10 minutes earlier like the day before, and then we get there and we’d just be late. We’ll just be walking, I’ll be like, “Colin let’s go. We’ll just walk in the back.”
5. **Anna:** There’ll just be traffic or just, something always holds you back.
6. **Brooke:** Our lab, we came in late a couple of times, but lab I didn’t worry about, because the lady was just a joke anyway.

7. **Anna:** Mhm.
8. **Brooke:** But it was funny.
9. **Anna:** Nice.
10. **Brooke:** I dunno. I went to the gym today, it was nice.
11. **Anna:** I wish we could take people that like don't go to this school to our gym because we have the nicest gym now.

Embedded within this snippet of conversation is an episode of assertion of incompetence. The practice of asserting incompetence is initiated in speaking turn 4, when Brooke states, "With Colin I could never go to class on time," suggesting that she was incapable of changing herself or her circumstances. The assertion is elaborated upon later in the speaking turn as she explains how they "tried" but were still unable to get there on time. Even if she blames Colin for the problem, she still portrays herself as helpless to arrive on time in the face of his lateness. In turn 5, Anna affirms that ostensibly unavoidable circumstances are the reason for the continual lateness. It is not clear whether turns 6 through 9 continue the episode. They could be construed as an exchange trivializing the lateness in order to justify Brooke's perceived inability to arrive on time. Regardless of whether the episode continues through turn 9, it certainly ends by turn 10, in which the subject is changed. Turn 11 continues the new topic, beginning an ongoing period of conversation during which no dialogic practices of internalized sexism are apparent.

Each episode begins with an initiation, as in the above excerpt when a speaker asserts her sense of incompetence, or when a speaker criticizes another woman not present in an episode of invalidation and derogation. The episode continues for as long as one or both speakers sustain the practice, conversing about the target or subject of conversation addressed in the original initiation. As in the example above, episodes can have fuzzy boundaries, but there is always a speaking turn that clearly falls outside the fuzzy boundary, which effectively ends the episode. Episodes ranged in length from a single phrase within one speaking turn to several pages of transcript.

Note that in the example above, turn 10 does not begin a new episode, since we would then have to ask, "an episode of what?", and the next period of conversation is of no particular interest to the present study. Rather, any given span of conversation might be entirely free of episodes in which internalized sexism is enacted dialogically. Another span of equal length might contain many episodes, some of which overlap. For instance, in the example above, speaking turn 6 contains an episode of invalidation and derogation in the form of the criticism, "the lady was just a joke anyway." Thus, an episode of invalidation and derogation, contained within a single speaking turn, overlaps with a longer episode of assertion of incompetence. Each of these episodes was counted independently as an instance of the relevant practice of internalized sexism.

### **Inter-rater Reliability**

To achieve agreement on episodes of all practices except general ignorance claims, the first author read through the full transcripts, identifying episodes from all practice categories. Then, for each practice category, he assembled 20 transcript pages in which he had identified one or more episodes of the practice and 20 transcript pages which he had determined to be free of the practice. These two sets of pages were randomly interspersed, and a second coder (sometimes the second author, sometimes a female undergraduate research assistant) read through all 40 pages, identifying episodes of the relevant practice. Any episode identified by both coders constituted agreement. An episode identified by only one coder constituted disagreement. Inter-rater reliabilities, based on number of agreed-upon episodes divided by agreed-upon plus disagreed-upon episodes, were .81 for assertions of incompetence, .76 for competitive banter, .86 for construction of women as competitors, .88 for construction of women as objects, and .95 for invalidation and derogation<sup>1</sup>.

General ignorance claims were a special case in that they always took the form of the phrases “I don’t know” or “I dunno.” The search function of a word processing program was used to identify all instances of these phrases. Coders then decided whether each instance was a traditional use of the phrase “I don’t know” (a specific claim of ignorance about a discernable referent that was not contradicted by a specific claim of knowledge about that referent), or whether it was a general ignorance claim: the special use of “I don’t know” as an oft-repeated general statement of not knowing. Each instance of “I don’t know” was subject to a binary coding choice indicating that it was or was not a general ignorance claim. Inter-rater reliability was  $kappa = .89$ .

## **RESULTS & ANALYSIS**

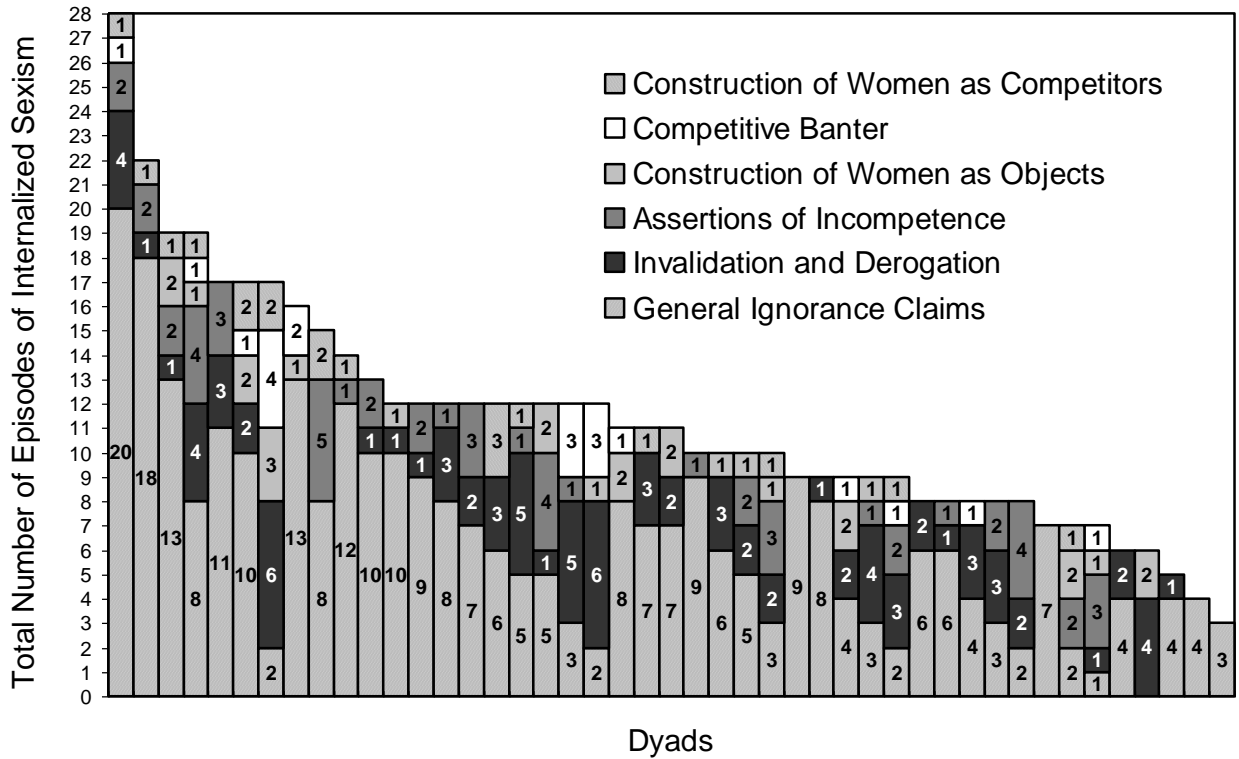
This section begins with the quantitative results of the coding process. Following these results, a sample episode is presented of each of the types of practices along with an explanation and analysis of the episode.

### **Frequencies of Practices**

Figures 1 and 2 are case graphs providing a detailed look by dyad at the practices enacted within each 10 minute catch up conversation. Figure 1 includes a column for each dyad, ordered from the dyad with the greatest number of episodes, 28, to the ones with the fewest, 3, over the course of the 10 minutes. Because general ignorance claims were both brief and common, they take up the bulk of the practices counted (297 overall versus a combined total of only 211 episodes of all other practices combined). Removing

general ignorance claims from Figure 2 allows for a closer view of the other kinds of practices that were counted within dyads. The range in this case is from 15 episodes at the high end to zero at the low end (note that the four dyads at the right of the chart have no episodes counted of any practice).

**Figure 1.** Case graph of episodes of internalized sexism within each dyad. Each column represents one 10 minute dyadic conversation.



**Figure 2.** Case graph of episodes of internalized sexism within each dyad (excluding general ignorance claims). Each column represents one 10 minute dyadic conversation. The four rightmost dyads have zero episodes each.

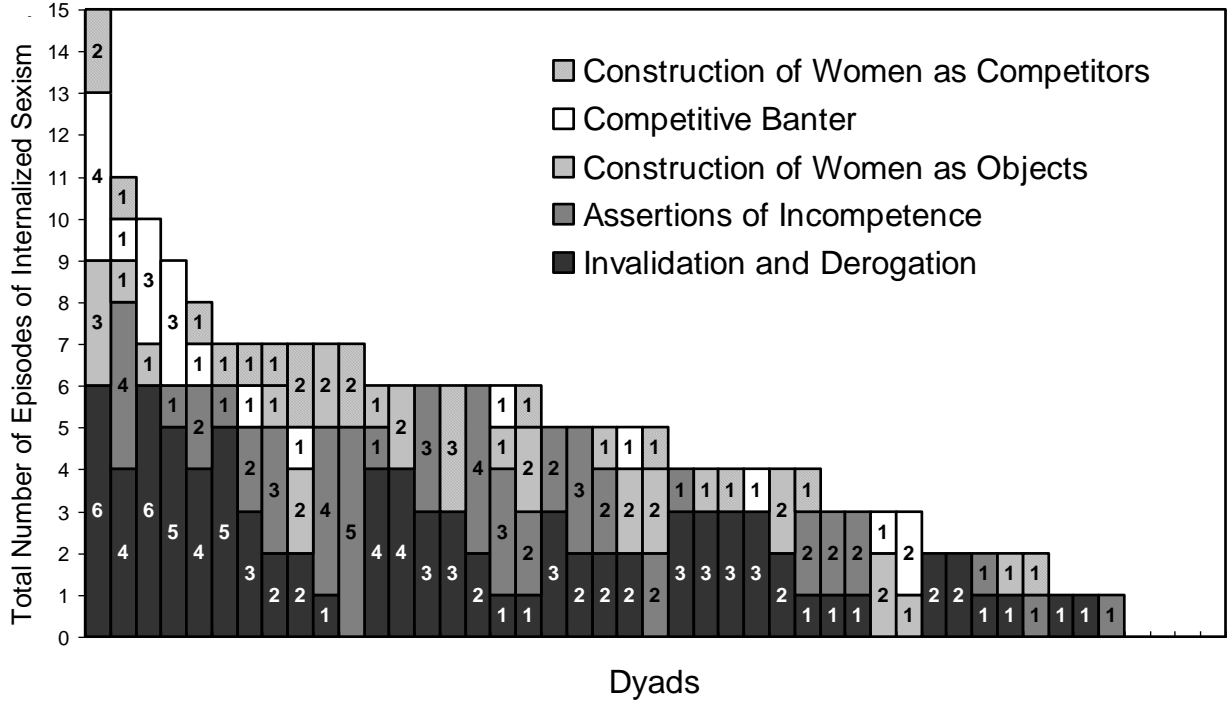


Table 1 shows the average frequency of each practice per 10 minute conversation. General ignorance claims, the most frequently occurring practice, were found on average 6.6 times per 10 minute conversation. Invalidation and derogation was the next most commonly found practice, showing up on average twice per conversation. The targets of invalidation or derogation were women not present 45% of the time, while 55% of episodes referred to the speaker, her conversational partner, or the dyad together. On average, 1.2 assertions of incompetence were found per dyad. Construction of women as objects occurred .63 times per dyad. The women constructed as objects in these episodes were third parties not present in 50% percent of the episodes, while 50% targeted the speaker, her conversational partner, or the two of them together. Least frequent were instances of competition via competitive banter (.44 episodes per dyad) and the construction of women as competitors (.42 episodes per dyad).



***Table 1.*** Average Frequency of Each Practice per Dyad

Type of practice	<i>M (SD) episodes per dyad (N = 45 dyads)</i>	Percentage of dyads with at least 1 episode
General ignorance claims	6.60 (4.24)	98%
Invalidation and derogation	2.00 (1.68)	78%
Assertions of incompetence	1.20 (1.41)	53%
Construction of women as objects	.62 (.86)	40%
Competitive banter	.44 (.92)	27%
Construction of women as competitors	.42 (.72)	31%
Total (all practices combined)	11.29 (4.82)	100%
Total (without general ignorance claims)	4.69 (3.12)	91%

Taken all together, internalized sexism was practiced in some form at an average of 11.29 times per 10 minute conversation, which, if distributed evenly in a conversation, would occur more than once per minute. If general ignorance claims are excluded, episodes of other practices combine for an average of 4.69 episodes per dyad. The practices found at least once in the largest number of conversations were general ignorance claims, appearing in 98% of dyads, invalidation and derogation in 78% of dyads, and assertions of incompetence in 53% of dyads. Other practices were enacted by fewer than half of the dyads observed.

To provide a richer examination of these practices than descriptive statistics allow, an episode of each is provided below. The episodes are analyzed to demonstrate some of the mechanisms by which sexism is internalized via conversational practices.

### **Assertions of Incompetence**

Sexism disempowers women. Internalized feelings of powerlessness can result, diminishing women's belief in their ability to do or get what they desire. This may be expressed out loud in the form of assertions of incompetence. Our initial episode happens in the context of two women discussing the need to study for their science class:

**Alice:** I like have to [study], cause I'm so stupid about that kinda stuff.  
Like, I just don't, like, get that stuff.

**Becca:** Yeah, you do.

**Alice:** Well, like some of the science stuff – well, like this one I do, but it’s like I have to write notes. It’s like I just . . . I don’t know.

Alice initiates the episode, asserting the belief that she’s stupid about science and doesn’t get it. Her friend responds by contradicting the assertion with “Yeah, you do.” As a result of this contradiction, a negotiation begins about whether Alice is or is not stupid, with Alice forced to acknowledge that she does “get” at least some of the material while still suggesting that her need to take notes in order to learn is evidence of her stupidity.

An initiation in which a speaker asserts incompetence may be responded to with the sort of contradicting reassurance that Becca offers, but this is not always the case, as demonstrated in the next episode. Here, we are entering into the middle of a conversation in which Ava is interested in a fellow student, and wants to start up a conversation with him:

**Ava:** Well, he’s not like, he’s not in the dining hall, and like the chances of like me passing him on like you know the sidewalk or something like that . . . or the quad.

**Betsy:** Yeah and then you’d be like, “Wait, I have something to ask you!”

**Ava:** Oh boy. No, that’d be really really bad.

**Betsy:** It would be funny though.

**Ava:** Watch, watch I run out – “Hey wait!” – and then I fall.

**Betsy:** Oh, God. You would, too.

**Ava:** Thanks. Yeah. Thanks, thanks for your faith, dear.

**Betsy:** I know. I’m kidding.

Unlike the first episode, in which Becca contradicts Alice’s assertion of incompetence, in this episode Betsy colludes with Ava’s internalized sexism, helping to construct the limitation. Both speakers implicitly assume that the only way a conversation could begin is by chance encounter, rather than decisive action on the part of Ava to seek out the man she wants to talk to. However, even in a chance encounter, the speakers anticipate that embarrassment, a common theme in assertions of incompetence, will play a crippling role in the interaction. Not only would it be embarrassing simply to approach the man (“that’d be really really bad”), but the salient threat exists of further embarrassment due to clumsiness. While in theory, Ava need not inhibit herself from acting simply because she feels embarrassed, when such inhibition is learned, embarrassment can become a profoundly incapacitating emotion.

The two episodes serve to demonstrate the co-construction of a sense of incompetence by conversational partners. Alice and Ava both assert incompetence, but

how the assertions are mutually handled depends on Becca and Betsy's responses. When presented with an assertion, will the listener collude with the speaker in her claim that she is limited and incapable, joining in to the project of constructing incompetence, or will the listener instead contradict the assertion, countering it with a depiction of the speaker as capable, not limited in the ways she claims she is? In either case, both members of a dyad collaborate to define the sense of incompetence they either assert and reinforce or strive to overcome.

### General Ignorance Claims

As a specific instance of how incompetence may be asserted or declared, women may make claims of general ignorance. General ignorance claims, or the phrase "I don't know" when it does not signify ignorance of particular information, took one of three related forms in our data. First, some "I don't know" statements lacked a clear referent in that an entire speaking turn consisted of an unattached "I don't know," or the claim served as a referent-free preface or conclusion to a statement:

**Andrea:** I don't know. He seems nice. Whatever.

Some of these free floating ignorance claims occurred during pauses in the flow of the conversation, as if to fill space, or as bridges transitioning from one topic to another. [50]

Second, specific knowledge claims were often contradicted by preceding or trailing ignorance claims:

**Audrey:** So what did you do?

**Bethany:** I don't know. We went to Yogurt Delight.

Here, Bethany clearly knows what she did, but prefaces her answer with the claim that she doesn't know.

The third, rarely seen, use of "I don't know" is a special case of the second. "I don't know" occasionally contradicted an inline statement that without the "I don't know" would indicate greater commitment to the statement:

**Ali:** I remember Jack told me about that one place, but I don't know if I trust him.

In this episode, the words “know if I” could be removed without loss of semantic coherence. “I don’t know if I” means “I don’t,” as not knowing if you trust someone means by definition that you don’t trust them.

When used in any of these three related forms, “I don’t know” contributes to the relocation of not knowing from a position taken relative only to missing particulars to a sort of overall context for interaction. Take, as an extended example, the exchange about the science class in the previous section, which ends with a general ignorance claim:

**Alice:** Well, like some of the science stuff – well, like this one I do, but it’s like I have to write notes. It’s like I just . . . I don’t know.

Alice has just made two specific knowledge claims: that she understands some of the science material from class and that to learn it she has to take notes. The final ignorance claim does not serve the purpose of informing Alice’s speaking partner that there is something about which she lacks knowledge. Rather, it serves the purpose of reinforcing a general stance of ignorance, not knowing in general. It is perhaps not surprising that someone who frames herself as “stupid” would reinforce that frame by casually asserting a general lack of knowledge.

Some readers might consider such microanalysis to be reading too much into a pragmatic linguistic device, and this would be a reasonable critique were general ignorance claims a rare speech event. This practice, however, occurred once every minute and a half in our sample. If someone gains ten pounds, it is unlikely that they did so by sitting down and eating a ten pound meal. Rather, hundreds of small decisions, for example to eat slightly beyond what hunger requires or to drive instead of walking, accumulate to produce an overall state change over time. We suggest that general ignorance claims may have a similar effect. Young women practice making general ignorance claims, model the practice for one another, and imitate each other in making such claims. Though mundane and mild in effect, these frequent repetitions seem likely, over time, to erode women’s trust in their own knowledge.

To find out whether friends modeled general ignorance claims for one another, an intraclass correlation was run (using a one-way, random effects model) on the relationship between how often one speaking partner made general ignorance claims and how often the other partner did. The resulting correlation of .248,  $F(44) = 1.66$ ,  $p = .047$ , was small but significant, suggesting that friends do imitate one another. Not knowing, or at least claiming to, is contagious.

Though we did not systematically investigate the phonological differences between “I don’t know” when used as general versus specific claims of ignorance, some differences seemed apparent. General ignorance claims, but not specific claims, usually occurred in the phonetically reduced form of “I dunno,” an observation shared by

Scheibman (2000). Occasionally, however, a drawn out, sing-songy, “I don’t know” served as a general ignorance claim.

### **Competitive Banter**

Competition with ingroup members is central to many forms of internalized oppression. To the extent that women compete with each other, ingroup solidarity is reduced and women are less likely to work together against sexism. Competition may take the form of playful banter between friends, in which participants continually keep each other off balance. In the excerpt below, the first speaker, Amy, self-conscious about being recorded, spends an unusual amount of time talking about the microphone. She says here that she “must sound like shit” and elucidates on this theme later on in the conversation. Perhaps as a way of handling her embarrassment, she has already been picking playful fights with her partner, who may be embarrassed by contagion and keeps the banter going. As we step into the middle of the conversation, much of the interchange has already been like a boxing match:

**Amy:** (enunciating slowly and directly into the microphone) I must sound like shit.

**Bella:** Stop talking to your little friend.

**Amy:** My little friend. Hello, little mike.

**Bella:** (quietly) Yeah, okay.

**Amy:** It’s not talking to me.

**Bella:** No, it doesn’t like you.

**Amy:** It doesn’t like me?

**Bella:** No.

**Amy:** (squeal) Sure likes me!

**Bella:** Stop touching yourself.

**Amy:** What? I can touch myself if I want to. It’s my body. My constitutional right, my privacy.

**Bella:** Oh yeah?

**Amy:** Yeah.

**Bella:** Is that written in the Constitution ‘Amy must touch herself?’

Each speaker attempts to maneuver the other into the lower status position. Bella prohibits Amy from talking directly into the lapel microphone. Amy preemptively co-opts that strategy, making the mike into “her little friend” with whom she is conversing. Bella interprets the microphone not speaking to Amy as a sign that Amy is unlikable, and Amy, apparently while touching herself in the area where the microphone is attached,

loudly affirms that it must like her. At this point, Amy touching herself as part of her demonstration that the microphone likes her is the new behavior that Bella can prohibit, and the back and forth continues.

The competitive banter here seems to originate in the participants' self-consciousness and embarrassment, embarrassment brought about by the context of being recorded. Do the two friends blame the researchers, who have the institutional power in this context, for putting them in this embarrassing position (Speer, 2002b)? Better yet, do they blame a sexist society that sets up young women to feel bad about themselves? They do neither, at least not out loud. Instead, while they in no way blame one another for their discomfort, they certainly seem to take it out on each other.

Participants in competitive banter, as is apparent here, create a frame of playful teasing around their interaction. For instance, Bella is clearly not seriously concerned about what is written in the Constitution. Even as the two women attempt to deflect the discomfort they feel by passing it off on their partners, they maneuver around the arena of competition in a series of creative moves modulated to insure they will not inflict genuine harm on one another. Banter seems to provide a solution to the social dilemma in which friends perceive the need to compete for interpersonal resources (such as saving face in relation to the researchers who will listen to the recording) but would prefer to at least compete cooperatively.

### **Construction of Women as Competitors**

Competition between women may take less playful and cooperative forms. Women may be pitted against each other in competition for ostensibly scarce resources, esteem, or social capital. In the following episode, April is talking with Britney about other women she might want to rent an apartment with in the coming academic year. April wants to live with Christine (mentioned below) and Chloe (not mentioned in the excerpt). Christine, however, also wants to live with her friend Danielle (mentioned below), but April has just expressed the concern that it is easier to find an apartment for a smaller group of roommates:

**April:** And so I think that like if we keep it at three, we might just have a better chance. And then like, I don't know. I like Danielle. Like, I do. But it's like her and Christine are too much alike.

**Britney:** Are they? I don't know Danielle that well.

**April:** They get super competitive. Like, Christine would complain to me about it. Like, before Christine was dating Derek. Um, if they were at a party together it would be like, they would

fight over guys. Like, they'd just try to top each other.

**Britney:** A low self-esteem thing. I remember that.

**April:** Yeah. It's like they'd always do that. Like they'd always try to top each other with guys. Like, oh I can get his attention more, you know. I can get this guy to talk to me and not you. With everything they do they're like that. They're just like too much alike, so they get all super competitive. And I don't want to live with that.

This exchange demonstrates the construction of women as competitors on at least three levels. First and most obviously, the two characters in the narrative, Christine and Danielle, are characterized as competitive, trying to “top each other” in competition for guys. Relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Walker & Smith, 2002) describes the tendency for people to evaluate what they possess or lack, and their accompanying satisfaction or discontent, by comparing their resources with others in a similar resource bracket. April echoes relative deprivation theory in viewing her friends' competition as driven by their similarity.

Second, April has established three as the ideal number to search for an apartment, leaving insufficient room in the group of apartment seekers for both Christine and Danielle. Faced with the task of legitimizing why the now finite resource should not be allocated to Danielle, April works to produce a negative portrait of Danielle while subtly sparing Christine from the worst of the criticism by depicting Danielle as less deserving than Christine. Though both friends are described as if their competitiveness is habitual and routine (“It's like they'd always do that.”), only her friendship with Danielle is qualified (“I like Danielle. Like, I do. But . . .”). Christine, on the other hand, is given the privileged role in the story of having a problem with Danielle, rather than the other way around (“Like, Christine would complain to me about it.”), exempting her from the justified conclusion: “And I don't want to live with that.” April pulls off accepting Christine while rejecting Danielle by comparing their similarities of character but differences in status such that one will lose in the comparison.

Third, though not stated explicitly, April and Britney construct Christine and Danielle as “the other”, inferior to themselves. The undesirable quality of competitiveness identified in the characters is not a quality the speakers claim as their own as well, and it is framed as a function of other negative traits (“low self-esteem”, “too much alike”) from which the speakers implicitly distance themselves. This third level of construction of women as competitors could be paraphrased as, “I'm not as competitive as you are.”

### Construction of Women as Objects

Sexism objectifies women, regarding them as visual and sexual objects looked at from the outside, rather than as subjects experiencing life from within. As sexism is internalized, women are trained to adopt the role of observer and evaluator, judging their own and one another's appearance. In the excerpt below, Amber is about to get her wisdom teeth removed a week before she starts her summer job as a lifeguard. She expects to be in pain post-surgery and unable to eat, but she identifies a grim upside to her anticipated suffering:

**Amber:** It's crazy. I figure it's a good diet, crash diet to be going on for like the week before I go to camp, you know.

**Brenda:** Oh no.

**Amber:** Cause I have to wear this speedo like –

**Brenda:** – every day –

**Amber:** – yeah, like out on the beach and stuff and be like, “Don't look at my butt.”

**Brenda:** Oh God. Who cares?

**Amber:** Yeah, I don't know. I think it would be fun though.

In the period leading up to her summer job, Amber is apparently preoccupied imagining how she will appear to others watching her and how she will feel under their gaze. To imagine this she has to project herself into the position of the observer and judge her appearance as an outsider might. She then normalizes her anticipated response to the fabricated observer (“I have to . . . be like . . .”), as if no self-objectification is happening at all and anyone in her situation would be required to respond similarly. Nowhere in her expression of distress about having her butt looked at does she recognize her agency in the role of self-objectifier, as she would in a statement like, “I have to wear this speedo like out on the beach and worry about how I look,” which at least locates the power to self-objectify (or self-subjectify) in her own gaze.

Note that Brenda does not simply collude with Amber's derogatory self-objectification. She does not say, as we might expect, “Oh God. You better diet for more than just a week!”. Instead, she resists the self-objectifying stance by minimizing Amber's concern: “Oh God. Who cares?”. While this response resists internalized objectification, it does so by engaging in invalidation. Brenda minimizes Amber's concerns even as she attempts to empower Amber to transcend self-objectification. Amber then manages Brenda's challenge by agreeing (“Yeah,”), mitigating her previous concern with a general ignorance claim (“I don't know.”), and reversing her expression



of distress with a more cheerful presentation of her anticipated experience (“I think it would be fun though.”). Though Brenda’s minimizing of Amber’s objectification prevents further construction of Amber as an object in this instance, it also shuts down Amber’s bid for empathy. Amber can expect no further help from Brenda in making sense of her distress.

Another strategy sometimes employed to contradict initiations of internalized sexism, and self-objectification in particular, is reassurance. In the first illustration of an assertion of incompetence, the science class episode above, Becca skillfully uses reassurance to contradict Alice’s construction of herself as incompetent. In the present case of self-objectification, a reassuring response might take a form such as, “You look fine. You don’t need to lose any weight.” Reassurance about objectification in particular may resist derogatory self-objectification by shifting it into the more desirable, though no less problematic, realm of validating self-objectification. In addition to continuing to objectify, reassurance occupies the same dual role as minimizing does, resisting derogatory self-objectification, but subtly invalidating a speaker’s stated sensitivities about her body, looks, or weight in order to do so. Minimizing and reassurance may even be an integral part of the shared practice of internalized objectification, shutting down meaningful dialogue. Any move to resist internalized objectification that does not fall into the trap of internalized invalidation has to validate the concerns of the person doing the objectifying while simultaneously rejecting the objectification itself. For instance, imaging Brenda saying, “That sucks! You do realize, though, that everyone else is probably just walking around worrying about people looking at their butts”, or “I worry about that stuff too, but then I remind myself that a butt’s just a butt, and then I don’t care as much.”

### **Invalidation and Derogation**

Oppression relies on negative and dehumanizing attitudes toward oppressed groups, encouraging criticism of group members. The project of dehumanizing group members is assisted by devaluing the beliefs, feelings, and choices of group members. Invalidation and derogation were often built into each of the other practices of internalized sexism we observed. For example, in the episode of competitive banter above, Amy, in imagining that she sounds “like shit,” is not merely self-objectifying but also self-derogating, as much of objectification is derogating objectification. In the episode demonstrating how women are constructed as competitors, the narrators criticize the characters in their story as a means of coming out favorably in comparison with them. Consider the following episode of invalidation and derogation:

- Angie:** Do you know what happened? Okay listen to this. My mom sent me a card today in the mail . . . no, this actually happened, and it has like a little Chinese proverb on it, saying like, you know, like birds sometimes they can't fly, and they don't let things get them down, but if they make a nest, you know, out of those problems: it was something like that. And then, so she writes in the card, she's like, 'Dearest Angie, I know that you've been having problems, blah blah blah, and you sent me this card, and nah nah nah,' and then she signs it with my name, saying 'Love, Angie,' and I was like, are you on crack, mom? I'm like, thanks for the, the card, but it was like, okay.
- Beth:** Your mom's funny.
- Angie:** My mom's a little whack.

Angie's mother's initiative at being supportive is invalidated via a criticism of her mental state ("I was like, are you on crack, mom?", "My mom's a little whack [slang for crazy]."). A common device for invalidating women's mental health is the use of terms like "weird" and "crazy" that construct a standard of normality not met by the woman being talked about. Within our sample, a full 27% of episodes of invalidation and derogation included some characterization of a woman as "weird", "funny" (as in weird), "strange", "abnormal", "whack", "crazy", or "insane," or used specific mental health diagnoses in derogatory ways to characterize women via the terms "psycho", "obsessed", "OCD", "anal", and "paranoid". Portrayals of women as deviating from a standard of normality accomplish directly what other forms of invalidation and derogation accomplish by less straightforward means. They police the territory of social norms, some of which are norms for women in particular, criticizing and punishing those who cross over cooperatively maintained boundaries.

## DISCUSSION

Everyday sexism has a long reach. It may rob women of their sense of power, preoccupy women with their physical appearance, make women question the validity of their judgments and feelings, and convince women that they and other women are to blame for the effects of sexism. Because of the multiplicity of forms sexism takes, sexism is internalized by a variety of practices. The organizing framework of internalized sexism helps to make sense of how conversational practices that differ in character may all be part of the system by which sexism is internalized.

Episodes of internalized sexism, in the forms we delineated for this particular sample, were initiated an average of 11 times per 10 minute conversation. While some practices take such mild forms that they may appear unremarkable, the steady repetition of episodes, and the compounding of one type of practice upon another, cumulatively produce day-to-day internalized sexism. It is the day-to-day nature of conversational practice that makes it so important to study. Sexism is not simply internalized once. As is apparent from the repetition of these practices, the project of internalizing sexism requires not merely a finite period of socialization, but ongoing maintenance as well, in this case by peers. Like sexism, internalized sexism is a relational process, produced and reproduced in the networks of interactions by which we compose ourselves. Fortunately, the relationships within which internalized sexism is constructed every day also have the potential to be sites for the rejection of oppression.

### **How Do We Know This Is Internalized Oppression?**

How can we be sure that practices like the assertion of incompetence, self-objectification, and competitive banter are really internalized sexism? As with most constructs in psychology, internalized sexism is a matter of definition, and the primary test of validity is whether or not the construct proves useful in forwarding our understanding of phenomena. If the organizing framework of internalized sexism helps to clarify the structure, function, and impact of the practices we identified, then the construct may have real world value.

Some of our readers have suggested that the way to assess whether a practice is part of internalized sexism is to see whether the same practice is equally apparent in conversations between men. Do men make general ignorance claims as often as women? Do men objectify other men as often as women objectify other women? We believe that reducing the question of internalized sexism to gender differences in the frequency of particular speech acts misses the dramatically different contexts in which women and men orient to cultural expectations about their gender roles (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Hyde, 1994). For instance, men may use the phrase “I don’t know” without a clear referent for different reasons than women do, perhaps to appear nonchalant about something that would otherwise make them appear vulnerable (Korobov & Thorne, 2006, 2007). If men are shown to objectify men far less often than women objectify women, this could be due to differences in how homophobia regulates men’s and women’s interactions. Men may not feel free to notice the bodies of other men or to voice what they do notice in the presence of male friends. The cultural imperatives to perform masculinity by hiding vulnerability or displaying rigid heterosexuality will tend to shape men’s behaviors differently than women’s. If we simply compare the frequency of practices for each gender without accounting for differences in meaning, we could end up

comparing apples and apricots. There is no meaning without context (Bateson, 1979), and the contexts of participation in one same gender group versus the other are sufficiently different to change the meaning of practices across gender lines. Although examining gender differences may be helpful in understanding internalized sexism, ultimately the examination of women's practices must stand on its own, without requiring a contrast with men's practices to validate it.

It is important to note that while each form of oppression is idiosyncratic, all forms of oppression also share commonalities. If the assertion of incompetence is a product of internalized powerlessness, we should expect to see some version of this practice across oppressed groups, as all oppressions are based on power differentials. A woman asserting her own sense of incompetence may be doing so because of internalized sexism, internalized racism, internalized classism, and so on. If young women and young men both make general ignorance claims, it may be due in part to the internalization of adultism, wherein the intelligence of young people is not valued or taken seriously by adults. It is impossible to sort these internalized oppressions out. All intersect to have unique effects on individuals. Internalized sexism plays out in the intersection of oppressions.

It is likely that the internalization of oppression is not the only reason for each of the practices listed. Many cultural practices are overdetermined. Women's criticism of themselves and one another may serve the cause of self-improvement and of women teaching each other how to be in order to survive in a sexist world (e.g., Korobov & Thorne, 2009). Self-objectification may be a necessary consequence of learning to take on the perspectives of others. General ignorance claims, though they are not the only practice that can serve this role, may lubricate cooperative talk and keep individuals from taking argumentative positions. Competitive banter may help women to become less vulnerable to put-downs so that they will be stronger in contexts where banter is less playful. The list of possible practices and their functions is endless.

Many of these additional functions bring to the foreground the positive socializing role of the practices of internalized sexism. Mixed in with the reproduction of internalized powerlessness, the perpetuation of within-group competition, and the enforcement of gendered behaviors and preoccupations, is another theme. Women sometimes work in their relationships to shield each other from the external influence of sexism and to strengthen each other in the face of social inequality. This is visible in the reinforcement of solidarity accomplished by framing external competitors as "others" or by asserting one's own incompetence to frame oneself as no more capable than one's conversational partner. It is visible in the creative uses of humor and irony which buffer otherwise potentially harsh forms of criticism in competitive banter, in attempts to minimize or reassure, which, though they invalidate a speaker's experience, are often intended to help her resist the pull to internalize objectification or derogation. A substrate

of resistance underlies each of the practices we have identified. Unfortunately, any move toward resisting sexism which makes use of internalized sexist practices is likely to be equivocal in its impact. Recognizing the underlying impulse toward resistance, however, may be integral in rallying the forces for change within populations most vulnerable to internalized sexism.

For that matter, despite our current focus on internalized sexism, we wish to highlight, for the sake of perspective, that far more than internalized sexism occurred in these dialogues. Conversations were also composed of displays of encouragement, requests for support, discussions about the work and challenges of being students, collaborative interpretation of shared histories, planning for shared futures, expressions of intimacy and caring, information sharing, play, and more. Women's conversations interweave internalized sexism with other dialogic practices, many of which are benign, beneficial, and even liberatory.

### **Limitations**

While each of the categories of practice represented here exposes an important aspect of internalized sexism, they cannot as a whole represent a comprehensive taxonomy of dialogic internalized sexism practices. Several dialogic practices that defied straightforward specification fell beyond the scope of this study. Future research on internalized sexism might be served by the incorporation of these practices, though some work is required to distinguish them with precision. Loss of self is one such practice, referring to circumstances in which women sacrifice, and even lose awareness of, their own needs and desires in order to prioritize the needs of others, often those of men (Fine, 2003; Jack, 1991; Jack & Dill 1992; Neff & Harter, 2002). Systematically distinguishing between the positive prioritizing of and taking care of others' needs, and the problematic silencing of one's own voice, however, may prove difficult. Gender role enactment is another set of practices tricky to differentiate from benign dialogue. A conversational dyad in our sample, for instance, might entertain gender role normative topics of conversation, perhaps talking about shopping for clothes or about which boys are cuter. Is it internalized sexism when women's conversations overrepresent such topics within the vast potential territory conversations can explore? Gender role policing, the set of practices by which women ensure that other women do not stray too far from gender role norms, is similarly difficult to distinguish systematically. Everyday dialogue may at times be a challenging medium through which to locate and learn about some aspects of internalized sexism.

Though late adolescence is a valuable period in which to observe the gelling of gender identity, including internalized sexism, college students as a population are not representative of the wider society in terms of age, economic class, life experience,

responsibilities, priorities, and relationship to authority (Sears, 1986). Even within our undergraduate sample, the preponderance of White students makes it impossible to generalize to undergraduates as a whole. We assume that internalized sexism will be practiced differently across cultural communities, though we are hopeful that the framework we've developed will be a helpful starting place in discerning the differences.

This study relied solely on the analysis of dialogue. No supplementary data were collected beyond the dialogues, such as intensive interviews, daily diaries, or other kinds of observations that would inform the meaning of the practices. In future research, survey measures might also provide a triangulation point, though no currently published scales are designed to capture internalized sexism.

### **Thwarting Internalized Sexism**

When learning about internalized oppression, some people express concern that it is just a way of "blaming the victim". Our purpose here is not to blame the targets of oppression for the existence or perpetuation of inequity or mistreatment. In fact, the purpose is not to blame anyone, but rather to more efficiently scrutinize how, when, by whom, and for what reasons internalized oppression seeps into the social practices of certain groups of women. Though we may understand a good deal about the nature of oppression, anti-oppression techniques and technologies are in great need of further development. The more we can understand the multi-level, dynamic network of interactions that reproduces oppression each day, the better chances we have of creating potent interventions and new practices that will effectively supplant the old. Internalized oppression plays a daily role in the maintenance of oppressive systems.

Does this mean that we should develop an intervention program to train young women to use language differently in conversation with each other? Perhaps, although such an approach could become reductionistic. We know that changing cultural practices changes cultures (Rogoff, 2003), and that changing language practices can change systems of oppression (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Guerin, 2003; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004). It is difficult to change that which cannot be observed. Though sexism is unlikely to disappear simply by virtue of changing conversational practices, observing conversation can help bring the practices which constitute internalized sexism to light, and awareness of internalized sexism is essential in bringing the wider system of sexism to an end.

On a day-to-day basis, cultivating an awareness of internalized sexism can change the lives of young women who are actively co-constructing their identities. For example, some of our students have informally reported to us a sense of power, or a feeling of being more substantial, that came from catching themselves in the act of saying "I don't know," and inhibiting the general ignorance claims before they could be spoken. By

recognizing and thwarting internalized sexism as it arises in both inner and outer dialogue, it is possible for women to stop discounting their intelligence or their capabilities, to empower other women by not colluding with their assertions of incompetence, to come to accept their bodies as they already are, shifting their focus away from judging objectification and toward the felt sense experience of embodiment, to validate their opinions and feelings and those of the women around them, refusing to participate in the derogation of their fellow women, and to learn to support and become allies to other women in overcoming the effects of sexism, instead of falling prey to the belief that other women should be treated as competitors. Empowerment, embodiment, validation, and collaboration are all potential benefits of learning about internalized sexism.

**Acknowledgements:**

Funding for this study was provided by NIH training grant T32 HD46423 to the second author and a grant from Consulting Psychologists Press. The authors wish to thank Barbara Rogoff and Janet Swim for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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**Footnotes:**

1. Calculating kappa for these categories of practices would have tended to artificially drive inter-rater reliability scores upward, since it would demand division of transcripts into arbitrary units, and most of those units would be devoid of any given practice. The result would be very high agreement between raters on where the practice is *absent* and an inflated kappa score. Percentage agreement is therefore the more conservative measure for these data.

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