

Commentary:

**THE PSYCHOANALYTIC PRODUCTION OF PATHOLOGY:
A COMMENTARY ON THE RE-SIGNIFICATION OF
SEXISM IN "THE FABRIC OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM"**

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Abstract

The study of social, psychological, cultural and economic modes of oppression is an area of research that merits serious attention. In medical, criminal and legal contexts, knowledge claims made by researchers remain central to cultural constructions of deviance, disease, dysfunction, and notions of “abnormality.” In this commentary, I offer a critical feminist perspective on the discussion presented by authors Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne (2009) in their analysis of internalized sexism. My primary critique of the work draws attention to the problematic reproduction of dominant discourses of sexism. I argue that the language, content, and conclusions offered by the researchers replicate a historical positioning of female subjects as pathological. Initial considerations by the authors of power dynamics as they take shape in language, identity performance and structural relations are largely absent from the final analysis of participant behavior and the conclusions that follow. This disconnection between complex power relations and the construction of gender is antithetical to addressing issues of internalized sexism. Recognizing the value of theorizing gender, power relations and discourse, my goal in this work is to inspire an ongoing reflection on the consequences of research claims in the process of producing knowledge.

Keywords: Gender, Internalized Sexism, Discourse, Power

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COMMENTARY

The focus of analysis in “The Fabric of Internalized Sexism” is on college-educated, primarily white, young females. Discursive exchanges between 45 pairs of female identified friends are examined for verbal expressions of internalized sexism. The basic argument presented in the article is that sexism can be practiced by anyone regardless of gender, age, race, class, sexuality, nationality or ethnicity. I do not take issue with an understanding of sexism as a pervasive ideology within Western culture that produces material, psychological and relational consequences for individuals and processes of social organization. My explicit concern with this work is that it presents a simplified depiction of the research subjects and their observed behaviors. The language used by the authors in their analysis, coding and conclusions perpetuates a dominant discourse of sexism. The authors participate in reproducing sexist ideology by creating research categories that discursively position female participants as pathological. The knowledge claims made by the authors do not effectively attend to the complex ways in which participants exercise agency and actively negotiate their identities in relation to the discourses they have available to them.

Internalized sexism, oppression and misogyny are not new topics within feminist theorizing (Anderson, 2004; Collins, 2002; Cook, 1993; Daleo, 1996; Minnich, O'Barr, & Rosenfeld, 1988; Moane, & Campling, 1999; Stanley and Wise, 1983). Of primary concern within feminist psychological literature is the way that psychology as a disciplinary practice colludes with structures of oppression (Burman, 1996). Feminist engagement with language practices has a long and rich history (for example see, Cameron, 1990 and 1985; Thorne, Kramare & Treichler, 1985; Lakoff, 1975; Lazar, 2005; McConnell-Ginet et al. 1980; and Spender, 1980). Discussions of discourse and power relations are central within these works. Although Bearman, Korobov and Thorne introduce power as vital to understandings of how individuals use discourse, a comprehensive examination of how power circulates within gendered discourse is lost within the data analysis section of the paper. Specific attention to how “status” is established in relation to circulating discursive constructs (such as race, class, sexuality, nationality) would provide a greater understanding of how sexist discourse is used by females to gain power in a misogynist culture.

Discourses are a product and reflection of social, economic, political factors and power relations (Gavey, 1989; Parker, 1992, Widdicombe, 1995). The authors’ opening example of “mundane” sexist talk in paragraphs two through three encourages readers to think about assumptions of gender with regard to who can be sexist. This illustration of sexism does not, however, address the ways in which the power of these statements depends on the social positioning of the speaker. While females absolutely do internalize modes of sexist behavior, their expressions of sexism operate quite differently depending on their own status within the social system. This point may be best conveyed by considering that a sexist remark made by a female toward a male individual does not carry the same impact as that of a male toward a female, regardless of who the speaker is; the assumption that discourse analysis can simply

attend to the words of the speakers is inaccurate. On this point, the authors explain that “[w]hile 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” (p. 12). What remains invisible through its omission is the way that women are situated differently in relation to one another; the power that they institutionally exercise is directly related to their varied membership in specific privileged groups.

The discussion of institutionalized power differentials as addressed by Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne (pp. 13-14) lacks serious attention to participant negotiations of socio-cultural capital. If subjectivity is shaped by cultural discourses, practices and meanings, it is certainly necessary for the authors, at minimum, to address how geography, nationality and ethnicity inform the observed speech patterns. Their discussion of internalized sexism provides a simplistic overview that lacks context; for example, in paragraph seven, the authors state that “the effects of oppression are often invisible or taken for granted.” Yet the question remains, invisible to whom? And taken for granted by whom? The phrasing of this statement communicates a position of power and privilege.

What is most clear in the language used by the authors is that what can be known is dependent upon the situational perspective of the knower (Haraway, 1996); it refers to a situated knowledge and a particular view of the world. Lost in the framing of the overall argument is the historical and cultural context in which “some people” exercise privilege as a result of membership within multiple and intersecting categories of identity (i.e.: race, class, sexuality, nationality, sex, gender, etc.). For example, if the authors addressed heterosexuality as a dominant discourse that undergirds power relations it would present readers with a more productive understanding of internalized sexism. Homophobia, briefly mentioned by the authors on page 36, is referenced with regard to how dominant norms of sexuality regulate cultural interactions. This paragraph begins the work of interrogating sexuality as a social construct that intersects with gender, specifically in relation to cultural imperatives about performing (Butler, 1990) “masculinity” and “femininity;” yet, the authors re-signify gender as a binary concept by linking it to dominant Western conceptions of sex as dichotomous (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). The reasoning provided by the authors for why it might be valuable to analyze female and male conversations separately remains rooted in a naturalized notion of a sex/gender model; thus, the analytic conclusions reached by the authors effectively reproduce a heteronormative (Warner, 1991) discursive framework. The study of “internalized sexism as it is enacted in everyday conversations” would greatly benefit from attention to the relationship between power, gender and sexuality, and the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) influences how subjects represent themselves in everyday conversation.

As noted by Gill (1995), “...language is not a neutral, descriptive medium but is deeply implicated in the maintenance of power relations...the micro politics of power – how it is practiced in particular discursive contexts – can serve to make structural inequalities invisible and lead to a neglect of the institutional bases of power...” (pp. 166-168). Maintaining critical engagement with the intersections between institutional and individual modes of behavior is not

an easy task, and yet in the closing section of their article, authors Bearman, Korobov and Thorne insert a justification for the problematic approaches within their work. They state, “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” (p. 39). The wording used in this statement implies that internalized sexism as expressed in discourse is a mystery; however, neither sexism nor internalized sexism “seeps” into discourse. Language and the process of making meaning are learned cultural practices. Notions of “gender identity” are discursively constructed within institutions (Smith, 1990), (for example within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association - DSM IV), and shape how individuals perceive themselves as well as how they are perceived by others (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Individual formulations and negotiations of discourse are most usefully analyzed in dialectic engagement with the workings of social constitution (Falmagne, 2004). A synthesis between individual discursive practices and the cultural environment in which these discourses are produced would significantly enrich the conclusions offered by Bearman, Korobov and Thorne. The complex ways that participants use language indicates that, as researchers, we must be actively curious about how participants mediate and negotiate linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge while constituting and constructing their identities and subjectivities (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995; Willis, 2008).

The psychological internalization of sexist ideology is a topic of investigation that is fruitfully explored across interdisciplinary perspectives. A reflexive approach to psychological inquiry (Gergen, 2000; Gill, 1995; Morawski, 1994; Reay, 1996) includes an interest in the consequences of the categories produced within psychological discourse, as well as in how these categories intersect with institutional practices. “Reflexive practice is that which accounts for the dialectical and reciprocal workings of power...” (Hess-Biber and Yaiser, 2004, p. 18). Language is an interactive activity, mediating linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge, and constituting a site for the construction of identities and subjectivities (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995). The continuation of traditional gender ideology is evident within each of the categories that Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne use (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) to analyze discourse exchanges. For example, in their analysis of “competition between women”, the authors describe competitive banter as “originat[ing] in the participants’ self-consciousness and embarrassment...” (p. 31). This conclusion is linked to a binary gender specific ideology; it communicates a hegemonic construction of gender in which competition between women is interpreted as negative. The dominant construction of competition, as it circulates within contemporary Western ideology, remains firmly in place; the prominent cultural idea that competition between males is culturally “normal” produces the competitive female as pathological. This model for understanding

“competition between women” is ineffective; it fails to challenge the way that power circulates in the participants’ discursive negotiations of subjectivity.

What possibilities does “The Fabric of Internalized Sexism” produce for disrupting sexist discourse practices? Throughout this commentary, I have offered an interdisciplinary critique of the approaches used by Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne to analyze discursive expressions of internalized sexism. Although I believe that their work has the potential to offer a contribution to interdisciplinary understandings of internalized sexism, I have pointed to several problems with the article relating to the how the authors use language and develop terms to reach specific analytic conclusions. My primary goal has been to stimulate feminist curiosity (Enloe, 2007) about the ways in which research claims reflect specific knowledge standpoints (Harding, 2004; Hess-Biber and Yaiser, 2004) and participate in the maintenance, negotiation, and/or transformation of systems of domination. My critical feminist analysis of the discussion offered by Bearman, Korobov and Thorne asks readers to consider what is highlighted and/or occluded in the coding of participant discourse exchanges, and how language is used to describe behavior such that dominant structures of gender ideology are reproduced. There is no point at which the authors identify themselves or their project as feminist; however, their stated interest in internalized sexism presents an opportunity to develop interdisciplinary conversations about discourse practices by drawing from the work of pioneering scholars in gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, disability, and class studies.

To further articulate the above critique, what I find most troublesome about the claims made in “The Fabric of Internalized Sexism” is that the research reifies a sex difference model. While the authors certainly document that internalized sexism is pervasive among the population observed, the structures that guide discursive practices are not integrated into the analysis of participant behavior. To make this final point clear, it is necessary to interrogate the author’s statement that “internalized sexism divides women” (p. 16). This is a valuable insight, and yet the authors fail to address the relationship between this phenomenon and its counterpoint, which is that women’s internalized sexism unites men. At this point, the authors might usefully expand their scope of analysis by examining gender more broadly as a system that sustains unequal social arrangements. Yet the authors’ arguments remain circular, repeatedly characterizing female subjects as through the use of language that pathologizes their behaviors rather than the system in which they are negotiating their subjectivities. A more nuanced approach to understanding discursive practices would substantively engage with the ways in which individuals develop particular survival strategies in response to sexist (racist, classist, nationalist, ageist, homophobic) discourses rooted in cultural ideologies, structures and institutions that shape their everyday lives.

The language used by researchers carries and communicates knowledge from a particular position of privilege. As stated by Thorne, Henley and Kramarae (1983), “Hierarchies determine whose version of the communication situation will prevail; whose speech style will be seen as normal; who will be required to learn communication style, and interpret the meaning of the other; whose language will be seen as deviant, irrational, and inferior; and who will be required

to imitate the other's style in order to fit into society" (pp. 19-20). Discourse remains a site of significant social struggle. Historically and culturally contingent analyses of internalized sexism require attention to the political implications of the knowledge produced. Reflexive practices of analysis within feminist frameworks focus specific attention on the social and relational organization of gendered power dynamics. In the process of shaping cultural ideas about sickness and health, the language applied by researchers continues to influence medical models of wellness and illness. Interpreting how individuals engage in daily struggles and negotiations of language requires a nuanced lens of analysis. Taking into account the fact that interrelations between gender, power, ideology and discourse are multifaceted and complex, any interpretation of individual or group behaviour cannot be adequately understood outside the structures in which they are formed.

Acknowledgements:

I am sincerely grateful for the feedback provided by Dr. Zachary Dorsey and Dr. Mark Denaci on multiple drafts of this commentary. I am additionally appreciative of Dr. Rainer Diriwächter for creating a space in which scholars may debate and expand our theoretical lenses such that social phenomena may be explored both comprehensively and holistically.

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