

Commentary:

**A REPLY TO DR. JESSICA WILLIS: SEEKING A CURE
FOR INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION**

Steve Bearman, M.S.

University of California, Santa Cruz

Neill Korobov, Ph.D.

University of West Georgia

Avril Thorne, Ph.D.

University of California, Santa Cruz

Abstract

In responding to Willis' (2009) critique of "*The Fabric of Internalized Sexism*", several implications of our study have become more clear. Members of groups targeted by oppression may fail to recognize oppression, or may rationalize or deny its existence, and this is especially true of internalized oppression. Sexism can be considered as a form of social pathology in need of cure, though the metaphor of behavior change may ultimately be more helpful than the disease metaphor. To change a behavior, the old behavior must first be illuminated, and given the potential invisibility of internalized sexism, our study sought to bring such behaviors to light. Because forms of oppression are interrelated, identifying the practices of internalized sexism in need of changing may have value for demographic groups beyond those represented in our sample. As an example, we discuss an alternative practice designed to counteract some aspects of internalized sexism, *developing solidarity*. This practice has utility for men as well as women. The project of developing additional practices to counteract internalized oppression is a very worthwhile pursuit.

Keywords: internalized sexism, internalized oppression,
developing solidarity

AUTHOR NOTE: Please address all correspondence to: Steve Bearman, Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, 95064, USA. Email: sbearman@ucsc.edu

Seeking a Cure for Internalized Oppression

For those of us who are well-practiced at recognizing oppression, the operation of sexism in our institutions, relationships, and identities may be readily apparent. The workings of sexism and of oppression, however, are not always obvious because people tend to be blind to forms of discrimination that do not affect them. The inequality inherent between groups who act as agents of oppression and those who are its targets provides the agents the freedom to ignore the oppression, to remain naïve about its effects, or to justify acts of discrimination by denying that anything oppressive is happening. To maintain group-based inequality, agents of oppression must consider their participation in oppressive systems to be natural, necessary, or justified.

What may be more surprising is that people on the receiving end of sexism, racism, class oppression, etc., may be equally blind to oppression, or may rationalize, naturalize, or deny its existence. In contrast to old-fashioned overt bigotry, many modern manifestations of discrimination are subtle, covert, unintended, or ambiguous (Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). As a result, targets may fail to identify prejudice or discrimination – a failure that, unfortunately, does not prevent modern oppression from having a cumulative impact on those who are subject to it on a day-to-day basis (Sechrist & Swim, 2008). Beyond the inability to detect oppression, people in oppressed groups may actively defend the status quo, legitimizing oppression and justifying a system that subordinates them (Jost & Banaji, 1994). This system-justifying motive often leads members of disadvantaged groups to unconsciously value groups that have power over them more highly than their own groups, and to believe they deserve less than members of relatively advantaged groups (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Finally, even when targets of discrimination are well-aware of the oppression aimed at a group they belong to, they may deny that they are personally affected. Some years ago, Crosby (1984, p. 372) observed that many women seemed to base their beliefs about sexism on the following logical sequence:

1. Women are discriminated against.
2. I am a woman.
3. Phew, that was a close call.

Rather than draw the conclusion, based on the initial premises, that they are discriminated against, women (and members of other target groups), may be motivated to avoid the distress and self-blame that can accompany recognition of discrimination by portraying themselves as personally exempt from the oppression.

The inability to recognize oppression is likely to be even stronger in the case of internalized oppression. Like fish taking water for granted (Linton, 1936), we have no contrast with which to compare the internalized oppression we have learned to breathe. Even an extensive education in the nature of oppression may focus entirely on external agents of oppression, leaving out the ways that targets of oppression learn to contribute to their own subjugation.

Sexism is perpetrated not only by men, but by the society as whole, a society comprised of men and women both. However, given the relative invisibility of internalized oppression, women are unlikely to be cognizant of the ways in which they have come to act as agents of sexism.

If social systems can be considered pathological, then sexism is certainly pathology. Oppression, poverty, war, violence, greed, bureaucracy, reductionism, and environmental destruction all form a complex of social dysfunction. Oppression is integral to this complex of social pathology, and sexism, fundamental to the interlocking system of social oppressions, can therefore be considered an illness.

Although the disease metaphor is limited, it illuminates some aspects of sexism. For one, sexism is certainly contagious. People who are raised male will, with few exceptions, contract the illness at a young age as they are indoctrinated into the male role. As with any disease, blaming boys for catching sexism is unlikely to be part of the cure. When men act as agents of sexism, they do so because they are carrying a social virus. Men themselves are not the virus, and everyone would benefit from a cure or a vaccine. Women, unfortunately, carry the same virus, or perhaps a complementary strain of it. Internalized sexism is not women's fault, but it is a part of the social pathology. Blame is useless, but unless the pathology can be identified and understood, eliminating it will be impossible. Groups that have been targeted by oppression must come to recognize their agentic (though unintended) participation in and contribution to the project of their own oppression. Only then can the effects of the oppression be lifted and healed.

Our study of the fabric of internalized sexism aimed to make visible some of the ways in which women inadvertently enact sexism in casual interactions with other women. We assume that most women would prefer not to contribute to sexism. The first step in changing an undesirable behavior is to identify the behavior in need of changing; the second step is to catch oneself in the act of behaving in the old way; and the third step is to replace or override the old behavior with something more desirable. Illumination of hard to see behaviors accomplishes the first step and makes possible the second.

The behaviors in need of changing that we hoped to identify and illuminate are interactional in nature. Oppression functions simultaneously on the institutional, interpersonal, and individual level, and these levels are mutually constituting. Institutions are made of individuals and the interactions between them; individuals are shaped by structural forces and by networks of interactions; and interactions emerge from individuals creating themselves in relation to one another, while constrained by the affordances offered by institutional structures. To disrupt systems of oppression, we must design interventions on all levels. Our study addressed the level of interactions, and so the behavioral changes informed by it are likely to be interactional changes.

The dialogic practices identified in "The Fabric of Internalized Sexism" were assertions of incompetence, general ignorance claims, competitive banter, the construction of women as competitors, the construction of women as objects, and invalidation and derogation. Though we identified these practices in a sample of mostly White, mostly middle class, female college

students aged 18-25 in Northern California, the practices themselves may be relevant to people of races, classes, ages, or genders different from those represented by our sample. All people are suspended in the web of oppression. All forms of oppression are interrelated. Regardless of whether you share the demographics of the group we observed, the real utility of identifying each of these practices comes when you can recognize the practice, or something like it, in your own interactions. Do you engage in the practice? If so, what impact does it have on you? How can you interrupt the practice? What would you replace it with?

Alternative practices are possible to counteract the effects of internalized sexism. As an example, an antidote to the construction of women as competitors may be the practice of *developing solidarity*. The basic premise behind the concept of solidarity is that “we’re all in this together.” Sexism affects all women. If women can recognize the ways their sister women are limited by the effects of sexism, overcoming those effects becomes a collective project. The social capital for which women are set up to compete is not usually as finite as internalized sexism would have women believe. Cultivating solidarity means assuming that everyone can get their needs met, and that women need to support each other in this endeavor to make it possible. The practice of invalidating or derogating other women is driven by a zero-sum model premised on the conviction that it is not possible for everyone to be well regarded. A key practice of solidarity is to question criticisms of women, or better yet, to refuse to criticize or invalidate at all, instead working to value all other women and to see them as “natural allies” (Wolf, 1991, p. 384).

Expressing solidarity with other women may be at least as contagious as the construction of women as competitors. Take the following excerpt from our archive of conversations between young women friends:

Allie: Oh cool, yeah. Did Camille go with you guys?

Bernice: No, who is she? He was talking about her. Is she like his girlfriend or something?

Allie: I don't know. I hope so. She's really nice. That would be cute if they were together, like . . .

Bernice: Yeah, cause they were like making a joke about him and her.

Allie: Yeah, she's really sweet. She's like one of the nicest people I know. I think . . .

Bernice: Does she go to school here?

Allie: Yeah, and she also like has a full time, well sort of like a . . . She's going to school, has a really big like workload, like a job outside of school, and then she's volunteering for like an AIDS thing too, like, she's really really cool.

Bernice: (softly) Oh wow.

Allie: Yeah. I know. I'm like ok, you're amazing.

Bernice: That's really cool.

Early in this exchange, Bernice introduces a joke some friends were making about Camille. Not only does Allie bypass this opportunity to make fun of Camille, but goes further by disregarding the comment, doesn't ask what the joke was, and instead continues to portray Camille as someone worthy of admiration. By the end of the exchange, Bernice starts to mirror Allie's language ("really cool") in speaking favorably about Camille. This interchange stood out as an unusual counterexample to the practice of constructing women as competitors. Instead, the speakers develop solidarity with Camille without needing to give up anything in the process. Everyone is enhanced. No one loses out.

It is not only girls and women who can benefit from the practice of developing solidarity because men and boys are caught up in the same system of gender role conditioning. Both groups are dehumanized by this conditioning in the sense that the full complement of desirable human qualities (e.g., being beautiful, strong, cooperative, assertive, empathic, ambitious, etc.) is divided up by gender. The system of rewards and punishments that comprises gender role conditioning denies each gender one set of these qualities while force-feeding them the other. The result is humans that have diminished access to their full humanness, and this process is just as dehumanizing of males as it is of females (Bearman, 2000; hooks, 2004; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; New, 2001).

Seeing how sexism sets up women to compete with each other is central to understanding the internalized dimension of sexism. Such competition is problematic because it shows social discord and interferes with women's ability to build the solidarity required to work against sexism. Men are also set up to compete with one another, and this competition is no less problematic (Kohn, 1986).

The conditioning of males to compete is overt. Boys are trained to be aggressive, goal-oriented, and dominating. Intimacy between males is often prohibited, replaced by participation in social hierarchies such as teams, clubs, gangs, fraternities, and armies, groups whose goals are often to "beat" one another in competitions and whose members jockey for rank within the group hierarchy. The production of sexist males relies on the early conditioning of boys into the male role, and becoming competitive is integral to how males are indoctrinated into domination as a way of relating. Rather than uniting men, the conditioning to compete that undergirds sexism also keeps men isolated from one another. Until men overcome this conditioning, sexism will persist, men will lose out on intimacy with one another, and opportunities for men to reclaim aspects of their humanness long denied them by the male role will be few and far between.

Women and men can be excellent allies for each other. Because women are not subject to the same conditioning that limits men, women may be more capable of seeing men's conditioning, though it remains invisible to the men who have grown up with it. Men, because they have not internalized sexism, may be able to more easily identify it as it functions in

women. Members of either group who make it their business to learn about how the other group has been hurt by gender role conditioning and sexism can be powerful allies in helping the other group become disentangled from the oppression. Ultimately, solidarity means not only that women are all in this together, but that everyone is (Bishop, 2002).

For any practice of internalized oppression, alternative practices can be imagined, work shopped, developed. Robinson (2003) trained young women to self-subjectify by meeting an objectifying gaze with an assertive rather than avoidant response. The *construction of women as subjects* could include women practicing naming and acknowledging only attributes in other women that are not related to physical appearance, much as anti-sexist men train themselves to do. *Developing substance* could be a set of practices wherein women make unmitigated statements of fact and opinion as a counter to general ignorance claims, or encourage one another to live as if there is no limit to how much they are capable of achieving. Women become agents of sexism through practices of internalized sexism. These practices are an unconscious utilization of power. Making that power conscious can release it for creative use to fuel the interpersonal practices of a post-sexism paradigm.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Steve Bearman seeks the vulnerable connections within networks of relationships where a small intervention, once introduced, can flow through the system creating widespread change. His research brings a distributed cognition framework to the project of ending oppression, tracing the ways we inadvertently coordinate and cooperate to maintain racism and sexism. He is currently working with high school students to seed contagious behaviors designed to reduce racial segregation into their schools. Steve is a counselor, social justice educator, and founder of the San Francisco based counseling training, Interchange: a training in Radical Counseling. He is also the developer of psychsurveys.org: the free survey website for social science researchers. Address: Steve Bearman, Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, 95064, USA. Email: sbearman@ucsc.edu. Websites: <http://www.radicalcounseling.com/?steve> and <http://www.psychsurveys.org>

Neill Korobov's work examines the architecture and texture of people's conversations and stories for the study of identity and ideology, particularly with respect to gender. He takes a keen interest in conversational practices since it is within this flow of responsive and relational activity that subjectivities emerge. His work is informed by critical discourse-narrative analysis and hermeneutic frameworks for social science inquiry. Currently, Neill is studying the stories that young adults tell about their romantic and sexual experiences, with a particular interest in the masculinization and feminization of intimacy. Address: Neill Korobov, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology. University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA 30118 USA. Email: nkorobov@westga.edu. Website: <http://www.westga.edu/~nkorobov>

Avril Thorne, a personality, developmental, and sociocultural psychologist, studies how identities are shaped in the exchange of personal stories between family members and friends. She also studies the narrative co-construction of personality. Her current work focuses on the developmental affordances of introverted and extraverted friends. Address: Professor Avril Thorne, Department of Psychology, 277 Social Sciences 2, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, 95064, USA. Email: avril@ucsc.edu. Website: <http://people.ucsc.edu/~avril/>