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“I don’t care” or “It’s their fault”: System justification and the lack of empathy as complementary obstacles to dealing with the modern sexism

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“I don’t care” or “It’s their fault”: System justification and the lack of empathy as complementary obstacles to dealing with the modern sexism

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyzed college students’ perceptions of their experiences with sexism through the frameworks of the ambivalent sexism theory and the theory of system justification. These theories describe the complexity of sexism and explain obstacles of dealing with it in the modern Western world. We qualitatively analyzed students’ responses to an open-ended question about sexism on their campuses. While many informants did describe sexism as a problem, others indicated that it is not important. Respondents displayed negative emotions that often took the form of blame directed both ways. There were almost no responses describing complexity of the modern sexism, which the theories of system justification and ambivalent sexism highlight. We conclude that the subtle nature of the modern sexism combined with people’s reluctance to empathize with the other side (whether they are negatively affected by sexism or not) contribute to the persistence of sexism in the modern world.

Keywords: modern sexism, ambivalent sexism, system justification, empathy

"No me importa" o "es su culpa": la justificación del sistema y la falta de empatía como obstáculos complementarios para lidiar con el sexismo moderno

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Abstract

En este artículo, analizamos las percepciones de estudiantes universitarios sobre sus experiencias con el sexismo a través de los marcos de la teoría del sexismo ambivalente y la teoría de la justificación del sistema. Estas teorías describen la complejidad del sexismo y explican los obstáculos para enfrentarlo en el mundo occidental moderno. Analizamos cualitativamente las respuestas de estudiantes a una pregunta abierta sobre el sexismo en sus campus. Mientras que muchos informantes describieron el sexismo como un problema, otros indicaron que no es importante. Las personas encuestadas mostraron emociones negativas que a menudo tomaron la forma de culpa dirigida en ambos sentidos. Casi no hubo respuestas que describieran la complejidad del sexismo moderno, que las teorías de la justificación del sistema y el sexismo ambivalente destacan. Llegamos a la conclusión de que la naturaleza sutil del sexismo moderno combinado con la renuencia de las personas a empatizar con la otra parte (ya sea que se vean afectados negativamente por el sexismo o no) contribuyen a la persistencia del sexismo en el mundo moderno.

Keywords: sexismo moderno, sexismo ambivalente, justificación del sistema, empatía

Scholars note that, as we are moving further into the twenty-first century, sexism (usually understood as a gender-based discrimination affecting women) remains a problem in the United States (Fouad et al., 2016; Gill, 2011; Grunspan et al., 2016; Leaper & Brown, 2008). The prevalence of sexism suggests that most Americans are bound to witness or experience it on a regular basis. However, scholars note that our experiences can create misunderstanding of sexism, especially due to the fact that in the modern Western society sexism often takes subtle forms (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004). Subtle forms of sexism might be difficult to combat because of people's tendency to justify the status quo (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay et al., 2007). The modern sexism appears not to create disadvantages for women; therefore, both men and women do not feel that the relationship between the genders needs to be changed.

There appears to be a connection between one's level of empathy, defined as the ability to take the Other's perspective, and willingness to fight discrimination (Shih et al., 2009). It has been argued that men's endorsement of the modern sexism can be reduced if their emotional empathy towards women who experience discrimination is encouraged (Becker & Swim, 2011). It is assumed that women have more empathy towards other women because they are members of the same social group. However, the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) implies that this assumption may not always be valid. Moreover, considering the theory of system justification, it is possible that to battle the modern sexism empathy should go both ways. For example, although men engage in sexist actions, it is important to take into consideration social pressures to perform masculinity in a certain manner (Pascoe, 2011; Pascoe & Diefendorf, 2019).

As part of this study, we analyzed 2461 responses to an open-ended survey question that asked undergraduate students in two U.S. Midwestern universities to describe their experiences with sexism. We obtained five main findings. First, many informants did describe sexism (especially overt) as a problem on the campuses where our research was conducted. This finding is in line with the literature that describes hostile sexism as widespread on U.S. college campuses (Van Brunt et al., 2015). Second, answers of a substantial number of respondents indicate that they do not see sexism as a problem. We interpret these respondents' reluctance to admit the existence of sexism or its

seriousness as an indication of their lack of empathy towards victims of sexism. Third, many answers displayed informants' negative emotions, such as anger and resentment (whether respondents believed that that sexism is a problem, or not). Fourth, expressions of these emotions were deployed for blame which was directed both ways (women blaming men and men blaming women), thus serving to essentialize gender differences and divide each other into battling groups along the gender line. Finally, there were almost no responses describing the complexity of the dynamics of the modern sexism, which the theories of system justification and ambivalent sexism point to.

Many Faces of Sexism

Although in the United States overtly hostile sexism is tolerated less, it would be premature to celebrate its disappearance (Sharp et al., 2017). At the same time, subtle forms of sexism are much more prevalent as they are considered socially acceptable (Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004). In fact, subtle forms of sexism are claimed to be better predictors of gender discrimination than blatant ones. Manifestations of modern sexism include microaggressions and sexist language (Fouad et al., 2016). Calling a female co-worker's ideas "cute" but not using the same adjective to describe suggestions of a male co-worker implies slight belittling of the former. When accumulated, such utterances and actions can result in reinforcing stereotype threat (Steele et al., 2002) and surreptitiously feed into expectations about gender differences, naturalizing them.

The theory of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001) posits that sexism can be hostile or benevolent. Glick and Fiske (1996) described three components of benevolent sexism: protective paternalism (women should be protected by men), complementary gender differentiation (women possess domestic qualities that men lack), and heterosexual intimacy (women fulfill men's romantic needs). The theory of benevolent sexism suggests that gender discrimination can exist through actions interpreted as positive by all parties involved.

This leads to blurring of boundaries between sexist and non-sexist behaviors. If a man holds a door for a woman, does it mean that he is sexist? The answer lies in analyzing his often-unconscious motivations and fleeting thoughts, a task which is difficult to accomplish. As women experience what

appears to be “special” treatment from men and feel themselves indispensable to them, they might be less likely to notice that seemingly positive manifestations of benevolent sexism are often mixed with gender-based microaggressions – covert and disrespectful behavior that is motivated by the target’s gender (Levchak, 2018).

The fact that our interactions with others are shaped by the gender binary (Butler, 1990)—the idea that all people are divided into two genders that are complimentary and do not overlap—might be one of the key reasons for the existence of sexism. Yet some scholars argue that dominant ideologies of gender are reinforced by men and women, and harm both (hooks, 2004). It is noted that some women are privileged more than others (McIntosh, 1988). Importantly, theorists have also suggested that women who are more privileged can contribute to the existence of sexism by oppressing other women as illustrated in Collins’ (2000) concept of the matrix of domination. In particular, she notes that an individual can simultaneously be oppressed and an oppressor. This paradox is also illuminated in the concept of horizontal oppression, which describes how individuals of a particular social group (e.g. women) can cause harm to members of their own group (Hardiman & Jackson, 2007).

According to the system justification theory, disadvantaged social groups can contribute to their own subordination by accepting the unjust social system and contributing to its existence (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004). The concept of benevolent sexism explains how women can contribute to the persistence of sexism by justifying the social system that disadvantages them: “exposure to benevolent sexism may be experienced as conferring individual and group advantages and may lead women to incorporate these representations as self-stereotypes and thus to endorse characterizations of their group that contribute to their lack of power” (Becker & Wright, 2011, p. 64). Research reveals that exposure to benevolent sexism increases system justification (Jost & Kay, 2005), and decreases the urge to challenge the status quo through social action (Becker & Wright, 2011).

Although it is essential to acknowledge the existence of sexism despite its subtle nature, it is also crucial to recognize the nuances outlined above. Sexism is not only or simply men oppressing women and refusing to let the status quo change in order not to lose their privilege. Rather, sexism is people of both genders contributing to unequal social relations, on purpose or

unconsciously, whether they benefit by the status quo or are hurt by it. In order to properly deal with sexism in the modern society, these nuances need to be taken into consideration.

The lack of understanding of sexism might be one of the main reasons why it is so difficult to eliminate. The theory of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001) sheds the light on these difficulties by describing the subtle nature of the modern sexism. Behaviors that can be classified as benevolent sexism are usually not perceived as sexist, despite their contribution to gender inequalities (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Swim, Mallett & Russo-Devosa, 2005). Hostile sexism, although it is more overt and traumatic, creates stronger reactions from the general public. In contrast, benevolent sexism is often not perceived as harmful either by those who engage in it, or by those who are put at a disadvantage by gender inequalities.

Research shows that raising awareness about different forms of sexism, their roots, and impact helps decrease people's motivation to engage in discriminatory behaviors (Swim, Mallett & Stangor, 2004). Unfortunately, raising awareness about sexism through education is a challenging task (Case, 2007). Sexism remains a controversial topic, and people who are exposed to awareness-raising discussions about it often distance themselves, become oppositional, or experience strong emotions that prevent them from learning (Young, Mountford & Skrla, 2006). Raising awareness about sexism is associated with resistance and conflict. The prevalence of benevolent sexism might make the task especially daunting.

Furthermore, research on implicit biases and system justification (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) reveals that, paradoxically, being aware of sexism might not be enough to fight it effectively. For example, Banaji and Greenwald (2013) use results of their Implicit Association Test and relevant studies to argue that implicit biases held by the majority of people might make them contribute to the status quo even if they want to challenge it.

In order to find more effective ways of dealing with subtle sexism in the U.S. society, people's (mis)understanding of sexism should be further explored. In this paper we discuss findings of a qualitative study that aimed to shed light on possible obstacles to dealing with sexism stemming from people's perceptions of this complex social phenomenon. Our analysis of the obtained data was guided by the theory of ambivalent sexism and the system

justification theory. More specifically, we wanted to find out what our informants’ answers implied about their (mis)understanding of different kinds of sexism, and about the way they might reinforce the status quo by justifying it and rationalizing their own actions. Our research question was: What do college students’ perceptions of their experiences with sexism on college campus reveal about obstacles of dealing with sexism?

Method

The data for this study came from a sample of undergraduate students enrolled at two U.S. Midwestern universities. The first university (F1) was located in a predominantly White college town and has a dominant sports and fraternity culture. The second university (F2) was located in a diverse large urban area and does not have a dominant sports and fraternity culture. At the time of data collection, F1 had over 30,000 enrolled students and F2 had over 27,000 enrolled students. In total, 1466 students were surveyed at F1 and 995 students were surveyed at F2 using an open-ended prompt: “Please describe your experiences with sexism on your campus.”

Undergraduate students from diverse racial and gender backgrounds, as well as students from diverse majors and programs were sampled. Descriptive statistics of the sample is presented in Table 1. It reflects the relative lack of racial and ethnic diversity in F1 compared to F2.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

F1	F2
63% women	65% women
37% men	35% men
4% black	12% black
7% Asian	22% Asian
7% Latino	28% Latino
82% white	38% white
20.01 average age	20.59 average age

The sampling plan involved listing all undergraduate programs within the university and college. Courses in which the survey was administered were selected using random numbers. Course listings and schedules as well as

requested permission from instructors to enter their classes on specified dates were obtained. After securing permission, a schedule of class times to collect data was created. The instrument was pretested before distributing it.

The research was conducted in compliance with the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both universities. Students were told that the purpose of the survey was to examine campus climate. The survey was collected immediately after the completion.

The open-ended prompt “Please describe your experiences with sexism on your campus,” was used to generate in-depth responses, with the anticipation that informants would share firsthand and vicarious experiences with sexism and gender-based microaggressions. The obtained data consisted of verbatim quotations that the respondents wrote.

Data Analysis

Describing coding techniques, Strauss (1987) recommended rereading data several times and analyzing it into emerging conceptual categories. We started by going through the students’ answers and looking for repeating patterns. Our goal at this stage was to find themes that would reflect possible obstacles to understanding sexism and/or to dealing with it. As we were using the theory of ambivalent sexism and the system justification theory as our theoretical frameworks, we were especially interested in finding out what manifestations of hostile and benevolent sexism our informants noticed, how they interpreted them, and how they tried to justify their understanding (or misunderstanding) of sexism.

Having formulated emerging themes, we used them for further coding. The rest of the data analysis consisted of looking for examples that would align with or contradict the themes that we had previously found. In the following sections we outline the main themes and subthemes we found, focusing on informants’ perceptions of sexism.

Qualitative methods are based on interpretation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The main limitation of our analysis is that it consists of the authors’ interpretations of the obtained data through the chosen theoretical framework. Informants’ replies that we encountered were complex and rich with meanings. It is possible that other researchers using different theoretical

frameworks would perform the analysis differently and focus on different findings.

We provide quotes that contain informants' race, gender, and age if/as they were indicated. If this information was not included, we add "n.i." – "not indicated."

Seeing Sexism

Guided by the theory of ambivalent sexism, we wanted to see whether our informants have noticed manifestations of sexism, and whether they were able to discern between hostile/overt and benevolent/subtle sexism. A number of replies revealed that some informants on both campuses have experienced or witnessed what can be classified as hostile sexism. Such testimonies usually came from women.

Hostile sexism was often described as verbal manifestations that included crude jokes ("So many 'rape' jokes. So terrible" (white, female, 20)), lewd comments ("Men yelling lewd comments at me and my friends, for example: 'I'd fuck you,' 'Nice tits,' 'You have dick-sucking lips' – really disrespectful things" (white, female, age n.i.), insults ("I get called things like 'whore,' 'slut,' 'bitch,' 'sorostitute' without justification" (white, female, 19)), and catcalling ("There isn't a night where I've walked home from an evening out with friends where I haven't been yelled at, or received rude statements from males" (white, female, 23)). Women who experienced this kind of treatment felt uncomfortable and unsafe. They often noted that this is something they have to face on a regular basis.

Some women felt that they were positioned as inferior to men. This manifestation of hostile sexism took the form of "jokes" ("I have overheard jokes about why women shouldn't be allowed in colleges" (white, female, 21)); in statements related to coursework ("When working on a group project I was told by a male member in the group that I was unable to do a certain task because I was female" (Black, female, 23)); and in relation to recreation ("Some of the guys at the rec [sic] told a girl she couldn't join a game of basketball because she was a girl" (n.i.)). An argument can be made that such comments are intended to remind women to stay away from activities and spaces traditionally associated with masculinity.

It was not uncommon for informants to complain about stereotyping that came in the form of limiting expectations. Some of those were again described as hurtful jokes (“Male students joking, saying that women are the best when they bring sandwiches to them etc.” (race n.i., female, age n.i.); “People tend to joke around about women stereotypes, ‘stay in the kitchen’” (Asian, female, 18)). However, sometimes things that our informants heard, even if they were intended as jokes, made these women feel excluded and humiliated (“People have asked me if I am on the two-year plan here to find a husband” (white, female, 20)). Limiting expectations were experienced in the classroom (“A professor said women shouldn’t go to college” (n.i)) and outside of classroom, in bars, on campus, and the nearby city (“Guys mistreated girls who they believed were too ‘fat’ to dance on the platform of a bar. They kicked those girls out of the bar” (n.i.)).

Some informants also described sexism as being objectified and sexualized (“Guys making sexual remarks on girls’ attires and body language and rating them” (white, female, 19)). Sexual harassment and assault experienced by women was mentioned by a number of informants. Several female informants described feeling unsafe because of men’s veiled or direct sexual advances, as the story below illustrates:

I had experienced an uncomfortable situation with 2 male janitors. I was peeling a banana and they were both staring at me. When I gave them a “dirty” look they asked me if I would like to join them on the couch. It felt like there was a sexual connotation and I felt disturbed. (Latina, female, 22).

Most students who talked about having experienced or witnessed sexism focused on its overt and negative forms. However, several informants also talked about subtle forms that sexism can take (“Sexism seems kind of taboo nowadays, when it happens, it’s usually subtle, so people just walking around campus wouldn’t really see it” (n.i.); “[Sexism is] existent but subtle” (Asian, male, 24)). We found only one comment that implied an understanding that sexism can take both negative and positive forms: “I am a woman so I feel that I have been treated differently because of that (sometimes in a good way, but mostly bad) by staff and students” (white, female, 20).

According to the informants we quoted above, sexism was part of life on campus, and it often made their lives uncomfortable. They described it as a persistent (though sometimes hidden) problem. As one transgender male informant put it: “You can hear it everywhere you go on the campus if you listen closely enough” (white, trans, 19). Our findings were consistent with the scholarship on ambivalent sexism, as it was easier for informants from both campuses to notice hostile rather than benevolent sexism. The findings were also consistent with the literature that describes the prevalence of sexism in the U.S. society.

Not a problem

Despite the responses described above, informants’ replies revealed that the majority of students did not perceive sexism as a problem: they either did not notice it or downplayed its impact. These replies were so different from the ones listed above that sometimes going through the answers we felt as if informants were living in two different worlds – one where sexism exists and the other one where it has stopped being an issue.

Almost one half of the respondents did not provide any answer to the survey prompt: “Please describe your experiences with sexism on your campus.” We interpret this in unwillingness to engage with the prompts, and possibly as an indication of the informants’ conviction that sexism is not important enough to be discussed. Among the respondents who did provide an answer, many gave what we describe as contradictory answers. We defined an answer as contradictory when it contained a misinterpretation of sexism while at the same time acknowledging its existence.

Some students mentioned witnessing what can be called hostile sexism and yet denied that it is a serious problem (“Not much [sexism], other than sexual language/objectification towards women” (white, male, 19)) or doubted that it can be defined as sexism (“I have been assaulted because of my gender but I don’t think it has anything to do with discrimination against women” (white, female, 18)). Downplaying sexism sometime took truly paradoxical forms:

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Sexism on campus from my point of view isn't too bad. In some classes, such as my science and math classes, I do feel left out as a woman because I feel like male professors treat women as unequals. (Asian, female, 21)

It seemed that some participants did not want to see sexism even as it was staring right into their faces.

Answering the question of whether they encountered sexism on campus, some informants used such words as “just” and “only” to downplay the importance of overt sexism:

[Sexism is] not a big issue. Only when working on group projects males seem to think their opinion is always right...that's in every class. (black, female, 21).
There has been some, just people saying women don't work as hard as men, they don't deserve to get paid the same amount. (white, female, 21).

Sexism was often described as “just jokes,” and thus “nothing really major.” Informants who used this language seemed to perceive jokes as harmless by definition: “People make jokes about how women should be homemakers – that's about it” (white, female, 18).

We also found the lack of empathy in answers that downplayed instances of sexism, especially those that portrayed it as “just jokes” or “just” verbal harassment. Both male and female informants who used this language were oblivious to the fact that words can hurt and denied that somebody else can be hurt by sexist comments that did not affect them personally.

Just the name calling of girls like whores, hoers. (Asian, female, 20).

Jokes about women being for sex and sandwiches – prevalent; seriousness about these jokes – minor. (white, male, 20).

The theory of system justification appears appropriate for explaining these cases of cognitive dissonance. Some informants (both male and female) appeared to be trying to rationalize instances of gender discrimination to prove that they were living in a just world. They did not seem ready to acknowledge that they have experienced sexism or perpetuated it through their actions.

Since many informants' comments displayed misunderstanding of overtly hostile sexism, it is not surprising that confusion about more subtle benevolent sexism was also present. More specifically, students talked about "special" treatment (paternalism) that women received as a strictly positive thing, contrasting it with "real" sexism: "Sexism is never an issue. Most of the time, men do the lady-first thing but no sexism" (Asian, female, 20). Another informant talked about gender norms (complimentary sexism): "[I have encountered] gender norms but not extreme aspects of sexism. Think chivalry for example" (Asian, female, 19).

The misunderstanding of benevolent sexism also came in the form of being disappointed when men did not treat women as special or try to protect them. This sentiment is exemplified in the following quote: "Sometimes guys don't open doors for women" (Latina, female, 18) which shows that for this informant not being treated as special meant sexism.

Focusing on reverse sexism is itself can be considered a form of subtle sexism. Some male (and a few female) informants described what can be called reverse sexism – discrimination against men. An example of mistaking benevolent sexism for reverse sexism came from a male student: "Women are expected to perform less than men in class, even in classes run by women instructors" (white, male, 29). This male student interpreted the situation as disadvantageous to male students. However, this can be also seen as a form of benevolent sexism (paternalism): if instructors indeed "protect" women from hard work that might mean that they do not see female students capable of studying as hard as male students do.

If we take into consideration answers of informants who said that they did not see sexism and those who did not answer this question at all, it appears that students who see sexism/see it as a problem are a minority on the campuses where the survey was administered. This finding is consistent with the literature that describes low levels of awareness about the persistence of sexism in the modern world.

Prioritizing Personal Experiences

To the question of whether they have experienced sexism on campus many informants gave terse negative answers: "I haven't had any experience with sexism, at least that I've noticed" (multiracial, female, 19); "I don't notice it much" (Indian, female, 17); "I have not experienced sexism" (multiracial,

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male, 19); “I haven’t dealt with any” (Asian, male, 21). Explanations, such as in the following quote: “People treat everyone fairly I believe since it is college” (Asian, male, 19) – were seldom provided. In addition, many informants did not answer this question at all. We believe that they had nothing to say because they similarly did not see sexism as a problem worth discussing.

The prompt the informants were answering was “Please describe your experiences with sexism on your campus” (Emphasis added). Thus, it is not surprising that most informants focused on their personal experiences.

I’ve never felt that an individual was being sexist towards me. (black, female, 20).

I don’t see much. I’ve always been treated fairly. (White, female, 21).

I have not been looked down based on my gender. (Latina, female, 19).

However, these answers might suggest that many informants generalized their experiences and that because they have not experienced sexism, they did not see it as a real problem. The following comments exemplify this interpretation more clearly:

I have not had any bad experiences with sexism on my campus. I think everyone has accepted everyone’s views. (Latina, female, 22).

I haven’t seen any, I feel like men/women are treated the same. (white, male, 20).

Exercising empathy means seeing beyond one’s personal experiences. Students whose answers we quoted in this section based their claim that sexism does not exist on their experience. They thought that there no sexism because they did not see it. Therefore, we might connect their denial of the existence of sexism to the reluctance of using empathy for understanding how somebody else might feel.

Negative Emotions

Replies of informants who saw sexism as a topic worth discussing (as opposed to those who gave terse yes/no answers) often displayed negative emotions that we describe as resentment (i.e., indignation at having been treated

unfairly) and blame. These sentiments had different sources for different students. In some instances, negative emotions were connected with having experienced or witnessed sexism. In other instances, informants seemed to be angry or irritated by the very claim that sexism exists. The negative emotions often took the form of blame and contrasting of the two genders.

Those who have experienced sexism (these were often female students) resented the fact that sexism exists and that they have suffered from it. This resentment at times took the form of essentializing the gender binary by contrasting men and women.

“Men on campus... treat women like animals” (white, female, 20);

“Men use women” (white, female, 20);

“Men expect women to be their slaves” (white, female, 19). Strong language was sometimes used to express these sentiments;

“Guys are dicks!” (white, female, 19).

Essentialization was especially strong when informants used the word “always.”

Men are men, they always think their opinions are more valuable and correct than women’s. (Latina, female, 19)

Men will always look down upon women in some way. (Asian, female, 18)

Men will always brush off opinions of women in class and argue with opinionated women. (Asian, female, 21)

In contrast, some male students talked resentfully about what they perceived as reverse sexism, and blamed women for creating it: “I feel sometimes men are used as a punching bag in classes where females dominate the class” (white, male, 18). In some cases the resentment also took the form of reinforcing the “men vs. women” or “us vs. them” binary (“Females being disrespectful because we can’t do much against it” (Latino, male, 20) [Emphasis added]. Several comments revealed male informants’ resentment about being constantly perceived through negative stereotypes (“There are some quite strongly opinionated females who believe males to be stupid and insensitive” (multiracial, male, 18)), e.g., sex-crazed predators (“Men are treated as assaulters everywhere you look”

(black, male, 21)). There was also resentment about the perceived privileging of women for the sake of increasing diversity: “I’ve personally seen leadership positions go to women when there are more qualified men also vying for the job, just because they want to convey a feeling of diversity” (n.i.).

In a few cases, male informants expressed resentment because they felt that that people who talk about sexism make a problem out of nothing: “I don’t think [sexism and racism] are a problem. Minorities make it a bigger deal than it is. It’s B/S (white, male, age n.i.).” In these replies, women were blamed for playing the card of sexism to mask their own incompetence: “I believe some people overreact and think they’re being discriminated against due to gender when it’s really due to lack of skills” (white, male, 19). Feminists were mentioned as a cause of the hatred and confusion associated with the debates about sexism: “Most sexism comes from feminists in my opinion” (white, male, 20); “[Sexism] exists as long as someone wants it to exist” (Native American, male, 18).

Sorority girls [are] easy – not necessarily true but when you put yourself out there like that... (white, male, 19)

What do girls expect when they go out wearing literally nothing. They are going to be called sluts but I’m not complaining because they look sexy as fuck. (white, male, 21)

These resentful and blameful comments took a disturbing form of victim-blaming targeted at women and could be themselves interpreted as sexist. In some instances, women were also engaging in victim-blaming targeted at other women:

[The campus is] very sexist, largely due to a large population of women submitting and dressing/behaving anticonservatively/desperately. (white, female, 20)

Complicating the Picture

Only a handful of answers indicated more nuanced understanding of sexism. Some students did make an effort to avoid blame and generalizations. These respondents appeared to be more empathetic, acknowledging the existence of sexism even when they personally did not experience it.

In contrast with the negative emotions brought up by the question about sexism, only a very small number of informants chose language more carefully in order to avoid blaming and resentment. They tried to complicate the binary (“There are expectations of certain ways certain people should act. People are judged by others if they don’t act a certain way” (white, female, 20) and disrupt the essentialization (“I think in certain classes certain male students do feel superior to female students out of ignorance but not the majority” (Latina, female, 19)).

Resentment is defined as a bitter indignation at having been treated unfairly; blame is intrinsically connected with resentment as we often feel the need to find those responsible for our mistreatment. The opposite of resentment and blame is empathy, which can be defined as an ability or willingness to understand others within their frame of reference (de Waal, 2010). When we are empathic, we try to understand why people who we think have treated us unfairly acted the way they did. Being empathic also means acknowledging our own flaws. In this section we speculate that denying that sexism is a problem, expressing resentment, and blaming the other side meant the lack of empathy displayed by the majority of informants.

In the above sections we offered evidence that sexism is indeed present on the campuses we studied, which is consistent with the vast literature on the prevalence of sexism in the modern U.S. society. Sexism is a topic that is widely discussed in the U.S. culture so it is unlikely that our informants have never heard about sexism at the time of the survey. Considering this, it is telling that some informants thought it is not important to talk about sexism, and believed that if they did not experience sexism it is not such a big problem.

In contrast, several informants specifically indicated that although they themselves have not experienced sexism, they knew that it is still a problem. In this sense, they displayed more empathy towards those disadvantaged by gender inequalities. For example, some female informants noted that even though they are not suffering from sexism, it is because of their personalities

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and people they surround themselves with, or simply because they have been lucky.

I have not had any serious problems yet. However, I saw that some people were judged for their choices. (white, female, 18).

I'm a pretty strong woman. I like to hold my own. Yet that doesn't mean that sexism still doesn't exist. I just haven't experienced it too much. And if it does happen I will point it out especially if it's someone I know. (Asian, female, 22).

I haven't witnessed any sexism towards women personally, but I also am academically oriented (I don't go out). (White, agender, 21).

Although most male students did not see sexism as a problem, some displayed empathy by noting that it does exist. For example: "I overhear conversations where women are being verbally sexually objectified all the time, mostly from groups of all-male students. I haven't personally witnessed much sexism beyond this, but I'm sure it's there" (white, male, 19). However, it was less common for male than for female students to describe sexism as a serious social issue. This is consistent with the literature on male privilege which suggests that men are often not aware of the social capital associated with masculinity. Very few men noted that they did not personally experience sexism because they are men: "As a male, sexism hasn't really happened to me, but I have seen women not treated fairly" (black, male, 19). Female students who did not display awareness of sexism or did not see it a problem might have been protected from it by their emphasized femininity (Connell, 2005).

Same as male students displayed little empathy about hurdles experienced by women, very few female students' answers suggested that they have ever considered that the complexity of the modern sexism might prevent men from understanding how they might engage in sexist behaviors, or how social pressure to perform their masculinity contributes to sexism. According to the system justification theory, both the privileged and the underprivileged contribute to social inequalities, but most students' answers did not imply that they understand these complex dynamics.

By blaming men (and, sometimes, other women) for essentializing the gender binary many female informants who saw sexism as a problem displayed their lack of awareness of how they themselves might contribute to

the status quo even if they want to change it. There were few indications that informants (both male and female) understood the complexity of gender inequalities described by the system justification theory.

Overall, we discovered that it was uncommon for our informants to display empathy towards people whose experiences were different from theirs. The controversial nature of sexism prevented female students from trying to imagine why male students might engage in what can be classified as sexist behavior. Male students, in their turn, seldom discussed why female students might complain about sexism. Both male and female students who did not experience the negative side of sexism (or were not aware of these experiences) denied that people different from them might be criticizing sexism for a reason. Informants who either noted that they personally have not experienced sexism or avoided answering the question altogether might have failed to put themselves in the shoes of people who claimed to have encountered the negative impact of sexism.

Discussion

It is undeniable that many men and some women benefit from the unequal social system. According to the system justification theory, both those more and less disadvantaged by the status quo contribute to its existence. While the question “Who is to blame for the prevalence of sexism?” is tempting, it might distract us from searching for the hidden and thus most insidious roots of sexism.

Instead of seeing gender inequalities as a way for dominant social groups to oppress subordinated social groups, the system justification theory can help us describe sexism as the pressure imposed by the social system on individuals regardless of their gender. For women it is the pressure to conform to standards of femininity, which include being different from men and complimentary to them. For men, it is the pressure to perform their masculinity in a certain way, which often manifests as subtly or violently reinforcing women’s place in society. Considering this complexity, instead of looking for villains and victims it might be more productive to engage in an empathy-based dialogue between those advantaged and disadvantaged by the social system that supports sexism.

Unfortunately, the controversial nature of sexism often makes it difficult to start such a dialogue. When people are ready to discuss sexism (as opposed to when they ignore the question), they often express negative emotions, such as resentment—either towards those who create sexism, or towards those who overreact about it. Conversations about sexism often result in reinforcing the gender binary, as it is not uncommon to contrast men’s and women’s experiences to explain how sexism functions (we ourselves have not been able to avoid the language of the gender binary in this article).

To make the matter worse, the subtle nature of benevolent sexism creates a vicious circle: when subtly sexist behaviors are labeled as sexist and criticized, those who engage in such criticism are often dismissed as being overzealous. This in turn might drive women’s rights and gender equality activists to continue criticizing modern sexism with doubled zeal, which then makes those who disagree with them double their resistance. Although benevolent sexism might seem less harmful, misunderstandings that it creates leave little room for a productive dialogue. This dynamics can explain challenges that educators who teach about gender inequalities regularly face (Carillo, 2007; Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Young, Mountford & Skrla, 2006).

Clearly, the most essential obstacle to dealing with sexism is the basic misunderstanding of what it entails, and of its negative impact. Our informants’ answers reveal that this misunderstanding concerns not only subtle benevolent sexism but also very overt and hostile manifestations of sexism such as harassment and cat-calling. The key step to dealing with sexism as a social problem still appears to be raising awareness about it through education among people of all genders. However, these awareness-raising efforts should take into consideration people’s tendency to engage in blaming and essentializing genders when the topic of sexism comes up.

The lack of awareness does not mean informants’ intrinsic inability to see sexism, but rather their rationalization of sexist behaviors consistent with the theory of system justification. If male students in our sample were justifying the social system because their gender provided them with certain take-for-granted privileges, female students might have similarly ignored or misunderstood sexism because of their privileged position. At the same time, resentment and blame that we found in answers of informants who did see

sexism as a problem reveal people's tendency to ignore how they can contribute to the status quo even when they are against it.

Apathy about sexism, as well as resentment and blame can be seen as different aspects of system justification that allow gender inequalities to remain in place. These subconsciously chosen strategies deepened the rift between different subsets of our informants: those who saw sexism and those who did not, those who believed that sexism is a problem and those who denied it, as well as students placing themselves on different sides of the gender binary.

We believe that healing the rifts associated with sexism is essential for tackling this persistent and highly controversial issue. Increasing empathy that was so rare in our informants' answers can provide a solution. Empathy might help to break the wall between the worlds that currently exist apart when it comes to the conversation about gender inequalities.

We believe that understanding sexism and dealing with it requires an ability to overcome the polarization and empathize with those whose experiences lie across the rift. This means not only that people who have been privileged by gender ideologies need to imagine themselves in the place of those disadvantaged by sexism. It also means that people who have suffered from sexism should be able to see the framework of reference of those who seem to be ignoring their suffering. It is essential to acknowledge the hidden nature of the modern sexism, but also to take into consideration how social pressures may lead people to engage in hostile sexism. In addition, each party needs to raise their self-awareness and learn about their own hidden biases that can reinforce the status quo.

Many scholars attest that sexism remains a serious problem in the United States, and our findings are consistent with this literature. Based on our qualitative analysis of comments about personal experiences with sexism, we argue that blaming and pushing back might not be the most effective strategies of dealing with this insidious problem, especially considering the hidden nature of the modern sexism. Using the system justification theory, we propose that raising awareness about sexism should include raising self-awareness of all parties involved, even those who feel that they are disadvantaged by sexism and fight against it. Dealing with the modern sexism should be based on an empathy-based dialogue that will help people see what

they have failed to notice and take perspectives of those whose experiences are different.

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