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Making sense of everyday sexism: Young people and the gendered contours of sexism

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SYNOPSIS

Many feminist scholars have traced the discursive effects of postfeminism with concern, noting how its ascendency has made sexism difficult to name and to challenge. As feminist critiques of persistent, pervasive gender inequalities trickle into media and popular consciousness, we ask whether and how possibilities for identifying and accounting for sexism might be transformed. We draw from an action-oriented research project that explored whether (and how) feminist ideas offered secondary school students critical purchase on their everyday experiences. Participants described copious examples of everyday sexism directed at women and girls but very few instances of "sexism" towards men and boys. Even so, interviewees often spoke about sexism in ways that prioritised boys' and men's experiences while downplaying sexism towards girls and women. In this article we explore how young people made sense of sexism around them, attending to the discursive effects of their talk.

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Introduction

In contemporary western societies, women and girls are said to be free to reap the social, sexual and economic rewards of their liberation: to 'run the world' (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). Over the past decade or so, feminist scholars have traced the discursive effects of this 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007) wherein gender equality is taken for granted and the possibility of enduring sexism is firmly rejected, along with any need for feminism (Gill, 1993, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2013). The ascendency of postfeminist discourse had, they contended, made sexism hard to identify. Many have shown how sexist practices evade critique through being couched as 'retro', 'ironic' or 'enlightened' (Benwell, 2008; Douglas, 2010; Williamson, 2003). The hegemonic, common-sense status of postfeminist discourse appeared to leave few openings for naming and challenging sexism, prompting feminist critics to express concern that sexism had become 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2011; McRobbie, 2009).

This notion of 'unspeakability' animates much recent scholarship on sexism and gender inequality. Joanne Baker (2008) described how the young Australian women she interviewed employed an individualising rhetoric of personal choice and responsibility to make sense of their lives. This punitive narrative framework silences talk about hardships and structural constraints by implying that success is the sum total of one's "good" and "bad" choices. Others, too, have observed this tendency to under-articulate structural gender inequalities and to resist a characterisation of women as disadvantaged by sexism or by men (Carey, Donaghue, & Broderick, 2011; Kelan, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Morrison, Bourke, & Kelley, 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Scharff, 2013; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). There are good reasons why speakers might choose to de-emphasise sexism: those who challenge gender inequalities may be caricatured as bitter, self-serving feminists (Gough & Peace, 2000; Olson et al., 2008) or as politically correct crusaders dogmatically pursuing trivialities (Mills, 2008). A similar phenomenon is evident in news and social media, where challenges to sexism are directly rebutted as unreasonable complaints (Benton-Greig, Gamage & Gavey, in preparation) or more subtly undermined (Attenborough, 2013).

Faced with these silencing manoeuvres, feminist activists and researchers have continued to document mundane sexism directed at women and girls in public, private and mediated life

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(Bates, 2013; Braithwaite, 2014; Coy, Thiara, & Kelly, 2011; Evans, 2014; Megarry, 2014; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Towns, 2009). Recently, feminist concerns about persistent, pervasive sexism seem to be gaining traction in media and popular consciousness. The success of the Everyday Sexism Project (Bates, 2013), a living document of sexism against women built by contributors who email, text or tweet their stories, is one compelling example. The international reach of activist initiatives like the Everyday Sexism Project, SlutWalk and #mencallmethings (see Megarry, 2014) suggests that, in some spaces at least, sexism is becoming increasingly articulable. In a context where feminist discourse on sexism appears to be re-entering the public sphere, what new possibilities might exist for identifying everyday sexism, and accounting for it?

To explore this question, we draw from a New Zealand-based, action-oriented research project that we began within this shifting territory in 2012. The project was designed to explore whether (and how) feminist ideas offered secondary school students an analytical purchase on their everyday experiences of sexism. Here, we examine 20 participants' talk about sexism: what they perceived as sexist around them, and how they made sense of their observations. We explore what counts as sexism for interviewees and we analyse the discursive effects of their meaning-making talk.

The project: sexism and social action

Our analysis draws from data collected as part of a workshop and interview-based research project exploring gender, sexism and social action with secondary school students in New Zealand. The project was 'action-oriented': beginning from the assumption that young people's capacity to perceive, describe and challenge sexism depends on the discursive resources available to them, we set out to diversify the discursive possibilities on offer. The workshops and interviews invited participants to explore feminist ideas and to unpick prevailing ideas about gender, feminism and sexism while providing us with opportunities for data collection.

Workshops

The workshop component of the project was designed to offer participants space to explore feminism and social constructionism, and to respond critically, collectively and creatively to everyday sexism, misogyny and homophobia. The content, structure and style of the workshops were informed by participatory, liberation and feminist traditions (for a fuller account of the workshop process and content, see Calder-Dawe, 2014; see also Freire, 2012; Moane, 2011; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012).

To recruit workshop participants, the first author contacted seven secondary schools located in a large New Zealand city in early 2013. She spoke to senior classes and/or distributed promotional leaflets explaining the workshop opportunity and the research project. The workshops were described as an opportunity to unpack mainstream representations of gender and gender relations, to discuss their implications and to explore avenues for creative activism. Despite their feminist tone, the workshops were not presented as feminist. Interested students were asked to fill out a brief application form outlining their interest in the workshops and indicating their availability. All those who returned applications were invited to participate. Participants were offered reimbursement for public transport costs.

A total of 23 students from five secondary schools participated in one of four workshops (2 three-day workshops, 2 single-day) held at the authors' University. Participants filled out brief surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the workshops. At the start of the workshops, 13 of 23 participants interviewed identified as feminist (six *strongly agree*; seven *agree*). At the end of the workshops, 19 of 21 surveyed identified as feminist (16 *strongly agree*, three *agree*).

Interviews

At least one month after each workshop, the first author recontacted workshop participants to invite them to participate in an individual follow-up interview. She explained the interview as an informal conversation about the workshop process and their reflections and experiences since. In late 2013 and early 2014, she interviewed 20 of 23 workshop participants. These semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences of the workshops, their orientation to feminism and their experiences of gender and sexism in everyday life. Each interview was held at a place of participants' choosing, frequently a local café or library. Most interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h. All were digitally recorded and transcribed by the first author (2) or a paid transcriber (18).

When quoting, we reproduce interviewees' speech as transcribed including repetitions. A comma signals a pause in speech. The symbol […] indicates that a passage of speech has been cut. To protect participants' anonymity, we substitute real names for pseudonyms throughout our analysis and we slightly alter potentially identifying details. We use pseudonyms that are not culturally matched, so that names reveal nothing of the cultural and social background of the speaker. Although this is undesirable from an analytic point of view, we considered it necessary to safeguard anonymity.

Interview participants

At the time of the interviews, all 20 participants were aged between 16 and 19 years old and 16 participants identified as women, four as men. Participants' ethnic identities included one or more of the following: Chinese (3), Israeli (1), Japanese (1), Korean (1), Māori (2), Niuean (1), Pākehā/New Zealand European (11), Polish (1), Scottish (1) and South African (1). Participants' self-described sexualities include gay (1), straight (15), straight-ish (1) and female (1); two interviewees did not specify.

The majority of participants were born in Aotearoa New Zealand; others immigrated as children. Most interviewees (13) lived in two parent households; four lived with mothers only, two in composite families and one in a homestay. Most participants had only attended mainstream, state-funded schools. A few participants had some private schooling, two participants had been home-schooled and one participant had enrolled in a Māori language immersion unit (Kura Kaupapa Māori). At the time of the workshops, all 20 interviewees were studying at one of five large, state-funded secondary schools rated 9 (two schools; five students), 8 (two students), 7 (seven

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