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Young people and the gendered contours of sexism**

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

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Abstract

Many feminist scholars have traced the discursive effects of postfeminism with concern, noting how its ascendancy 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 and very few instances of “sexism” towards men and boys. Even so, interviewees often spoke about sexism in ways that prioritised the experiences of boys and men while downplaying sexism towards girls and women. In this article we explore how young people made sense of everyday sexism, attending to the discursive effects of their talk.

Keywords: *everyday sexism, young people, gender, feminism, reverse sexism, discourse*

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 ascendancy 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 (Gamage, Benton-Greig, & 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 (Bates, 2013; Braithwaite, 2014; Coy, Thiara, & Kelly, 2011; Evans, 2014; Megarry, 2014; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Towns, 2009). Over the past few years, 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 experienced by 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 observed as sexist around them, and how they made sense of these 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 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 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 negotiating sexism in everyday life. Each interview was held at a place of participants’ choosing, frequently a local café or library. Most interviews lasted for

between one and two hours. 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 students) and 3 (six students) in current decile rankings (Ministry of Education, 2014).¹ Accordingly, those interviewed are drawn from school communities of varying privilege, with the majority attending school alongside economically comfortable or privileged peers. Just over half of interviewees attended single sex schools (13; 12 girls, 1 boy), and just under half attended co-educational schools (10; 7 girls 3 boys).

Analysis

The purpose of the interviews was to build a picture of whether (and how) interviewees would name and orient to sexism, feminism, gender and gender relations in the wake of the workshops. Our analysis in this article picks up one of these threads, asking what was visible to participants as sexism and how they accounted for sexism more generally.

¹ The national decile system ranks all state-funded and state-integrated primary, intermediate and secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand according to the socio-economic indicators of the areas from which its students are drawn. The decile scale runs from 1 (the roughly 10% of schools whose student body has the least favourable socio-economic indicators) to 10 (the roughly 10% of schools whose student body has the most favourable socio-economic indicators).

Our research is informed by a feminist, poststructuralist perspective that attends to the interrelationships between knowledge, power and subjectivity (see Gavey, 1989). Accordingly, we are interested in interviewees' talk for what it reveals of the discursive landscape they inhabit: the resources and subject positions that shape their orientations to sexism. We explore how participants describe and account for sexism as well as considering the contextual imperatives facing speakers and attending to their positioning work.

We began analysis by coding interview transcripts for explicit talk about sexism (e.g. definitions, anecdotes and evaluations), as well as talk relevant to sexism (e.g. comments about gender inequality). Some of this talk arose in response to specific questions about sexism. Other talk arose more haphazardly as participants reflected on their lives, friends, families and their motivations for participating in the project. An initial sweep yielded 80,000 words of relevant talk. From here, interview extracts were recoded into two broad categories of interest: 1) participants' accounts of their experiences and observations of sexism, and 2) participants' general, definitional talk about what sexism is and who it affects.

We approached participants' descriptions of sexism (1, above) thematically (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). We began by reading and re-reading the coded extracts looking for patterns in participants' descriptions. Although those we interviewed did not speak explicitly about typologies of sexism, we found that their examples cohered into three key domains or thematic groupings: sexual harassment, gendered diminishment and gender stereotyping. Almost all interviewees' accounts of sexism fitted into one of these domains.

In our second analytic section, we examine how interviewees made sense of sexism. Our analysis considers participants' general rhetorical talk about sexism as well as their evaluations of sexism they had observed or experienced. Analysis began with reading and re-reading participants' talk, this time with an eye for underlying patterns of meaning, the familiar tropes and assumptions that organise participants' evaluations of sexism. Participants' evaluative talk about sexism was patterned by two strikingly different orientations to sexism. We analyse these orientations as interpretative repertoires: well-rehearsed, cohesive and persuasive lines of argument, orientation and evaluation that characterise talk on a given subject (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Defining sexism

During interviews, each participant was asked to offer their own definition of sexism. In part, this question was intended to catalyse talk about sexism, but it also offered useful clarification for the interviewer (it had become apparent during workshop discussions that participants had differing views on its meaning and proper usage). Participants' off-the-cuff definitions of sexism were remarkably consistent. Overwhelmingly, interviewees defined sexism with reference to gender-based

discrimination and stereotyping, or ‘trying to place false images or false aspirations or false ideals on both sexes’ (Leah). This exchange with Max is fairly typical:

Octavia: [...] how do you define sexism? What is that in your mind when you talk about it?

Max: Um, I feel like in my mind sexism is kind of, in one sense, I don’t know, using gender stereotypes and gender roles to judge somebody and kind of, I don’t know, not accept them based on that [...] And I also feel like it’s, I don’t know, just discriminating against someone based on the fact that they may be different from you or a particular gender kind of thing [...] trying to sort of impart particular, I don’t know, like stereotypes on them

In accounts like Max’s, sexism is understood to arise from a set of gender-specific ‘rules’ (Jon) and ‘roles’ (Max) imposed on both men and women. Jessie’s definition is fairly similar:

I would say that [sexism is] a generalisation about the whole gender. So kind of like racist, like you just assume something just because they are a specific race. I feel like sexism would be you assume something about a girl or a guy just because they are a girl or a guy.

In striking contrast to feminist definitions of sexism (and racism) that highlight asymmetries in power, almost all interviewees gave a gender-neutral account of sexism. When defined as ‘discrimination based on sex’ (Dylan), the concept of sexism becomes equally applicable to women and men. In taking care to point out that sexism affects women *and* men (sexism ‘can definitely be towards everyone’: Mia), interviewees’ definitional talk suggested that women and men are *equally* affected (it ‘greatly affects both sexes’: Jade).

One participant defined sexism differently. While acknowledging that men are subject to discrimination and unfair gender-based treatment, Holly used the word sexism to refer to ‘institutionalised’ discrimination against women only. Holly put it like this:

Like, you can still be like discriminating towards a guy, but I don’t think it’s called sexism. Yeah.

Even so, Holly was quick to manage the implications of her gendered definition of sexism, telling the interviewer ‘it’s just a word really’ and ‘discrimination [towards men] is just as bad’.

Seeing sexism

Over the course of the interviews, most young men and women interviewed outlined instances of sexism that they had observed around them. The young women also described personal experiences of sexism; the young men did not. Detailed talk about sexism arose in two ways. The interviewer asked simple, open questions such as

‘where, if anywhere, does sexism come up in your everyday life?’ Participants also gave examples of sexism without explicit prompting as part of general talk about gender and power in their lives. Interviews yielded a great deal of relevant talk. Here, we organise the kinds of practices and experiences participants identified as sexist into three key domains of sexism: sexual harassment, gendered diminishment and gender stereotyping. We hope to provide, if not an exhaustive account, an impression of the lay of the land: the context within which participants’ rhetorical accounts of sexism grow.

Sexual harassment

None of those interviewed described observing sexual harassment directed at boys or men, nor did any young men describe experiencing it. Participants gave many examples, however, of sexualised harassment of women and girls around them. A few participants had observed physical sexual harassment of female peers and friends: a ‘slap’ on the bottom at school (Nina) or ‘inappropriate touching’ in the workplace (Phoebe). Verbal harassment was experienced and observed much more frequently, often in the form of sexualised commentaries on women’s body shape, size and attractiveness. As Phoebe put it, women and girls’ bodies are ‘constantly being commented on’. Unwanted commentaries came from various quarters: male friends, family members, co-workers and bosses, strangers, a male teacher (in one case) and male peers (in many more). In keeping with evidence from research elsewhere (Clear et al., 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012), a significant proportion of interviewees’ examples of sexual harassment occurred at mixed-sex schools. Max explained that ‘disrespectful’ sexualised commenting on girls was ‘quite common’ among young men at his school:

Typical comments, I think like, a lot of like objectifying girls and things like that, like not considering them as people, just talking about their body parts

Nina, too, described relentless sexist commentaries on girls’ ‘boobs’ and ‘butts’ at her co-educational school:

I have heard people saying things like oh I’d paper bag her, and I’m like ‘what does that mean?’ it’s like ‘oh I’d have sex with her with a paper bag over her face’. And I’m like mm, crawl into a hole, this is so awful, that shouldn’t even be a term that 15 year olds, 16 year olds should be using, because it’s so awful, it’s like doesn’t matter if she hasn’t got a pretty face, it’s not about her [...] It’s like ‘she’s a person, she has feelings.’ They’d be like ‘yeah but she has really big tits’.

Nina’s example recalls Ann Cahill’s (2011) concept of derivitization, as the young men in question reduce their target’s personhood to a reflection of their purported sexual desires: a sexy body with ‘big tits’.

Those interviewed also spoke of witnessing sexual harassment of women and girls outside school grounds. Emily described an experience of sexualised heckling from a group of young men that left her feeling intimidated and unsafe:

I didn't actually end up walking home. I walked around in a big circle so they wouldn't see where I lived.

Interviewees also reported rape-talk and rape jokes in circulation amongst peers at school and online. These jokes and comments trivialised rape, ridiculed women for being raped or threatened rape by suggesting the speaker's propensity to rape. At Jessie's co-educational school, 'the guys' assert a desire to rape women around them who they consider 'hot'. These comments are most frequently aimed at young women peers, but occasionally at women teaching staff, such as Jessie's technology teacher:

she is like really pretty and all the guys are like Miss Phillips is hot as, blah, blah, blah. And then so sometimes when she helps them like go [to the storage cupboard] and get out timber to cut off, they're like "oh yeah, just go rape Miss Phillips" or whatever, like stuff like that. So I'm quite used to them saying that.

Along similar lines, Phoebe recalls a joke told to her by an 'old friend':

He was like [...] 'I prevented a rape this morning'. And I said 'oh what, how'? He said, 'self-control'. And I was like 'oh'.

The joke is on Phoebe, who (as intended) imagined that her friend had intervened in an assault. Instead, her friend claimed he prevented a rape through 'self-control', aligning himself with dominant discourses of male sexuality implicated in the cultural scaffolding of rape (see Gavey, 2005).

Gendered diminishment

The second domain of everyday sexism is gendered diminishment. Like examples of sexual harassment, instances of diminishment reported by interviewees are gendered: they target women and girls, but not boys and men. This domain encompasses practices and comments that diminish women and girls by restricting or undermining their capability and 'space for action' (see Coy, 2009). Interviewees encountered gendered diminishment in others' assertions that 'men are better than women' (Jade), or that being 'like a girl' (Holly) is shameful and undesirable. Thomas saw this routine disparagement of women in 'the stuff people say like everyday like "oh" like "woman driver"'. Many of those interviewed had encountered put-downs that implied women were less capable and competent than men, or as Phoebe puts it: 'you know, [women] can't do that, they can't do this'. Some young women, like Jade, recalled formative experiences of gendered diminishment with clarity:

I didn't quite understand the concept of sexism, what do you mean men are better than women? So yeah when I was really little I used to get quite upset when people used to say I can't be a mechanic. Like the boys in my, like in my crèche or kōhanga used to be like you can't be a mechanic. Why not? Cause you're a girl. What do you mean, I don't understand, I know I'm a girl!

Claudia described an experience of gendered diminishment in similar terms. She 'first thought' about how gender calibrated others' expectations of her when her all-girl

team placed third in a mixed-sex science competition. Surprised by their success, an adult official told the team there were ‘never any girls’ at the top.

the person who presented awards, he mentioned something about how there’s never any girls who get the, get in the top three.

Alongside overtly diminishing comments and jokes, participants observed more subtle diminishing practices around them. Sasha recounted how she is sometimes reminded that, as a woman, she is considered less capable than men (‘oh yeah, I’m a woman’) when others around her ‘take over’ a task, assuming that she needs help:

there is like a lot of stuff for when my Dad takes over or somebody else takes over for me. Most of the time I am like sure yeah, I am happy, you know. But like it is, like some days it will bring up, oh yeah I’m a woman, I forgot that.

Diminishment was also enacted through exclusion. Dylan observed that women teaching at his all-boys school ‘wouldn’t really be the leaders of anything’, ‘never got to go on any [school] trips’ and appeared to be ‘ignored’ by some male colleagues. Others like Phoebe noticed patterns of workplace diminishment closer to home. According to Phoebe, her mother ‘felt tiny’ at work despite her senior role because male colleagues exclude her from decision-making.

Like sexual harassment, gendered diminishment could also appear to be light-hearted. Those interviewed recounted commonplace diminishing jokes that imply women belong in the kitchen and ought to stay there: ‘why did the girl get hit by the car? Because she wasn’t in the kitchen.’ (Thomas). Alternatively, gendered diminishment could appear as a joking comment or rhetorical question: ‘why doesn’t your girlfriend go to the kitchen and make you a sandwich instead of like talking to you about stuff?’ (Mia). Georgia described hearing these jokes from male friends ‘all the time’ and explained their intent:

it’s got that insinuation that it’s because, you know, because you’re a woman and you belong in the kitchen, yeah.

While most jokes were made by peers, Paige recalled her history teacher making ‘jokes’ along these lines during class to his all-female students, declaring that men are ‘better’ than women, ‘and that’s why my wife’s at home’.

Kitchen and sandwich jokes were not restricted to female targets. Thomas explained how these jokes (popular among his friends) could be used against young men who stray into ‘something feminine’:

if a guy is doing something feminine um my friends can sometimes be like ‘go make a sandwich’, like associating it as him being a girl so he should make me a sandwich.

This is a double-whammy: under the cover of humour, it diminishes women and femininity in a general way while also disparaging the young man in question for ‘being a girl’ (Thomas).

Gender stereotyping

A third cluster of examples concerns gender stereotyping. This domain of sexism aligns with participants' definitional talk, which frequently referred directly to the "sexist" stereotyping of both women and men. Despite providing the backbone of participants' definitions of sexism, this domain was a less prominent feature of interviews than the two others. Interviewees gave fewer tangible examples of gender stereotyping and the examples given were generally less elaborated.

Several young women and one young man interviewed described men's subjection to gender roles as a form of sexism. These interviewees located sexism towards men in the gendered expectations and stereotypes imposed by dominant restrictions of hegemonic masculinity: or, as Nina puts it, 'how the male stereotype tells them that they have to be a certain way'. Mia filled in these 'expectations': a young man is expected to 'play sport' and to be 'intelligent'. He ought to be a 'power guy' who can 'do everything. He should 'get all the girls', and he must 'protect his woman'. This talk, while plentiful, was seldom drawn from direct observation. Instead, participants' speech was either rhetorical (arguing that men *do* experience sexist stereotyping) or hypothetical (enumerating the ways in which men could theoretically experience sexism related to gender roles).

Talk detailing young women's experiences of gendered stereotyping unfolded rather differently. Few of the young women we interviewed oriented to expectations associated with normative femininity as a form of sexism. Like Stuart and Donaghue (2012), we found that young women tended to characterise gendered practices like beautification in terms of free choice rather than compulsion or sexism. Those who did connect normative femininity with unfair sexist pressures illustrated their talk with real-life, rather than hypothetical, examples. Phoebe, for instance, described how her mother 'constantly' tells her she is 'not feminine enough':

my sister and I are constantly being told you are too brutish, you are too like, you know, and if we want to argue a point it's like not okay [...] Mum's like I don't want to hear that, it's too rough, you need to be more gentle and female.

Ashleigh also explained that 'social expectations' of niceness and self-sacrifice shape what women are 'expected to do'

Ashleigh Um, I just noticed it with my family friends, like um the mother was um, she had her child and then she got a scholarship to go and study again. I'm not sure what it was for. Then the husband just wanted her to stay at home and look after the child instead of furthering her own career.

Octavia: And what happened?

Ashleigh: She stayed at home and looked after the child.

Accounting for sexism

So far, we have examined how interviewees defined sexism and we have explored the kinds of practices they identified as sexist. In this section of our analysis, we turn our attention to the discursive resources interviewees took up to make sense of the sexism they observed, experienced and imagined. At first glance, one can see there is some discursive work to be done here. Interviewees' definitions suggest gender parity in sexism, and yet the real-life instances of sexism participants described were overwhelmingly directed at women and girls. Examining interviewees' meaning-making talk, we explore how this tension is managed.

We draw from interviewees' general rhetorical talk about sexism, as well as more specific talk orienting to actual instances of sexism observed or experienced. Two strikingly different interpretative repertoires characterised interviewees' talk in these domains. When accounting for sexism in an abstract sense, interviewees oriented to sexism as a serious issue, identifying men and boys as its hidden victims. When accounting for their own experiences and observations of sexism (towards women), participants characterised sexism quite differently: as irritating, a bother, but not a big deal.

'Guys do have it tough': Men suffer sexism in silence

When offering an account of sexism as an abstract phenomenon, most young women interviewed and one young man drew on a repertoire that positioned boys and men as the unacknowledged victims of sexism. The foundations of this repertoire are evident in participants' definitions of sexism, almost all of which emphasised that sexism is not exclusive to women and 'can go both ways' (Amber). This repertoire develops the claim that, despite gender equivalence in experiences of sexism, there is no equivalence of redress. Men are suffering too, a suffering exacerbated by the lack of recognition and attention afforded them. This repertoire builds on definitional talk about sexism in a more literal sense, too:

Octavia: [...] And what about sexism, how do you define that?

Jade: Sexism is judging someone, like for me, is judging someone based on their sex. Like saying that someone shouldn't be able to do something because he's a he or she's a she. Even kind of discriminating against someone because of their sex, and it relates to males and females. And sexism is a huge thing, a huge thing in today's society. Like just this morning actually we were talking about um, me and my mum, were talking about how, oh do you notice short men, coz all of the women in our family are real short, do you notice that short men tend to be real macho-ists and kind of like 'rrr I'm a man'. And then we started talking about why was that, and it's kind of like we came to the conclusion that men are judged hugely on the fact that if they're short they're not manly enough, you know because they are shorter than all the other men, blah, blah, blah. But it's fine if you're a woman and you're short [...]

Jade's definition of sexism as 'judging someone based on their sex' develops into a more complex rhetorical account that positions sexism as a 'huge thing'. This claim is illustrated, not with a gender-neutral example, but with a hypothetical anecdote about the difficulties faced by short men. This spotlighting of men's struggles continues into the next passage through the contrast Jade sets up between men ('judged hugely') and women ('it's fine if you're a woman and you're short').

Others also played on the contrasting experiences of men and women to position men as contemporary sexism's real victims. The point that sexism against women is wrongly perceived as 'more common' (Mia) or 'worse' (Claudia) than sexism towards men was a frequent feature of participants' talk:

like I said I think you pick up more on sexism towards women because it's more seen as being more common and a lot of people don't really see things as sexist towards guys (Mia)

I think sexism does affect men and sometimes, in some situations they affect men worse than women. (Claudia)

if you say something about a man, [it's] not often you hear people say that's sexist, but you hear it a lot when people say it about women. (Georgia)

Often, as above, the claim that sexism towards women is 'more advertised' (Mia) and more readily recognised stood alone as a self-evident truth. Where elaboration did occur, interviewees turned to hypothetical examples drawn from areas more usually associated with feminist activism: relationship violence and street harassment. Such examples work to emphasise the extent to which women's experiences have wrongly trumped men's. Thomas explained that because men are perceived as 'strong' and are 'viewed as being better than women' people wrongly suppose they 'can't be abused':

it's sexist that how they perceive only girls can be the ones abused in a relationship guys can't be abused when guys can easily be abused

Leah draws on this repertoire in a similar way, suggesting that men are at a disadvantage when it comes to sexism. She observes that 'there isn't exactly a violence against men campaign' because such initiatives are 'all geared towards women'. Taking street harassment as an example, Mia advances the same argument: despite a mainstream focus on women's issues, 'guys do have it tough'.

it's made more known that women get more sexism towards them, but it's not really like known when guys do, do you know what I mean because like say a girl is being harassed at a bus stop or something about like what she was doing, like the way that she looked, then that would be, people would probably cause a bit of an uproar about that, but if a guy was harassed it would be like oh toughen up, why don't you stand up for yourself

This repertoire of sexism downplays women's experiences, commanding space for the discussion of sexism towards men. When asked for details, however, interviewees had few real-life examples with which to fill this space:

- Octavia: [...] have you come across in your experience or your friends' experience any of those kinds of instances of men being limited by their gender role that you're talking about?
- Mia: Um I don't know, I have to think about that one. I don't really have many guy friends

We might ask, then, what this repertoire does beyond making space for talk about sexism towards men. What else does it achieve discursively and interactionally? This repertoire of sexism feeds from and into a network of 'poor male' and 'masculinity in crisis' discourses, which position men as neglected victims of gender relations and reverse sexism (Gough & Peace, 2000, p. 390; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Ringrose, 2007) and feminism (Edley & Wetherell, 2001). At the same time, this repertoire intersects with common-sense discourses that position feminists as unreasonable, selfish and man-hating (Scharff, 2013; Tyler, 2007; see also Calder-Dawe & Gavey, in preparation). In taking up this repertoire, interviewees invoke and reject woman-only accounts of sexism that seemingly exclude and disadvantage men. As Edley and Wetherell (2001, p. 451) observed over a decade ago, equality remains a 'rhetorical centrepiece' of meaning-making about gender relations, sexism and feminism. In rejecting an apparent double standard, interviewees position themselves as champions of equality for *all*, rather than equality for women. Taking up this repertoire enables speakers to engage in equality talk from an unassailable position: that of the beneficent, fair-minded feminist concerned about men's difficulties. This subject position may be a particularly important resource for women, who are more susceptible to being positioned as angry or selfish feminists 'playing the gender card' (Donaghue, 2015). Certainly, young women made more frequent use of this repertoire than young men.

As feminist scholars, we are interested in the kinds of speech this repertoire authorise for those with feminist concerns and commitments. The argument that, in the interests of equality, it is men's experiences that ought to be prioritised makes feminist critiques of ongoing sexism towards women more difficult to justify. Within this repertoire, attempts to address sexism directed at women and girls may appear unwarranted: men and boys are the true victims of sexism and it is they who need 'a bit of help' (Hannah). In short, this repertoire claims a platform for men and boys while dismantling that platform for girls and women. As a result, attention is funnelled away from the pervasive, everyday sexism towards women our interviewees described.

'Not necessarily a big deal': Sexism is inconsequential

As we have seen, participants identified a wide range of sexism towards women and girls around them. They spoke of routine comments and jokes undermining women's capacity, sexual harassment and the constant surveillance of women and girls' bodies. Interviewees mobilised a second set of discursive resources to account for these

experiences and observations. They drew on a repertoire that acknowledged the existence of sexism towards women and girls while orienting to it as inconsequential. Within this repertoire sexism is ill judged and out-dated, but not harmful; sexism is not a 'big deal' (Sasha).

Unsurprisingly, this repertoire of sexism as inconsequential marshals a language of understatement. Indeed, the words *big deal* are one of its most prominent motifs, appearing again and again as participants explained that peers 'don't seriously say' (Thomas) sexist things. Evaluating instances of sexual harassment or gendered diminishment of women, interviewees dismissed them as simply 'unnecessary' or 'pointless' behaviour (Sasha) that is 'not necessarily a big deal' (Phoebe). Often, participants described an instance of sexism only to add that it 'didn't bother me' (Nina). Where sexist behaviour was problematized, it was done in a manner that downplayed any malicious intent. Sexism may be 'immature' (Amber), bothersome, 'insensitive [...] a bit dickish' (Mia), but no harm is intended; it is a sign of 'carelessness' (Rose) rather than a practice of power. As Georgia remarked, reflecting on her experiences of being diminished by male friends, they 'don't really mean it'. The seriousness of sexism is similarly undone in Phoebe's characterisation of peers' misogyny as 'stupid boy remarks'. This repertoire makes sexist practices articulable as playful, perhaps stupid, but not serious enough to merit vigorous challenge or unflinching correction. Here, the legitimate response to sexism is to simply let it pass, as Rose explained:

people just kind of let it go, like you know, like no one's really got time for it, yeah.

That 'no one's really got time' for sexism implies that sexism is trivial, unimportant and unworthy of attention: something to 'let [...] go'.

Certainly, this second repertoire is more spacious than the first. It offers a framework within which sexism towards women and girls can be acknowledged and articulated. At the same time, however, this repertoire undoes the seriousness of sexism even as it is spoken about. This manoeuvre eases discursive tension, allowing interviewees to shift smoothly between repertoires:

there was that big thing and it was like 'you're a woman' like, 'why doesn't your girlfriend go to the kitchen and make you a sandwich instead of like talking to you about stuff?', and it's like 'what?' you know. Just kind of dumb things like that I guess you kind of see them from time to time, you just kind of think 'what? This is just ridiculous.' Sometimes I see stuff like that and I'm like 'is this person serious?' or like 'what is happening?'. But it is definitely a daily occurrence, sexism, and you know like I said I think you pick up more on sexism towards women because it's more seen as being more common and a lot of people don't really see things sexist towards guys or other genders.

This passage begins with an example of sexism: diminishing jokes being made about women online. Mia describes this form of sexism as 'stupid', 'dumb' and 'ridiculous'

– words that cement sexism’s position as an irritation rather than a gendered practice of power. As she transitions into a more general, abstract account of sexism (marked by her assertion that sexism is a ‘daily occurrence’), Mia takes up a different set of discursive resources that redirect attention away from women and towards men’s experiences of sexism that ‘a lot of people don’t really see’.

As with the first repertoire, we observed that it was mostly young women interviewees who oriented to sexism as no big deal. Certainly, there is something attractive in the subject positions this repertoire opens up to young women. Sexism figures as boyish immaturity that warrants an eye-rolling tolerance on the part of the savvy (female) observer or target. Indeed, there is something of the benign parent or mature older sibling in the positioning this repertoire affords young women. By rejecting sexism as a kind of juvenility best ignored, young women interviewees show themselves as calm, mature, even superior in their ability to see ‘stupid boy remarks’ (Phoebe) for what they are (harmless) and meet them with indulgence or ‘relaxed intolerance’ (Rose). nNegating the power of sexism may also allow speakers to sidestep victimhood, evading positioning as weak and disadvantaged and appearing instead as resilient and self-determining (see Baker, 2008; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). Furthermore, downplaying the seriousness of sexism (‘it didn’t bother me’; Nina) defends young women against charges of selfishly or cynically “crying sexism” (Donaghue, 2015).

A repertoire of sexism as ‘no big deal’ could be seen to draw from (and feed into) well-rehearsed postfeminist discourse about gender equality, feminism and sexism. These claims that imply that the “battle” for gender equality has been won, that sexism towards women and girls is virtually extinct, and that any lingering inequalities are of little consequence and will take care of themselves (McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2013). Angela McRobbie (2009, p. 26) has argued that post-feminist discourse ‘disarticulates’ feminism: in denying sexism, it ‘devalues, or negates and makes unthinkable the very basis of [feminist] coming-together’. For this reason, the tendency to under-articulate or understate sexism and gender-based oppression has often been interpreted as a kind of postfeminist recuperation, insofar as it stifles talk about sexism.

Our interviewees, however, were far from silent about sexism. The young women and men we spoke to described a great deal of sexism towards women and girls around them. Furthermore, many examples were labelled as ‘awful’ (Leah, Nina) ‘horrible’ (Alice) or ‘unfair’ (Phoebe, Amber, Emily), before speakers moved into a discursive account that positioned their examples as no big deal. In the context of our interviews, we wonder whether this repertoire of sexism as not a ‘big deal’ could signify something in excess of a disavowal of sexism. Certainly, this repertoire draws on logics that can work to erase the seriousness and the unevenness of sexism towards women and girls. Even so, when taking up this repertoire, interviewees oriented to sexism as an unjust, ongoing practice that is not and ought not to be powerful.

Perhaps this repertoire harbours a splinter of ambivalence: dismissing sexism need not preclude an understanding of it as a practice of power.

Conclusion

The young women and men we interviewed described a climate of sexism around them, where routine derivitization (Cahill, 2011) and diminishment of women and girls permeated school, work, family and digital life. The interpretative resources interviewees drew on to make sense of this normative and pervasive ‘matrix of sexism’ (Sills et al., in press) worked against the grain of their examples and observations, de-emphasising and even reversing the gendered pattern evident in their talk. One repertoire positioned men and boys as unacknowledged victims of sexist practices, while another emphasised the harmlessness of sexism towards women and girls.

Notably, it was in young women’s talk, rather than young men’s, where both of these repertoires were most frequently and fully elaborated. Joanne Baker (2010) has argued that young Australian women work to ‘evade victimhood’ and, in doing so, to maintain their intelligibility as worthy, self-determining subjects. Like Baker’s interviewees, the young women we interviewed were able to refuse positioning as victims and, in our case, locate victimhood elsewhere. Drawing on two different but complementary repertoires, interviewees downplayed the seriousness of contemporary sexism towards women while simultaneously orienting to men and boys as its genuine victims.

The imperative to avoid victimhood intersects, in our analysis, with another imperative more particular to those we interviewed. In rehearsing the hypothetical ways in which boys and men could face sexism, participants are “doing equality work”: that is, they are demonstrating even-handedness and their willingness to take the hurt of boys and men into account. This kind of display may be especially important for young women with proximity to feminism; it pre-emptively uncouples the speaker from punitive characterisation of feminists as selfish and unreasonable man-haters, securing her position as a good feminine subject. When decrying sexism towards men, feminist-identified women have an unassailable right to speak. Ironically, the possibilities for addressing sexism towards women often appear to be dissolved by the positioning work required to achieve it: women and girls secure authority to speak by attending to male victimisation and disadvantage and declining to make a ‘big deal’ of their own. In doing so, opportunities for problematising sexism towards women appear to recede. At the same time, we are hesitant to rule out a more open-ended reading of this discursive work. We see the seeds of a more feminist political project within this repertoire of sexism as not a ‘big deal’: a more ambivalent re-articulation of sexism that underplays sexism while attempting to refuse and defuse its power.

Finally, we note that this research took place during a time of feminist metamorphosis. There were changes afoot in many interviewees’ lives as they

grappled with new feminist ideas and perspectives. More broadly, western discourse on feminism and sexism also appeared to be in transition, as unreservedly hostile popular characterisations of feminists and feminism were (and continue to be) increasingly contested. As the visibility and acceptability of feminism continue to grow, the possibilities for accounting for sexism will no doubt take firmer (and, we hope, more feminist) shape. In the meantime, this article conveys the resources and imperatives facing those accounting for everyday sexism on this shifting ground.

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