

CLASSIC

CONTEMPORARY

CROSS-CULTURAL

42 How Subtle Sex Discrimination Works

NIJOLE V. BENOKRAITIS

There are many forms of sex discrimination. Blatant sex discrimination is typically intentional, quite visible, and easily documented. Covert sex discrimination is hidden, purposeful, and difficult to prove. This selection discusses subtle sex discrimination—behavior, often unnoticed, that people have internalized as “normal,” “natural,” or customary.

Subtle sex discrimination refers to the unequal and harmful treatment of women that is typically less visible and obvious than blatant sex discrimination. It is often not noticed because most people have internalized subtle sexist behavior as “normal,” “natural,” or acceptable. Subtle sex discrimination can be relatively innocent or manipulative, intentional or unintentional, well-meaning or malicious. Subtle sex discrimination is difficult to document because many people do not perceive it as serious or harmful. In addition, subtle sex discrimination is often more complex than it appears: What is discrimination to many women may not seem discriminatory to many men or even women. . . .

CONDESCENDING CHIVALRY

Condescending chivalry refers to superficially courteous behavior that is protective and paternalistic,

but treats women as subordinates. Sometimes the chivalry is well-intentioned because it “protects” women from criticism. For example, “A male boss will haul a guy aside and just kick ass if the [male] subordinate performs badly in front of a client” but may not say anything to a female subordinate (Fraker, 1984). Not providing such criticism may seem benevolent in the short term, but it will handicap an employee’s performance in the long run. . . .

Thus, chivalrous behavior can signal status inequality. According to some researchers, outmoded attitudes—on the parts of both men and women—are preventing many qualified women from breaking into top jobs as school superintendents. Unlike their male counterparts, female candidates still get such questions from school board members as “How would your husband feel about your moving?” “Can you deal with a district where the administrators are mostly men?” and “Can you handle tough discipline problems?” According to researchers, the oppressive chivalry continues after a woman is hired. Female school superintendents often face greater scrutiny, for

Source: Nijole V. Benokraitis, *Subtle Sexism: Current Practices and Prospects for Change*, pp. 11, 14–24. Copyright © 1997 by Sage Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

example, when it comes to such “masculine” tasks as finances and maintenance issues (see Nakashima, 1996).

SUPPORTIVE DISCOURAGEMENT

Supportive discouragement refers to a form of subtle sex discrimination where women receive mixed messages about their abilities, intelligence, or accomplishments. One form of supportive discouragement involves encouraging women to succeed in general but not rewarding their actual achievements because the latter may not reflect traditionally male interests:

. . . [H]aving served on several search committees, I’m aware of how often feminist (or even woman-topic) dissertations are dismissed as “jargony,” “trendy,” etc. . . . I’m not really sure if feminism is still seen as a “fly-by-night” sort of discipline, but the accusation is a difficult one to argue because the people who make it will assure you until they’re blue in the face (or you are) that they would love to hire a woman, are not opposed to feminism, etc. But it’s only “this” dissertation, you see, they are opposed to. . . . (E-mail correspondence, 1996)

Another form of supportive discouragement encourages women to be ambitious and successful but places numerous obstacles in their paths, which either limit or derail the progress. Consider the following example from a colleague in the United Kingdom:

One of the largest departments in our College is the Access department which offers part-time courses for people with no formal qualifications who wish to enter higher education or return to work. I would say that about 70 percent of these students are female and intend to go into teaching or similar work. The College refuses to implement a crèche or other day-care on the basis that it would be too expensive; staffing would cost almost nothing as the College runs courses for Nursery Nurses, childcare workers, etc. This despite the fact that of the people who are offered places on the Access course and turn it down, 80 percent give lack of child care as the main reason. Of this 80 percent, 92 percent are women. The courses are also run in some of the worst accommodations on site—“temporary” buildings which have been there for about twenty years and which are in a terrible state.

The Chemistry department (not many women here) has, however, had at least three major renovations in the last ten years. It certainly makes clear to the many women on the Access course the opinion the College management has of their relative importance. (E-mail correspondence, 1996)

FRIENDLY HARASSMENT

Friendly harassment refers to sexually oriented behavior that, at face value, looks harmless or even playful. If it creates discomfort, embarrassment, or humiliation, however, it is a form of subtle discrimination. According to some female students at Stanford Medical School, for example, it is in such traditionally male-taught courses as those in surgery and internal medicine that many women encounter the most offensive sexual jokes. A fourth-year student said that many of her days “are spent fending off stupid little comments,” many of them sexual, from male residents and doctors. She hesitated to complain, however, because good evaluations from professors are essential to get a good residency (Gose, 1995).

When women don’t laugh at “stupid little jokes,” moreover, they are often accused of not having a sense of humor:

In response to a question from a friend of mine (a female graduate student) regarding how to comport herself at a job interview, a male faculty adviser responds, “Just flirt!” When I recount the incident to a male friend (junior faculty in another field at another institution), he responds: “Maybe it was a joke. Lighten up!” The primary sexism of the first remark gets echoed in the secondary sexism of the second remark, which trivializes the offense and the indignation [“no sense of humor”]. (E-mail correspondence, 1996)

Humor and jokes serve a number of functions: They reinforce group solidarity; define the defiant/outsider group; educate; save face; ingratiate; express caring for others; provide a safety valve for discussing taboo topics; maintain status inequality; silence or embarrass people; and provide tension release, hostility, and anger toward any group that is seen as marginal, inferior, or threatening. A single joke can serve several of these functions.

Although women's humor can be a powerful tool for changing stereotypes about females, much of men's sexual humor expresses male dominance over women, negates their personhood, and tries to silence women: "There are whole categories of jokes about women for which there are no male parallels: prostitute jokes, mother-in-law jokes, dumb blonde jokes, woman driver jokes, Jewish mother jokes" (Crawford, 1995:138). Women often don't laugh at many of these jokes not because they don't have a sense of humor, but because the "jokes" are hostile, aggressive, and demeaning. . . .

SUBJECTIVE OBJECTIFICATION

Subjective objectification refers to a form of subtle sex discrimination that treats women as children, possessions, or sex objects. Women are often punished like children—their "allowances" may be taken away, they may be forbidden to associate with their friends, their physical mobility may be limited, they may be given curfews, or they may be threatened with punishment similar to that of children. . . .

Our culture is continuously bombarded with images of women as little more than sexual body parts. The Media Action Alliance, which publishes the *Action Agenda* newsletter, is constantly filled with examples of posters, ads, videos, and other media materials that glorify violence against women and exploitation of women's bodies. It has been estimated that the average teenager sees between 1,900 and 2,400 sex-related messages per year on television alone (Brown, Childers, & Waszik, 1990). Many of the images, including those in films targeted at adolescents, treat women's bodies as trophies: Boys compete to be the first to "score," to achieve the most sexual conquests, and to "make it" with the sexiest teenage girls (see Whatley, 1994).

A frightening result of such competition can include rape and other sexual assaults on women. Consider the "Spur Posse" case in California. In 1993 eight members of a suburban high school, many of them top athletes at the school, created a

clique called the "Spur Posse." Their primary goal was to "score" with as many girls as possible. They kept track of the girls with whom they had intercourse, and some bragged that their individual tallies ran into the sixties. In at least seven cases, girls from ten to sixteen years old said they had been raped. Some of the parents condoned their sons' behavior. One father, in fact, boasted to reporters that the assaults were not rape but indicators of his son's virility and sexual prowess (Seligmann, 1993).

This bizarre perception of women as possessions and trophies follows many boys into adulthood. According to Brooks (1995:3–4), what he refers to as "the Centerfold Syndrome" represents "one of the most malignant forces in contemporary relationships between men and women." One of the elements of the Centerfold Syndrome is objectification:

Women become objects as men become objectifiers. As the culture has granted men the right and privilege of looking at women, women have been expected to accept the role of stimulators of men's visual interest, with their bodies becoming objects that can be lined up, compared, and rated. . . . Objective physical aspects are critical: Size, shape, and harmony of body parts are more important than a woman's human qualities. . . . Men talk of their attraction to women in dehumanizing terms based on the body part of their obsession—"I'm a leg man," or "I'm an ass man."

Brooks notes that one of the most harmful effects of such objectification is that real women become more complicated, less appealing, and even ugly: "Stretch marks, varicose veins, sagging breasts, and cellulite-marked legs, common phenomena for real female bodies, may be viewed as repugnant by men who see women as objects" (p. 5). As a result, Centerfold Syndrome men may be sexually and emotionally inexpressive with the most important women in their lives.

RADIANT DEVALUATION

Although women are less likely to be openly maligned or insulted than in the past, they are devalued more subtly but just as effectively. Often, the

devaluation is done in glowing terms (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995:102):

A psychologist, one of the most popular instructors in her college, said she would get good teaching evaluations from her male chair but that the positive review would be couched in sex-stereotypical rather than professional terms—she was described as being “mama-ish” and as having a “charming” approach to teaching. Being “mama-ish” and “charming” are *not* the criteria used by tenure and promotion committees.

On a much broader scale, some scholars contend that the most recent devaluations have focused on antifeminist intellectual harassment through the use of “vilification and distortion or even violence to repress certain areas of research and forms of inquiry” (Clark et al., 1996:x). Attacks on feminists and feminist scholarship are nothing new. What has changed, however, is that much of the “newest wave of antifeminism cloaks itself in the vestments of feminism: the new antifeminists are women who, claiming to be feminists themselves, now maintain they are rescuing the women’s movement from those who have led it astray” (Ginsburg & Lennox, 1996:170). Many of these devaluators have impressive academic credentials, are articulate, have been supported by conservative corporate foundations, and have found a receptive audience in the mainstream media and many publishing companies, which see antifeminism as a “hot commodity” because it is so profitable. Blaming feminism for such (real or imagined) ailments as the deterioration of relationships between the sexes and the presumed dissolution of the family—especially when the criticism comes from well-educated, self-proclaimed feminists—sells a lot of books.

LIBERATED SEXISM

Liberated sexism refers to the process that, at face value, appears to be treating women and men equally but that, in practice, increases men’s freedom while placing greater burdens on women. One of the best examples of liberated sexism is work overloads both within the home and at the job site. Since the 1970s, increasing

numbers of women have found themselves with two jobs—one inside and one outside the home. Ironically, women working these “double days” are often referred to as “liberated women.” But liberated from what?

Shared parenting reflects more rhetoric than reality. In a national study, Bianchi (1990) found that more than 60 percent of divorced fathers either did not visit their children, or did not visit them and had no telephone or mail contact with them over a one-year period. Employed mothers with preschool-age children spend twenty-four hours more a week in child-care activities than do their husbands. Because the husband’s job typically takes priority over his wife’s (his salary is usually much higher), nearly nine out of ten mothers care for their children when they are sick, compared with only one out of ten working fathers (DeStefano & Colasanto, 1990). Although in one survey 56 percent of male employees said they were interested in flexible work schedules that would allow them more family time, in reality fewer than 1 percent take advantage of the unpaid paternity leaves that some 30 percent of companies offer today. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which was signed into law by President Clinton in 1993, allows workers of employers with fifty or more employees to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave following the birth or adoption of a child. Most men fear the career repercussions of taking paternity leaves or can’t afford unpaid leaves financially, however (see Sommer, 1994). . . .

CONSIDERATE DOMINATION

Men often occupy preeminent positions and control important decision-making functions. . . . Men’s dominance is built into our language, laws, and customs in both formal and informal ways. The dominance is accepted because it has been internalized and is often portrayed as “collegial,” authoritative, or mutually beneficial.

Most of us take for granted that the expert and dominant cast of characters in the media are men.

The media routinely ignore women or present them as second-class citizens. A recent survey of the front-page stories of twenty national and local newspapers found that although women make up 52 percent of the population, they show up just 13 percent of the time in the prime news spots. Even the stories about breast implants quoted men more often than women. Two-thirds of the bylines on front pages were male, and three-quarters of the opinions on op-ed pages were by men. Fewer than a third of the photographs on front pages featured women. Since the old “women’s sections” are now more unisex and focus on both men and women, news about and by women has lost space even in these lifestyle sections (Goodman, 1992; see also Overholser, 1996).

Television news is not much better. In a study of the content of evening news programs on CBS, NBC, and ABC, Rakow and Kranich (1991) found that women as on-camera sources of information were used in less than 15 percent of the cases. When women did speak, they were usually passive reactors to public events as housewife or wife of the man in the news rather than participants or experts. Even in critical analyses of issues that affect more women than men, women may not appear on the screen. For example, a lengthy story on CBS on welfare reform did not use any women or feminist sources. . . .

COLLEGIAL EXCLUSION

One of the most familiar forms of subtle sexism is collegial exclusion, whereby women are made to feel invisible or unimportant through physical, social, or professional isolation. When Hall and Sandler’s pamphlet, “The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?” was published in 1982, it was an instant success. Among other reasons, Sandler and Hall articulated the feelings that many women had experienced in higher education of being ignored, not having female role models, or being excluded from classroom discussions and activities. Since then, many studies have documented women’s exclusion from classroom discourse, textbooks, and

other academic activities (see, for example, Gino-rio, 1995; Lewis, 1990; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Peterson & Kroner, 1992).

Although there has been greater awareness of exclusion, it’s not evident that there has been much change since 1982. At Stanford Medical School, for example, “The male body has been used as the standard, and the woman’s body has been seen as a variation on that theme,” says a third-year female student. Several women once heard a professor dismiss the clitoris with five words: “like the penis, just shorter” (Gose, 1995:A50). At Yale and American University law schools, female students’ complaints are strikingly similar to those that Hall and Sandler described in 1982: Women feel their speech is stifled in class; professors respond more positively to comments by men, even if a woman voiced the same idea first; male students, even friends, ignore women’s comments on legal issues and talk around them; male students and faculty devalue women’s opinions; and men don’t hear what women say (Torry, 1995).

When I asked the subscribers of the Women’s Studies e-mail discussion list if they or someone they knew had ever experienced subtle sexism, many of the responses (from both the United States and Europe) described collegial exclusion. Here are a few examples:

Just got back from a national conference and heard a female college president relate her experiences at meetings with other college presidents in the state. She was the only female present at the meetings and found that her suggestions/insights were ignored by her male colleagues. However, when the same suggestions later came from one of them, they were acknowledged. She finally took to writing her suggestions on the chalkboard. They couldn’t be ignored that way—or at least not for long.

There was a series of women-only staff development meetings set up by one of the more senior women (there are few), but the “only” time that could be found for this was on Monday at 6:00 p.m. Other staff development meetings are held at lunchtime with time off for anybody who wants to go.

Women often feel they’re isolated. . . . Many women begin with great promise but are demoralized and cut

off from support . . . I'm referring to women who are cut off from support in ways it's hard to explain . . . often the only women in their departments . . . although some are in departments with other untenured women but the Old White Guys have the power. [The women] often are lacking a real (feminist) community.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Why are the various categories of subtle sex discrimination presented as oxymorons? How does subtle sexism differ from more blatant forms of discrimination?
2. Can you identify situations in which you have experienced subtle sex discrimination? Have you ever discriminated in this way against others?
3. What are the individual and organizational costs of subtle sex discrimination? What remedies might be effective in decreasing this form of inequality?

REFERENCES

- BENOKRAITIS, N. V., and J. R. FEAGIN. 1995. *Modern sexism: Blatant, subtle, and covert discrimination*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- BIANCHI, S. 1990. America's children: Mixed prospects. *Population Bulletin*, 45: 3–41.
- BROOKS, G. R. 1995. *The centerfold syndrome: How men can overcome objectification and achieve intimacy with women*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- BROWN, J. D., K. W. CHILDERS, and C. S. WASZIK. 1990. Television and adolescent sexuality. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 11: 62–70.
- CLARK, V., S. N. GARNER, M. HIGONNET, and K. H. KATRAK, eds. 1996. *Antifeminism in the academy*. New York: Routledge.
- CRAWFORD, M. 1995. *Talking difference: On gender and language*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- DESTEFANO, L., and D. COLASANTO. 1990. Unlike 1975, today most Americans think men have it better. *Gallup Poll Monthly*, (February): 25–36.
- FRAKER, S. 1984. Why top jobs elude female executives. *Fortune*, (April 16): 46.
- GINORIO, A. B. 1995. *Warming the climate for women in academic science*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- GINSBURG, E., and S. LENNOX. 1996. Antifeminism in scholarship and publishing. In *Antifeminism in the academy*, eds. V. Clark, S. N. Garner, M. Higgonnet, and K. H. Katrak, 169–200. New York: Routledge.
- GOODMAN, E. 1992. A woman's place is in the paper. *Baltimore Sun*, (April 7): 15A.
- GOSE, B. 1995. Women's place in medicine. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (November 3): A49.
- LEWIS, M. 1990. Interrupting patriarchy: Politics, resistance, and transformation in the feminist classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60: 472.
- MAHER, F. A., and M. K. T. TETREAU. 1994. *The feminist classroom*. New York: Basic Books.
- NAKASHIMA, E. 1996. When it comes to top school jobs, women learn it's tough to get ahead. *Washington Post*, (April 21): B1, B5.
- OVERHOLSER, G. 1996. Front page story: Women. *Washington Post*, (April 21): C6.
- PETERSON, S. B., and T. KRONER. 1992. Gender biases in textbooks for introductory psychology and human development. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 16: 17–36.
- RAKOW, L. F., and K. KRANICH. 1991. Woman as sign in television news. *Journal of Communication*, 41: 8–23.
- SELIGMANN, J. 1993. A town's divided loyalties. *Newsweek*, (April 12): 29.
- SOMMER, M. 1994. Welcome cribside, Dad. *Christian Science Monitor*, (June 28): 19.
- TORRY, S. 1995. Voice of concern grows louder on gender bias issue. *Washington Post*, (November 20): 7.
- WHATLEY, M. H. 1994. Keeping adolescents in the picture: Construction of adolescent sexuality in textbook images and popular films. In *Sexual culture and the construction of adolescent identities*, ed. J. M. Irvine, 183–205. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.