

Ethnography: A Study of Sexist Attitudes

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Abstract

From appearances and stereotyped gender roles to objectification and sexual harassment, sexism can rear its head in many different ways. Sexism is generally acknowledged as being perpetrated by chauvinist men against women. However, there has emerged an ever increasing 'hate-male' culture of casual misandry and sexual impertinence by women which appears to be accepted and ignored. The aim of this research is to reveal the impact and prevalence of modern sexist attitudes, based on the sexist attitudes of students studied at a University campus. Covert ethnography is used to observe students in different surroundings around the campus of the University of Essex, studying their language and interactions with members of the same and opposite sex, to identify any underlying sexist opinions.

Keywords: Stereotypes, gender, sexism, ethnography.

Introduction

My interest in social life has always been motivated by inequality, whether between races, genders, classes, or any other social groups. For my social research project I shall be concentrating on gender inequality in the form of sexism amongst students. I chose this subject area due to the history surrounding gender inequality, particularly the inequality and oppression of women. I hope to uncover whether sexism is still rife against women, or if women are in fact appearing more as the perpetrators of sexism. Although sexism against males is not regarded as a prevalent social issue, if my research is to highlight an underlying theme of misandry, it may bring the issue more to the forefront of socio-political concern. Conversely, though perhaps less surprising, sexism against women may be seen to prevail, underlining the falsity of any sense of modern equality between genders.

Literature Review

Before examining sexism between the genders, 'gender' as a concept must be scrutinized. The term 'gender' is socially constructed, as are the gender roles and expectations associated with it. Garrett (1987, p. vii) outlines this idea: 'whether you are born male or female will be of major consequence for all aspects of your life: for the expectations others in society will have of you, for your treatment by other people, and for your own behaviour.' The social construction of gender and the corresponding characteristics typically associated with the identity of *male* or *female* function as a foundation for sexism and gender discrimination, as any refusal to adopt gender specific characteristics or crossing the boundaries of gender roles will often result in a negative societal reaction. Eagly et al. (2004) highlight how stereotypical gender roles are presented in the media. Women are often portrayed as 'unambitious and emotional', 'subservient', and 'domestic' (Eagly et al., 2004, p. 109), whilst conversely, 'men are often shown pursuing careers of high status' and 'exercising control over events' (Eagly et al., 2004, p. 109). Sue Askew (1988) claims that males are also oppressed by society's 'gender roles'. The dominant view of men 'represents them as being tough, strong, aggressive, independent, brave, sexually active, rational, intelligent, and so on' (Askew, 1988, p. 2), and 'these stereotypes are obviously damaging and prevent young men from developing their full potential' (Askew, 1988, p. 3). However, the dominant view of women could not be more different, sharing many stereotypical characteristics often associated with children, such as 'vulnerable, weak, frightened, stupid, dependent and immature' (Askew, 1988, pp. 2-3). Askew (1988, p. 3) claims that young men are not only confused and oppressed by their ideological gender characteristics instilled in them during socialization, but that 'they are also internalising extremely negative images of girls and women', instilling a view of women as subordinates from an early age.

Feminism tackles the social and political oppression of women in society. The foundation of feminist theory is that society is patriarchal and women are oppressed within it (Fulcher and Scott, 2007). Gersoni-Stavn (1974) claims that we are indoctrinated during socialization to believe that men are the elite, and the most important gender. She says that women gain a negative self-image from hearing everything referred to in masculine terms, for example job titles ending in "man" e.g. fireman, policeman (Gersoni-Stavn, 1974, p. 3). Feminists highlight many ways in which women are oppressed. Controversial feminist Germaine Greer uses the beauty industry as an

example of a modern method of oppression, claiming that ‘conditions that practically all women “suffer from” are spoken of as unsightly and abnormal, to make women feel that parts of their bodies, perhaps their whole bodies, are defective and should be worked on.’ (Greer, 2000, p. 25)

Conversely, Nathanson and Young (2001) claim that while misogyny is now almost universally unacceptable, misandry is generally considered morally acceptable, and the projection of women as superior to men is reflected in many aspects of popular culture, such as in film and television. Anthony Synnott (2009, p. 135) alleges that men ‘have been widely demonized and vilified over the last 50 years’, resulting in misandry, ‘the anger towards, and the hatred, fear and contempt of men’. He claims that misandry has become institutionalized, hidden by a veil of humour that disguises the underlying contempt, and is present in advertising, books, coffee mugs, and many other articles (Synnott, 2009).

A more political aspect of my research is the struggles of women and progress in the form of social policy throughout history. For years women have fought for equal rights, resulting in the introduction of social policy such as the Equal Pay Act in 1970, implemented ‘to prevent discrimination, as regards terms and conditions of employment, between men and women’ (legislation.gov.uk, 1970). However, there has been considerable dispute surrounding this, and it is widely argued that women are still not receiving equal rights, but that the inequality is now simply disguised. The general issue of sexism can also be examined using C. Wright Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination*, which considers social problems in terms of whether they are a personal trouble or a public issue (Mills, 1959). Sexism meets both these classifications, in terms of personal experiences of sexism, and sexism as an issue in wider society, both socially and politically. The current literature makes certain assertions, primarily that sexism towards women is still highly prevalent despite advancements in feminism and the implementation of certain regulations, such as the Equal Pay Act. There are also claims of extensive perpetration of sexism towards men, which is often overlooked and widely accepted. I have conducted an ethnographic study in order to either discover more evidence to substantiate these claims, or to establish whether these claims do in fact correspond to reality.

Methodological reflections

Walliman (2006, p. 131) defines ethnography as ‘the immersion of the researcher into the social setting for an extended period in order to observe, question, listen and experience the situation in order to gain an understanding of processes and meanings’. Ethnography involves the researcher engaging with their research subjects in their day-to-day lives, collecting data over a period of time in different forms including photographs, although essentially in the form of participant observation. It can be conducted either covertly (the researcher conceals the aim of his presence) or overtly (researcher is transparent about their research).

The ethnographic method is drawn from the interpretivist perspective and uses qualitative data. Interpretivism is ‘predicated upon the view that a strategy is required which respects the differences between people and the objects of natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 16). In contrast to the empirical scientific method of positivism, interpretivism aims to reveal the deeper meanings behind actions. I am studying the prominence of sexism in the discourse of students, and so it is necessary to study this qualitatively to collect detailed information in context, and uncover the deeper connotations of this attitude. Thus I am using the covert ethnographic method in order to observe students in their everyday surroundings and gain an insight into their overall attitude. Ethnography also contains some aspects of the naturalist approach, which takes into account the use of facial expressions and body language in interpreting the meanings behind language (Weiten et al., 2011).

I am conducting my ethnography covertly. If I informed the participants of the purpose of my research, their ‘natural’ behaviour would alter as a result. Sexist attitudes may be concealed in light of my presence in order to prevent themselves from being seen as socially undesirable. If I was to use methods from the positivist approach for my topic, such as the structured interview method instead of the ethnographic method, the data would lack validity. For example, using the interview method is more standardised and thus reliable, but lacks the depth and context of ethnography, and so provides superficial answers without the aid of the wider context. Other qualitative methods would be more appropriate alternatives, such as unstructured interviewing, but this also lacks the validity gained from the context of actions and from observing people in a more natural setting. Non-participant observation could be used to observe participants in their natural environment,

but this again would be lacking the depth and understanding gained from immersing yourself within the participants.

Every method of social research carries its own difficulties and flaws. As ethnography largely relies on the researcher's analysis and interpretation of data, reflexivity is essential to avoid a biased outcome. To be 'reflexive' is to be able to keep research objective and free from these personal values and beliefs, and the inability to do so can result in the erroneous construction of artificial social data which epitomizes the perspective of the researcher. I must be aware of my own biases so I can better reflect on my data and identify potential prejudices. The nature of the ethnographic method also carries the risk of the researcher 'going native'. 'Going native means that we become immersed so fully in our fieldwork or with our subjects that we become acculturated, and our identity is enmeshed with the culture we study' (Thomas, 1993, p. 48). Broadly speaking, we lose objectivity and our views are changed by becoming too involved with the subjects of our study. This is particularly relevant with my research as I am researching subjects in a social group I am already a part of (students). Also, it can be difficult to provoke people to talk about certain relevant topics related to your research without arousing suspicion or revealing your aim when operating covertly. A further obvious methodological issue is the ethical concern of the use of deception in carrying out ethnography covertly. Although this can be avoided by using the overt methodology, I believe that the increased validity obtained by using the covert method outweighs the ethical issues associated with deception. By operating surreptitiously, individuals will not modify their behaviour as they might if I was open about my research, allowing me to observe natural behaviour and thus increasing validity. Lastly, although the ethnographic approach is rich in validity, it can often be low in reliability and generalisability, as the small group of people being studied may not be representative of the wider relevant population. Overall, taking into account methodological issues, I am satisfied that the covert ethnographic method is most appropriate for my research topic.

I obtained the observations on which I base this paper during day-to-day life on the University campus, engaging with my subjects as a fellow student. First and foremost, I studied students with whom I already had some form of relationship in order to experience interactions at close range, using these relationships to join conversations with other unknown students through association, although I did observe some behaviour from the side lines. I also immersed myself in

other wider social situations to attain a more comprehensive set of observations, in settings such as the SU bar or night club Sub Zero where I was easily able to observe a range of behaviours. I carried a notepad with me at all times, using it to make discrete notes after a relevant observation, which was easily done clandestinely given the common nature of note-taking and reading in a university setting. However I did have to postpone this until later in Sub Zero or in the evening at the SU bar as the activity would have stood out as unusual on these occasions. My analysis was based on my own interpretations, coupled with examination of previous research on the topic. I used my field notes to reconstruct the situations and conversations I observed, from which I was able to discern the relevant sections, that is, those which included displays of sexist attitudes or were otherwise related to sexist attitudes among students. I then analysed these pieces in conjunction with an examination of previous research on the topic, from which I was able to reach my findings.

Findings

Sexism from males to females took a variety of forms. One example I encountered was a discussion about women's rights which had a strong underlying sexist theme, with one male claiming that 'men will always be dominant', meeting the topic of women's rights with humour and derision. The disparagement of the subject of women's rights in this example suggests that the progress made in terms of women's rights has not made a significant impact, or is not taken seriously. Even with legislation, equality is down to the wider attitudes of society, and true equality cannot be achieved unless it is supported in the attitudes of wider society. I observed more examples of blatant sexual impropriety towards females in the form of the sexual objectification of women when two maintenance workers hounded a young woman. After spotting an attractive young woman, one of the two men shouted something at her which I can only assume was sexually orientated (I could not make out exactly what was said), before laughing between themselves. Gilmore (2001, p. 9) claims that 'misogyny is close to being universal'. Currie and Raoul (1992) claim that misogyny is not only hatred of women, but also a fear of them. Human beings fear the unknown, and 'for thousands of years woman has been "The Unknown" to man'. Men have therefore feared women, and their fear has frequently taken the form of male domination over the minds and bodies of the women in their societies' (1992, p. 38). Johnson (2005, p. 64) claims that misogyny has taught women to 'hate their own femaleness, an example of internalized oppression',

which goes some way to explain why women appear to persecute their own gender, as with discrimination towards female sexual practices, explored below. Patriarchy and the accompanying misogyny has become ingrained in the female brain to the extent that we now employ self-regulation of ourselves and other females in order to remain faithful to the patriarchal ideology (Johnson, 2005).

However, I also found examples of females displaying the same kind of sexually suggestive behaviour towards men. When I observed two girls discussing a male in a sexually evocative manner, this exposed the fact that it is not just men who sexually objectify women; though whilst a man would often be reprimanded for this kind of behaviour, women are not judged. This highlights the inconsistency between the social acceptability of sexually suggestive behaviour between the sexes. Had a man voiced the same opinion of a female, he would likely be accused of chauvinism and sexual harassment. Another example of the inconsistency between the social expectations and tolerability of the genders was the parallelism in sexually beleaguering behaviour from both males and females, and the contrasting reactions they received. When a male referred to a girl as a 'Piece of skirt', it was met with disdain. However, when girls pestered a male in a sexual manner, it was met with jest and with no sign of disapproval. This discrepancy between the genders can be explained by the gendered assumptions about the underlying intentions of such sexual behaviour. As women are customarily physically weaker than men, they are seen to pose no real physical threat, and thus their intentions are assumed to be innocuous. Men, on the other hand, are often presumed to have more sinister intentions because of their physical capabilities. Media representations of strange men as sexual predators or potential attackers produce a ubiquitous fear of men as dangerous. 'The attention the media give crime and violence teaches women to fear, and continually reinforces those lessons through frequent portrayals of violence against women' (Gordon and Riger, 1991, p. 67) giving 'misleading impressions of both the crime and how it might be dealt with' (Gordon and Riger, 1991, p. 132). Thus obvious displays of sexual interest towards females can be interpreted as threatening, whereas women are viewed as harmless in this sense. Nathanson and Young (2006, p. i) claim that men have been demonized in modern society, and due to this we now all have 'perceptions of evils or inadequacies that characterize all men'. Many people 'fervently believe that hatred toward men should be regarded as a legitimate exception to the general rule against hatred to other groups' (Nathanson and Young, 2006, p. x), echoed in one conversation I observed of girls collectively labelling men as 'perverts' and 'dickheads'. They argue

that misandry, or 'viriphobia' (Gilmore, 2001, p. 12), often goes unnoticed, as the common assumption is that men have all the power, and therefore 'are immune to all serious harm' (Nathanson and Young, 2006, p. x).

The observation I was most shocked by was the lack of appreciation or interest shown by three females to a round of drinks bought for them in the Student Union bar. By freely accepting the drinks and then proceeding to disregard the man who bought them without so much as a thank you, what message were the girls conveying? I also bore witness to what appeared to be a genuine display of chivalry when a male student gave up his coat for a cold female on a night out, for which he received little appreciation. By rejecting the notion that a free drink obliges them to stay and effectively be 'bought', were the girls providing a display of women's independence, or simply taking for granted the males affability, expecting such generosity as a given in modern wooing? Or was it in fact an example of casual misandry? The act of buying the round of drinks can be explained as modern chivalry, in which case my observation offers a useful insight into why chivalry seems to be a thing of the past. However, even in the 21st century, where freedom of expression and liberation from archaic gender roles has emancipated women from housewife duties and acknowledged them as equal members of the workplace, females pursuing males still appears to carry a certain stigma. If women now expect and demand the chase of men, displays of genuine chivalry become superfluous. It may also be the case that modern women are adopting the feminist view of chivalry as a display of male superiority and thus rejecting it accordingly. Chivalry can be viewed as demeaning and patronizing in an era where women are supposed to be equal to men in all spheres of life, and feminists argue that chivalry 'presumes women's weaknesses, inferiority, and a need to rely upon men' (Carroll, 2003, p. 88), viewing chivalry in traditional courtship as 'particularly abhorrent' (Lukas, 2006, p. 8). 'The implication of allowing men to assume the financial burden associated with courtship was that men were essentially "buying time" with the woman or that the woman was for sale' (Lukas, 2006, p. 8).

Even with the progress made by feminist movements, males and females are judged completely differently in terms of their sexual practices, made evident by the conversation between students about a particular female's promiscuity in which she was labelled as a 'slag' without similar consideration of the men involved. What I find especially poignant is that women do not dispute this assumption either, but in fact largely encourage it. By calling other females degrading names

like 'slut', women are essentially oppressing themselves, and invalidating the progress made by feminist movements. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005, p. 135) uncovered the 'slut/stud dichotomy', which is the antagonistic labelling of males and females according to their sexual practices¹. Marianne Hester (1992, p. 40) draws on the work of Shulamith Firestone to explain that the repression of women's sexuality is 'controlled socially in the interests of men'. Marysol Asencio's ethnographic work on the sexuality of Puerto Rican Youth highlights the discrepancy between attitudes of female and male promiscuity. Males who had many sexual partners were reacted to positively, whilst female promiscuity was condemned, or even viewed as 'abnormal' (Asencio, 2002, p. 38). Women are also expected to bear the majority of the responsibility when it comes to contraception (Valenti, 2008).²

Conclusion

I uncovered examples of sexism from both genders, but found that whilst sexism against women was generally considered distasteful, (although it was discussed with amusement between groups of males on many occasions), sexism against men was received with little or no contention. However, it is possible that I was not able to observe the true extent of male sexism because the males observed may have altered their behaviour around me because I am female. I found that when females displayed sexual objectification of men, I almost overlooked it, whereas I was very aware of male examples. It has drawn my attention to the fact that sexism seems to be tolerated differently between the sexes. I believe the discrepancy in tolerance lies in history coupled with threats of modernization. With the widespread awareness of the threat of rape to women, whether disproportionate or not, the fear of malicious intent in male attention makes sexism, and sexual impropriety in particular, especially objectionable. The struggles of women over the past 100 years

¹ Valenti (2008, p. 15) provides further evidence of the disparate views of male and female sexuality, claiming that the word 'slut' controls women through shame and humiliation, and girls who have a variety of sexual partners are labelled as 'sluts', while boys are 'studs', or 'players'.

² Due to space limitations not all observations could be studied in full, but a particularly striking observation was made regarding sexist behaviour in an educational context. Female students were disproportionately selected to answer questions over males, suggesting an expectation gap in the abilities of male and female students. Previous research has proposed an institutionalised higher expectation of males than females (Weiner, 2011) and thus I may have observed the females being given a perceived 'chance'. See also Tauber (1997), Weiner (2011), and Moore and Johnson (1983) for more on sexism in education.

and the discrimination endured makes the topic particularly sensitive, as is the case with racism, although the suffering endured during colonialism was evidently more severe. The point, however, is that both subjects are not considered topics of joviality due to their past persecution and maltreatment. Although the prevalence of sexism towards males appears comparable to that towards females, it does not condone the alleged underlying theme of misogyny in everyday life. With many sociologists theorizing that patriarchal oppression still exists, but is hidden behind deceptive laws and regulations, the progress made by feminist movements is fundamentally a sham, created in order to present a mythical picture of equality and maintain cooperation.

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Ethnography: A Study of Sexist Attitudes among Students

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Ethnography: A Study of Sexist Attitudes among Students

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