Speaking the unspeakable: An Autoethnography exploring unintended sexism in critical personal relationships

Abstract

This research explores how feminist women respond to male allies' unintended sexism. I use a feminist autoethnographic method to document and analyze vignettes that explore interpersonal conflicts about unintended sexism. Autoethnography provides the methodology that allows me to link the personal challenges of responding to sexism in caring relationships within the broader cultural context. Three case vignettes demonstrate the processes I undertook. As a social worker, I draw upon process oriented psychology and feminism to examine the vignettes and analyze key concepts in the experience of responding to unintended sexism. I discuss the importance of communication between social workers who are feminist and male allies when unintended sexism occurs. Finally, I examine the issue of feminists doing the majority of the work challenging sexism. In sharing my personal experiences of responding to male allies' unintended sexism, I anticipate these stories and explorations can be helpful for social workers who are feminist or male allies concerned with communicating about unintended sexism in caring relationships.

Keywords: Unintended sexism, Process Oriented Psychology, Feminism, Autoethnography, Deep Democracy, Male allies.

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> The potency of sexism lies in its very unspeakability...just using the word sexism, naming it, opening up a conversation about its novel forms, would be an important political act…" (Gill, 2011: p. 63)

Sharing My Intentions - Introduction

This paper is an autoethnographic exploration of my experiences of responding to the unintended sexism of three men I care about it. I present these encounters as three vignettes and use process-oriented psychology (hereafter referred to as process work) and feminism as lenses to guide my analysis. I attribute these two paradigms to giving me a voice to respond to sexism. I explore these experiences from my perspective as a white European-Australian, queer, cis-woman, social worker, and the vignettes report my interactions with white, heterosexual cis-men. This paper focuses on gender in the context of binaries.

This feminist autoethnography (Ettorre, 2017; Saraswati, 2019) is the story of my experiences of struggling to communicate effectively with male allies I care about when unintended sexism occurs. It reflects how systemic and cultural sexism impacts personal relationships and what might assist in maintaining connections while addressing unintended sexism in caring relationships. I aim to provide a reflection that could be useful in social work practice and other contexts where unintended hurt is caused by the misuse of privilege in caring relationships.

Autoethnography is about the individual researcher's experience and is applied here with "…the intent … to expand the understanding of social realities…" (Chang, 2013: p. 108). As Gill (2011) suggested in the opening quote, sexism is an important and invisible area for many feminist social workers. Taber (2005: p.290) invites an exploration of these issues stating, "…many of women's daily struggles are still hidden from view, and it is necessary to engage in questioning assumptions and critical analysis…."

Men's unintended sexism in caring relationships is an issue I have discussed with feminist social work friends and colleagues since my early career. Often these were private conversations focused on concerns that confrontation could result in the loss of relationships or negatively impact a career. In this paper, I take three of my own experiences where male allies – men I care about and respect – were unintentionally sexist. I have labeled the sexism as unintended, as I experienced it as originating from an unconscious awareness. Despite the sexism, I felt continuing respect and friendship between us. I explore these experiences using process work as the overarching conceptual lens within a feminist autoethnographic framework.

I am new to academia, so in grappling with the fascinating aspects of autoethnography, I sought help from friends in academia. I invited my colleague, Dr Lise Johns, to assist me in transforming my experiential reflections and writing into a paper for publication and to share authorship.

Unintended Sexism – Exploring The Literature.

The unspeakable nature of sexism is highlighted by Rosalind Gill (2011) above. It is crucial as feminists to focus on sexism due to its constancy in women's daily lives. However, this constancy can increase its invisibility and minimize an awareness of the impact on women as it is viewed as part of life's experience (Ahmed, 2015). Sexism can be difficult to define or

explain precisely, as Ahmed (2015: p.5) states it can be difficult to "…pindown." Despite the difficulty of identifying and naming sexism research shows that challenging sexism has the potential to reduce it (Gervais et al., 2010). Confronting sexist behaviours or comments in interpersonal relationships is complex and can have both positive and negative outcomes for the person challenging (Becker et al., 2014).

Sexism can be categorized as blatant, covert, or subtle (Benokraitis and Feagin (1999) as cited in Swim et al., 2004). Blatant sexism is the obvious discrimination of women, while covert sexism is described as "…unequal and unfair treatment of women that is recognized but purposefully hidden from view" (Swim et al., 2004: p. 117). Covert and unintended sexism sends negative and denigrating messages to women through "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities" (Nadal et al., 2015: p. 147).

Furthermore, expressions of subtle sexism can be enacted by individuals who make assertive statements in favor of gender equality (Swim et al., 2005). This can occur in interactions, from formal to informal ones, such as partnerships or platonic friendships. Becker and Swim (2011) add that those sexist incidents may be discounted in personal relationships due to their cumulative prevalence causing a denial of its existence. Additionally, confusion about the perpetrator's intent only compounds the issue, resulting in difficulty directly addressing the sexism.

Other studies have examined sexism in the context of intimate relationships. Studies on benevolent sexism highlight the complexities of intimate relationships between men and women (Cross and Overall, 2017; Hammond and Overall, 2017). For example, Hammond and Overall (2017: p.122) unpack the dynamics of benevolent sexism in intimate

heterosexual relationships, arguing the "…devotion, protection, and care promised by men's benevolent sexism offer incentives to women to adopt sexist attitudes…"

Engaging in interpersonal conversations about unintended sexism can be an important act for feminists and male allies. The process of engaging in these difficult conversations can evoke emotions that may encourage change. For example in the social work literature, Pease (2012: p.128) discusses the role of emotions for male allies and argues emotions are important "to motivate men to interrogate their own individual and collective privilege."

Jane Edwards (2017) uses feminist autoethnography to analyse her experiences of challenging sexism within her relationships with colleagues in higher education. Edwards discusses the difficulties of calling out sexism in these daily interactions but highlights the need to speak up in order to achieve transformative change.

Feminist autoethnography: A method of exploration and analysis.

As signalled in the label itself autoethnography utilises the personal experiences of the researcher (auto) to understand cultural experiences (ethno) using description and systematic analysis (graphy) (Ellis, 2003; Holman Jones, 2005). It utilises autobiographical material but is distinguished by the application of systematic analysis to understand the researcher's experience in the cultural context. It is considered both a process and a product (Ellis et al., 2011). It draws upon deep introspection and self-reflection as a qualitative method yet still claims "the conventions of literary writing" (Belbase et al., 2008: p. 88). While autoethnographic methodology has been critiqued because objectivity cannot be entirely claimed, this paper centralises subjective experience drawing on counter literature that emphasises the power of subjectivity (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography provided a method to capture detailed and personal experiences of challenging unintended sexism. As a feminist researcher, this method gave embodiment to the expression the personal is political (Ettorre, 2017; Holman Jones, 2005). I was drawn to feminist autoethnography as a means to "…transform…personal stories into political realities by revealing power inequalities inherent in human relationships as well as the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships" (Ettore, 2017: p.357). I chose autoethnography so that I could capture the subtleties and nuances of these experiences that cannot be conveyed in the same detail when the researcher is distanced from the experience (Holman Jones et al., 2013). As such autoethnography aligned well with both process work theory and feminism due to its emphasis on introspection, the socio-cultural context, and an appreciation of the subjective experience as valid and meaningful (Ellis et al., 2011).

My journey with sexism

In developing this autoethnography my childhood experiences of growing up in sexist, conservative, rural Australian culture felt close. The impact of sexism impacted my adult relationships with men. I struggled from a young age with the relationships with men and boys in my life due to the strict gender stereotypes and culture rife in rural Australia. When I left the farm to study social work in a small city I found great relief. My social work lecturers taught me feminism. The women social work lecturers embodied feminism. They showed me a freedom in how they approached the world and taught me to think critically. Helping me to understand the psychological and social impact of structural oppression. While I had questioned gender this was the first time my thoughts and feelings about gender were validated and encouraged. I found myself relieved of the anger and shame I had felt about inequality for so long. After feeling so alone and isolated in my thinking, it was validating. In social work, I

met feminist women and male allies. It was a joyous time for me as I discovered freedom and support to challenge the ideas I had felt imposed on me from childhood.

Finding a voice in community.

A significant moment of change in speaking back to sexism occurred in my early twenties as a young social worker when I attended my first process work event. It was my first personal development workshop. Each day the sixty participants sat in a circle in the hall. At times, the male facilitator/ therapist would work in the middle of the group with a single participant. One day a woman was working in the middle with the therapist. She was discussing a relationship challenge she had with a man she cared about, and she described how he criticized her, including the way she behaved and what she wore. Suddenly the male therapist yelled – "That's sexism! I don't believe his attitudes!" Writing that now I still feel butterflies in my stomach. It was so powerful! I had never encountered a man speaking with strength and power against sexism! It shocked me to see and hear a man who cared about sexism and was willing to vigorously challenge it publicly. I started crying. I was moved to my core and internally conflicted as I found it difficult to believe his sincerity. After the therapy session had finished, I was invited to share my experience with the larger group. A woman came and sat next to me and encouraged me, 'speak, speak for me, speak for all of us.' It was so difficult for me to speak the words that I could only whisper back to the therapist, "I don't believe you. I want to believe you, but I don't." Although only a whisper, a significant change occurred for me, as I was validated, and others joined me.

The entire group came together as we spoke and shared about sexism and its impact on women and our relationships with men. It was healing to talk personally with male allies about the effect their sexism had on relationships. It was the start of the next step in a journey for me about the role of male allies in my life. The relief I felt at finding this understanding would also

lead to an ongoing challenge of how to interact with male allies' unintended sexism sustainably and effectively.

Process Work

The process work community provided me with a space for transformation. We shared a vision of the possibility of transformation through conflict when facilitated with awareness using key process work techniques. Process work is an awareness method that has applications in various fields, including psychotherapy, social work, and organizational and community development (Diamond and Spark Jones, 2004). It is a helpful technique to facilitate relationship conflicts due to the emphasis on power analysis and increasing self-awareness (Diamond and Spark Jones, 2004). Other autoethnographic projects have drawn upon process work; for example, see Fredenburgh (2007) and Stevens (2021).

Methods and data

To develop the autoethnography, I drew on data from my journals that I have kept as a process work student for over five years. I documented experiences of relating to male allies about unintended sexism and journaled my feelings and observations of these experiences. I had video or voice recordings of my process work therapy and supervision sessions related to the topic. As I undertook the writing of this autoethnography, I used therapy and supervision to unpack my experiences further. I transcribed some of the most relevant sessions or relistened and took notes for others that were less detailed. Three different examples emerged as the data for the study. I utilized "emotional recall" to develop the examples as vignettes (Ellis, 1999). I drew upon emotional recall, which included returning to the incidents by remembering what happened and drawing on process work inner work techniques of visualization and body experiences (Mindell, 1990).

I used reflexivity to examine my experiences of speaking up and relating to men about their sexism (Saraswati, 2019). I considered each moment of losing voice to regaining it through autoethnography (Berry, 2013). The process of going over those complex incidents was confronting, and I found myself remembering and reliving feelings of shame, self-doubt, anger, righteousness, and desperation. Ettorre (2005: p.537) reflects in her autoethnography about the painful process of "reading, remembering, writing and processing…". I developed the vignettes through a similar approach based on three situations where I encountered unintended sexism from men I cared about. The accounts provided in the vignettes are from memory and are not verbatim documentation of the interactions.

In writing the vignettes below, I gained consent from the men involved. I changed names and details to protect the confidentiality of those involved. I have drawn upon methodological principles to be ethically responsible for describing events and how others participated. This included consulting with those involved and ensuring they reviewed drafts of the autoethnography as it progressed. The men involved in this paper have participated throughout the process of creating the paper and added to my reflections and reviewing of the experiences outlined. All those referred to in the vignettes have read and agreed to the final version of this paper. Names and other details have been altered to protect the privacy of those referred to in this paper. The case examples from my role as an emergency department social worker are not based on any particular patient but on multiple experiences.

The vignettes – Finding my voice.

Vignette 1 – "You're mean!"

I answer the Skype call, my heart is beating fast as I answer it. I feel my stomach tighten. I am glad I am standing up to have this conversation; I feel my feet on the ground. I

speak quickly as I state my concerns before barely saying hello. "Why have you agreed to allow three white, heterosexual, able-bodied, educated, cisgender men to facilitate the upcoming workshop? You could have ensured there was a better diversity on this training team." He is quiet and looks down. I continue, "I no longer feel that I can attend this workshop. It doesn't feel like a safe place for me to learn in."

I notice my shoulders and body relax as I take a breath. This relationship is important to me. It is a complex relationship embedded with power differences as he is my teacher, mentor, and older man. I know him to be a kind man, open to feedback and learning. "How could you allow this to happen? It is pretty disappointing and shows a big gap in your awareness to allow this to occur!" I notice a sense of self-righteousness. I anticipate his shock at realizing the gap in his awareness. It is clear to me there has been a mistake. I mentally want him to admit the errors of his ways and fix them. "So what happened? How could you let this happen?" I demand.

Suddenly, I hear him "Bronnie, your being mean!" I stop and check-in with myself. Am I being mean? I feel sick in my stomach; I look down and notice I can no longer find words. I withdraw from further discussion about my concerns about the training. The call ends.

I feel despair at my failure to address sexism. I feel let down by my teacher. The moment he had called me 'mean' the interaction changed. I seek support from my female therapist and explain what happened. She responds "When a man calls a woman mean during a conflict on sexism, that is sexism." I say to her, "I know what you are saying, but I am finding it hard to experience it as sexist. Rather, I feel that I should have done it better." My therapist encourages me, "It sounds like it is difficult to be on your own side here. Perhaps that is connected to your history with sexism?" I agree, "Why not go back and try again?" I feel encouraged and reinvigorated. I return to my teacher to discuss.

He answers our skype call. “Hi, Bronnie! Lovely to see you! How are you?” “I am fine; good to see you too! I wanted to follow up our conversation about the training team.” He responds warmly – “Yes, of course.” “Well, in that last conversation, you called me mean. That really shut me down, and it felt like another version of sexism when I was accusing you of sexism, and you called me a mean girl!” “Oh, wow. Yes, I can see how that would hurt. I am really sorry, Bronnie. That was totally out of line.” I continue, “Thank you for saying that, and I still want to know why you are supporting a team of all white hetero, cis-men. Especially when that effectively prevented me from participating. Can you tell me more about that decision?”

“Well, see, I have this deep belief about freedom, that people should be free to do what they want. I felt that the training team could choose who they wanted to work with in this case. Then people are free to attend if they would like to or not.”

“That’s a fine theory if there is no structural oppression. In our culture, being a white heterosexual, cisgender man means you have so much power to decide.”

“I think it’s true what you say. I realize that now after doing some reading and reflecting following our previous conversation. I realise that the value of freedom is important, but without considering other factors such as the nature of oppression and marginalization, it can become narcissism.” I feel myself breathe, and my body relax. I notice a sense of resolution to our conflict.

Vignette 2 - “Hey man – that’s a lot of power!”

We sit down in the room at Oliver’s house. I begin “Thanks Oliver for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate it. For a while now I have been struggling with your off-handed comments about women. Sometimes you joke in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable.”

Oliver looks surprised “Oh, what do you mean?”

“Well, the other day you made a joke about men and woman’s roles. I don’t find jokes like this funny and I feel they reinforce gender stereotypes.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything by that. I am sorry, but you know it is just a light-hearted joke.”

Oliver is looking down and away. His body language is closed and he seems more and more uncomfortable as we continue.

“The thing is, it doesn’t feel lighthearted to me. I feel like it contributes to sexism against women. I know you are a man concerned with sexism, but at the same time you make comments that it seems like you do not understand sexism at all, and in fact contribute to it. I feel like you think you have little or no power, when in fact you have a lot, you are a white, heterosexual, cisgendered man.”

Oliver turns to me, looking down and speaking softly he says; “You know I think part of me struggles with this because I have been hurt in an abusive relationship by my ex-partner, who is a woman. I found it hard to defend myself against her emotional abuse. It’s hard for me to feel the power difference between you and me when we talk about sexism, as I don’t feel aware of that power. I know there are areas where I could own this more, but I can’t quite do that, yet.” As we venture deeper, he shares his own experiences of abuse and his feelings of powerlessness.

Vignette 3 – “Sharing the load”

We are driving on the motorway, travelling home from a day together. I am sitting in the back of the car while my male friends are in the front, Jason is driving, Edward is in the passenger seat. They are chatting and laughing. I notice a feeling of resentment towards them both. It is a feeling I have had all day. They have no idea about my feelings.

I know this feeling, it's an attitude I call "all men are bastards." I feel ashamed to put this on my friends, but I know this is an effect of vicarious trauma. I just had a weekend immersed in responding to men's violence against women as emergency department social worker.

As the car rolls along and my male friends chat, I find myself recalling the work. It had been a relentless and tiring weekend. Saturday, responding to a woman who presented post a violent sexual assault from a man. Her body violated, the freshness of the assault on her clothes and body. My whole shift devoted to responding to the trauma. Supporting her through an invasive forensic test, managing police or other hospital staff who were pressuring her to either make a criminal complaint or advising her not to. Due to inadequate legislation and social policy, she must decide immediately if she wants to spend the next three or more years of her life in courts facing the offender.

The following day I respond to a woman living in domestic violence. She presented post a violent assault. I assess her risk for domestic homicide, which is high. I spend most of the day providing counselling, information and support to her, knowing she is likely to return home.

I take a moment in the back seat of the car and feel my body. There is a heaviness, I follow the feeling with my attention, it is contained in my stomach. I trust the proprioceptive experience and place all my attention on it. I experience the heaviness more deeply. Suddenly a sorrow about the world, and women's suffering arises. I encourage myself to trust and believe in this sorrow. A clarity and strength to speak up overwhelms me and I feel I must tell my male friends about my experience.

I interrupt their light-hearted talking to explain my mood. I tell them – "I'm irritated with you!" I explain about my weekend in the Emergency Department. I tell them part of me

wants to apologize for feeling like this towards them when it seems they have done nothing. Yet another part of me wants them to do something!

Edward grew up with a violent Dad. His awareness of domestic violence and abusive men, and his ability to respond with concern and care is a balm on my wounds. As I explain my mood and the context of my recent work, both my friends respond with feeling. Both men want to hear about what happened and appreciate my contribution as a social worker. Their words are validating. Edward shares his own pain and frustration about domestic violence, men's general lack of responsibility, and his concern for women and children, breaking up some of the pain of my mood. Jason listens as Edward and I discuss these issues, this is new information to him and he is interested to learn more. Together we all start to talk about how to make change. We grapple with the complexities. Edward shares his plans to engage with men to build healthier relationships. I feel maybe a sense of hope…I at least feel not so alone.

Themes that emerged….

Through the process of autoethnography, I explored experiences of finding my voice in relation to sexism with men I cared about. Autoethnography can "…break silence by addressing understudied and/or sensitive topics…" (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 35). I found this process assisted me in relating to and understanding voices that were difficult to listen to. As I applied an analysis drawing on the autoethnographic method, two themes emerged deep democracy - valuing all voices and experiencesand the fluidity of rank.

Deep democracy and valuing all voices and experiences.

As I analysed the vignettes the importance of deep democracy in guiding my approach was apparent. Deep democracy includes bringing mindful awareness to a conflict and purports if hearts and minds are not changed, then even structural changes will not address wounds of

oppression (Mindell, 2008). Deep democracy does not focus on one person changing the other person, rather it is a facilitation approach that values both roles in a conflict and facilitates the relationship so that the overall wisdom of the system can emerge (Schupbach, 2018). Using this approach requires that we account for not only the socio-political context of a person but the spiritual and psychological aspects which are viewed as essential (Diamond & Spark Jones, 2004).

Welcoming both sides of the conflict is a key attitude in deep democracy (Schuitvoeder, 2000). I experienced the transformative effect of this attitude when understanding more about the origins of unintended sexism. In vignette one, my Teacher apologised; this was important. However, when he explained that his decision was based on a value of freedom, and shared his reflections about the limitations of this that led to sexism, this felt transformative. The value underlying the decision of freedom was something that I knew and valued about him. In fact, he had helped me with my sense of freedom. This aligns with the theory of deep democracy that, through valuing all that is present deeper relationships and sustainable change can be achieved (Mindell, 2008).

Holding a deeply democratic attitude made it possible to value an essential part of my male friend's (Oliver's) experience in vignette two. Initially, I was reluctant to hear my friend's side; in fact, I doubted there was another side. My immediate attention as an activist was to challenge and change sexism. Oliver's history of abuse made it difficult for him to be aware of the multiple privileges he possessed from his structural rank as a man. Through our conflict, Oliver developed an increased awareness of the impact of this abuse on his identity as a man and his awareness of sexism. This increased our understanding of each other and created opportunities for further conversations.

Deep democracy is an attitude that welcomes all sides in a conflict. It relies on the principle that all voices and experiences are essential, and through facilitating awareness of all that is present, more sustainable relationships can be achieved (International Association of Process Oriented Psychology, 2019). This includes non-rational experiences. In vignette three, my mood is an example of a non-rational experience. My awareness of process work inner work tools allowed me to focus on my mood and unfold the proprioceptive experience. I had initially attempted to marginalize this experience, feeling self-critical for my mood. Mindell (2017: p.9) states that "bringing these marginalized signals into awareness…can deepen relationships and help resolve tensions." I noticed my marginalized signals (body feelings), which made me aware of my frustration from the weekend of responding to violence against women in the emergency department, by sharing this with my friends in the car, I found a connection and support against sexism.

Fluidity of rank

The concept of 'rank' is another key tenet of process work that I drew upon when analysing the vignettes (Mindell, 1995; Mindell, 2008). In process work, there are three categories of rank. The first is social/structural rank, which includes, for example, gender, ethnicity, sexuality. Psychological rank refers to an individual's personal abilities, both inherited and developed (Mindell, 2008). Finally, spiritual rank relates to a sense of connection to something more significant than the individual that assists the person to experience detachment or a sense of wellbeing. Spiritual rank may be developed by those hurt by mainstream society and possess a passion for changing the world (Mindell, 2019). Process work emphasizes rank as a fluid phenomenon that occurs in relation to others (Diamond, 2016).

The fluidity and complexity of rank can also be seen through these vignettes. While I was experiencing low social rank as a woman, I shared high structural rank as a white, able-bodied, similarly educated, cisgendered woman, living in an opposite sex relationship. The shared experiences of high structural rank provided me with areas of safety when relating to these male friends. The context of challenging the use of power of men who shared a commitment to our relationship and were anti-sexist also created a context of safety.

I experienced high psychological rank at times during the conflicts. The concept of psychological rank relates to having greater personal comfort to respond to challenging situations; for me (and many activists), this may have been developed from having experienced challenging life situations (Schuitevoerder, 2000). The personal suffering from sexism, consequent personal development work, and my activist history provided me with awareness, skills, and confidence specifically in noticing sexism when it occurs, articulating what it is, and a clarity of focus on the need for justice.

In vignette two, the fluidity of rank is highlighted. Oliver possessed high structural rank by being a white, heterosexual, cisgender man. However , his low psychological rank inhibited his ability to respond and engage during our conflict. Process work emphasises the contextual nature of rank. Oliver cared about our relationship and wanted to do better about sexism. When he could not adequately respond, he experienced low psychological rank while I held a higher psychological rank. The initial conflict about sexism somehow dissolved for me as I became aware of having high psychological rank. As I became more aware of this, I noticed that my attitude towards Oliver lacked compassion and relatedness. This awareness allowed me to connect again with Oliver and restored our friendship to a place of warmth, and although we had not managed to resolve the initial conflict fully, it fell away for me.

Owning rank, whether high or low, can be helpful for relationships. In vignette three, my friends showed the use of high rank as a tool to enact healing and reconciliation. I

brought out my resentment towards them personally based on my weekend of work responding to men's violence against women. Part of my irritation with them was that I was the one who had done (and regularly did) the work with women in the Emergency Department and was now suffering alone. In contrast, they had the opportunity to be lighthearted and carefree. When I challenged them, they could have been defensive or disparaging. Instead, they were open and reflective about patriarchy and their role in it. My friend, who had experienced domestic violence as a child, had worked a lot on these dynamics. This was a clear example of using high rank well. He fluidly engaged in conversations about making change, and he demonstrated his sorrow about the situation of violence against women and children. I felt a shared connection with him about the devastating impacts of sexism from his lived experience. It seemed he had high psychological and spiritual rank that supported him to own his structural rank as a white, heterosexual, cisgender man.

Discussion

Sexism impacts the social work profession as, for example, women social workers "still lag behind men in…salary and in career advancement" (Anastas, 2007: p.235). Sexism in the social work profession may be largely invisible (or unspeakable) in interpersonal relationships due to shared values of social justice and human rights. Identifying and challenging sexism is vital and impacts the broader social context of oppression of women. Edwards (2017, p.631) argues, "…feminism allows me to point out things but how do I do things?" when referring to her experiences of challenging male colleagues' sexism in the academic context. As explored in this paper, the concepts of deep democracy and rank highlight two ideas that can assist social workers when "sitting in the fire" (Mindell, 1995) of conflict about sexism. Male allies can help conflicts by remembering Pease's (2010, p:173)

observation that "Privilege blinds many people in dominant groups to the realities of oppression….". While male allies may not readily identify sexism, research shows that male allies are more sensitive to sexism than other men (Drury and Kaiser, 2014). Further exploration of daily sexism within social work and how social workers engage in these problematic personal conflicts is vital for the profession. The current literature in social work and sexism primarily focuses on the impact on practice or social work education. Communicating about unintended sexism and its harmful nature is vital to creating stronger relationships and can assist in achieving the goals of reducing sexism and its impact (Gervais et al., 2010).

Who is doing the work?

Feminist social workers combat and challenge the impact of sexism through practice, organizational change, and in their lives outside of work. There is limited research about how feminist social workers challenge unintended sexism from men they care about. Assertively addressing sexism is crucial as it demonstrates the behaviour is concerning and can contribute to a reduction in sexism (Gervais et al., 2010). This paper showed three processes of challenging sexism, and highlighted the role women take of being the ones "doing the work" of addressing sexism. "Oppression and privilege need to be addressed by marginalized and privileged groups" (Pease, 2010: 169). Despite this, those who belong to oppressed groups are the instigators of change work, relying on their awareness and commitment to identify and address oppression. Confronting and directly challenging sexism can have positive and negative consequences for the confronter (Becker et al., 2014). Confronting sexism can include financial costs of counselling or supervision and social and emotional costs, including being stereotyped as overreacting or complaining (Becker et al., 2014). The model of deep democracy, as highlighted in this paper, demonstrates a collaborative and relationship-based

approach, which can be a slow process for change. This can be frustrating for social activists (Schuitevoerder, 2000). However, it offers a model that can contribute to maintaining sustainable relationships between feminists and male allies. Male allies can assist these processes by increasing their self-awareness of their privilege; this can be achieved by various methods, for examples, see Mindell, 1995 or Pease 2010.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an autoethnographic approach was used to explore how I, as a feminist social worker, addressed unintended sexism with men I cared about. This paper drew on my experience through three vignettes. I used process work as a conceptual framework to highlight some key concepts that I found helpful when I engaged with unintended sexism. The themes were deep democracy - valuing all parts and the fluidity of rank. The paper demonstrated examples of how I engaged with these difficult conversations. It highlighted the importance of valuing my own voice and making space for others' experiences. I explored the importance I found of psychological and spiritual rank in assisting in developing deeper relationships and creating sustainable change. The implications for social work, particularly the importance of considering interpersonal communication between feminists and male allies when unintended sexism occurs, was discussed. Finally, I discussed how feminist social workers hold much of the burden for initiating and engaging in these difficult conversations and that male allies can and should also act to create safety for these conversations. When writing this paper, I wrestled with a tension between my feminist perspective and the desire to connect and relate to unintended sexism. I shared my feminist voice and analysis through autoethnography, hoping to contribute to social work reflections about the problem of relating about unintended sexism.

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