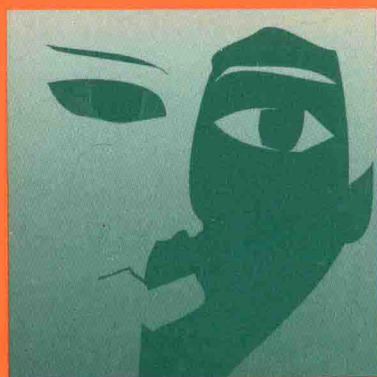


Nijole V. Benokraitis

SUBTLE SEXISM

*Current
Practices and
Prospects for
Change*



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Preface

Much of the openly blatant sexism in this country has decreased because of federal and state laws against overt discrimination. As one of my friends, a nurse with 25 years' experience, recently observed: "It's nice to go to work and know that most of the [male] patients won't be grabbing your breasts every time you bend over or pinching your butt every time you turn your back." This doesn't mean that all blatant sexism has disappeared, however. In fact, and as Chapter 1 shows, such large corporations as Mitsubishi have spent millions of dollars fighting sexual harassment charges rather than the harassment itself.

Subtle sexism, which is just below the surface and is often not noticed because it is accepted as "normal" and customary, has replaced much of the blatant sex discrimination of the past. Some subtle sexism is still disguised as "tradition." Many people were very angry, for example, when the Supreme Court ruled in June 1996 that Virginia Military Institute's exclusion of women was unconstitutional and instructed the Institute to accept women or lose its state funding. Many alumni and others decried the decision as violating a "venerable tradition." Writing for the majority opinion in *United*

States v. Virginia (1996), however, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg emphasized that it is illegal for the government to impose “artificial constraints on an individual’s opportunity” and to “create or perpetuate the legal, social, and economic inferiority of women” (116 S. Ct. 2264, 135 L.Ed.2d 735). Much subtle sex discrimination that perpetuates and reinforces women’s inferiority continues, is pervasive, and constitutes one of the most serious problems facing U.S. society today.

The purpose of this reader, then, is to sensitize readers to the widespread prevalence of subtle sexism and to suggest how such practices can be changed. Part One, “The Continuing Significance of Sexism,” shows that sex discrimination, including subtle sexism, is robust and thriving. This section summarizes the various types of sex discrimination (blatant, subtle, covert) that women still encounter on a daily basis and explores subtle processes in our everyday interactions. Part Two, “Subtle Sexism in Organizational Settings,” focuses on subtle sexism that is both intentional and unintentional. This section begins with a chapter on “good natured” but stereotypical perceptions of Latinas that limit their opportunities in the workplace and shows how both intentional and unintentional subtle sexism excludes women from engineering, discourages many men from seeking jobs in child care professions, and diminishes morale and productivity in the military. Part Three, “Subtle Sexism as Social Control,” examines how subtle sexism, innocent and normal though it may seem, reinforces and encourages stereotypes about women’s and men’s roles. This section begins with an examination of how black women, especially, are controlled and treated as outsiders by both white and black men and women. Other chapters show how women are manipulated or exploited (sometimes unintentionally and sometimes purposely) by family therapists, the courts, and corrections systems. Some of the practices may not be maliciously motivated; however, the results are discriminatory and demeaning. In Part Four, “How to Change Subtle Sexism Practices,” the contributors offer suggestions—based on their own or others’ experiences—on changing subtle sexism practices. These recommendations range from individual to societal levels. Although many of the earlier chapters also incorporate change-oriented analyses, Part Four is devoted, exclusively, to this issue.

The contributors and I have prepared this reader specifically for students. Every chapter is eminently readable and accessible to both undergraduate and graduate students regardless of discipline. *Subtle Sexism: Current Practices and Prospects for Change* does not presume that students (or faculty) are already familiar with the literature and research on either sex discrimi-

nation in general or subtle sexism in particular. We tried to ensure that each chapter is as "student friendly" as possible. The conceptual and methodological approaches are traditional, but there is as little academic jargon as possible. Where the contributors have used sophisticated statistical analyses, they present the results in an engaging and readable manner.

This reader can be used in courses in social work, women's studies, gender roles, political science, public administration, marriage and the family, business administration, communications, criminal justice, social problems, and human resources because the chapters address topics that are germane to all of these disciplines. We hope that *Subtle Sexism: Current Practices and Prospects for Change* will be a catalyst for stimulating class discussions and will encourage students (and faculty) to view gender inequality through wider lenses.

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We are eager to hear reactions from students and faculty about this collection of readings. You can contact individual authors or write me at the following address:

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PART I

The Continuing Significance of Sexism



As a new Ph.D., I recently went on a job interview where . . . the dean got very irate and belittling when she asked what salary I expected. She basically told me I was uninformed on current salaries for her type of institution and I didn't have the experience to merit the salary. This was in conjunction with her raised voice, fists slamming on the table and her demanding that I answer simplistic questions (e.g., "Have you ever heard of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*?"). I knew of a man who had just interviewed for the position. He had graduated from my institution at the same time as me, was the same age, and had equal or less experience than me. He had named a similar [salary] figure and she had told him simply that "it shouldn't be a problem."

(E-mail correspondence, 1996)

As this new job candidate discovered, sexist behavior is not a relic of the “old days,” as a number of my students believe. Neither, as this section illustrates, is there any evidence that sexism is likely to decrease very much after the turn of the century. *Sexism*, or discrimination against people based on their biological sex, usually refers to the economic exploitation and social domination of women by men. As the example of the job-hunting Ph.D. shows, however, women can also engage in sexist behavior.

Part One begins with a broad overview of several types of discrimination that vary along a continuum. In “Sex Discrimination in the 21st Century,” Nijole V. Benokraitis shows that many women are often targets of several types of sexism—blatant, subtle, and covert. After describing the several types of inequality, she focuses, specifically, on subtle sexism. Often, as she notes, the several types of discrimination can overlap. As the newly minted Ph.D. example reveals, a “raised voice” and “fists slamming on the table” send such overt messages as “I’m more powerful than you,” “I have more authority than you do,” or “You’re inferior to me.” There is nothing subtle here. When, however, the male candidate is more acceptable than his female counterpart (even though they both have similar academic backgrounds and demographic characteristics), then something else is going on. The “something else” may not necessarily be subtle sexism, of course. It may be personality, personal hygiene, an arrogant attitude, or the dean was just having a bad day.

In many cases, however, our sex plays a critical role in how we are evaluated and treated. As Beth Bonniwell Haslett and Susan Lipman show in “Micro Inequities: Up Close and Personal,” most of the women attorneys they surveyed experienced micro inequities, “the small, minor ways in which people are treated differently and thus disadvantaged.” Each micro inequity, in and of itself, is so small that one is tempted to ignore the “slight.” As these slights accumulate, however, they attack one’s autonomy and public dignity and subsequently complicate interpersonal relationships and career development. Women with M.D. or Ph.D. degrees, for example, often experience a diminution of their credentials:

What I frequently encounter as a faculty member is that my students address me as “Miss” or “Mrs.” while the institutional norm at my small school—and the title they use for male professors—is “Dr.” My colleagues and I view this as a way students show us that we’re not equal in status and expertise to our equally-educated male colleagues. (E-mail correspondence, 1996)

What this faculty member (and other similarly situated female professionals) is complaining about is *not* that she is called “Miss” or “Mrs.” but that the *continuous* and *differential* usage of titles is an everyday example that reflects and reinforces many women’s lower status and authority.

Such slights are especially problematic because they are so common. As Judith E. Owen Blakemore, Jo Young Switzer, Judith A. DiLorio, and David L. Fairchild show in their chapter “Exploring the Campus Climate for Women Faculty,” providing a less respectful and less supportive environment for female faculty than for male faculty may result in women’s lower morale, greater sense of isolation, and lowered productivity. Differential gender expectations outside the campus can exacerbate professional barriers as well. Blakemore and her associates found, for example, that over two thirds of the women faculty they interviewed (compared to 45% of the men) said that parenting and household responsibilities decreased the ability to travel to conferences or pursue other professional activities.

Professional women are not the only ones who experience subtly “chilly” receptions. In Chapter 4, “Who’s Laughing? Hillary Rodham Clinton in Political Humor,” Ann Marshall examines how the most accomplished and influential women in politics, such as First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, are devalued and demeaned through jokes. Most jokes are generally straightforward and fun, enliven everyday interactions, and can fill uncomfortable conversation gaps during cocktail parties. Hostile humor, however, is considerably more subtle because it is aggressive and attacks any group that is seen as marginal, inferior, or threatening. And as Chapter 4 demonstrates, the more successful and nontraditional the woman is in terms of gender role expectations, the more hostile the humor in assaulting her personality, intellectual capabilities, family roles, and sexuality.

