What is “internalized sexism”?

Posted by tekanji on October 20, 2007 in clarifying-concepts, FAQ, sexism

Short definition: Internalized sexism is the involuntary internalization by women of the sexist messages that are present in their societies and culture. It also the way in which women reinforce sexism by utilizing and relaying sexist messages that they’ve internalized.

The effects of living in a sexist culture

We live in a society that bombards us with sexist messages from the day we are born to the day that we die (see FAQ entries on the patriarchy, privilege, and why feminism is still needed for more information on this topic). The way that these messages affect us vary from person to person, and are influenced by other factors such as time, place, personality, and even mood. When exposed to a certain message everyone will, on both conscious and unconscious levels, interpret and then decide how to internalize the message (accept, reject, or a mixture of the two).

Janet Thomas explains more about external and internal oppression:

The message of sexism comes at us in two ways: external and internal oppression. The external sexism is messages and behavior coming to us from outside, through institutions and individuals, e.g. “Women are too emotional to be in positions of authority.” Internalized sexism is taking in and believing the stereotypes and misinformation that our sexist culture tells us about being female and what it means to be a woman, resulting in e.g. “What do I know…” , “Who am I to speak…” Both external and internal avenues of oppression are painful and limiting for women as individuals and as a group, and deprives the world of our best thoughts, decisions, and actions.

[Janet Thomas (BREAKFREE): THEORY AND THOUGHTS.]

The interaction between being the recipient of external sexism and turning it into internalized sexism isn’t a one-to-one causal relationship. If a little girl is told to not speak up because that’s what “good little girls do”, she is not necessarily going to internalize that literally. She could have any number of reactions, including (but not limited to): “I want to be a good little girl, so I will speak up less” (acceptance), “If being quiet is what ‘good’ girls do, then I want to be a ‘bad’ girl” (mixture of acceptance/rejection), or “I am a good girl and I don’t want to always be quiet, therefore that person was wrong” (rejection). It is important to understand that, while the ways in which we internalize messages vary from person to person, we are all of us, without exception, affected by these messages.

Another thing to be aware of is that it’s not just one message on one occasion. It’s not just the little girl being told by someone “good little girls are quiet”, but rather her being exposed to that same kind of idea in a multitude of mediums: both the direct statements as well as, say, the difference between how little boys are treated when they act out versus little girls, or the portrayals of little girls on television. She will be exposed to the opposite messages as well; someone telling her “good little girls aren’t afraid to speak their mind”, having a school environment that consciously works to treat the children the same regardless of gender, or seeing television shows that show girls as active and assertive. All of this will contribute to how she internalizes the message, and as she grows and adds experience to her life those internalizations will change accordingly.

The effects of internalized sexism

Internalized sexism negatively affects both ourselves and the women around us, manifested primarily in the following ways:

Internalized oppression is an involuntary reaction to oppression which originates outside one’s group and which results in group members loathing themselves, disliking others in their group, and blaming themselves for their oppression — rather than realizing that these beliefs are constructed in them by oppressive socio-economic political systems.

[Penny Rosenwasser (Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference, 2000): Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a Process for Healing from Internalized Oppression.]

Just as how we internalize external sexism is influenced by various factors, so too is how we deal with the internalized sexism. When Rosenwasser says “group members loathing themselves” (ie. self-hate), she isn’t asserting that all women walk around in a depressed funk thinking consciously about how they suck because they are women. The same goes for “disliking others in their group” — that assertion doesn’t mean, for instance, that women who have a lot of unaddressed internalized sexism can’t and don’t make connections with other women. What it does mean, however, is that it is very easy for women — even feminist women — to side with the “male” point of view (see the FAQ entry on male privilege for how “male” is seen as “normal”) and therefore devalue the “female” point of view, in ourselves, in other women, and even in men.

Illustrated in another way:

The consequence of internalizing this role is an enormous reservoir of self-hate. This is not to say the self-hate is recognized or accepted as such; indeed most women would deny it. It may be experienced as discomfort with her role, as feeling empty, as numbness, as restlessness, as a paralyzing anxiety at the center. Alternatively, it may be expressed in shrill defensiveness of the glory and destiny of her role. But it does exist, often beneath the edge of her consciousness, poisoning her existence, keeping her alienated from herself, her own needs, and rendering her a stranger to other women. They try to escape by identifying with the oppressor, living through him, gaining status and identity from his ego, his power, his accomplishments. And by not identifying with other “empty vessels” like themselves. Women resist relating on all levels to other women who will reflect their own oppression, their own secondary status, their own self-hate. For to confront another woman is finally to confront one’s self-the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid. And in that mirror we know we cannot really respect and love that which we have been made to be.

[Radicalesbians (Special Collections Library, Duke University):The Woman Identified Woman.]

Internalized sexism is bad for ourselves, bad for other women, and bad for society at large, even if it doesn’t always feel that way. It is infinitely easier to accept the roles that society has put forth for us, even if they chafe at spots and make us unhappy sometimes. It’s infinitely easier to lash out at other women — who don’t have the institutionalized authority to hurt us or take away what power we may have gotten — and label them as “the problem”, but that doesn’t get us any closer to solving the problem. Indeed, by shifting the blame and creating a scapegoat we’re just helping to obscure the root of the problem: sexist beliefs and institutions.

Combating internalized sexism

So, what can we do to combat internalized sexism?

Well, the first step is acceptance that it exists:

Women, too, must realize that they have internalized sexism. By admitting our participation in the system, we can begin to change it.

[Katey Zeh (Women’s Ministries): We Asked a Young Feminist….]

We need to be aware of not only the external sexism in the world, but the ways in which we internalize and contribute to these messages. We can’t allow ourselves to think that we are the exceptions, that we are somehow smart enough, educated enough, or vigilant enough to be completely free of all internalized sexism. We need to realize that, no matter how much conscious work we put into dismantling sexism that we are, ultimately, products of our culture and because of that there will be sexist assumptions and thoughts operating in the background of our thoughts. Only once that we accept that we are all, sometimes, part of the problem, can we work towards minimizing that problem.

After that, there are many different things we can do to combat internalized sexism. Below are some suggestions that other women have made.

Janet Thomas:

Freeing ourselves of internalized oppression means first increasing our awareness of the messages we give ourselves regarding limits, and secondly and equally important, the way I respond to other women. Am I living my life with an awareness of what I really want and who I really am or trying to sniff out where they want me to fit in? Am I championing other women who are coming from their bigness and appreciating the room they are making for me and all women in the world or responding within the internalized oppression, thinking and saying, “Who does she think she is….”? […]

Let us have the courage to hear the voices of internalized sexism, the decisiveness to purge and dismiss them as the fear-based drivel they are, and the love and connectedness to live in the truth of the fullness of life. Let us support and celebrate any woman any time she acts as a dynamic, playful, outspoken, laughing deeply , fully alive human being. Let us say YES! and express, feel, and live You Go Girl!!! Who said we can’t have our cake and eat it too and what were they afraid of? No Limits.

[Janet Thomas (BREAKFREE): THEORY AND THOUGHTS.]

Radicalesbians:

Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men. This consciousness is the revolutionary force from which all else will follow, for ours is an organic revolution. For this we must be available and supportive to one another, five our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. […]

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women’s liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution. Together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves. As we do this, we confirm in each other that struggling, incipient sense of pride and strength, the divisive barriers begin to melt, we feel this growing solidarity with our sisters. We see ourselves as prime, find our centers inside of ourselves.

[Radicalesbians (Special Collections Library, Duke University):The Woman Identified Woman.]

Ultimately, combating internalized sexism without falling victim to it is not easy; the line between critique and attack is not easily drawn, nor is it easy to differentiate between righteous anger and unfounded attack (see this discussion on women in the gaming industry for an example of these problems in action). But, despite the pitfalls and the problems, not trying is not an option. If women are ever to gain equality we have to do it together; that means that we need to find ways to minimize and cope with internalized sexism, both our own and that of others.

Related Reading:

FAQ: What is “sexism”?

Feminism Friday: The origins of the word “sexism”

Introductory:

Penny Rosenwasser (Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference, 2000): Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a Process for Healing from Internalized Oppression, pp. 565-566.

Aspazia (Mad Melancholic Feminista): Why Does a Reformed Republican Chick Need Prozac?

Radicalesbians (Special Collections Library, Duke University):The Woman Identified Woman

Janet Thomas (BREAKFREE): THEORY AND THOUGHTS

Clarifying Concepts:

Experiencing internalized oppression:

We realized that we shared similar experiences of fear: feeling like we never quite “belonged” anywhere, that we couldn’t show our true selves because we were either “too much” or “not enough”, trying to be perfect so we wouldn’t be attacked or abandoned, feeling responsible for everything going well because we would be blamed if there was trouble.

[Penny Rosenwasser (Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference, 2000): Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a Process for Healing from Internalized Oppression.]

Intersections of internalized oppression:

Through sharing stories, we became aware of the interrelationship between the internationalization of anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, racism, ableism, and fat oppression. Gerri told us that she had “spent a million years of my life imagining they’ll come up into the Castro [a visibly gay neighborhood] and try to get us. It’s either about being a Jew or being a queer.” And in addition to feeling the self-hatred from taking in anti-Semitic messages MJ said that “Feeling so stigmatized for being disabled and and a butch dyke and fat, has brought on a sense of shame. This culture makes us feel that way. The negative stuff gets to you after a while; I get really enraged, but I also start taking it in.”

From her work teaching voice, Emily illustrated an overlap between internalized sexism and anti-Semitism… “It’s a common theme around women in general, it’s not just unique to Jews, how women have been taught not to take up space — vocally, physically, and in many other ways.”

[Penny Rosenwasser (Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference, 2000): Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a Process for Healing from Internalized Oppression.]

Internalized sexism and shame:

On yet another level the realizations about our internalized sexism intensify when we start to consider how we feel writing this article. We struggle with feeling ashamed. […] This fear of judgment does not come from our experiences with other women we have talked to about MAVEN; they have been nothing but supportive. These questions and feelings of shame come from within ourselves, but are a product of external messages about women. First, we are taught that if we are hurt or manipulated it is our fault as the victim. Second, we are taught that women are our own worst enemy. Third, we are taught that feminists are especially condemning people and should be feared. Not only do these three things not speak to our experience, but they do not even ring true intellectually. Yet they have been internalized so deeply that we find them boiling up inside of us as we write this, creating shame.

[Mohan, Laurel, Schulz, Angela (Off Our Backs, Oct 2001): Mauled by MAVEN: our story of involving men in the movement.]

The consequences of unaddressed internalized sexism:

Too often the focus has been on going after external oppression with its’ rewards and waves of hopelessness, frustration, and anger. Internalized oppression is equally deadly, it holds women back. It causes us to hold back our excellence to protect men from embarrassment, to go quiet, to stand by and watch children get ravaged by it, to judge and undermine other women, to lower our standards of leadership, and to assess our worth on the basis of sexist conditioning. In order to be true, loving, allies for each other, and to reclaim our power, we each need to go after facing and completely freeing ourselves of internalized oppression.

[Janet Thomas (BREAKFREE): THEORY AND THOUGHTS.]

Some thoughts on the whys of internalized sexism:

I think we’re harsher on our own gender both because those who have “fallen” are a reminder that our own tenuous position in male-dominated social circles is gifted by men, and can be as easily taken away, as well as us buying into the same idea that the men have: masculine good, feminine bad.

[tekanji (The Official Shrub.com Blog):A deeper look into femininity.]

On understanding why blaming other women doesn’t help:

The solution isn’t to buy into the existing hierarchy. It’s not to point fingers at the traits that make up the construct of femininity and say, “You! You’re the culprit!” And especially we shouldn’t point fingers at the women who embrace said construct, even some of the more harmful aspects, and blame them for this. […]

Critique femininity. […] But never, ever forget that to be a woman is to be feminine in the eyes of society. Ultimately I believe that the concept of femininity will eventually become archaic (or, at the very least, cease to include traits that aren’t actually related to gender), but in the meantime it’s up to us to determine whether or not we’re going to allow the label to continue to be a stigma or if we’re going to reclaim the concept and turn it into something that is a strength rather than a weakness.

[tekanji (The Official Shrub.com Blog):A deeper look into femininity.]

On women’s acceptance of benevolent sexism:

Another explanation for women’s acceptance of benevolent sexism is that it is a form of self-protection in response to men’s sexism. Smuts (1996) argued that pair-bonding among humans is, in part, an evolved female response to the threat of sexual violence (because a pair-bonded male mate offers protection from other men). In a similar manner, endorsing benevolent sexism may be a way in which women cope when many men in a culture tend to be hostile sexists (cf. Jackman, 1994). The irony is that women are forced to seek protection from members of the very group that threatens them, and the greater the threat, the stronger the incentive to accept benevolent sexism’s protective ideology. This explains the tendency for women in the most sexist societies to endorse benevolent sexism more strongly than men. Furthermore, the countries in which women (as compared with men) rejected benevolent sexism as strongly as hostile sexism were ones in which men had low hostile sexism scores. As sexist hostility declines, women may feel able to reject benevolent sexism without fear of a hostile backlash.

[Peter Glick, Susan Fiske (American Psychologist Volume 56(2), February 2001, p 109–118): “An Ambivalent Alliance: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism as Complementary Justifications for Gender Inequality”.]

Examples of internalized sexism

Women attacking women as an expression of internalized sexism:

Internalized oppression is alive and well when we criticize women who speak up, who have an opinion, and when we avoid women who show their own unique style, who dare to be different. These women make us nervous because they are acting outside the female conditioned box, they are reconnected to that place we once reveled in and became estranged from in our painful conditioning. We are consciously or unconsciously jealous of these women for returning to where we abandoned ourselves in the name of being good little girls, nice girls, and succumbed to the dreaded what-will-people-think conditioning.

[Janet Thomas (BREAKFREE): THEORY AND THOUGHTS.]

“Internalized sexism” being interpreted as straight up “sexism”:

A bout an hour later she asked me how my hunt for a better job was going – I hadn’t found one yet. She told me it’s because my hair is too long. I had to “be a man” and cut it. I thought that was as sexist as the store manager telling me “the public wasn’t ready” to see a man who had earings, no matter how discrete.

[brooklynite (Feminist): Sexism.]

However, while the woman who told the OP that he had to cut his hair to get a job wasn’t being sexist (as she was female) she was putting forth a sexist idea — and the sexist idea has an institutionalized backing in U.S. patriarchy. I think “internalized sexism” is the correct term.

[Comment by sabonasi]

Expression of the idea of “male as authority figure”:

A few days ago, I went to the bank to close my account. My father came with me, because we were on our way to do some other errands together. He waited in the line with me, and when a teller opened up he stood a little to the side as I approached the window and told the woman what I wanted. She took my ID and bank book, asked me why I was closing the account, and started typing in numbers.

After a minute or two, she turns to MY FATHER, who at this point is sort of bored and spaced out, and says, “Would she like cash or a check?”

I kid you not. Apparently, despite the fact that I am a legal adult, despite the fact that the bank account is in my name only and filled mostly with money I earned, it seems that the teller couldn’t get over the internalized sexism that automatically, subconsciously, suggests that middle-aged, white males like my father are the authority figures.

It’s not my intention to beat up on the teller for making this mistake, since I think it’s an easy enough mistake to make in this culture. Still, I have to say that it really blows my mind that, even though I was standing right there at the window and that I had been handling the transaction, she still turned to my father out of habit. (I mean, what she did was, technically, illegal.)

[Ellen (All Girl Army): Internalized sexism makes people act weird..]