

Summary

Women's Responses to Sexism: Justification, Self-Silencing, Confrontation, and Collective Action

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Women are exposed to a variety of sexist behaviors in their daily lives. What kind of responses do women give to the sexist behaviors? Does women's awareness of sexism change their responses to sexism? What kind of social psychological variables influence women's responses? What are the positive or negative outcomes of women's responses? The purpose of the article is to review the literature on women's responses to sexism to answer these questions.

Women's Responses to Sexism

Briefly, sexism is defined as discrimination based on person's gender in social psychology literature. In general, researchers who study sexism generally focus on gender stereotypes, negative attitudes toward women, and discriminatory behaviors against women. Exposure to sexist behaviors may lead women to show various responses such as avoidance, self-blaming, humor, being silent, negotiation, warning, seeking social support, complaining to friends, and filling an official complaint (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995; Knapp, Faley, Eckberg, & DuBois, 1997; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). In the present paper, inspiring from the intergroup literature (Tajfel & Turner, 1976; Wright et al., 1990), women's responses to sexism are covered under two main dimensions as *the level of awareness of sexism* and *passive /active strategies against sexism*. Depending on the literature on sexism and responses to sexism, it is possible to indicate that women's responses may vary from passive acceptance to active collective actions and can be grouped under four main titles as

- (1) acceptance and justification of sexism without awareness of sexism,
- (2) self-silencing with awareness of sexism,
- (3) confronting sexism with awareness of sexism,
- (4) collective behavior against sexism with awareness of sexism.

Acceptance and Justification of Sexism

Although women are exposed to prejudice and discrimination (Swim et al., 2001), some of them are not aware of the existence of sexism. They conform to gender roles without questioning (Szymanski et al., 2009; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010), and support the existing gender system (Radke et al., 2016). They reject feminist views (Yeung et al., 2014). There are many social psychological theories to explain why some women accept and justify the existing gender system. These theories are ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), system justification (Jost & Kay, 2005), social dominance (Pratto et al., 2006), and right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1998).

Self-Silencing

Some women may be aware of sexism but still prefer to be silent (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). Jack (1991) suggested that according to traditional gender roles, good women are supposed to fulfill others' needs first in their family and intimate relationships. Women who internalized traditional gender roles may present self-silencing to protect the gender system (Jack, 1991), and not to feel bad (Hyers, 2007). There may be many factors influencing self-silencing such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), quality of intimate relationship (Whiffen et al., 2007), having feminist attitudes (Watson & Grotewiel, 2016), having experiences of being seen as a sexual object (Watson et al., 2012), and rejection sensitivity (London et al., 2012).

Confrontation

Women who are aware of sexism may question and confront sexist behaviors of men and others. Confrontation is a way of dealing with a stressful event such as sexism. With confrontation, women try to change their target position (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). Researchers have examined the association between confronta-

tion and several social psychological variables such as awareness of sexism (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008), identification with their own gender (Major et al., 2003), and identification with feminists (Ayres et al., 2009). They have also searched the effects of type of sexist behavior, acquaintance (Ayres et al., 2009), characteristics of the situation (Swim & Hyers, 1999), and perception of costs and benefits (Shelton & Rocheson, 2005; Stangor et al., 2002) on confrontation.

Further, women who confront sexist behaviors may be judged negatively and less likely to be liked and respected. They may be perceived as cold, problematic, overreactive, and bad intention (Becker et al., 2011; Dodd et al., 2001). They may be even punished (Bergman et al., 2002).

Collective Behavior against Sexism

Some women may prefer collective action against sexism in order to solve not only an individual problem but also a group problem. As Wright et al. (1990) argued, if a behavior is performed to correct a group's disadvantaged social status by an individual, the behavior can be considered as collective behavior. From signing a petition to joining an active women organization, many behaviors can be accepted as collective action (Radke et al., 2016). There are several social psychological theories about collective actions such as relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976) and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Foster and Matheson (1995) found that women who feel both egoistic relative deprivation and fraternal relative deprivation perceive their group's disadvantaged positions and participate in collective action. Similarly, van Zomeren et al. (2008) suggest that identification, perceiving illegitimacy, and self-efficacy are necessary factors to create a social change. If women who identify with their own gender and perceive that the disadvantaged position of women is illegitimate may think that they can control their outcomes and contribute to social change in sexism; and so they are more likely to join collective action. In addition, researchers (Duncan, 1999; Zucker, 2004) have suggested that having feminist identity, blaming system, and feeling negatively about power predict collective action.

Even though feminist identity is necessary for collective action, some women have negative attitudes toward feminists. Feminists are perceived as aggressive, problematic, and forceful individuals (Beryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985; Yoder et al., 2011). They are seen as a threat to traditional social values (Cottrel & Neuberg, 2005). Some women may try to disidentify with feminists (Redford et al., 2016). They may even say "I am not a feminist but I support gender equality."

In order to increase collective action tendencies, decreasing prejudice against feminists seems to be necessary. Researchers have demonstrated that exposure to feminist views (Nelson et al., 2008; Reid & Purcell, 2004); having positive social contact with feminists (Reid & Purcell, 2004), having a feminist mother (Nelson et al., 2008), taking a feminist course (Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Nelson et al., 2008) may lead women to develop feminist identity.

Negative or Positive Outcomes of Responses to Sexism

As mentioned, justification of sexism, self-silencing, confrontation and collective behavior are four different main responses to sexism. These responses may bring various individual or group related positive or negative outcomes to women.

Individual Based Negative and Positive Outcomes

Focusing on the individual outcomes of responses to sexism, it is possible to observe that justification of sexism, especially benevolent sexism, may increase well-being of women (Hammond & Sibley, 2011; Napier et al., 2010). However, benevolent sexism also leads women to question their abilities and performances (Dardenne et al., 2007; Dumont et al., 2010); to see themselves as an object (self-objectification; Calogero & Jost, 2011); and to judge themselves by their appearance (Szymanski et al., 2009). These women, in return, may experience more discrimination.

Women who justify the gender system may experience many psychological (Moradi & Subich, 2002), physical (Goldenhar et al., 1998) and sexual health problems (Yoder et al., 2007). Similarly, researchers have presented that women who silence themselves blame themselves more (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), and have depression (Jack, 1991). In contrast, women who confront are more likely to feel good about their confrontation (Hyers, 2007). They feel good and strong about themselves (Gervais et al., 2010). Similarly, collective behavior is positively correlated with well-being (Szymanski & Owens, 2009).

Group Based Positive and Negative Outcomes

Justification of sexism and self-silencing block social change in gender system, and so women's disadvantaged position stays the same. Becker and Wright (2011) presented that women who strongly support benevolent sexism are less likely to have a motivation to decrease discrimination. Similarly, Dardenne et al. (2007) found that benevolent sexism lowers women's motivation and performances.

Confrontation and collective actions, however, are positively correlated with social change. As minori-

ty influence literature (e.g., Moscovici, 1976) suggests minority groups such as women should create a conflict with the majority group (dominant gender system and men) in order to make the women's issues visible in the society. Confronting and collective action can be used as a way of creating awareness about sexism, and providing gender equality.

Conclusion

The article covers main women's responses to sexism, namely, justification of sexism, self-silencing, confrontation, and collective action. The motivation behind these responses might be relevant to avoiding conflict, protecting self-image, saving energy, presentation of self, and educating others (Hyers, 2007).

These different responses may be displayed by the same woman in different times. Personal social development and changes in attitudes may lead to each of these responses. A woman who justifies the gender system may internalize self-silencing for a while, but then she may confront to sexism because of some social experiences. She may move toward feminist ideology and join collective action (Downing & Roush, 1985; Savaş & Stewart, 2019).

There are many variables that influence women's responses to sexism. These variables can be combined under individual, situational and contextual variables. In terms of individual variables, both women's and others' attitudes, attribution style, commitment to social norms, and levels of awareness may exert influence on women's responses to sexism. In addition, where the sexist event occurs is very important for women's reactions. Culture may be highly associated with women's responses.

Further, responses to sexism may consist of cognitive, affective and behavioral components and so are highly relevant to attitude change literature. Several attitude change theories (e.g., Elaboration Likelihood Model of Petty and Cacioppo, Social Judgment Theory of Muzaffer Sherif, Psychological Reactance of Jack Brehm) can be applied to responses to sexism and change in sexism issues.

Finally, it is important to understand women's responses to sexism and how to create a social environment in which women can easily show their reactions to sexist behaviors. Education, politics, and laws should provide a safe environment for women to present these responses. In addition, researchers from different disciplines such as psychology, sociology, women/gender studies, and politics should search women's responses and attitude change in sexism, especially in Turkey.