

Surprised by the mundane: Reflecting on a sexist moment within an anti-sexism study

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The work began with that feeling inextricably and unmistakably linked to the outset of something meaningful. Invigorated by the possibilities of what could be, I initiated a phenomenological study with pre- and in-service educators consisting of four workshops centered on an anti-sexism curriculum. Through participation in activities and discussions focused on three specific manifestations of educational sexism: sex(ual/ist) harassment, misrepresentation in curricular materials, and androcentric pedagogy, participants engage in a critical reflection of their own beliefs about the sexism that takes place in school contexts as well as their roles in both reproducing and disrupting gender inequity in their own classrooms. Through this qualitative study, I sought to understand what effect(s) participating in anti-sexism professional developments might have on educators' discourses, beliefs, pedagogical practices, and interactions with students as they connect specifically to gender. Additionally, I aimed to understand more deeply what beliefs teachers have about themselves as antisexist educators.

I was eager to engage in thoughtful, critical, and perhaps even healing dialogue. And indeed, each time we came together, space was co-created to share poignant experiences as well as critical analyses of educational structures rife with sexist policies and practices. Participants seemed eager to both share of themselves and listen to one another's stories. Yet, despite the meaning cultivated throughout our time together engaged in this work, it is a singular, difficult moment from a participant interview that, for me, remains the most vivid memory from the experience. Nearly a year later this interaction still has me questioning, "what just happened?" and, "why didn't I say anything?"

Context

I have a persistent fear when conducting studies centered on intersectional gender equity that participants will join the study only to engage in narrative takeover and forcefully claim that sexism does not and has never existed. This, of course, has never proven to be the case, and yet the fear lingers. In fact, directly countering my fear, a finding that continuously emerges from these workshops is just how prevalent sexism and misogyny are within educational spaces. Despite the differences in age, ethnicity, national origin, and gender of the educators taking part in the study, participants consistently share examples of the sexism they have personally endured or witnessed.

This is also a theme of the content for the workshops—the countless ways in which sexism and misogyny are embodied and reified through schooling structures.

Because of this, a large piece of the curriculum and workshops is dedicated to examining scenarios taken from ethnographic research in which a type of educational sexism is enacted. Then, participants are charged with the task of implementing a method detailed in the curriculum entitled Pause, Listen, Act, Now (PLAN) in an attempt to disrupt the sexism taking place. Finally, as a whole group we discuss the scenario and reflect on participants' implementation of the PLAN method.

We repeatedly engage in this activity because participants often state that when sexism is perpetrated in the classroom, in the hallway, or on the recess yard, teachers have a tendency to freeze, to not know what to do. And as we reflect on this, we discuss how this freezing, this inaction leads to tacit approval (Bailey, 1992). That is, it leads to those involved and those witnessing the situation to internalize this treatment of women and girls as acceptable. In order to combat this idea, we dig into multiple scenarios throughout the workshops so that participants have the time and space to think through how they would want to intervene in those moments and why.

Within the workshops, I make clear that while we want to be responsive to each individual situation as it takes place, we also want to have a way of navigating these interactions confidently and with thoughtful language. One of the most effective ways to do this is to put some thought into potential scenarios before they occur so that one is not caught off guard by the enactment of sexism and thus resorts to either inaction or reacting in a way that is unhelpful. And yet, despite my own personal understanding and professional expertise in this work, I let a moment within a participant interview pass without meaningfully intervening nor holding the interviewee accountable for his inappropriate comments. I froze, unsure of what to do.

The Moment

As we were digging into the interview questions, the participant began explaining a policy at a previous place of work in which sexual harassment claims are not investigated further should the person accused of the harassment be transferred to a different department or location, or if the person who made the claims quits. It was evident to me how this is problematic, and I appreciated the participant making note of how this is an irresponsible and inequitable practice. However, he did not stop his explanation there. He then proceeded to state:

So say ... I'm hitting on you, Kim, Dr. Pfeifer ... saying, "Oh, you're very attractive. Let's go on a date." You keep saying no, but I keep doing this constantly. And then

you file a report with HR to investigate. You say, “Hey, this guy is harassing me, I’m telling.”

Reflection

It is nearly a year later, and I am still unsure of what to make of this interaction. What I do know is that I am left with several questions, questions that straddle the intersection of a Venn diagram with being a woman made to feel uncomfortable in my own skin by a man on one side, and being a scholar engaging in anti-sexism work on the other:

- Why would a participant use himself as an example of someone enacting sexual harassment? And why the choice to use me as the person experiencing that harassment?
- Why make this choice during an independent interview in which no one else can hear it? Would it have been said if other participants were present?
- Had it been said in front of other participants, would I have utilized the skills taught in the workshop and said something?
- Why didn’t I say something?
- Is it always my responsibility to say something?
- Where does the power lie here? I am the researcher and he is the participant, but he is also a man discussing sexually harassing me as a woman.

And perhaps the most unrelenting and difficult questions: Does not saying something in this moment allow for this person to create more moments like this for others? Do I now share responsibility in this potential harm?

But perhaps larger than the questions I’m left with is the complexity of being caught in a paradox. That is, at the center of these workshops is the idea that sexism continuously shows up in educational spaces, and yet, I was completely caught off guard by this participant’s sexist comments. How is it that I could be surprised by the very thing I research and write about happening everywhere, all the time, well, happening? How is it that I could be so unprepared for a moment I’ve written, researched, and experienced ad nauseam?

While these questions initially kicked the door wide open and laid the welcome mat for my perennial imposter phenomenon’s return, with some distance, I am beginning to conceptualize the moment a bit differently and ask myself a new question: What would it mean to not be surprised by this interaction? Because shouldn’t a

comment like his be unexpected, particularly from a participant involved in an entire study dedicated to dismantling educational sexism? Even if I know sexism to be ever-present, shouldn't I still be startled by its intrusive presence?

This is where I find myself now, vacillating between the understanding of sexism's pervasiveness in educational settings and the shock at the scale and tenacity at which it continues to pervade. Being surprised by the mundane, by something that takes place every day, may at first glance appear to be naive or critically unaware, but digging a bit more deeply, I am coming to understand my surprise was neither naivete nor unpreparedness, but rather, it was my deep rooted belief that this should not be taking place trying to reconcile with the reality that it was.

In fact, perhaps my silence stemmed not from not knowing what to do in the moment but from frustration that a participant chose to enact sexism in this particular moment—a moment dedicated to reflecting on the often painful ways in which women and girls are marginalized within educational spaces. And while this frustration elucidates the rationale for and ignites my desire to continue this work, I am left wondering if the participant too is doing his own work. Because without that piece, without those with dominant and privileged identities holding themselves accountable in these moments rather than relying on others to continuously and agonizingly do that work for them, educational spaces that are humanizing, liberatory, and joyful for all remain out of reach.

References

Bailey, S. (1992). *How schools shortchange girls: The AAUW report*. Marlowe & Company.