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Racism and Sexism
Comparisons and Conflicts

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Are racism and sexism parallel or separate processes? Can we apply findings from one area of research to the other? Obviously, any response to such questions must be conditional, subject to definitions of the terms themselves as well as to the specific circumstances under which the questions are answered. These questions are necessarily asked, however, in light of this society's long-standing interest in racial prejudice and its increased awareness of discrimination based on gender. For this reason, there is a need to understand the extent to which the biased treatment of women may be legitimately compared to that of blacks. In other words, can it be determined whether racism and sexism are parts of a generalized response set, or if they are two different behaviors? In this chapter, the analysis has two components. In the first part, an examination of racism and sexism is presented with respect to a variety of dimensions relative to the assessment of the existence of parallelism: the definitions, the causes, and the scope of the problems. This review emphasizes social-psychological perspectives, although it is recognized that many other disciplines, such as economics, history, and political science, have contributed to the literature on racism and sexism. The second part of the chapter deals with the impact of both processes on black women, who have dual identities and are oppressed under each. In addition, the possibility that these processes may have an additive effect is explored. Specifically, in the second part of the chapter, the conflicts arising from the racism and sexism that are presented to black women are examined. It is suggested that black women may need special consideration because of their unique position relative to the movements both for women's equity and for black civil rights.

COMPARISONS OF SEXISM AND RACISM

DEFINITIONS OF RACISM AND SEXISM

The terms racism and sexism are frequently used in research literature and in discussion without definition. Indeed, the terms may have such widespread usage that most
people believe they are aware of what is meant. However, it seems necessary to examine carefully the various ways in which the terms are described so that we may determine whether the concepts described in various situations are actually similar.

Consideration of the terms *racism* and *sexism* may begin with the definitions in the 1975 edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. *Racism* was defined first as “a belief that race is a primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.” In the second definition, provided by the synonym *racialism*, there is reference to prejudice or discrimination. The same dictionary defined *sexism* as “prejudice or discrimination against women.” There is obviously some imbalance in the development of the two concepts based on this common source. In defining racism, there is the assumption of a belief system that can support or, at least, explain any discriminatory attitudes or behavior. For sexism, no such system is explicitly presented in the definition. The lack of any explanation for sexism may result either from an assumption of a common experience that does not need explication, or from the fact that the concept of sexism does not yet have the history of examination and research that racism has.

Another definition of *racism* is the classic in social psychology from the preface to the 1954 edition of *The Nature of Prejudice* (Allport, 1979): “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of that group” (p. 9). This description of racism—or more accurately, of “negative ethnic prejudice”—appears to be as easily applicable to the concept of sexism as it is to racism. The definition includes the mode of racist expression, covert or overt; sexist attitudes and behavior may also take these forms. The definition indicates the process involved in racism (faulty generalization), a process identical to the stereotyping that occurs in sexism. Finally, the affective dimension described by Allport (antipathy) and the object of the negative expression (an individual or a group) are both common to racism and sexism. In fact, Allport recognized that sex was the basis of certain discriminatory behavior. He pointed out examples of antifeminism, which he stated clearly demonstrated the basic characteristics of prejudice (pp. 33–34).

Parallelism between racism and sexism may also be inferred from an examination of the definition developed more recently by Chesler (1976). In his review of contemporary theories of racism, Chesler focused on “institutional white racism,” describing it in this way: “acts or institutional procedures which help create or perpetuate sets of advantages or privileges for whites and exclusions or deprivations for minority groups” (p. 22). Important to this definition is Chesler’s assumption of “an ideology of explicit or implicit superiority or advantage of one racial group over another, plus the institutional power to implement that ideology in social operations” (p. 22). The picture of blacks as powerless with respect to social institutions is also reflected in the discrimination experienced by women. Both groups have had to deal with the expectation and assumption that white men were better suited to certain positions, such as supervisory and managerial positions (Kanter, 1977). Both groups have a history of exclusion from prestigious community organizations and clubs (e.g., the Jay Cees for the first time accepted women as members in 1986). In addition, both groups have faced limitations on their acceptance to schools and universities. As defined in this research, then, institutional racism appears to have strong parallels with institutional sexism. Although the similarities of sexism to racism are evident for the mode of expression and the process in both the Allport and the Chesler definitions, neither addresses the root or the cause of the negative feelings that exist. The causes of racism and sexism have, however, been offered as an explanation in a number of other theories.