Canadian Jewish Women and their Experiences of Antisemitism and Sexism

Nora Gold
School of Social Work, McMaster University

Introduction

The research presented here is part of a study of Canadian Jewish women and their experiences of antisemitism and sexism. Participants were located through advertisements in the English and Jewish newspapers in Toronto and Montreal, where the study was briefly described and interested Jewish women were invited to contact the researcher directly. The forty-seven women who responded were assigned to focus groups based on their place of residence and whether or not they saw themselves as feminists. In total, there were six groups of feminists (four from Toronto, two from Montreal), and two groups of non-feminists (one from Toronto and one from Montreal). Each focus group met once for two hours with this researcher. The women in this study ranged in age from 22 to 77, and there was similarly wide variation in terms of their ethnicity (Sephardic/Ashkenazi), marital status, sexual orientation, income, education (Jewish and secular), level of religious observance, and communal affiliations. There were no salient differences between the feminists and non-feminists on any of the above.

The group discussions were structured around four main themes:

(1) Experiences of Antisemitism: Under what circumstances do the women in the study feel comfortable, safe, understood, included, or appreciated as Jews? In what circumstances do they feel unsafe, uncomfortable, misunderstood, excluded, vulnerable, insulted, or degraded as Jews? How often do they feel the latter? In what contexts? How are they affected by these experiences?

(2) Experiences of Sexism: These questions were parallel to those asked above, i.e., Under what circumstances do they feel safe vs. unsafe, etc. as women? Etc.
(3) Similarities, Differences, and Points of Intersection Between the Experiences of Sexism and Antisemitism: What do they see as some of the similarities between the two sets of experiences? The differences? What comes to mind when they think about "a Jewish woman?" Where do their ideas about Jewish women come from? Because of the work by Siegel (1995, 1992), which suggests that Jewish women's feelings about their bodies can be negatively affected by sexism and antisemitism, women were also asked which parts of their bodies they thought of as "Jewish." Did they like these parts of their bodies? What about the "non-Jewish" parts? Where did those feelings about their bodies come from? (Jews/non-Jews? Males/females?)

(4) Coping with Sexist and Antisemitic Experiences: How do they cope when they have experienced an incident that is antisemitic and/or sexist? Do they fight back? Do they withdraw? (From whom or what?) Do they talk to others? (If so, to whom? Jews/non-Jews? Women/men?)

Antisemitism

The women who took part in this research have had some amazing things said and done to them. For example, one was asked, "Have you eaten a non-Jewish baby lately?" One worked in a store that had a "jew-me-down" sale, others were called "dirty Jews," "Christ-killers," or chased home from school by boys throwing rocks at them. Women were picked on by antisemitic teachers, deprived of jobs they were qualified for, and told by non-Jewish children in their neighbourhoods that they couldn't play because they were Jewish. One woman in charge of the anti-racism initiative in a large agency was called "a Jewish princess" by a colleague, who received only the mildest of reprimands. Another woman had a noose hung from the tree in her backyard, and several women have had swastikas painted onto their doors. A third woman picked up an old brooch for $5 at a garage sale. The next day she cleaned it off and took it in to have it appraised, and it turned out it was really worth $500. A few days later she was telling this story to people at work, boasting about her "find," and she was told, "Well, what do you expect? You're a cheap Jew."

The women in this study found these comments and incidents "shocking," "horrifying," and frightening. One woman said, "I felt terribly hurt, I got sick to my stomach, I went away by myself and cried." Another woman got angry, "really really angry. My blood was boiling, I couldn't believe what was coming out of this person's mouth." Someone else became hysterical.

Adding to the emotional intensity, even trauma, of these incidents was the fact that when these women recounted these incidents later to non-Jewish friends and colleagues, their experiences were trivialized or dismissed. They were told that they were being too sensitive, that "jewing down," for example, was just an expression, it didn't really mean anything. This compounded the original pain by undermining the felt reality of the woman, and constituted a kind of secondary victimization. One said:

I think that we kind of tend to have a feeling that unless it's like somebody coming up putting a swastika on your door, it
doesn't matter, it's not antisemitism. People have this attitude, which makes it very hard to talk about it... People go, "That's not antisemitism," and that makes me feel really uncomfortable, because people don't understand, so I often feel very uncomfortable talking about my experiences. They just dismiss it and go, "Well, that doesn't sound so bad," or "Are you sure he was..."

Not surprisingly, when asked where they felt most comfortable, and safest, as Jews, the women in this study responded almost uniformly with "among Jews... [in Yiddish] indzere... among our own." A number of the feminists in this study, however, qualified this by saying that given the sexism in the Jewish community, they felt really safe only among Jewish women; and some were even more specific, saying only among Jewish feminists. Several commented sadly that a few years back, they would also have included as a safe place the feminist movement at large, and being among other feminists Jewish or non-Jewish, but that this is no longer the case. One woman said:

I was in a women's studies class, it was feminist theory, and... I watched this black women say, "Well, how could you compare a black, poor, single mother with a wealthy Jewish woman?"
And it's a very bizarre thing to deal with, because on the one hand, I don't want to get up there and start saying, "Well, I'm Jewish, and you know, and I'm like, well, I'm white and Jewish, but I could be Sephardic and I could be having to deal with being both a woman of colour and Jewish..." You know, it's ranking the oppressions which is a terrible thing, but it's difficult. It's difficult to come to terms with, "Oh, you're just a little, white Jew, a middle-class Jew, who's opening your mouth." Antisemitism's there, in the feminist movement... it's in my safe little hold.

This reduction, this shrinking, of the "safe spaces" of the women in this study is directly related to Jewish women's dual oppression (Gold, 1996, 1993), such that the non-Jewish world (including other women and even other feminists) is seen as hostile; but so is the male-dominated Jewish community, which was supposed to be their refuge.

**Sexism**

Then women in this study told many stories about the effects on them of living in a sexist world. One woman felt that sexism had deprived her of doing what she had wanted with her life: she wanted to be a mathematician, but was streamed out of enriched math in high school because she was a girl. Another woman, a homemaker who got married in the '50's, spent decades worrying about her adequacy as a woman, because she was "lousy at pouring tea, [had] no interest in mahjong, [was] a lousy interior decorator, and [was] not interested in fashion." She was attracted to chiropractic, but it never entered her head to enter it; instead, she persuaded her husband to, and this became his profession.
In terms of the sexism of everyday life, three women told similar, and familiar-sounding, stories about interacting with a male service provider: a car mechanic refusing to provide complete information about the bill for some car repairs; a contractor rejecting a woman's input about where to position a wall, and asking to speak to her husband; an accountant yelling at a woman on the phone, and another time this same accountant carrying on a conversation with her lawyer about her financial affairs, in her presence, as though she wasn't in the room. (The accountant actually said to her, when she insisted on being part of the discussion, "There there, dear.")

Examples of sexism at home focussed on the unequal distribution of labour in family life: the exploitation of homemakers as wives, mothers, and caregivers, and women's "double duty" for those who work outside the home. Sexism in the workplace was also common, and many examples were given, including discriminatory hiring practices, the underpaying and exploitation of women working in "female professions," and sexual harassment in both corporate and academic settings. One woman was actually fired from her first job for "not coming across." Women also spoke about sexism in the workplace in terms of the way they are treated on a day-to-day basis. For example,

I find that most of the time I have to prove myself because... when I'm dealing with men they categorize women in a certain way, and once they see that gee, she really has a brain, she can think for herself, then their attitude changes. I always find that I have to prove myself.

Sexism in the Jewish community was also discussed. Many expressed eloquently the sense of exclusion, marginalization, and devaluation that they have experienced within the Jewish community and Jewish religious tradition. They described "watching the men dance with the Torah, and standing on the sidelines and not being allowed to take part." Many experienced Judaism as a "boys' club," and felt "unwanted" and alienated as a result. A number of women in this study gave up on Judaism in order to maintain their self-esteem as women, although two Orthodox women found Orthodox Judaism utterly compatible with their self-respect as women, and urged other women to learn more about Orthodox Judaism before rejecting it. Yet another sub-group of women found a meaningful relationship with Judaism through egalitarian forms of practice, such as the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Havurah movements, and some of the rituals recently developed by and for women, such as women's prayer groups and Rosh Hodesh [New Month] celebrations. "[We're] creating something new and exciting," said one woman. "We're creating our own spiritual world."

**Similarities, Differences, and Intersections Between Antisemitism and Sexism**

There are certain obvious similarities shared by antisemitism and sexism. Conceptually, of course, they are both fundamentally about a power differential, and the exploitation of one group by another for social, political, and economic gain. In this study, women found their experiences with sexism and antisemitism alike in the sense that both were insulting, degrading, and painful, and that anyone
who challenged sexist or antisemitic remarks was made to feel oversensitive. However, a very important difference between them was also identified. These women felt that sexism, unlike antisemitism, is recognized, and to some degree acknowledged, within the society at large (e.g., on talk shows and in magazines); with sexism, there was not the same silence. For example, during one focus group discussion, a woman was talking about being treated in a sexist manner by a car mechanic, and someone else piped up: "Oh, yeah, there was a program on about that, probing into how they treat a woman when she's going to buy or repair a car." Immediately the woman telling her story felt supported and validated, not just by one person, but by the society at large. This rarely, if ever, happens with antisemitism. In this sense, structural reality significantly shapes the emotional and psychological impact of an oppressive experience. One woman said,

I put sexism and antisemitism quite a way apart. I can deal with sexism. Sexism we have a handle on, a little bit of a handle. It's being discussed in the media, it's out in the open. We don't like it, we're making a stink about it. But antisemitism -- we're still cowering, we're still afraid... How much progress have we really made with antisemitism?

The women in this study felt clearly that antisemitism was far more frightening and pernicious than sexism. This may reflect, first of all, these women's identities as "Jewish first, and women second," as one woman put it; but also, as previously mentioned, the social indifference to antisemitism, and (not unrelated to this) the historical awareness that within this last half-century, the Jewish people came closer than at any other point in history to being wiped off the face of the earth.

Intersections

In light of the above two sets of experiences, what then does it mean to be Jewish and a woman? Is this merely additive, the sum of the above anecdotes about antisemitism and the sum of the anecdotes about sexism? I think not: the two oppressions feed on each other in some powerful and profound ways, and work together to create something new, a third thing, a dynamic which is at the core of Jewish women's experience. From the discussions of these focus groups, there seem to be three main places where such intersection occurs: one is in the stereotype of the JAP (the Jewish American Princess); the second is in regard to how Jewish women feel about their bodies, and in particular the "Jewish" parts of their bodies; and the third is in the relationships and psycho-sexual dynamics between Jewish women and Jewish men.

(1) The JAP, or American Jewish Princess

Consistent with what has been written about the JAP phenomenon (Beck, 1988; Booker, 1991; Chayat, 1987; Marks, 1992; Siegel, 1986), the women in this study were very worried about being labelled JAPs, and went to great pains to differentiate themselves from "that kind of Jewish woman." (In a variation of the "good Jew/bad Jew" game, we now have the "good Jewish woman vs. the bad Jewish woman".) Interestingly, the feminists and the non-feminists in this study related in markedly different ways to the stereotype of the JAP (this was, in fact,
the only notable difference between the two groups.) The non-feminists were significantly less critical of the JAP label than the feminists, less aware of the antisemitism and sexism contained in it, and more apt to accept the term and use it in conversation like any other word. In sharp contrast, none of the feminists in the focus groups expressed these sentiments, or casually used the word "JAP." Even if not liking "a certain kind of Jewish women," they without exception recognized the term JAP as both sexist and antisemitic (and in the words of one woman, "a put down to all Jewish women"), and refused to use it in their everyday speech.

(2) Jewish Women's Bodies

Another point of intersection between sexism and antisemitism is in the Jewish woman's body (Siegel, 1995, 1992). Women (all women, not just Jewish women) have been taught to reject their bodies, because they do not measure up to an impossible ideal of beauty (Wolf, 1991). However, for Jewish women in this society, the issues of body image are further complicated, because the physical characteristics of Jewish women are in direct conflict with the non-Jewish images of beauty in the dominant culture (straight blond hair, small noses, and thin figures) (Siegel, 1995). Consequently, a fair number of Jewish women in North America have problems related to body image, focussed on their not liking specific parts of their bodies that seem to them to be "too Jewish" (e.g., frizzy hair, a big nose, or wide hips), because they have internalized the values of the dominant culture, including its antisemitism (Cantor, 1995; Siegel, 1992). According to Cantor (1995, 1992), Jewish women who are proud of being Jewish, and reject the lure of assimilationism, are relatively unlikely to suffer these kinds of problems with body image and self-esteem.

how they felt about these parts of themselves. The answers were wide-ranging, and included almost every part of the body, but the most common answer was the nose. This is not surprising, since for Jewish women, the "nose job" is nowadays the most common way that they can express through their bodies the desire to "make themselves over" in a non-Jewish image. (A parallel exists here, of course, to women of other ethnic groups, such as Black women straightening their hair.) In this study none of the women liked their noses. Several women explained that this was because it looked "so Jewish." Three women, when they were young girls, tried to force their noses into a more desirable, Aryan shape by holding them up or pressing objects against them. They were very aware of, and concerned with, the Anglo-Saxon beauty ideal and the undesirability of "looking Jewish." For example:

I have a girlfriend, she said to me once, "You have a gentile body," and I said, "What's a gentile body?" "Well, Jewish women have the hips and the this and the that. You have beautiful long legs, and small hips." When people say to me, "You don't look Jewish," it's a compliment... I take it as a compliment.

(3) Relations Between Jewish Men and Jewish Women
The comments of the women in this study were completely consistent with the dynamic described by Cantor (1995), in which many Jewish men project onto Jewish women their own internalized antisemitism, and then distance themselves from them. The women in these focus groups felt very put down and rejected by Jewish men because of their preference for non-Jewish women. This preference, of course, also had the effect of fostering competition between Jewish women and non-Jewish women (and what could be more prototypically sexist than pitting women against each other in the fight over a man?). However, as one woman put it, this is, for the Jewish woman, "a losing battle." She cannot possibly compete with the allure of the non-Jewish world, as so many Jewish men perceive it, or the "golden aura" (as one woman put it) that surrounds non-Jewish women.

Jewish men see these blondes, the ideal blonde goddess (who doesn't really exist, by the way) as upwardly-mobile, the way to upwardly...like the Thirty-something couples... There's this thing: "Look at this, I got a blondie, I got a blonde one just for me..." It's a way of getting social approval from the non-Jewish world. And from themselves.

Understanding the reasons for this dynamic, however, did not necessarily ease the bitterness of it. Many of these women had been socialized to feel the burden of Jewish continuity and the importance of creating a Jewish home and raising a Jewish family. By definition they needed Jewish men to achieve these goals; yet Jewish men were intermarrying and therefore not available to them. As a result, many of them felt tricked, almost cheated, by their own community.

Conclusion

This research explored 47 Canadian Jewish women's experiences of antisemitism and sexism, some of the similarities and differences between these two forms of oppressions, and some of the ways in which they intersect in the lives of Jewish women. Interestingly, all three areas in which antisemitism and sexism converged (the JAP stereotype, the woman's body, and her relationships with Jewish men) all relate somehow to sexual identity and are extremely intimate. This, of course, is consistent with the feminist recognition that "the personal is political," and that structural inequalities and oppressions enter our lives at the deepest, most personal levels, where no aspect of our selves is immune.

This project is dedicated to the women who took part in this study, sharing generously of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and to my Jewish sisters everywhere. It is hoped that this research will contribute to increasing understanding about Jewish women, especially among non-Jewish feminists and Jewish men, and that as we learn more about the insidious nature of oppression, in all its manifestations, we can work together more effectively to eradicate it from the world.

Introductory Note

The research on which this paper reports was generously funded by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
Dr. Nora Gold is Associate Professor at the School of Social Work, McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario.

References


Marks, Wendy (1992). "A Feminist/Pychological Reading of Jokes about 'JAPS' and Jewish Mothers." Presented at the First International Conference on Judaism, Feminism, and Psychology, Seattle, WA.


[top]