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Research participation and its impacts: ethical and methodological considerations in qualitative research on sexism in academia

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ABSTRACT

This article explicates key ethical and methodological considerations in qualitative research on sexism in academia. We draw on a longitudinal qualitative study that combined focus groups, diaries and repeated individual interviews with 15 female PhD students. First, we outline prospective considerations in the design phase. Previous studies document how sexism and gender biases may be hard for individuals to recognize; we explicate how we took this research into account in our methodological design. Second, we examine the cognitive, emotional and social impacts that participants experienced, such as an increased awareness of sexism. Instead of treating research participation impact as an unexpected and potentially harmful by-product of the research process, we actively engaged with the possibility of 'ethical change' and embraced a process-oriented conception of validity. We outline the limitations, risks, and potentials of various methodological tools, discussing them in relation to qualitative research on other oppressive practices reflecting structural injustices.

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Ethical change; qualitative longitudinal research; process-oriented validity; research participation impact; sexism

Introduction

> 'Sexism goes so deep that at first it is hard to see; you think it is just reality.'
>
> Alix Kates Shulman, *Burning Questions: A Novel, 1978*

In October 2020, a petition protesting sexism in Danish academia was published (Politiken, 2020). An initiator group had collected more than 800 stories exemplifying sexism in various forms occurring in Danish universities; stories that contradict the pervasive idea that gender equality has been accomplished in Denmark (Guschke et al., 2022; Utoft, 2021). A book published by the initiators the subsequent year (Einersen et al., 2021) opened with the Schulman quote above pointing out how hard it is to see sexism deeply integrated in everyday practices.

This article focuses on ethical and methodological considerations related to qualitative research on sexism in academia. We draw on experiences gained through a research

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project carried out in Denmark in 2022–2023. Our study was conducted in the aftermath of the 2020 petition and to some extent motivated by it; however, it was carried out by researchers unrelated to that initiative. In our research project, 15 female PhD students participated in focus groups, diary writing and repeated interviews in a longitudinal qualitative research design. The research project also included quantitative analyses that document the frequencies of various forms of sexism experiences at Danish universities and the increased likelihood of female PhD candidates to leave academia if they work in research environments with a high prevalence of sexism (Lessner et al., 2024). With this article, we move beyond the findings to explicate ethical and methodological concerns that became detectable through our research endeavour.

Ethically, a key challenge is that inviting research participants to reflect on sexism in their everyday lives may raise their awareness of uncomfortable truths. Previous research has documented various forms of sexism and gender bias in academia, and participants might begin to notice structural injustices that they – in the here and now – are powerless to change. Following Kostovicova and Knott (2022), we argue that change should not be considered harmful per se; rather, we must work with 'ethical change' in research processes. Our study is not embedded in a tradition of action research aiming to spur self-reflection, community-building and transformation of practice (Leigh et al., 2024). Raised awareness among research participants was not an aim but a potential consequence of our research project. Recognizing this potential leads us to agree with Wolgemuth and Donohue:

> Making the research as intervention explicit and valuable to the participant is more ethical than treating the participants' transformation as either a by-product of research or merely additional data. (2006: 1027)

Accordingly, we paid close attention to the aspects of potential participant transformation throughout the study, from prospective considerations in its design phase to our analysis of the impacts experienced by the participants explicated in this article.

Methodologically, a key challenge is to make sure that the research preserves validity. Following Cho and Trent (2006), we align our approach with an interactive, procedural understanding of validity, implying that we bring together transactional or transformational approaches to validity. In a transactional approach to validity, techniques are used with the aim of optimizing the accuracy of the representation of (participants' construction of) reality. In a transformational understanding of validity, techniques are used to uncover social, political and cultural forms of power at play in the construction of meaning and reality, with the aim of facilitating emancipation. Our research design combines traditional transactional validity techniques such as triangulation with a transformational approach recognizing the potential for social change in a recursive, process-oriented view of validity.

In the following section, we illuminate how previous research on sexism in academia informed our research design. More specifically, we highlight prospective ethical and methodological considerations related to how participation might change participants' perceptions. In the subsequent section, we present a systematic examination of the cognitive, emotional and social impacts experienced by participants. Most but not all participants reported that the research participation spurred an increased awareness of sexism, and some participants described how new insights impacted where they wanted

to work after attaining their PhD degree and how they negotiated their position in a new job. In this way, research participation became an intervention in the participants' lives, if to varying degrees.

Research design phase: prospective considerations

Our research embarks from a broad understanding of sexism as outlined by the Council of Europe (2019): sexism is practices with the 'purpose or effect' (p. 10) of a) violating the dignity of persons based on their sex, b) harming them in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic ways, c) creating hostile environments to the full realization of their human rights, or d) maintaining gender stereotypes. Practices enacted with this kind of *purpose* in mind are explicitly sexist, while practices may also be sexist if they unintentionally have the *effect* of, for example, maintaining gender stereotypes. We understand sex as linked to biological anatomy, while gender concerns social identification, and we acknowledge that sexism operates in intersections with racism, ageism, homophobia and other oppressive practices present in society.

Previous research describes various forms of sexism in academia, ranging from sexual harassment (Tenbrunsel et al., 2019) to subtle forms of everyday sexism facilitated by dynamics such as unconscious bias. The term 'leaky pipeline' (Alper, 1993), has been used for decades to describe the persistent problem of gender inequality in universities, where the proportion of women declines progressively at each career stage (Rosa et al., 2020).

In Denmark, half the candidates attaining a PhD degree are women, but only 24 percent of professors are female (Forskningsstyrelsen, 2023, p. 11). Studies show how numerous factors disadvantage women in the process of recruitment to associate and full professorships (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024b; Nielsen, 2016). For example, gender norms often dictate that female faculty members take on more academic service work and may face social penalties when they resist, reinforcing a gendered pattern that hinders women's career progression (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024a). At the same time, research also documents that the idea that gender equality has been achieved at Danish universities is prevalent (Guschke et al., 2022; Utoft, 2021).

The literature broadly offers two kinds of explanations of why sexist practices may persist in academia without being recognized: individuals cannot see it or will not see it. Sexism can be integrated into structures, cultures and subtle social practices in ways that make it difficult for individuals to recognize. For example, a study carried out by the Seminar Dynamics Collective collected observations from 460 paper seminars to document how women were interrupted more frequently than men and in more patronizing ways (Dupas et al., 2021). Identifying such patterns is generally impossible for any one person. Gender inequality in academia is furthermore maintained by what is *not* happening; when a woman is not invited to have a beer with the guys after a long conference day (Husu, 2020) or is silenced by men's use of sporting metaphors in male-dominated meetings (Oakley, 2014).

Other types of sexist practices may be visible, but individuals are unwilling to see it. Scholars have found that academia's competitive and hierarchical climate stimulates a motivated blindness; while women are more likely than men to see sexual harassment, some research suggests 'that most women may still fall prey to motivated blindness'

(Tenbrunsel et al., 2019, p. 257). Younger scholars find themselves depending upon senior members of the faculty for support to continue a research career. They may – justifiably or not – fear that complaining about sexism could endanger relations with people upon whom they are forced to depend (cf. Thorne & Hochschild, 1997, pp. 518-–519). At the same time, acknowledging unfairness without speaking up is psychologically distressing, so simply *not seeing* sexism is the most comfortable way to enable survival in academia.

Ethical considerations

Participants' inability or unwillingness to recognize sexism creates a delicate starting point for qualitative research; previous research informs us that an awareness of sexism may be experienced as unpleasant and make it more difficult for participants to cope with everyday life at university. Guidelines for research ethics assert that 'research should not inflict harm on participants' but also that 'participants may consent to a certain degree of risk of discomfort and disadvantage' (Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2022, p. 27).

In some literature, all change is considered unethical; for example, Woliver states that researchers must leave participants 'in the same position as you found them. You must do no harm to them' (Woliver, 2002, p. 677). In the design of our study, however, we follow Kostovicova and Knott's (2022) rejection of the equation of change and harm and embrace their notion of 'ethical forms of change' (57); a deliberative approach where ethical procedures are devised to take into account the unpredictability and potential for change integral to qualitative research. This approach is well aligned with other methodological literature that advocates for a qualitative research ethics 'that treats participants more as research collaborators rather than victims in waiting' (Connor et al., 2018, p. 400). As Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) argue, qualitative research has emancipatory potential by encouraging research participants to question assumptions and position themselves in relation to structural injustices; participants are empowered when encouraged to be 'more reflective of their lived experiences' (1035). At the same time, research ethics require that 'participants unwilling to consider subjective change must be respected' (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006, p. 1036). Given this ethical position, we aimed to design a study that balanced the prospect of subjective change among participants without conveying normative expectations indicating that change was presumed or encouraged.

Methodological design

Methodologically, we designed a study that began with focus groups, followed by three weeks of diary writing, an initial individual qualitative interview and a final individual interview approximately 10 months after the focus group (see Figure 1). The design was developed with the support of an academic advisory board and approved by VIVE Research Ethics Committee (journal no. 2024/16). The design aimed to produce valid data on sexism at Danish universities and female PhD students' deliberations over whether they wanted to pursue an academic research career.

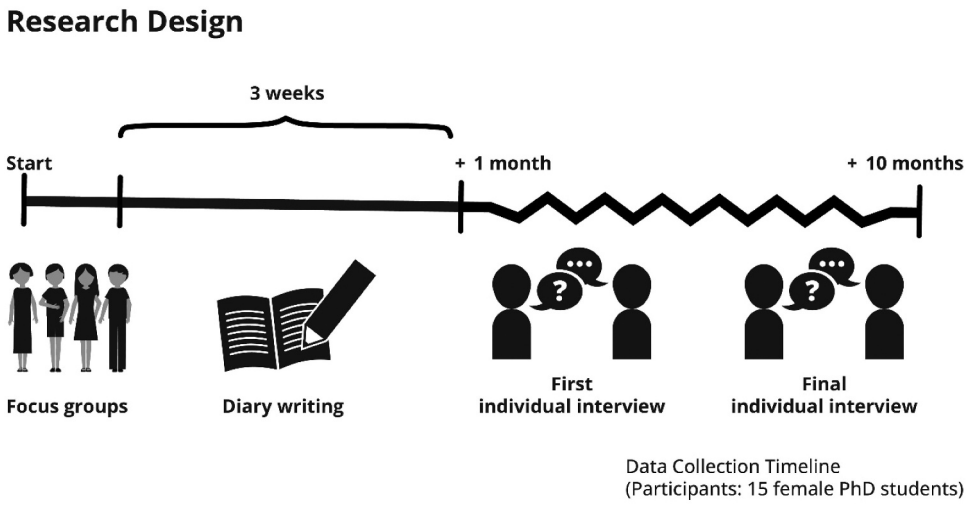


Figure 1. Overview of the methodological research design and longitudinal data collection process.

We recruited participants through an invitation letter circulated to Danish doctorate-granting institutions. Within few days, 44 candidates responded and we selected 16 participants. Selection aimed to increase variation in institutional affiliation (participants came from five different universities), discipline (five from social sciences, five from humanities, five from STEM), and experience (some participants experienced sexism as a severe problem in academia; others did not). The number of participants was necessarily limited by practical constraints, including time and funding, and it was never intended to include all who expressed interest. We contacted everyone who responded to acknowledge their interest. The final selection was guided by logistical considerations for organizing focus groups of four women with busy schedules. We have no reason to believe that anyone felt invalidated or silenced, and we recognize that clear, respectful communication is essential to mitigate such potential ethical concerns in recruitment.

Axes of social similarity and difference (gender, age, race, status etc.) impact researcher-participant relations (Tarrant, 2014) and we took our positionality into account from the beginning. The letter of invitation included names, colour photos and job titles of the researchers. We presented as white females aged 30 to 42 with jobs at a research centre. Participants were white women in their twenties, thirties and forties. While gender, race and age span were shared, researchers and participants differed in relation to job status as participants were about to finish their doctoral thesis. This difference impacted dynamics in data collection. For example, the focus groups were conducted at our research centre, and participants who voiced a desire to leave research implicitly positioned themselves in contrast to the interviewers who evidently had chosen to pursuit a research career.

In the initial phase, before data collection, our deliberations focused on minimizing risks of harm and (re)traumatization. As part of the recruitment process we collected information on participants' experiences of sexism to allow a screening. For example, we did not consider it ethically sound to invite participants with recent personal trauma of rape as this entailed the risk of retraumatizing that participant and other participants.

None of the 44 candidates who contacted us shared experiences of rape, and we did not screen out any participants due to the severity of their experiences in this regard. Still, the knowledge that some participants had experiences of stalking, sexual harassment and other explicit forms of harmful sexist practices was vital in the preparation and compositions of focus groups.

In framing and facilitating the focus groups, we ensured participant commitment to establishing a safe and confidential space (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Four participants were invited to four focus groups, but one had to cancel due to illness, leaving one group with three participants. Each group was guided by a facilitator who steered the discussion supported by an observer who monitored the group process for signs of participant discomfort. The facilitator instructed participants to remain respectful of one another even in cases of disagreement. As part of the focus group facilitation, we used vignettes that described various forms of sexism in academia (Einersen et al., 2021). The vignettes enabled participants to discuss sexism in principled and prototypical ways rather than making the discussion personal. The decision to initiate data collection with focus groups was motivated by the recognition that individuals who experience oppressive practices such as sexism often feel isolated and anxious. Assembling groups facilitates the identification of structures of political, social and cultural forms of power and reduces 'it's probably just me' feelings. For this reason, focus groups have been described as a feminist method with conscious-raising potential (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006; Wilkinson, 1999).

In the diary writing after the focus groups, participants were invited to note reflections in relation to two questions: a) *Did you experience or consider anything today you perceive to be related to sexism, gender stereotypes or gender-based discrimination at the university?* b) *Did you think about your future employment today? If so, what have you been thinking or doing in relation to that?* After completing their diaries, participants shared them with us, and we interviewed them individually soon thereafter. The decision to include diaries was motivated by the recognition that this method is well suited to producing rich and detailed insights on everyday experiences (Harvey, 2011). The diary method remains underused in the social sciences but is currently gaining increased attention in fields such as higher education studies (Cao & Henderson, 2021). In this context, the method provides valuable data for research on decision-making trajectories (Baker, 2023) and doctoral students' social transitions (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). We strategically placed the diary after the focus group, as the experience of group deliberation might make it easier for participants to see and have the kind of language needed to describe forms of sexism that were previously invisible or taken for granted.

In the first individual interviews we talked with participants about their diary reflections and invited them to elaborate on their experiences. The final individual interviews enabled us to follow up on how they navigated their careers after earning their doctorates, which most of participants had attained at the time their final interviews. In the final interviews, participants were also invited to share their experiences of participating in the research project. Both rounds of interviews used semi-structured interview guides.

Each methodological element served a purpose in its own right, but the combination of focus groups, diaries and repeated individual interviews was also motivated by specific concerns. For example, the focus groups were motivated by the rationale of bringing participants together, while the diary writing and qualitative interviews served as opportunities for participants to share experiences individually. The

sequencing also allowed the individual interviews to support focus group and diary writing debriefing (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Diary writing raises particular ethical concerns, as it may give rise to difficult emotions while the researcher is not present and therefore cannot respond in real time. To mitigate these risks, the research design, included a follow-up individual interview, giving participants the opportunity to debrief. Participants were also informed that they could contact the research team at any time during the diary writing period.

Overall, the research project comprised five types of data: information on how participants perceived sexism in their everyday work life at the time of recruitment, focus groups, diary writing, initial and final individual interviews. Data were coded with the use of the NVivo software. The first round of coding identified the most common forms of sexism experienced by the participants and outlined their responses to sexism and important factors in their decision to stay or leave academia after earning the doctorate. These findings have been published in a research report (Lessner et al., 2024). For the present study, we recoded all the qualitative data with a focus on how the research process impacted participants.

Research as intervention: the impact on research participants

This section presents the findings of how research participation impacted the female PhD students recruited for the project. We focus first on cognitive, emotional and social impacts and then unfold the retrospective evaluation of participation taken as a whole, with particular attention to how it impacts participants' prospective career navigation.

To protect the identities of participants, no names or information about institutional affiliations appear in the analysis. This article is not about findings, and we do not focus on distinguishing between different forms of sexism which we have done elsewhere (Lessner et al., 2024).

Cognitive impact

Participating in the research project made several participants think about and notice sexism in academia in new ways. They describe an increased awareness: 'I have noticed more how my gender matters' (Participant K). This makes them understand everyday challenges in new ways: 'I realized it was not me who was wrong. Something structural was wrong' (Participant J). Participant I offers a concrete example of a new recognition regarding the existence of a gendered pattern of academic service work distribution:

> It was mentioned in our focus group and I thought, 'No, that is simply not how it is in my department. It simply isn't'. But then we have had several meetings since [the focus group], and it actually *is* like that. I just hadn't noticed it.

The cognitive impact of research participation varied with participants' awareness at the starting point. While some participants stated that they had not experienced sexism at Danish universities, others were already actively protesting various forms of sexism at the time of recruitment. Participant C was in this latter group and conveys a lack of surprise:

> After all, it was – as I had dreaded – not just where I work there is this kind of, what should we call it, petty sexism. [. . .] But I was already very aware of it [sexism] in advance' of participating in the focus group.

In the case of participant C, the cognitive impact is not transformative but rather confirms her impression that sexism is pervasive. Participant E, who did not experience sexism as a problem at her department, also reported a confirmatory impact of participation. At the time of recruitment, she stated, 'I do not think I have ever experienced what I will define as explicit or direct sexism in my department'. Writing in her diary after the focus group, she reported the following:

> Well, it has been very interesting, because I have really been walking around observing and listening to comments and stuff like that and I must conclude that I actually view it [the department] as very spotless. I mean, there is not much to address, and I have never experienced any of my male colleagues being inappropriate or patronizing.

Taking part in the study has affirmed participant E's understanding of sexism as not a major problem in her workplace. Summing up, we find that the cognitive impact of research participation is not necessarily transformative in the sense that participants change their views on sexism. The impact can also be confirmatory in the sense that participants have their understanding of sexism as either a problem or not a problem confirmed.

Emotional impact

Participants conveyed a wide range of emotional reactions to the research project. For some participants, it spurred anger: 'I was so fuming the day we had the interview because I had been talking about everything that was wrong. I was so mad that I didn't get any work done' (Participant L). Other participants experienced a mixture of feeling validated and saddened:

> This has really somehow spurred many reflections. Yes, it was in quotation marks 'nice' to hear that others have similar experiences. Like, I was not the only one and what I sense *is* real because others recognized it and shared similar experiences. Of course, you are sad when you think about how this is the way it is and how little you can do about it. I think that is also something I realized: I do not have much power where I work. I cannot influence much. I have tried to change something, and, yeah, well [pause] there is some sadness, yes. (Participant J)

Being involved in the research project was linked for some participants to a sense of obligation: 'When you have experienced it on your own body, in different ways, there is a sense of justice, that compels you to act' (Participant N). Participant O also felt it was important for her to participate:

> It was also important for me to participate because I wanted to share my experience as a PhD student coming from another country where gender stereotypes are different than in Denmark. I feel things in different ways than my colleagues from Denmark and I think that was important [to share].

Some participants expressed feelings of collective effervescence. Participant H worked in a department where all professors are male, while the majority of PhD students are female. In a focus group she stated that

> some of us have to take it upon ourselves and show that 'You can do it'. [. . .] I see all of the things [co-participant] brings up; I just think I only have male [senior] colleagues, and we have to retain more women. So, we all have to contribute to a working climate where we feel like staying. [. . .] I am ready to fight for it and prove to ordinary students that you can be a female researcher and do not have to be a white male in your fifties.

Summing up, participation spurred a wide array of emotional reactions among participants. Our analysis suggests that those who spoke about themselves as part of a group tended to feel a sense of empowerment, while those who talked about themselves as isolated individuals leaned more towards feelings of anger or despair. To illustrate this point, participant H refers to a 'we' that all have to contribute in her call for action to improve the working climate at universities, while Participant J talks about 'I' alone that 'cannot influence much'. These emotional reactions are linked with social responses clarified in the next section.

Social impact

In terms of social impact, the research project spurred contrasting reactions, ranging from intensified group identification to withdrawal from research environments and more social isolation. The focus groups facilitated a sharing of experiences that allowed participants to discover similarities and contrasts. In one of the focus groups, participant M exclaimed: 'Much of what you describe is almost 1:1 of what I have experienced' (Participant M). Likewise, participant B stated the following in an interview when reflecting on her experience of participating in the focus group:

> I think it was quite remarkable that [. . .] we come from different faculties but still there was so much commonality in our stories [. . .] both in what we had experienced and how we have tried to react and how it was ineffective. [. . .] Of course, it was frustrating to see a pattern across various disciplines, but it was also somehow therapeutic to see that other people had also been ineffective or reacted in the same way as me.

Prior to taking part in the research, participant B had experienced issues related to sexism in her department and openly voiced her concerns. This implied she was involuntarily cast in a social role as a go-to person. She gives an example of how this played out at a conference:

> Several women contacted me to share their stories of sexual harassment, and some of it – it was an international conference – unquestionably constituted criminal offences. Somehow, it is great to create change in your field, but it is also exhausting when you are standing around eating finger foods and drinking a glass of wine to learn that someone has been subjected to harassment.

For participant B, involvement in the study represented a relief from social obligations: 'Now a research project exists that takes this issue seriously'. She explained how this made her everyday social interaction at the department a bit easier:

> I can detach a bit perhaps from the [pause] I don't want to call it activism, but I cannot find another word for it: my effort to vocalize issues. I may have been able to let it go, and to me that has been positive. It means that I am not quite as mad in department meetings.

Meanwhile, participant D reported that she increasingly stayed away from her department, whose climate she experienced as toxic. In her diary she wrote the following:

> There is a research seminar in my department unit. But I have chosen not to participate because there is a very harsh tone which in my experience especially targets women. I am increasingly withdrawing from activities. All in all, I am focusing on finishing my PhD.

Participation was not cognitively transforming for participant D, as she was already aware of sexism before being recruited. However, her social strategy of staying away from her department intensified. In her final interview, she explains: 'I interact with a few PhD colleagues but have otherwise simply dropped being part of the common environment because I find it to be unhealthy'. Summing up, research participation impacted social orientation in various ways, with some finding it easier to navigate everyday life at their universities and others increasingly withdrawing.

Retrospective evaluation and prospective navigation

In the final interviews conducted 10 months after data collection began, we invited participants to evaluate their experience of participation overall, along with specific elements like focus groups and diaries. Most participants described their overall experience of research participation positively:

> I think that it has been great to be part of the research for several reasons. To be able to contribute to something that is not pleasant, but hopefully [. . .] will make a difference. [. . .] You have been really nice and able to meet us exactly where we are. [. . .] It has felt really safe. (Participant M)

Participant M was a participant who entered the study with experiences of severe sexism. She reports benefiting from the experience of being part of a heterogeneous focus group:

> The experience of [hearing about] some things I recognized a lot but also something I recognized from the time before I started my PhD where I was in a nice and safe environment at the university. I mean, it still exists. So, the combination of something similar nastiness but also something in a completely other ballpark where a person had no explicit unpleasant experiences in their group or field; for me, that has been beneficial for my whole process of reflection.

As part of our research design, we composed heterogenous focus groups with participants from different universities and various experiences of sexism. Participant M came from an environment plagued by sexism, and found it beneficial to hear other participants confirm that nice, safe research environments do exist. By contrast, participant G, who had not experienced the kind of severe sexism that participant M had, found that the heterogeneity of the focus groups made her hesitant to share her experiences:

> In the focus group, I kind of felt that it was difficult because you want to weigh in and say something, but some of the others just had so much more substantial experiences. So, you started doubting whether you were supposed to interrupt with your – what should we call it – less substantial experiences. I remember one participant who was in an absolutely

> dreadful department where she was the only woman. [. . .] Some of the issues [co-participants] identified I didn't fully agree on and it was difficult to say it [. . .] because I will in no way be the judge of their experiences. But I kind of felt we had to be a group and agree with each other and I didn't. [. . .] I kind of felt that if someone said, 'Okay, that may be how you experience it, but in my department, things are very good', it kind of felt as if you were disputing their experiences.

Participant G spells out two risks and limitations embedded in a design including heterogenous focus groups. First, she feels uncomfortable about voicing her own experiences of sexism that appear 'less substantial' in the context of a focus group where others have had severe personal experiences. Second, she indicates a pressure to conform with views she does not actually agree with due to group dynamics. The risks of conformity and (self-)censoring are well known risks in focus group methodology (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006). We sought to mitigate these limitations by combining focus groups with subsequent diaries and individual interviews that allowed participants hesitant to share experiences in focus group a space to share them individually.

The participants' experiences of writing diaries for the research project varied. For some, it did not mean much. Participant F stated, 'I don't think the diary exercise made any impression on me as such'. Participant A entered the research project by noting that 'I have not experienced much that I have thought of as sexist'. In her diary, Participant A describes everyday episodes like a meeting with her supervisor and poses a question of reflection: 'I wonder if he would have spoken so condescendingly to me if I had been a man?' During the diary writing period, Participant A begins to consider whether she is experiencing forms of sexism to which she has thus far been blind. However, in her final interview, Participant A concludes that she still does not see sexism as prevalent in her research environment:

> We were given the task of diary writing, and then you start thinking. I mean, all the things I noted, as you [the interviewer] can see, are [questions] like: 'I wonder whether this would have been different if I was a man?' or 'Would it be different if he was a woman?' [. . .] But nothing jumped out. [. . .] I think we are doing very well [in my research environment].

While the experience of writing a diary did not mean a great deal for some participants, others described it as instructive. Participant H noted in her diary that 'it has been eye-opening to take these notes'. In the final interview, Participant H explained that 'now, in my new job, I am much more aware of speaking up when something like this happens'. Other participants also noted in their final interviews that the awareness gained in the research project influenced how they navigated prospective career options. Participant O explained:

> Especially after the first focus group interview, I started to contemplate some things [. . .] because I am from a different culture with respect to gender in [home country], there are things I don't even notice here in Denmark because I have much worse experiences in [country]. However, then I started notice how my colleagues ask me about professional stuff and how it differs from how they ask my male colleagues, or how they act in general towards me versus the others. It makes me think about what I seek in a new job.

Participant I stated the following in her final interview:

> To me, writing a diary was really cool. I mean, it became an eminent tool of reflection for me, and I ended up writing more for myself than for you. It was a really nice experience. [. . .]

> I was surprised about some of my reflections [. . .] and have been thinking about it a lot since. [. . .] It was really ground-breaking for me. [. . .] I didn't imagine that it would make a difference but it has and it still is. [. . .] If this workplace with the new leader chooses to offer me a job, we need to talk about the situation described in my diary. [. . .] If this is the place where I am going to live my daily life, then I will go to management from day one and make it stop.

Participant I describes her increased awareness as a welcome impact of participation in the research project. A few participants, however, expressed concern that their increased awareness of sexism in universities could have adverse effects, including participant H:

> About this research project, I kind of feel that I would be sorry to see it have the impact that fewer women would want to enter academia. I thought about it when I responded to your letter of invitation: 'Oh no, will it now be even more difficult to convince my female students to become PhDs?'

At the same time, participant H underlined that she thinks increased awareness is necessary:

> I think awareness will make a huge difference because I really don't think my superiors think about it in their everyday. I really don't think they do. So, they need someone to hold up a mirror in front of them and say, 'Look, there is a problem'.

Participant F also expressed ambivalence: 'it is not necessarily a good thing to give so much attention to how difficult it is, how many battles you still have to fight as a woman in this setting'. Participant F emphasized in her interviews, the focus group and her diary that it is important for her not to be cast as a victim. She expresses an awareness of gendered structural injustices but does not feel she can or will fight this battle:

> We talk a lot about this topic [gender], and sometimes I think we make ourselves victims. And I find it very difficult as an individual to be in that role. Like, I have to make it my narrative, that because I am a woman I am unfairly treated. And no doubt I probably am in some ways, but I just don't feel like making it my narrative. [. . .] I think it is super cool that some of the other women in the focus group said that they wanted to stay in research and open doors for other women. You can only applaud people who somehow want to dedicate their life to that [. . .] but I just think it would be too much; I mean, I cannot do that. It is not my battle to fight.

Summing up, participants reflected back on various impacts and shared their thoughts – at that point in time – on whether those impacts prospectively influenced their career navigation, such as where they wanted to work after earning their doctorates. For some participants, the research project did not have much impact, whereas others described it as ground-breaking. While some participants shared concerns, such as the possibility that increased awareness of sexism might prospectively deter women from applying for PhD programs or cast them in victim roles, none of the participants described their participation in the research as harmful.

Discussion: ethical change and research validity

In a call for a deliberative approach to research ethics, Kostovicova and Knott (2022) argue that the ethics of unpredictability of how qualitative research participation impact

participants remains underemphasized in methodological literature. Researchers are routinely required to consider typical ethical questions of consent, anonymity and security but rarely 'asked to engage ethically with the process of self-reflection by participants themselves on their participation in the research process' (Kostovicova & Knott, 2022, p. 63). They are not calling for regulation because 'it is increasingly evident that "more" rules and guidelines do not mean "better" ethics' (67); rather, they advocate for a deliberative approach that considers the experience of change in ethical ways.

In alignment with this argument, we have aimed to take the predictability of unpredictable change into account throughout our research process through various deliberate strategies. For example, we screened participants before inviting them to focus groups to minimize the risk of (re)traumatization (cf. section on methodological design). However, no amount of preparedness can eliminate the unpredictability of qualitative research (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). We could not know what the participants would share in focus groups or predict how the experience of diary writing might change them. Following Kostovicova and Knott (2022) we 'embrace the notion of ethical change' (57). The primary change spurred by this study was an increased attention to or awareness of sexism, and we want to argue that two deliberative strategies warranted the ethical soundness of the change potentially inflicted on participants in this study.

First, it was important that the topic of sexism was clearly communicated in the letter of invitation and that participants voluntarily contacted us to be part of the study. This indicates a 'consent to a certain degree of risk of discomfort' (Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2022, p. 27) given by informed and competent adults (Sim & Waterfield, 2019, p. 3011). We argue that an approach that seeks to prevent participants from gaining more awareness would be an example of infantilizing research subjects (Connor et al., 2018). Second, the prospect of raised awareness was a possibility; not an expectation. As the analysis makes clear, participation did not necessarily change participants' views. For some participants, the study encouraged them to temporarily devote more attention to sexism, but the experience confirmed their previously held beliefs that sexism was not a prevalent problem in their everyday work in their departments. In our conception, ethical forms of change require that 'participants unwilling to consider subjective change must be respected' (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006, p. 1036). Hence, it was important for us that participants did not feel any expectation that their involvement should entail changed perceptions.

The ethical considerations are linked with methodological concerns to secure the validity of the study. Overall, we have refrained from choosing between the practical requirements of transactional validity and the emancipatory purposes of transformational validity to instead embrace an interactive, procedural understanding of validity (Cho & Trent, 2006). To optimize validity in a transactional sense, it is important that participants are enabled to convey an accurate representation of their reality, regardless of whether they perceive sexism as a problem or not. To secure this, we employed traditional transactional validity techniques such as triangulation. For example, we strategically combined a focus group methodology, which carries the inherent risks of conformity and (self-)censoring (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006) and thereby limits participants' ability or willingness to voice their perceptions accurately, with diaries and individual interviews. This is an example of a methodological strategy designed to optimize validity in a transactional sense.

To optimize validity in a transformational sense (Cho & Trent, 2006), the design, timing and sequencing of data collection methodologies was important. By making focus groups the first phase of data collection, we used the consciousness-raising and language-stimulating potential of focus groups in relation to the illumination of social, political and cultural forms of power (Wilkinson, 1999). Focus groups were followed by the use of the diary method, which is also well established as a valuable methodology to facilitate reflection (Harvey, 2011). These methodological elements were followed by individual interviews where participants were invited to share their reflections on whether and how their participation had a transformational impact. This longitudinal design aimed to optimize validity in a transformational sense.

Previous research on sexism in academia roughly falls into two camps regarding research participation impact. The emancipatory research tradition (see, e.g. the anthology *Academic Women* by Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2024) is highly attuned to participant impact, as studies explicitly aim to give participants a voice, raise awareness, and build communities (Leigh et al., 2024). In contrast, other forms of research (see, e.g. the review of research on sexism in academia by Tenbrunsel et al., 2019) focus on findings such as the prevalence of sexual harassment, rather than on the research's impact on the participants involved in specific studies. These two types of research function in tandem. Findings-oriented studies reveal patterns of crucial importance for emancipatory research: 'Knowing about the oppression of women depends on an opportunity to examine their relative positions vis-à-vis men' (Oakley, 2000, p. 299). Research that documents, for example, decreased retention of female PhD candidates in research environments with a high prevalence of sexism (cf. the quantitative part of our study; Lessner et al., 2024) does not initially aim to impact participants (in this case, survey respondents). However, once the findings are published, they have the potential to affect both participants and the public by raising awareness of the consequences of sexism in academia.

The challenges faced by research on sexism produced by individuals' inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the problem are similar to challenges confronting research on other types of oppressive structures, such as racism. Corresponding to the challenges of employing qualitative methodologies to study sexism in societies swayed by unconsciously gendered thinking, researchers may struggle to unveil racism in race-mute societies. As Hoong Sin (2005) clarifies; 'data on the experience of racism are very much a consequence of the process of research'(101). Wojnicka and Nowicka (2023) recommend a triangulation of methodologies; they 'stress the risks of single-method approaches that treat the disclosure of racism on face value' (15) and point to the value of a longitudinal design that allows a language to describe the experience of oppressive structures to develop over time.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented a study of research as intervention through a systematic analysis of data collected as part of a qualitative study of sexism in academia. For our longitudinal design, we recruited 15 female PhD candidates in the final stages of their projects through a letter of invitation circulated in Danish universities. First, the article explicates prospective ethical and methodological considerations ingrained in the study

design including focus groups, diaries and repeated individual interviews. Second, we examine the cognitive, social and emotional impacts of participating in the study. A retrospective evaluation shows that most participants experienced various forms of cognitive, emotional and social impact, with raised awareness of sexism as a common change.

Building on previous methodological literature, we make the case that change can be ethical (Kostovicova & Knott, 2022) and aligned with research validity (Cho & Trent, 2006) through a triangulated research design that deliberatively takes the potential of change into account. Through our research design, we kept findings of previous research in mind by recognizing that sexism may be invisible and taken for granted in everyday life. We used the strength of the focus group methodology to raise awareness about power structures and were prepared for the possibility that participants' perceptions of everyday reality might change. However, we were also concerned not to convey any normative expectations suggesting that subjective change was presumed or encouraged. We argue that these ethical and methodological considerations allowed us to ensure both participant safety and the research validity of the study.

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