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# Sexist Beliefs in a Sexist World: Exploring the Causal Role of Sexism in Sexist Beliefs

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## Abstract

The claim that prejudice causes prejudiced beliefs is a familiar one. Call it *the causal claim*. In this paper, I turn to sexism and sexist beliefs to explore the causal claim within the context of current debates in the ethics of beliefs about moral encroachment on epistemic rationality. My goal is to consider and arbitrate between plausible ways of fleshing out the idea that the non-doxastic dimensions of sexism (including its motivational and affective components as well as its structural and institutional varieties) cause sexist beliefs in a normatively significant way – that is, in a way that can render those beliefs epistemically deficient. I suggest that, in conjunction with the assumption that sexist beliefs are epistemically irrational, each position in the ethics of belief debate lends itself to a different interpretation of the causal claim: purism about epistemic rationality supports a narrow interpretation, while revisionism supports a broad one. After developing each interpretation, I argue that – at the heart of the disagreement between them – is a different story about the normative significance of the fact that evidence about an unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance. Along the way, I consider what it means for evidence to be “stacked in favor” of sexist beliefs.

**Keywords:** Sexism; epistemic rationality; moral encroachment; motivated reasoning; prejudice

## 1. Introduction

It is widely thought that prejudiced beliefs are epistemically irrational. Perhaps this is just a brute fact. But the contention that prejudiced beliefs, in all their very many forms, are epistemically irrational is more plausible if there is something about them that ensures epistemic deficiency. In light of this, it is natural to claim that prejudice *causes* prejudiced beliefs. Call this *the causal claim*. If prejudice causes prejudiced beliefs, then we have a principled answer to why prejudiced beliefs are epistemically irrational: they are illicitly based on prejudice and, thus, not based on supporting evidence. It is characteristic of prejudice, after all, that it leads us to mishandle evidence and reason fallaciously – it causes us to neglect some pieces of evidence and misinterpret others, to draw hasty conclusions and overestimate base rates.

The view that prejudice causes prejudiced beliefs has a venerable history, especially when it comes to racism and racist beliefs. For example, on Kwame Anthony Appiah’s view, racial prejudice inevitably leads one to accept racialized beliefs (Appiah 1990);

on Lewis Gordon's view, racism is a flaw in one's beliefs that reflects some moral deficiency in one's psychology or character (Gordon 1995); and, on J.L.A Garcia's view, "beliefs are racist in virtue of their coming from racism in desire, wishes, and intentions of individuals" (Garcia 1996: 11).

In this paper, I turn to sexism and sexist beliefs in order to explore the claim that sexism causes sexist beliefs. More specifically, my focus is the claim that sexism causes sexist beliefs *in a normatively significant sense* – that is, in a way that makes, or can make, those beliefs epistemically deficient. Call this "the causal claim."

My goal is to explore the causal claim within the context of current debates about the ethics of belief – in particular, the debate between purist and revisionist accounts of epistemic rationality. On purism, epistemic rationality is determined alone by evidential considerations; on revisionism, moral considerations get a say in epistemic rationality. Both purists and revisionists agree that an epistemically rational belief is based on sufficient supporting evidence. What they disagree about is what counts as sufficient evidence: revisionists contend that what counts as sufficient evidence varies from context to context in accordance with the moral stakes, whereas purists contend that it remains constant across contexts.

In conjunction with the assumption that sexist beliefs are epistemically irrational, each position in this debate, I suggest, lends itself to a different interpretation of the causal claim. Consider, first, one revisionist's contention that – because we live in a sexist world – the world "stacks evidence in favor" of sexist beliefs.<sup>1</sup> This contention can be understood as a broad interpretation of the causal claim that dovetails with moral encroachment on epistemic rationality. On this interpretation, it is possible for a belief to be caused by sexism in a normatively significant way by being based on evidence that is there because of sexism. In contrast, a narrower interpretation of the causal claim says that a belief is caused by sexism in a normatively significant way only if it is directly based on sexism. This interpretation, I suggest, fits best with purist accounts of epistemic rationality. After exploring each interpretation, I argue that – at the heart of the disagreement between the two interpretations – is a different story about the normative significance of the fact that evidence about some unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance.<sup>2</sup> I consider each story, and how to go about arbitrating which story is most plausible.

## 2. Preliminaries

At the psychological level, prejudice (and sexism *qua* form of prejudice) is a multifaceted attitude, with interrelated cognitive, affective, and motivational components. My primary focus will be on one of the cognitive components of sexism: sexist belief – even more specifically, the production of sexist beliefs.

<sup>1</sup>This contention is adapted from Basu (2019b: 2497). Basu's original claim is about racism and racist beliefs.

<sup>2</sup>By "unfortunate truth," I mean to refer, broadly, to regrettable or bad facts about the world: things would be better if the world was not the way it is (in the particular way captured by the fact). My focus here is on facts regarding a negative or diminishing property being common among a historically socially marginalized group – namely, women. It is *true* that some negative and diminishing properties are common among women. And this truth is *unfortunate* (or regrettable or otherwise bad) for a couple of reasons. First, the property being common among women may harm or disadvantage women and particular individuals *qua* women; and second, the reason why the property is common among women traces back to discrimination or prejudice against women – women have historically had a lack of opportunities, privileges, and resources. It is unfortunate that the world is such that a morally irrelevant feature of social identity like gender can limit someone's opportunities, privileges, and resources, especially in ways that make it such that, given her gender, a woman is likely to have some negative or diminishing property.

Very broadly, my goal is to explore the causal role that the non-doxastic components of sexism play in the production of sexist beliefs in the ways that help make those beliefs morally and epistemically deficient. I will be referring to these non-doxastic components of sexism merely as “sexism.” So, the causal claim – that sexism causes sexist beliefs – amounts to the claim that the non-doxastic cognitive (e.g., cognitive biases), affective, and motivational components of sexism, as well as its structural and institutional varieties, cause sexist beliefs in a (potentially) normatively significant way.<sup>3</sup> I take it that sexism causes sexist beliefs in a (potentially) normatively significant way insofar as the causal role that sexism plays renders (or, under certain conditions, *can* render)<sup>4</sup> those beliefs epistemically or morally deficient. My primary focus here will be on the epistemic dimension of normative significance. I will consider plausible ways of fleshing out the idea that sexism causes sexist beliefs in ways that (can) make them epistemically irrational.<sup>5</sup>

One other preliminary note about the causal claim: it is possible to take the claim as posing a necessary condition on sexist beliefs, in which case a belief is sexist only if it is caused by sexism in a normatively significant way. The upshot of accepting such a necessary condition is that it would allow us to explain why *all* sexist beliefs are epistemically irrational. For this reason, among others,<sup>6</sup> I am sympathetic to the view that being caused by sexism is something like a necessary condition for sexist belief. But I think the following discussion is interesting and significant for those who reject this analysis, and so I want to remain officially neutral on whether being caused by sexism is strictly necessary for sexist belief.

Before moving forward, I want to flag a few more assumptions that I will be making. First – as already mentioned – I assume that prejudiced (and, thus, sexist) beliefs are epistemically irrational. In particular, I assume that sexist beliefs are *doxastically* (rather than propositionally) epistemically irrational. A (doxastically) epistemically irrational belief is either not sufficiently supported by the believer’s evidence, or else is not held on the basis of that evidence.

This assumption entails that there are no (doxastically) epistemically rational sexist beliefs.<sup>7</sup> It also entails that “sexist” is a normative status, not just a descriptive one: sexist beliefs are, by virtue of being sexist, bad, and we ought not have them. Relatedly, I assume that this status does not supervene only on a belief’s propositional content: a belief is not sexist just by virtue of its content.<sup>8</sup> Finally, I assume that sexist beliefs do not

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<sup>3</sup>To clarify: I do not intend to imply that sexist beliefs are merely parasitic on more “fundamental” components of sexism, or that they have a merely derivative role in sexism. I also do not mean to imply that sexist beliefs interact with the other components of sexism only, or primarily, by being caused by them. It is possible that sexist beliefs, and the ideologies they constitute, are fundamental to sexism in ways that are beyond my focus.

<sup>4</sup>As we will see, some ways in which sexism causes sexist beliefs render any belief so caused epistemically deficient; but other ways in which sexism causes beliefs renders only *some* beliefs so caused epistemically deficient. I will refer to the latter ways as “potentially” normatively significant. See §4.3 for further discussion.

<sup>5</sup>Throughout the paper, “sexism causes sexist beliefs” is meant to refer to the idea that sexism causes sexist beliefs in a *normatively significant way* – I will sometimes leave the italicized clause implicit.

<sup>6</sup>For example, this necessary condition would codify the relationship between sexism and sexist beliefs, and it would allow us to explain why some beliefs are distinctly *sexist* as opposed to more generally morally and epistemically problematic.

<sup>7</sup>I take it that there may be some sexist beliefs that are propositionally rational. In what follows, “epistemic rationality” is meant to refer to *doxastic* epistemic rationality.

<sup>8</sup>See Begby (2021) for a view of prejudiced belief according to which “prejudiced” does supervene on propositional content; see Kelly (*forthcoming*) for a critical discussion of this part of Begby’s view.

have to be false: there can be true sexist beliefs. It may be true, for example, that Sally is bad at math and yet a belief with that content may be sexist.

Beyond these theoretical assumptions, I rely on nontechnical, everyday conceptions and intuitive judgments about sexism and sexist beliefs. In fact – beyond the modest assumption that sexist beliefs have or implicate some sex-based content – I hope to keep my commitments about the propositional content of sexist beliefs limited. Many sexist beliefs involve, or derive from, negative stereotypes about women: women are hyperemotional, susceptible to hysteria, fragile, gossipy, nags, weak, “bitchy,” dependent, docile, more agreeable/accommodating, less competent, less rational, less decisive, worse at math, and so on. Other sexist beliefs may involve (implicit) prescriptions about what it is to be a “good” woman: women belong in the home, women are not suited to be president or CEO, wives should submit to their husbands, women should be caring and nurturing and attentive, women are mothers and caretakers. And, while some sexist beliefs target women as a group, some others target individuals *qua* women: Mary should really smile more, or there is just something *off* about Hillary (who happens to be violating dominant gender norms).

### 3. Sexism causes sexist beliefs: the narrow interpretation

What, exactly, does it mean for a belief to be caused by sexism in the relevant sense – that is, in a way that renders, or can render, that belief epistemically deficient?

One way of answering this question – which I call “the narrow interpretation” of the causal claim – is that sexism causes a belief in the relevant sense insofar as the belief is directly based on sexism. In this section, I explore a couple of mechanisms by which sexism may serve as the direct basis of a belief: a belief may be based on desires that are constitutive of ill will or lack of good will toward women (§3.1), or it may be based on culturally prominent stereotypes and narratives that have been encoded by an individual believer (§3.2). These desires and encoded stereotypes and narratives infect believers’ reasoning process, leading them to favor a predetermined outcome and, thereby, result in beliefs that are not based on the evidence.<sup>9</sup>

Because of this, any belief, including a sexist one, caused by sexism in the narrow sense is automatically epistemically irrational. Both purists and revisionists agree that a belief is epistemically rational only if it is based on sufficient supporting evidence. If a belief is directly based on sexism – if it is based on a desire constitutive of ill will or lack of good will toward women, or on an encoded stereotype or social narrative – then it is guaranteed not to be based on evidence the believer may have, sufficient or otherwise. So, on the narrow interpretation, any belief caused by sexism is epistemically deficient according to both purism and revisionism.

#### 3.1. Motivated reasoning

Perhaps the most familiar mechanism by which sexism may serve as the basis of belief is the one in play during motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning occurs when a believer “has a desire or preference for a particular conclusion and that desire guides their reasoning in a way that facilitates their drawing that conclusion” (Ellis 2022: 2). At the

<sup>9</sup>Importantly, I do not intend to give a comprehensive overview of the ways in which a belief may be directly based on sexism: there may be other mechanisms that I do not discuss, and there may be different plausible ways of developing or fleshing out the mechanisms I do discuss. My goals are to clarify how, exactly, a belief may be directly based on sexism, and also to show that, despite its narrowness, this interpretation allows for sexism to cause sexist beliefs in an array of theoretically rich and interesting ways.

psychological level, sexism is often taken to constitutively involve volitional, affective, and/or motivational states that, in turn, implicate various desires. These desires then go on to be involved in the sort of motivated reasoning that gives rise to sexist beliefs.

For the sake of simplicity and clarity of exposition, I will take on board a volitional account of the relevant psychological states, and account for them in terms of will.<sup>10</sup> Broadly, at the individual level, sexism constitutively involves ill will, or a lack of good will toward women and, derivatively, toward (some) individuals *qua* women. To have good will toward women, and, derivatively, individuals *qua* women is to desire and care about their flourishing or, perhaps more mundanely, their welfare, broadly construed to countenance considerations about rights, interests, preferences, and autonomy. To lack good will toward women is to *not* desire or care about their welfare, or at least not to a morally sufficient degree. To have ill will toward women is to desire and care about a deficiency in their welfare. This may include a desire to mistreat or control women, or to “keep them in their place.” Such desires are inimical to respecting women, and their autonomy, interests, preferences, and rights.

Before considering how the desires and cares constitutive of someone’s will toward women can be the basis of belief, one important clarification is in order: although ill will or lack of good will toward women may be correlated with felt contempt or animosity toward women, someone with the relevant volitional states may not have such feelings toward all women, or each individual woman he comes across. As Kate Manne (2017) points out, a misogynist can love his mom or wife, in full knowledge of her womanhood. On my view, that’s because the ill will or lack of good will toward women may give rise to radically different treatment (and feelings) toward “good” women and “bad” women, where – following Manne – “good” women are those who abide by their society’s patriarchal norms and “bad” women contravene those norms. More specifically, on Manne’s view, “good” women are willing givers of feminine-coded goods (e.g., nurture, affection, and sex), and they do seek out masculine-coded goods to which only men are entitled (e.g., leadership, power, and money).

Ill will or lack of good will toward women, then, may manifest in felt animosity toward only “bad women,” or individual “bad women,” who fail to abide by the relevant patriarchal norms. Such animosity – or the potential for such animosity, even when it is not triggered by “good” women – flows from ill will or a lack of good will toward women. For example, consider the desire to keep women in their place (where “their place” is defined by the ruling patriarchal order). This desire is inimical to the desires and cares that are constitutive of good will toward women, but it is frustrated only by “bad” women, and it is this frustration that spurs felt animosity toward women. The upshot is that someone may be sincerely warm (even loving!) toward “good” women, but nevertheless still harbor ill will or a lack of good will toward women, even when any felt animosity remains latent. A sexist does not necessarily “hate” (all) women.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Arpaly (2003) and Arpaly and Schroeder (2014) develop a volitional account of prejudiced belief: on their view, all prejudiced beliefs flow from ill will or a lack of good will. Their account echoes J.L.A. Garcia’s volitional account of racism (which we might extend to other forms of prejudice such as sexism) – see Garcia (1996, 1997, 1999). That said, the plausibility of the narrow interpretation of the causal claim does not depend on a volitional account of the psychological states of sexism – I take it that the narrow interpretation can be plausibly fleshed out by appealing to a number of other accounts.

<sup>11</sup>This is important because, as Manne (2017) points out, people who hate (all) women seem to be quite rare. Lawrence Blum (2002: 210) makes a similar point about the relative commonness of what he calls antipathy racism vs. inferiorizing racism – inferiorizing racism seems to be more common. So, if being sexist constitutively involves having the relevant volitional states, and those volitional states entailed hating (all) women, then few people today would be sexist, and beliefs caused by the relevant states would be rare and less theoretically important. But, it seems, having ill will or a lack of good will toward women does not have this implication and often comes in more subtle varieties.

With that in mind, let's turn to how desires and cares constitutive of ill will or a lack of good will toward women can serve as the direct basis of belief. Consider some paradigmatic sexist belief – say, that women are unfit for high political office. First, consider a sexist who harbors ill will toward women: perhaps he wants to mistreat or control women, or he wants to “keep them in their place.” The desires cause the sexist to favor a particular predetermined conclusion when thinking about the roles of women: recognizing that women are fit for high political office would be in tension with his desire to keep women in their place, and so this desire leads him to favor the view that women are simply unfit.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, the relevant desires can lead to sexist beliefs because those beliefs are wish-fulfilling: the sexist might believe that women are weak or fragile (and, thus, unfit for high political office) so that he can justify his efforts to control and dominate the women in his life as benevolent (Arpaly and Schroeder 2014: 235).

Now consider a milder sexist who does not have ill will toward women: he does not hate women, nor does he desire to mistreat or control them or to “keep them in their place.” But he does want to fit in with others in his traditionalistic community – where inferiorizing views of women serve as a marker of belonging – and this desire causes him to favor gender views embraced by his community, including the belief that women are unfit for high political office. Wanting to fit in is not a morally bad desire, but it leads this sexist to adopt a belief that it is unlikely he would have if he cared more about the welfare of women.

As these examples make clear, a belief based on the desires and cares constitutive of ill will or a lack of good will is not based on evidence. In cases of sexist belief caused by ill will, the relevant desire is morally bad. In cases of sexist belief caused by a lack of good will, the relevant desire is not morally bad itself, but it causes a belief that would have been unlikely if the believer had the desires and cares constitutive of good will toward women to a morally sufficient degree.

### 3.2. Encoded bias

Another mechanism by which sexism can serve as the basis of belief is the one involved in encoded bias.<sup>13</sup> Encoded bias against women starts with culturally prominent descriptions of and prescriptions for women – for example, gendered stereotypes and social narratives. These stereotypes and social narratives are sexist to the extent that, together, they socially disadvantage women and, perhaps more importantly for our purposes, foster an unfavorable shared understanding of (some subset of) women.

Importantly, a stereotype or narrative may be culturally prominent even if it is not widely endorsed. Consider the stereotype that women are hyperemotional. This stereotype may be culturally dominant in a society even if most people in that society do not outright believe that women are hyperemotional – the stereotype may still be prevalent in the news, entertainment, humor, stories, and historical interpretations. Or consider the social narrative that “good” women are nurturers and caretakers. This narrative may be culturally dominant even if most people do not outright believe that women should be nurturers and caretakers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>See Avnur & Scot-Kakures (2015) for a detailed exploration of how desires can illicitly influence beliefs.

<sup>13</sup>By “encoded bias,” I mean something close to what is sometimes referred to as “implicit bias,” although implicit bias is often taken to include more than just encoded bias. See Gender (2011) for a discussion of the epistemic significance of implicit bias.

<sup>14</sup>Oftentimes, such stereotypes and narratives are enshrined in societal structures and institutions through laws, regulations, norms, and customs in ways that not only disadvantage women but also serve to perpetuate those stereotypes and narratives. Consider situations in which paid parental leave is offered only to mothers, thus confirming and perpetuating the idea that women (not men) are, or should be, caretakers.

When certain stereotypes or narratives are culturally prominent in a society, people in that society will regularly encode them even if they do not endorse them. For example, people may associate women with fragility, or “good” women with being nurturers and caretakers, even though they do not believe that women are fragile or should be caretakers – in fact, even if they are avowed feminists who not only have ample good will toward women but also knowledge of the gender injustices that have given rise to the stereotypes and narratives in question.<sup>15</sup> These encoded stereotypes and narratives can be triggered even in people who do not endorse them by encounters with women, or representations of them.

During socialization, a culture’s beliefs about various social groups are frequently activated and become well-learned. As a result, these deep-rooted stereotypes and evaluative biases are automatically activated, without conscious awareness or intention, in the presence of members of stereotyped groups (or their symbolic equivalent). (Divine and Sharp 2009: 62)

When an encoded stereotype or narrative is triggered, it can illicitly sway the belief formation process: the stereotype or narrative guides reasoning in ways that favor outcomes that align with the relevant stereotype or narrative. For example, encoded stereotypes about women lacking competence or leadership ability may cause members of a hiring committee for an executive position to believe that an application with a man’s name is more impressive than an application with a woman’s name even though both applicants are equally well qualified, or it may cause a voter to believe that there is “just something off” about a woman candidate running for president.<sup>16</sup> An encoded narrative about women being homemakers may cause a husband to believe that the division of domestic labor between him and his wife is equal, when in fact she does significantly more.<sup>17</sup> An encoded narrative that women should be accommodating may cause a university student to believe that his female professor is a “bitch” when she is simply enforcing the class rules about deadlines spelled out on the syllabus. And an encoded stereotype about women and hysteria may cause a doctor to attribute a female patient’s complaints of chest pain to anxiety, or to underestimate the severity of her pain.<sup>18</sup>

A belief based on encoded stereotypes or narratives is not based on the evidence. An encoded culturally prominent stereotype about women being hyperemotional, for example, does not, itself, bear on the truth of the beliefs it causes – after all, culturally prominent stereotypes tend to be false and unreliable. The same thing can be said about encoded cultural narratives. Beliefs that are based in part on a stereotype or narrative that has been encoded, then, are not based on the available evidence, sufficient or not.

To sum up: according to the narrow interpretation of the causal claim, a belief is caused by sexism in a normatively significant way to the extent that it is directly based on

<sup>15</sup>See Gendler (2011: 43–44) for further discussion.

<sup>16</sup>See Manne (2017) for related discussions about the role of misogyny in widespread negative perceptions of Hillary Clinton and Julia Gillard in the American and Australian political context, respectively.

<sup>17</sup>Despite increasing belief in gender inequality, studies show that women continue to do disproportionately more unpaid domestic labor relative to their male partners, even when both partners work full-time outside the home. Kimmel (2000: 128–9) notes that men who explicitly believe in gender equality do not tend to do more domestic labor; rather – when it comes to men and the division of domestic labor – the most significant effect of a man believing in gender equality is that he tends to overestimate the amount of domestic labor he performs.

<sup>18</sup>See Barnes (2020) for discussion about the treatment of women’s pain in medical contexts.

sexism. The sexist basis of a belief may be a desire that is implicated in having ill will or a lack of good will toward women, or it may be a culturally prominent stereotype or narrative that has been encoded. Either way, the relevant component of sexism guides the belief formation process in ways that favor a particular predetermined outcome: the resulting beliefs are based on sexism and, thus, not on available evidence, rendering them epistemically irrational according to both purism and revisionism.

#### 4. Sexism causes sexist beliefs: the broad interpretation

Recently, there has been increasing attention among epistemologists on cases of belief that seem to be both sexist and epistemically rational. These cases foreground an interesting epistemological possibility: that the evidence is “stacked in favor” of sexist beliefs. This possibility motivates a broader interpretation of the causal claim. On this interpretation – call it the *broad interpretation* – a belief may be caused by sexism in a normatively significant way when it is based on evidence that is there because of sexism.

In this section, I consider what it means for the evidence to be stacked in favor of sexist beliefs (§4.1) and build on this idea to develop the broad interpretation of the causal claim (§4.2). I then situate the broad interpretation within current discussions of moral encroachment on epistemic rationality (§4.3).

##### 4.1. Stacking the evidence

Let’s start with the idea that the evidence is stacked in favor of sexist beliefs. The basic thought here is that the world itself is prejudiced (sexist) and so gives evidence for prejudiced (sexist) beliefs. And, since the world itself is sexist and it is the world that provides evidence for our beliefs, then *of course* there are beliefs that are both sexist and supported by the evidence (at least, supported by evidence that is sufficient to rationalize beliefs in many contexts). Consider the following passages from Basu’s work.

The world is an unjust place and there may be many morally objectionable beliefs that it justifies. As a result, the evidence might be stacked in favour of racist beliefs. The world we inhabit is a racist one, so it is no surprise that some of our beliefs are racist as well. (Basu 2019b: 2513–2514)

It is not up for debate that we live in a world that has been shaped by, and continues to be shaped by, racist attitudes and racist institutions. From the transatlantic slave trade, to anti-miscegenation laws, lynchings, redlining, and voter identification laws that “target African-Americans with almost surgical precision,” racism is an unfortunate part of the fabric of our world. It should not be surprising, then, that as a result of structural racism, there may be morally objectionable beliefs that are well-supported by the evidence. Further, some of the morally objectionable beliefs could be paradigmatic examples of racist beliefs. (Basu 2019b: 2498)

A consequence of living in a society shaped by racist attitudes and institutions is that the epistemically rational agent – the one who attends to and believes on the basis of the strength of their evidence – may be forced to believe in accordance with evidence that supports beliefs that they would otherwise reflectively reject. (Basu 2019c: 9)

Although Basu’s points are about racism and racist beliefs, they apply to sexism and sexist beliefs as well: sexism causes something to be true about the world – sexism causes it to be the case, for example, that some negative or diminishing property is prominent



among women – and thus causes there to be evidence that this is true, and this evidence goes on to be the basis of beliefs. Some of these beliefs are sexist. This is what it means for the world to “stack the evidence in favor of” sexist beliefs. There are a number of cases that give traction to this idea. Consider two such cases.

**The Consultant** Steve, a financial consultant specializing in medical practices, is visiting a large surgery center. Steve knows that the vast majority of women employed at the center are nurses and that all men employed at the center are surgeons. A woman, Jane, wearing scrubs walks past Steve in the hallway. He comes to believe that she is probably a nurse.<sup>19</sup>

**The Teacher** Stacy is a fifth-grade teacher at a public elementary school. It is the first day of school, and she is meeting this year’s students for the first time. Two new students, Jenna and Joel, walk in. Stacy knows that, on average, girls consistently score lower than boys on standardized math exams. In light of this, Stacy comes to believe that Jenna probably scored lower than Joel on last year’s statewide standardized math exam.

The beliefs in question are Steve’s belief about Jane and Stacy’s belief about Jenna. These beliefs seem sexist. But they are also supported by the sort of statistical evidence that seems sufficient to rationalize inferential beliefs about things like the weather. For example, suppose that 9 out of 10 women employed in the surgery center are nurses, and that there’s a 9 out of 10 chance that any randomly selected girl scored lower on last year’s standardized math exam than a randomly selected boy. If we know that there is a 9 out of 10 chance of rain tomorrow, it is rational for us to inferentially believe that it will probably rain tomorrow. So it seems that – if the evidential threshold that a belief needs to pass in order to be epistemically rational holds steady across contexts – then the evidence that Steve and Stacy have to support their respective beliefs about Jane and Jenna is sufficient to make those beliefs epistemically rational.

#### 4.2. *The broad interpretation*

The idea that the evidence is “stacked in favor” of sexist beliefs highlights another potential way that sexism can cause sexist beliefs in a normatively relevant sense – namely, when sexism causes something to be true and, thus, causes there to be evidence supporting this truth, and this evidence goes on to be the basis of belief. As we will see in §4.3, some beliefs caused in this way are epistemically irrational according to revisionism. So, within a revisionist framework, sexism causing a belief in this way has the potential to render that belief epistemically irrational, and this potential is realized when the belief being so caused thereby ends up epistemically irrational. This gives us

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<sup>19</sup>This is supposed to be an example of a case in which a believer ascribes a “negative or diminishing” property to an individual based on her apparent social group. To clarify: there is nothing in itself diminishing or bad about being a nurse. As most anybody who has been cared for in a hospital by nurses will readily agree, nurses are highly competent, highly skilled medical professionals. The point here is that, fairly or not, nurses occupy a lower-status position in many medical settings than surgeons: surgeons are seen as having contextually valuable credentials, expertise, capital, and power that nurses lack. So, it can be diminishing for someone in a higher status position (e.g., surgeon, pilot, professor, and executive) to be mistaken for someone in a lower-status position (e.g., nurse, flight attendant, grad student, and administrative assistant) – the person is seen as lacking valuable credentials, expertise, capital, or power. See Schroeder (2018: 124) for further discussion about what it means for a belief to diminish.

the broad interpretation of the causal claim: a belief is caused by sexism in a normatively significant way insofar as it is either (i) directly based on sexism or, potentially, (ii) based on evidence that is there because of sexism. Call (i) *the direct causal pathway*, and (ii) *the indirect causal pathway*.

The broad interpretation allows for the beliefs in question in *The Consultant* and *The Teacher* to be caused in a potentially normatively significant way – namely, in way (ii). That's because it is ultimately because of sexism that the propositional content of these beliefs is true, and, thus, that there is evidence supporting them: it is because of sexism that it is true, and there is evidence, that girls tend to score worse than boys on math exams (and, thus, that Jenna probably scored lower than Joel), and that women tend to be nurses rather than surgeons (and, thus, that Jane is probably a nurse).

When it comes to the gender achievement gap in math, studies suggest that stereotypes related to gender and mathematical ability negatively affect girls' performance in competitive testing environments.<sup>20</sup> When it comes to the disparity between female nurses and female surgeons, there is a lack of empirical literature dedicated to this particular issue. But something like this is a plausible story: a variety of sexist historical practices (e.g., the historical exclusion of women from intuitions of higher education and fulltime careers outside of the home), social norms (e.g., that women are expected to be the caretakers, which prompts them to seek more flexible work compatible with caretaking duties), and social narratives (e.g., those that render high-paying, high-status jobs like surgeon masculine-coded and lower-paying, lower-status jobs like nurse feminine-coded) make it the case that women are disproportionately nurses rather than surgeons.<sup>21</sup> Stacy's belief about Jenna and Steve's belief about Jane, then, are both caused by sexism indirectly by way of the evidence. They are, thus, caused by sexism in a potentially normatively significant way. Of course, the next question is this: is the potential realized in these cases? That is, does being caused by sexism in this way render the beliefs in question epistemically deficient?

On purism, beliefs caused by sexism way (ii) are epistemically rational (supposing the evidence that is there because of sexism is sufficient to rationalize beliefs in other contexts). So purism leaves no room for the possibility that a belief being caused by sexism in way (ii) can render that belief epistemically deficient. But revisionism does have room for this possibility: the revisionist account of epistemic rationality allows for it to be the case that the beliefs in question are epistemically irrational despite being based on evidence that (we're supposing) is sufficient to rationalize beliefs in other contexts. This account also gives revisionists the theoretical resources to explain why sexism is the source of that irrationality. In other words, within a revisionist framework, in some cases, being caused by sexism in way (ii) does render a belief epistemically irrational. It is in these cases that the potential normative significance of being caused by sexism in way (ii) is realized. To understand all this, and how it bears out in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*, we must look further at the account of epistemic rationality at the center of revisionism: moral encroachment.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>See Niederle and Vesterlund (2010) for a helpful overview of the relevant empirical literature.

<sup>21</sup>See Okin (1989) and Saul (2003) for relevant discussions about the gendered division of labor.

<sup>22</sup>See Bolinger (2020) for a critical overview of the recent literature on moral encroachment. I will focus on the version of moral encroachment that is developed and defended by Basu (2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) and Basu and Schroeder (2019).

### 4.3. The broad interpretation and moral encroachment

According to popular stakes-based versions of moral encroachment, the evidential threshold that a belief needs to pass in order to be epistemically rational is determined by moral considerations. In particular, when the moral stakes are high – when having the belief is harmful or poses a significant risk of harm – the evidential threshold that belief must pass tends to be high. In other words, the believer needs better or stronger evidence than they would otherwise need in order for their belief to be epistemically rational. Given the high moral stakes, it is not rational to infer that an individual probably has some negative or diminishing property based on statistical information about that individual's apparent social group, even if it is rational to infer that it will likely rain tomorrow given the same degree of statistical evidence about the weather.

Given moral encroachment, being caused by sexism in way (ii) ends up guaranteeing that the beliefs in question in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher* are epistemically deficient within a revisionary framework. In these cases, the belief in question ascribes a negative or diminishing property to an individual woman based on statistical evidence suggesting that most women have that property. These beliefs are situated in a sexist social environment – after all, our world has been heavily shaped by sexism. And when sexism's impact on our social environment makes it so that some negative or diminishing property is prevalent among a historically marginalized social group, this same impact also makes it especially harmful to ascribe such properties to individuals *qua* members of that social group. Consider what Basu writes about a case like this involving a seemingly racist belief that ascribes the property of “probably being a staff member” to a Black man in a swanky social club.

What is it that makes these cases high stakes? Answer: the socio-historical context in which the features are formed. Underrepresented groups are more often mistaken for employees because of the color of their skin and the racist institutions that make their skin color a determining factor in their inability to gain access to more prestigious employment opportunities. Being mistaken in this context, namely one in which you've historically been excluded, is a greater harm and wrong than being mistaken in a space where that historical disadvantage is lacking[ . . . ]It is this social and moral fact that makes all the cases so far seem like high-stakes cases. I conjecture that this is because of how deeply our social environments are steeped in and shaped by a history of racism. (Basu 2019c: 15)

When applied to sexism, the thought is this: when sexism indirectly causes a belief about an individual that ascribes a negative or diminishing property to her based on her womanhood, this guarantees that the belief is harmful, given the sexist social environment in which the belief is situated. This, in turn, raises the evidential threshold higher than the belief can pass so long as the believer has only suggestive but inconclusive group-level evidence to support it. So, if the belief in these cases is caused by sexism in the indirect sense, then it is guaranteed not to be epistemically rational, at least in any world like ours.<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, according to this sort of view, it is the moral stakes related to the relevant harms – *not* the sheer fact that it is indirectly caused by sexism – that raise the

<sup>23</sup>The fact that the beliefs in question in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher* are caused by sexism can, in principle, be torn apart from the related harms – in a different socio-historical environment not marred by sexism, the fact that these beliefs were caused by sexism in way (ii) may not implicate the related harms, in which case the evidential threshold for these beliefs would not be especially high. But it is not clear that these beliefs would seem or be sexist in such a radically different environment.

evidential threshold for the belief in question. But the fact that the belief is indirectly caused by sexism implicates the relevant harms in a social environment like ours, thus guaranteeing that the belief is a morally high-stakes one, and thereby raising the relevant evidential threshold. So being caused by sexism in way (ii) makes it so that the beliefs in question are harmful (and, thus, high stakes) in ways that raise the evidential threshold higher than the belief can pass given the suggestive but nonconclusive evidence involved. Given this, being caused by sexism in way (ii) does render beliefs in question in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher* epistemically irrational. The relevant potential, then, is realized in these cases: given the broad interpretation, Steve's belief about Jane and Stacy's belief about Jenna are caused by sexism in a normatively significant way within a revisionist framework.

That said, it's important to emphasize that a belief being caused by sexism in way (ii) does not *always* implicate the relevant harms or render it morally high stakes like it does in *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*. So, the relevant potential is not always realized. Whether being caused by sexism in way (ii) renders a belief morally high stakes depends on the content of the belief and the way beliefs with that content interact with the believer's social context. For an example of harmless, low-stakes beliefs that have been caused in way (ii), consider beliefs about the suffrage movement. Sexism causes certain facts to be the case and, thus, causes there to be evidence that these facts are the case. The historical record of these facts in, say, American history textbooks causes us to have beliefs about the women's suffrage movement – such as the belief that American women did not have the right to vote until 1920. The belief that American women did not have the right to vote until 1920 is not harmful in our social environment in any relevant sense, even though it was caused by sexism in way (ii). Thus, the moral stakes for this belief are not especially high, and the evidence provided by American history textbooks is clearly sufficient to push the belief over the relevant evidential threshold. Revisionists can say that such beliefs about the suffrage movement are morally and epistemically permissible. These beliefs have been caused by sexism in a potentially normatively significant way on the broad interpretation, but this potential is not realized.

## 5. Purism, revisionism, and the causal claim

According to the causal claim, sexism causes sexist beliefs in a normatively significant way. But what does this mean, exactly? In particular, what are the ways in which sexism can cause sexist beliefs so as to render them epistemically deficient? On one interpretation of the causal claim – the narrow interpretation – sexism causes sexist beliefs in a normatively significant way insofar as (i) they are directly based on sexism (on, say, desires constitutive of ill will or lack of good will toward women, or on an encoded stereotype or social narrative). On another interpretation of the causal claim – the broad interpretation – sexism causes sexist beliefs in a normatively significant way insofar as (i) or, potentially, (ii) they are based on evidence that exists because of sexism.

We have already considered some of the epistemic implications of each interpretation, but it will be helpful to bring these considerations together here in order to situate the two interpretations within current debates between purism and revisionism. As a reminder, purists and revisionists agree that a belief is epistemically rational only if it is based on sufficient supporting evidence. What they disagree about is whether what counts as sufficient evidence holds steady across contexts. Purists say that it does, which implies that epistemic rationality is determined alone by the evidence. Revisionists say that it varies context to context in accordance with the moral stakes, which implies that morality gets a say in what is epistemically rational to believe.

Purists should favor the narrow interpretation over the broad interpretation – they should say that a belief can be caused by sexism in a normatively relevant sense only in way (i), not potentially in way (ii).

Any belief that is caused by way sexism in way (i) is based on something other than the evidence and is thereby epistemically irrational, on both purist and revisionist accounts. These beliefs are not based on sufficient supporting evidence since they are directly based on sexism. Any belief that is caused by sexism in way (i) is epistemically deficient.

When it comes to beliefs caused by sexism in way (ii) – that is, indirectly by way of the evidence – purism entails that these beliefs are epistemically rational (supposing that the relevant degree of evidence is sufficient to support beliefs in other contexts). So, on purism, a belief that is caused by sexism in way (ii) is epistemically rational. This means that being caused by sexism in way (ii) cannot make a belief epistemically deficient given purism: purism precludes the potential normative significance of way (ii) from being realized. The causal claim is about being caused by sexism in a normatively relevant sense – that is, in a way that renders, or can render, a belief epistemically deficient. Since, on purism, being caused by sexism in way (ii) has no potential to render a belief epistemically irrational, it would not make sense for a purist to accept the broad interpretation.

Revisionists, however, have reason to favor the broad interpretation. Revisionists are largely motivated by cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*. They want to say that the beliefs in question in these cases are sexist, and, thus, epistemically irrational. Within revisionist frameworks – and following the idea that the evidence is “stacked in favor” of sexist beliefs – it also makes sense to say that the source of this epistemic irrationality ultimately traces back to sexism. To the extent that they want to render this judgment, revisionists have reason to favor the broad interpretation, since only the broad interpretation can categorize beliefs like Steve’s and Stacy’s as being caused by sexism in a normatively significant way.

## 6. Narrow vs. broad: the normative significance of sexist evidence

At the heart of the disagreement between the broad and narrow interpretations – between those who accept that a belief can be caused by sexism in a normatively significant way by being caused by evidence that is there because of sexism, and those who deny this – are two different takes on the normative significance of the fact that evidence supporting some unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance. The differences in these takes come out in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*. In this section, it will be helpful to refer to these cases schematically: a believer knows that most members of some historically marginalized social group *G* (e.g., girls/women) have a negative or diminishing property *P* (e.g., scoring worse on a math exam than the average boy, being a nurse instead of a surgeon) and then infers that some individual member of that group *J* (e.g., Jane, Jenna) probably has that property. The belief in question is the individual-level belief (e.g., *J* is probably *P*), which is inferred from the group-level belief (e.g., most members of *G* are *P*).

Revisionists clearly have a story to tell about the normative significance of the sexist provenance of evidence about an unfortunate truth. In fact, one of the things that makes revisionism so attractive is that it accommodates theoretical resources (like the broad interpretation of the causal claim) that allow them to say something decisive about this normative significance. In contrast, it is not clear that purists have a story of their own. After all, by embracing the narrow interpretation of the causal claim, purists deny that sexism can cause a sexist belief in a normatively significant way by causing there to be

evidence to support that belief. Revisionists may contend that if purists have nothing to say about something so important, this is all the more reason to accept revisionism along with the broad interpretation.

In what follows, I consider a revisionist story about the epistemic and moral significance of the fact that the evidence on which a belief is based has a sexist provenance – the story supported by the broad interpretation (§6.1). I then set out to develop an alternative purist-friendly story – one that complements the narrow interpretation (§6.2). That there is such a purist-friendly story is significant in itself: if purism can also accommodate theoretical resources that allow purists to say something substantial about this, some of the motivation for revisionism is dampened. I conclude by considering how to arbitrate between these two stories (§6.3).

### 6.1. The revisionist story

Let's start with the revisionist story. The broad interpretation seems to entail something like this: if evidence exists because of some moral problem (like sexism or other form of prejudice) in the world, then – to the extent that the beliefs that the evidence supports are harmful in part because of the way that those beliefs interact with the world as shaped by the moral problem – we epistemically and morally ought not believe what the evidence supports (i.e., unless the evidence supporting that belief is *exceptionally* strong, perhaps even conclusive – in any case, much stronger than is needed to rationalize beliefs in many other contexts). For example, Steve and Stacy epistemically and morally ought not to have their respective beliefs about Jane and Jenna: sexism has shaped the world in ways that not only make it true that P is common among G but also make it harmful for believers to ascribe P to J *qua* member of G.<sup>24</sup> And, importantly, this holds even though the morally problematic source of the evidence does not affect the quality of the evidence *qua* evidence – that is, the moral problem does not disrupt the connection between the evidence and the truth of the relevant propositional content.

### 6.2. A purist story

Now let's turn to what purists can say here. A good place for the purist to start is by parsing out what, exactly, it means for evidence to have a sexist provenance.

In cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*, the relevant evidence is the statistical evidence about P's commonness among G. The fact that this evidence has a sexist provenance means that it is because of sexism that it is true, and there is evidence, that girls tend to score worse on standardized math exams than boys, and that most women employees at the surgery center are nurses. Given this, perhaps the surrounding beliefs – beliefs about *why* the propositional content of the belief in question is true – are central to a plausible purist story. The purist can say that the fact that the evidence about an unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance bears *not* on whether it is epistemically permissible to believe the propositional content capturing that truth, but rather on the

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<sup>24</sup>When it comes to cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*, revisionists focus on the individual-level belief and the harms it poses rather than the group-level belief. However, the group-level belief poses harms too. If that is right, then, presumably, on revisionism, moral considerations set the evidential threshold for both beliefs quite high. But there is a key difference: statistical evidence is strong enough to push the group-level belief over the high evidential threshold, even though it is not enough to push over the individual-level belief. So, on the revisionist story, the individual-level belief is morally and epistemically impermissible, but the group-level belief is not: the statistical evidence is conclusive when it comes to the group-level belief but not the individual-level belief.

permissions of surrounding beliefs. More specifically, it bears on what is epistemically permissible to believe about why the proposition is true – in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*, why it is that P is common among G (and, thus, why J is probably P).<sup>25</sup> So, on this purist story, in light of the fact that the relevant evidence has a sexist provenance, the only rational thing to believe is that P is common among G because G has been subject to a long history of sexism.

This story can make sense of the epistemic significance of the sexist provenance of the relevant evidence. It is epistemically important that our beliefs reflect reality. But true beliefs about certain facts may distort reality rather than reflect it when they are held in isolation, or otherwise not couched in true surrounding beliefs.

This should not be surprising. We all know that the meaning or significance of facts can be distorted when they are taken out of context, even when what is said is technically true. This can happen for a couple of reasons. First, a fact that is not properly contextualized may capture only a small unrepresentative bit of reality. For example, consider a media outlet that regularly reports on instances of voter fraud or shark attacks without also citing the very low rate at which they occur. Second, and most relevant here, a fact that is not properly contextualized may invite a misunderstanding of important surrounding factors. For another media example, consider the following headline from a Canadian newspaper: *Trudeau devotes a quarter of his time to “personal days.”*<sup>26</sup> Although it is technically true that 25 percent of the days since Trudeau took office were personal days, important contextualizing information is missing: most of the days Trudeau took off were weekends and statutory holidays, and the 25 percent rate of personal days is well below the 34 percent rate of the average Canadian. When presented on its own, the information in the headline invites readers to think that the reason Trudeau devotes 25 percent of his time to personal days is that his priorities are out of whack, and that he is not a good steward of a prime minister’s time.

Similarly, a true, evidence-backed belief that is not properly contextualized may lead to a distorted view of reality. Consider the group-level and individual-level beliefs in *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*. When not properly contextualized, these beliefs invite a misunderstanding of why P is common among G – in particular, they invite the common misunderstanding that *scoring worse than the average boy on the math exam or being a nurse rather than a surgeon* is common among girls/women because of some inherent flaw or deficiency characteristic of girls/women (e.g., low competence or intelligence or skill). After all, like many historically marginalized social groups, women have long been negatively characterized in ways that are viewed as causally responsible for properties common among them. And so this mistaken explanation of why P is common among G is readily available and culturally prominent, poised to fill in an explanatory vacuum if the believer does not already understand the correct explanation. When not properly contextualized within an understanding that it is because of sexism – not some inherent characteristic deficiency or flaw – that P is common among G, having the relevant group-level and individual-level beliefs makes us susceptible to a distorted broader view of reality by putting us in a position to form false beliefs about why P is common among G.

The upshot is that true, evidence-backed beliefs about bare statistical facts about women/girls and about individuals inferred directly from those statistical facts may end

<sup>25</sup>In cases with a different structure – cases in which the belief in question does not regard a negative or diminishing property being common among some historically marginalized social group – the relevant surrounding beliefs may be about something else. The focus here, though, will be on cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher*.

<sup>26</sup>See McGregor (2023).

up leading to a distorted broader view of the relevant slice of reality by inviting false (and harmful!) beliefs about important surrounding factors. So, if the sexist provenance of the relevant statistical evidence makes it epistemically impermissible for those who are cognitively sensitive to this provenance to have such beliefs, then the sexist provenance of the evidence is, indeed, epistemically significant. It is epistemically significant to the extent that cognitive sensitivity to it discourages and renders irrational a broader set of beliefs that distort the relevant bit of reality and promotes and rationalizes ones that reflect it. So, it seems, this purist story can explain the epistemic significance of the sexist provenance of the relevant evidence.

Although the focus so far has been on *epistemic* significance, I think it is worth noting that this purist story can also explain the *moral* significance of the sexist provenance of the relevant evidence. The idea here is that understanding why P is common among G has morally significant motivational and affective implications. The affective and motivational dimensions of understanding are discussed at length in relation to moral propositions in the literature on moral testimony – understanding why it is wrong to lie or why it is good to donate to charity can be central to (re)acting in morally appropriate ways in a variety of morally significant contexts.<sup>27</sup> But it is widely agreed that understanding some nonmoral propositions can also be central to (re)acting in morally appropriate ways. To borrow an example from Laura Callahan (2018: 444), I might need to understand the reasons why my partner is late picking up our child from daycare in order to react appropriately – if he has a legitimate excuse, it would be inappropriate to be angry at him.

Similarly, I may need to understand why some negative or diminishing property is common among girls/women in order to react appropriately to an individual girl or woman who probably instantiates that property. For example, a doctor may need to know why women's complaints of severe pain tend to be met with skepticism – if it is because healthcare professionals are prone to illicitly view women as “hysterical” or “dramatic,” then skepticism about the level of reported pain would be inappropriate. Or an admissions committee for an elite STEM-focused charter school may need to understand why girls tend to score lower on average on math exams in competitive testing environments in order to give the dossiers of girl applicants a fair evaluation.

To put another spin on the same idea, if I *misunderstand* why P is prevalent among women/girls, I may be liable to (re)act in ways that are inappropriate given the truth. For example, if a teacher inaccurately believes that girls tend to score worse on standardized math exams than boys because girls are just inherently worse at abstract thinking, then she might be liable to ignore or downplay the mathematical acumen of the girls in her class.

So, if the sexist provenance of some evidence bears on the epistemic permissions of the surrounding beliefs about why P is common among G – rendering permissible only those beliefs attributing the property's commonness to sexism, and not to something inherently deficient or negative about girls/women – then cognitive sensitivity to this fact promotes further sensitivity to morally relevant features of the social environment. This, in turn, enables and encourages (re)actions and attitudes that are appropriate in light of morally significant features of the bit of reality that is captured in part by propositional content of the relevant group-level and individual-level beliefs. The culturally prominent misunderstanding – that P is common among G because of some inherent or characteristic flaw or deficiency – is liable to give rise to actions and attitudes that are morally inappropriate.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, Callahan (2018), Enoch (2014), Howell (2014), and Swila (2016).



### 6.3. Concluding thoughts

So now we have two different stories about the normative significance of the fact that evidence about an unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance. According to the revisionist story, in cases like *The Teacher* and *The Consultant*, the believers epistemically and morally ought not believe that J is probably P, given the sexist provenance of the supporting evidence and the related harms of so believing. According to the purist story, the sexist provenance of the relevant evidence does not rule out permissibly believing that J is probably P; rather it bears on the permissions of the surrounding beliefs, rendering it epistemically and morally important for the believers to understand that it is because of sexism that P is common among G.

I have suggested that it is significant in itself that purists have a plausible story to tell: purists can resist challenges stemming from worries that they lack something to say about something so important as the normative significance of sexism's impact on the world that gives us evidence for our beliefs.

Even so, the question remains: which story is more plausible? To conclude, I want to consider how to go about answering this question. My goal is not to defend a particular answer favoring one story or another. Instead, I want to develop a way of arbitrating between the two stories, on their own terms.<sup>28</sup>

It will be helpful, then, to consider a case that clearly has all the normatively relevant features picked out by both stories: namely, a case in which evidence supporting an unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance, this evidence is the basis of some belief that ends up being harmful in part because of the way that the belief interacts with the sexist social environment in which it is situated, and the believer understands that it is ultimately because of sexism that the belief is true. Each story will render different verdicts about such a case, and we will have some reason to accept whichever story seems to render the most plausible verdicts. To that end, consider the following variation on *The Teacher*, adapted from Brinkerhoff ([forthcoming](#)).

**The Informed Teacher** Stacy knows that, statistically, girls tend to score lower on standardized math exams than boys and infers that Jenna likely scored lower than Joel on last year's statewide standardized math exam. Stacy has recently done a lot of research about the gender gap in mathematical achievement. In addition to the relevant statistical information, Stacy knows that women and girls have been historically characterized in ways that impugn their mathematical abilities. From her research, Stacy knows that the gender disparity in math performance is explained – not by a lack of rationality or analytic prowess in girls and women – but rather by the ways that negative stereotypes about women and math negatively affect girls' math performance, especially in competitive testing environments.

According to the revisionist story, Informed Stacy's belief about Jenna is epistemically and morally problematic. After all, the evidence supporting Informed Stacy's belief about Jenna has a sexist provenance, and this belief poses many of the same harms as Stacy's belief about Jenna in the original case, in part because of the way it interacts with Stacy's sexist social environment. So, according to the revisionist story, this makes

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<sup>28</sup>There may be many reasons to accept one story over another given our prior theoretical commitments. For example, if we have independent reason to accept purism about epistemic rationality, we will of course have reason to accept the purist story (and the narrow interpretation) over the revisionist story (and the broad interpretation). But, in what follows, I want to consider reasons to accept one story over another that do not depend on such "outside" theoretical considerations.

Informed Stacy's belief about Jenna epistemically and morally wrong – her statistical evidence is not strong enough to rationalize it.

The purist story renders different verdicts. On the purist story, Informed Stacy's belief about Jenna may well be epistemically and morally in the clear, so long as it is based on the relevant statistical evidence that supports it. What's more, the purist story recognizes that it is both epistemically and morally good that Informed Stacy understands why it is that girls tend to score worse on standardized math exams than boys – there would be something morally and epistemically deficient about Stacy's broader doxastic state if she lacked this understanding while believing that P is common among G (and, thus, that J is probably P).

If it is morally and epistemically wrong for Informed Stacy to believe that Jenna likely scored worse than average despite her understanding, then we have reason to accept the revisionist story along with the broad interpretation. On this take, the sexist provenance of the facts and evidence featured in the relevant cases bears directly on the permissions of the belief about the fact itself; the understanding in which the belief is couched does not dispel its normative deficiency.

If, instead, Informed Stacy's belief about Jenna is (or, at least, may be) morally and epistemically in the clear despite the morally high stakes that render it impermissible with a revisionist framework, then we have some reason to favor the purist story and the narrow interpretation. On this take, the sexist provenance of the facts and evidence featured in cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher* bears on the permissions of the surrounding beliefs rather than the belief about the fact itself.

In sum: at the heart of the disagreement between the broad and narrow interpretations of the causal claim are two different stories about the normative significance of the fact that evidence supporting some unfortunate truth has a sexist provenance. In order to decide which story to favor, it is helpful to consider variations on cases like *The Consultant* and *The Teacher* in which the belief in question is couched in an understanding of sexism's impact on the socioeconomic environment. Which story is most plausible will depend, in part, on our verdicts about the normative status of the beliefs in question – and the surrounding beliefs – in these variations.<sup>29</sup>

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