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Communicating misogyny: an interdisciplinary research agenda for social psychology

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Communicating misogyny:
An interdisciplinary research agenda for social psychology

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss how social psychology might go about studying social hostility in public life that goes beyond mere disagreement on political matters. The paper addresses the case of online misogyny against women active in public life. In the context of a profound coarsening of political debate in Britain and elsewhere, women who are active in public life come regularly up against a barrage of abuse and intimidation online. The paper argues that manifestations of misogyny cross ideological lines and takes an array of forms. Misogyny is a specific class of prejudice that harms the dignity of women by calling into question women's (human) rights to participation in public life, freedom of expression, and personal safety. In order to fully understand the intricacies of online misogyny social psychologists need to draw upon more directly on communications and media theories of mediated communication and connective action.

We want to know how the communication and diffusion of prejudiced group attitudes transcend the level of single, isolated, interpersonal conversations. Talk is embedded in more complex, higher-level systems of social information processing within groups, which also involve institutional discourses such that of the media, politics or education. Social members routinely invoke such other discourses, or the inferences based on them, to develop and sustain their own attitudes, and to warrant argumentatively such attitudes in talk, for instance, as public, if not shared, social opinions.

van Dijk, 1987, p. 12

The quote that opens this paper comes from Teun van Dijk's landmark 1987 study *Communicating Racism: Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk*. The question that van Dijk was addressing in 1987 is still relevant today: how does everyday talk contribute to the spread and acceptance of prejudice? Van Dijk was not interested in personal opinions but in the specific social representations of minority groups in majority-group talk. This minority-majority framework has been, in the last thirty years, one of the most influential, and productive, avenues for researching prejudice in talk and text (e.g. Tileagă, 2005; Verkuyten, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). However, it has also been perhaps one of the most limiting and limited frameworks (for critiques see Condor, 2006; Dixon & Levine, 2012; Kerr et al., 2017).

Although studies of prejudice have since successfully shifted the focus from cognition to discourse (Augoustinos, 2016), I argue, one further shift is needed: a shift from discourse to a more general theory of communication that might be able to help social psychologists engage with public forms of extreme social hostility. I focus here on misogyny and analyse it as a form of connective action that harms the dignity of women by calling into question women's (human) rights to participation in public life, freedom of expression, and personal safety. Here I look at online misogyny against women active in public life.

We recognise public intolerance against certain groups of people (e.g. ethnic minorities), but we do not yet have the theoretical tools to describe what makes public intolerance a

problem. But the term “intolerance” itself may be also limiting current approaches to understanding the nature of hostile sentiments about women and their political views on social media or other public fora. What is usually referred to “public political intolerance”, as one of the most striking symptoms of the increasingly coarsening tone of political discussion in uncertain times, tells only part of the story. Simply ‘mapping’ the language of intolerance is no longer enough. Social psychologists need to address what used to be called ‘macro-level questions’ about the nature of (extreme) social hostility. A renewed focus on (extreme) social hostility, as I will be showing below, may help us to connect debates in the social psychology of prejudice to theoretical and empirical approaches to incivility in public life in other fields, especially media and communications studies.

In the context of a profound hardening of political debate in advanced democracies, women who are active in public life come regularly up against a barrage of abuse and intimidation online. In this paper I argue that misogyny crosses ideological lines and takes an array of forms. The nature of these extreme forms of social hostility can only be understood with the help of interdisciplinary incursions and dialogue with scholars of (mediated and connective) communications.

Incivility and understanding the nature of misogyny in public life

What is increasingly being described as the ‘new politics of incivility’ (Phillips & Stuart, 2018) goes beyond mere disagreement on political matters. What some have call ‘in-your-face politics’ (Mutz, 2015), includes but is not limited to delegitimising those who hold different political views, personal invectives, insults, ad hominen attacks, intimidation, misogyny and homophobia.

When researching civility in political discourse the focus is often on the political consequences of incivility (e.g., Mutz, 2007) and the ‘extent and texture of political incivility

itself' (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011). There is usually a distinction being made between incivility in political discussions (Herbst, 2010; Sobieraj and Berry, 2011) and incivility in public discussions (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014). Political incivility is said to cover various expressions and manifestations of hostile political discourse (Stryker, Conway, & Danielson, 2016). In public discussions incivility is usually defined as those "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics." (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). Both sets of definitions of incivility that focus on ill-mannered political and public discussion presuppose that anyone can be the target of incivility.

Misogyny is usually listed as a consequence of offensive political and public discourse. It is, however, also a certain type of *discourse*, with a history and tradition, about a certain category of people: women. In the literature misogyny tends to be associated with the discourses and traditions of men online subcultures (Incels, etc.), what has been loosely termed the "manosphere" (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Themes of masculine victimhood (Blommaert, 2017) or fantasies of sexual violence (Gotell & Dutton, 2016) abound as descriptions and sometimes explanations as what is seen as misogynistic discourse. What makes this discourse misogynistic is not that it is 'uncivil', but that it has a specific target: women.

What we see in the public sphere, beyond the world of subcultures, is that misogynistic discourse is even more complex, as it intersects with race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and as it is actively used to stifle the political participation of women in politics. I argue, then, that it does matter who is the target of incivility. Incivility, as some have argued, may not always be the problem (Rossini, 2018). But extreme social hostility is.

It is a documented fact that "many women active in public life can today expect to encounter unprecedented levels of vitriol – which often spill over into threats of violence" (Phillips & Stuart, 2018, p. 8). The latest report on 'Intimidation in Public Life' of the Committee on Standards in

Public Life in the UK, concludes that “Intimidation has been experienced by individuals across public life, from all groups and across the political spectrum.” It then goes on to say

What is especially worrying is that some groups are disproportionately likely to be the targets of intimidation and abuse both online and offline. Candidates who are female, BAME or LGBT are disproportionately targeted in terms of scale, intensity and vitriol. The intimidation experienced by those who fit in more than one of these groups can be even worse.

Committee on Standards in Public Life, p. 28

The same report, using evidence submitted by Amnesty International, highlights the fact that black and Asian women MPs are abused more online (Twitter) than white women MPs.

The unprecedented levels of vitriol against women in public life do not seem to fit any of the existing forms of incivility that simply cover things like name-calling, aspersion, lying, or vulgarity. Although incivility does tend to, in some circumstances, delegitimize the political arguments that women in public put forward, that is not the crux of the matter. The vitriol is directed to women in public life *as* women. Amnesty International are claiming that no female MP active on Twitter has been free from online intimidation. In the run up to the last general election, the Labour Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott was the victim of a remarkably high share of abusive Twitter messages. According to Amnesty International UK, she had received almost a third of abusive messages directed against women. The Amnesty International UK findings also show that no political party is spared vitriolic online abuse against women MPs.

The question then is perhaps not only how much incivility against women active in the public sphere exists, but what is its nature. One does not need to wait for politicians and academics to declare a “crisis of civility” in order to take misogyny seriously. Online misogyny is part of a wider social problem – that of violence against women. Online violence is as pernicious as offline violence against women. It is a specific class of prejudice because it harms the dignity of the person. It does so by calling into question women’s (human) rights to participation in

public life, freedom of expression, and personal safety. Misogyny is part of a class of prejudices that inflict harm by transforming or altering people's worth and dignity (Tileagă, 2015). But what is striking about the misogyny directed against women active in the public sphere is that it tends to come from the decent 'middle', from people who declare themselves unprejudiced on other matters of public and political life, and who are quite careful to distance themselves from the violent imagery of the "manosphere."

The idea of prejudice as indignity is not just about the forms and consequences of extreme forms of social hostility. What might be called the 'reasonable' prejudice of Twitter users against women active in public life relies on what Bennett & Segerberg (2012) call 'connective action' based on forms and consequences of incivility that spread and are spread across media networks. What Bennett and Segerberg call 'large-scale action networks', real or imagined, are driving the expression of contentious politics. The logics and formation of 'large-scale action networks' are becoming a prominent tool in the analysis of causes and consequences of contentious politics in uncertain times (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013 on protest networks). These same large-scale action networks are vehicles for communicating, spreading, and enacting misogyny, and making it acceptable.

Emotional capital of extreme hostility

It is arguably true that "insults and invective are a powerful means of differentiating an in-group from an out-group, an opponent from an ally" (Jamieson, Volinsky, Weitz, & Kenski, 2017, p. 6). But there is perhaps more to misogyny than a process of intergroup differentiation.

The community of the decent, self-righteous, citizens that take to Twitter to belittle and delegitimize women's perspectives on politics is not only a community of values but is also what Rosenwein (2006) has called an 'emotional community'. Any emotional community trades in

emotional capital – in this case, emotions and descriptions that position active and influential women as worthless and repulsive.

Online communities reproduce a form of emotional capital where expressing disgust is considered acceptable. As I showed elsewhere (see Tileagă, 2015) disgust is perhaps the most visible form of affect used in transforming people's worth and moral status. Disgust mingles with anxiety and contempt for women. It is disgust that leads to other forms of emoting – invectives, insults, ad hominem attacks.

People are careful to not express personal disgust but rather point to the reasonableness of being disgusted by women's political views, values, or behaviours. Emotional registers of tolerance, empathy, openness, open-mindedness (positive social emotions) may coexist with lack of empathy, disgust and derision. An acceptable affective canon of social hostility becomes "woven together in subtle ways with people's usual communal methods for describing, accounting for, and judging self and others." (Wetherell, 2012, p. 116). Disgust is a collective affective practice. It is the emotional *appui* for a communal representation of women as unworthy participants to public life and debate.

Disgust is a major source of indignity, it is the political emotion, that, as Nussbaum argues, "blocks equal political respect" (2013, p. 186). Disgust is "a key device of subordination" (ibid., p. 182) of women. Like other affective practices, disgust is a means to "construct and mark boundaries" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 114), and is a precursor to action (the murder of Jo Cox is the tragic example of the power of violent and derogatory language aimed at the political views of women).

The emotional capital of disgust works against the emotional capital of women's emancipation and affirmation in public life. Online misogyny reproduces what Honneth has called "evaluative forms of disrespect" that imply the "denigration of individual or collective

ways of life” (1996, p. 134). Online misogyny is, arguably, not a problem of antipathy or irrational individual psychology – delegitimizing, and dehumanizing, perspectives and actions, deny public recognition of women’s dignity, and social and moral worth. The prejudices of decent citizens are evaluative prejudices. Depriving women active in public life of the social esteem and social approval they would otherwise deserve means depriving them of their dignity. In the case of active women in politics bearing multiple identities, misogyny is heightened as it is intersecting with racism and other practices that are demeaning people.

It is a given, at least for some, that political polarization leads to uncivil and intolerant discourse in online political talk (Herbst, 2010). However, the focus, as some researchers argue, should not solely be on incivility but rather on the nature of intolerance (Rossini, 2018). I argue that, when one turns to the analysis of misogyny, the notion of “intolerance” is not enough. The case of misogyny and racism against women active in public life is also perhaps a case where we see the emergence of new social norms that protect, rather than oppose, the communication and dissemination of extreme social hostility online. These new, emerging, social norms are underpinned by an “interactive process of personalization and sharing”, whereby communication networks around certain political ‘issues’ become established, “become scaled up and stabilized through the digital technologies people use to share ideas and relationships with others” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 746).

An interdisciplinary research agenda for a social psychology of misogyny

I focused here, sketchily, on misogyny as a form of prejudice that harms the dignity of women by calling into question women’s (human) rights to participation in public life, freedom of expression, and personal safety. Women who are active in public life come regularly up against a barrage of abuse and intimidation online. In this paper I argued that misogyny is not only the province of what

might be called 'professional misogynists', those people belonging to the underground of masculine, violent, subcultures; it is increasingly an everyday occurrence in public discourse. Misogyny is extreme prejudice that is afforded by digital technologies, it is the kind of extreme prejudice that creates networks of emotional and political social hostility against women active in public life. Misogyny is not simply the expression of ideological cleavages – quite the contrary, it crosses ideological lines and manifests itself in unexpected and pernicious ways.

Misogyny is of a different nature to what social psychologists have described as hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Misogyny is not primarily about structural gender relations that may engender hostile attitudes of one sex towards the other.

It may be true that not all sexism is hostile. However, misogyny, by definition, is. Sexism is perhaps only one contributing factor in the equation of misogyny. Sexism is only one cluster of cultural beliefs that helps legitimize the status quo of gender relations and roles. Misogyny is not about maintaining the status quo of gender relations - misogyny is a characterization of practices of a higher order. Misogyny has more in common with anti-Semitism than it has with sexism, in that it is part of class of historical prejudices that, in its case, demean and stifle the affirmation of women. Sexism is a modern invention and is primarily an issue of individual differences. For example, hostile sexism is said to be primarily predicted by social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and low education (Hellmer, Stenson, & Jylha, 2018). Misogyny, although not always called by its real name, has deeper historical roots. Whereas sexism functions primarily at individual level (attitudes and beliefs), misogyny embraces a much broader spectrum – from the Incel to the average Twitter user, and intersects with race, ethnicity, sexual orientation.¹ With the advent and proliferation of

¹ It would be ill-advised, however, to discount the veiled innocuousness of benevolent sexism or the demeaning power of violent sexism. By the same token, a sole focus on sexism (violent or otherwise) would miss the myriad of forms that prejudice against women takes. An analysis of similarities and differences between sexism and misogyny requires separate analysis and is beyond the scope of this paper.

social media, sexism itself is shifting and morphing. Researching misogyny is a way of researching the shifting and transformative nature of sexism in the public sphere.

The nature and forms of online prejudice can only be understood with the help of an interdisciplinary dialogue with scholars of (mediated and connective) communications. This does not mean to say that social psychology does not have a theory of online communication. It does. It is, however, limited to process and social interactions (e.g., Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003; Meredith & Stokoe, 2013). Media and communications scholars tend to speak of communication in the plural (communications), whereas social psychologists, including discursive social psychologists and conversation analysts, speak of it in the singular. Communications scholars are working with an increasingly robust vocabulary that enables them to describe how communication technologies shape network structures, and how, network structures, in turn, shape the public expression of beliefs and public positions.

Understanding the undemocratic manifestations and consequences of social media requires careful analysis. Communication technologies such as social media enable “the growth and stabilization of network structures” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 760) that may threaten the values of democratic pluralism by demeaning and belittling the right to equal political participation and expression in the public sphere. Such is the case of misogyny and racism directed at women active in public life. These network structures are not necessarily those of the active ‘manosphere’, extreme, subcultures – but rather self-organizing, emerging, network structures (of decent, right-thinking, citizens) based on “personalization that leads actions and content to be distributed widely across social networks” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 760).

It is in the age of Twitter that we have come to appreciate Memmi’s contention: “racism ... *attacks along many fronts and in many forms*, deploying whatever is at hand, and even what is not, inventing when the need arises.” (Memmi, 2000, p. 78, emphasis in original). It is that what

we are seeing on social media when users take to Twitter to hurl abuse at women active in politics. We have a lot to learn about misogyny by analysing data generated in and by cultural spheres. We still have a lot to learn about the capacity of social media to shift social norms around public debate. Online, connective, ethnographies or large-scale studies of communications across networks, can describe a varied anthropological world of people and social relations that are not necessarily tied to psychological mental processes. Network structures can promote not only emancipation ideals but also harm inflicted by indignity. They perpetuate misogyny as a form of political hostility.

A social psychology of online misogyny should explore heuristic avenues that open a dialogue and engagement with the “technopolitics thesis” (Sampedro, 2011). The technopolitics thesis

posits that the Internet, blogosphere, and interactive social media provide new opportunities to make political processes public. They provide citizens with autonomous platforms of communication. Personal media can become mass media. Digital devices allow populations—individuals and collective actors— to perform as proactive agents in political communication, not merely as mostly passive and reactive receivers as in the classic model.

Sampedro, 2011, p. 434

This dialogue can inform both traditional and critical social psychological approaches to prejudice. Calls for dialogues between fields are of course not devoid of challenges - see for instance Tileagă & Byford (2014) on some of the pitfalls of interdisciplinarity. However, identifying elective affinities, at least in the first instance, is a first step towards better integration and social impact.

Deliberative and participatory innovations in digital communications have become spaces where prejudice is a “commodity” being traded by individuals, groups and communities that self-organize around emerging, ad-hoc, yet fluid, network structures. They are also spaces in which

one can more fully appreciate the value of studying indignity as the resulting inequality based on differences of esteem (and respect). When you start looking at misogyny as a consequence of connective action, you start to appreciate its nature as a set of social practices that stifle public recognition of women's social worth and dignity. As Habermas argues, the importance of human dignity "extends beyond the vertical relation between individual citizens and the state and permeates the horizontal relations among individuals and groups." (2012, p. 80).

Deliberative and participatory innovations in digital communications are, increasingly, redrawing the boundaries of what is acceptable in the public sphere, by altering and in some cases producing new moral evaluative schemes for judging people's dignity. The new global twittersphere can alter, transform, our own ideas about other people's human rights, our assessment of their safety and vulnerability, as well as our judgment about freedom of expression and participation in public life. As social psychologists we strive to ensure that our theories are "attuned to real-world conditions" (Paluck and Green, 2009, p. 360).

When it comes to extreme prejudice, the stakes are perhaps even higher. We need to be able to incorporate in our analyses a much broader and more comprehensive understanding of the function and nature of digital communications. Interdisciplinary approaches to misogyny may borrow productively from research on the affordances of digital communications for creating participatory environments (Chadwick, 2009) and sharing of political information (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018).

The "fundamental tone and practice of democracy" (Herbst, 2010, p. 3) is not merely an issue of pitting civility against incivility. In liberal-democratic societies the line separating dignity from indignity is precarious, especially online. Researching extreme prejudices as source of disvalue implies researching public, not private, prejudices, especially those prejudices whose consequences take the form of an explicit or implicit attempt to transform or diminish people's

social esteem and worth. Prejudice can take many forms – including stopping others to want to engage in legitimate political debate and public life. When the dignity of women is at stake, we need to bring into view women’s rights to self-affirmation, safety, and more generally, women’s rights (desire and entitlement) to be treated fairly and equitably by others in public life.

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