

Sexism, Racism, & Speciesism

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Abstract

Aristotle argued that “plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man,” which assigns hierarchical roles based on perceived superiority and inferiority (humans at the top). This justifies relationships of dominance. When broken down the foundation of his statement is as follows:

X is superior to Y, therefore X has authority over Y¹

Does this structure seem familiar? We see it many times throughout the work of Aristotle. “The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled.”² This quote maintains the structure X is superior to Y; therefore, X has authority over Y, but now in the context of sex. This structure is mirrored once again when he addresses how “barbarians” – historically a term used for anyone non-Greek³ – should be ruled by the Greeks as, “the barbarian and the slave are by nature the same.”⁴ He continues this thought by expressing, “It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and other slaves, and that for this latter slavery is both expedient and right.”⁵

All three of these power dynamics (male over female, “civilized” over “barbarian”, “man over nature”) follow the format of X is superior to Y; therefore, X has authority over Y.⁶ But what is it about racism, sexism, and speciesism that create this equation? Racism and sexism are concepts that we as a society are quite familiar with generally perceive to be unjust. However, speciesism is not as familiar in discussion. Philosopher Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (2009) is foundational to the

¹ Note that this is a binary example. While the original quote involves three hierarchical positions I am focusing on direct relations between the positions (e.g., animals control over plants and humans control over animals).

² Aristotle, *Politics*, I.5.

³ “Barbarian | Meaning, Connotations, & Facts,” Britannica.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, I.2.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, I.5.

⁶ The term “superior” is used to demonstrate a commonly held belief that certain groups are “inherently superior” – an idea I discuss and counter in the second principles listed below.

discussion of speciesism as he defines speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” and our moral considerations should not be based on “species membership”, but on an individual’s ability to experience suffering. While I have many issues with Singer’s argument (including what we know to be sentient and how such discrimination extends beyond suffering), my primary critique is his lack of clarity/oversimplification of sexism and racism and how they structurally resemble speciesism (Singer, 2009).⁷ In this paper, I identify four shared principles underlying systems of oppression⁸ :

1. Arbitrary distinctions that categorize and assign value
2. Beliefs in inherent superiority
3. Reliance on illogical assumptions about dominant group qualities⁹
4. Reinforcement by broader systems of oppression

I will review how sexism and racism are composed of these four principles, and I will demonstrate how speciesism does as well; this will effectively prove how speciesism mirrors sexism and racism in its structure. In the first section, “Arbitrary distinctions that categorize and assign value”, I will identify how our categorization of race, gender, and species are blurred rather than clearly defined. I also demonstrate how these categories are dependent on cultural norms. In the second section, “Beliefs in inherent superiority”, I introduce the trend of dominant groups assuming superiority over others in the context of race, gender, and species. In the third section, “Reliance on

⁷ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009).

⁸ The equation “X is superior to Y; therefore, X has authority over Y” was meant to introduce the structural similarities between racism, sexism, and speciesism in a way that is familiar to readers; it is a segway into further analyzing their structures. The four principles are the main focus of the paper

⁹ Dominant group = group of people who hold most privilege and power in a given environment. Universally, men are the dominant group compared to women. In many societies (specifically the United States for the sake of this paper) White people are the dominant racial group compared to all others. In the context of living things on Earth, humans are the dominant group.

illogical assumptions about dominant group qualities”, I elaborate on the previous section by demonstrating why it is illogical for society to normalize the superiority of dominant groups. The fourth section, “Reinforcement by broader systems of oppression” demonstrates how these systemic structures – of race, gender, and species – uphold hierarchies of oppression.

The question that my paper will answer is whether it makes sense to accept species discrimination in the same nature as sexism and racism. I argue that if we accept that sexism and racism are unjust due to one group assuming authority over another, speciesism must also be seen unjust.¹⁰

Arbitrary Distinctions That Categorize and Assign Value

What is it that divides people into categories, and are those lines drawn by nature or by culture? While sex defines differences in anatomy and hormonal cycles, sexism is a product of gender classification and expectations. When studying non-Western cultures, it becomes evident that gender norms are not universally consistent.¹¹ For instance, the Fa'afafine is a third gender generally accepted in Samoan culture. They are usually assigned male at birth but take on responsibilities regarding childcare and household chores that are usually assigned to women.¹² Additionally, the discrimination one experiences with sexism is dependent on how society perceives them. If a transgender man appears to be a cisgender man, strangers will likely treat him as they would any other man. However, if his biological sex was apparent, people may assume things about

¹⁰ In this paper I assume sexism and racism are founded upon socially constructed principles of race and gender. Particularly aligned with Ásta's 'conferralist' framework, as well as papers from Sally Haslanger, Judith Butler, and Linda Martín Alcof, I take race and gender to be shaped by social practices and power dynamics (Alcof, 2006; Ásta, 2018; Butler, 1990; Haslanger, 2012). I also focus on the United States for the purpose of clarity.

¹¹ Richard Nisbett, *Intelligence and How to Get It: Why Schools and Cultures Count*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

¹² Serena Nanda, *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations*, (New York: Waveland Press, 2014).

him that they typically would a woman (qualifications at a job interview, wanting to have kids, unsolicited inappropriate behaviors, hyper emotional, etc.). In the context of living things on Earth, humans are the dominant group. While this person was assigned female sex at birth, they do not experience the discrimination a woman does because they do not appear that way.¹³

Race is also not categorized based on biology. Racial categorization has been historically fluid, as seen when Italians weren't considered "White" in the United States until the first half of the 20th Century.¹⁴ Due to slavery, many African Americans do not know where their lineage originates but are categorized as "Black". The discrimination one experiences racially is dependent on physical qualities; the more "white" someone appears, the less discrimination they experience, regardless of their racial identity (also known as colorism). "White passing" individuals are more likely to experience greater socioeconomic advantages compared to darker-skinned individuals.¹⁵ Therefore, while the concept of race is not based on physical appearance, racism can be.

Contrary to the belief that species are clearly and distinctly defined, philosophers like John Dupré assert that "species are not fixed natural kinds but fluid populations with blurry boundaries". While Dupré would disagree with my point that the concept of "species" is a convenient but artificial construct imposed by humans,¹⁶ he would agree that there are many ways to organize and understand the natural world.¹⁷ Not only are the categories themselves blurry, but the value assigned to different species – and the way we treat them because of it – vary between cultures. Dogs, for example, are

¹³ Note: transgender individuals are a great example of how sexism is not confined to biological sex, but for the sake of this paper I will address sexism in a way that fits cisgender models. This is not to exclude the experiences of other gender identities but to highlight the systemic similarities between sexism, racism, and speciesism, which often rely on binary frameworks to categorize and oppress groups.

¹⁴ Fred Gardaphé, "We Weren't Always White", *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 13, no. 3, July–Sept. 2002, pp. 185–199.

¹⁵ Ellis P. Monk, "The Unceasing Significance of Colorism: Skin Tone Stratification in the United States", *Daedalus*, vol. 150, no. 2, 2021, pp. 76–90

¹⁶ Remember that I assume the social constructionist theory for the purpose of this paper and therefore am building on Dupré's belief in how we can categorize the world in many different ways)

¹⁷ John Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals*, (UK: Clarendon Press, 2002).

considered companions in the US, but can be considered food in other parts of the world. A more perplexing example is how many people eat fish but also have pet fish (that they would not eat due to the emotional value they have placed on their own fish). One must also consider the importance of aesthetics, that causes us to like some animals and dislike others, butterflies and moths for example. This shows that the treatment displayed by speciesism, just as in sexism and racism, is arbitrary. It is dependent on cultural norms rather than being defined by objective criteria.

Beliefs in Inherent Superiority

Superiority, in society, is also sustained and maintained by beliefs and stereotypes. Women are often assumed to be "emotionally unstable" and less intellectually capable than men. For example, pseudoscientific claims indicate that smaller brain sizes in women were indicative of lower intelligence. On the other hand, modern neuroscience has reported no significant differences in cognitive ability between men and women. This would indicate that gender differences in behavior and aptitude are shaped more by socialization than biology.¹⁸ Generally, young girls are socialized to take emotional responsibility for others' emotions and actions, while boys are praised for individual, action-oriented behaviors.¹⁹ Despite being seen traditionally in more leadership positions, Men are associated with increased aggression and competitiveness; leadership and intelligence are skills that require collaboration, empathy, and adaptability – which are skills that women often excel in due to social conditioning.²⁰ This reflects that it is the social expectation and not any inborn traits that account for this gendered difference in leadership qualities.

¹⁸ Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

¹⁹ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Bantam, 1995.

²⁰ John Archer, "The Influence of Testosterone on Human Aggression." *Behavioral Science Review*, 2006.

Perhaps the most important argument against my claim is that men are superior simply because they hold the majority of power positions. However, such a fact reflects more on the systemic exclusion of women throughout history than on any natural inferiority or low intellectual capacity. Women who managed to come into leading positions, such as Cleopatra in ancient Egypt or Queen Elizabeth I in England, proved themselves as more than capable in governance and decision-making as their male colleagues, thus refuting the argument of men's superiority.²¹

Many racial groups have been historically oppressed due to assuming inferiority to dominating groups. The indigenous peoples of North America developed systems of government and ecological management but were regarded by colonizers as "savage" because of differences in appearance and cultural practices. Communal land ownership and sustainable ecological relationships were thought of as backwards, rather than a deliberate and efficient construct.²² This perception is enhanced by religious differences: the colonizers saw indigenous practices, which included sacrificing, as barbaric. The "barbaric" and "savage" perceptions of colonizers were used to justify claims of moral superiority and rulership. A similar argument was provided in the 19th-century pseudoscience of craniology, where scientists equated brain size and shape with intelligence. Scientists like Samuel Morton manipulated evidence to make claims that African Americans indeed had smaller or deformed skulls, which were indicative of intellectual inferiority.²³ These selfsame narratives exist today in expectations of minority inferiority due to differences in test scores and educational attainment. However, these gaps reflect systemic inequalities which result in underfunded schools and implicit biases; not inherent cognitive differences.²⁴

²¹ Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*, (Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2007).

²² Charles C Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

²³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

²⁴ Richard Nisbett, *Intelligence and How to Get It: Why Schools and Cultures Count*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

Addressing the issue of assumed superiority of white men is not an uncommon topic of conversation. However, we rarely discuss how as humans, we assume superiority over other species. The “uniquely human qualities” that are generally thought to set humans apart from animals are reasoning, self-awareness, and language. But in fact, none of these three are exclusive to humans. Many believed that the usage of tools was a “uniquely human quality” until 1960 when Jane Goodall observed chimpanzees using tools to extract termites.²⁵ In fact, there are many tool-using non-primate species, such as crows in making hooks, and dolphins in using sponges for foraging. Self-medication was discovered in animals such as great apes, birds and insects involving creative medicinal remedies.²⁶ Yet another ability is architectural intelligence, which has been manifested in beavers, bees, and birds that build rather complex architectures.²⁷ This pattern also manifests in emotional intelligence: elephants mourn their dead, and dolphins use distinctive whistle signals for names, reflecting self-awareness and social complexity. These were all qualities once thought to be “uniquely human”.²⁸ These examples demonstrate how animals exhibit traits in intelligence, emotional depth, and communication. Here lies the inconsistency of arguments using such qualities to claim human’s “inherent superiority”.

Illogical Assumptions

At the end of the day, the playing field is uneven; and it remains that way through ignorant assumptions made by dominant groups. In a society that is designed for and run by men, women

²⁵ Gavin R. Hunt and Russell D. Gray, “The Crafting of Hook Tools by Wild New Caledonian Crows.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 2004.

²⁶ Michael A Huffman, “Self-Medicative Behavior in the African Great Apes: An Evolutionary Perspective into the Origins of Human Traditional Medicine.” *Bioscience*, 2001.

²⁷ Mike Hansell, *Built by Animals: The Natural History of Animal Architecture*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

²⁸ Rory Collins, “What Does It Mean to be Human, and Not Animal? Examining Montaigne’s Literary Persuasiveness in ‘Man is No Better Than the Animals.’” *Sloth: A Journal of Emerging Voices in Human-Animal Studies* 4 (1).

seldom get the opportunity to prove themselves equally competent and lead prosperous lives. In a society based upon white privilege, people of color are rarely allowed the opportunity to prove equal competence. The rest of nature will continue to suffer in a world where human beings have determined themselves to be superior without considering the consequences. While females intellectually develop quicker than males, they often face the burden of responsibility for the actions and emotions of their male counterparts: for example, being told to dress appropriately in order to avoid assault. Yet paradoxically, the same boys who are excused from self-control are also assumed to be the "best leaders." Social and institutional structures are designed to favor men.

For example, work and school schedules reinforce men's 24-hour hormonal cycle in which testosterone peaks in the morning and decreases gradually throughout the day. In contrast, women's bodies undergo a 28-day hormonal cycle through four phases: follicular, or increased energy; ovulation, with peak motivation and productivity; luteal, where energy is lower though intuition heightens; and menstruation, where greater balance occurs in the brain hemispheres.²⁹ It does not make sense that even after achieving success while working against the very nature of their hormonal clock, women are somehow seen as "inferior" to the men who work in a structure that complements their hormonal clock. It is illogical to consider men "superior" when men and women aren't even playing the same game.

For race as well, the strength and determination of marginalized communities in the face of such continuous hurdles go unseen by the very systems that constrain them. Human genetic diversity is such that two individuals of the same racial group are, on average, as different genetically from each other as they are from individuals in other racial groups.³⁰ If we do not distinguish intellectual abilities or inherent values based on arbitrary traits like hair color or height, why would we do so

²⁹ Katie Anderton, "The 24-Hour Day Falls into the Patriarchy's Lap." Medium, 28 Dec. 2022,

³⁰ "National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI)." National Institutes of Health (NIH)

based on skin color which is simply a matter of melanin quantity?³¹ Similar to sexism, the systemically discriminatory white society of America causes differences in opportunity, socio-economic factors, education and health access, and racial bias which impact social mobility. It is illogical to compare the socioeconomic positions of Black and White people when the nation was built in the oppression of Black and Native peoples.³² They did not start in the same place, so it is unreasonable to expect a continuously oppressed group to be in the same place of those who oppress them. It is an uneven playing field.

Speciesism, as previously stated, is founded upon the assumption that we have “uniquely human qualities”. All of these “uniquely human qualities” we have self-designated are continuously disproven and there’s a reason for it. We assume that if we cannot understand something it must be below us, as if the tools we created are free of the bias of human perception and knowledge.³³ A great example of this is how English-speaking Americans often assume that people who do not speak English are somehow less intelligent, when in reality English is not superior to any other language.³⁴ We cannot assume humans are more intelligent than other species if we cannot even quantify our own intelligence (American Psychological Association). In fact, many animals are superior to humans in other ways (dogs, for example, have a better sense of smell).³⁵ Perhaps there are alternative forms of intelligence we do not possess and therefore cannot detect. Being that our knowledge of nature is constantly evolving, it is illogical to claim to know all there is about nature and the species

³¹ Nina Jablonski, *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color*. (California: University of California Press, 2012).

³² Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

³³ Richard Nisbett, *Intelligence and How to Get It: Why Schools and Cultures Count*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

³⁴ M.N. Abu Guba, S. Daoud, and S. Jarbou. “Foreign Accented-Speech and Perceptions of Confidence and Intelligence.” *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, vol. 52, 2023, pp. 1093–1113

³⁵ Alexandra Horowitz, *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know*, Scribner, 2009.

that encompass it (including ourselves). One is forced to consider too how we are the only species that was able to destroy the balance of maintaining a healthy planet. Why would we then not assume that we are the unintelligent ones? That we are the invasive species of the planet? Because we do not treat other species with the same kind of respect as we do for other humans, there is no way to discover their level of intelligence.

Reinforcement by Broader Systems of Oppression

If we can recognize these unreasonable categorizations and social hierarchies, why do they still exist? Being that we as a society have become aware of sexism for quite some time, one would expect the issue to be solved by now. And yet, the patriarchy remains intact. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles (only 8.8% of Fortune 500 CEOs during 2022 were women according to Catalyst Global Statistics) and continue to be hypersexualized in films which reinforce stereotypes of objectification and emotional irrationality.³⁶ The patriarchal norms which validate such objectification and perpetuate narratives of victim blaming and gender norms continue to be taught in homes, demonstrated in schools, and enforced in society.³⁷

Colonialism and slavery worked together to institutionalize racial hierarchies and normalize discrimination and exploitation (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). Systemic biases reinforce such ever-present racist structures. Unequal funding for Education in minority neighborhoods, limited healthcare accessibility, and a systematically biased criminal justice system are all examples of systemic racism persisting today.

³⁶ Stacy L. Smith et al. "Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, and LGBTQ+." *USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative*, 2019.

³⁷ Anita Hill and Emma Coleman Jordan, *Race, Gender, and Power in America: The Legacy of the Hill-Thomas Hearings*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

While not discussed as often, the movement for natural rights of the environment (not just animals) has gained momentum in recent years in an attempt to broaden perspectives on what defines inherent value and who possesses it. We see it within factory farming – an institution resulting from industrialization and mass production – where the animals are fed improperly and kept in confined spaces in large quantities.³⁸ Our laws prioritize human interests over animal welfare, allowing such practices like factory farming and animal testing to continue despite evidence of animal suffering and environmental harm.³⁹ Fast food, fast fashion, and mass media further perpetuate this idea that we can damage the environment and other species for our pleasure. On a more systemic view of speciesism, Anthropocentrism itself places a human being at the top of the "hierarchy of beings" and perpetuates the belief that nature is to be exploited by human needs (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2002).⁴⁰ This form of thought has helped to justify environmental destruction, the use of animals for whatever purposes imagined.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrated how sexism, racism, and speciesism each rely on four of the same principles: arbitrary distinctions that categorize and assign value, beliefs in inherent superiority, reliance on illogical assumptions about dominant group qualities, and reinforcement by broader systems of oppression. These systems depend on constructed hierarchies, illegitimate both biologically and morally, but maintained through cultural norms, economic structures, and institutionalized biases.

³⁸ Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism* (California: Conari Press, 2010).

³⁹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009).

⁴⁰ Andrew Brennan, "Environmental Ethics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (California: 3 June 2002)

Society holds expectations from women that are premised on a severely outdated essentialism of biology, while the systemic racism of white supremacy against racial minorities perpetuates inequalities in education, health care, and criminal justice. These structures are repeated in speciesism, where humans would impose arbitrary sets of distinctions upon other species, labeling them as inferior because of their intelligence or perceived utility. All three - sexism, racism, and speciesism - fall short of providing undeniably clear evidence to justify themselves as valid/logical social structures

I have explained using several historical and modern examples how sexism, racism, and speciesism fit into the equation of “X is superior to Y; therefore, X has authority over Y”. Sexism assumes men are superior to women; therefore, men have authority over women. Racism assumes White people are superior to non-White people; therefore, White people have authority over non-White people. Speciesism assumes humans are superior to all other species; therefore, humans have authority over all other species. Given that rational people understand the equation - in the context of sexism and racism - to be morally wrong, it is their identical structure with speciesism which allows me to argue my position that we should view speciesism as an equal theoretical framework as sexism and racism, and therefore equal weight in their injustice and moral considerations.

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