

The burden of benevolent sexism: How it contributes to the maintenance of gender inequalities

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Abstract

This study (N = 235) examines the responses of male and female participants to information about the alleged endorsement of either hostile or benevolent sexist beliefs by a sample of either men or women. We predicted that people endorsing benevolent sexist statements would be less likely to be perceived as sexist than those endorsing hostile sexist views, and examined the judgmental process through which people fail to recognize benevolent sexism as a form of prejudice. We argue that benevolent sexists do not match the mental prototype of sexist perpetrators, because they are seen as likeable. Our results confirm that because benevolent sexists are evaluated more positively than hostile sexists, they are less likely to be seen as sexists. This judgmental process occurs relatively independently of emotional responses to hostile vs. benevolent sexism. These results are discussed in terms of their relevance to the maintenance of gender inequalities. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

When women are portrayed as inferior to men few would hesitate in finding the source of these opinions sexist. However, contrary to more traditional conceptualizations of prejudice, researchers have argued that sexism does not necessarily take such overtly hostile forms (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Jackman, 1994). Indeed, in modern societies, expressions of sexism are often quite subtle, and can even be positive in tone (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), for instance because they are presented as jokes (Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998), or as a form of flattery (Pryor & Whalen, 1996).

In this paper we focus on a specific type of 'positive' sexism, namely benevolent sexism, as compared to hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Although social scientists have established that benevolent sexism can be harmful for women, so far no research has examined *whether it is perceived as a form of sexism by ordinary men and women* (see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Given that prejudice first needs to be *perceived* before it can be *challenged* as an illegitimate cause of social inequalities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Jost & Major, 2001, for reviews), examining how men and women perceive and experience benevolent sexism will significantly advance our understanding of the

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processes that contribute to the promotion and maintenance of gender inequalities. In the present research we address this important gap in existing knowledge by directly examining whether benevolent sexism is perceived as sexist, both by men and by women, and by studying the psychological process that mediates these perceptions.

WHAT IS BENEVOLENT SEXISM AND WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

It has long been known that gender stereotypes can be positive in tone (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). However, in parallel to what has been documented within research on social identity processes in other inter-group contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see e.g. Ellemers, Van Rijswijk, Roefs, & Simons, 1997; Mummendey & Schreiber, 1984; Spears & Manstead, 1989), women are only seen as superior to men on dimensions which are either inconsequential for the status relation between men and women, or that imply their dependence on men (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Jackman, 1994). Following this thought, Glick and Fiske (1996) distinguished ‘hostile’ from ‘benevolent’ forms of sexism. Hostile sexism communicates a clear antipathy towards women, whereas benevolent sexism takes the form of seemingly positive but in fact patronizing beliefs about women. Benevolent sexism encompasses three components: protective paternalism (e.g. the belief that women should be protected by men), complementary gender differentiation (e.g. the belief that women have—typically domestic—qualities that few men possess), and heterosexual intimacy (e.g. the belief that women fulfil men’s romantic needs). It is similar to hostile sexism because it relies on gender stereotypes (e.g. women are dependent on men), but it clearly differs from hostile sexism in the sense that it conveys these beliefs in a positive tone.

Research has demonstrated that, despite its positive tone, and despite stemming from a genuine positive feeling towards women, benevolent sexism clearly has negative implications. For instance, like hostile sexism, benevolent sexism predicts endorsement of gender stereotypes and of old-fashioned and modern sexist beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001a). It is related to sexual harassment (Fiske & Glick, 1995; Pryor, Geidd, & Williams, 1995), as well as to negative reactions to rape victims (Abrams, Vicky, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002). Moreover, although benevolent sexism encompasses the conviction that women should receive male protection, research has shown that benevolent sexism is positively associated with attitudes that legitimize domestic violence (Glick, Sakalli-Ugurlu, Ferreira, & Souza, 2002; Sakalli, 2002). Finally, in international comparisons, the national level of endorsement of benevolent sexism is related to United Nations indicators of gender inequality such as the participation of women in the economy and in politics (Glick et al., 2000; Glick & Fiske, 2001a).

HOW BENEVOLENT SEXISM CONTRIBUTES TO THE MAINTENANCE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES

These findings demonstrate that to successfully address existing gender inequalities it is essential to combat not only hostile but also benevolent forms of sexism. Although people are generally more likely to endorse benevolent than hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), it has been suggested (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001b; Jackman, 1994) that benevolent sexism might be more difficult to combat than hostile sexism. However, there is as yet no direct evidence that this is true, or why this might be the case. To complement previous research in this area, we argue that benevolent sexism contributes to the maintenance of social inequalities *because it passes unnoticed as a form of prejudice*. Given that

perceptions of prejudice are an important determinant of people's types of responses to social inequalities (see Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002, for a review), demonstrating that these perceptions are impaired by benevolent sexism constitutes an important contribution to the understanding of how gender inequalities are created and maintained. Thus, our first prediction is that compared to hostile sexists, those who endorse benevolent sexism are less likely to be seen as holding sexist views (Hypothesis 1).

We examine how people perceive benevolent and hostile sexism when it is endorsed by a group of others, rather than when it is voiced by a single individual (see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Past research examining the circumstances under which people perceive subtle expressions of discrimination as a form of prejudice has mainly focused on the attributions people make regarding negative treatment received by a single individual (see Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998, for a review). However, it has been argued that victims can see these perpetrators as exceptions to the rule, and hence discount the prejudice they express (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998), whereas prejudice which is seen as more pervasive has been found to have a greater impact on its victims (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003). We therefore chose to employ this procedure when examining our hypotheses.

Additionally, we examine the *psychological process* responsible for the failure to recognize benevolent sexism for what it is. We propose that people who express benevolent sexist views do not match the mental prototype of sexists. Seeing the source of a statement as sexist involves the comparison between the observed exemplar (i.e. the source of sexism) and mental prototypes of sexist perpetrators (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991; Feldman-Barrett & Swim, 1998; Inman & Baron, 1996). If the source fits the mental prototype it is seen as sexist, but if it does not this characterization is hindered.

Prior research found that people evaluate a benevolent sexist perpetrator more positively than a hostile sexist (Killianski & Rudman, 1998). We argue that this positive evaluation is inconsistent with the prototype of sexist perpetrators, who are seen as unlikeable people, typically expressing antipathy towards women (e.g. Dion, 1975; Locksley, Borgida, Brekke, & Hepburn, 1980). Thus, our second prediction is that the evaluation of the source that expresses hostile or benevolent sexism *mediates* the extent to which this source is perceived as sexist (Hypothesis 2). Importantly, the empirical connection between the evaluation of a source and the recognition of the views endorsed by this source as prejudicial has not been made in previous research.

To further support the validity of our reasoning that evaluative *judgments* of the source affect the perception of sexism, we aim to exclude the alternative possibility that *emotional* responses to sexist statements cause people to designate the source as sexist. Exposure to overt discrimination induces more anger than subtle expressions of prejudice (e.g. Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Hence, it could be argued that the greater experience of anger induced by exposure to hostile sexism (as opposed to the flattery implied by benevolent sexism, Glick & Fiske, 1995) causes people to perceive a source of hostile sexism as more sexist than a benevolent sexist. Although we acknowledge that exposure to hostile sexism is likely to evoke more anger than benevolent sexism, we predict that these emotional responses occur relatively *independently* of people's evaluative judgments of the source. That is, if our reasoning in terms of prototypes is correct, the experience of *anger should not mediate* the perception of the source as sexist.

An additional aspect of the prototype of sexist events that should be taken into account in this analysis is the gender of the perpetrator. Prior research found that people are more likely to perceive a sexist statement as sexist when it is voiced by a male perpetrator (Baron et al., 1991). It is unclear whether this is also true in the case of benevolent sexism, since it can be interpreted as 'gentlemanly' behaviour when endorsed by a man (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 2001a). Therefore, it is important to examine whether the gender of the source of a benevolent sexist statement affects how the source is evaluated, and whether it is seen as sexist.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN REACTIONS TO BENEVOLENT SEXISM

Prior research suggests that benevolent sexism may be perceived differently by men and by women. Specifically, in a study by Greenwood and Isbell (2002), benevolent sexism was associated with enjoyment of sexist jokes among men, but not among women. Although the authors explained this finding by suggesting that benevolent sexism is likely to mean different things to men and to women, no direct evidence has been provided so far as to whether or not this is the case. Some evidence does suggest that this may be the case: research examining endorsement of hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes shows that men tend to agree more with *hostile* sexist statements than women do (Glick & Fiske, 2001a, for a review). This is in line with the blatant threat that hostile sexism represents to women, and the fact that as a form of intergroup bias it is more likely to be held by men. However, while some samples also reveal differential agreement with *benevolent* sexist statements, others fail to show this gender difference (see Glick & Fiske, 2001a, for a review). Because of these contradictory findings, in this study we will directly examine whether men and women differ in their perceptions of benevolent sexism as prejudicial.

METHOD

Design and Participants

The study consisted of a 2 (Type of sexism: Hostile sexism, Benevolent sexism) X 2 (Gender of participant: Male, Female) X 2 (Gender of the source: Male, Female) between-participants design. A total of 79 male and 156 female students at a Dutch University voluntarily took part in this study and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.

Procedure

The majority of participants completed the questionnaire at the start of one class, taught by another member of staff at the University where the authors are affiliated. These participants were debriefed and provided with the results of the study in a class that took place 2 weeks later. The remaining participants (approximately 50) completed the questionnaire in our laboratory, and were debriefed by the experimenter.

Manipulations

Participants read a short description purportedly summarizing the results of a prior study concerning opinions about the position of women in Dutch society. Gender of source was manipulated by varying how the sample of the prior study was described. Half of the participants were told that the study examined the opinions of a sample of women (Female Source), and the remaining participants were told that the previous study had investigated the opinions of a sample of men (Male Source). It is important to note that we did not describe this sample as representative of the opinions of all men or all women.

Subsequently, the ostensible results of this study were summarized, in which the Type of sexism was manipulated. In the *Hostile* condition participants read that the women/men in the sample agreed that women are too easily offended and interpret innocent remarks quickly as sexist, that women seek to gain power by getting control over men, that women exaggerate problems they get at work, that when women lose to men in a fair competition they typically complain of being discriminated, and that most women do not appreciate fully what men do for them. These opinions were modelled after the items of Glick and Fiske's (1996) scale of Hostile sexism. In the *Benevolent* sexism condition, participants read that the women/men in the sample agreed with opinions that correspond to each of the three components in the Benevolent sexism scale developed by Glick and Fiske (1996): that many women have a quality of purity that few men possess, and that women—compared to men—tend to have superior moral sensibility (complementary gender differentiation), that no matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman (heterosexual intimacy), that women should be cherished and protected by men, and that men should be willing to sacrifice themselves in order to provide financially for the women in their lives (protective paternalism).

Dependent Measures

Subsequently, participants were asked to indicate their reactions to these opinions on 7 point rating scales ranging from (1) 'not at all' to (7) 'very much'. To assess participants' *evaluation of the source* of the sexist statements, participants indicated the extent to which they expected that they would like people with these (sexist) views, and would be willing to collaborate with people who endorse such views ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$). *Perceived sexism* was assessed by asking to what extent participants thought that people who held those opinions were prejudiced against women. Participants indicated to what extent they experienced *anger* by stating to what extent they experienced each of five negative emotions after reading the (sexist) message: angry, indignant, irritated, disappointed, and frustrated ($\alpha = 0.83$).

RESULTS

Analyses of Variance

All variables were entered in one 2 Type of sexism (Hostile, Benevolent sexism) X 2 Gender of participant (Male, Female) X 2 Gender of the source (Male, Female) between-participants multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This analysis revealed a significant multivariate main effect of Type of sexism, $F(3, 222) = 9.16$, $p < 0.001$ as well as a significant interaction between Type of sexism and Gender of participant, $F(3, 222) = 2.91$, $p < 0.05$. At the univariate level, the main effect of Type of sexism was significant for all dependent variables: evaluation of source, $F(1, 224) = 25.56$, $p < 0.001$, perceived sexism, $F(1, 224) = 5.35$, $p < 0.05$, and anger, $F(1, 224) = 4.21$, $p < 0.05$. Participants evaluated the Hostile sexist source less positively ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.04$) than the source of a Benevolent sexist message ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.04$). They saw the Hostile sexist source as more prejudiced ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.43$) than the Benevolent sexist source ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.35$). Finally, participants were more angry at the Hostile sexist source ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.35$) than at the Benevolent sexist source ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.29$). These results corroborate Hypothesis 1, as they indicate that a source that expresses benevolent sexism is less likely to be seen as sexist and accordingly elicits a less negative evaluation and less anger than a source of hostile sexism.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of evaluation of source, perceived sexism, and anger as a function of Type of sexism and Gender of participant

Type of sexism	Gender of participant			
	Male		Female	
	Hostile	Benevolent	Hostile	Benevolent
Evaluation of the source	3.41 _b (0.91)	4.24 _a (1.07)	3.24 _b (1.11)	3.89 _a (1.01)
Perceived sexism	4.89 _a (1.47)	4.41 _b (1.36)	4.88 _a (1.41)	4.45 _b (1.35)
Anger	2.61 _b (1.25)	2.72 _b (1.39)	3.25 _a (1.35)	2.39 _b (1.25)

Note: Standard deviations are presented within parentheses. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < 0.05$. Comparisons are made within rows.

The interaction between Type of sexism and Participant's gender was significant only for anger, $F(1, 226) = 7.28$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 1). Women felt more angry when facing hostile sexism than when facing benevolent sexism, $F(1, 231) = 17.05$, $p < 0.001$, while men reported similar levels of anger in both conditions, $F(1, 231) = 0.10$, *ns*. As a result, women clearly felt more angry than men when facing hostile sexism $F(1, 231) = 9.26$, $p < 0.005$, whereas in the benevolent condition, there was a marginally significant gender difference in the opposite direction $F(1, 231) = 3.32$, $p = 0.07$, indicating that women tended to feel *less* angry than men when facing benevolent sexism. This latter effect is likely caused by some degree of flattery women experienced as a result of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Mediation Analyses

The mediation of the effect of Type of sexism on perceived sexism by evaluation of source (Hypothesis 2) was tested with the regression approach. Following Baron and Kenny (1986), we tested whether 1) the manipulation of Type of sexism reliably affects perceived sexism (the dependent variable), 2) the manipulation of Type of sexism reliably affects evaluation of the source (the mediator), and 3) when evaluation of the source is controlled for, the effect of Type of sexism on perceived sexism decreases reliably. Type of sexism reliably predicted perceived sexism ($beta = 0.14$), $F(1, 232) = 4.5$, $p < 0.05$, and type of sexism reliably predicted evaluation of the source ($beta = -0.33$), $F(1, 232) = 27.78$, $p < 0.001$. Evaluation of the source also predicted perceived sexism ($beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$), $F(1, 231) = 21.26$, $p < 0.001$. When Type of sexism and evaluation of the source were entered simultaneously as predictors, the effect of Type of sexism on perceived sexism was no longer reliable ($beta = 0.06$, *ns*), while the effect of evaluation of source on perceived sexism remained significant ($beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$), $F(2, 230) = 10.99$, $p < 0.001$. The reduction in the effect of Type of sexism after accounting for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986) is significant (Sobel test: $z = 2.25$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, following the method proposed by MacKinnon and Dwyer (1993) we found that evaluation of source mediates 63% of the total effect of Type of sexism on perceived sexism, constituting a ratio of indirect effect to direct effect of 1.7.

To exclude alternative possibilities, we first tested the inverted model (i.e. whether perceived sexism mediated the effect of Type of sexism on evaluation of the source). This turned out not to be the

case. When Type of sexism and perceived sexism were simultaneously entered as predictors both Type of sexism ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived sexism ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$) remained negatively and reliably associated with evaluation of the source, $F(2, 230) = 23.01$, $p < 0.001$. Next, we tested whether, instead of evaluation of the source, anger could function as a mediator of the effect of Type of sexism on perceived sexism. Although Type of sexism significantly predicted reported anger ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.005$), and the effect of Type of sexism is slightly reduced ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.08$) when anger is also included as a predictor of perceived sexism ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), the Sobel test for this mediation is not significant ($z = 1.09$, $p = 0.28$), and the percentage of mediation is considerably smaller (27% of the total effect or 0.37 ratio) than when evaluation of source is taken as a mediator of this effect. These analyses further support our reasoning, and confirm Hypothesis 2 that it is the negative evaluation of the hostile sexist source (and not the emotional response people experience) that contributes to perceiving this source as sexist, while this perception is hindered by a positive evaluation of the benevolent sexist source.

DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on a psychological process that contributes to the maintenance of gender inequalities in modern societies. Our results are the first to demonstrate that when people express benevolent sexism, they are *less likely to be recognized* as holding sexist views than when expressing hostile sexism. That is, this study revealed that both men and women perceived people endorsing hostile sexist views as significantly more sexist than those who voiced benevolent sexism. Additionally, our results extend previous research as they clarify the *process* through which this happens. Our mediational analyses clearly showed that benevolent sexism is not recognized as sexist because its source is relatively positively evaluated and therefore deviates from the prototype of a sexist perpetrator (see also Baron et al., 1991; Dion, 1975; Locksley et al., 1980). In sum, whereas prior research demonstrated that *endorsement* of benevolent sexism is associated with a range of negative attitudes towards women, the present results illustrate another way in which benevolent sexism might have adverse consequences, namely because it tends not to be recognized as sexism by those who are *exposed* to it and therefore is likely to remain unchallenged.

Our results also point to the pertinence of examining not only the responses of those more directly targeted by sexism (women), but also to include the perspective of men, who tend to be in the position to either sanction the occurrence of sexism or to offer social support to those who challenge it. Although women (who are more directly targeted by sexist views) experienced more anger than did men when exposed to hostile sexism, it is important to stress that—as predicted—this did not translate into gender differences in the core judgmental process (relating evaluation of the source to perception of sexism). Thus, our data indicate that this core judgmental process takes place in similar ways for men and for women, and is relatively independent of affective reactions (which were mainly elicited among women). Although there may be some degree of variability in how people experience this process, and a sample with different characteristics (e.g. people with more conservative ideologies) may be more likely to accept hostile as well as benevolent sexist views, there is no reason to assume that this will uncover gender differences which were not found in the present study.

It is important to stress that, unlike prior research, we did not subject our participants to negative treatment that affected them directly (see Crocker et al., 1998, for a review). One important consequence of this feature of our study is that it provides some indications about the likelihood that the actual victims of prejudice may expect to receive social support from others when they recount their experiences or challenge those who hold sexist views (see Stangor, et al., 2003 for a review).

Given that social support is often a pre-requisite for protest against illegitimate treatment, these findings suggest still another way through which benevolent sexism may inhibit restorative action and thereby promote gender inequalities.

Some limitations of this research should also be noted. Whereas previous research focusing on other forms of sexism revealed that the gender of the sexist perpetrator tends to affect the perception of sexism (e.g. Baron et al., 1991), in our examination of hostile vs. benevolent sexism this was not the case. This is an intriguing finding, and future research should further investigate the process that causes this effect. In addition, although our results indicate that women express less anger in response to benevolent rather than hostile sexist views, this does not imply that it is less harmful for them to be subjected to benevolent rather than hostile sexism. In fact, the evidence we reviewed to show that benevolent sexism is related to gender inequality suggests that this is not the case. Therefore, future research should examine whether exposure to benevolent sexism might have other negative affective or behavioural consequences not examined here.

Future research should also examine the relationship between benevolent sexism and other phenomena that contribute to the creation and promotion of gender differences in less obvious ways. Some examples are the queen bee phenomenon (Ellemers, van den Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004), and the glass cliff phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, in press). These phenomena are all based on the belief that current gender differences are legitimate in the sense that they reflect objective differences between men and women rather than being the result of a system in which men and women are not given the same opportunities. Exposure to, or the endorsement of, benevolent sexism contributes to such beliefs. Additionally, it supports the notion that women are better suited than men to deal with crises and conflictual situations, which causes women to be assigned to more difficult leadership situations than men, and sets them up for failure (the glass cliff phenomena). Likewise, benevolent sexism supports the idea that women as a group are better suited for domestic and nurturing tasks than for professional achievement, so that women who are successful in their career are inclined to see themselves (and are seen by others) as different from other women (the queen bee effect). In this sense, the failure to recognize benevolent sexism as a form of prejudice might be seen as a central mechanism that lies at the heart of a number of phenomena through which seemingly positive beliefs about women indirectly induce and sustain gender discrimination.

In sum, although benevolent sexist expressions appear to be positive, they are far from benign (see also Abrams et al., 2003; Glick et al., 2002). The present research shows that in some sense, benevolent sexism is more (rather than less) harmful than hostile sexism, since by promoting acceptance of prejudicial attitudes they contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 2001a; Jackman, 1994).

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