

# How Nice of Us and How Dumb of Me: The Effect of Exposure to Benevolent Sexism on Women's Task and Relational Self-Descriptions

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**Abstract** This research demonstrates how women assimilate to benevolent sexism by emphasizing their relational qualities and de-emphasizing their task-related characteristics when exposed to benevolent sexism. Studies 1 ( $N=62$ ) and 2 ( $N=100$ ) show, with slightly different paradigms and measures, that compared to exposure to hostile sexism, exposure to benevolent sexism increases the extent to which female Dutch college students define themselves in relational terms and decreases the extent to which they emphasize their task-related characteristics. Study 3 ( $N=79$ ) demonstrates that benevolent sexism has more pernicious effects when it is expressed by someone with whom women expect to collaborate than when no collaboration is expected with the source of sexism. The implications of these results are discussed.

**Keywords** Benevolent sexism · Women's self-descriptions · Task-related and relational self-descriptions · Stereotype confirmation

## Introduction

Women are still under-represented in the workforce, in the US as well as in Europe, and especially in high status and powerful positions (Barreto et al. 2009). Both factors internal and factors external to women themselves have been argued to be at the origin of this under-representation. For example, prior research has shown that gender discrimination plays an important role in impeding women's access to these positions (e.g., Powell 1999). Others showed that women often voluntarily self-select out of work, and out of high status and powerful work positions (e.g., Konrad et al. 2000). In this paper we take a different angle by looking at how these internal and external influences shape each other. We argue that women's career related choices and aspirations often stem from exposure to sexist beliefs that are dominant in their environment. More specifically, the goal of the research reported in this paper is to demonstrate that exposure to benevolent sexist views held by others increases the extent to which women self-define in relational terms, decreases the degree to which they view themselves in task-related terms, and diminishes their leadership aspirations.

## Hostile and Benevolent Sexism

When we think of stereotypes and prejudice we tend to think of negative beliefs about a particular group (e.g., Allport 1954). However, stereotypes are often associated with both negative and positive beliefs about the groups in question. Gender stereotypes are a case in point: as demonstrated by several researchers, in various countries, and with samples of young students as well as samples of working adults, women tend to be stereotyped both in

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negative terms, such as incompetent and overly emotional, and in positive terms, as kind, gentle, and warm (e.g., Eagly and Mladinic 1993; see also Jackman 1994). Generally, this ambivalence towards women encompasses the belief that women have positive characteristics in the relational domain and negative in more task-related domains.

Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001) developed the concept of benevolent sexism to capture the prejudicial beliefs of those who see women as warm, but not competent. Contrary to hostile sexism—which clearly communicates hostility towards women and a belief in women’s inferior competence compared to men—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 social and 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 in that 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 and more ambiguous tone. Studies conducted in the US (Killianski and Rudman 1998), as well as studies conducted in the Dutch context (Barreto and Ellemers 2005), where the current research was carried out, provide evidence for this relative ambiguity of benevolent sexism.

#### How Benevolent Sexism is Associated with Relational and Task-Related Perceptions

As originally conceptualized, benevolent sexism is closely linked to traditional gender role divisions, which associate women with the relational domain and men with the task/achievement domain (Glick and Fiske 1996). And indeed research carried out mainly in the US has documented an *intra-psychic* association between these concepts, showing that people who endorse benevolent sexism tend to view (other) women in traditional terms, and to perceive traditional women as warm but incompetent (Fiske et al. 1999; Fiske et al. 2002). Past research has also shown that women who endorse traditional gender roles place less value on achievement-related activities than women who do not endorse traditional gender roles (e.g., Eccles et al. 1999; Rudman and Heppes 2003).

However, we know a lot less about how benevolent sexism, on the one hand, and relational or task-related perceptions, on the other, are *associated at the interpersonal level*. That is, little is known about how the endorsement of benevolent sexism by one person can affect the importance (other) women award to tasks and

social relations in their self-definition. However, given that benevolent sexism stems from the view of women as warm but incompetent, it is reasonable to expect that it might communicate this same view when expressed, the question remaining as to what implications this has for women’s self-descriptions. Research by Sinclair et al. (2005) provides some relevant evidence to answer this question. In this research, American female college students self-defined more in line with the female stereotype when they interacted, or believed they would interact, with a benevolent sexist than when they interacted with a partner who held egalitarian and non-traditional views of women (see also Sinclair and Lun 2006).

However, the importance of examining the particular effects of benevolent sexism lies in the expectation that its effects might differ from those of other forms of prejudice, a comparison which the studies by Sinclair and colleagues did not include. Indeed, given that benevolent sexism often remains unrecognized as a form of sexism, while hostile sexism is easily seen as such (Barreto and Ellemers 2005; Killianski and Rudman 1998), women are more likely to assimilate to benevolent sexist views of them than to hostile sexism. Prior research conducted in the US has in fact shown that college students often assimilate to the stereotypical views others have of them (e.g., Steele and Aronson 1995; Zanna and Pack 1975), even when these views are expressed through TV commercials (e.g., Jennings et al. 1980) but that this happens mainly when the stereotypes held by others are ambiguous, while non-ambiguous stereotypes are usually rejected (Kray et al. 2001).

Past research has also demonstrated that exposure to benevolent sexism can lead women to unwittingly confirm gender stereotypes to a greater extent than exposure to hostile sexism. For example, in their research with American college students, Jost and Kay (2005) documented that exposure to benevolent sexism leads women to increase the endorsement of system justifying beliefs, that is, their sense that it is all right that men are dominant in high status positions, while women are not. Research carried out in Spain also showed that female college students behave more submissively when exposed to benevolent than to hostile sexism (Moya et al. 2007). Other studies carried out in Belgium and in the US, again with college student samples, suggest that exposure to benevolent sexism uniquely leads women to express increased self-doubt (Dardenne et al. 2007), and to perform poorly both in male stereotypical tasks (Vescio et al. 2005) and in female stereotypical tasks (Dardenne et al. 2007)—showing themselves to be as incompetent as implied by the benevolent sexist belief to which they are exposed.

## The Current Research

Although the studies reviewed here clearly demonstrate that exposure to benevolent sexism can make women feel incompetent and behave incompetently, none of these studies showed that benevolent sexism may lead women to dissociate their self-view from the task-domain and associate themselves with the relational domain, as compared to when they are exposed to hostile sexism. This is the first goal of the research reported here. This was tested in two studies (Studies 1 and 2), carried out in the Netherlands with college student samples.

The Netherlands is generally regarded as an egalitarian country. On the one hand statistics indeed suggest that gender gaps in the Netherlands are narrower than in other countries (for example, a 2007 report of the World Economic Forum reveals that the Gender Gap Index in terms of labor participation in the Netherlands is the 12th smallest of the 128 countries covered by this study). On the other hand, however, a recent study of the Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics and the Social and Cultural Planning Agency (Merens and Hermans 2008) indicates that 75% of female workers work part-time (24 h per week on average), and only 43% are economically independent. Furthermore, this study shows that after correcting for differences in age, education and experience, women earn 3–6% less than men doing the same job, and only 7% of the top managerial positions are held by women, indicating that governmental goals that have been set to achieve greater gender equality in labor participation have not been met. A Eurobarometer survey carried out in 2008 accordingly shows that 27% of the Dutch think that gender discrimination is widespread in Dutch society, even though only 3% claim to have been personally discriminated on the basis of their gender. A prior study suggests that although hostile expressions of sexism might be relatively rare in the Netherlands, Dutch female college students express agreement with benevolent sexism, and do not regard it as very sexist (Barreto and Ellemers 2005), suggesting that subtle forms of sexism such as benevolent sexism are prevalent also in this country.

In this context, we expected that women would tend to assimilate to the stereotypical views of them implied by benevolent sexism, but not to those implied by hostile sexism (Studies 1 and 2). Specifically, we expected that women exposed to benevolent sexism would describe themselves as more relational and less task oriented, than women exposed to hostile sexist views, and than women in control conditions (Hypothesis 1). The specific goal of Study 3 was to demonstrate that women are likely to self-describe less in task-relevant terms, and to express fewer leadership aspira-

tions when they are exposed to benevolent sexism than when they are not, particularly if this exposure occurs within a relational context (Hypothesis 2).

## Study 1

In this study Dutch female university students read about the prevalence either of benevolent or of hostile sexist views and subsequently filled in a questionnaire inquiring about their self-descriptions in relational and task terms. We expected that female participants exposed to benevolent sexism would describe themselves more in relational terms and less in task-related terms than female participants that read about hostile sexism (Hypothesis 1).

## Method

### *Design and Participants*

A total of 62 female Dutch college students with a mean age of 20.13 (SD=1.88) took part in this study and were equally and randomly allocated to conditions. Participants were approached in diverse sites throughout campus and asked to participate in a study about men and women. Those who agreed to participate were handed in a short questionnaire and a pen or pencil. Participants either read about the prevalence of benevolent sexism or the prevalence of hostile sexism in Dutch society. They were then asked to answer some questions (dependent measures). Upon completion, participants returned the questionnaire to the experimenter who had stayed close by, and those who so wished wrote their name and contact in a separate form to enable them to participate in a lottery of four prizes of 20 Euros each. Participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed about the goals of the study.

### *Procedure*

The first page of the questionnaire contained the manipulation of benevolent vs. hostile sexism. Participants read that a study had recently been conducted about people's beliefs concerning the position of men and women in Dutch society (see also Barreto and Ellemers 2005). The following lines summarized some of the results of that study. The beliefs summarized in this section were either items from the benevolent sexism scale or items from the hostile sexism scale (Glick and Fiske 1996). In the *benevolent sexism* condition participants read that many people in this society believed that many women have a quality of purity that few men possess; that compared to men, women have a superior moral sensibility (both Complementary Gender

Differentiation); that irrespective of how much he has accomplished, a man is not completely successful without the love of a woman (Heterosexual Intimacy); that women should be cherished and protected by men and that men must be prepared to sacrifice in order to provide for women (both Protective Paternalism). In the *hostile sexism* condition, participants read that many people believed that women are too easily offended: innocent remarks are easily interpreted as sexist by women; that women seek power by gaining control over men; that women exaggerate problems at work; that when women lose from men in a fair competition they claim they have been discriminated against and that women fail to appreciate all that men do for them.

After reading these statements, participants were asked to think carefully about them, to picture what it meant to them that people had these beliefs, and to subsequently turn the page to answer some questions.

### Dependent Measures

All questions were presented as statements with which participants were asked to agree or disagree on 7 point Likert-type scales (from '1' not at all to '7' very much). To show how participants viewed the benevolent and the hostile sexist statements, participants were asked to indicate on one item whether they agreed with the (benevolent sexist vs. hostile) beliefs of the sample of the alleged study. Self-descriptions in the *task* domain were assessed by asking participants to indicate on 4 items how important they found competence and academic achievement. These items were selected and adapted from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale of Crocker et al. (2003): 'knowing that I am better than others at a task increases my self-esteem', 'my self-esteem is influenced by how well I perform in competitive tasks', 'I feel worth while when I perform better than others at some tasks or abilities', and 'my self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance'. Scores on these items were averaged to form a reliable scale ( $\alpha=.85$ ). Self-descriptions in the *relational* domain were assessed by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they saw themselves as attentive, warm, and romantic. Scores on these items were averaged, and although they did not form a reliable scale ( $\alpha=.38$ ) the items were reliably inter-correlated (inter-correlations  $\geq .25$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and analyzes at item level were also conducted. For both measures, only a small selection of items was used because the questionnaire needed to comply with severe space restrictions, as it was part of a larger package of questionnaires presented to participants in a time-limited session. Participants then indicated their gender, their age, and their study major.

## Results and Discussion

### Agreement with the Stimulus Material

Agreement was analyzed with independent samples t-test with condition (benevolent vs. hostile sexism) as a between participants factor. Participants agreed more with the benevolent sexist statements ( $M=3.63$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ) than with the hostile sexist statements ( $M=2.70$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ),  $F(1, 58)=8.30$ ,  $p<.01$ . This replicates past research and demonstrates a core difference between benevolent and hostile sexist beliefs, i.e., that people find benevolent sexism easy to agree with it, presumably because they do not see much harm in it.

### Task-related and Relational Self-descriptions

To test whether, as predicted in Hypothesis 1, task-related self-descriptions were downplayed and relational self-descriptions were emphasized in the benevolent sexism condition, a repeated measures MANOVA was conducted with condition (benevolent vs. hostile sexism) as a between participants factor and type of self-description (task vs. relational) as a within participants factor. This analysis revealed only the expected reliable multivariate interaction between condition and type of self-description,  $F(1, 60)=11.88$ ,  $p<.001$ . Although participants in all conditions self-described more in task terms than in relational terms (both  $t_s>2$ ,  $p_s<.01$ ), in line with Hypothesis 1, participants self-described less in task-related terms when they were exposed to benevolent sexism ( $M=4.58$ ,  $SD=.98$ ) than when they were exposed to hostile sexism ( $M=5.24$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ),  $t(59.79)=2.58$ ,  $p<.01$ , equal variances not assumed. Participants also defined themselves more in relational terms when they were exposed to benevolent sexism ( $M=4.13$ ,  $SD=.49$ ) than when they were exposed to hostile sexism ( $M=3.84$ ,  $SD=.44$ ),  $t(60)=2.45$ ,  $p<.01$  (see Table 1).

Due to the poor reliability of the measure of relational self-descriptions, we also tested this effect with a 2 (condition) X 3 (item) MANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor and again found a reliable main effect of condition,  $F(1, 60)=6.03$ ,  $p<.05$ , which is unqualified by an interaction with item,  $F(2, 59)=.73$ ,  $p=.49$ . We can thus conclude that the pattern we find for this scale is valid across all items.

These results confirm Hypothesis 1 by indicating that exposure to benevolent sexism increases the extent to which women describe themselves as less task-oriented and more relational, in line with traditional gender role beliefs. These effects emerged despite the poor reliability revealed by the relational self-description scale. We conducted a second study to examine whether similar results can be

**Table 1** Means and standard deviations for agreement and self-descriptions as a function of exposure to sexism (Study 1 and Study 2).

	Condition		
	Benevolent sexism	Hostile sexism	Control
Agreement (Study 1)	3.63 (1.09) a	2.70 (1.39) b	–
Self-descriptions:			
Task-related			
Study 1	4.58 (.98) b	5.24 (1.04) a	–
Study 2	3.17 (.67) b	3.47 (.61) a	3.55 (.61) a
Relational			
Study 1	4.13 (.49) a	3.84 (.44) b	–
Study 2	5.04 (.89) a	4.42 (.65) b	4.50 (.99) b

Means with different subscripts differ with  $p < .05$ . Comparisons are made within rows. Standard deviations are presented within parentheses. Scale end-points are 1=not at all and 7=very much.

obtained with a slightly different paradigm and different indicators of task and relational self-views.

## Study 2

The goal of study 2 was to test Hypothesis 1 and replicate the basic findings of study 1 with a slightly different paradigm and other indicators of the outcomes of interest, both to test the robustness of our findings, as well as an attempt at improving the reliabilities of the measures. As to the paradigm, in this second study women were more implicitly exposed to benevolent sexism than was the case in the first study. This was done by framing the stimulus materials as text in need of proofreading, not requesting any explicit agreement or disagreement from the participant, and presenting the dependent measures as a separate study. Study 2 also included a control condition aimed at specifying whether it is benevolent or hostile sexism that affects the importance women attach to task and relational self-descriptions, compared to a baseline.

## Method

### *Design and Participants*

The design of this study was one between participants factor with 3 levels: experimental participants were implicitly exposed either to benevolent sexism or to hostile sexism, while control participants only answered the dependent variables. A total of 100 female Dutch college students with a mean age of 20.39 ( $SD=2.51$ ) took part in this study and were equally and randomly allocated to conditions. Participants were approached at various sites throughout campus and asked to participate in a study about men and women. Those who agreed to participate were handed the research materials and a pen or pencil. Upon completion, participants returned the questionnaires to the

experimenter who had stayed close by, and those who so wished wrote their name and contact in a separate form to enable them to participate in a lottery of four prizes of 20 Euros each. Participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed about the goals of the study.

### *Procedure*

Participants who agreed to participate were handed two short packages which were described as separate studies. The first package contained two pages where the same items used to manipulate benevolent vs. hostile sexism were printed. In an adaptation of the method followed by Jost and Kay (2005), participants were asked to indicate for each item the extent to which it was clearly worded. Participants were instructed to fill in this questionnaire first and then proceed to the second questionnaire. The second questionnaire contained some general instructions about how to fill in the questionnaire (e.g., answer what first comes to your mind, there are no right or wrong answers, etc), the dependent measures, and some filler items. To enhance the idea that the two questionnaires were in fact different studies, the questionnaires had quite different formats, used different letter types, and different letter sizes. Participants in the control condition only completed the second questionnaire.

### *Dependent Measure*

*Task-related* self-descriptions were assessed by asking participants to what extent they described themselves as self-assured, ambitious, and dominant. The scores on these items were averaged and formed a reasonably reliable scale ( $\alpha=.68$ , inter-correlations  $> .38$ ,  $p < .05$ ). *Relational* self-descriptions were assessed with 5 items from the Contingencies of Self-Worth scale (Crocker et al. 2003) 2 items tapping the importance of social approval for self-esteem

(‘my self-esteem depends on the opinion that others have of me’ and ‘I do not care about what others think of me’, recoded), and 3 items tapping the importance of appearance for self-esteem (‘my self-esteem goes down when I think that I do not look good’, ‘my self-esteem is not dependent on whether or not I feel attractive’ (recoded), and ‘my self-esteem is influenced by how attractive I find my face or facial characteristics’). These items loaded on one factor (explaining 47% of variance and with loads  $> .53$ ) and thus scores on these items were averaged and formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha=.71$ , which is acceptable for ad hoc measures). Again, for both measures, only a small selection of items was used because the questionnaire needed to comply with severe space restrictions, as it was part of a larger package of questionnaires presented to participants in a time-limited session.

## Results and Discussion

### *Task-related and Relational Self-descriptions*

To test whether, as predicted, task-related self-descriptions were downplayed and relational self-descriptions were emphasized in the benevolent sexism condition, compared to the hostile and the control conditions, a repeated measures MANOVA was conducted with condition (benevolent vs. hostile sexism vs. control) as a between participants factor and type of self-description (task vs. relational) as a within participants factor. This analysis revealed only the expected reliable multivariate interaction between condition and type of description,  $F(2, 96)=7.476$ ,  $p<.001$  (see Table 1). Although in this study participants in all conditions described themselves more on the basis of relational than on the basis of task-related attributes (within the benevolent condition  $t(31)=9.69$ ,  $p<.001$ , within the hostile condition  $t(33)=5.75$ ,  $p<.001$ , within the control condition  $t(32)=4.34$ ,  $p<.001$ ), in line with predictions, participants endorsed task-related self-descriptions more when they were implicitly exposed to benevolent sexism ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=.67$ ) than when they were exposed to hostile sexism ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=.61$ ),  $t(64)=1.93$ ,  $p=.05$ , and than when they were not exposed to sexism ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=.61$ ),  $t(63)=2.40$ ,  $p<.05$ . The means in the hostile sexism and control condition did not reliably differ from each other,  $t(65)=.50$ , *ns*. This means that implicit exposure to benevolent sexism lowered the extent to which female participants’ self-descriptions were task-related, both in relation to the baseline and to exposure to hostile sexism, while hostile sexism did not affect these self-descriptions. In a similar vein, participants exposed to benevolent sexism attached more importance to social approval and to their appearance ( $M=5.04$ ,  $SD=.89$ ) than participants exposed to hostile sexism ( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=.65$ ),  $t(65)=$

$3.29$ ,  $p<.005$ , and than control participants ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=.99$ ),  $t(63)=2.30$ ,  $p<.05$ . The means in the hostile sexism and the control condition did not reliably differ from each other,  $t(66)=.43$ , *ns*. This is in line with our expectations and demonstrates that exposure to benevolent sexism increases the importance female participants attach to the relational domain in relation to the baseline (and to exposure to hostile sexism), while exposure to hostile sexism does not have this effect.

In sum, two different paradigms and two different set of measures suggest that exposure to benevolent sexism aligns women’s self-descriptions with traditional gender stereotypes, so that women exposed to benevolent sexism describe themselves as less task focused and more attuned to social relations than women exposed to hostile sexism and than women in control conditions. That this effect is not obtained when women are exposed to hostile sexism demonstrates that it does not necessarily emerge when gender stereotypes are made salient, but only when this is done in an ambiguous or subtle manner. The finding that our female Dutch students described themselves more in task than in relational terms in study 1 and more in relational than in task terms in study 2 must be taken with care, given the differences between the scales used to measure these two types of self-definition in the two studies, which render comparisons across conditions more relevant than comparisons within conditions.

### Study 3

Study 3 was conducted to examine whether benevolent sexism has particularly pernicious effects on women’s task-related self-descriptions, compared to control conditions, when building a positive social relation is important, such as when collaboration with the source of sexism is expected (Hypothesis 2). In addition, we wanted to examine what happens when exposure to benevolent sexism occurs in the context of work relationships, where task-related self-descriptions can be important precursors of professional success. To achieve these goals, we thus created a context where particular tasks had to be performed and varied the extent to which female participants expected to collaborate with an otherwise attractive male, who either expressed or did not express benevolent sexism. We also expanded our focus beyond task-related self-definitions, to examine women’s willingness to take on leadership of the team or instead delegate team leadership to the male partner. So while in studies 1 and 2 we examined how the importance of task and relational concerns for women’s self-definition varied depending on whether they were exposed to benevolent or to hostile sexism, we now introduced a

factor that should strongly affect the extent to which the relationship with the other is important and observed its effect on the extent to which benevolent sexism affected women's task-related self-descriptions and leadership aspirations. Thus, in this study we were less interested in how the two types of self-description (co-)varied, as we examined how varying the importance of relational concerns can lead to variations in self-ascribed task characteristics and leadership aspirations in a work context.

We reasoned that expecting to collaborate with an attractive male partner would motivate women to build a positive relationship with the male partner, and in turn increase the extent to which female participants align themselves with the partner's views. Our focus was thus on creating a relational frame of mind and examining whether this would have consequences for the extent to which women endorsed task-related self-views and goals. We thus reasoned that this relational focus created by the expected collaboration would increase the likelihood that women exposed to benevolent sexism would assimilate to the partner's stereotypical view of them. More specifically, we predicted that women exposed to a benevolent sexist partner with whom they expected to collaborate, and who seemed otherwise attractive, would describe themselves as less task-oriented than when the partner was not sexist and when no collaboration was expected. We also anticipated that women's leadership aspirations would suffer when participants expected to collaborate with a benevolent sexist partner, compared to when the partner was not sexist, or when they did not expect collaboration.

Prior research has already shown that women assimilate to stereotypical views of others mainly when stereotypes are expressed in relational contexts, such as when women expect or actually have interactions with attractive partners (Sinclair et al. 2005; Von Baeyer et al. 1981; Zanna and Pack 1975). However, in previous research by Sinclair and colleagues, gender stereotypes were always made salient, as they compared self-descriptions after exposure to stereotype consistent (benevolent sexism) and stereotype inconsistent (egalitarian and non-traditional) views of women. Our focus in Study 3 is on comparing women's self-descriptions when they are exposed to benevolent sexism with their self-descriptions in a control condition, where gender stereotypes are not activated. In addition, while Sinclair et al.'s interest was on more broadly defined feminine and masculine stereotypical self-definitions, our focus in Study 3 is more specifically on task-related self-descriptions and leadership aspirations that are relevant to work and career aspirations. In sum, past research did not specifically examine how benevolent sexism from the source of sexism affects women's task-related self-definitions and leadership aspirations, when compared to control conditions. This is thus the core goal of this study.

## Method

### *Design and Participants*

This study followed a 2 (Expected Collaboration: Yes vs. No) X 2 (Benevolent Sexism: Yes vs. No) between-participants factorial design. A total of 79 female Dutch college students with a mean age of 22.2 years ( $SD=4.09$ ) voluntarily took part in this study and were randomly assigned to one of the 4 experimental conditions. The study took approximately 40 min. All participants were debriefed at the end of the study and paid for their participation.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited to participate in a study about task performance. Only female participants were recruited, but they were unaware of this fact. Participants were welcomed into the lab where they sat in front of computers inside separate cubicles. Participants could not see each other during the study and we made an effort not to let participants meet each other prior to the study (i.e., directing each participant to her respective cubicle as soon as she arrived). The study was introduced as focusing on task performance. Participants read that they would be connected to a team partner through the computer network to work on a task about solutions for organizational dilemmas. Participants in the expected *collaboration* conditions read that for each organizational problem presented, the team partners would first have to communicate to each other their provisional solution. Subsequently, they would both be given the opportunity to adapt or improve their own solution, if they so wished. Their team score would be the sum of their individual scores and result from this collaboration. In the conditions where *participants did not expect collaboration*, it was also said that the team score would be the sum of the partners' individual scores. However, in these conditions, participants did not expect to see their partners' provisional solution. Instead, participants read that they would propose their provisional solution, have some time to reflect, and then state their final solution. Importantly, however, this task never took place. This means that participants did not actually differ in their exposure to the partner's answers, or to actual collaboration. Given that our interest was on the relational focus associated with expected collaboration, we also found it important to control for other factors that might be affected by expected collaborations, such as anticipated accountability. We thus informed all participants that they would meet face to face at the end of the study. Again, in reality this did not happen. In sum, all participants expected to meet their partner at the end of the experiment, all participants expected to perform a task with their partner with some level of interdependence (in terms of the final

score), but participants in the expected collaboration condition expected to exchange feedback about their answers, while participants in the no expected collaboration condition did not.

Following this short explanation about the upcoming task, and allegedly to acquaint team members with each other, participants were asked to respond to several background questions. We explained that their partner would also answer these questions and that subsequently partners would be able to see each others' answers. Participants indicated their gender, age, place of birth, and field of education. Participants also indicated whether they had participated in psychological experiments before; if so, whether they had worked together with someone else in that prior experiment; how they evaluated this prior experience and with what sort of people they generally preferred to work. Pre-programmed answers to these questions were projected onto the participant's screen. These answers served to manipulate benevolent sexism and to portray the partner as relatively attractive, despite his sexism, to ensure that expected collaboration would induce a relational focus. Attractiveness was ensured by making sure the answers given on the filler questions were very friendly. The (female) participants saw that their partner was male, and of similar age to themselves. Participants in the *benevolent sexism* condition also saw that their partner expressed some benevolent sexist attitudes, including protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy (Glick and Fiske 1996). Specifically, in the conditions where the partner expressed benevolent sexism, the partner indicated that '*in earlier experiments I have mostly worked with female partners, whom I had to help with several difficult and heavy tasks, but a gentleman does that, of course* [protective paternalism]. *In general, I prefer to work with women because they are more sensitive and have better taste* [complementary gender differentiation]. *Men and women complement each other in many situations*' [heterosexual intimacy]. In the conditions where the partner did not express benevolent sexism, the partner indicated that '*In earlier experiments I have mostly worked with female partners because there are more female students. In general, I do not mind whom I work with, as long as the task is completed successfully.*' We thus controlled for the extent to which participants expected their partner to be familiar with working with women (such as the female participant), and varied the extent to which this was due to a benevolent sexist preference, or to random factors such as greater availability of female participants. Note that this is different from manipulations of other types of sexism because—in line with theoretical conceptualizations of benevolent sexism—in the benevolent sexist condition women are actually preferred to men, albeit for sexist reasons.

### Dependent Measure

At this point participants were asked to respond to a series of questions, among which were the manipulation checks and the dependent measures. Unless otherwise specified, all questions were answered by indicating agreement with a particular sentence, on a Likert-type scale from 1 'not at all' to 7 'very much'.

Our *check of the benevolent sexism manipulation* consisted of asking participants to indicate to what extent they thought their partner was biased and sexist. Scores on these two items were averaged and formed a reliable scale ( $r=.56$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Although benevolent sexism is not perceived as sexist as hostile forms of sexism (Barreto and Ellemers 2005), participants should be able to perceive the benevolent sexist partner as relatively more biased than the non sexist partner. To mask the goals of the experiment, these items were interspersed with 5 filler items.

We *checked the manipulation of expected collaboration* in two ways. First, we used a scale with 6 items that focused on participants' expectations that they would collaborate with their partner during the task (i.e., that they and their partner would both contribute to the task and take each other's contributions into account), their expectations that this exchange would go smoothly and their motivation to ensure that the collaboration would be positive. The items were: 'I think that my partner will acknowledge my contribution to the task', 'I think that my partner will appreciate my contribution to the task', 'I think I have an influence on the outcome of the task', 'I do not expect a conflict to develop between me and my partner', 'I am motivated to solve conflicts that arise between me and my partner', and 'I think that working together with my partner will go smoothly'. Scores on these items were averaged and formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha=.85$ ). To further examine the effects of this manipulation on relational focus we also assessed the extent to which participants were concerned about the impression they made on others (i.e., 'I do not care when others have a negative opinion of me' and 'what others think of me does not influence the way I think about myself'). Scores on these items were averaged and formed a reliable scale ( $r=.62$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

To measure the *task-related self-descriptions*, we used 4 items adapted from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale of Crocker et al. (2003). The items were: 'doing well at the task will give me a feeling of self-respect', 'doing something better than others gives me a feeling of self-respect', 'my self-esteem is influenced by how well I do something compared to others', and 'knowing that I am better at something than someone else increases my self-esteem'. Scores on these items were averaged and formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha=.83$ ). Relational self-descriptions were not measured in this study.



To measure leadership aspirations we told participants that for the upcoming team task one participant would have to be appointed as the leader and subsequently asked the participants to indicate their opinion on 9 items. Of these, 5 items inquired about the extent to which participants wanted to be the leader of their team and thought they would do well in that role ('I would like to be the leader of my team', 'I think I will be a good leader of my team', 'I think that if I am the leader of my team we will have a good outcome', 'I think that if I am the leader of the team working together will go well', and 'I think that if I am the leader of my team more conflict will arise, recoded). Scores on these items were averaged and formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha=.77$ ). In addition, 4 items assessed the extent to which participants would delegate the leader role to their (male) partner ('I think that my partner will be a better leader of the team than I will', 'I think that if my partner is the leader of my team we will have a good outcome', 'I think that if my partner is the leader of the team working together will go well', 'I think that if my partner is the leader of my team more conflict will arise, recoded;  $\alpha=.57$ ).

## Results and Discussion

Unless otherwise indicated all measures were analyzed with a 2 (Expected collaboration: Yes vs. No) X 2 (Benevolent Sexism: Yes vs. No) between participants ANOVA.

### Manipulation Checks

As intended, participants in the benevolent sexism condition perceived their partner as more sexist and biased ( $M=4.18$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) than participants in the no sexism condition ( $M=3.31$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ),  $F(1, 75)=13.17$ ,  $p<.001$ . In addition, participants in the expected collaboration conditions expected more and a smoother collaboration ( $M=5.65$ ,  $SD=.67$ ) than participants that did not expect collaboration ( $M=5.17$ ,  $SD=.85$ ),  $F(1,75)=7.73$ ,  $p<.01$ . Finally, participants who expected collaboration expressed greater relational concerns ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=1.68$ ) than did participants who did not expect collaboration ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ),  $F(1, 75)=4.17$ ,  $p<.05$ . No other effects on the manipulation checks were reliable. Therefore, our manipulations can be considered successful.

### Task-related Self-descriptions

A reliable interaction effect between expected collaboration and benevolent sexism was obtained,  $F(1, 75)=4.17$ ,  $p<.05$  (see Table 2). Inspection of means and main effects revealed that, in line with expectations, participants with a benevolent sexist partner described themselves in less task-related terms when they expected interacting with the

**Table 2** Task-related self-descriptions and delegation of leadership to the male partner as a function of benevolent sexism and expected collaboration (Study 3).

	Benevolent sexism	
	Yes	No
Expected collaboration		
Yes		
Task-related self-descriptions	4.74 (1.16) b	4.89 (1.11) b
Leadership delegation	4.94 (.77) a	4.40 (.62) b
No		
Task-related self-descriptions	5.67 (.79) a	4.84 (1.13) b
Leadership delegation	4.50 (.86) b	4.75 (.68) b

Means with different subscripts differ with  $p<.05$ . Comparisons are made within rows and columns for each dependent variable. Standard deviations are presented within parentheses. Scale end-points are 1=not at all and 7=very much.

source of sexism ( $M=4.74$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ) than when they did not expect to interact with the source of sexism ( $M=5.67$ ,  $SD=.79$ ),  $F(1, 76)=7.58$ ,  $p<.001$ . By contrast, participants' task-related self-descriptions did not differ when they had a non-sexist partner irrespective of whether they expected collaboration ( $M=4.89$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ) or not ( $M=4.84$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ),  $F(1, 76)=.01$ , *ns*. As a result, when participants did not expect interacting with their partner, the partner's benevolent sexism was associated with more task-related self-descriptions than when the partner did not express benevolent sexism,  $F(1, 76)=5.87$ ,  $p<.05$ . When participants expected collaboration the partner's sexism did not affect participants' self-descriptions,  $F(1, 76)=.20$ , *ns*.

### Leadership Aspirations

The manipulations did not reliably affect the extent to which participants wanted to become the leaders of their team and thought they would do well in this role (overall  $M=4.65$ ,  $SD=.88$ ). However, we found the expected pattern of results for the extent to which women delegated leadership to their partner. A reliable interaction between the two factors,  $F(1,75)=5.63$ ,  $p<.05$ , revealed that participants with a benevolent sexist partner thought their partner was a better leader when they expected collaboration ( $M=4.94$ ,  $SD=.77$ ) than when they did not ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=.86$ ),  $F(1, 76)=3.53$ ,  $p=.06$ , while expected collaboration did not affect leadership perceptions when the partner was not sexist (expected collaboration  $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=.62$ ; no expected collaboration  $M=4.75$ ,  $SD=.68$ ),  $F(1, 76)=2.25$ , *ns*. Additionally, when they expected collaboration, participants with a sexist partner saw their partner as a better leader ( $M=4.94$ ,  $SD=.77$ ) than participants with a

non-sexist partner ( $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=.62$ ),  $F(1, 76)=5.38$ ,  $p<.05$ , while when they did not expect collaboration the partner's sexism did not affect leadership expectations (benevolent sexist partner  $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=.86$ ; no sexism  $M=4.75$ ,  $SD=.68$ ),  $F(1, 76)=1.14$ , *ns*.

In sum, this study shows that when encountering benevolent sexism, Dutch female college students who expect to collaborate with the source of sexism define themselves less in task-related terms and are more willing to delegate team leadership to the male partner, than participants who do not expect to collaborate with the source of sexism. Expected collaboration induced a relational focus that was optimal for the revelation of effects of benevolent sexism. Note that our focus in this study was on examining task-related self-descriptions and leadership aspirations in contexts that differed in the relational focus implied. This is why we checked the effectiveness of our manipulation in changing the way participants perceived the relation with their *partner*, but did not assess relational *self*-descriptions in this study. We thought the added value of measuring relational self-definitions in this study would be limited, as we would have expected these to covary with task self-definitions, as a result of benevolent sexism, just as in studies 1 and 2.

## General Discussion

This research demonstrates that women's self-descriptions can be altered by exposure to benevolent sexism in ways that impair their career-related aspirations. Dutch female college students exposed to benevolent sexism described themselves more in relational terms and less in task-related terms than participants exposed to hostile sexism (studies 1 and 2) and than participants in control conditions (studies 2 and 3). Study 3 shows that this pattern is most likely when benevolent sexism is expressed in relational contexts, such as when women expect to interact with the source of sexism. Study 3 also expanded our findings to show that our female participants' willingness to delegate leadership to a male team member was affected by exposure to benevolent sexism, especially when collaboration with the source of sexism was expected. This helps highlight the important implications these findings have to understand the difficulties women face when trying to find their ways within organizations. Appreciating women for what they are stereotypically good at, as implied by benevolent sexism, thus does not seem the best strategy to motivate women to challenge prevailing stereotypes and demonstrate their task focus or their leadership abilities.

Given that our manipulation of benevolent sexism included a reference to the prior helping behaviour of the

male partner, it is possible to claim that the finding of Study 3 that women delegated leadership to a male team member in the benevolent condition because they saw that prior help as a demonstration of great leadership abilities. In hindsight, it would have been better not to include this reference to helping in the manipulation (we thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion). However, this does not provide an adequate explanation for the results we found for task-related self-descriptions. We thus think that our explanation more adequately explains the full pattern of our findings.

These results are thus consistent with our argument that exposure to benevolent sexism leaves women unarmed to reject stereotypical views of themselves, to which they assimilate instead. By contrast, women who were not exposed to benevolent sexism, and women who were exposed to more blatant forms of sexism did not show this pattern of self-descriptions. Given the experimental nature of these studies, and the implied random allocation of participants into conditions, these studies clearly show that what might seem a purely internal inclination can in fact reflect an external influence—women may come to define themselves in ways that do not favour career success due to benevolent sexist cues present in their environment. That study 3 shows this is most likely to happen when women anticipate interacting with the source of sexism is important because it shows how insidious this effect is likely to be in the daily life of women exposed to their partner's benevolent sexism, or that of their friends and co-workers, with whom repeated interactions are to be expected. Future research might address this problem and uncover the factors that might help to reduce assimilation to benevolent sexism in these common contexts.

We also wish to stress that it is not part of our argument that being tuned to social relationships and devaluing the task or achievement domain is necessarily a problem. Our claim is only that what often appears to be an unconstrained choice of what to value, is sometimes the product of insidious influences from external factors. This is indeed a problem when women make crucial choices without being aware of these subtle influences. As our results suggest, women who devalue the task domain because they are exposed to benevolent sexism might actually value it and thrive in their career when they are not exposed to these sexist beliefs.

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that these studies were conducted in a specific cultural context (the Netherlands) and among a young student population. We do think, however, that these results have broader relevance for other national contexts and age groups. First, we note that other studies have shown detrimental effects of benevolent sexism on women's self-descriptions in a variety of other cultural contexts (e.g., Dardenne et al. 2007; Moya et al.

2007; Sinclair et al. 2005). Second, previous research (Merens and Hermans 2008) has shown that gender differences in wages and career aspirations already emerge in people's first jobs, and exacerbate over time, suggesting that this is a particularly relevant age group in which to examine these processes. Future research may compare how women in different age groups, work conditions, and national contexts respond to benevolent sexism, to further ascertain the specific implications this might have to understanding women's barriers at work at different career stages and in different cultures.

It is also important to stress that participants' responses in these studies were controllable and might therefore reflect more their wish to be seen in a particular way, than their private self-views. It is in fact impossible on the basis of the current data to state with full certainty that participants' self-views have been affected, rather than merely their public self-presentation. However, it is also important to note that in all of these studies participants' responses were only public to the experimenter (and even then, not individually identifiable), and never to the source of the sexist views. It is thus unlikely that participants assimilated to the benevolent sexist view with the aim of pleasing the source of prejudice (contrary to what happened in Von Baeyer et al. 1981 and in Zanna and Pack 1975), and more likely that their responses reflect what women genuinely thought about themselves at that particular moment.

Our results contribute to the growing body of research on the negative consequences of benevolent sexism. Moreover, our results are relevant in gaining more insight into the role of benevolent sexism in the maintenance of gender inequalities and, more specifically, into the processes that underlie women's under-representation in the workforce. Prior research showed that men place more value in earnings, power, and leadership than women do, and this has been seen as an important factor causing women to opt out of the work force, or of high status positions in organizations (Konrad et al. 2000). The present research questions the idea that the value placed on task and relational domains of self-definition is necessarily an intrinsic gender difference. Instead, we suggest that this difference often results from the fact that women are often faced with benevolent sexism and this has a pernicious effect on the value they attach to career and leadership. Awareness of these contextual effects might be important when considering what male and female employees truly value.

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## Appendix

### Measures Study 1

*Task-related* (selected from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale of Crocker et al. 2003):

- Weten dat ik beter ben dan anderen op een taak vergroot mijn zelfvertrouwen (knowing that I am better than others at a task increases my self-esteem)
- Mijn eigenwaarde wordt beïnvloed door hoe goed ik presteer op competitieve taken (my self-esteem is influenced by how well I perform in competitive tasks)
- Ik voel me de moeite waard wanneer ik beter dan anderen presteer op bepaalde taken of vaardigheden (I feel worth while when I perform better than others at some tasks or abilities)
- Mijn zelfvertrouwen wordt beïnvloed door mijn academische prestatie (my self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance)

*Relational*: attent (attentive), hartelijk (warm), romantisch (romantic)

### Measures Study 2

*Task-related*: Zelfverzekerd (self-assured), ambitieus (ambitious), dominant (dominant)

*Relational* (selected from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale of Crocker et al. 2003):

- Mijn zelfvertrouwen is afhankelijk van de mening die anderen van mij hebben (my self-esteem depends on the opinion that others have of me)
- Het kan mij niet schelen wat anderen van mij denken (I do not care about what others think of me)
- Mijn zelfvertrouwen gaat omlaag wanneer ik denk dat ik er niet goed uitzie (my self-esteem goes down when I think that I do not look good)
- Mijn zelfvertrouwen is niet afhankelijk van of ik mij wel of niet aantrekkelijk voel (my self-esteem is not dependent on whether or not I feel attractive)
- Mijn zelfvertrouwen wordt beïnvloed door hoe aantrekkelijk ik mijn gezicht of gezichtstrekken vind (my self-esteem is influenced by how attractive I find my face or facial characteristics).

### Measures Study 3

*Check of the benevolent sexism manipulation*

- In hoeverre denk je dat je partner bevooroordeeld is (to what extent do you think that your partner is biased)

- In hoeverre denk je dat je partner seksistisch is (to what extent do you think that your partner is sexist).

#### *Checks of the manipulation of expected collaboration*

- Ik denk dat mijn partner mijn bijdrage aan de taak zal erkennen (I think that my partner will acknowledge my contribution to the task)
- Ik denk dat mijn partner mijn bijdrage aan de taak zal waarderen (I think that my partner will appreciate my contribution to the task)
- Ik denk dat ik invloed heb op de uitkomst van de taak (I think I have an influence on the outcome of the task)
- Ik verwacht niet dat er een conflict zal ontstaan tussen mijn partner en mij (I do not expect a conflict to develop between my partner and I)
- Ik ben gemotiveerd om eventuele conflicten die tussen mijn partner en mij ontstaan op te lossen (I am motivated to solve conflicts that arise between my partner and I)
- Ik denk dat de samenwerking met mijn partner soepel zal verlopen (I think that working together with my partner will go smoothly).
- Het kan met niet schelen als anderen een negatief oordeel over me hebben (I do not care when others have a negative opinion of me)
- Wat anderen van mij denken heeft geen invloed op de manier waarop ik over mijzelf denk (what others think of me does not influence the way I think about myself).

*Task-related self-descriptions* (adapted from a selection of items from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale of Crocker et al. 2003):

- Goed presteren op deze taak zal me een gevoel van zelfrespect geven (doing well at the task will give me a feeling of self-respect)
- Iets beter doen dan een ander geeft me een gevoel van zelfrespect (doing something better than others gives me a feeling of self-respect)
- Mijn zelfvertrouwen wordt beïnvloed door hoe goed ik iets doe in vergelijking met anderen (my self-esteem is influenced by how well I do something compared to others)
- Weten dat ik ergens beter in ben dan een ander vergroot mijn zelfwaardering (knowing that I am better at something than someone else increases my self-esteem)

#### *Leadership aspirations*

- Ik zou graag de leider van mijn team willen zijn (I would like to be the leader of my team)
- Ik denk dat ik een goede leider van mijn team zou zijn (I think I will be a good leader of my team)
- Ik denk dat we als team een goede uitkomst kunnen bereiken als ik de leider van mijn team ben (I think that

if I am the leader of my team we will have a good outcome)

- Ik denk dat de samenwerking in het team goed zal verlopen als ik de leider van het team ben (I think that if I am the leader of the team working together will go well)
- Ik denk dat er meer conflicten zullen ontstaan als ik de leider van mijn team ben (I think that if I am the leader of my team more conflict will arise)
- Ik denk dat mijn partner een betere leider van het team zal zijn dan ik (I think that my partner will be a better leader of the team than I will)
- Ik denk dat we als team een goede uitkomst kunnen bereiken als mijn partner de leider van het team is (I think that if my partner is the leader of my team we will have a good outcome)
- Ik denk dat de samenwerking in het team goed zal verlopen als mijn partner de leider van het team is (I think that if my partner is the leader of the team working together will go well)
- Ik denk dat er meer conflicten zullen ontstaan als mijn partner de leider van mijn team is (I think that if my partner is the leader of my team more conflict will arise)

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