

The Effects of Ambivalent Sexism on Academic Performance

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### Abstract

The present study was intended to test the effects of hostile and benevolent sexism on individual academic performance. Participants were presented with a reading comprehension task that portrayed hostile, benevolent, or no sexism. After treatment, performance was measured based on answers to reading comprehension questions. A series of ANOVA's revealed no significant results. The results of this study as well as ideas for further research are discussed.

*Keywords: sexism, ambivalent sexism, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, reading performance, hegemony*

### The Implications of Sexism on Classroom Performance

History seems to reveal that the emergence of dominant groups within society as almost inevitable (Condit, 1994). Whether influences are political, social, or economic; forces seem to work in favor of certain groups. Sexism has emerged in society as one example of how groups can gain power and influence other groups and is the result of gender hegemony processes (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Becker & Wright, 2011).

Sexism is the differential treatment of individuals based on attitudes determined by biological sex (Glick and Fiske, 1996 & 2011). Sexism takes many forms, several of which go unrecognized or ignored within modern (as well as historical) society and sexism research is intended to reveal the reasons behind the attitudes that cause this differential treatment (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Glick & Fiske 1996, 1999 & 2011).

#### Forms of Sexism

In an attempt to better understand and explain the concept of sexism, Glick and Fiske (1996, 2011) developed a theory of sexism that divides sexism into two categories: hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism, as the name indicates, refers to acts that shed a negative light on the targeted gender. Conversely, benevolent sexism refers to acts that shed a kind of positive light on the targeted gender. Glick and Fiske (1996 & 2011) believed these two forms of sexism contrasted strongly, yet found they were complimentary to one another in nature (Glick & Fiske 1996, 1999, & 2011). They referred to their understanding of sexism as ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1999 & 2011).

In modern society, hostile sexism is what is typically thought of when one hears the word “sexism.” This form of sexism makes targeted sexes seem inferior, incapable, and incompetent. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is a gentler form of sexism. Instead of shedding a negative light on the targeted gender, benevolent sexism focuses on gender-specific positive traits.

Typically, hostile sexism incorporates harsh and negative attitudes towards one sex or the other (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2011). Glick and Fiske (1996, 2011) felt that this type of sexism was closely related to prejudice and racial discriminations. Ideas of hostile sexism typically include that one sex is too easily offended, seeks special favors, or is power hungry (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1999; Glick & Fiske, 2011).

In opposition, benevolent sexism emphasizes mutual need based on gender-specific differences and highlights gender-specific qualities, which results in an assumed dependence of one sex on the other (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2011). While this is typically seen as harmless, it gives way to the assumption that one sex cannot carry out tasks without the help of the other (Glick & Fiske, 2011). Examples of benevolent sexism include thinking that women are not complete without men, that women need to be supported by men, and that men are not complete without women (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1999).

### Socialization in school

From a young age, children are socialized into gender roles (Zusman, Knox, & Lieberman, 2005). These learned roles are what lead to sexism (Becker 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2011). According to Becker (2010), men are socialized into sexism with the idea that sexism will help them keep any power they have within society. Women, in a similar manner, often go along with sexist ideas because they are raised to believe there are certain ways a woman should act and certain things she should do in order to conform to societal expectations (Becker, 2010).

Schools are key to the socialization of gender and play a vital role in individual perceptions (Lee, Marks, & Byrd, 1994). Treating students differently on the basis of sex can have negative implications for both male and female students during school years and long after they leave the classroom environment. Sexism in the classroom can go several different directions: benefiting some students while holding others back (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Sadkar & Sadkar, 1986).

Increasing gender equity in the classroom benefits not only students but also instructors and enhances the classroom environment. Previous research has indicated a positive correlation between classroom equality and instructor effectiveness (Sadkar & Sadkar, 1986). If a student feels inferior for any reason, he or she is not as likely to participate in the classroom or interact with the instructor (Sadkar & Sadkar, 1986). This results in negative attitudes towards instructors and less overall classroom participation. In order for instructors to be as effective as possible and to have a welcoming classroom environment, measures should be taken to ensure each student has an equal opportunity for success within the classroom.

While some instructors recognize the biases they present, some are entirely unaware of any unfair treatment of students (Campbell, Eichhorn, Basch, & Wolf, R., 2009; Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007). Regardless of instructor recognition, these varying treatments can result in different levels of student productivity and effort (Campbell, Eichhorn, Basch, & Wolf, R., 2009). Even when instructors recognize bias, they often view their attempts to counter these biases as successful, even when they fail (Boysen, Vogel, Cope, & Hubbard, 2009).

Gender gaps and sexism in academia, while less prominent than they once were, still exist (Dee, 2007). After gender biases in the classroom are recognized, simple training techniques can be used to educate instructors on how to decrease the amount of sexism in the

classroom (Dee, 2007; Sadkar & Sadkar, 1986). Recognizing and being proactive towards resolving these existing gender biases will not only promote student learning but will also increase instructor credibility, effectiveness, and affinity.

### Hegemony

At the root of scholastic socialization is a deeper issue of societal socialization over time. Condit (1994) discusses the role of hegemony in social theory and sexism within modern American society. Historically, hegemony is what allows a dominant group to not only come to a position of power but remain in that power position (Condit, 1994). In order to stay in power, this dominant group must (1) give the less dominant group a reason to allow domination and (2) meet the needs of the non-dominant group enough to stay in power (Condit, 1994). Sexism stems from this gender hegemony (Becker & Wright, 2011).

Dominant groups can maintain power in hegemony through subtle means (Becker & Wright, 2011). According to Becker and Wright (2011), this is where ambivalent sexism plays into gender hegemony. Hostile sexism is often readily recognized and deemed socially unacceptable. Benevolent sexism, as the seemingly less harmful form of sexism, sheds a sort of positive light on sexism and is often deemed as socially acceptable. Women are seen as kind, generous, and caring and see the resulting differential treatment as a sort of benefit to being female. As a result, these females do not argue with benevolent sexism (Becker & Wright, 2011). This eventually decreases not only cognitive performance (Dardenne, Dumont, and Bollier, 2007) but also cause females to act out less against sexism in general (Becker & Wright, 2011). Hostile sexism, on the other hand, is what motivates women to (1) work harder to prove that women can in fact perform on a level equal to men and (2) act out against differential treatments based on sex. This argumentation is used by Becker and Wright (2011) to explain why previous

studies find that benevolent sexism is more of a hindrance to performance and activity than hostile sexism.

### Sexism Within Society

In line with research by Becker and Wright (2011), Barreto and Ellmers (2005) examined acts of benevolent sexism and found they were rated as less sexist and offensive than acts of hostile sexism by both male and female participants who were exposed to these forms of sexism.

Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier (2007) examined the effects of hostile, benevolent, and no sexism on female productivity and cognitive performance within a work setting. Participants were exposed to sexism via instructions to a job-related task that were said to be given by either a co-worker or employer. The instructions used items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) to portray either hostile or benevolent sexist ideas or no sexism in the control group.

Instructions were manipulated to seem like a convincing piece of workplace literature. A sample from the hostile instructions states that, "Industry is now restricted to employ a given percentage of people of the weaker sex. I hope women here won't be offended, they sometimes get so easily upset!" A sample from the benevolent instructions states that "Industry is now restricted to choose women instead of men in cases of equal performance. You'll work with men only, but don't worry, they will cooperate and help you to get used to the job."

After reading the instructions, individual performance was measured on work-related tasks. Results indicated that, in the work related setting; female performance was the worst in benevolent sexist conditions, slightly better in the hostile condition, and the best in the control. Overall, cognitive performance was lower for females in the benevolent sexism group. Both hostile and benevolent sexism conditions were rated as uncomfortable by participants, even

when sexism was not readily identified. It was found that hostile sexism was readily recognized and attributed to outside sources and therefore did not have an impact on task completion.

Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, was not seen as sexism and had a seemingly subconscious effect on performance and task completion.

The findings of the Dardenne, Dumont, and Bollier (2007) study are in congruence with findings by Kilianski & Rudman (1998) that women rate hostile sexists as less favorable than benevolent sexists (Kilianski & Rudman 1998) and support ideas that benevolent sexism is seen as more appealing than hostile sexism. All of this ties back to the ideas by Becker and Wright (2011) that benevolent sexism can be more damaging than hostile sexism to female performance because it is not recognized as sexism.

The literature shows that socialization into gender roles starts at an early age and continues to effect performance in academia and goes into the workforce in the adult years. What individuals learn in the classroom carries over into the workplace. If sexism continues to be present in the social setting of education, it will be present everywhere else.

In order to fully understand the effects of sexism in the classroom and the implications it has for sexism beyond the classroom, the effects of sexism within the classroom need to be examined.



### Research Hypotheses

While effects of ambivalent sexism on female cognitive performance have been revealed, as well as relationships between biases and academic performance, little has been done to examine the effects that ambivalent sexism has on individuals within an academic setting. The present study seeks to determine whether or not there is a significant relationship between sexism and student performance. Thus, the following research hypotheses are proposed below:

- RH1: In an academic setting, female students will perform best on an academic task under no sexist conditions.
- RH2: In an academic setting, female students will perform better on academic tasks under hostile sexist conditions than under benevolent sexist conditions.
- RH 3: In an academic setting, sexist conditions will have no effect on the performance of men in academic-related tasks.

### Method

In order to test the research hypotheses, the present study presented students with an academic task in a classroom setting and exposed these individuals to either hostile, benevolent, or no sexism before the task was completed. The selected academic task was a reading comprehension test that required students to read three different reading passages and answer corresponding questions. The initial reading passage served to present either hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, or a control. The participants were unaware this was the purpose of the initial passage. The students then completed a series of questions pertaining to the initial passage before reading the remaining two passages and answering corresponding questions. The answers of the questions related to the second and third passage were used as the measure of overall task performance.

### Participants

Participants were all students from a small Midwestern university and participated in the study in groups of 11 or less. All participants were over the age of 18 and gave informed consent. Data was collected from 79 participants, with participant age ranging from 18 to 59. The mean age was ( $x=24.22$ ). There were a total of 49 female participants and 30 male participants (final  $n=79$ ).

Participants received packets containing instructions, a demographics sheet, and the three passages with corresponding questions. For the experimental condition, the three conditions were randomly distributed throughout all packets and the researcher was unaware of which condition

participants were in as they completed the task. Only the initial passage was varied between subjects, and there were no other differences in the packets.

### Procedure

The initial reading passage exposed participants to either hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, or a control. The remaining two passages and corresponding questions were from SAT practice examinations. This method of sexism manipulation and testing follows that used by Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier (2007), in which reading passages were used to introduce participants to sexism and then tested on task performance.

Sexism passages were manipulated using items from the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Glick and Fiske (1996) developed this inventory after establishing the idea of ambivalent sexism. The inventory is intended to measure levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism. The ASI consists of 22 statements (representing either hostile or benevolent sexism) that participants label the degree to which they agree with each statement. For example, in the passage created for the present study for the hostile excerpt, an item taken from the ASI was, "When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against." From this item, the statement "Even if a woman loses to a man in a fair competition for a job or promotion, she will consider it discrimination" was developed and included within the hostile sexism passage. One of the corresponding questions for this passage was, "The author's attitude towards women seems to be: a. indifferent, b. ambivalent, c. hostile, d. loving." For the benevolent passage, an item taken from the ASI was, "Men are complete without women." This was a reversed scored item from the ASI and was used to develop the statement; "Generally speaking, men and women cannot be complete without one another," which was included within the benevolent experimental passage. A corresponding question from this passage was, "The

author's attitude towards women seems to be: a. indifferent, b. ambivalent, c. hostile, d. loving.” The control passage discussed odes. An excerpt from the control includes “Generally speaking, an ode is any formal address to an event, person, or thing not present.” A corresponding question from the control includes, “The purpose of this passage is most likely to: a. Inform, b. Persuade, c. Entertain, d. Argue.”

The two remaining passages were the same throughout the study and consisted of two reading passages taken from previous SAT exams. The second passage contained seven questions and the third passage contained eight questions. The answers to these passages were used to measure overall performance. Since the initial passages that exposed individuals to sexism were written by the researcher and varied between groups, these answers did not count towards total score.

### Results

A total score was calculated for each participant using answers from passages two and three. Correct answers were given a score of one and incorrect answers were given a score of zero. These results were added for a highest possible score of 15. Questions from the priming passages were not included in the total score.

A 2 (sex: female, male) x 3 (sexism: hostile, benevolent, control) ANOVA was run on total scores. There were no significant differences at the .05 level on total score of the interaction between sex and sexism on total score  $F(2, 72) = 2.141, p = .125$ .

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences at the .05 level on total score across sexism groups,  $F(2, 79) = .141, p = .869$ . The mean score for the hostile sexism group was 6.45 and the standard deviation was 2.15. The mean score for the ambivalent sexism group was

6.31 and the standard deviation was 1.93. The mean score for the control group was 6.15 and the standard deviation was 2.25.

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences at the .05 level on total score across sexism groups for males,  $F(2, 29) = 1.774, p = .188$ . The mean score for the hostile sexism group was 7.42 and the standard deviation was 2.10. The mean score for the ambivalent sexism group was 6.13 and the standard deviation was 2.10. The mean score for the control group was 5.92 and the standard deviation was 2.13.

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences at the .05 level on total score across sexism groups for females,  $F(2, 47) = .456, p = .637$ . The mean score for the hostile sexism group was 5.76 and the standard deviation was 2.31. The mean score for the ambivalent sexism group was 6.39 and the standard deviation was 1.91. The mean score for the control group was 6.33 and the standard deviation was 2.08.

### Discussion

Results of the present study do not support the proposed hypotheses. Overall, there were no effects of sexism as defined by this study on overall performance or performance of males and females individually. While research hypothesis three did predict that there would not be an effect of sexism on the performance of males, the lack of significance in the female group caused the researcher to refrain from taking this result into much consideration.

The lack of difference between male and female performance can be linked to research that has shown sexism against females does not hinder male performance (Dardenne, Dumont, and Bollier, 2007). The lack of difference between the performances of females within the three sexism groups is harder to explain. While individuals were exposed to sexist ideas to some degree, a noticeable degree of gender group identification (not necessarily sexism) must be

present (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007). While the present study focused on portraying the correct attitudes as far as sexism is concerned, it did not focus on ensuring groups realized these attitudes as targeted at a specific gender.

While the results of this study were not significant, available literature and previous research still attest to the importance of sexism within the classroom. There were several limitations to the present study, but research like that of Dardenne, Dumont, and Bollier (2007) and Becker and Wright (2011) shed light on the fact that sexism, specifically benevolent sexism, can have damaging effects on female performance. Additionally, since schools are where gender norms are defined, it makes sense to examine these norms within the classroom setting (Lee, Marks, & Byrd, 1994). Sexism in the classroom, while seemingly prevalent, is not inevitable (Lee, Marks, & Byrd, 1994).

In the past, direct action by women has done a great deal to reduce sexism. Regardless, the emergence and acceptance of benevolent sexism has decreased female action and therefore affected the performance of women in numerous situations (Becker & Wright, 2011). This attitude has caused an acceptance of current gender status quos (Becker & Wright, 2011). Women are become accustomed to sexism not only because of socialization from a young age but also because it's deemed acceptable. Benevolent sexism, regardless of its seeming appeal, makes gender inequality seem acceptable (Glick & Fiske, 1996). In order for change to take place, awareness of benevolent sexism needs to be brought about and preventative measures need to be taken against this form of sexism.

Socialization leads to learned gender roles that lead to sexism (Becker 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2011). In order to stop socialization into these roles and therefore the spread of sexism, specifically benevolent sexism, future research needs to examine how sexism is learned,

maintained, and carried out within society. A better understanding of the nature of this detrimental form of sexism is needed in order for preventative measures to be taken.

### Limitations

The results of this study could be due to three primary limitations. These limitations include, research materials, processes related to sexism portrayal, and sample size. All three of these things, if improved within the study, could have potentially resulted in more approachable results.

The materials used to portray sexism were developed by the author of the present study. While the reading passages used in this study were developed using guidance from the Dardenne, Dumont, and Bollier (2007) study, there was a very low level of internal validity within the instruments used. As mentioned earlier, the focus of this study might have been too much on the portrayal of attitudes and not enough on specific gender attitudes. There was an oversight in ensuring that the attitudes were directed towards females. This low level of reliability might have been prevented if the instruments were tested before use in the present study. If a similar study were to be conducted, more detailed materials would need to be developed in order to accurately expose participants to sexism and ensure participants realized the direction of the sexism.

As for sexism exposure, the use of a reading passage to present sexism is not an accurate presentation of sexism. In real-world situations, sexism would likely be presented by the words and/or actions of an instructor or another student, not through reading. Therefore, a major limitation of this study could have been due to this unrealistic presentation of sexism.

The total sample size of the present study was 79. Considering there were three groups and each was to be divided into males and females, there were a total of six groups participants

were divided between. These limitations should be kept in mind if a future study, similar in nature, is to be conducted.

### Future research

The findings within this study should not be seen as a setback. Rather, the findings and analysis of this study can prove to be valuable study can be used a guiding factor in future research. Taking what was learned from the limitations of the present study, a future study should focus on more valid and realistic materials within the research. Additionally, efforts should be made to maintain a fairly large sample size so that all experimental groups have enough participants to accurately measure the effects of manipulations.

In order to make progressive observations within examining how sexism, specifically benevolent sexism, functions within society, observational research could prove to be of great worth. A study that required females to log weekly experiences within an academic setting over the course of several months could serve as a highly valuable asset to the current literature base. While these individuals would not be looking for sexist actions, nor would they be aware of the nature of the study, researcher analysis could reveal various experiences within the setting and how this related to individual performance.



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