

Nasty or nice?

Elena Lemonaki and Patrick Leman
consider overt and insidious
forms of sexism

Egalitarian norms are typically endorsed in most modern Western democracies, and it could be argued that expressions of sexist beliefs and attitudes have been driven 'underground'. As a result, subtle forms of sexism (e.g. a belief in the virtue of women exhibiting 'feminine' qualities) can often appear superficially benign, and thus are more likely than more blatant forms of sexism to go unnoticed and remain unchallenged. But does that mean we no longer need to be alert to overt sexism? In this article we outline the characteristics and consequences of different forms of sexism, and argue that psychologists and others must still consider all forms of discrimination and how they connect with the broader societal and moral context.

Much recent research has explored the insidious dangers of 'benevolent sexism' (sexist or discriminatory behaviour that is presented in a positive way) and how it contributes to the maintenance of gender inequality. According to Peter Glick and

Susan Fiske, benevolent sexism consists of subjectively positive paternalist beliefs that are sexist 'in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles' (1996, p.491). Benevolent sexism casts women as nice but also weak, and therefore in need of being cherished and protected. For instance, a benevolent explanation for why there are more female than male nurses could run along the lines that women are more nurturing and compassionate than men, so are better suited to the role. Exposure to benevolent sexism undermines women's decisions to challenge the gender status quo, by decreasing their engagement in collective action, or less directly by increasing system justification – explaining or excusing sexist beliefs because these are justified by social systems and structures.

Benevolent sexism has been the focus of much recent research, but it is worth remembering that more overt and aggressive 'hostile sexism' is still evident in cultures that ostensibly endorse an egalitarian ideology. Laura Bates documents the stories of women from the UK and from around the world reporting their daily encounters with explicit sexism (e.g. in

the form of demeaning and degrading comments and behaviours) in public spaces, universities, workplaces. Hostile sexism is more likely to be identified as a form of discrimination than benevolent sexism and can decrease emotions relating to collective self-confidence, thereby undermining women's assertive, competitive inclinations towards men (Lemonaki et al., 2015).

Perhaps hostile sexism is on the increase? In a nationally representative survey, preceding the recent US presidential election, Carly Wayne and political science colleagues wrote in the *Washington Post* that hostile sexism was one of the strongest predictors of support for a candidate. In fact, these elections illustrated how hostile sexism sometimes remains unchallenged, is excused or even accepted, after recordings of Donald Trump's derogatory remarks towards women were made public. (It is worth remembering that sexist attitudes towards women may be held by, endorsed or ignored by both sexes; many American women voted for Donald Trump!)

The situation is arguably better, but not much better, in the UK. Although we currently have a woman Prime Minister

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and First Minister of Scotland, women in the UK still earn on average 9.4 per cent less than men (Scott, 2017), and the BBC reported last year that only 24 per cent of professors in British universities are women (Coughlan, 2016). And where do we stand in psychology? Although we, in the British Psychological Society, currently have a woman President, and although the majority of psychology students are women, the proportion of women professors (and probably their salaries) does not reflect that. There is evidence of bias in research too. Adam Brown and Jin Goh examined the gender of first authors in two major journals across 10 years (2004–2013), citations to these articles, and the gender of award recipients given by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (2000–2016). They found that although women and men are represented near equally in the field (based on membership demographics), only 34 per cent of first authors in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and 44 per cent of first authors in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* were women. Moreover, articles authored by men were cited more than those

authored by women, and only 25 per cent of the award recipients were women. There must at least be a suspicion that the same pattern plays out across journals in the field; it is probably worth investigating.

Gender stereotypes and 'nasty' women

Back to the rest of the world... Research by Peter Glick and colleagues has described how traditional female 'subtypes' (e.g. housewives/homemakers, mothers) are typically seen as consistent with traditional gender roles, and tend to be ascribed positive characteristics and to elicit favourable evaluations and benevolent, paternalistic reactions. By contrast, non-traditional female subtypes (e.g. career women/businesswomen, feminists) are viewed as violating traditional gender roles, and tend to evoke negative evaluations and hostile, aggressive responses.

The presence of gender stereotypes pervades our lives. According to Alice Eagly and Steven Karau's role congruity theory of prejudice, perceived incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice towards female leaders (or potential leaders). First, by comparison with men, women are evaluated less favourably with respect to

their potential to take on leadership positions because leadership ability is more stereotypical of men than women. Second, the actual behaviour of women leaders is evaluated less favourably than that of male leaders because such behaviour is perceived as less desirable in women than in men.

In a similar vein, Laurie Rudman and colleagues have shown that the display of agentic traits and behaviour by women (consistent with the requirements of the leader role), is viewed as violating the stereotypic prescriptions of 'feminine niceness' and can result in discrimination against agentic female candidates for a managerial role. Thus a display of agency by women can increase their perceived competence, but does so at the expense of their perceived likeability ('the backlash effect'), leading to perceptions of female leaders or potential leaders as 'nasty'.

Hostile and benevolent sexism

Glick and Fiske call sexism 'a special case of prejudice marked by a deep ambivalence, rather than a uniform antipathy, toward women' (1996, p.491). This ambivalence stems from two kinds

of complementary but opposite (in terms of their evaluative implications) sexist beliefs toward women: hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism fits Allport's classic definition of prejudice as antipathy, and typical conceptualisations of sexism as a unitary hostility toward women. It comprises negative and competitive beliefs, maintaining that women use sexuality or feminist ideology as a means to control men and achieve status. Glick's research has shown that across nations, average scores on measures of hostile and benevolent sexism are positively correlated and predict national indices of gender inequality in power (i.e. the extent to which women are represented in high-status jobs in business and government) and resources (i.e. women's level of education, standard of living), supporting the notion that they constitute complementary ideologies in support of gender inequality.

Both hostile and benevolent sexism trade on gender stereotypes. They are grounded in the same fundamental beliefs about women (e.g. that women are less competent and capable than men, and therefore less suitable for taking on high-status positions) and serve to justify men's dominance, and therefore maintain gender inequality. However, compared to benevolent sexism, hostile sexism is a more explicit and conflictual route to inequality. Specifically, hostile sexism justifies men's fit (and women's lack of fit) to high-status roles by asserting men's superior competence and power.

Benevolent sexism also justifies men's privileged position in the social hierarchy, but does so in a more socially acceptable way, by asserting women's superiority in socio-emotional warmth (thereby implying a lack of competence). This way, benevolent sexism provides a seemingly comfortable rationalisation for constraining women in domestic roles: it is not women's lack of competence that renders them unsuitable for high-status roles, rather, it is women's superiority in socio-emotional warmth that renders them especially suitable for domestic roles.

Why are people motivated to express sexism in benevolent ways? In her 1994 book *The Velvet Glove*, Mary Jackman argued that paternalistic (as compared with hostile) justifications of hierarchies are more effective in minimising resistance and maximising compliance from low-status groups. According to Glick, Fiske and colleagues, hostile assertions of women's lack of competence would not have been as effective in maintaining the current gender hierarchy as the combination of hostile and benevolent sexism. Like a punishment-and-reward reinforcement system, hostile sexism deters women from seeking higher-status roles, while benevolent sexism provides incentives for remaining in lower-status, gender-traditional roles, eliciting women's cooperation in their own subordination. In times when socio-moral norms favour equality, benevolent sexism is, arguably, a more effective means of preserving the existing (unequal) social order.

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The danger of benevolence

Previous research has shown that benevolent sexist beliefs are less likely to be recognised as a form of prejudice compared with hostile sexist beliefs. Moreover, people who endorse benevolent sexist views, compared with those who express hostile sexist views, are less likely to be perceived as sexist, are evaluated more positively and elicit less anger (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). As a result, research attention has shifted toward the dangers of benevolent sexism and how it contributes to the maintenance of gender inequality. For example, a 2007 study led by Benoit Dardenne found that in the context of a job-selection interview and testing, the recruiter's benevolent sexist comments led women to experience intrusive thoughts about their sense of competence (e.g. self-doubt about their competence), and as a result impaired their cognitive performance in a task that was part of the job-recruitment process.

Women who endorse benevolent sexism were more likely to accept their male romantic partner's ostensibly protectively justified restriction on their career (e.g. not to do a potentially dangerous internship about which they were excited), and to assume the partner's motives as benign, even while recognising the restriction as discriminatory (Moya et al., 2007).

The consequences of hostile sexism

Benevolent sexism is, then, far from unproblematic, but it is important not to overlook the damaging consequences of hostile sexism. As we have seen, more overt expressions of sexist attitudes and beliefs persist and arguably are on the increase. Hostile, but not benevolent, sexism is associated with negative evaluations and lower employment recommendations of a female candidate for a management position (Masser & Abrams, 2004). Women who engage in agentic behaviours (e.g. choose to pursue a career in a male-dominated domain) and who display agentic traits may be perceived as competent but also as insufficiently nice. Perceptions of nastiness can result in discrimination against agentic female candidates for a managerial role that requires interpersonal skills. And research has also revealed that apparently pregnant (vs. non-pregnant) female job applicants encountered more hostile behaviour (e.g. rudeness) and were especially likely to encounter hostility when



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applying for traditional masculine jobs, as compared with traditional feminine ones.

Interestingly, individuals with hostile sexist attitudes tend to deny uniquely human qualities to women, such as agency. Viki and Abrams (2003) found that individuals with hostile sexist attitudes are more likely to deny positive secondary emotions to women as a social group, and Cikara et al. (2011) found that men with hostile sexist attitudes tend to objectify sexualised women who, compared to clothed women, are more likely to be seen as the objects, rather than the agents, of an action.

Hostile sexism, despite being more blatant and explicitly negative, can also go unchallenged. Lemonaki et al. (2015) found that hostile sexism can both motivate and demotivate social competition

intentions through different mediating psychological processes. Exposure to hostile sexism can have a positive indirect effect on social competition intentions through increased anger-related emotions, and a negative indirect effect through decreased confidence-related emotions. So although both types of sexism cast doubt on women's competence, exposure to hostile sexism could undermine women's collective self-confidence and striving in more profound ways than benevolent sexism.

Confronting sexism

Much recent energy has been directed towards addressing the less obvious features of sexism in the workplace, including features of interpersonal interactions such as micro-aggressions and decision-making in the context of employment opportunities. However, it is notable that many interventions to reduce sexism lack robust scientific evidence for their effectiveness. As Julia Becker and colleagues pointed out in a 2014 'call for research on intervention', psychological studies of prejudice reduction in terms of sexism are surprisingly rare compared to other forms of discrimination. It is odd that psychology has somewhat failed to take a lead in this.

One example of effective intervention in reducing the endorsement of sexism is the Workshop Activity for Gender Equity Simulation–Academic (WAGES–Academic) reported by Matthew Zawadzki and others in a 2014 *Psychology of Women Quarterly* paper. WAGES–Academic is an experiential simulation of the cumulative effects of unconscious bias and discrimination experienced by women in the

workplace. Participants playing it learn that the accumulation of apparently minor biases and unfair practices hinders advancement, that different gender-relevant factors are significant at each stage in work life, that stereotypes impair people's ability to notice bias, and that patterns, not single incidents, reveal inequalities. Results showed that WAGES–Academic participants reported less endorsement of sexist beliefs both after completing the activity and about a week later. It is worth mentioning that although this is an intervention specifically designed to reveal the nature, operation and effects of subtle sexism, it was also effective in addressing hostile sexism. Much work is still needed to identify the antecedents and processes that maintain sexist beliefs and attitudes, as well as a recognition of the broader societal and political contexts that shape such attitudes.

For example, in line with Claude Steele's disidentification hypothesis, the mere anticipation of hostile sexist behaviour in male-dominated areas, such as in science and leadership, may be experienced as threatening by women, and thereby negatively influence their motivation to pursue a career or excel in such domains. In this way gender inequality may persist through the avoidance of high-status roles in which women do not stereotypically fit. It is therefore important to understand the precursors to women's competitive aspirations and how these can be deterred by hostile sexism. Again, interventions are possible: a

2015 study by Lemonaki and colleagues suggest that exposing women to information about their gender group's collective achievements can protect women from the negative effects of hostile sexism and increase their motivation to engage in social competition by enhancing their collective self-confidence.

Far to go

Benevolent sexism may be deemed more socially acceptable because it is less likely to elicit negative reactions, cause direct harm or overtly transgress social norms of equality than hostile sexism. However, if social mores drive sexism underground and maintain a status quo of inequality, the work to achieve equality requires a different approach. We should beware of benevolent sexism. But, arguably, the additional danger of hostile sexism is not that it is overt or more damaging, but rather that it belies a social context where striving for equality is no longer a publicly agreed societal consensus, and where the task of achieving fairness becomes a matter of conflict rather than cooperation. Social competition, in itself, may not necessarily be a bad thing, but it becomes much more disturbing when it is viewed and enacted through the lens of hostile sexism. In most conflicts it is the more powerful and dominant group that typically wins out; when all is said and done, we are still far from achieving a gender-equal society.



The British
Psychological Society
Professional Practice Board

Sexual and Gender Minority Guidance Task & Finish Group – Chair and Members

The Society's Professional Practice Board (PPB) is seeking to appoint a Member of the Society act as Chair and several Members to join the above Group from spring 2018. It is anticipated that there will be around 15 members. The Group reports directly to the Professional Practice Board.

The remit of the Group will be to update the Society Guidelines written in 2012. The guidance will

support and guide psychologists in their work with sexual and gender minority people in order to enable their inclusion and to help psychologists better understand people who may have suffered social exclusion and stigmatisation.

It is expected that group members will be able to demonstrate knowledge, skills or experience in this area. Every effort will be made to have a

range of experience across domains, contexts of practice and regions but expertise will be the primary criteria.

For full details on these positions or to request a Statement of Interest Form please contact Sunarika Sahota on sunsah@bps.org.uk.

Statements of Interest should reach the Society's office no later than **5 January 2018**.