

AMBIVALENT SEXISM

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AMBIVALENT SEXISM: DEFINITION AND CONSTRUCT

Ambivalent sexism represents a highly nuanced and pervasive form of prejudice defined by the simultaneous existence of both overtly unfavorable, antagonistic views and seemingly favorable, protective attitudes directed toward one of the two genders, typically women. This construct, primarily developed by psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske, moves beyond simplistic notions of overt discrimination by acknowledging that prejudice can operate through systems of reward and punishment, wherein women who conform to traditional gender roles are idealized and protected, while those who deviate are actively disparaged. Ambivalent sexism is foundational to understanding how patriarchal structures are maintained in modern societies, often operating beneath the surface of conscious awareness, allowing individuals to hold conflicting views that ultimately serve to perpetuate gender hierarchy and limit female autonomy across various domains, including professional environments, interpersonal relationships, and political participation. The concept directly addresses the inherent contradiction often observed in individuals who might express deep admiration or affection for women in specific roles (e.g., mothers, caregivers) while simultaneously harboring deeply suspicious or critical views regarding women in roles traditionally reserved for men (e.g., leadership, professional competition).

The psychological mechanism driving **ambivalent sexism** is the need to justify existing social inequality while simultaneously managing interdependence between the sexes. Because men and women rely on each other for reproduction, social cohesion, and resource distribution, a purely hostile system of sexism would be socially untenable. Therefore, the favorable component--known as benevolent sexism--emerges to soften the harshness of the unfavorable component--known as hostile sexism--thereby making the overall system of discrimination palatable and even desirable to those whom it subordinates. This duality is critical because it ensures that gender inequality is not perceived merely as oppression but rather as a natural, complementary, and often affectionate arrangement. The original research highlighted that **ambivalent sexism** is perhaps the most common form in which many men engage, reflecting a complex internal conflict where they genuinely prefer the female sex for various interpersonal or complementary reasons, yet concurrently harbor resentment or dislike toward them when they challenge established male dominance or control resources.

THE DUAL STRUCTURE OF AMBIVALENT SEXISM

Ambivalent sexism is fundamentally structured around two distinct yet correlated factors: **Hostile Sexism (HS)** and **Benevolent Sexism (BS)**. These two components are not mutually exclusive; rather, they operate synergistically to maintain a cohesive system of gender stratification. Hostile sexism represents the more traditional, overt prejudice, characterized by derogatory beliefs about women's competence, intelligence, and ambition, alongside strong antagonistic feelings toward women who challenge male power. Conversely, benevolent sexism consists of subjectively

positive evaluations that nonetheless maintain the subordination of women by portraying them as pure, delicate, and needing male protection and provision. Crucially, research consistently shows that individuals who score high on measures of hostile sexism often also score high on measures of benevolent sexism, indicating that these two forms of bias are intertwined aspects of a unified ideological system rather than opposing viewpoints.

The relationship between HS and BS is often described as a system of carrots and sticks designed to enforce gender roles. Benevolent sexism acts as the "carrot," rewarding women who conform to traditional roles by offering them perceived affection, idealized status, and paternalistic care. This perceived reward encourages women to accept their subordinate status willingly. Hostile sexism, the "stick," is reserved for women who violate the established social order, such as those who pursue high-status careers, exhibit sexual promiscuity, or express feminist ideologies. When a woman steps outside the boundaries defined by benevolent protection, she immediately becomes subject to the antagonism and devaluation characteristic of hostile sexism. This mechanism ensures that the majority of women remain incentivized to uphold the status quo, viewing the protections offered by BS as genuine benefits rather than subtle forms of control.

HOSTILE SEXISM: THE NEGATIVE COMPONENT

Hostile sexism embodies the overtly negative facet of **ambivalent sexism** and is rooted in traditional patriarchal ideology asserting the superiority of men and the inferiority of women. This component involves overt antagonism, distrust, and competitive rivalry directed toward women. Core beliefs associated with hostile sexism include the idea that women exaggerate problems related to discrimination, that women are overly sensitive to criticism, and that women are constantly seeking to gain power or control over men, often through manipulative means such as leveraging their sexuality or emotional vulnerability. Hostile attitudes are particularly prevalent when men perceive their status or resources to be threatened by women's advancement in the workplace or political arena, leading to increased resentment and active resistance toward policies aimed at gender equality.

The expression of **hostile sexism** often manifests in straightforward discriminatory behaviors, such as excluding women from informal networking opportunities, questioning their professional qualifications, or engaging in microaggressions that undermine their authority. In its most severe forms, hostile sexism is linked directly to aggression and violence against women, particularly in contexts where men feel their masculinity has been challenged or rejected. For instance, studies have shown that men scoring high on hostile sexism are more likely to endorse sexual aggression myths, blame victims of sexual assault, and believe that women who are assertive or successful deserve negative consequences. This component serves as the punitive element of the larger system, acting as a clear deterrent for any behaviors that might dismantle the male-dominated hierarchy.

BENEVOLENT SEXISM: THE POSITIVE COMPONENT

Benevolent sexism, while seemingly positive and often expressed as affection or chivalry, is inherently controlling and damaging because it frames women as weak, dependent, and incapable of independent functioning. This form of sexism is characterized by three primary dimensions: **heterosexual intimacy**, which idealizes women as romantic partners; **paternalistic protection**, which frames women as delicate beings requiring male safeguarding; and **complementary gender differentiation**, which asserts that while women may be morally or emotionally superior, they are intellectually or physically inferior. Although these attitudes may feel subjectively positive to both the holder and the recipient, they serve the crucial function of maintaining the status quo by restricting women to domestic or supportive roles.

The danger of **benevolent sexism** lies in its seductive nature; because it is often delivered with warmth and genuine intent, it is less likely to be recognized as prejudice, both by the women who are the targets and by the men who perpetuate it. A man exhibiting benevolent sexism genuinely believes he is caring for and honoring women, but this care comes with strict conditions: dependence and obedience. For example, a benevolent sexist might insist on paying for all shared expenses or discouraging a female partner from taking a challenging job involving extensive travel, rationalizing these actions as "protection" rather than control. Research has demonstrated that exposure to benevolent sexism can lead women to underestimate their own competence, exhibit greater dependence on male figures, and accept lower pay or fewer career opportunities, thereby internalizing the limitations imposed by the patriarchal system.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND FUNCTIONS

The persistence of **ambivalent sexism** is supported by several deep-seated psychological mechanisms, primarily serving system justification and the management of intergroup relations. System justification theory suggests that people are motivated to defend and bolster the existing social, economic, and political arrangements, even if those arrangements are disadvantageous to their own group. Benevolent sexism is particularly effective in system justification because it frames the existing gender hierarchy not as unfair oppression, but as a desirable, mutually beneficial arrangement where men and women play complementary, albeit unequal, roles. This ideology reduces cognitive dissonance regarding inequality, making the system feel just and stable.

Furthermore, **ambivalent sexism** serves critical functions related to managing intergroup dependence and conflict. Since men and women must interact closely, both romantically and professionally, a purely hostile worldview would be socially destructive. Benevolent sexism mitigates this potential conflict by offering an ideological justification for male dominance that minimizes backlash. By placing women on a pedestal while simultaneously restricting their sphere

of influence, men maintain control over resources and political power while avoiding the moral burden of appearing tyrannical. This mechanism ensures that women are often viewed as valuable--but only insofar as they remain within their prescribed, subordinate roles, thus safeguarding male status while preserving cooperative relationships.

MEASUREMENT AND RESEARCH: THE AMBIVALENT SEXISM INVENTORY (ASI)

The scientific study of **ambivalent sexism** relies heavily on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), a psychometric scale developed by Glick and Fiske to measure both the hostile and benevolent components independently. The ASI consists of two subscales, allowing researchers to obtain separate scores for hostile sexism (HS) and benevolent sexism (BS). Typical items on the Hostile Sexism subscale might include statements reflecting competitive antagonism, such as, "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men," or "Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist."

Conversely, items on the Benevolent Sexism subscale reflect paternalistic protection and idealization, such as, "Women should be cherished and protected by men," or "A good woman should be put on a pedestal by her man." The development of the ASI was crucial because it provided empirical evidence that these seemingly contradictory belief systems often correlate positively within individuals, confirming that sexism is indeed an ambivalent phenomenon rather than a simple unidimensional hatred. Research using the ASI has been instrumental in demonstrating the pervasive nature of this prejudice, showing that higher scores on both HS and BS are correlated with negative outcomes for women, including lower self-efficacy, reduced ambition, and greater acceptance of gender inequality.

CONSEQUENCES AND SOCIETAL IMPACT

The societal impact of **ambivalent sexism** is extensive, subtly influencing everything from career choices to public policy. Hostile sexism directly contributes to overt discrimination, gender pay gaps, and workplace harassment, creating toxic environments that actively push women out of high-status fields, particularly science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). However, the consequences of benevolent sexism are often more insidious, shaping women's internal constraints and psychological well-being. Benevolent sexism can encourage women to embrace self-objectification, prioritize pleasing their male partners or superiors, and internalize the belief that they require external protection, leading to reduced independence and risk-taking behavior essential for professional advancement.

In the political sphere, **ambivalent sexism** dictates how female leaders are evaluated. Hostile sexism directly attacks female competence and qualifications, leading to voter skepticism.

Benevolent sexism, however, can be just as limiting, as female politicians are often judged more harshly if they fail to exhibit perceived feminine warmth or nurturing qualities, even when these traits are irrelevant to effective governance. Furthermore, the presence of benevolent sexism within legal and judicial systems can lead to differential treatment, such as judges giving lighter sentences to female defendants under the guise of paternalistic leniency, or conversely, granting custody based on outdated notions of maternal superiority, thereby reinforcing restrictive gender roles for both men and women.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATIONS

While **ambivalent sexism** primarily focuses on the relationship between men and women, its manifestation is significantly modulated by factors of race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity-- a concept explored through intersectionality. For instance, benevolent sexism, which often idealizes certain characteristics (e.g., purity, fragility), is typically reserved for women who fit dominant, often white, high-status norms. Women who belong to marginalized racial or ethnic groups are often subjected to less benevolent sexism and disproportionately higher levels of hostile sexism, as they are frequently stereotyped as less pure, more aggressive, or more sexually promiscuous, thus falling outside the scope of paternalistic protection.

Cross-cultural research using the ASI has provided strong evidence that **ambivalent sexism** is a robust, global phenomenon. Studies conducted across dozens of countries consistently show that the two components, HS and BS, are correlated, and that high levels of ambivalent sexism in a given society correlate positively with objective measures of gender inequality, such as the Gender Inequality Index (GII). However, the specific content of the hostile and benevolent beliefs can vary based on local cultural norms regarding honor, family structure, and economic reliance. In societies with greater economic interdependence between the sexes, benevolent sexism may be particularly high, whereas in societies undergoing rapid social change or conflict, hostile sexism may become more pronounced as men perceive a loss of traditional status.

The universality of **ambivalent sexism** suggests that the dual mechanism of rewarding conformity and punishing deviance is an effective, cross-cultural strategy for maintaining male hierarchical power, regardless of specific regional ideologies. This reinforces the idea that addressing sexism requires targeting both the overt antagonistic attitudes and the seemingly positive, protective beliefs that function equally well to limit women's freedom and maintain systemic inequality.