

'Benevolent sexism' is not an oxymoron and has insidious consequences for women

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Recent debate about whether acts of "benevolent sexism" harm women are addressed in a new commentary published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

"The truth about sexism seems stranger than fiction," wrote authors Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, about their investigations into the nature of sexism. [Sexist attitudes](#) are not exclusively hostile, but include an "odd…conjunction of what at first seemed inherently incompatible: subjective affection as a form of prejudice," which they labeled "benevolent sexism."

Glick and Fiske have shown the negative consequences of attitudes that idealize [women](#) as pure, moral, pedestal-worthy objects of men's adoration, protection, and provision. People who endorse benevolent sexism feel positively toward women, but only when women conform to highly traditional ideals about "how women should be."

Benevolent sexism motivates chivalrous acts that many women may welcome, such as a man's offer to lift heavy boxes or install the new computer. While the path to benevolent sexism may be paved with good intentions, it reinforces the assumption that men possess greater competence than women, whom benevolent sexists view as wonderful, but weak and fragile.

The authors developed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), which measures both Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism, nearly 20 years ago. Since its inception, thousands of people in dozens of countries have taken the ASI.

Cross-national comparisons show that hostile and benevolent sexism go hand-in-hand (that is, nations that endorse hostile sexism also endorse benevolent sexism). The beliefs work together because benevolent sexism "rewards" women when they fulfill traditional roles whereas hostile sexism punishes women who do not toe the line,

thereby working together to maintain traditional relations. In other words, act sweet and they'll pat you on the head; assert yourself and they'll put you in your place.

Numerous studies by various researchers document benevolent sexism's insidious effects. For example, when led to expect benevolently sexist help in a masculine workplace, women became unsure of themselves, got distracted, and consequently performed poorly.

More information: The article "Ambivalent Sexism Revisited" in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* is available free for a limited time at: pwq.sagepub.com/content/35/3/530.full.pdf+html

An interview with the authors of the article, Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, conducted by Dr. Jan Yoder, editor of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* is available at: pwq.sagepub.com/content/35/3/530/suppl/DC1

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