"A Giant Leap for Mankind", but What About Women?

The Role of System-Justifying Ideologies in Predicting Attitudes Toward Sexist

Language

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Abstract

Sexist language excludes, trivializes or diminishes either gender. Despite efforts by many professional bodies to encourage the use of nonsexist alternatives, sexist language use persists across many languages. Further, research has shown that men are less supportive of nonsexist language alternatives than women, and that this effect is mediated by attitudes toward women. We propose that broader ideologies related to the perceived legitimacy of dominance hierarchies and existing social systems also explain this gender gap. British undergraduate participants completed measures of attitudes toward women, gender-specific system justification, and social dominance orientation. They also completed an inventory of attitudes toward sexist language. There was a strong gender difference in attitudes toward sexist language that was significantly mediated by gender-specific system justification and social dominance orientation. The relationship between gender and attitudes toward sexist language therefore appears to be driven by broader ideologies that serve to keep women "in their place".

Keywords

The use of masculine generic terms to describe people, such as "he" and "mankind",

hierarchic expressions such as "man and wife", and belittling references to women as "girls"

are all said to be examples of *sexist language* – language that excludes, trivializes or

diminishes either gender (Doyle, 1998; Hegarty, Watson, Fletcher, & McQueen, 2011; Kitto,

2011; Parks & Roberton, 2004). Such language use has long concerned researchers, largely

motivated by the feminist argument that it reflects gender bias in society and women's

exclusion from important social roles (Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007). A

growing body of research validates this concern. For example, when people hear masculine

generic language, they predominantly visualize pronoun referents as being male (e.g., Gygax,

Gabriel, Sarrasin, Oakhill, & Garnham, 2008; Hamilton, 1988; Moulton, Robinson, & Elias,

1978; Ng, 1990; Stahlberg, Sczesny & Braun, 2001). Other research suggests that sexist

language perpetuates male privilege (Kleinman, 2002), influences children's gender schemas

(Hyde, 1984), limits the perception of vocational choices for women (Briere & Lanktree,

1983), influences perceptions of status and competence (Merkel, Maass, & Frommelt, 2010),

and even makes women feel ostracized (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). Although sexist language

could also be used to diminish, trivialize or exclude men, it is women who predominantly

bear the brunt of its effects (e.g., Briere & Lanktree, 1983; Hamilton, 1988).

Following these findings, the American Psychological Association and other

professional bodies now prohibit the use of gender biased pronouns and terms in articles

submitted to their journals (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2009). However,

despite these efforts, typically referred to as initiatives to make language *gender-inclusive* or

gender-fair, the use of sexist language persists across many languages (see Hellinger &

Bußmann, 2001 for an overview). For example, Gygax et al. (2008) observed that many job

advertisements in France and Germany use masculine generic plural forms of nouns,

essentially excluding women from employment opportunities (see also Garnham, Gabriel,

Sarrasin, Gygax, & Oakhill, 2012; Gygax, Gabriel, Lévy, Pool, Grivel, & Pedrazzini, 2012).

Further, Vervecken, Moser, Sczesny, and Hannover (2010) demonstrated a dominant

tendency amongst German participants engaged in cloze (word replacement) tasks to use

masculine generic language when referring to people whose gender was unknown. Although

said to be decreasing in English academic writing, sexist language is still widely used in the

popular press and other media (e.g., Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Programs designed to promote

the use of nonsexist language have also failed to document "short-term influence" on either

women's or men's language use (Prentice, 1994, p.15). Given the persistence of sexist

language, it is therefore surprising that little research has examined exactly why people use it

(Stahlberg et al., 2007).

One reason may be that it is simply easier to use sexist language such as masculine

generics to describe people in general. For example, terms such as "they" and "their" to talk

about individuals may be more cumbersome grammatically than masculine generics.

However, research that consistently demonstrates a gender gap in support for nonsexist

language suggests that other factors must be at play. Specifically, studies have

predominantly shown that women are significantly more supportive of nonsexist language

than men (e.g., Jacobson & Insko, 1985; Matheson & Kristiansen, 1987; Parks & Roberton,

2002; 2004; but see Vervecken & Hannover, 2012). Why such a gender difference exists,

and the broader question of the functions of sexist language, are the focus of the current

research.

The dominant view in the literature is that attitudes toward sexist language – and in

particular the gender gap in support for nonsexist language – are associated with attitudes

toward women (e.g., Jacobson & Insko, 1985; Martyna, 1978; Matheson & Kristiansen,

1987; Parks & Roberton, 2004; Sarrasin, Gabriel, & Gygax, 2012). Specifically, men tend to

demonstrate more traditional attitudes towards women, and it is this gender difference that

mediates the effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language. To demonstrate this effect, Parks and Roberton (2004) measured female and male college students' attitudes towards sexist language in addition to attitudes toward women and found that the latter significantly mediated the gender difference in attitudes toward sexist language. Based on these findings, Parks and Roberton argued that nonsexist language is most likely rejected by men because it potentially violates cultural sex role expectations, and that sexist language therefore serves to keep women "in their place".

We argue however that there may be other reasons for the gender gap, providing broader evidence for the function of sexist language to keep women "in their place". Specifically, we argue that attitudes towards women may be associated with broader ideologies that serve to maintain social dominance hierarchies and the perceived legitimacy of social systems. In the current research, we therefore introduce both *social dominance orientation* and *system justification* as further potential mediators of the gender gap in attitudes toward sexist language.

Social dominance orientation (SDO) comprises a general preference for hierarchical, as opposed to equal, relations between groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This individual differences construct has a range of effects. For example, Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle (1994) found that individuals who scored high on SDO showed prejudice toward a range of social groups, and typically opposed social policy measures designed to enhance the welfare and esteem of these groups. They also tended to endorse beliefs that legitimized the unequal status of different groups. Research also suggests that men score higher on SDO than women, reinforcing their own group's superior social status (e.g., Pratto, Liu, Levin, Sidanius, Shih, Bachrach, & Hegarty, 2000; see also Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994). Providing a link with language, Thomas and Esses (2004) found that participants who scored higher in SDO found female-

disparaging jokes to be less offensive. We argue that because SDO reflects a preference for existing social hierarchies, it could be associated with attitudes toward sexist language, which serve to perpetuate the hierarchical social relationship between women and men. Further, because men tend to score higher on SDO than women, we expect that SDO should mediate the effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language.

Similarly, we expect the gender gap in attitudes toward sexist language to be mediated by levels of system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The core idea of system justification theory is that people's dependence on social systems for wealth and security motivates them to justify those social systems, and to see them as essentially fair and functional. Using a scale specific to gender relations in society, Jost and Kay (2005) showed that men perceive the system of gender relations to be significantly more justified than do women. System justifying beliefs have consequences for both high and low status groups such as the internalization of stereotypes, and the belief that economic equality is legitimate and necessary (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Kay & Jost, 2003), and system justification is an important facet of sexist ideology (Calogero & Jost, 2011). We argue that because system justification reflects the perception that existing social systems are fair, it could be associated with attitudes toward sexist language, which, as theorists argue, serve to uphold a social system where men dominate. Further, because men tend to score higher on gender-specific system justification than women, we expect that it should mediate the effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language.

The aim of the current study was therefore to investigate factors that predict the gender gap in attitudes toward sexist language, including measures of attitudes toward women as in previous research, but also system justifying ideologies. Participants were asked to complete the attitudes toward women scale (Spence & Hahn, 1997) and the ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI: Glick & Fiske, 1996) in order to measure attitudes toward

women. In recent years, the ASI has been widely used in sexism research and has been found

to correlate strongly with other measures of sexism (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996; Masser &

Abrams, 1999). Using the ASI also allowed us to examine relationships between attitudes

toward sexist language and two dimensions of sexism (hostile and benevolent), that other

sexism scales do not necessarily capture. We expect, as in previous research, that men will

display more traditional attitudes toward women, and higher levels of sexism (e.g., Glick &

Fiske, 2001). To measure the ideological variables of interest, participants completed the

SDO scale (Pratto et al., 1994) and the gender-specific system justification scale (Jost & Kay,

2005). To examine attitudes toward sexist language, participants completed the inventory of

attitudes toward sexist/nonsexist language (Parks & Roberton, 2000; 2004).

It was hypothesized that (a) men would show less positive attitudes toward nonsexist

language than women, (b) men would show less favorable attitudes toward women and

higher levels of system justifying attitudes than women, and (c) attitudes toward women and

system justifying attitudes would be associated with attitudes toward sexist language.

Finally, we predicted that (d) both attitudes towards women and system justifying attitudes

would mediate the gender gap in attitudes toward sexist language. Using a multiple

mediation analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), it was possible to examine which of these

potential mediators best explains the gender difference in attitudes toward sexist language.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred forty nine people (92 female and 57 male, mean age = 20.56 years, *SD* = 2.14,

range 18-30 years), participated in the study as part of a large testing session where

volunteers were paid GB £10 to complete a series of unrelated questionnaires. All

participants were British undergraduates with English as their first language. The majority

(86%) were White. The sample is consistent with those used in other investigations of

attitudes toward sexist language (e.g., Parks & Roberton 2002; 2004).

Materials and Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the psychology department ethics committee and all

participants provided their informed consent. The study was conducted using online

questionnaire software.

Attitudes toward women. Participants completed the *ambivalent sexism inventory* (ASI:

Glick & Fiske, 1996), consisting of 22 statements about women, men and their relationships

in society. Participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with each statement (from

0 'disagree strongly' to 5 'agree strongly', $\alpha = .74$). The scale is typically separated into two

subscales. Eleven items measured *hostile sexism* (e.g., "Women seek to gain power by

getting control over men", $\alpha = .63$) and 11 measured *benevolent sexism* (e.g., "A good

woman should be set on a pedestal by her man", $\alpha = .68$). The correlation between

benevolent and hostile sexism was $r(135) = .46$, $p < .001$ (for females: $r(79) = .39$, $p < .001$,

for males: $r(55) = .33$, $p = .012$). Participants also completed the *attitudes toward women*

scale (AWS: Spence & Hahn, 1997), which measures attitudes towards women's roles,

responsibilities and rights. The scale consisted of 15 items (e.g., "Women should worry less

about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers", $\alpha = .81$), and

participants responded on a scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly).

System justifying attitudes. Participants completed the *SDO* scale (Pratto et al., 1994), which

consisted of 16 items measuring people's degree of preference for inequality among social

groups (e.g., "Some groups are simply inferior to other groups", $\alpha = .89$). Participants

responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participants also

completed Jost and Kay's (2005) *gender-specific system justification scale*, measuring the

extent to which people tend to legitimize gender inequality (e.g., "In general, relations

between men and women are fair", $\alpha = .75$). Participants responded on a scale from 1

(disagree strongly) to 9 (agree strongly).

Attitudes toward sexist language. Participants completed the *inventory of attitudes toward*

sexist/nonsexist language-general (IASNL-G: Parks & Roberton 2000; 2004), consisting of

21 items where participants were asked to rate their attitudes (e.g., "Worrying about sexist

language is a trivial activity"), judgments of sexism within phrases (e.g., "Alice Jones should

be chairman of our committee"), and willingness to use nonsexist language (e.g., "When you

are referring to a married woman how willing are you to use the title 'Ms Smith' rather than

'Mrs Smith'?"). Participants responded on scale from 1 representing low support for

nonsexist language and 5 representing high support ($\alpha = .80$). [1] At the end of the testing

session, participants were debriefed, thanked and paid.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Scores on the IASNL-G were reversed so that higher scores indicated less favorable attitudes

toward nonsexist language (more favorable toward sexist language). The means and standard

deviations for all variables appear in Table 1. As predicted, men showed less favorable

attitudes toward nonsexist language than women (hypothesis a). There were significant

gender differences on all other measures, conceptually replicating previous research

(hypothesis b). Specifically, men demonstrated higher levels of benevolent and hostile

sexism, less favorable attitudes toward women, higher levels of SDO and higher levels of

gender-specific system justification than women. Further, both attitudes toward women and

system justifying ideologies were associated with attitudes towards sexist language

(hypothesis c). A correlation matrix is presented in Table 2.

Testing Mediation

The potential mediators of attitudes toward women, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, gender-specific system justification and SDO were examined together in a test of multiple mediation to explain the effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language (IASNL-G). This analysis therefore tested hypothesis d. The multiple mediation was carried out using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping method for indirect effects. An indirect effect is estimated as being significant from the confidence intervals not containing a zero, as opposed to significance in the individual paths (Hayes, 2009). Results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1.

First, there was a significant total indirect effect. Importantly, the specific indirect effect indicated that gender-specific system justification and SDO were significant mediators of the effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language, when controlling for the other potential mediators and for each other. However, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism and attitudes toward women were not found to be significant mediators when controlling for the other variables and for each other. This suggests that gender-specific system justification and SDO were the driving mediators of the effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language.

Discussion

The current study provided further evidence for the gender gap in attitudes toward sexist language. Specifically, we found that men were significantly less likely to support gender-inclusive language than women. The study also established key mediators of this effect, demonstrating that system-justifying ideologies predict the gender difference in attitudes toward sexist language above and beyond attitudes toward women. Specifically, SDO and gender-specific system justification mediated the gender difference found on the IASNL-G, suggesting that gender differences in attitudes toward sexist language, rather than being a

product of sexism alone, may reflect people's endorsement of broader ideologies that serve to keep people (in this specific case, women), "in their place".

Research to date has established that attitudes toward women predict gender differences in support for nonsexist language (e.g., Jacobson & Insko, 1985; Martyna, 1978; Matheson & Kristiansen, 1987; Parks & Roberton, 2004; Sarrasin et al., 2012). Specifically, it has been argued that because men tend to hold more traditional attitudes toward women that they in turn hold more traditional attitudes toward nonsexist language. Nonsexist language challenges conventional sex role expectations, whereas sexist language serves to maintain the status quo and keep women in traditional sex roles. It is therefore important to consider why in the present study, when SDO and gender-specific system justification were introduced into the analysis, attitudes toward women no longer mediated the gender effect. We argue that the constructs of SDO and system justification may provide higher order explanations for gender differences in attitudes toward sexist language. Broader than attitudes toward women, these system-justifying ideologies reflect more general attitudes to keep *people* "in their place" and preserve the legitimacy of existing social systems. This study therefore demonstrates that rather than sexist or traditional gender attitudes per se, attitudes toward sexist language may reflect more general ideologies about dominance and hierarchy in society. This study therefore provides an important extension to the literature on attitudes toward sexist language that has previously focused primarily on the role of more specific sexist ideologies.

Of course, such factors may not be the only mediators of gender differences in attitudes toward sexist language, and an important limitation of the present research is that it only included two additional measures out of several other possibilities. Future research is necessary to establish other potential factors that influence attitudes toward sexist language and that may perhaps also predict gender differences in these attitudes. For example, it may

simply be easier for men to associate the self with examples of language that make specific reference to men. Therefore, men, in comparison to women, may find sexist language easier to relate to, and therefore more appropriate to use. This idea is consistent with previous research demonstrating that men in general find it easier to visualize male exemplars and women to visualize female exemplars (e.g., Moulton et al., 1978; Prentice, 1994), but as yet this possibility remains untested.

The current research also opens up some possibilities for future research examining the implications of sexist language, which have not been addressed in the present research. For example, we know that exposure to sexist language influences the exemplars that are drawn from memory (e.g., Stahlberg et al., 2001), but what might the material effects of sexist language be for women? Does exposure to language that excludes women also influence their self-esteem, or even impair performance on specific tasks? Research shows that just being aware of a stereotype (e.g., that women are inferior to men at mathematics) is enough to make women under perform on that task relative to a control condition where the stereotype is not activated (Steele, 1997). The stereotype thus becomes self-fulfilling and may have the ultimate consequence of keeping women away from non-traditional occupations and tasks (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002). It is possible that sexist language may influence women in a similar way. Based on existing work suggesting that sexist language draws women's attention to their subordinate position in society, exposure to sexist language could be threatening and therefore impair women's (but not men's) performance on stereotype-relevant tasks such as mathematical and intellectual tasks.

Further, if according to feminist theorizing, sexist language serves to exclude or disenfranchise women, its effects should go beyond impairment on stereotype-relevant tasks. The effect of sexist language on women (but not men) may therefore also occur at an emotional or attitudinal level. Thus, exposure to and active use of sexist language may

influence women's (but not men's) attitudes about themselves, women in general and the perceived difference between women's and men's status in society. Future research may also consider if the current analysis extends to other forms of language that are considered sexist, such as hierarchic and separatist expressions (e.g., "man and wife") and terms that trivialize women (e.g., referring to women as "girls" or "chicks").

Future research on this topic would also benefit from the inclusion of participants from a wider variety of ages, ethnicities and social settings. Although the use of undergraduate students is commonplace for such studies (see Parks & Roberton, 2004), it is nevertheless desirable to obtain evidence for these effects with a sample that is more broadly representative of society.

Although there is much to do to fully establish the functions and potential pitfalls of sexist language, this research makes an important advance in knowledge. Specifically, men tend to show less support for nonsexist language than women, because they also support the notion of group-based dominance hierarchies in society more than women do, and because they perceive, more so than women, that existing social systems are fair. These reflect ideological principles that broadly influence group dynamics in society and they explain the gender gap in attitudes toward sexist language above and beyond more specific attitudes toward women. Sexist language use therefore appears to be a reflection of attitudes that indeed serve to keep the subordinate group – women – "in their place".

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 We also attempted to introduce a new measure of sexist language attitudes into the literature, measuring the perceived likelihood of using, rather than attitudes toward, sexist language. Here, participants were asked to read a series of common English language sayings and rate how likely they are to use each on a scale from 1 'very unlikely' to 5 'very likely'. Fifteen contained sexist language (e.g., "May the best man win", $\alpha = .77$) and thirty did not (e.g., "No news is good news", $\alpha = .89$). A pilot study with a separate group of participants revealed that sexist and nonsexist sayings were equally familiar. A preference for sexist language score was calculated such that higher values indicated greater preference for sexist sayings (likelihood of using sexist sayings minus the likelihood of using nonsexist sayings). As predicted, men showed greater preference for sexist sayings. However, this variable did not correlate significantly with the IASNL-G ($r = .006$, $p > .05$). Further, a multiple mediation analysis was carried out using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping method for indirect effects including attitudes toward women, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, gender-specific system justification and SDO. This revealed no significant total indirect effect. We therefore decided not to report this variable further in this paper. It is likely that preference for sexist sayings captures something subtly different to people's attitudes. In general, researchers could consider how different measures of sexist language attitudes might be utilized in future research to

disentangle factors such as liking and support for sexist language. Researchers could also make more use of behavioral measures of sexist language use.

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Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations on Language Attitudes, Measures of Attitudes

Toward Women, and Ideological Measures (all significance values are two-tailed).

Measure	Total	Women	Men	*t*	*p*
IASNL-G	3.32 (.57)	3.13 (.58)	3.41 (.53)	2.73	.007
HS	2.29 (.82)	2.11 (.79)	2.62 (.81)	3.15	.001
BS	2.27 (.78)	2.11 (.76)	2.55 (.73)	3.24	.001
AWS	2.08 (.59)	1.83 (.40)	2.51 (.59)	8.07	<.001
SJ	4.41 (.92)	4.28 (.90)	4.68 (.90)	2.52	.013
SDO	2.40 (.99)	2.10 (.72)	2.93 (1.17)	5.10	<.001

IASNL-G – Inventory of attitudes towards sexist/nonsexist language-general

HS – Hostile Sexism

BS – Benevolent sexism

AWS – Attitudes toward women scale

SJ – System justification (gender specific)

SDO – Social dominance orientation

Means on the IASNL-G and the AWS were reverse-scored so that higher means indicated

less favorable attitudes towards inclusive language, and higher levels of sexism.

Table 2. Intercorrelations (and standard deviations) Between Language Attitudes, Measures of Attitudes Towards Women, and Ideological Measures (all significance values are two-tailed).

	IASNL-G	HS	BS	AWS	SJ	SDO	Gender
IASNL-G	1.00	.338**	.078	.280**	.276**	.424**	-.230**
HS		1.00	.462**	.457**	.303**	.462**	-.292**
BS			1.00	.360**	.168∫	.318**	-.270**
AWS				1.00	.245**	.518**	-.568**
SJ					1.00	.181*	-.209*
SDO						1.00	-.405**
Gender							1.00

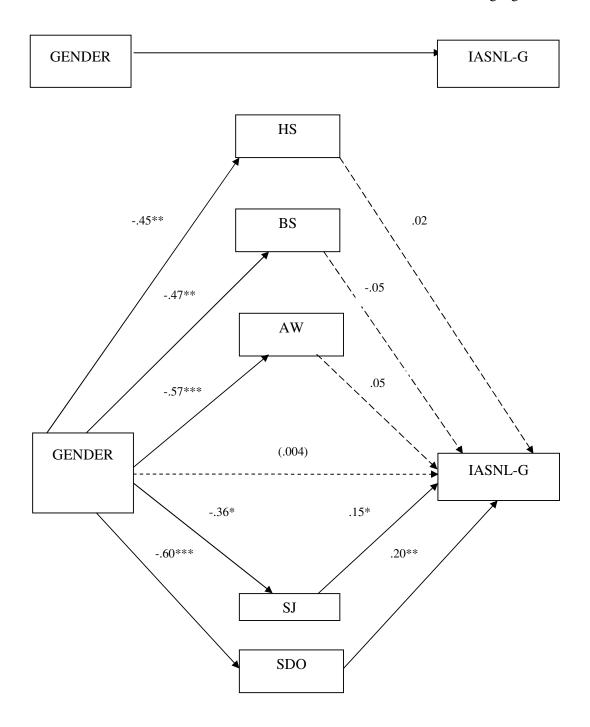** *p* < .001
* *p* < .05
∫ *p* < .10

Table 3. Simple Mediation of the Indirect Effects of Gender on Attitudes Towards Sexist Language (IASNL-G) through Attitudes Towards Women, Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism, Gender-Specific System Justification and SDO (N=149, 5000 bootstrap samples).

BCa[a] 95% confidence interval (CI)

	Point estimate (S.E)	Lower	Higher
Multiple indirect effects			
HS	-.0104 (.0373)	-.0947	.0590
BS	.0223 (.0435)	-.0591	.1157
AWS	-.0300 (.0775)	-.1864	.1217
SJ	**-.0552 (.0388)**	**-.1655**	**-.0041**
SDO	**-.1190 (.0592)**	**-.2652**	**-.0312**
TOTAL	**-.1923 (.1020)**	**-.4236**	**-.0175**

Boldface type highlights a significant effect as determined by the BCa[a] 95% confidence interval (CI) which does not contain a zero.

[a] refers to bias corrected and accelerated (BCa) bootstrapping confidence intervals (CI) that include corrections for both median bias and skew.

-.19*

Figure 1. Multiple mediation test of the relationship between gender and attitudes towards

sexist language (IASNL-G). Dashed lines highlight non-significant relationships and solid

lines highlight significant relationships (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, $p < .001$).

Adj R^2 = .14, $F(6, 142) = 3.97$, $p < .001$.

Bios

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