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Communal Stereotypes Prime Men's Benevolent Sexism: Implications for Romance and Family

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## Abstract

Previous work suggests that men holding benevolent sexist views also hold favorable attitudes towards traditional women (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997). The following study examines whether priming heterosexual men ( $n = 47$ ) with traditional views of women (i.e., the stereotype that women are more communally oriented than men) engenders more benevolent sexist views as well as greater relational motivation. We predicted that the communal prime would activate a complementary view of gender relations, and increase men's endorsement of benevolent sexism. In turn, activating benevolent sexism would increase men's desire to appeal to women, as evidenced by greater investment in romance and family. Results of a preliminary study suggested that men's benevolent sexism was associated with greater relationship motivation, greater investment in romantic ideals and family. Results from the priming experiment confirmed our hypotheses; the communal prime led men to invest in romance and family, and the effect of the prime was mediated by benevolent sexism.

Key words: *benevolent sexism, communal, romantic relationship, gender stereotype*

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## Communal Stereotypes Prime Men's Benevolent Sexism: Implications for Romance and Family

One of the most consistent gender stereotypes is that women are more communal than men. Men are believed to be more agentic (assertive and dominant), whereas women are believed to be more communal (warm and caring) (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Across 30 countries, women were consistently rated as more communal and men as more agentic (Williams & Best, 1990). The present study aims to add to the literature by investigating how stereotypes about women affect men's attitudes toward women and romantic relationships.

We propose that priming the communal stereotype of women will increase men's desire to be with women because communal stereotypes trigger benevolently sexist beliefs. We believe that the desire to appeal to women will result in greater relational orientation (i.e., greater investment in romance and family as well as relationship motivation). This model was derived from work suggesting that communal stereotypes prime endorsement of complementary gender-relations (Jost & Kay, 2005) and benevolent sexism engenders paternalistic behaviors (Viki, Abrams, & Hutchison, 2003).

### *Communal Stereotypes Prime Benevolent Sexism*

System justification theory states that stereotypes endorsed by both advantaged and disadvantaged groups serve to maintain the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Benevolent sexism justifies a system of gender inequality by focusing on the positive, complementary nature of gender stereotypes, as endorsed by both men (advantaged) and women (disadvantaged) (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Cross-cultural research shows that hostile sexism (HS) and benevolent sexism (BS) are positively correlated for both men and women and nations with higher HS and BS scores demonstrated greater gender inequality (Glick, Fiske,

Mladinic, Saiz, Abrams, et al., 2000). This pattern supports the notion that BS, with its seemingly positive treatment of women, allows HS to go unchallenged and gender inequality to persist.

Recent experimental evidence confirmed this system-justifying hypothesis, as participants primed with gender stereotypes increased gender-specific system justification (Jost & Kay, 2005). By priming participants with the stereotype that women are more communal, the authors activated a complementary view of gender relations in which women and men seem to mutually benefit from their gender roles. This positive view of gender role differentiation led men and women to believe in the fairness of the system's status quo, obscuring evidence of continued gender inequality. Thus, BS may seem positive, but in actuality has severe negative consequences that include maintaining gender inequality (Jost & Kay, 2005; Lau et al., 2008) prescribing traditional, restrictive roles for women (Gill, 2004; Hebl et al., 2007), and cognitive performance impairments (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007).

#### *Benevolent Sexism Predicts Communal Orientation*

A complementary view of gender is central to benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Benevolent sexists believe that women have a more refined aesthetic and moral character, and that men are not complete without the love of a woman (Glick & Fiske, 1996, Glick & Fiske, 2001). Therefore, we feel that by priming traditional stereotypes about women we will likely activate BS in men as a means of benefiting from women's complementary nature through romantic relationships.

Protective paternalism, a dimension of BS, encompasses the view that men depend on women as wives, mothers, and romantic partners and therefore must cherish and protect them (Glick & Fiske, 1996). By encouraging men to protect women, this type of paternalism implies

that women are weaker and need protection. Thus, we predict that activating men's BS will lead to more family and relationship oriented views because men will want to become the protectors and emotional intimates of communal women.

Moreover, research has shown that BS is also associated with paternalistic chivalry, or traditional views about romantic ideals (Viki, et al., 2003). Both men and women who held BS beliefs were more likely to endorse chivalrous attitudes. Furthermore, women high in BS tended to respond favorably to protective or paternalistic gestures from their male partners (Moya, Glick, Exposito, de Lemus, & Hart, 2007). Chivalry dictates that both men and women commit to their romantic relationships albeit in traditional ways; therefore we believe that BS will be related to men's investment in being the ideal man in a romantic relationship.

### *The Present Research*

We first tested the proposed relationships between BS, investment in romantic ideals, investment in family, and relationship motivation. While past research has shown that BS is associated with paternalistic chivalry (Viki et al., 2003), it is unclear from previous research whether endorsing BS predicts greater relational orientation. We conducted a pretest to explore these relationships, presented as Study 1 in order to fully describe our measures of relational orientation later used in our main study (Study 2). In Study 2, we primed men with the stereotype that women are more communal to test whether increased investment in romantic ideals and family, as well as more relationship motivation increased as a result of activating BS.

### Study 1: Pretest

#### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Fifty-five undergraduate men (mean age = 18.73) participated in the study as part of an Introductory Psychology course requirement. Racial composition was as follows: White/European (47.3%), Asian (25.5%), Hispanic/ Latino (12.7%), African American (10.9%), Other (3.6%).

### *Materials*

*Investment in romantic ideals.* We revised 2 items measuring investment in gender ideals (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997) to measure participants' investment in meeting romantic ideals (e.g. "How important is it for you to be similar to the ideal man in your romantic relationships?"). Participants indicated their agreement on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (a great deal). The original version of this scale demonstrated high scale reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ), (Wood et al., 1997). The present scale had similarly high reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and face validity.

*Investment in Family.* To assess the extent to which men were invested in family, we administered the Family Support subscale of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). The 5 items (e.g. "When my family members are proud of me, my sense of self-worth increases.") were rated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale has shown good test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and discriminant validity (Crocker et al., 2003). The family support subscale showed good reliability in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

*Relationship motivation.* We measured relationship motivation with 5 items revised from the Multidimensional Relationship Questionnaire (MRQ; Snell, Schicke, & Arbeiter, 2002). These items included "I'm strongly motivated to devote time and effort to an intimate relationship." Participants indicated their response on a 5-point scale from A= not at all characteristic of me to E= very characteristic of me. The full version of the MRQ has shown

good test-rest reliability, structural and convergent validity (Büyükşahin, 2005). In Study 1, scale reliability was high, ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Benevolent sexism.* The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) was used to measure participants' self-reported benevolent sexism. An example from the 11-item BS subscale is "Women should be cherished and protected by men." Responses were indicated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ASI has shown good convergent, discriminate, and predictive validity (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Its factor structure has also been validated cross culturally (Glick et al., 2000). Scale reliability was high, ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### *Results and Discussion*

Table 1 shows the zero-order correlations between all study variables. As predicted, BS was positively associated with investment in being the ideal romantic partner, investment in family, and motivation to engage in romantic relationships. Having established that men's BS was associated with the relational orientation variables (investment in romantic ideals, investment in family, and relationship motivation), we sought to test the central part of our hypothesis regarding the effect of the communal prime. In Study 2, we primed men with the stereotype that women are more communally oriented than men. We expected men in the prime condition to report greater investment in romance and family as well as greater motivation to pursue a romantic relationship because BS was activated (see Figure 1).

### Study 2: Main Study

#### *Method*

##### *Participants*

Forty-seven heterosexual men (mean age = 19.32,  $SD = 1.92$ ) participated in the study as part of an Introductory Psychology course requirement. Racial composition was as follows:

White/European (65.2%), Asian (26.1%), African American (2.2%), Hispanic/ Latino (2.2%), Other (4.3%).

### *Materials and Procedure*

*Communal stereotype prime.* Participants were randomly assigned to either the communal prime or no prime condition. Following the communal stereotype priming procedure utilized by Jost and Kay (2005), participants in the prime condition were asked to indicate whether five communal traits (considerate, honest, happy, warm, moral) applied more to men or to women, and to what extent. Participants responded on a 10-point scale from 0 (“Men are more *considerate*”) to 9 (“Women are more *considerate*”), substituting the appropriate trait. Mean ratings in the prime condition were above the scale midpoint of 4, indicating that men rated women as more communal than men ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = .86$ ).

*Relational orientation and benevolent sexism.* Following the priming procedure, we measured benevolent sexism and relational orientation using the same scales from Study 1. In Study 2, we found the measures of investment in romantic ideals ( $\alpha = .92$ ), investment in family ( $\alpha = .83$ ), relationship motivation ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and benevolent sexism ( $\alpha = .82$ ) reliable.

### *Results and Discussion*

Table 2 shows the correlations between variables collapsing across conditions. Investment in romantic ideals, investment in family, and BS were all significantly positively correlated ( $ps < .01$ ). Surprisingly, relationship motivation was not significantly correlated with any of the other variables. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for all variables by condition. To examine the effect of the communal prime, we conducted one way ANOVAs on all dependent variables. Men reported significantly greater investment in romantic ideals,  $F(1, 43) = 5.56$ ,  $MS = 16.40$ ,  $p = .02$ , greater investment in family,  $F(1, 45) = 12.86$ ,  $MS = 12.13$ ,  $p =$

.001, more benevolent sexism,  $F(1,45) = 5.74$ ,  $MS = 5.63$ ,  $p = .02$ , and marginally more relationship motivation,  $F(1, 45) = 3.02$ ,  $MS = 1.99$ ,  $p = .09$ , in the communal prime condition than in the no prime condition. Although the relationship motivation effect was marginally significant, all other effects were consistent with our hypotheses and the effect sizes were medium to large in size (Cohen, 1988; see Table 3).

### *Mediation Analyses*

According to Baron & Kenny (1986), we must follow 3 steps to test for mediation: (1) regress the mediator on the independent variable, (2) regress the dependent variable on the independent variable, and (3) regress the dependent variable on both the mediator and the independent variable. Following these procedures, we tested our hypothesis that BS would mediate the effect of the communal prime on the indicators of relational orientation. As demonstrated in the above ANOVA analyses, the communal stereotype prime significantly increased two of the dependent variables (romantic ideals, investment in family) as well as the mediator (benevolent sexism); therefore we need only demonstrate the third step.

When we regressed investment in romantic ideals on both the communal prime and benevolent sexism, BS remained a significant predictor,  $\beta = .45$ ,  $p = .002$ , while the communal prime became nonsignificant,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .16$ . A Sobel test confirmed the significant mediation effect,  $z = 3.21$ ,  $p = .001$ . Next, when we regressed investment in family on both the communal prime and benevolent sexism, BS again remained a significant predictor,  $\beta = .42$ ,  $p = .001$ , and the effect of the communal prime was reduced,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $p = .003$ . A Sobel test confirmed significant mediation,  $z = 1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ . We therefore concluded that BS fully mediated the effect of the communal prime on investment in romantic ideals and partially mediated the effect on

investment in family. Because BS was not correlated with relationship motivation in Study 2, we did not conduct mediation tests on this variable.

### General Discussion

The present study tested the effect of priming the communal stereotype on men's investment in romance and family, as well as endorsement of benevolent sexism. We predicted that the communal prime would activate a complementary view of gender relations (Jost & Kay, 2005) such that men would indicate greater endorsement of BS. Our findings were consistent with this perspective. Moreover, in response to stereotypes that favor women's relational abilities, men did not respond in ways consistent with stereotype threat effects such as disengaging from the relational domain (Koenig & Eagly, 2005). Men actually showed the opposite pattern— increased relational striving in response to communal stereotypes. We believe there is an interesting explanation. Romantic relationships present an opportunity to indirectly benefit from women's perceived superiority in the communal domain. Because BS posits that men are incomplete without women, aligning with women in a romantic relationship may allow men to “acquire” the communal qualities they lack themselves. Indeed, we found that the communal prime increased BS in men, which was associated with greater relational orientation.

We do not purport that this increased relational striving in men is necessarily positive. Indeed, desiring to enter a heterosexual relationship in order to achieve complementarity with women may serve to reinforce the status quo and maintain gender inequality (Jost & Kay, 2005). For example, men primed with the communal stereotype may only be relationally interested in communal or traditional women. This may explain why relationship motivation was unrelated to communal priming in Study 2. Men may not be generally motivated to be with women after communal priming but rather specifically motivated to be with communal women. Indeed, when

under system threat, men showed greater interest in women embodying benevolent sexist ideals (Lau et al., 2008). Future research should explore the system maintaining effects of threat-induced preference for communal women as relationship partners.

Although men report increased relational orientation following the communal stereotype prime, we do not know the effect of the prime on men's behavior toward women. Does the communal prime lead men to engage in egalitarian, respectful behavior toward women, or, as we suspect, lead men to cherish, protect, and restrict women to traditional communal roles? Perhaps men who hold more benevolent sexist beliefs prior to the prime are motivated to embody a traditional male role as provider/protector, whereas men with lower levels of BS may strive to be a nonsexist/egalitarian romantic partner. Future research should explore the content of men's romantic ideals and include the impact of the communal stereotype prime on men's treatment of women.

Our study is limited in that we used an undergraduate sample, the romantic ideal measure contained only 2 items, and our sample size was small. Generally, one must be cautious in interpreting effects found with small samples; however the magnitude of the effect sizes obtained indicate that our priming manipulation did have an effect on the dependent variables. Moreover, this research is important because it is contrary to stereotype threat predictions (Koenig & Eagly, 2005) and suggests that romantic relationships represent an important indirect route through which men may perceive themselves to benefit from women's communal aptitude.

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Table 1

*Correlations Among Pretest Variables*

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Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Investment in Romantic Ideals	--			
2. Investment in Family	.35**	--		
3. Relationship Motivation	.56**	.23	--	
4. Benevolent Sexism	.57**	.30*	.45**	--

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*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 2

*Correlations Among Study 2 Variables*

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Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Investment in Romantic Ideals	--			
2. Investment in Family	.47**	--		
3. Relationship Motivation	.09	.01	--	
4. Benevolent Sexism	.51**	.54**	.22	--

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*Note.* \*\* $p < .01$

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations by Condition*

	Communal Prime ( <i>n</i> = 21)		Control ( <i>n</i> = 26)		Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Investment in Romantic Ideals	6.88	1.38	5.66	1.94	.72	-2.36*
Investment in Family	5.87	.59	4.75	1.23	1.08	-4.04**
Relationship Motivation	3.75	.86	3.34	.78	.50	1.74 <sup>†</sup>
Benevolent Sexism	4.16	1.05	3.47	.94	.69	-2.40*

*Note.* <sup>†</sup>*p* < .10 \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01

## Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Hypothesized mediation model. Dashed line represents the path benevolent sexism will mediate.

