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Gender Differences in the Effects of Complementary versus Competitive Gender Stereotypes on System Justification and Tolerance of Sexism

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Abstract

Research has shown that people often support social systems that are not in their best interests (Kay & Jost, 2003). One way that people may justify support for such social systems is by focusing on beneficial characteristics. For example, people exhibit greater system justification when people are described as poor but happy (complementary attributes) as opposed to poor and unhappy (non-complementary attributes) (Kay & Jost, 2003). The present study examined the effects of complementary (i.e., that women and men fulfill different career roles) versus competitive (i.e., that women and men compete for the same career roles) gender stereotypes on women’s and men’s system justification and tolerance of sexism. Participants, who were recruited through Prolific Academic, were randomly assigned to read one of two ostensible news articles modeled after Eagly et. al. (2020), which described gender career roles as competitive or complementary. Participants then completed measures of system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and tolerance of sexism (Folberg et. al., 2021) The results revealed only that men tolerate and justify sexism more than women. Additionally, participants who were assigned to the competitive (vs. complementary) condition scored higher on system justification. No significant interactions between gender and condition were found.

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, competitive gender roles, complementary gender roles, system justification, tolerance of sexism
Gender Differences in the Effects of Complementary vs. Competitive Gender Stereotypes on System Justification and Tolerance of Sexism

Significant gender inequalities in the United States are evident in income, employment fields, devices’ intended functioning, and social status. In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that women made just 81.1% of the wages that men made (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Women are also underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) workforce, making up 24% of the STEM workforce as of 2009 (Beede et. al., 2011). Perhaps surprisingly, women are also more likely to be severely injured in car accidents as a result of automobile safety features that have been designed for male drivers (Bose et. al., 2011). Additionally, women in the United States are likely to experience lower subjective well-being past the age of 45 as compared to men, which is believed to be due to the devaluation of older women in American society (Inglehart, 2002). Despite efforts to eliminate gender inequalities, evidence shows that they are still widespread. Research suggests that one reason is that system justification and tolerance of sexism legitimize gender inequalities.

Zosuls et. al. (2011) examined historical trends in approaches to gender in scientific research. They found two consistent approaches. Biological theories are the longest standing approaches; they suggest that differences between men and women are due to biological mechanisms. Biological theories have been used to justify gender inequalities by arguing that because differences are due to genetic makeup, men and women were designed for different purposes and little can be done to lessen inequalities. In contrast, more recent socialization approaches to gender argue that knowledge of gender stereotypes and gender roles is reinforced by social norms and influential role models in children’s lives. Thus, in contrast to biological approaches to gender, which posit that inequalities are determinate, socialization theories imply
that inequalities can be addressed by better understanding the ways that gender stereotypes, social norms, and ideologies perpetuate sexism.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of two types of gender stereotypes, that is, competitive and complementary stereotypes, on system justification and tolerance of sexism. I also examined whether these effects depend on gender. I hypothesized that women would exhibit greater tolerance for sexism when gender roles were described as complementary. I also expected that men would exhibit greater tolerance of sexism when gender roles were described as competitive as well as greater system justification than women across both conditions. The results may improve our understanding of ways that both men and women contribute to the continued presence of sexism in the U.S. and may help identify new ways to address it.

**Ambivalent Sexism**

According to Glick and Fiske (1996), historically, gender roles were viewed primarily as competitive. Men were deemed the dominant group; they were perceived as more intelligent and competent. This dominant status encouraged men to perceive ownership over the women on whom they depended. Women were rewarded by their husbands through intimacy and affection for exhibiting desirable traits (e.g., nurturing, trusting) if they did so without conflict. Women likely complied as compliance was another desirable trait expected of women and women lacked power to resist openly. The power differential exhibited in these intimate relationships thus created hostile and benevolent ideologies that individuals internalized and that guided their interactions with members of each sex.

Ambivalent sexism, then, refers to the notion that sexism consists of two components: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism refers to blatantly
negative attitudes toward women, whereas benevolent sexism refers to attitudes toward women that seem positive but that undermine gender equality (e.g., that women should be held on a pedestal). People who are higher in benevolent sexism perceive gender roles as complementary to each other, that is, that each gender has a set of strengths that the other does not and that society works better when women and men act in ways that reflect their perceived respective strengths. An example is the belief that men should be breadwinners and protectors while women should be caretakers and homemakers. Both ideologies reflect sexist notions of women and men. Although benevolent sexism may seem positive, it actually serves to undermine gender equality and justify existing gender roles.

**System Justification and Complementary versus Non-complementary Stereotypes**

According to system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), people often justify or rationalize existing social systems even when those systems are not in their best interests. In other words, people are motivated to perceive social systems as fair and just. For example, Kay and Jost (2003) conducted four studies investigating whether complementary stereotypes resulted in greater system justification, that is, support for the status quo. In their first study, they asked undergraduate students to read a short scenario that depicted a target individual as either rich but miserable, poor but happy, poor and unhappy, or rich and happy. Rich but miserable and poor but happy were considered complementary because the negative attribute is thought to be offset by the positive attribute. All participants then completed measures of perceived fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability of the prevailing social system. The results indicated that participants who read about the “poor but happy” and “rich but miserable” targets exhibited stronger system justification as compared to participants who read about the poor and unhappy and “rich and happy” targets. Kay and Jost concluded that “poor and happy” and “rich and
miserable” stereotypes reinforced the belief that social and economic outcomes are fair, resulting in greater system justification. In Study 2, they observed the effects of the group stereotypes, that is, “poor but honest” and “rich but dishonest,” on system justification. The results aligned with the results of the first study with the complementary stereotypes having higher rates of system justification than noncomplementary stereotypes.

Kay and Jost’s (2003) final two studies examined whether noncomplementary stereotypes threaten justification while complementary stereotypes satisfy it. In Study 3, they asked participants to read and remember a story that described two friends. Half of the stories depicted the rich friend being happier than the poor friend and the other half of the stories depicted the poor friend as happier. After reading the story, participants completed a reaction time task during which they were exposed to non-word, neutral word, and justice-related words in each trial. Participants also completed measures of system justification and Protestant work ethic. Findings showed that participants who were exposed to the noncomplementary (threatening) stereotype had faster reaction times to justice-related words than did those in the complementary (non-threatening) stereotype condition. Responses to neutral words did not differ as a function of condition. These findings supported the notion that exposure to noncomplementary stereotypes activates the justice motive. Finally, in Study 4, Kay and Jost compared wealth and morality, rather than wealth and happiness, stereotypes. The results of this study once again revealed that exposure to noncomplementary stereotypes yielded quicker reaction times to justice related words, providing evidence of justice motive activation. As Kay and Jost noted, prior to their research, victim-blaming was the most supported form of justification; their findings introduced the possibility of other system-justifying strategies.
Subsequently, Jost and Kay (2005) completed three experiments investigating the activation of complementary gender stereotypes and their effects on perceptions of fairness. In the first study, participants completed two questionnaires. The first questionnaire contained one of four different stereotype conditions. In one condition, participants indicated whether each of five communal traits applied more to men or more to women. In the second condition, participants indicated whether agentic traits applied more to men or women. In the third condition, participants indicated the extent to which both communal and agentic traits applied to women and men. Participants in the fourth condition served as the control group. Participants then completed a measure of gender-related system justification, which consisted of eight opinions about the current state of gender relations. The results showed that participants exposed to communal traits believed these traits to be more characteristic of women. Likewise, those exposed to agentic traits believed these traits to be more characteristic of men. Overall, participants generally endorsed complementary stereotypes. Further, those who believed men were more agentic were likely to also believe that women were more communal. Men showed no effect of exposure to communal stereotypes on system justification. In contrast, women who were exposed to communal stereotypes scored higher on system justification than women not exposed to those stereotypes. Overall, then, Study 1 found that a brief exposure to complementary stereotypes increased support for the system of gender inequality.

Building on the work of Jost and Kay (2005), Becker and Wright (2011) sought to research the effects of exposure to benevolent and hostile sexism on collective action. They argued that greater system justification as a result of benevolent sexism should, in turn, produce less collective action. They conducted four studies. In the first two studies, women were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Two of the conditions were controls, one gender
neutral and the other gender unrelated. In the other two conditions, participants were exposed to benevolent sexism or hostile sexism. Then all participants were given six sentences and told that they were participating in a memory test and that they would be asked to distinguish their six sentences from a group of 24 sentences later. After reading the initial six sentences, participants responded to measures of perceived advantages of being a woman, positive and negative affect, gender-specific justification, and collective action intention. Results showed that exposure to benevolent sexism decreased intention to engage in collective action, whereas exposure to hostile sexism increased intentions to engage in collective action. Results also indicated that the gender-specific system justification and the perceived advantages of being a woman effects contributed to these findings. Women exposed to benevolent sexism perceived the social system as fair and acknowledged the advantages of being a woman; they therefore had less desire for collective actions because they felt nothing needed to change. Additionally, those exposed to hostile sexism perceived the social system as less fair and acknowledged fewer advantages of being a woman. These results increased intentions for collective action as they felt things should be changed. The results of the control conditions showed that the negative impact that the exposure to benevolent sexism had could not be attributed to the fact that the sentences generally appeared favorable to women as the collective action responses were similar in both the gender neutral and gender unrelated conditions.

In their second study, Becker and Wright (2011) measured collective action intent using two actual collective actions rather than a scale. These actions were taking flyers related to gender inequality to distribute or signing a petition. They also measured women’s endorsement of benevolent and hostile sexism. The results replicated and further explained the results of the
first study. Those exposed to hostile sexism were more inclined to sign a petition or take the flyers and those exposed to benevolent sexism were less inclined.

Becker and Wright’s (2011) third study examined the impact of gender-specific system justification on participants’ likelihood to engage in collective action. Participants were randomly assigned to low and high gender-specific system justification conditions. They were asked to read a brief article that claimed to be about their peers’ opinions about gender fairness. Those assigned to the high condition read about how their peers justify the gender system and those in the low condition read about how their peers did not justify the gender system. The results showed that female students exposed to low levels of gender-specific system justification were more inclined to participate in collective action.

In Study 4, Becker and Wright (2011) examined the perceived advantages and disadvantages of system justification. Participants were asked open-endedly to write about either the perceived advantages or disadvantages of being a woman depending on the condition to which they had been randomly assigned. The results indicated that the most common advantages discussed related to benevolent sexism such as being more emotional or having people more apt to assist in a task. The most common disadvantages related to discrimination in the workplace such as the wage gap or a poor career outlook. The results further showed that women assigned to the perceived advantages condition were less likely to participate in collective action than those assigned to the disadvantages condition. These four studies provided experimental evidence on how system justification impacts commitment to social change.

**Overview of Present Research**

The research described previously provides evidence that gender stereotypes impact how fair or just people believe the social system to be despite negative outcomes of the system. The
purpose of the present study was to examine the consequences of complementary and competitive gender stereotypes on men’s and women’s system justification and tolerance of sexism. Tolerance of sexism refers to the willingness to tolerate others’ sexist behavior (Folberg et al., 2021), which perpetuates gender disparities, maintaining the status quo.

I hypothesized that women would have a higher tolerance for sexism in the complementary condition, that is, when women and men were described as fulfilling different roles than in the competitive condition, that is, when women and men were described as competing to fulfill the same types of social roles. I also expected that men would be higher in tolerance for sexism in the competitive condition. Additionally, I anticipated that men would score higher on system justification than women as men benefit more from existing gender roles. The results from this study are important for understanding how men and women may both contribute to the presence of sexism.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 266; 140 women, 126 men) were recruited through Prolific Academic for a study about perceptions of women and men in today’s society. The complementary condition had 133 total participants leaving 133 participants for the competitive condition. The complementary condition had 67 women and 66 men. The competitive condition had 73 women and 60 men.

Most participants (n = 214, 80%) identified as heterosexual or straight. Of the remaining participants, 8.65% identified as bisexual, 4.89% as lesbian, 3.38% as gay, 1.88% as queer, 1.5% as pansexual, 1.13% as asexual, and 0.38% as questioning. The majority of participants (n = 191,
71.8% identified as White; 13.16% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 9.02% as Hispanic or Latino/a, 7.52% as black or African American, 1.88% as other, and 1.13% as Middle Eastern. Participants’ levels of education included four-year degrees ($n = 85, 32.08\%$), some college education (22.64%), professional degrees (21.51%), high school diplomas (13.21%), 2-year degrees (7.17%), doctoral degrees (2.26%), and less than a high school diploma (1.13%). Finally, most participants identified as middle class ($n = 113, 42.48\%$), followed by middle to lower class (26.32%), middle to upper class (18.8%), lower class (9.77%), and upper class (2.63%).

Materials

I created two ostensible news articles following Eagly et. al. (2020) in which gender stereotypes were characterized as competitive or complementary (see Appendix A). In the competitive condition article, participants were told that perceptions of women and men’s intelligence and competence had changed over time. This article indicated that women are now perceived as more competent (e.g., creative, common sense) and intelligent (e.g., smart, logical) than men. Furthermore, the article explained that due to the increase in perceived competence and intelligence of women, women and men may now be on more even footing in the job market and could be competing for the same opportunities.

The complementary condition article described public perceptions of men and women’s communion and agency as narrowing over time, but that women and men were still perceived differently. Men are perceived as more agentic (e.g., strong, decisive) and women as more communal (e.g., compassionate, sensitive). It was also explained that women and men were likely to be hired for different jobs. Women would be hired for jobs that require more emotional intelligence and men would be hired for jobs that require strength and decisive action.

Procedure
Participants were randomly assigned to read either the competitive or complementary article. They then completed Jost and Banaji’s (1994) eight-item measure of system justification (e.g., “Gender roles need to be radically restructured.”; $\alpha = .82$) and Folberg and colleagues’ (2021) seven-item measure of tolerance of sexism (e.g., “I could not be friends with someone who held sexist views.”; $\alpha = .82$). The response scale for both measures was 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Results**

I conducted separate 2 (Women vs. Men) X 2 (Complementary vs. Competitive Stereotypes) ANOVAS of system justification and tolerance of sexism. Only three significant effects emerged. Participants in the competitive stereotype condition exhibited greater system justification than did those in the complementary stereotype condition, $F(1, 262) = 5.57, p = .019$. In addition, men exhibited greater system justification, $F(1, 262) = 41.22, p < .001$, and greater tolerance of sexism, $F(1, 262) = 13.84, p < .001$, than did women (See Figure 1). All other effects were not significant, $ps > .28$.

**Discussion**

The present study aimed to further understand how gender and gender stereotypes affect system justification and tolerance of sexism. Participants completed a questionnaire in which they read that women and men were fulfilling complementary or competitive gender roles. Participants then responded to measures of system justification and tolerance of sexism. I expected that system justification would be higher in the complementary (vs. competitive) condition and that men would exhibit greater system justification than women. Finally, I anticipated that women in the complementary condition would score higher than men on the
tolerance of sexism scale and men in the competitive condition would score higher than women on the same scale.

Unexpectedly, participants in the competitive gender stereotype condition exhibited greater system justification. As expected, men exhibited greater system justification than women. Men also showed higher rates of tolerance of sexism than women in both conditions. Gender stereotype information did not affect tolerance of sexism nor did the effect of gender stereotypes differ for women and men. The outcomes of this study are thus inconsistent with findings of previous research as prior research has supported the notion that exposure to complementary stereotypes increases system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003).

Limitations and Future Directions

It seems likely that the manipulation used in the study was ineffective. This lack of effectiveness could be, in part, due to participants, whose average age was 33, already having well developed views of gender roles. However, the effect that did emerge was in the opposite direction of expectations. Perhaps participants perceived the competitive information as more threatening, resulting in greater system justification. It is difficult to tell whether the content within the manipulation was perceived in the way that it was intended. It is possible that the news articles were not clear enough, too lengthy, or that the manipulation was too subtle. Even with comprehension checks, researchers cannot ensure that participants were engaged in the study.

Nevertheless, the findings contribute to a better understanding of how sexism may be perpetuated in society in that tolerance of sexism was relatively high overall and greater for men than women. System justification was also higher among men than women. Moving forward, the present study may also provide guidance in how to better manipulate individuals’ views on
gender. Future research might also further examine the consequences of tolerance of sexism as a mechanism that serves to maintain gender inequality. For instance, research on tolerance of sexism could investigate how differing social circumstances and surroundings, such as a professional work setting compared to a relaxed family setting, may impact one’s level of tolerance of sexism. Such research may, ultimately, provide guidance on ways to reduce sexism at the individual level as well as how to restructure social systems to end sexism.

Conclusion

Based on the understanding that sexism is a byproduct of a patriarchal society (Glick & Fiske, 1996), one can assume that sexism has been an ingrained social system since long before the start of our country. Efforts have been made to eliminate sexism. For example, the Equal Rights Amendment was passed in 1972, which gave women legal equality to men (Georgetown Law, 2021). With these types of blatant forms of sexism already being addressed, moving forward it is important to look at how people may contribute to sexism on an individual level by means of social interaction, for example, by tolerating others’ expressions of sexism. System justification and tolerance of sexism begin to explain where the issues lie within the stereotypes, but further research is needed to fully understand how and why biases remain. Such research may provide guidance on how to reduce sexism in our own individual actions, such as how we all contribute to gender norms and stereotypes being taught and reinforced in children from an early age. Ultimately, addressing these issues where they lie on an individual level may lead to the end of sexism.
References


https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NqoWmrAoQn0C&oi=fnd&pg=PP6&ots=VQTCbav7uy&sig=12hhvhLiwnlCI465Tj2BZlOM56s#v=onepage&q&f=true


**Table 1**

*Women’s and Men’s Mean Judgments by Condition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Complementary (67 women, 66 men)</th>
<th>Competitive (73 women, 60 men)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Justification</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance of Sexism</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Justification</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance of Sexism</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 1**

*Gender Differences in System Justification and Tolerance of Sexism*

![Graph showing gender differences in system justification and tolerance of sexism. The x-axis represents the measures, with 'System Justification' and 'Tolerance of Sexism'. The y-axis represents the mean score, ranging from 1 to 5. Women's scores are represented in red, and Men's scores are represented in grey. The graph indicates that Men have higher mean scores in both measures compared to Women.]*
Appendix A

Complementary and Competitive Ostensible News Articles Presented to Participants

Complementary Article:

In an examination of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to the present, psychological researchers examined how perceptions of women and men have changed over time. The researchers looked at two different types of trait characteristics: communion (e.g., compassionate, sensitive) and agency (e.g., strong, decisive). The researchers found that although perceptions of gender differences tend to narrow over time, women and men are still perceived differently. Men are often perceived as more agentic (e.g., strong, decisive) than are women, whereas women are perceived more communal (e.g., compassionate, sensitive) than are men (Figure 1).

When asked about the implications of their research, the researchers said the following, "Women and men are likely to be hired for different types of jobs. For example, although structural disadvantages still exist, women tend to be selected for positions that require emotional intelligence and good communication skills, whereas men tend to be hired for positions that require strength and decisive action." They went on to say, "I don't really think there's a 'battle of the sexes' occurring. Men and women are generally perceived as having strengths that complement each other."

![Graph showing changes in perceptions of agency and communion over time](image)

*Figure 1.* The figure above shows changes in perceptions of agency (left) and communion (right) among women and men from 1946 to the present. Although perceptions of gender differences seem to be narrowing over time, women and men are still perceived differently. More specifically, men are perceived as more agentic (e.g., strong, decisive) than are women, whereas women are perceived as more communal (e.g., compassionate, sensitive) than are men.
In an examination of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to the present, psychological
researchers examined how perceptions of women and men have changed over time. The
researchers looked at two different types of trait characteristics: competence (e.g.,
creative, common sense) and intelligence (e.g., smart, logical). The researchers found
that although men were historically perceived as more competent (e.g., creative,
common sense) and intelligent (e.g., smart, logical) than were women, those perceptions
have changed. Their research now indicates that women are perceived as more
competent and intelligent than men (Figure 1).

When asked about the implications of their research, the researchers said the following,
"It used to be the case that men had a relative advantage on the job market because they
were perceived as more intelligent and creative. Although structural disadvantages still
exist, these results indicate that men and women may be on more even footing, and are
likely to be perceived as competitive for the same types of opportunities." They went on
to say, "If there is indeed a 'battle of the sexes,' men have a reason to be nervous."

Figure 1. The figure above shows changes in perceptions of competence (left) and
intelligence (right) among women and men from 1946 to the present. Although men
were perceived as more competent and intelligent than women in the past, women are
now perceived as more intelligent and competent than men.