

Rethinking sexism: Study examines how society maintains the status quo

November 12 2009

There is a tendency to think that only men treat women in a sexist way, but a new study by a University of Miami researcher and his daughter shows that both men and women participate in maintaining a gender hierarchy in our society. The study, titled "Social Dominance and Sexual Self-Schema as Moderators of Sexist Reactions to Female Subtypes," was recently published by the journal of *Sex Roles*.

The two most significant findings of the study are that both men and women respond in a more hostile way to a woman who violates sex-role expectations, than to one who adheres to them. Secondly, that the more an individual supports social hierarchy in general (that some people should have more power and resources than others), the more hostile they responded toward a woman who violated sex-role expectations.

"We were surprised by the lack of difference in the role of social hierarchy support in hostile sexism between men and women," said Blaine Fowers, professor in the Department of Educational and Psychological Studies in the UM School of Education and co-author of the study. "We expected social hierarchy support to lead to greater hostile sexism among men than among women."

Although sexism has been discussed as an issue of social hierarchy for decades, few researchers have directly tested the role that social hierarchy plays in sexism. Some of the motivation for supporting the gender hierarchy is the belief that social hierarchy is important in general, explained Alyssa Fowers, co-author of the study and a first year

student at Duke University.

"It's important for women to understand that judgment hurts everyone and that sexist judgment hurts women in particular," said Alyssa "When women are influenced by society to make assumptions about each other they also hurt themselves--it's a cycle that feeds itself "

The study also indicates that women show a strong preference for benevolent sexism (BS) -- portraying women as relatively weak, placing them on a pedestal of purity and suggesting they need protection and guidance, over hostile sexism (HS)--the derogatory portrayals of women. Other important findings of the study include:

- Men have similar scores on BS and HS
- Women are divided into two different subtypes, for the purpose of the study: chaste, described as a woman who does not like "casual flings" and promiscuous --women who like "casual flings;"
- Women with a positive Sexual Self-Schema (cognitive representations of one's self) have the largest difference in HS across women subtypes
- Women with low sexual self-schema have almost identical levels of HS toward both the chaste and promiscuous characters.
- Both HS and BS are harmful. Both forms of sexism support a gender hierarchy that limits and marginalizes women

The results provide concrete evidence that sexism is a form of [social hierarchy](#) that is beneficial to men and detrimental to women and offers

some avenues for educating about and reducing sexism through making it clearer how sexism is related to [social dominance](#).

"Women have a direct stake in the ongoing effort to create a more just society and men can benefit greatly when the women in their lives become more empowered and fully engaged partners, colleagues, and fellow citizens," said Blaine Fowers

The study helps form a clearer understanding of how sexism works among both [men](#) and [women](#) and contributes to the long conversation about gender equity in society.

Source: University of Miami ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Rethinking sexism: Study examines how society maintains the status quo (2009, November 12) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-rethinking-sexism-society-status-quo.html>

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