

# Can rude behavior mask sexism? Study says yes

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Being rude to everyone can hide sexism, according to a recent analysis from a researcher at The University of Texas at Dallas.

Dr. Sora Jun, assistant professor of organizations, strategy and international management in the Naveen Jindal School of Management, and her co-authors identified a barrier that makes [sexism](#) hard to recognize: men's rudeness toward other men.

Their study, published online Feb. 21 and in the March issue of *Psychological Science*, found that a man does not seem sexist if he treats everyone—both men and women—poorly.

Jun said the idea for the research topic came from a discussion with her co-authors, Dr. Peter Belmi and Dr. Gabrielle S. Adams of the University of Virginia.

"We were having conversations about men who get away with making sexist remarks," Jun said. "We realized that one commonality among these people is that they are often seen as simply being rude, because they are rude to men as well. We thought that this attribution of general rudeness might be what allows these people to continue displaying sexist behaviors without retribution."

The researchers conducted a series of five studies from 2019 to 2021, using online survey platforms.

First, a [pilot study](#) examined whether men can both hold sexist beliefs and be rude toward men. The researchers conducted a two-part survey among 759 employed men to obtain self-reports about rudeness to female and male colleagues at work and their attitudes and beliefs about women.

The pretest found that men who reported holding more negative stereotypes about women also reported being more discourteous, impolite or inconsiderate toward their male and female colleagues.

Researchers said the men believed that rudeness may obscure the recognition of sexism by creating the perception of gender blindness, in which the perpetrator does not notice or pay attention to a person's gender, creating an illusion of impartiality.

"By 'equal-opportunity jerk,' we mean an individual who is mistakenly seen as gender-blind in their negative treatment toward others," Jun said. "They think, 'This person is presumably rude toward both men and women equally, and therefore cannot be sexist.' Of course, in our research, we find that this perception is flawed."

Next, the researchers tested whether rudeness toward men obscures gender bias. They surveyed nearly 5,000 male and female online participants and students from professional schools.

In one study, participants read tweets written by former President Donald Trump from July to August 2019, while he was in office. All participants read tweets that contained [negative comments](#) toward women, and some saw additional tweets of Trump berating men.

The participants were asked whether they thought Trump was sexist or gender-blind. The study found that the more lay observers saw Trump being rude toward men, the more they thought he was gender-blind.

In another study, participants read a fictitious story about a manager who made a sexist remark toward a female intern. Some participants read that the manager also berates male interns.

In this study, when the manager made a sexist remark to a female intern and was also rude to male interns, participants viewed him as less sexist because they perceived him to be gender-blind.

The findings suggested that rudeness obscures the recognition of sexism

by creating the perception that the sexist perpetrator does not notice or pay attention to gender when dealing with other people.

"Sexism and rudeness are two different concepts, and we try to outline this idea in the paper," Jun said. "Rudeness is defined as behaviors that are regarded as discourteous, impolite or inconsiderate. Sexism is defined as attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that reflect, foster or promote negative or pejorative stereotypes about women. Not all rude behaviors are sexist, because not all rude behaviors invoke negative stereotypes about women—for example, failing to acknowledge a co-worker in the hallway. On the other hand, not all sexist treatment is rude."

For example, Jun said, in a common form of sexism, called benevolent sexism, women are treated as if they should be cherished and protected. Benevolent sexism may be regarded as being polite and courteous, but it harms gender equity by promoting [negative stereotypes](#) about women, such as being weak or lacking agency.

## **Gender-bias training**

The researchers also explored the downstream implications of their findings, including gender-bias training.

In a replicated study with the fictitious manager, participants diminished the importance of gender-bias training the more they saw the sexist manager's rudeness toward men.

Jun said these findings show that rudeness creates a critical barrier to addressing sexism by discouraging observers from recommending gender-bias training for sexist perpetrators.

"The first step to eradicating sexism in the workplace is to identify it when it happens," Jun said. "If observers are unable to recognize an

employee's [behavior](#) as sexist—because those behaviors are incorrectly explained away as general rudeness—those problematic sexist behaviors will likely continue to plague organizations."

The study also suggests that when rudeness toward men hides sexist behavior, it hurts women in more than one way, Jun said.

Women first must manage the sexism they face, she said. Second, they may begin to have doubts about whether sexism actually was present, which also can be psychologically taxing. Finally, even when [women](#) conclude that sexism is present, they may have a difficult time convincing others that sexism is at play.

Organizations should clearly define sexism in their training programs, Jun said.

"Our work suggests that lay people's conception of sexism may be both broad and malleable, so being clear about what it means to be sexist may help people better identify sexism," she said.

Jun said future research could examine whether [rudeness](#) can hide other types of discrimination, such as racism.

**More information:** Peter Belmi et al, The "Equal-Opportunity Jerk" Defense: Rudeness Can Obfuscate Gender Bias, *Psychological Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976211040495](https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211040495)

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