

Reducing Sexist Attitudes as a Result of Completing an Undergraduate Psychology of Gender Course^{1,2}

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An investigation was conducted on the impact of a Psychology of Gender course on reducing sexist attitudes. Undergraduate students enrolled in either Psychology of Gender (n = 27) or Introduction to Psychology (n = 28) completed questionnaires measuring sexism. Results showed that students enrolled in Psychology of Gender, unlike students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology, reported a significant reduction in sexism scores by the end of the course. These findings support the use of content-specific courses in reducing prejudicial attitudes. This is consistent with previous research.

The feminist movement is well over 40 years old, but sexism and sexist attitudes continue as a part of American fabric. Grounded in society's sex role standards, disparities in the distribution of power among its members and/or misinformation about women's and men's dispositions and abilities may be at the root of such attitudes. Sex role standards and behaviors exist in all cultures, often seen as a product of socialization practices, whereby particular attributes and behaviors are deemed more "appropriate" for one gender over the other. As an illustration, the constructs of *agency* and *communion* are used to characterize American society's gender role expectations. Men are expected to be dominant and assertive (*agentic*), while women are expected to be submissive and nurturing (*communal*). This creates an important context for (1) personal interactions and (2) the distribution of power and status (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 1991, 1999). Stereotyping promotes rigid adherence to these roles, with little room for deviation from prescribed sets of behaviors. Therefore, even 40 years since the feminist movement began, women still earn less than men for doing the same work (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008), and despite advances from the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, men rarely take paternity leave at the birth of a child, perhaps, at least in part, because this activity is inconsistent with sex role standards and behaviors adopted by our culture. Men often feel conflicted about providing economically and emotionally for their new child (Brott, 2001). Some men may be afraid of negative job-related consequences and societal stereotyping and discrimination from being a nurturing parent and spending at-home time with a new child.

Such gender role stereotyping, and the often resultant sexism, can be powerful influences on behavior; they may contribute to discrimination and/or violence directed at disenfranchised groups. For example, Begany and Milburn (2002) reported a correlation between hostile sexism, likelihood to sexually harass, and support for rape myths. Sex-typed individuals are more likely to endorse gender-stereotyped beliefs (Frable, 1989), which may lead them to promote unequal treatment of women and men. Although the concept of androgyny has been met with criticism (e.g., Matlin, 2000), many studies have shown that being androgynous is predictive of psychological well-being (e.g., Cook, 1985; Williams & D'Alessandro, 1994). Additionally, more subtle effects of gender role stereotyping can also be seen. As one example, women may experience *stereotype threat* when placed in situations where gender is made salient and where they are called on to perform in ways (i.e., take a difficult math test) that run counter to gender expectations (e.g., Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). The presumed pressure born out of the stereotype is believed to generate anxiety that contributes to reductions in performance.

Clearly, much discourse and research over several decades has documented the continued presence of bias on the basis of gender and the negative impact it has on human potential. Providing for ways to reduce sexism, therefore, remains warranted. Feminism currently is experiencing a backlash within the North America population (Evans, 2003). Individuals are reluctant to identify with the feminist movement, and they do not label themselves as feminists. Yet, people seem to readily endorse Pollitt's (2004) definition of feminism as a belief system where individuals, regardless of gender, should be equal in social, economic, and legal spheres. They also seem comfortable endorsing a broader view of feminism that incorporates social justice for all people, rather than just gender issues (Braun, 2003). Our interest in conducting this study was, in part, to investigate what impact current social climate may have on sexist attitudes and the extent to which attitude change may be influenced by this climate.

Reducing Sexism

Education is one powerful tool in reducing prejudice and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation. Colleges and universities often promote diversity experiences and greater tolerance for people of varying backgrounds through specific courses that target the "isms" (e.g., sexism, racism, ageism, heterosexism). The good news is that these practices seem to be working. For example, after taking a sex role course, female, but not male, students showed attitude changes toward more liberal sex-role attitudes (Geffner & McClure, 1990). A Psychology of Homosexuality course resulted in decreases in homophobia among those enrolled in it (Waterman, Reid, Garfield, & Hoy, 2001). And courses on prejudice and racism have been associated with greater awareness of racism and increased feelings of racial guilt and responsibility (Kernahan & Davis, 2007), as well as decreases in sexist, racist, and homophobic attitudes (Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008). Through such courses,

researchers are demonstrating that prejudicial attitudes are open to change when specific knowledge is provided that enlightens and/or challenges students to think deeply about such issues and experiences. This is human progress.

The Current Study

This study, strived to add to the existing body of scientific knowledge by investigating whether a Psychology of Gender course would yield reductions in sexist attitudes among college students enrolled in it. The comparison group consisted of college students enrolled in a more general psychology course. Although Geffner and McClure (1990) examined this very issue, their study is now about 20 years old, and their results may not be reflective of current sociocultural practices. In today's social climate, attitudes about feminism and feminists tend to be negative. This could impact the effect of feminist education on attitude change. Nonetheless, it was predicted that students completing a Psychology of Gender course would show reductions in sexist attitudes from the beginning to the end of the term. It was further expected that students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology would show declines in sexist attitudes, although not to the same degree as shown by Gender students, due to the less specialized course content. Unlike Geffner and McClure (1990) who administered the Bem Sex Role Inventory and a modified form of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale, these researchers examine the issues by using updated sexism constructs (i.e., the Old Fashioned and Modern Sexism Scale by Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory by Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students attending a Catholic liberal arts college in northwestern Pennsylvania were participants in this study. Students enrolled in either Psychology of Gender ($n=27$) or Introduction to Psychology ($n=28$) comprised our sample. The majority of students in both classes were female (74.1% in Psychology of Gender, 64.3% in Introduction to Psychology) and heterosexual (92.6 % in Psychology of Gender, 100% in Introduction to Psychology). In the Psychology of Gender course, students ranged in age from 18 to 42, with an average age of 21.67 years ($SD=4.71$). Most were psychology majors (56%), and 7% were freshmen. In Introduction to Psychology, students ranged in age from 18 to 22, with an average age of 19.04 years ($SD=.92$). Most were non-psychology majors (89%) and freshmen (75%). Both courses were taught by the same professor (first author) during the same academic term.

Materials

Psychology of Gender Content. The Psychology of Gender course has been offered at this institution on an every-other-year basis for the past 13 years. Originally called The Psychology of Women, it was re-cast in 2001 to reflect more coverage of both women's and men's issues. The course attracts many students; the average course size is 30, and students from a variety of majors (i.e., psychology, art therapy, marriage and family studies, sociology) take this

course. Topics covered include: gender role development; gender stereotypes; gender comparisons in cognitive abilities and personality; workplace issues; love, relationships, and sexuality; physical and psychological health; and violence. The course is mostly theory based, research-oriented, and developmental in its approaches. Class discussions and in-class activities are common, as are films that explore such issues as historical contributions to the women's movement, gender role development, and the role of the media in eating disorders. The required texts utilized during the term in which data collection occurred were *The Psychology of Women* (Matlin, 2004) and *Men's Lives* (Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Students were required to reflect on the readings and course content and to draw links to their own lives where possible. The class met three times a week (for 80 minutes each time) over the course of a 10-week term.

Introduction to Psychology Content. Introduction to Psychology is a survey course covering major topics and theories in psychology. A focus on research methods and classic studies characterizes this course, as do efforts to help students recognize how findings derived from psychological science might apply to their own lives. Although topics of prejudice and discrimination are covered in the course, along with feminist psychology, these are but two of many given attention throughout the term. Prominent topics include biopsychology, sensation and perception, learning and memory, developmental psychology, social psychology, disorders and treatment. *Psychology*, by Wade and Tavris (2006), is the primary resource text for the course. The class met three times a week (for 80 minutes each time) over the course of a 10-week term.

Questionnaires. Two questionnaires were used in this study: The Old-Fashioned (OFS) and Modern Sexism (MS) Scale (Swim et al., 1995), and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), which includes both the Hostile Sexism (HS) Scale and the Benevolent Sexism (BS) Scale (Glick & Fiske, 1996). These scales measure both the more direct, traditional forms of sexism (OFS) as well as more subtle, contemporary forms (MS and ASI). Distinctions between OFS and MS can be summed up in the following;

Old-fashioned sexism consists of beliefs in the maintenance of traditional gender-role distinctions and adherence to stereotypes about the characteristics of men and women to rationalize those distinctions. Modern sexism, on the other hand, consists of denial of continued discrimination against women, antagonism toward women's demands, and lack of support for affirmative action and other policies designed to be of assistance to women (Spence & Hahn, 1997, p. 31).

Glick and Fiske argued for a "reconceptualization of both the nature and measurement of sexism" (McHugh & Frieze, 1997, p. 10) and created The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). The ASI is designed to gauge both the

more hostile, blatant forms of sexism and the more subtle, “benevolent” types that, while benevolent, still promote a view that women are different from and weaker than men (Glick & Fiske, 1997). In both cases, such attitudes can be used to justify gender inequality. Within the two subscales, three areas are addressed: power, gender differentiation, and heterosexuality. The items on the ASI deal more directly with male-female relationships. Therefore, this inventory may be a better tool to use with respondents who do not identify closely with the feminist movement and/or with issues related to women’s rights (McHugh & Frieze, 1997).

All instruments have documented reliability and validity data, verifying their effectiveness as measurement tools. A demographics page was part of the survey given at the end of the term; respondents’ age, gender, major, and sexual orientation was solicited from participants at this time.

Procedure

At the very start of the class, students in the Psychology of Gender and the Introduction to Psychology courses received packets containing each of the surveys. The professor instructed students to complete all surveys to the best of their abilities. Students answered all questions using a 5-point (OF and MS scales, where 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) or a 6-point (AS scales, where 0 = *disagree strongly*, 1 = *disagree somewhat*, 2 = *disagree slightly*, 3 = *agree slightly*, 4 = *agree somewhat*, 5 = *agree strongly*). When students were finished, they were given a white business envelope and told to place their surveys in the envelope, seal it, and write their name on it so it could be returned to them. No additional information was given at this time. Most students completed the questionnaires in about 20–25 minutes. The sealed envelopes were kept in the instructor’s locked office for the remainder of the term.

On the last day of class, students were presented blank copies of the same packet of questionnaires, along with a demographics sheet, and were asked to complete all the forms. When they were finished, the instructor returned the envelopes with their pre-course questionnaires inside and explained the goal of the study. Students were assured of the anonymity of their responses and the fact that their participation would have no bearing on their course grade (envelopes with students’ names written on them were collected separately and discarded). All students agreed to have their responses included in the final analysis.

Results

Scores for each of the sexism measures were computed for each participant. The Old-Fashioned and Modern Sexism Scales were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, while the Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism subscales were rated on a 6-point Likert scale. We then conducted dependent means *t*-tests to assess changes in scores from the beginning of the class to the end of the class.

Results revealed that students in Psychology of Gender showed a reduction in Old-Fashioned Sexism, $t(26) = 3.40, p < .01, d = .61, Ms = 1.81 (SD = .57)$ and $1.53 (SD = .32)$, respectively, Modern Sexism, $t(26) = 2.45, p = .02, d = .48, Ms = 2.38 (SD = .55)$ and $2.12 (SD = .54)$, respectively, and Hostile Sexism, $t(26) = 3.43, p < .01, d = .65, Ms = 2.09 (SD = .66)$ and $1.66 (SD = .67)$, respectively, and a marginally significant reduction in Benevolent Sexism, $t(26) = 1.98, p = .06, d = .20, Ms = 2.25 (SD = .81)$ and $2.08 (SD = .90)$, respectively, at the end of the term. These results are displayed in *Figures 1* and *2*.

Figure 1. Mean pre- and post-course Old-Fashioned and Modern Sexism scores for the Psychology of Gender course. Scale statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale where larger values indicate greater sexism.

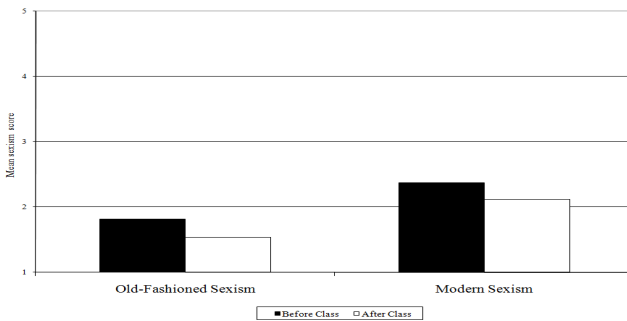
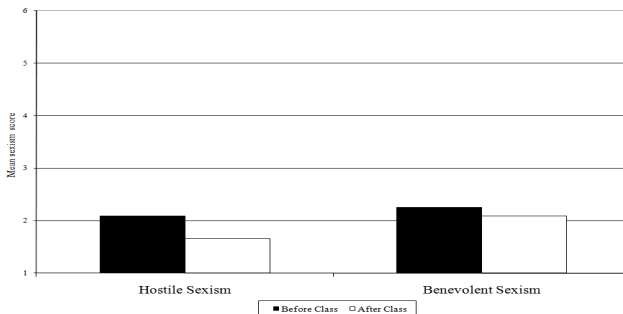


Figure 2. Mean pre- and post-course Hostile and Benevolent Sexism scores for the Psychology of Gender course. Scale statements were rated on a 6-point Likert scale where larger values indicate greater sexism.



In comparison, students in Introduction to Psychology did not show statistically significant reductions on any of the sexism measures from pre- to post-testing, all $ps > .3$.

The influence of gender and age on the current study's outcomes was considered. While there were more females than males in the current study, no gender differences were found when investigating pre-post sexism change scores, all $ps > .12$. However, a significant difference in age was found between the students enrolled in Psychology of Gender and students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology students, $t(53) = 2.90, p = .005$. As noted from the large standard deviation, the Psychology of Gender class average age was influenced by the variability from three outlier students (ages 29, 30, and 41) who were non-traditional in classification. A look at the median scores shows that the groups were actually closer in age: the median age of the Introduction to Psychology class was 19 years and the median age of the Psychology of Gender class was 20. More importantly, age was not significantly correlated with any of the sexism change scores, all $ps > .28$.

Discussion

The results indicated that students enrolled in a Psychology of Gender course showed a decline in sexist attitudes from the start of the term to its end. Students in Introduction to Psychology showed slight sexist attitude changes from beginning to the end of the term, although these differences were not statistically significant. While there may be various explanations for the decline in sexist attitudes experienced by the students enrolled in Psychology of Gender, it is likely that the in-depth coverage of such topics as gender bias, sexism, and gender stereotyping promoted greater knowledge and understanding of these issues, which helped to facilitate attitude change. Class discussions and activities, coupled with readings and exams, appear to have helped students gain additional insight and personal appreciation for how gender impacts lives. These results are consistent with others (e.g., Geffner & McClure, 1990; Kernahan & Davis, 2007; Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008; Waterman, Reid, Garfield, & Hoy, 2001) who have documented similar attitude change following courses that specifically address prejudice and discrimination. These results add to the growing body of literature by showing that declines in prejudicial attitudes can be elicited through a course on gender and sexism, even in current times. Reducing sexism may help to promote more and varied opportunities for women and men through helping to counter occurrences of stereotype threat and discrimination. Changes in attitudes and beliefs, which result from new experiences and new information, can be important features of behavioral change.

Scores on the Benevolent Sexism scale were marginally significant at the end of the term, and several reasons were considered why this might be so. Religiosity has been shown to predict Benevolent but not Hostile Sexism, and it has been suggested that some religious ideologies, including the Catholic religion, may reinforce benevolently sexist views (e.g., Burn & Busso, 2005; Glick, Lameiras, & Castro, 2002). Although religiosity was not measured directly, the participants were selected from an institution that has direct ties to

the Catholic Church and where the majority of students identify themselves as Catholics. Alternatively, Psychology of Gender courses and textbooks may place greater focus on hostile sexism (S. Fiske, personal communication, March 30, 2009), thus providing students with more awareness and knowledge of this type of sexism over other, more subtle kinds. Finally, hostile sexism is easier to recognize and perhaps easier to change; despite evidence suggesting that benevolent sexism is detrimental, people may be skeptical about its impact (P. Glick, personal communication, April 2, 2009) and, therefore, unconvinced as to the need for change.

This research documents the positive outcomes of a course focused on gender-related issues, even during a time when sensitivity to gender issues (i.e., acceptance of and identification with traditional feminism) is not a popular position (Evans, 2003). Students in the Psychology of Gender course reported less sexist attitudes at the end of the term, relative to the beginning of the term, while students in the Introduction to Psychology course remained more similar in attitudes throughout the term. Exposure to specific gender-related content is believed to be responsible for this difference. An obvious limitation in this work is that the researchers did not manipulate course enrollments and evaluate long-term change in sexist attitudes beyond the term in which students were enrolled in them.

It might be useful and prudent to investigate whether this change is temporary or permanent by experimentally distributing students into courses to control selection bias. Also, efforts should be directed at trying to identify the specific factors associated with the attitude change. For example, to what extent did instructor personality and gender play a role? How impactful were the films that students saw? How effective were the hands-on activities in illustrating certain concepts and principles? Answers to these types of questions could shed additional light on which aspects of the course proved most transforming. Finally, having mostly female respondents as participants can reduce the external validity of these results, although males in the current sample showed responses that were similar to females. Future work should aim for a more equal gender distribution.

Despite these limitations, it is believed it was worthwhile and quite satisfying to note the positive influence of such courses on those students enrolled. Many colleges and universities offer diversity-related courses, and it is encouraging to note that these kinds of classes appear to be generating, at least in the short term, greater tolerance and acceptance of differences and an appreciation of the commonalities that cut across gender and racial lines. Based on these findings, institutions of higher learning may wish to consider adding gender-related courses to their curricula as a means of promoting greater awareness of women's and men's issues and of the impact of sexism on their lives.

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