



Does it pay to be a sexist? The relationship between modern sexism and career outcomes

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Abstract

In this study, we examined the consequences of harboring “modern sexist” beliefs on the career outcomes of both men and women. We argued that individuals endorsing these beliefs disproportionately rely on men (versus women) for work-related advice and, in turn, obtain more promotions than do their less sexist counterparts. Results obtained from a sample of 192 communication workers supported our primary prediction, namely that modern sexism was positively related to advantageous outcomes in the workplace. The discussion focuses on the implications of modern (versus blatant) sexism in the workplace, especially in terms of the need for researchers and managers to recognize and address the organizational consequences of holding these subtle sexist beliefs.

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“A failure to join the traditional guy talk about sports can bar women from informal networks that make it much easier to navigate the male-infested waters.”

-Andrew Hacker (Epstein, 2005)

1. Introduction

Despite claims to the contrary, employment discrimination against women is alive and well (e.g., Reskin & Ross, 1995). For instance, a judge presiding over a recent case against Wal-Mart, the largest company in the United States (Fortune, 2005), observed that, “...women working at Wal-Mart stores are paid less than men in every region, that pay disparities exist in most job categories, that the salary gap widens over time, that women take longer to enter management positions, and that the higher one looks in the organization, the lower the percentage of women” (PBS, 2004). Furthermore, according to the 2003 United States Census Bureau, women make \$.77 to the male dollar, a discrepancy that cannot be explained solely by differences in education, job training, job experience, number of hours worked, or job type (United States General Accounting Office, 2003). Such findings suggest that the prejudice likely underlying such discrimination remains ubiquitous. Scholars, however, have argued that blatant or “old-fashioned” prejudice (e.g., sexism) has declined significantly in the United States (e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), as evidenced by the fact that overt claims of women’s inferiority no longer are socially acceptable (e.g., Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & St.-Pierre, 1999).

Sexism now manifests itself in a subtler and ostensibly benign set of beliefs including denial of continuing discrimination against women and antagonism towards women’s demands (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). In particular Swim et al. (1995), in extending work on the “new face” of racial prejudice (e.g., McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988), suggested that beliefs regarding the absence of enduring sexual prejudice and discrimination are indicative of, not arguments against, present-day sexism. According to Swim and colleagues (1995, p. 200), this newer form of sexism, which they termed “modern sexism,” is characterized by the following: beliefs that discrimination against women is a thing of the past, antagonism towards women who are making political and economic demands, and resentment about special favors for women. Notably, individuals espousing such views do not regard these notions as sexist or unfair and, accordingly, fail to perceive themselves (Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004) or others (e.g., Swim, Mallett, Russo-Devosa, & Stangor, 2005) as sexist. Instead, they conclude that, given the even-playing field upon which the two sexes now compete, the continuing under-representation of women in certain roles (e.g., management positions; Reskin & Ross, 1995) must be a result of women’s own choices or inferiority as opposed to discrimination (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005).

Modern sexism recently has been evoked to explain the enduring discrimination against women (e.g., Swim et al., 1995). In particular, several researchers (Swim et al., 1995) have reasoned that modern sexism should be a better predictor of discrimination than blatant sexism partially due to the fact that modern sexist views, unlike blatant sexist notions, are socially acceptable and, therefore, are more likely to be endorsed by respondents. Supportive of this idea, findings indicate that modern sexism is associated with negative attitudes toward feminists, positive attitudes toward male chauvinists (Swim & Cohen, 1997), and insensitivity to sexist language (Swim et al., 2004) and gender inequality (Benokraitis, 1997; Davies-Netzley, 1998). Moreover, a growing number of empirical studies demonstrates that modern sexism is

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