Benevolent and Hostile Sexism and preferences for romantic partners

Lucy K. Travaglia, Nickola C. Overall *, Chris G. Sibley

Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This research investigated the associations between sexist attitudes and preferences for romantic partners both cross-sectionally (N = 347 women, 130 men) and longitudinally over a nine-month period (N = 174 women). Women placed greater importance on status/resources partner characteristics, particularly when they were high in Benevolent Sexism (ideation of women who conform to traditional gender roles). Longitudinal analyses also revealed that, for women, Benevolent Sexism predicted increases in status/resources preferences over time. Men, in contrast, placed greater importance on attractiveness/vitality characteristics, particularly when they were high in Hostile Sexism (hostility toward women who oppose traditional roles). These findings indicate that sexist ideologies promote preferences for romantic partners who possess qualities congruent with traditional gender roles.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Men tend to regard attractiveness as more important in a romantic partner compared to women, and women tend to place greater importance on status and resources (see Buss, 1999; Fletcher, 2002). These gender differences are partly shaped by the social roles men and women have traditionally occupied; women have typically assumed lower status care-giving roles compared to men who have occupied resource provision roles (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Individuals' attitudes and expectations regarding gender roles, therefore, should influence their preferences for opposite sex partners. We explored this possibility by examining the cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between Benevolent Sexism (ideation of women who conform to traditional gender roles), Hostile Sexism (hostility toward women who oppose or fail to conform to traditional roles), and preferences for romantic partners.

1.1. Romantic partner preferences

The Ideal Standards Model (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) postulates that the standards people use to evaluate potential and current romantic partners fall within three dimensions: warmth/trustworthiness (e.g., understanding and supportive), attractiveness/vitality (e.g., sexy and outgoing), and status/resources (e.g., successful and financially secure). There is considerable evidence that, across many cultures, both men and women focus on these particular categories of traits when evaluating partners (see Buss, 1999; Fletcher, 2002). Factor analytic studies

of preference ratings have also revealed that most partner-evaluation items fall into these three categories (Fletcher et al., 1999).

Research has shown, however, that there are systematic differences in the importance men and women assign to partner qualities. There is consistent cross-cultural evidence that women prefer educated mates with good earning potential (high status/resources) more than men, while men report greater preferences for mates high in attractiveness/vitality (see Buss, 1999; Fletcher, 2002). Women are also less likely to trade-off status attributes for someone with good looks, whereas men are less likely to trade-off attractiveness for a woman who possesses status/resources (e.g., Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004).

Although these gender differences have an evolutionary basis (see Buss, 1999; Fletcher, 2002), they are also maintained and modified by the social roles men and women occupy. Because women are more likely to assume childcare responsibilities and men are more likely to act as primary resource providers, women are less able to directly access status and resources (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Within this social structure it is advantageous for women to align themselves with a male partner who can provide resources. Presenting good evidence that division of labor contributes to partner preferences, Eagly and Wood (1999) found that in countries where women participated equally in economic, political and decision-making roles, women placed lower emphasis on men's earning capacity. Men's preferences for domestic skills, such as a good housekeeper and cook, were also reduced.

Nevertheless, although robust gender differences exist, there is also substantial within-sex variability (Fletcher, 2002). For example, a good predictor of the importance of specific attributes is the degree to which the individual also possesses the targeted qualities (e.g., both men and women who are attractive have greater expectations regarding attractiveness in a partner)

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 9 373 7599.
E-mail address: n.overall@auckland.ac.nz (N.C. Overall).

(e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). Consistent with the above findings, partner preferences should also vary according to the degree to which individuals expect others to conform to gender roles—expectations which are captured by Benevolent and Hostile Sexism.

1.2. Sexism and partner preferences

Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Theory describes two types of sexist attitudes that incorporate expectations regarding the roles to which men and women should adhere. *Hostile Sexism* (HS) describes hostility toward women who do not conform to traditional gender roles and challenge male power. In contrast, *Benevolent Sexism* (BS) defines "subjectively benevolent but patronising" attitudes that cast "women as wonderful but fragile creatures who ought to be protected and provided for by men" (Glick et al., 2004, p. 715). Although BS contains caring and positive attitudes toward women, BS also reinforces male dominance by implying women are weaker and best suited to conventional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). For example, stereotypical traits attributed to women (i.e., warm and nurturing) position women as better suited for domestic roles, whereas characteristics attributed to men (i.e., independent and self assured) position men as best suited for high status roles (Glick et al., 2004).

Importantly, both men and women endorse BS and HS to varying degrees. Not surprisingly, men endorse HS at significantly greater levels than women across cultures (Glick et al., 2000). In contrast, women tend to reject HS, but sometimes endorse BS at the same or to a greater extent than men, particularly when they live in countries where men's HS is high (Glick et al., 2000). This latter finding highlights the stabilizing function of BS ideologies: endorsing men as providers and guardians protects women against hostile attitudes. Thus, BS is an effective way of maintaining traditional gender roles because accepting BS offers a way for women to secure a protected place within a wider system of inequality (Glick et al., 2000; also see Jost & Kay, 2005).

Given that expectations about the interpersonal relations between men and women underpin sexist ideologies, the degree to which both women and men endorse HS and BS should influence the expectations they have for romantic partners. Those high in BS, for example, should be more attuned to whether male partners can and are motivated to fulfil their role of resource provider (status/resources and warmth/trustworthiness attributes) and whether female partners fulfil domestic roles and are good caretakers (warmth/trustworthiness attributes). Previous research examining preferences for role-related characteristics provides some support for these predictions. For example, in data from nine nations, Eastwick et al. (2006) found that BS was associated with greater preferences for an older mate with good financial prospects, particularly in women (also see Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). These studies also found that greater BS and HS in men were associated with more rigid expectations for partners to be a good cook and housekeeper.

We also expect that HS should increase the importance men attach to women's attractiveness/vitality. Men's HS is at least partially driven by the motivation for group-based dominance (Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). This motivation for dominance should lead high HS men to view physically attractive women as "trophies" that reinforce their status and power by demonstrating their ability to attract highly valued mates. Available research provides some support for this prediction. Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, and Wise (2007) found that hostile attitudes toward women predicted greater importance placed on women's beauty and thinness, but they did not examine whether this association differed across gender. Examining preferences for romantic partners, Joh-

annesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002) also reported that greater HS in men was associated with assigning greater importance to 'good looks' and 'favourable social status' in a mate.

1.3. Current research

While supporting our predictions, the research described above targeted and assessed very specific attributes associated with gender roles. It is not clear, however, whether the possession of attributes such as 'good cook and housekeeper' influence mate selection or judgments of partners in ongoing relationships. To reiterate, research has shown that people across cultures evaluate partners according to three broad dimensions: warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality and status/resources. However, HS and BS have not been directly and systematically linked to the importance placed on attributes incorporated within these three dimensions. This was the primary goal of the current research.

We predicted that women would place greater importance on status/resources than men, but that this difference would be most pronounced for women high in BS who more strongly endorse traditional gender roles. We also predicted that men would place greater importance on attractiveness/vitality than women, and that this difference would be most pronounced for men high in HS. Finally, we predicted that BS in both men and women would be linked with greater emphasis on partner's warmth/trustworthiness. For high BS men, a warm/trustworthy partner should fit more strongly with the role of caretaker. For high BS women, warmth/trustworthiness should be a critical signal that their male partner will be motivated to protect, cherish and provide for her.

We explored these predictions by collecting measures of BS, HS, and ideal standards from a large sample of undergraduates. We also gathered these measures over a nine-month period to provide the first test of whether sexist attitudes forecast changes in partner preferences across time. Establishing longitudinal effects would provide stronger support that sexist ideologies influence partner preferences. If expectations regarding the roles of men and women (e.g., BS) drive what people desire in romantic partners (i.e., attributes congruent with gender roles) then greater initial levels of BS in women should predict increases in status/resources partner preferences over time. We did not expect, in contrast, that preferences for romantic partners would shape more general attitudes regarding men and women.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 477 (347 women, 130 men) undergraduates with a mean age of 19.65 years (women M_{age} = 19.59, SD_{age} = 3.56, men M_{age} = 19.80, SD_{age} = 2.74). The majority were New Zealand European (46%) or Asian (26%). Thirty-nine percent of participants were involved in a romantic relationship with a mean relationship length of 18.01 (SD = 20.22) months.

Of the women sampled at Time 1, 174 also responded to an invitation sent to all participants to complete a follow-up email questionnaire nine-months later. Women sampled at both times did not differ from those sampled only at Time 1 in age, ethnicity, HS, or preferences for warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources (Fs(1,345) = .66 to 3.31, ps > .07, partial $\eta^2 \leqslant$ .01), but were lower in levels of BS (M = 3.82, SD = .95 versus M = 4.04, SD = .97; F(1,345) = 4.33, p = .04, partial η^2 = .01) and attractiveness/vitality preferences (M = 4.92, SD = .90 versus M = 5.20, SD = .80; F(1,345) = 9.71, p < .01, partial η^2 = .03). Not enough men (N = 37