The Contextual Endorsement of Sexblind Versus Sexaware Ideologies

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Abstract. The current research examines the extent to which individuals endorse "sexblind" versus "sexaware" ideologies. Analogous to colorblind and multicultural ideologies, sexblindness involves ignoring sex categorization when perceiving others, and sexawareness involves recognizing and celebrating sex differences. Results revealed that participants endorsed sexblindness more (and, thus, sexawareness less) in work than in social contexts. Further, sexblindness was correlated with an internal motivation to respond without sexism, suggesting people perceive sexblindness as a way to reduce sexism. Consistent with this view, the more participants endorsed sexblindness in social settings, the less benevolent sexism they harbored. The implications of sexaware and sexblind ideologies and the difference between these ideologies and colorblind and multicultural ideologies are discussed.

Keywords: gender, sex differences, sexism

In our "men-are-from-Mars, women-are-from-Venus" culture it has become common to hear about the differences between men and women. For example, the *New York Times* recently reported about sex differences in personality (Tierney, 2008) and in dining preferences (Bruni, 2008); *Time Magazine* reported about the decreasing sex difference in math (Park, 2008); and *Newsweek* about differences in stress levels (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 2008). In contrast to this tendency of the press to acknowledge – or even emphasize – sex differences, laws and court precedents prohibit treating women and men differently in employment settings. For example, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on sex, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963 prohibits sex-based wage discrimination for men and women who perform equal work in the same organization. In an effort to avoid discrimination, therefore, employers may be motivated to ignore sex differences among their employees. The present research examines the extent to which individuals believe that, for the goal of equality, sex differences should be emphasized; or whether they believe that sex categories (and differences) should be ignored.

Our examination builds upon research on models of racial diversity. Social scientists and policymakers have forwarded two fundamentally different approaches to the reduction of interracial/interethnic tension and stratification. *Colorblindness* proposes that the use of racial categories should be eliminated when perceiving and making judgments of others, and that instead we should judge and treat one another as individuals (Lipset, 1996). The other approach, *multiculturalism,* proposes that we should acknowledge and celebrate group differences, creating greater awareness and understanding of differential group experiences and an appreciation of both similarities and differences between groups (Takaki, 1993; Yinger, 1994). Although these ideologies have typically focused on ethnic/racial diversity, they may also be relevant as a way of reducing sexism and increasing gender equality. We define a *sexblind* ideology as the view that, in order to increase equality, the use of sex categories should be eliminated and everyone should be treated as an individual, whereas a *sexaware* ideology maintains that one should acknowledge and appreciate sex differences.[1]

We want to emphasize that these ideologies are different from other concepts related to gender. Sexblindness and sexawareness are lay theories about how to treat sex categories in order to reduce sexism and increase equality. The ideologies presume sex differences exist, but are not concerned with people's perceptions of the sources of the differences. Thus, these ideologies are different than sexism,

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[1] We use the term *sex* to denote the grouping of people into female and male categories. The terms *sex differences* and *sex similarities* describe the results of comparing these two groups and the term *sexblind* indicates that biological sex categories are being ignored. Conversely, *sexaware* indicates that sex categories are being acknowledged. Of course, once sex categories are acknowledged, the meanings that societies and individuals ascribe to these female and male categories (*gender*) also becomes relevant. We did use the term "gender" in the questionnaire because it is more common than "sex" in lay language and because we did not expect our participants to understand the difference in our usage of the two terms.

which deals with evaluations of men and women; and essentialism, which states that gender groups are biologically fixed and unchangeable, and that there are deep and unchanging properties that define the group (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000).[2]

Although the race and sex ideologies are similar conceptually, lay thinking about racial and sex categories and these ideologies may differ in a number of ways. Although colorblindness is endorsed more than multiculturalism among White Americans (Plaut, 2002), there are several reasons why sexawareness may be a more popular belief than sexblindness. For instance, people believe that men and women are different in fundamental ways that stem from deep, unchanging properties of each sex (Prentice & Miller, 2006, 2007), and that sex differences are due more to biology than are racial differences (Martin & Parker, 1995). In addition, women and men have daily contact with one another, are interdependent within family units (see Fiske & Stevens, 1993), and their interactions often involve complementary roles that emphasize gender and sex differences. Contact between men and women is also necessary for reproduction. The same cannot be said for racial groups. Finally, because sexist behavior is not always perceived as negatively as racist behavior (see Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Rudman & Glick, 2008) and does not lead to the same levels of guilt as racist behavior (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), people may not be motivated to avoid using sex categories as a strategy for appearing nonbiased, as has been shown for race (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). In fact, people believe there would be more negative consequences if scientists do *not* report a sex difference when it really exists than if they falsely report one that does not exist (Martin & Parker, 1995). Taken together, this work suggests that the societal forces that have promoted colorblindness as a strategy for avoiding racial bias may not translate to the case of sex and sexism. Rather, people may endorse sexawareness more than sexblindness.

Although we predict that sexawareness will be endorsed more than sexblindness, it is likely that their differential endorsement will be context-dependent; thus, we assessed people's ideological endorsement when thinking about *work* or *social situations*. People may be particularly likely to categorize by sex (or its correlate, gender) in social settings where the relevance of sex is more obvious, such as within families and romantic relationships or for reproduction. In contrast, sexblindness may be endorsed more in work settings. Indeed, the workplace has been the primary site of concern about sexism and the focus of laws designed to curtail gender discrimination. Similar to the reasoning often underlying colorblindness – that failure to categorize a person by race makes racial bias impossible – motivation to avoid gender discrimination in the workplace may encourage a sexblind ideology.

If people believe that sexblindness is a way to avoid sexism, then people who are more motivated to avoid sexism should also be more likely to endorse the sexblind ideology. The idea that sexblindness may be a way to reduce sexism is also paralleled by the writings of early feminist empiricist researchers who emphasized the similarities between women and men as a way to increase equality (see Eagly, 1995). Indeed, research has found a positive correlation between colorblindness and external motivation to respond without prejudice (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), and we expect a similar relation between sexblindness and motivation to respond without sexism. To assess this hypothesis, participants completed the internal and external motivation to respond without sexism scales (Klonis, Plant, & Devine, 2005) as well the sexblind versus sexawareness ideology scale.

In addition to exploring the relations among sexblindness, sexawareness, and motivation to respond without sexism, the present work also considered the relations between these ideologies and sexist beliefs. Specifically, we assessed participants' hostile and benevolent attitudes toward women with the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism is the traditional type of sexism measured as negative attitudes toward women. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is an attitude toward women that is subjectively positive but still sexist because it is stereotypical and limits women to traditional roles. In the race bias literature, multicultural ideologies have been associated with lower race prejudice (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2003) but higher stereotyping (Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), compared with colorblindness. Given these findings, one might predict that sexblindness would be associated with greater sexism. If sexblindness is related to the motivation to avoid sexism, however, it is possible that sexblindness will actually be associated with lower sexism, relative to sexawareness. This study provides initial evidence regarding the relation between sexblindness (and sexawareness) and sexism.

Method

Participants

Participants were students from two different geographical areas. Sample 1 consisted of 17 men and 45 women with a mean age of 19.40 (*SD* = 1.34) from a large urban area in the Midwest, 56.5% of whom were European American, 19.4% Hispanic/Latino, 11.3% Asian/Asian American, 8.0% African American, and 4.8% other or multiracial. Sample 2 consisted of 37 men and 112 women with a mean

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[2]   A separate sample of students (14 men and 45 women) completed both the sexblind versus sexaware items (without reference to a specific context) and scales measuring the essentialist qualities of men and women (including the degree to which categories are understood as natural kinds and as coherent entities; Haslam et al., 2000). There were no significant correlations between the scales (all *p*s > .48). Thus, we have initial empirical evidence that the sexblind ideology scale measures something different from essentialism.

age of 19.21 (SD = 2.05) from the Southwest, 63.8% of whom were European American, 10.7% Hispanic/Latino, 2.0% Asian/Asian American, 2.7% African American, and 20.8% other or multiracial. Most students were recruited through research participation pools in their introductory psychology course, although 40 participants from Sample 1 were recruited in a classroom setting. Although Sample 2 (M = 3.66, SD = 0.74) had higher overall mean sexblindness versus sexawareness score than Sample 1 (M = 3.47, SD = 0.65), the sample did not significantly interact with any other variables in the design. Thus, we combined the two samples for the sexblind scale analyses.

Materials

Sexblind Versus Sexaware Scale

A 12-item scale was created to assess sexblind versus sexaware ideologies, consisting of 6 items written to assess sexblindness and 6 to assess sexawareness, on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales (see Appendix A for the full scale). The items were chosen from a larger pool of items which were written by the authors to represent the ideas of sexblindness and sexawareness. Some items were modeled after either Neville et al.'s (2000) colorblind racial attitudes scale or other items we have used in the past to measure colorblindness. For example, the colorblind item we have used in past research stating that "Recognizing racial/ethnic differences undermines social cooperation and progress" became "Recognizing differences between men and women undermines social cooperation and progress" and the multicultural item "It is important to recognize a person's race/ethnicity in order to fully appreciate the person" became "It is important to recognize a person's gender in order to fully appreciate who the person is." The sexaware items were reverse-scored before the average response to all 12 items was calculated (α = .74 for the work context; α = .76 for the social context).[3] Thus, higher means indicate greater endorsement of sexblindness and lesser endorsement of sexawareness, with a midpoint of 4 indicating equal endorsement.

Work and Social Context

For the work context, participants were asked to answer the items with a professional or work/employment environment in mind and to think about people in employment settings as they responded. For the social context, participants were asked to answer the items with social interac-

tions in mind and to think about social settings as they responded. Phrases such as "in the workplace" and "in social situations" were also embedded within each item. The sexblind versus sexaware ideology scales in the work and social contexts were correlated, r(209) = .60, p < .001.

Motivation to Respond Without Sexism

Participants in Sample 2 also completed the Motivation to Respond Without Sexism Scale (MRWSS; Klonis et al., 2005), which consists of 6 items measuring internal motivation to respond without sexism (e.g., "I am personally motivated by my beliefs to be nonsexist" and "I attempt to act in nonsexist ways because it is personally important to me"; α = .81; M = 5.30, SD = 1.05) and 6 items measuring external motivation to respond without sexism (e.g., "I attempt to appear nonsexist in order to avoid disapproval from others" and "I try to act in nonsexist ways because of pressure from others"; α = .89, M = 3.12, SD = 1.23). Items were answered on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Internal and external motivations were not significantly correlated, r(147) = –.01, p = .91.

Sexism

Sample 2 participants also completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), which consists of 11 items measuring benevolent sexism (e.g., "In a disaster, women ought to be rescued before men" and "Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility"; α = .87; M = 3.74, SD = 1.08) and 11 items measuring hostile sexism (e.g., "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men" and "When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against"; α = .89; M = 3.72, SD = 1.13). Items were answered on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Hostile and benevolent sexism were positively correlated, r(147) = .54, p < .001, and thus we used each scale as a covariate for the other when computing correlations.[4]

Procedure and Design

Each participant completed the sexblind versus sexaware ideology scale, once when thinking about employment settings and once when thinking about social settings. The design was a 2 (Context: work, social) × 2 (Participant Sex:

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[3] Factor analyses of the items were not consistent across contexts and did not indicate that the sexblind and sexaware items should be separated. In addition, the alphas for separate 6 item scales were lower than the combined scales. For the combined scales, reliability analyses indicated that removing items never increased either α more than .01.

[4] There were no significant sex differences in internal, t(147) = 0.53, p = .60, or external, t(147) = 0.23, p = .82, motivation to respond without sexism or in the hostile, t(147) = 0.79, p = .43, and benevolent, t(147) = 1.24, p = .22, sexism scales. Because there were no sex differences, correlations between these scales and endorsement of sexblind versus sexaware ideology were calculated on the sample as a whole.

male, female) × 2 (Order: work context first, social context first) mixed-model factorial, with context as a within-subjects variable. After completing the ideology scale, participants in Sample 2 completed the MRWSS and ASI.[5] Participants in both samples completed all items after finishing other studies that were unrelated to perceptions of sex differences.

Results and Discussion

Sexblind Versus Sexaware Ideology

Average ideology ratings were subjected to a 2 (Context: work, social) × 2 (Participant Sex: male, female) × 2 (Order: work context first, social context first) mixed-model analysis of variance. Results revealed a main effect of context, indicating that participants endorsed sexblindness more (and sexawareness less) in work settings ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.80$) than in social settings ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.81$), $F(1, 207) = 140.91$, $p < .001$. No other effects were significant, all p values > .11. One-sample t-tests comparing scores on the sexblind ideology scale to the scale's midpoint (i.e., 4) indicated that agreement with the items was not different from the midpoint in work contexts, $t(210) = –0.67$, $p = .50$, indicating equal endorsement of sexblind and sexaware ideologies. However, agreement was significantly lower than the midpoint in the social context, $t(210) = –13.55$, $p < .001$, indicating significant endorsement of a sexaware ideology. Thus, as predicted, participants endorsed sexblindness more (and sexawareness less) in work than social contexts and also endorsed sexawareness more strongly than sexblindness in the social context.

Sexblind Ideology and Sexism

As shown in Table 1, the more internally motivated to control their sexist responses participants were, the more likely

Table 1. Correlations between the sexblind versus sexaware scale and motivation to respond without sexism and ambivalent sexism in Sample 2

	Motivation to respond without sexism		Ambivalent sexism[1]	
	Internal	External	Hostile	Benevolent
Work context	.36***	–.02	–.01	–.12
Social context	.40***	–.09	.02	–.21*

Note. $n = 149$. For the sexblind/sexaware ideology scale, higher scores indicate greater endorsement of sexblindness and lesser endorsement of sexawareness. [1]Correlations with ambivalent sexism were partial correlations, covarying for the other sexism scale. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

they were to endorse the sexblind ideology in both the social and work contexts. These correlations suggest that individuals may, indeed, construe sexblindness as a way to reduce sexism. Contrary to Apfelbaum et al. (2008), external motivation to respond without sexism was not significantly correlated with the ideology scales, suggesting that it is a personal commitment to equality, and not just concern over outward appearances, that is associated with greater endorsement of the sexblind perspective. Thus, concerned about *being* sexist, but not concerns about *appearing* sexist, seem to be associated with the adoption of a sexblind ideology.

The results also revealed interesting correlations between scores on the sexblindness scale and those on the sexism inventory. Specifically, benevolent sexism was negatively correlated with the endorsement of sexblindness in the social setting, indicating that people who endorsed sexblindness more (and, thus, sexawareness less) expressed less benevolent sexism. Although the correlation with benevolent sexism in the work context was also negative, it was not statistically significant. Similarly, correlations between sexblind ideology endorsement and hostile sexism were nonsignificant (see Table 1). Although the result that sexblindness is related to lower bias expression seems inconsistent with research in the racial domain, in which colorblindness has been associated with greater expression of bias (Neville et al., 2000; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2003), it likely reflects facets of the benevolent sexism scale. Specifically, benevolent sexism stems from positive, but stereotypical, views of traditional women. Thus, people scoring higher on sexblindness in the present study expressed views of women that were less stereotypical, which is consistent with Wolsko et al.'s (2000) finding that colorblindness was associated with less stereotyping than multiculturalism. Because the ASI does not distinguish between evaluative reactions and stereotype endorsement and because benevolent sexism contains positive (albeit stereotypical) views of women, it remains unclear how sexblindness is related to gender prejudice. Future research should examine this issue with other measures of prejudice and stereotyping. In addition, given that sexblindness was only reliably correlated with benevolent sexism in the social context, future research should explore the relation between sexblind and sexaware ideologies and sexism in the workplace – one of the more prevalent domains of gender discrimination. In sum, the current results are only a first step in addressing the question of which ideology will promote gender equality under what circumstances.

It will also be important for future research to examine the meanings that different people ascribe to these ideologies. For some, sexblindness may be seen as a way to reduce prejudice, but for others, it may be a way to main-

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[5] Participants also completed the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), but it was not correlated with sexblind ideology.

tain the current gender hierarchy and division of labor (i.e., ignoring category boundaries means gender disparities and discrimination cannot be addressed; see Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009). Clearly, different meanings of sexblindness will be associated with differential levels of sexism.

Limitations

We would be remiss not to mention the somewhat low reliability of the sexblind versus sexaware scales as a caveat to the current results. The results should be replicated with more reliable scales, although many of the effects demonstrated here are quite large, despite potential issues of reliability. Another limitation of the research is that participants simply imagined the setting as they answered the questions, rather than giving their opinions while actually in a particular context. It would be interesting to measure sexblind and sexaware ideologies while people are in work and social settings in order to see if people shift their perspective naturally.

Future research should also address sex differences in these ideologies. There were few men in the current sample, which may have contributed to the lack of sex differences in the scales. A larger, more balanced sample of male and female participants may show sex differences in sexism as well as ideology endorsement. For example, members of minority groups endorse multiculturalism more than majority members (Plaut, 2002; Verkuyten, 2005). It is possible that similar differences could emerge for men and women.

Overall, the idea that people may be sexblind or sexaware is a new concept with intriguing implications for sexism, as well as the contextual nature of how men and women are treated in society. The current research is a first step in assessing when and why individuals may endorse these ideologies. Our results indicate that people endorse the sexblind notion that sex categories should be ignored more (and the sexaware ideology that sex differences should be acknowledged and celebrated less) in a work than social context. In addition, endorsing a sexblind ideology was related to lower benevolent sexism (especially in social settings) and a greater concern to avoid being sexist. Future research should continue to explore the contextual nature of these ideologies and the causal relationship between the ideologies and sexism.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

1. There is no reason to categorize individuals as men or women.
2. Both men and women have unique assets to contribute.*
3. We need to recognize and celebrate the cultural differences between men and women in order to create an equal society.*
4. We should describe others in terms of their individual traits rather than their gender.
5. Recognizing differences between men and women undermines social cooperation and progress.
6. Clothing and hairstyles for men and women should become indistinguishable.
7. The differences between men and women should be acknowledged and celebrated.*
8. It is important to recognize a person's gender in order to fully appreciate who the person is.*
9. We should adjust our behavior when interacting with men versus women because men and women are different.*
10. Talking about differences between men and women causes unnecessary tension.
11. It's okay to treat men and women differently.*
12. We should try not to notice or think about whether an individual is male or female.

*These items are sexaware items and were reverse-scored.