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If It Looks Like a Compliment, and Sounds Like a Compliment...Is It Really a Compliment?

By Melanie Tannenbaum | January 31, 2012

Two weeks ago I was at Science Online 2012, the annual conference for science bloggers and writers in Raleigh, NC. While there, I attended the session on Blogging Science While Female (a more detailed summary of the session can be found [here](#)).

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Comment about blogger's appearance, rather than the point of her post.	"The science blogosphere is harsh. If you don't like it, go back to LiveJournal."	Blogger labeled as "hysterical," "screaming," or "misandrist"	"Why don't you write something more scientific?"	Blatant rejection of research showing gender bias/harms of sexism.
"Evo psych says men are smarter than women."	"Why don't you post a profile pic?"	"Science isn't PC."	"Why are you complaining about this when there are bigger problems in the world?"	"Women can't be objective about gender issues."
"I have never noticed hostility to women in science, so it doesn't exist."	"It is your duty to blog about the experience of women in science."	"Can't you take a joke?"	Minimizing	Claim that it's easier for women in science degrees/careers.
"I know I'll get killed for saying this, but ..."	"Maybe people would be less sexist if you weren't so mean about it."	"As a woman, I didn't find it sexist, so you shouldn't either."	"A bingo card is not an argument."	"I'm tired of hearing about sexism. Blog about something else."
"I didn't intend it to be sexist, so it isn't."	Demand for citations to back up blogger's account of her own experience.	"Moderating comments infringes on my free speech!"	"You're obviously looking for things to get angry about."	"I have a friend who is a woman and she thinks you are wrong."

At the session, many of the women in the room expressed discouragement at how many comments they have received that, while seemingly complimentary, somehow still felt wrong. These comments may have focused on a blog author's appearance rather than her post's content, or called attention to the relative lack of women in science as if this should somehow make the addressed female scientist feel good about herself rather than marginalized. Even though these remarks can sometimes feel good to hear – and no one is denying that this type of comment *can* feel good, especially in the right context – they can also cause a feeling of unease, particularly when one is in the position of trying to draw attention towards her work rather than towards personal qualities like her gender or her appearance.

This isn't just limited to Internet commenting, either. There are plenty of seemingly positive portrayals of women that nonetheless perpetuate harmful stereotypes, such as the omnipresent depiction of the "how-does-she-do-it-all" housewife. Although a woman might feel complimented by this stereotype and the way in which it paints women as the kind of people who can "magically" get so much done, it is also quite

possible for a woman to feel like this stereotype creates an unfair standard of comparison, or, alternatively, like it depicts women as weak, frazzled creatures who should be receiving more help from men in order to manage their lives without suffering a nervous breakdown. In social psychology, we refer to this phenomenon as *benevolent sexism*. Although it is tempting to brush this experience off as an overreaction to compliments or a misunderstanding of the communicator's benign intent, benevolent sexism is a phenomenon that is both real and insidiously dangerous.

What Is Benevolent Sexism?

In 1996, Peter Glick and Susan Fiske wrote a paper on the concept of *ambivalent sexism*, noting that despite common beliefs, there are actually two different kinds of sexist attitudes and behavior. *Hostile sexism* is what most people think of when they picture "sexism" – angry, explicitly negative attitudes towards women. However, the authors note, there is also something called *benevolent sexism*:

We define *benevolent sexism* as a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviors typically categorized as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy-seeking (e.g., self-disclosure) (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491).

[Benevolent sexism is] a subjectively positive orientation of protection, idealization, and affection directed toward women that, like hostile sexism, serves to justify women's subordinate status to men (Glick et al., 2000, p. 763).

Essentially, there's now a formal name for all of those comments and stereotypes that can somehow feel both nice and wrong at the same time, such as the belief that women are "delicate flowers" that need to be protected by men, or the notion that women have the special gift of being "more kind and caring" than their male counterparts. And yes, it might sound complimentary, but it still counts as sexism.

Why is Benevolent Sexism a problem?

Admittedly, this research begs an obvious question. If benevolently sexist comments seem like nothing more than compliments, why are they problematic? Is it really "sexism" if the content of the statements appears to be positive towards women?

Well, for one thing, benevolently sexist statements often depict women as weak, sensitive creatures that need to be "protected." While this may seem positive to some, for others – especially women in male-dominated fields, or those who simply want to be seen as strong – it creates a damaging stereotype. Second of all, by depicting women as homogeneously different from men in any way not directly related to chromosomes or genitalia, benevolently sexist statements sometimes justify a climate where opportunities can be withheld from women because they are somehow "different." Indeed, as Glick and Fiske themselves note in their seminal paper:

We do not consider benevolent sexism a good thing, for despite the positive feelings it may indicate for the perceiver, its underpinnings lie in traditional stereotyping and masculine dominance (e.g., the man as the provider and woman as his dependent), and its consequences are often damaging. Benevolent sexism is not necessarily experienced as benevolent by the recipient. For example, a man's comment to a female coworker on how 'cute' she looks, however well-intentioned, may undermine her feelings of being taken seriously as a professional (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491-492).

In a later paper by Glick and Fiske, they examined levels of hostile and benevolent sexism across 15,000 men and women in 19 different countries. First of all, they found that hostile and benevolent sexism tend to correlate highly across nations. It is not the case that people who endorse hostile sexism don't tend to endorse benevolent sexism, whereas those who are benevolently sexist look nothing like the hostilely sexist people. On the contrary, those who endorsed benevolent sexism were also very likely to hold explicit, hostile attitudes towards women (although one does not necessarily *have* to endorse these hostile attitudes in order to engage in benevolent sexism).

Secondly, they discovered that benevolent sexism was a significant predictor of nationwide gender inequality, **independent of the effects of hostile sexism**. Specifically, in countries where the men were more likely to endorse benevolent sexism, there were also significantly lower female participation rates in politics and the economy, and men generally had longer life expectancies, higher literacy rates, more years of education, and higher purchasing power than women. The warm, fuzzy feelings surrounding benevolently sexist statements come at a cost, and that cost is often actual, objective gender equality.

The Insidious Nature of Benevolent Sexism

A recent paper by Julia Becker and Stephen Wright details even more of the insidious ways that benevolent sexism might be harmful for both women and social activism. In a series of experiments, women were exposed to statements that either illustrated hostile sexism (e.g. "Women are too easily offended") or benevolent sexism (e.g. "Women have a way of caring that men are not capable of in the same way.") The results are quite discouraging; when the women read statements illustrating benevolent sexism, they were less willing to engage in anti-sexist collective action, such as signing a petition, participating in a rally, or generally "acting against sexism." Not only that, but this effect was partially mediated by the fact that women who were exposed to benevolent sexism were more likely to think that there are many advantages to being a woman and were also more likely to engage in *system justification*, a process by which people justify the status quo and believe that there are no longer problems facing disadvantaged groups (such as women) in modern day society. Furthermore, women who were exposed to hostile sexism actually displayed the opposite effect – they were *more* likely to intend to engage in collective action, and *more* willing to fight against sexism in their everyday lives.

How might this play out in a day-to-day context? Imagine that there's an anti-woman policy being brought to a vote, such as a regulation that would make it easier for local businesses to fire pregnant women once they find out that they are expecting. If you are collecting signatures for a petition or trying to gather women to protest this policy and those women were recently exposed to a group of men making comments about the policy in question, it would be significantly easier to gain their support and vote down the policy if the men were commenting that pregnant women *should* be fired because they were dumb for getting pregnant in the first place. However, if

they instead happened to mention that women are much more compassionate than men and make better stay-at-home parents as a result, these remarks might actually lead these women to be less likely to fight an objectively sexist policy.

“I Mean, Is Sexism Really Still A Problem In 2012?”

It sometimes seems like every day, we hear people claiming that sexism, racism, or other forms of discrimination that seem to be outdated are “no longer really a problem.” Some people legitimately believe this to be true, while others (particularly women and racial minorities) find it ridiculous that others could be so blind to the problems that still exist. So why does this disparity exist? Why is it so difficult for so many people to see that sexism and racism are still alive and thriving?

Maybe the answer lies right here, on the benevolent side of prejudice. While “old fashioned” forms of discrimination may have died down quite a bit (after all, it really isn’t quite as socially acceptable in most areas of the world to be as explicitly sexist and/or racist as people have been in the past), more “benevolent” forms of discrimination still very much exist, and they have their own sneaky ways of suppressing equality. Unaffected bystanders (or perpetrators) may construe benevolently sexist sentiments as harmless or even beneficial; in fact, as demonstrated by Becker and Wright, targets may even feel better about themselves after exposure to benevolently sexist statements. This could be, in some ways, even worse than explicit, hostile discrimination; because it hides under the guise of compliments, it’s easy to use benevolent sexism to demotivate people against collective action or convince people that there is no longer a need to fight for equality.

However, to those people who *still* may be tempted to argue that benevolent sexism is nothing more than an overreaction to well-intentioned compliments, let me pose this question: What happens when there is a predominant stereotype saying that women are better stay-at-home parents than men because they are inherently more caring, maternal, and compassionate? It seems nice enough, but how does this ideology affect the woman who wants to continue to work full time after having her first child and faces judgment from her colleagues who accuse her of neglecting her child? How does it affect the man who wants to stay at home with his newborn baby, only to discover that his company doesn’t offer paternity leave because they assume that women are the better candidates to be staying at home?

At the end of the day, “good intent” is not a panacea. Benevolent sexism may very well seem like harmless flattery to many (or most) people, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t insidiously dangerous, with far-reaching consequences for men and women alike.

Citations:

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