The Compassionate Sexist? How Benevolent Sexism Promotes and Undermines Gender Equality in the Workplace

Ivona Hideg and D. Lance Ferris


CITATION

The Compassionate Sexist? How Benevolent Sexism Promotes and Undermines Gender Equality in the Workplace

Ivona Hideg
Wilfrid Laurier University

D. Lance Ferris
The Pennsylvania State University

Although sexist attitudes are generally thought to undermine support for employment equity (EE) policies supporting women, we argue that the effects of benevolent sexism are more complex. Across 4 studies, we extend the ambivalent sexism literature by examining both the positive and the negative effects benevolent sexism has for the support of gender-based EE policies. On the positive side, we show that individuals who endorse benevolent sexist attitudes on trait measures of sexism (Study 1) and individuals primed with benevolent sexist attitudes (Study 2) are more likely to support an EE policy, and that this effect is mediated by feelings of compassion. On the negative side, we find that this support extends only to EE policies that promote the hiring of women in feminine, and not in masculine, positions (Study 3 and 4). Thus, while benevolent sexism may appear to promote gender equality, it subtly undermines it by contributing to occupational gender segregation and leading to inaction in promoting women in positions in which they are underrepresented (i.e., masculine positions).

Keywords: gender equality and diversity, benevolent sexism, affirmative action/employment equity, compassion, masculinity and femininity

Supplemental materials: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000072.supp

Women continue to face barriers in the workplace that hinder their career advancement. This situation is particularly pronounced for high ranking positions, with women holding only 16.9% of board of directors seats for Fortune 500 companies in the United States, 17.8% of board seats for the largest publicly listed companies in the European Union, and 15.9% of board seats for Financial Post 500 companies in Canada (Catalyst, 2013a, 2013b; European Commission, 2014). Moreover, approximately 40% of Financial Post 500 companies had no women at all on their board of directors (Catalyst, 2013a). To address these inequalities, gender-based employment equity (EE) policies, or policies that aim to reduce discrimination and increase the hiring of women, have been implemented in many countries worldwide (Sowell, 2004; Yang, D’Souza, Bapat, & Colarelli, 2006). While EE policies have positive and socially beneficial goals which presumably should garner support from employees, a large body of research shows negative employee reactions to EE policies (see Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006, for a meta-analysis). These negative reactions are problematic for governments and organizations that implement EE policies because negative reactions undermine the success of EE policies in promoting gender diversity and equality in the workplace (cf. Crosby, Iyer, & Sinharoena, 2006).

One of the main factors undermining support for EE policies is prejudiced attitudes such as sexism (e.g., Konrad & Hartmann, 2001; Son Hing et al., 2011; Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). Researchers typically postulate a straightforward prediction: The more sexist an individual’s attitudes, the less likely the individual is to support the EE policy. And not surprisingly, this prediction holds: Past work has repeatedly shown that sexist attitudes decrease support for gender-based EE policies (Harrison et al., 2006).

In the United States, the equivalent term is affirmative action. Given that three of our four studies were conducted in the context of Canadian employment equity policies, we use the term employment equity throughout this article.
In this article, we argue for a more complex perspective on the effects sexism has on EE policy support. While acknowledging the numerous previous findings showing a straightforward negative relation between sexism and EE policy support, we draw on ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997) to contend that this is a byproduct of past work almost always conceptualizing sexism as hostile sexism, or feelings of antipathy and hostility toward women (cf. Allport, 1954). Conversely, past work on reactions to EE policies has almost always ignored benevolent sexism, or subjectively positive attitudes toward women characterized by a sense of protection, idealization, and affection for women. We suggest that distinguishing between hostile and benevolent forms of sexism is critical, as their effects on support for EE policies likely differ. In particular, we posit that EE policies may be particularly likely to evoke a sense of compassion in benevolent sexists, or a sympathetic emotional reaction which arises when seeing others that are vulnerable and need help (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). This sense of compassion, in turn, should evoke a desire to help women via support for EE policies.

However, our focus on compassion also allows us to outline a boundary condition that illustrates how benevolent sexism ultimately undermines occupational gender equality. In particular, our model suggests that, should benevolent sexists not experience compassion, benevolent sexism should not lead to EE policy support; in line with this, we argue the compassion benevolent sexists experience is limited to EE policies that promote female employment in jobs that adhere to the stereotypical gender roles (i.e., jobs perceived to be feminine such as teachers or nurses). As such, while benevolent sexism appears to promote gender equality via support for gender-based EE policies, it subtly suffocates gender equality by keeping women in occupational “gender ghettos.” In what follows, we outline our theoretical logic in more detail, and subsequently present four studies designed to test our predictions.

**EE Policies and Ambivalent Sexism**

EE policies have become important tools for reducing gender inequality worldwide (Tougas & Beaton, 1993; Yang et al., 2006). Yet, despite the fact that EE policies assist organizations in addressing past discrimination, promoting social justice, and increasing the pool of job candidates, employees tend to show low levels of support for EE policies (Harrison et al., 2006). A meta-analysis by Harrison et al. (2006) identified prejudiced attitudes against racial minorities (racism) and women (sexism) as one of the most influential factors in predicting negative reactions to EE policies.² In particular, they found sexism has a strong negative relation with favorable attitudes toward EE policies ($p = -.518$); indeed, the relation between sexism and policy support was the strongest of all examined individual difference variables (including self-interest, belief in discrimination, experience of discrimination, and political ideology and affiliation). This is in line with an array of studies showing that sexist attitudes are related to less favorable attitudes toward EE policies (e.g., Konrad & Hartmann, 2001; Konrad & Spitz, 2003; Tougas et al., 1995), and opposition to EE policy implementation (Son Hing et al., 2011).

While these results highlight the importance of sexist attitudes in predicting whether or not an individual will support EE policies, we argue that these findings are limited given that there are various forms sexism can take. In particular, ambivalent sexism theory suggests that there are two complementary forms of sexism: hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Glick et al., 2000). Hostile sexists, or what most people consider “sexists” to be (Glick & Fiske, 1996), view women as inferior to men in general and as trying to control men through feminist ideology and sexual seduction (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). Past research has found that hostile sexism is related to adopting negative stereotypes and evaluations of women (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000; Masser & Abrams, 2004), as well as imbalanced traditional gender role norms such as the notion that a wife should assist her husband’s career even at the cost of her own career, and that a wife should do the housework and be responsible for nurturing children (Chen, Fiske, & Lee, 2009). Overall, past research has shown that hostile sexism relates to a host of negative attitudes and evaluations of women.

Benevolent sexists, on the other hand, have subjectively positive attitudes toward women but that ultimately characterize women as wonderful, yet weak (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). For example, benevolent sexists believe that women are delicate and should be protected and taken care of by men, that while women, compared to men, have traits that men generally lack such as sensitivity to others’ feelings, they may not have traits necessary to lead and govern important social institutions and that women should be valued and protected because they fulfill men’s romantic needs (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997).

In contrast to findings for hostile sexism, past research has found positive effects of benevolent sexism such as its association with positive stereotypes and evaluations of women (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000). Indeed, in comparison to hostile sexism, benevolent sexism is more prevalent and socially accepted in today’s society, and women are just as likely as men to hold benevolent sexist attitudes (Becker, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2001); both men and women oftentimes do not even perceive benevolent sexism as gender discrimination (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Becker, 2010), and women may prefer a profile of a benevolent sexist man over a profile of a nonsexist man (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). At the same time, this subjective positivity of benevolent sexism masks how it reinforces gender inequality. For example, past research has found that treating women in a benevolent sexist manner undermines women’s cognitive performance (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007), that benevolent sexist managers are more likely to assign women to less challenging roles in the workplace (King et al., 2012), and that endorsement of benevolent sexism is related to support of status quo (Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost & Kay, 2005).

---

² In addition to individual differences (e.g., sexism), Harrison et al. identified a policy type as an important factor influencing support for EE. Namely, they found that when EE policies give preference to disadvantaged group members with less or no regard to said members’ job qualifications (i.e., strong preference policies), employees’ reactions become increasingly negative in comparison to policies that consider qualifications first and demographics second (i.e., weak preference policies). Given that EE policies that consider qualifications after demographics are illegal in most countries including Canada and the United States (Pyburn, Ployhart, & Kravitz, 2008), in our studies, we employ legal, weak preference EE policies.
Taken as a whole, research from an ambivalent sexism framework suggests that the effects of benevolent sexism on attitudes and evaluations of women tend to be complex. On the one hand, women are viewed as possessing positive idealized qualities deserving of protection, affection, and (presumably) support; on the other hand, women are viewed as weak and lacking abilities. We argue that this complex nature of benevolent sexism is reflected in the extent to which benevolent sexists support EE policies. In particular, and in contrast the unilaterally negative effect hostile sexism has on support for EE policies, we argue that benevolent sexists will feel a sense of compassion for women and support programs (i.e., EE policies) that seek to protect them. However, this support is qualified by benevolent sexist views of women as weak and incompetent, meaning EE policies should only be supported when they seek to place women in gender-appropriate positions. Below, we outline (and, in Studies 1 and 2, test) how benevolent sexism may have the aforementioned positive effects on support for EE policies via feelings of compassion. Subsequently, we outline (and, in Studies 3 and 4, test) how this seemingly positive effect of benevolent sexism on support for women actually serves to reinforce gender inequality by limiting women to “feminine” jobs.

How EE Policies Evoke Compassion for Benevolent Sexists

Past research suggests that there are two main dimensions along which groups can be perceived: competence and warmth (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). In particular, groups viewed as occupying high status roles are seen as competent, whereas groups who traditionally occupy low status roles are not; groups viewed as competitive are seen as lacking warmth, whereas groups seen as cooperative are seen as warm (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Fiske et al., 2002). The combination of perceptions of warmth and perceptions of competence, in turn, evokes emotional responses: for example, those viewed as highly competent but low in warmth evoke feelings of envy, while those viewed as low in both warmth and competence evoke feelings of contempt (Cuddy et al., 2007).

Given that past research on intergroup affect and stereotypes suggests that emotions arising from the combination of warmth and competence perceptions are the key mediators of the effect of stereotypes (such as benevolent sexism) on behaviors (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000), a pertinent question becomes “How warm and competent do benevolent sexists view women?” With respect to warmth, past research has consistently shown that benevolent sexism is associated with the appraisal of women as being warm (Becker, Glick, Ilic, & Bohnner, 2011; Delacollette, Dumont, Sarlet, & Dardenne, 2013). With respect to competence, there are indications that benevolent sexism may be related to perceiving women as low in competence. Indeed, a definition of benevolent sexism suggests that benevolent sexist view women as wonderful, yet weak (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). Moreover, empirical research has shown that women who are treated in a benevolently sexist manner are perceived as less competent (Good & Rudman, 2010).

There is also reason to believe that within the context of EE policies, benevolent sexists—and, indeed, all individuals—are likely to view women as being low in competence. In particular, extensive work by Heilman and colleagues has demonstrated that EE policies can cause both beneficiaries (e.g., Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987) and nonbeneficiaries (e.g., Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997) of EE policies to view the beneficiaries of EE policies as being low in competence. Thus, while benevolent sexists may in general not strongly demean women’s competence, the presence of an EE policy may make negative appraisals of women’s competence more salient.

From the perspective of the stereotype content model, viewing women as warm yet incompetent means benevolent sexists are likely to experience the emotion of pity when considering EE policies meant to enhance the employability of women. Pity represents an ambivalent emotion comprising feelings of both sadness and compassion, and which sometimes leads to helping pitied others (also referred to as active facilitation) and sometimes leads to inaction and avoidance of pitied others (also referred to as passive harm; see Cuddy et al., 2007). In particular, feelings of sadness and disrespect toward a group are likely to lead to distancing from the group, while feelings of compassion toward a group is more associated with subsequent helping behaviors toward the group (Goetz et al., 2010; Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010). We suggest that benevolent sexists will be particularly likely to experience compassion (and be inclined to help women) given women, unlike other pitied groups such as orphans or tsunami victims, cannot easily be avoided or distanced from given their ubiquitous presence and given most individuals would not want to avoid or distance themselves from women (who despite being pitied are still generally highly valued in their own right; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Guttentag & Secord, 1983). As such, we expect that benevolent sexists are likely to experience the emotion of compassion toward women when considering EE policies.

The experience of compassion should, in turn, be related to greater support for EE policies that are helping women secure jobs. Past theorizing posits that compassion acts as a prosocial motivator to help others through its other-orientation, or concern for others and their hardships (Goetz et al., 2010; Miller, Grimes, McMullen, & Vogus, 2012). By directing one’s attention toward, and increasing one’s awareness and understanding of, others’ vulnerable circumstances, compassion leads to engaging in more helping behaviors designed to alleviate unfavorable conditions of others (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Kanov et al., 2004). In particular, by increasing understanding and appreciation of others’ vulnerable circumstances, compassion enables people to connect with others and instill a desire to alleviate others’ suffering (Batson & Shaw, 1991). We thus argue that in response to the feelings of compassion aroused when viewing EE policies, benevolent sexists will seek to help out women by sup-

3 In line with Heilman’s work, a meta-analysis by Leslie, Mayer, and Kravitz (2014) suggests that the presence of an EE policy is negatively associated with perceptions of women’s competence. Interestingly, Leslie et al. also found that a presence of an EE policy is negatively associated with perceptions of women’s warmth. We suggest that finding is qualified by benevolent sexism, that is, benevolent sexists would be more likely to appraise women as high in warmth even when presented with EE policies. Consistent with this, in a separate study of 89 participants, we found support for the notion that benevolent sexists do indeed maintain their perception of women as warm, even when presented with an EE policy. For more details, please contact the first author.
porting the EE policies that will assist women in improving their lot in life.

The Present Studies

To test our model we conducted four studies in the context of Canadian (Studies 1–3) and American (Study 4) gender-based EE policies. In Study 1, we examined whether individuals who endorse benevolent sexist attitudes on trait measures of benevolent sexism are more likely to support the EE policy, and if this effect is mediated by compassion. In Study 2, we sought to establish the causal effects of benevolent sexism by testing whether priming benevolent sexism stereotypes (compared to a control condition) leads to more compassion and support for the EE policy. In Study 3 and 4 we sought to identify a key boundary condition of the positive effect of benevolent sexism on support for the EE policy: whether the EE policy promotes the hiring of women in feminine or masculine jobs. Further, given pity is viewed as comprising both compassion and sadness but our theoretical development argues compassion in particular is what would be invoked for benevolent sexism in the context of gender-based EE policies, in all four studies we also sought to rule out sadness as an alternate explanation for our results.

Study 1: Individual Differences in Endorsement of Benevolent Sexism Are Related to Compassion and Support for a Gender-Based EE Policy

In Study 1, we measured participants’ individual differences in endorsement of benevolent sexism and examined the effect of benevolent sexism on support for a gender-based EE policy, as well as compassion’s mediating effect, in the context of a Canadian gender-based EE policy for students’ co-operative (co-op) jobs. Co-op jobs are full-time, paid, semester-long job placements related to students’ field of study, and are an integral part of students’ education where students gain practical skills and work experience (Linn, Ferguson, & Egart, 2004). As such, these jobs are valuable for students’ careers and an EE policy that applies to their co-op hiring would be seen as very relevant and influential on their career. In line with past research (Harrison et al., 2006; Hideg, Michela, & Ferris, 2011), we conceptualized policy support as involving favorable attitudes toward the EE policy, and behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy. As such, we tested whether participants’ endorsement of benevolent sexist attitudes is related to more favorable attitudes toward, and behavioral intentions that promote, the EE policy, as well as whether those relations are mediated by the experience of compassion.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 115 business undergraduate students (52 men and 63 women; age: $M = 20.25$, $SD = 3.13$) enrolled in an organizational behavior course at a large Canadian university who received course research credit for participation. Sixty-seven participants identified as East Asian, 24 as Southeast Asian, 10 as Caucasian, two as Middle Eastern, one as West Indian, and eight as mixed (three unreported). These participants were enrolled in co-op education and were applying for co-op jobs for the next semester during the semester when this study took place. Thus, our sample consisted of real job applicants who were applying for 4-month full-time jobs. Participants first completed an online survey at the beginning of a semester assessing their benevolent and hostile sexist attitudes and demographics. One month after completing the online survey, participants were given an in-class presentation of a gender-based EE policy that was ostensibly being developed at the university to be applied to students’ job placements (see below) and were told that their input is sought as the EE policy is relevant to them. Following the presentation, the participants first completed a measure assessing their state experience of compassion, and then measures assessing their attitudes and behavioral intentions to promote the proposed EE policy. The data from the online survey and the in-class survey were matched using student identification numbers, which participants provided in both surveys.

Materials. Participants read about an EE policy for women ostensibly under development at their university. This policy was developed and used in previous research (for the exact wording of the policy, see Appendix A in Hideg & Ferris, 2014) and involved hiring students into co-op jobs through the university’s co-op center. The EE policy first stated that women are currently under-represented in managerial and professional positions; the concept of EE policies and their legislation in Canada were then described. A comparison of hiring rates for men and women in managerial and professional positions in the region followed. Specifically, participants read that the proportion of men and women in these positions were 65% and 35%, respectively. The policy then suggested that for women to be hired according to their rates of university graduation and other related factors, the rate of their hiring should be 55% instead of 35%. Thus, the policy proposed that co-op companies should favor hiring women over men to begin to redress the unequal representation of women in the workforce—with the caveat that this preferential hiring should only occur when the candidates possessed equal qualifications.4

Measures. The measures reported below used a 7-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) unless otherwise noted.

Benevolent and hostile sexism. We measured benevolent and hostile sexism with the 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory developed by Glick and Fiske (1996). This scale has two dimensions: benevolent sexism (e.g., “Women should be cherished and

---

4Our sample size was limited by our access to the two sections of course. However, using G*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), we estimated that our power to detect main effects with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$) in multiple regression analyses with a significance level of $\alpha = .05$ with our sample size of 115 was 98%.

5In Canada, an equal-qualification or a tiebreak policy is in line with Employment Equity Act of 1995, which requires organizations to monitor their workforce for representation of the protected groups, and design and implement EE programs that will accelerate and help hiring of members from protected groups by hiring based on demographics after the qualifications for the position have been met (Jain, Sloane, Horwitz, Taggar, & Weiner, 2003). Similarly, in the United States, a tiebreak policy is consistent with federal regulations based on Executive Order 11246, which requires organizations to monitor their workforce for representation of protected groups (Sowell, 2004). If underrepresentation of protected groups is detected then remedial actions must be taken and can range from strategies that include active recruitment of underrepresented groups to giving additional weight to race or gender when making employment decisions (Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, & Downing, 2003).
protected by men”) and hostile sexism (e.g., “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men”). Two composite scores were computed, one for benevolent sexism by averaging the 11 benevolent sexism items, and one for hostile sexism by averaging the 11 hostile sexism items. Although the focus of our studies is on benevolent sexism, past research documents a significant positive relation between benevolent and hostile sexism; consistent with past work (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997), to test the unique effects of benevolent sexism we control for hostile sexism in our analyses.

**Emotions.** Participants rated to what extent they felt “compassionate,” “touched,” and “sympathetic” (Oveis et al., 2010) and “sad” at the present moment on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all), 2 (a little bit), 3 (moderately), 4 (quite a bit), to 5 (extremely). A composite compassion score was computed by averaging the first three items (per Oveis et al., 2010), and a higher score indicated higher experience of compassion.6 As noted previously, we used a one-item sadness measure to rule out the possibility that sadness underlies the relation between benevolent sexism and support for a gender-based EE policy.

**Attitudes toward the EE policy.** We measured attitudes toward the EE policy with a six-item scale. Sample items include “Employment equity as presented in today’s class would constitute a good policy” and “I would not like to work at an organization that implements this proposed employment equity policy” (reverse-coded; for all items, see Appendix in Kravitz & Platania, 1993). A composite score was computed by averaging the six items, and a higher score indicated more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy.

**Behavioral intentions.** We measured behavioral intentions with an eight-item scale assessing to what extent participants would be willing to implement a range of behaviors that would promote the EE policy, such as “Volunteer for one day at an information booth to create public awareness about the employment equity policy” and “Distribute and post flyers at the [university] promoting the employment equity policy” (for all items, see Appendix in Hideg et al., 2011). A composite score was computed by averaging the eight items, and a higher score indicated a higher endorsement of behavioral intentions.

**Results**

**Preliminary analyses.** Table 1 presents means and standard deviations by gender (and overall) for each variable, Cronbach’s alphas, and partial and zero-order correlations. As seen in Table 1, in line with past research, benevolent sexism and hostile sexism were positively correlated, $r = .34, p < .001$ indicating that they are complementary components of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000). Also, in line with past research examining sexism and EE policy support using hostile sexism measures, we found that hostile sexism was negatively related to attitudes, $r = -.27, p = .005$, and marginally negatively to behavioral intentions, $r = -.16, p = .097$. Gender did not moderate the relation between benevolent sexism (or hostile sexism) and support for the EE policy.

Before proceeding to test our hypotheses, we examined gender differences in a) endorsement of sexist attitudes, and b) support for a gender-based EE policy because past research indicates gender differences in these domains. Consistent with past research, men endorsed hostile sexism more than women, $t(113) = 4.20, p < .001 (d = 0.79)$. Also, in line with past research that suggests that the gender gap in benevolent sexism is smaller than for hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), there were no differences between men’s and women’s endorsement of benevolent sexism, $t(113) = 1.05, p = .296 (d = 0.20)$. Consistent with past research on reactions to EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006), women, compared to men, had more favorable attitudes, $t(113) = -4.37, p < .001 (d = 0.82)$, and endorsed more behavioral intentions promoting the EE policy, $t(113) = -3.38, p = .001 (d = 0.64)$.

Given that our preliminary results showed that hostile sexism was positively correlated with benevolent sexism and that both gender and hostile sexism influenced our outcome variables (i.e., support for the EE policy), we controlled for hostile sexism and gender in our analyses below. We note that controlling for either hostile sexism or gender did not affect the significance of our results, but we nevertheless control for them in our analyses here (and in all subsequent studies) in line with best practices suggesting that inclusion of control variables is warranted (and needed) if control variables are theoretically relevant to the phenomenon studied and are statistically related to dependent variables (e.g., Becker, 2005; Becker et al., 2016; Spector & Brannick, 2011).

**Benevolent sexism, compassion, and support for the EE policy.** To test whether benevolent sexists are more likely to experience compassion in response to an EE policy, and more likely to have positive attitudes toward and behavioral intentions to promote an EE policy, we conducted regressions controlling for hostile sexism and gender (see Table 2 for complete regression analyses). In line with our predictions, benevolent sexism was positively related to compassion ($b = .42, p = .002, f^2 = 0.10$), attitudes ($b = .32, p = .013, f^2 = 0.06$), and behavioral intentions ($b = .44, p = .007, f^2 = 0.07$). Thus, individuals who endorsed benevolent sexism experienced more compassion and showed more support for the gender-based EE policy.

**Mediation analyses.** We next tested whether compassion mediates the relation between benevolent sexism and support for the EE policy. To rule out the possibility that sadness underlies the relation between benevolent sexism and support for a gender-based EE policy, we tested a multiple mediator model in which we included both compassion and sadness as mediators of the relation of benevolent sexism to attitudes and behavioral intentions. To test a multiple mediator model we used a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 samples (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) while controlling for hostile sexism and gender in the analyses.

Although there was a significant relation between benevolent sexism and sadness ($b = .29, p = .019, f^2 = 0.05$), there was only a significant indirect effect of benevolent sexism on attitudes through compassion (indirect effect = .14, 95% confidence interval [CI] [.06, .27]), and not through sadness (indirect effect = -.04, 95% CI [−.17, .01]; see Figure 1, Panel A). Similarly, there was only a significant indirect effect of benevolent sexism on behavioral intentions through compassion (indirect effect = .16, 95% CI [.05, .32], but not through sadness (indirect effect = -.04, 95% CI [−.16, .01]; see Figure 1, Panel B). These

---

6 One limitation of this measure was that it did not specify the target of emotion. We address this issue by specifying the target of emotions (i.e., women) in Studies 3 and 4.
results indicate that compassion, not sadness, underlies the relation between benevolent sexism and support for the gender-based EE policy.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial empirical evidence that sexism—namely, benevolent sexism—can have positive effects on support for EE policies. In particular, we found that the greater an individual’s benevolent sexist attitudes, the more favorable their attitudes toward the EE policy and the more likely they were to indicate behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy. We further found evidence that compassion mediated the effect of benevolent sexism on attitudes and behavioral intentions. However, we should note that our correlational design precludes causality inferences, a point to which we return in our general discussion. Nevertheless, Study 1 provides evidence that previously postulated negative effects of sexist attitudes on the support for gender diversity may not be straightforward and that in some instances sexist attitudes may actually appear to enhance support for an EE policy.

One limitation, however, associated with Study 1 is that it was a correlational study, which introduces concerns over common method variance and causality. By assessing our predictor (benevolent sexism) and outcomes variables (attitudes and behavioral intentions) at two different time points separated by 1 month, we reduce concerns regarding common method variance issues (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). However, we still cannot infer causality, rendering it possible that, for example, compassionate individuals are more likely to be benevolent sexists. In Study 2, we sought to address this limitation and to provide more evidence for the positive effect of benevolent sexism on support for an EE policy by priming benevolent sexist stereotypes.

Priming stereotypes refers to incidental activation of knowledge structures such as stereotype contents (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Stereotype priming research argues that salient and cognitively accessible stereotypes automatically prompt people to act in a way that promotes those stereotypes, because stereotypes are deeply ingrained in a society and hence lead to automatic behaviors (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Devine, 1989). Research has shown that activation of stereotypes can, in certain circumstances, influence the attitudes and behaviors even of those individuals who personally do not endorse those stereotypes (Jost & Kay, 2005; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). For example, nonprejudiced individuals have been shown to act similar to prejudiced individuals when exposed to stimuli that prime prejudicial stereotypes (Devine, 1989). Such effects occur because even though an individual may not be prejudiced, they are frequently familiar with different stereotypes others hold (particularly when such prejudices are prevalent in society and media) when exposed to a stimulus that primes the stereotype, they may automatically behave in a way that resembles prejudiced

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach’s Alphas, and Partial and Zero-Order Correlations (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Men (n = 52)</th>
<th>Women (n = 63)</th>
<th>Overall (n = 115)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2a</th>
<th>3b</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Benevolent sexism</td>
<td>4.42 (.64)</td>
<td>4.28 (.73)</td>
<td>4.34 (.70)</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hostile sexism</td>
<td>4.35 (.56)</td>
<td>3.86 (.68)</td>
<td>4.08 (.67)</td>
<td>-.38***</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Compassion</td>
<td>2.65 (.86)</td>
<td>2.49 (.99)</td>
<td>2.56 (.93)</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Attitudes</td>
<td>4.82 (.98)</td>
<td>5.56 (.84)</td>
<td>5.23 (.98)</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Behavioral intentions</td>
<td>3.89 (1.05)</td>
<td>4.61 (1.20)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.18)</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sadness</td>
<td>1.60 (.93)</td>
<td>1.57 (.82)</td>
<td>1.58 (.87)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Gender is coded as 0 = men and 1 = women. Columns labelled “men,” “women,” and “overall” present means and standard deviations (standard deviations are in parentheses). For compassion and sadness, the scale ranged from 1 to 5; and for benevolent and hostile sexism, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, the scale ranged from 1 to 7. Cronbach’s alphas are presented in parentheses.

Table 2
Regression Analyses Result: The Effect of Benevolent Sexism on Compassion, Attitudes, and Behavioral Intentions That Promote the Gender-Based Employment Equity Policy (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Compassion</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Behavioral intentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b/β</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>b/β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 R²</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td>.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.10/.-.05</td>
<td>[-.48, .28]</td>
<td>.70/.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile sexism</td>
<td>.15/.10</td>
<td>[-.41, .43]</td>
<td>-.09/.-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 ∆R²</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolent sexism</td>
<td>.42/.31**</td>
<td>[.20, .64]</td>
<td>.32/.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total R²</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. CI = confidence interval. Gender is coded as 0 = men and 1 = women. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
behavior even if it is not their intention (although this is not always the case; for reviews, see Devine, 1989; Jost & Kay, 2005; Wheeler & Hurts, 1990), we conducted a pilot study to find attributes that are considered gender stereotype-neutral differs over time and cultures (Hoffman & Hurts, 1990), and what is considered gender stereotype-neutral differs over time and cultures (Hoffman & Hurts, 1990), and what is considered gender stereotype-neutral differs over time and cultures (Hoffman & Hurts, 1990).

As noted previously, benevolent sexist perceptions of women as being warm yet in need of protection are prevalent in Western society (Becker, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2001); thus, even individuals who do not typically subscribe to benevolently sexist views should be susceptible to activation of those views through priming. In Study 2, we sought to take advantage of this susceptibility to priming and randomly assigned participants either to a condition where benevolent sexist stereotypes were activated by having participants read and memorize statements containing benevolently sexist views or to a condition where participants read control statements that were positive in nature but not intended to activate benevolent sexist stereotypes. In line with Study 1, we expected participants primed with benevolent sexism, compared to the control condition, would be more likely to experience compassion and support EE policies; moreover, we expected compassion would mediate the effect of benevolent sexism (compared to the control condition) on support for the EE policy.

**Study 2: Priming Benevolent Sexism Predicts Compassion and Support for a Gender-Based EE Policy**

**Method**

**Participants and procedure.** Participants were 105 business undergraduate students (52 men and 53 women; age: $M = 20.31$, $SD = 3.27$) at a midsize Canadian university who received course research credit for participation. 7 Thirty-nine participants identified as Caucasian, 27 as East Asian, 15 as South Asian, six as Southeast Asian, two as Middle Eastern, one as Hispanic, and five as mixed (10 unreported). Participants came to a laboratory and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a benevolent sexism condition where they read benevolent sexist statements, or a control condition where they read positive but “gender-stereotype-neutral” statements (see below for a description of experimental manipulation). To cover the purpose of the study participants were told that they were participating in a memory study and that their task was to memorize given statements and that they would be later tested on their memory of those statements. Following the exposure to statements, all participants read the same EE policy as in Study 1. After reading the EE policy, the participants first completed the same measures as in Study 1, and then manipulation checks.

**Experimental manipulation.** We followed Becker and Wright’s (2011) manipulations to create our experimental (benevolent sexism) and control groups. In the benevolent sexism condition, we activated benevolent sexist stereotypes by having participants read and memorize the following six statements from Glick and Fiske’s (1996) Benevolent Sexism Scale: “Women should be cherished and protected by men”; “Secretly, most women yearn for a man whose arms they can find protection and security”; “Women have a way of caring that men are not capable of in the same way”; “Women compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility”; “Men are incomplete without women”; and “Many women would like a man who conquers their heart.” These statements were used and validated in Becker and Wright’s (2011) paper. To establish that the effects of activated benevolent sexist stereotypes are due to their stereotypical content rather than any generally positive attitudes toward women, it was important that our control condition present participants with statements that were still favorable toward women but that did not activate stereotypes about women (Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost & Kay, 2005). Thus, in line with past research (Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost & Kay, 2005), participants in the control condition read and memorized five “gender-stereotype-neutral” statements that were positive in nature but unrelated to stereotypes held toward women (e.g., “As compared to men, women are more reliable”).

**Dependent measures.** We used the same measures for compassion (α = .90), sadness, attitudes (α = .85), and behavioral

---

**Figure 1.** Multiple mediator models of the relation between benevolent sexism and attitudes (Panel A) and behavioral intentions (Panel B), via participants’ compassion and sadness (Study 1). Values are unstandardized coefficients. EE = employment equity; ns = nonsignificant. $p < .10$. $p < .05$. $p < .01$.
intentions that promote the EE policy (\(\alpha = .88\)) as in Study 1; we also used the same 7-point Likert response scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) for attitudes and behavioral intentions and the same 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely) for compassion and sadness.

**Manipulation checks.** In line with previous research (Becker & Wright, 2011), at the end of the study participants were presented with the 11 statements used in the two conditions, and were asked to select sentences that they had seen at the beginning of the study. We examined whether participants identified the correct sentences and used this as a manipulation check to ensure that participants carefully read and memorized sentences. Selection of a sentence was coded as 1 and a nonselection as 0. We summed selected sentences for each condition creating two manipulation check scores, a benevolent sexism score and a control score for each participant. The benevolent sexism score varied between 0 (no sentences selected) and 6 (six sentences selected), and the control score varied between 0 and 5.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.** To test whether participants could recall sentences that they had read at the beginning of the study, we conducted *t* tests examining differences in benevolent sexism scores and control scores between the two conditions. In particular, we tested whether participants in the benevolent sexism condition were more likely to select benevolent sexism sentences, and participants in the control condition were more likely to select control sentences. As expected, participants in the benevolent sexism condition were more likely to select benevolent sexism sentences (\(M = 5.36, SD = 0.88\)) than participants in the control condition (\(M = .02, SD = 0.21\)), \(t(103) = 39.38, p < .001\) \((d = 8.30)\). Also, as expected, participants in the control condition were more likely to select control sentences (\(M = 4.78, SD = 0.52\)) than participants in the benevolent sexism condition (\(M = 0.23, SD = 0.46\)), \(t(103) = 47.08, p < .001\) \((d = 9.27)\). In summary, participants in both the benevolent sexism condition and the control condition showed significantly higher recognition of the statements that they saw at the beginning of the study compared to the other condition. This indicates that participants followed task instructions and carefully read and memorized statements at the beginning of the study.

**Benevolent sexism prime, compassion, and support for the EE policy.** The purpose of Study 2 was to test whether priming benevolent sexist stereotypes, compared to a control condition, invokes feelings of compassion and enhances support for the EE policy. To test these predictions, we conducted analyses of covariance testing for differences between the two conditions (benevolent sexism vs. control condition) while controlling for gender as in Study 1. It should be noted that there were no significant interactions between condition and gender in predicting compassion, attitudes, or behavioral intentions, and that the conclusions of our analyses remain the same regardless of whether we include or exclude gender in our analyses.

Means and standard deviations of all measures are presented in Table 3. As expected, participants in the benevolent sexism condition experienced more compassion, \(F(1, 102) = 5.28, p = .024, 95\% CI\) for mean differences \([-0.88, -0.07]\) (\(\eta_p^2 = .05\)), and endorsed more behavioral intentions, \(F(1, 102) = 4.72, p = .032, 95\% CI\) for mean differences \([-0.65, -0.03]\) (\(\eta_p^2 = .04\)), than participants in the control condition. However, there were no differences between the two conditions in predicting attitudes, \(F(1, 102) = .02, p = .903, 95\% CI\) for mean differences \([-2.01, 2.27]\) (\(\eta_p^2 < .001\)).

**Mediation analyses.** We further predicted that compassion would mediate the effect of the benevolent sexism condition (compared to the control condition) on attitudes and behavioral intentions. As in Study 1, we initially planned to rule out the possibility that sadness underlies the effect of benevolent sexism condition (vs. control condition) on support for a gender-based EE policy by testing a multiple mediator model. However, given that there were no differences in experienced sadness between participants in the benevolent sexism condition and the control condition, \(F(1, 102) = 1.02, p = .314 (\eta_p^2 = .01)\), sadness could not explain the significant observed differences between conditions in support for the gender-based EE policy; consequently, we only tested compassion as a mediator. Figure 2 presents the results of our analyses testing the mediating effect of compassion on the effect of benevolent sexism on behavioral intentions (while controlling for gender, as in Study 1). As expected, there was a significant indirect effect of benevolent sexism on behavioral intentions through compassion (indirect effect = .24, 95\% CI [.04, .47]).

Although, as described above, there were no direct effects of the benevolent sexism condition (compared to the control condition) on attitudes, more recent treatments of mediation suggest this link might not be necessary and that an indirect effect may nonetheless exist (e.g., MacKinnon & Fairchild, 2009; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). In line with this recent literature on mediation, we tested for an indirect effect and it was significant (indirect effect = .14, 95\% CI [.02, .28]). Thus, there was an indirect effect of the benevolent

### Table 3

**Means and Standard Deviations (Study 2)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Benevolent sexism prime</th>
<th>Control prime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men (n = 33)</td>
<td>Women (n = 28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>2.22 (.91)</td>
<td>2.64 (.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>4.55 (1.01)</td>
<td>5.56 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral intentions</td>
<td>3.23 (1.21)</td>
<td>5.01 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>1.58 (.87)</td>
<td>1.39 (.57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. For compassion and sadness, the scale ranged from 1 to 5; for attitudes and behavioral intentions, the scale ranged from 1 to 7.
sexism condition (compared to the control condition) on attitudes via compassion. Taken together, these results provide evidence that activating benevolent sexist stereotypes leads to higher experience of compassion, which in turn leads to more support for a gender-based EE policy.

Discussion

Study 2 establishes causality for the effect of benevolent sexism on compassion and support for a gender-based EE policy. Moreover, this study shows that it is not just any positive attitudes toward women that influence support for EE policies, but it is positive and stereotypical attitudes that cause these effects. Namely, we found that participants primed with benevolent sexist statements, compared to participants primed with positive, but not stereotypical statements about women, experienced more compassion and expressed more behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy. We also found that compassion mediated the effect of benevolent sexism on behavioral intentions. Although we did not find direct effects of benevolent sexism on attitudes toward the EE policy, we found evidence for indirect effects of benevolent sexism on attitudes via compassion.

To this point, we have outlined how benevolent sexism can lead to increased support for EE policies by inducing experiences of compassion. On the one hand, these findings support our contention that a more complex and nuanced view of sexism—specifically, accounting for its two forms—is required to truly understand how sexist attitudes influence support for EE policies. On the other hand, these findings seemingly fly in the face of the rather dismal statistics we report at the beginning of this article regarding female representation in traditional positions of power and influence, as well as ambivalent sexism theory’s contention that benevolent sexism is ultimately harmful to women. In other words, if benevolent sexism is widespread (as suggested by past research, i.e., Becker, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2001) and it seemingly encourages EE policies designed to advance women’s employment prospects, why are so few women advancing to the highest levels of organizations?

As one solution for this conundrum, consider also that benevolent sexist ideology holds that women are warm, but are also the “weaker” sex. Benevolent sexists view women as being fragile and in need of assistance; a consequence of this view-point is that benevolent sexists should believe that women (particularly in comparison to men) are not suited for positions of power or status in our society (Glick et al., 2000). In other words, benevolent sexists view women as being warm and in need of help—but also as being inherently limited in their abilities. These views may also have implications for the types of employment positions benevolent sexists view women as suitable for. We argue that EE policies that seek to place women in jobs that violate traditional gender roles are likely to alter how benevolent sexists perceive women, and hence the compassion they experience.

In particular, gender stereotypes suggest that women are expected to be warm, affectionate, helpful, kind, nurturing, and gentle; in contrast, men are expected to be assertive, aggressive, independent, and decisive (Bakan, 1966). Benevolent sexists are especially likely to see women in this light (Glick et al., 2000). Thus, from the view of a benevolent sexist, women should be well-suited for feminine occupations characterized by behaviors such as being affectionate, nurturing, and helpful, but particularly unsuitable for masculine occupations characterized by behaviors such as being assertive, independent and aggressive. If an EE policy is attempting to place women in employment roles that are more masculine in nature, the EE policy may also alter how benevolent sexists view the women helped by such policies. When women seek to occupy what are traditionally viewed as masculine roles, they are less likely to be perceived as fitting the feminine stereotype of being warm and cooperative, but rather are viewed as being competitive and uncaring. For example, past research has found that women who occupy traditionally male roles are seen as cold and calculating (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Consequently, EE policies that seek to place women in traditionally male roles are likely to lead benevolent sexists to view women assisted by such policies as contrary to how women “should be” and a violation of their perceptions of what makes women different from men (i.e., warm and nurturing). As a result, EE policies seeking to place women in traditionally male roles should be less likely to evoke compassion from benevolent sexists because such policies are perceived as assisting competitive, independent women—that is, women who are not warm and nurturing. Thus, while we have argued that benevolent sexists are likely to experience compassion when considering EE policies in general, when considering an EE policy that promotes women into masculine roles benevolent sexists are unlikely to experience that sense of compassion because such women violate the necessary conditions for experiencing compassion.

Notably, the EE policy used in Study 1 and 2 was in reference to students’ co-op job placements in general. That is, it was not specified in the EE policy whether the employment of women was encouraged in more male or female stereotyped positions. Although such cues as to the type of position were absent, given co-op positions are typically entry level positions it is unlikely that our study participants viewed the EE policy as being designed to place women in powerful or high status positions—positions predominantly perceived as masculine jobs (Glick, Wilk, & Perreault, 1995). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in the absence of explicit statements of the type of job, participants may not have
viewed co-op positions as very masculine. However, in Study 3, we sought to more explicitly manipulate whether the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in more masculine jobs or more feminine jobs to establish a possible boundary effect of our findings.

In addition to testing this prediction, in Study 3 we also sought to address a limitation of our compassion measure in Study 1 and 2, in that it did not indicate the target of the compassion felt (i.e., toward women). In Study 3, we address this issue by referencing the target of the compassion in our compassion measure. Finally, given that in Study 1 and Study 2 we used a one-item measure of unknown reliability when ruling out sadness as an alternate explanation for our findings, in Study 3 we use a more psychometrically sound three-item measure of sadness.

Study 3: Benevolent Sexism and Job Type

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 90 business undergraduate students (33 men and 57 women; age: $M = 20.41$, $SD = 1.00$) at a midsize Canadian university who received course research credit for participation. Forty-four participants identified as Caucasian, 15 as East Asian, 11 as South Asian, three as Southeast Asian, two as West Indians, one as Middle Eastern, and five as mixed (nine unreported). The procedure consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants completed an online survey assessing their benevolent and hostile sexist attitudes and demographics. In the second part, 2 weeks later, in an online survey participants were randomly assigned to read one of the two versions of a gender-based EE policy that was ostensibly being developed at the participants’ university and were told that their input is sought as the policy is relevant to them. In one version, the EE policy promoted the hiring of female students in more masculine co-op jobs. In another version, the EE policy promoted the hiring of female students in more feminine co-op jobs (see below for details on position type manipulation). Following the presentation, the participants first completed a measure assessing their state experience of compassion toward women, and then measures assessing their attitudes and behavioral intentions to promote the proposed gender-based EE policy. The data from the two surveys were matched using student identification numbers, which participants provided in both surveys.

Position type manipulation. We used the same gender-based EE policy as in Study 1 and 2, but we added and manipulated information about the position type the EE policy was specifically targeting. In one version the policy applied to more masculine positions; in another version the policy applied to more feminine positions. To determine what co-op positions students perceived as more masculine as opposed to more feminine, we conducted a pilot test with a separate sample of 138 undergraduate business students (76 men and 62 women). We tested to what degree co-op positions in different business areas (finance, accounting, marketing, and human resource management) are perceived to be masculine and feminine. Our pilot study (please see the online Supplemental Materials for complete results) showed that undergraduate business students perceived finance positions to be the most masculine and the least feminine; whereas they perceived human resource management positions to be the most feminine and the least masculine. Based on these findings, we manipulated whether a gender-based EE policy for students’ co-op positions was aimed at promoting the hiring of female students in masculine or feminine positions, by using finance and human resource management positions, respectively.

Measures. Using 7-point Likert response scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), we used the same measure to assess benevolent sexism ($\alpha = .76$) and hostile sexism ($\alpha = .87$) as in Study 1, and the same measures to assess attitudes ($\alpha = .91$) and behavioral intentions ($\alpha = .90$) as in Study 1 and 2. To assess compassion, participants rated to what degree they feel or possess “compassion,” “tender feelings,” and “sympathy” toward women at the present moment on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely); $\alpha = .90$ (Oveis et al., 2010). To assess sadness, participants rated to what extent they felt “sad,” “blue,” and “downhearted” ($\alpha = .95$; Watson & Clark, 1994) using the same 5-point Likert scale as compassion. To assess whether participants in the finance condition perceived the co-op positions as more masculine and less feminine than participants in the human resource management condition, participants rated whether the co-op positions for which the EE policy would apply are seen as “masculine” and “feminine” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Results

Preliminary analyses. Means and standard deviations of all measures are presented in Table 4. In line with past research and our Study 1 results, benevolent sexism and hostile sexism were positively correlated, $r = .41$, $p < .001$. Thus, to parse out unique effects of benevolent sexism on support for the EE policy, we controlled for hostile sexism in our hypotheses tests.

Before proceeding to test hypotheses, we examined gender differences in a) endorsement of sexist attitudes, and b) support for gender-based EE policies. Consistent with past research and our Study 1 results, men endorsed more hostile sexism ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .70$) than women ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .99$), $t(88) = 3.44$, $p < .001$. Also, in line with past research that suggests that gender gap in benevolent sexism is smaller than for hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), there was only a marginal difference between men’s ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .67$) and women’s ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .90$) as in Study 1 and 2.

10 Our power analysis using GPower software (Faul et al., 2007) with an effect size of $f^2 = 0.08$ (the average effect size obtained in Study 1) with a significance level of $\alpha = .05$ and 80% power would be 101. However, due to limits of our subject pool, we only managed to recruit 90 students and thus have an estimated power of 76% to detect two-way interactions between benevolent sexism and job type. We address this lower power issue in Study 4 with a larger sample size.

9 In a separate sample of 298 students, we tested whether co-op positions in general (i.e., with no specific industry mentioned) were seen as masculine on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), compared to typical masculine co-op positions (i.e., finance). As expected, we found that general co-op positions were perceived as less masculine ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.25$) than finance co-op positions ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(286) = 11.46$, $p < .001$.

11 Students in our samples were business undergraduate students, and their four areas of specialization included finance, accounting, marketing, and human resource management. As such, their co-op experiences were mostly in these four areas of business.
SD = 0.82) endorsement of benevolent sexism, \( t(88) = 1.96, p = .05 \) (centered) and position type. In the third step, we entered the interactions between benevolent and hostile sexism. In the first step of the regression model. To interpret the interaction, we graphed it at high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of benevolent sexism. In line with our predictions, a simple slope analysis revealed that the more individuals endorsed benevolent sexism the more compassion toward women they experienced when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in human resource management positions, \( b = .71, t(83) = 3.28, p = .001 \); but not in finance positions, \( b = .03, t(83) = .17, p = .868 \) (see Table 5). We further examined differences in compassion toward women when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in human resource management versus finance positions within high and low levels of benevolent sexism. As expected, individuals high on benevolent sexism experienced marginally more compassion toward women when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, \( b = .50, t(83) = -1.68, p = .097 \). We found the opposite effect for individuals low on benevolent sexism: they experienced marginally less compassion toward women when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, \( b = .56, t(83) = 1.89, p = .062 \).

In predicting attitudes, there was a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type, \( b = -.35, t(83) = -3.98, p = .004 \) (centered) and position type. In the first step of the regression model. To interpret the interaction, we graphed it at high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of benevolent sexism. In line with our predictions, a simple slope analysis revealed that the more individuals endorsed benevolent sexism the more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy they had when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in human resource management positions, \( b = .67, t(83) = 2.65, p = .010 \), but not in finance positions.

12 Without controlling for hostile sexism and the interaction between benevolent sexism and position type, our interactions became marginal or nonsignificant (.079 ≥ \( p \) ≥ .125). However, in Study 4 (with a larger sample size), controlling for hostile sexism and the interaction between benevolent sexism and position type did not influence the significance of our results.
positions, $b = -0.32$, $t(83) = -1.48$, $p = .144$ (see Figure 4).

Further, as expected, individuals high on benevolent sexism had more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, $b = -0.87$, $t(83) = -2.46$, $p = .016$. We also found that individuals low on benevolent sexism had marginally less favorable attitudes toward the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, $b = .68$, $t(83) = 1.95$, $p = .054$.

In predicting behavioral intentions, there was a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type, $b = -0.77$, $t(83) = -2.05$, $p = .043$ ($r^2 = 0.05$; see Table 5). As expected, the more individuals endorsed benevolent sexism the more behavioral intentions that promote the EE policy they endorsed when the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, $b = .66$, $t(83) = 2.28$, $p = .025$; but not in finance positions, $b = -.12$, $t(83) = -.48$, $p = .632$ (see Figure 5). However, contrary to our expectations, individuals high on benevolent sexism did not endorse more behavioral intentions supporting the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, $b = -.44$, $t(83) = -1.09$, $p = .278$. In line with findings for compassion and attitudes, individuals low on benevolent sexism endorsed marginally fewer behavioral intentions supporting the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in human resource management positions compared to finance positions, $b = .77$, $t(83) = 1.96$, $p = .054$.

**Moderated mediation.** Finally, we proposed an overall moderated mediation model (see Figure 6) in which the positive effect of benevolent sexism on attitudes and behavioral intentions via compassion extends to EE policies that promote the hiring of women in feminine positions, but not in masculine positions. To assess this hypothesis, we used Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 8), which tests for moderated mediation using two regression models and bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (with 10,000 samples) to compute conditional indirect effects. The first regression model estimates the interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting compassion toward women (we also controlled for gender, hostile sexism, and the interaction between hostile sexism and position type in our moderated mediation analyses). The second regression model estimates the effect of compassion toward women on support for the EE policy (attitudes and behavioral intentions) while controlling for the effect of benevolent sexism, position type, and their interaction.

In the first regression, as described above, there was a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting compassion toward women. In the second regression, there was a significant effect of compassion toward women on both attitudes, $b = .63$, $t(82) = 5.75$, $p < .001$, and behavioral

![Figure 3](image1.png)

**Figure 3.** An interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting compassion toward women (Study 3).

![Figure 4](image2.png)

**Figure 4.** An interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting attitudes toward the employment equity (EE) policy (Study 3).
intentions, $b = .55, t(82) = 4.10, p < .001$. Finally, the conditional indirect effect was significant for human resource management positions when predicting both attitudes (conditional indirect effect = .45, 95% CI [.18, .83]) and behavioral intentions (conditional indirect effect = .39, 95% CI [.14, .48]), but not for finance positions (conditional indirect effect for attitudes = .02, 95% CI [-.25, .33]; conditional indirect effect for behavioral intentions = .02, 95% CI [.22, .29]). Thus, benevolent sexism was related to favorable attitudes and higher endorsement of behavioral intentions that promote the gender-based EE policy via compassion toward women only when the policy promoted the hiring of women in human resource management positions but not in finance positions.

**Additional analyses.** In line with Study 1 and Study 2, to rule out the possibility that sadness underlies the effect of benevolent sexism and position type on support for a gender-based EE policy, we tested for an interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting feelings of sadness. As expected, there was no significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting sadness, $b = -.29, t(83) = -1.04, p = .301 (f^2 = .01)$. This result indicates that sadness did not underlie the effect of benevolent sexism and position type on support for the EE policy. Although we do not have sufficient power to reliably test whether participant gender qualified our two-way interactions, we address this issue in Study 4.

**Discussion**

Study 3 demonstrated that the positive effect of benevolent sexism on support for gender-based EE policies extends only to EE policies that promote the hiring of women in feminine roles. In particular, Study 3 provided empirical evidence for a moderated mediation model in which greater benevolent sexism elicits greater compassion toward women, which in turn leads to more favorable attitudes and a higher endorsement of behavioral intentions that support the EE policy, but only when the policy promoted the hiring of women in feminine (human resource management), but not masculine (finance), positions.

To this point, we have tested the effect of benevolent sexism on support for EE policies in samples of participants who would be directly influenced by the proposed EE policy (i.e., co-op job applicants where the EE policy applied to their potential co-op jobs). While this contributes to the external validity of our findings, it may also have influenced our results because both male and female participants may have viewed the EE policy as harming or helping their job prospects. This level of self-interest may color reactions to the EE policy in unanticipated ways. To address this concern, in Study 4 we test the boundary effect of job type in an employee sample that had no personal stakes in a proposed EE policy. Further, in Study 4 we also extend our investigation to additional masculine and feminine jobs to increase our stimulus sampling, that is, using multiple instances of a stimulus category (in our case masculine and feminine job types). By doing so, we increase the external and construct validity of our findings (Wells & Windschilt, 1999). Study 4 also seeks to replicate the findings of Study 3, an important step in establishing the robustness of our effects (Nosek, Spies, & Motyl, 2012). Finally, although Study 3 found no evidence for three-way interactions between benevolent sexism, job type, and participant gender, one possible explanation raised by reviewers is that Study 3 was not sufficiently powered to detect such interactions. Thus, in Study 4 we sought to recruit a larger sample to ensure adequate power to examine such interactions.

**Study 4: Additional Evidence for a Boundary Effect of Job Type**

**Method**

**Participants and procedure.** Participants were 713 U.S. employees (335 women, 378 men; age: $M = 34.43, SD = 9.69$). We recruited our sample for Study 4 in two waves via MTurk. Our initial sample consisted of 223 employees. While this sample had sufficient power to detect predicted two-way interactions, it did not have adequate power to detect three-way interactions. Using GPower software, we estimated that the sample size needed for 80% power to detect three-way interactions with a significance level of $\alpha = .05$ and an effect size of $f^2 = 0.009$ (i.e., the average effect size obtained in Study 3 for our three-way interactions) would be 875. As such, we recruited an additional 600 participants; however, 110 participants did not correctly answer two open-ended manipulation check items, that is, “What was the name of the policy you read about?” and “What was the main goal of the policy you read about?” These participants were thus excluded from analyses. Thus, our final sample was 713, which provided 72% power to detect three-way interactions with an average effect size of $f^2 = 0.009$. Although somewhat below the ideal 80% power threshold, this sample size does provide us with enough participants to detect a three-way interaction when predicting attitudes based on the effect size in Study 3 (80% power for $f^2 = 0.02$, meaning 395 participants would be needed).
recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online platform for web-based survey and experimental data collections (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). Five hundred fifty-nine participants identified as Caucasian, 45 as African American, 37 as Hispanic, 22 as East Asian, 11 as Southeast Asian, seven as South Asian, four as Middle Eastern, and 20 as mixed (eight unreported). Participants completed an online survey posted on MTurk and were compensated $2.00 for their participation. Participants were informed that they would complete two unrelated studies. In the first study, participants completed a benevolent and hostile sexism measure. In the second study, participants were randomly presented with one of four versions of a gender-based EE policy that would ostensibly be implemented at a company not related to the participants. The EE policy promoted the hiring of women in either more masculine positions (depending on the version, either a finance manager or a corporate sales manager job) or more feminine positions (depending on the version, either a human resource manager or a customer service representative job; see below for details on position type manipulations). Following the presentation of the EE policy, participants completed the same measures as in Study 3.

Position type manipulation. As in Study 3, we embedded our position type manipulation in the gender-based EE policy. The proposed policy, however, did not apply to participants’ own job search and hiring (as was the case in our previous studies), but rather was framed as being for the hiring process in a company not related to them called INDSCO (this name was taken from previous research on EE using a company not familiar to participants; James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001). There were four versions of the EE policy, with two versions proposing the hiring of women in masculine positions—that is, finance manager or corporate sales manager—and two versions proposing the hiring of women in feminine positions—that is, human resource manager or customer service representative. These four positions were chosen because past research by Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, and Gibbons (2010) has identified these positions as masculine and feminine, respectively (please see the online Supplemental Materials for pilot study results testing masculinity and femininity perceptions for these four positions).

Measures. Using 7-point Likert response scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), we used the same measure to assess benevolent sexism (α = .91) and hostile sexism (α = .94) as in Study 1 and 3 and the same measures to assess attitudes (α = .93) and behavioral intentions (α = .94) as in Study 1, 2, and 3. Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely), we used the same measure of compassion (α = .90) and sadness (α = .95) as in Study 3. Our manipulation check consisted of one item assessing to what degree the job position for the EE policy was seen as masculine or feminine on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (feminine) to 7 (masculine).

Results

Preliminary analyses. Means and standard deviations of all measures are presented in Table 6. In line with past research and the results of Study 1 and 3, benevolent sexism and hostile sexism were positively correlated, r = .38, p < .001. Men also endorsed more hostile sexism (M = 3.49, SD = 1.27) than women (M = 2.94, SD = 1.37), t(711) = 5.62, p < .001 (d = 0.42), as well as more benevolent sexism (men: M = 3.67, SD = 1.21; women: M = 3.32, SD = 1.27), t(711) = 3.75, p < .001 (d = 0.28). Finally, consistent with past research and our Study 1, 2, and 3 results, women, compared to men, had more favorable attitudes (women: M = 5.39, SD = 1.35; men: M = 4.82, SD = 1.40), t(711) = −5.51, p < .001 (d = 0.41). As such, we controlled for hostile sexism, gender, and the interaction between hostile sexism and position type in our analyses, which is also in line with our analyses in previous studies.

Manipulation checks. As expected, the masculine position of finance manager was perceived as more masculine (M = 4.16, SD = 1.07) than either of the two feminine positions: human resource manager (M = 3.73, SD = 1.14), t(709) = 3.65, p = .002 (d = 0.39), or customer service representative (M = 3.54, SD = 1.10), t(709) = 5.31, p < .001 (d = 0.57). The finance manager position was perceived as marginally less masculine than the other masculine position, corporate sales manager, (M = 4.45, SD = 1.13), t(709) = −2.42, p = .073 (d = 0.26). The position of corporate sales manager was perceived as more masculine than either the human resource manager, t(709) = 6.10, p < .001 (d = 0.63); or the customer service representative, t(709) = 7.79, p < .001 (d = 0.82). Further, the difference in masculinity perceptions between the human resource manager and the customer service representative was not significant, t(709) = 1.61, p = .377 (d = 0.17). Given that the differences in masculinity perceptions between the two masculine positions (finance manager and corporate

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations (Study 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Feminine positions</th>
<th>Masculine positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men (n = 192)</td>
<td>Women (n = 171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolent sexism</td>
<td>3.60 (1.25)</td>
<td>3.35 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile sexism</td>
<td>3.59 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.84 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>2.77 (1.06)</td>
<td>3.16 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>4.83 (1.38)</td>
<td>5.51 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral intentions</td>
<td>3.92 (1.72)</td>
<td>4.65 (1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>1.30 (.69)</td>
<td>1.25 (.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. For compassion and sadness, the scale ranged from 1 to 5; for benevolent and hostile sexism, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, the scale ranged from 1 to 7.
sales manager) were only marginal (and that in a separate pilot study reported in the online Supplemental Materials were not significant), and the differences in masculinity perceptions between the two feminine positions (human resource manager and customer service representative) were nonsignificant, we collapsed data within each position type. We used this dichotomous variable (masculine vs. feminine job positions) in our subsequent analyses.

Further, as in Study 3 we found no significant interactions between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting our manipulation check, $b = -1.0, t(706) = -1.45, p = .147 (f^2 = 0.003)$. In line with Study 3, we also tested for potential differences between masculine and feminine positions on benevolent and hostile sexism. As expected, there were no condition differences on either benevolent sexism, $t(711) = -0.52, p = .607$, or hostile sexism, $t(711) = .12, p = .904$.

**The moderating effect of job type.** As in Study 3, we conducted hierarchical moderated regression analyses testing for an interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting compassion toward women, and attitudes and behavioral intentions. In addition, we added gender as a full factor to test three-way interactions between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender. As in Study 3, we also controlled for hostile sexism and the interaction between hostile sexism and position type.14

In predicting compassion toward women, the three-way interaction between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender, was not significant, $b = .09, t(703) = .80, p = .426 (f^2 = 0.001)$. As predicted there was a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type, $b = -0.20, t(704) = -3.23, p = .001 (f^2 = 0.01);$ see Table 7). In line with our predictions and Study 3 results, the more individuals endorsed benevolent sexism the more compassion toward women they experienced when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in feminine positions, $b = .50, t(704) = 9.69, p < .001$. Contrary to Study 3 results, we found that benevolent sexism was positively related to compassion experience even in masculine positions, $b = .29, t(704) = 5.49, p < .001$ (see Figure 7). Further, as expected, individuals high on benevolent sexism experienced more compassion toward women when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in feminine versus masculine positions, $b = -0.31, t(704) = -2.50, p = .013$; there were no such differences for individuals low on benevolent sexism, $b = 0.20, t(704) = 1.51, p = .132$.

In predicting attitudes, the three-way interaction between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender, was not significant, $b = .10, t(703) = .71, p = .480 (f^2 = 0.001)$. As predicted there was a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type, $b = -0.23, t(704) = -2.94, p = .003 (f^2 = 0.01);$ see Table 7). As expected, the more individuals endorsed benevolent sexism the more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy they had when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in feminine positions, $b = .31, t(704) = 4.80, p < .001$, but not in masculine positions, $b = .08, t(704) = 1.15, p = .250$ (see Figure 8). Further, as expected, individuals high on benevolent sexism had more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in feminine versus masculine positions, $b = -0.39, t(704) = -2.55, p = .012$; there were no such differences for individuals low on benevolent sexism, $b = .18, t(704) = 1.12, p = .262$.

In predicting behavioral intentions, the three-way interaction between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender was marginally significant, $b = .36, t(703) = 1.93, p = .054 (f^2 = 0.005; see Table 7). To follow-up on this marginal three-way interaction, we tested two-way interactions between benevolent sexism and position type for men and women. A two-way interaction between benevolent sexism and position type was significant for men, $b = -.41, t(703) = -3.10, p = .002$, but not for women, $b = -.05, t(703) = -.38, p = .703$. Following up on the significant two-way interaction for men, simple slope analyses showed that there was a significant positive relation between benevolent sexism and endorsement of behavioral intentions promoting the hiring of women in feminine positions, $b = .56, t(703) = 6.21, p < .001$, but not in masculine positions, $b = .15, t(703) = 1.52, p = .128$ (see Figure 9 for a complete three-way interaction). Further, men high on benevolent sexism endorsed more behavioral intentions supporting the EE policy promoting the hiring of women in feminine versus masculine positions, $b = -1.36, t(703) = -3.27, p = .001$; there were no such differences for men low on benevolent sexism, $b = -3.33, t(703) = -.86, p = .391$. Thus, men high on benevolent sexism were in particular likely to support an EE policy hiring women in feminine, but not in masculine, positions (whereas women seemed to support the hiring of women in both positions; see Figure 9). Although our proposed two-way interaction between benevolent sexism and position type was significant (see Table 7), it was qualified by the above described marginally significant three-way interaction.

**Moderated mediation.** As in Study 3, we used Hayes’s PROCESS macro (Model 8) to test the overall moderated mediation model (we did not test three-way interactions between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender as a part of our moderated mediation model given the three-way interaction did not predict our mediator, compassion). In the first regression, as described above, there was a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting compassion toward women. In the second regression, there was a significant effect of compassion toward women on both attitudes, $b = .52, t(705) = 12.23, p < .001$, and behavioral intentions, $b = -.75, t(705) = 14.36, p < .001$. Given that simple slopes were significant for both feminine and masculine positions in a two-way interaction predicting compassion toward women (our mediator in the moderated mediation model), we tested conditional indirect effects at high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of benevolent sexism. The conditional indirect effect was significant for high benevolent sexism when predicting both attitudes (conditional indirect effect = −.29, 95% CI [−.56, −.04]) and behavioral intentions (conditional indirect effect = −.42, 95% CI [−.80, −.07]), but not for low benevolent sexism (conditional indirect effect for attitudes = .01, 95% CI [−.20, .21]); behavioral intentions = .01, 95% CI [−.29, .30]). Thus, individuals high (and not low) on benevolent sexism were more likely to support the EE policy hiring women in feminine versus masculine positions due to experience of compassion toward women.

**Additional analyses.** In line with our Study 3 results, there was no significant interaction between benevolent sexism and
position type in predicting sadness, $b = -.05, t(704) = 1.10, p = .273$. This result indicates that sadness did not underlie the effect of benevolent sexism and position type on support for the EE policy.

### Discussion

Study 4 provides additional evidence for the conditional nature of the positive effect of benevolent sexism on support for EE policies by showing that benevolent sexists support the hiring of women in feminine, but not masculine, positions. Extending our Study 3 results, our results held even for individuals who did not have any personal stakes in the proposed EE policy and across multiple types of feminine and masculine positions. Finally, in Study 4 we were able to adequately test any potential effects of participant gender. We did not find a significant three-way interaction between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender when predicting compassion toward women and attitudes. However, there was a marginal three-way interaction when predicting behavioral intentions indicating that benevolently sexist women were likely to endorse behavioral intentions supporting the EE policy for both feminine and masculine positions, men supported only the EE policy for feminine, and not masculine, positions.

There was also one unexpected finding: benevolent sexism was positively related to the experience of compassion even when the EE policy promoted the hiring of women in masculine positions. This positive relation between benevolent sexism and the experience of compassion for masculine positions was statistically weaker than the positive relation between benevolent sexism and the experience of compassion in feminine positions, and stands in contrast to the findings of Study 3. One reason for this unexpected finding could be due to the fact that the participants in Study 4 were an employed sample with more work experience, and hence have more exposure to women struggling in the workplace in stereotypically masculine positions. In turn, this may translate to feeling more compassion toward women in general, albeit not translating to more support for EE policies. Alternatively, it could be due to the fact that compassion triggered in masculine positions was for different reasons than compassion triggered in feminine positions. Namely, it could be that participants experienced compassion in feminine positions, and stands in contrast to the findings of Study 3.

This positive relation between benevolent sexism and the experience of compassion in feminine positions was for different reasons than compassion triggered in feminine positions. In turn, this may translate to more support for EE policies. Alternately, it could be due to the fact that compassion triggered in masculine positions was for different reasons than compassion triggered in feminine positions. Namely, it could be that participants experienced compassion because they felt that it would be difficult for women to be in masculine positions (potentially because these positions are too

![Figure 7](image-url)  
**Figure 7.** An interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting compassion toward women (Study 4).

![Figure 8](image-url)  
**Figure 8.** An interaction between benevolent sexism and position type in predicting attitudes toward the employment equity (EE) policy (Study 4).
challenging for women and ultimately they may fail or because potentially they may not be happy in positions where they will be minority). This might have occurred in this sample in particular since there was no self-interest implicated (i.e., the EE policy would not influence their own hiring prospects as it did in the previous three studies) and hence they might not have felt threatened in the masculine positions. Of course, these explanations are speculative, and future research is needed to replicate and further understand this effect.

**General Discussion**

In this paper, we provided a more complete account of how sexist attitudes influence support for gender-based EE policies by examining the effect of benevolent sexism on support for EE policies. By drawing on and integrating work on ambivalent sexism and applying it to the literature on reactions to EE policies, we show that the previously postulated negative influence of sexism on support for EE policies is not that simple. Past EE research has uniformly held that sexism should have straightforward negative effects on the promotion of gender equality and diversity; however, this past research has only conceptualized sexism in terms of negative attitudes toward women and has overlooked that sexist attitudes may also be positive, that is, benevolent sexism. Counter to past research on hostile sexism, across four studies we find that the effect of benevolent sexism on support for gender-based EE policies can be positive, but the effect is complex. Namely, benevolent sexism has a positive effect on support for EE policies due to experiences of compassion, but only for EE policies that promote the hiring of women in more feminine positions, and not in more masculine positions. Thus, even the seemingly positive effects of benevolent sexism subtly erode gender equality in the workplace.

It is interesting to note that in line with Masser and Abrams’s (2004) finding that benevolent sexism was not associated with evaluations of women applying for managerial (i.e., masculine) positions (while hostile sexism was negatively associated with evaluations of women), we found that benevolent sexism was not associated with support for EE policies promoting women in masculine positions. Thus, benevolent sexism does not appear to have the blatant negative effects that hostile sexism does, yet it subtly undermines gender equality by only supporting the placement of women in gender-appropriate positions, making it even more dangerous for gender equality as its effects may go unnoticed. Similarly, our results suggest that benevolent sexism leads to inaction when it comes to promoting equality and diversity where it matters the most: where a significant underrepresentation of women in traditionally masculine jobs exists.

**Contributions to the Literature on Sexist Attitudes**

Our research contributes to the literature on sexist attitudes in several ways. First, in our theorizing we outline the emotional consequence of benevolent sexism, that is, the experience of compassion, and how the experience of compassion influences consequent support for EE policies. The finding that benevolent sexism leads to more support for EE policies contributes to recent research findings suggesting that benevolent sexism is related to beliefs in gender equality of income and employment opportunities (Sibley & Perry, 2010), but more importantly it identifies the underlying mechanism. By outlining the experience of compassion as the mediating process, our research also leads to the insight regarding a critical boundary condition of the positive effect of benevolent sexism: compassion experienced by benevolent sexists is limited only to EE policies that promote the hiring of women in more feminine positions that do not violate traditional gender roles.

Second, our research contributes to resolving an apparent paradox in the sexism literature in which on one hand, benevolent sexism is related to an array of positive and beneficial outcomes for women such as positive evaluation of women (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and on the other hand is related to detrimental outcomes for women such as lower gender equality indices at the national level (Glick et al., 2000) and providing less challenging developmental work assignments (King et al., 2012). By identifying the mechanism underlying reactions of benevolent sexists, it appears that seemingly positive reactions of benevolent sexists to women and gender issues are due to the experience of compassion but that benevolent sexists only experience compassion if the EE policy places women in traditional gender roles.

Our findings thus illustrate how benevolent sexists may fuel gender inequality and gender segregation at the workplace by encouraging the employment of women in “gender-appropriate” jobs, and not promoting their access to more masculine jobs such as upper management, leadership, and other positions in typically male domains. In line with this suggestion, a recent study by King et al. (2012) showed that benevolent sexist attitudes limit women’s exposure to more challenging developmental assignments in organizations, which in turn may limit women’s opportunities to obtain high level positions in organizations. Further, this assertion is well aligned with past research that suggests that in Western countries, where there is a high rate of participation of women in the workplace, women are disproportionately represented in lower-level positions such as customer service roles and underrepresented in higher-level positions such as managerial positions (Re skin, 1993). Even in traditionally female employment sectors such as call centers, women are disproportionately segregated into mass production roles as opposed to mass customizations roles (i.e.,
professional roles) and team leader and manager roles (Scholarios & Taylor, 2011).

Contributions to the Literature on Compassion

Our work also contributes to the literature on compassion and moral judgment, which suggests that compassion is important for moral judgment and action as it makes people attuned to unjustified harm experienced by others and consequent actions to alleviate that harm and suffering (Goetz et al., 2010; Kaplan & Tivnan, 2014; Oveis et al., 2010). While this literature suggests primarily positive and beneficial effects of experiencing compassion, our work suggests that experiences of compassion may also have negative outcomes. In particular, the experienced compassion of benevolent sexists contributes to occupational gender segregation and limits women’s opportunities, which contributes to gender inequality.

Interestingly, and in line with recent research (Shnabel, Bar-Anan, Kende, & Bareket, 2015), one possible interpretation of our work is that the compassion benevolent sexists experience may lead them to engage in dependency-oriented helping behaviors. Dependency-oriented help refers to providing a final solution to those in need rather than giving them with tools to succeed on their own or remove barriers to success (Nadler, 2015; Nadler & Chermyak-Hai, 2014). Dependency-oriented help thus does not empower those who are helped, and reinforces their dependent position and the superiority of helpers. An EE policy may be seen as a type of dependency-oriented help as EE policies do not remove barriers (i.e., discrimination) to women’s success, but rather provide a final solution by placing women in jobs without addressing the root cause of the problem (Jackson & Esses, 2000).

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of our work should also be noted. First, our operationalization of masculine and feminine jobs may be confounded with other dimensions. More specifically, the masculine and feminine jobs that we tested in our Study 3 and 4 may also differ in occupational prestige in addition to perceived masculinity and femininity traits needed for success in the job. Thus, it may be difficult to discern whether our Study 3 and 4 results were driven by the masculinity-femininity of the jobs or the occupational prestige of the jobs. Past research suggests that gender-specific positions are naturally confounded with occupational prestige, in that masculine jobs are highly and positively correlated with occupational prestige (Glick, 1991; Glick et al., 1995). Thus, an alternate perspective on our results is that benevolent sexists may be likely to encourage and promote the employment of women in less prestigious positions, instead of more feminine positions.

Relatedly, an alternative perspective may be that benevolent sexists may be likely to encourage and promote the employment of women in positions where they are the majority (i.e., less prestigious positions), perhaps thinking women might be happier in a job where they are well represented. Yet regardless of their possible reasons for only supporting EE policies for women in feminine positions—including possibly having the best of intentions—the outcomes are the same: women are segregated into feminine jobs and gender equality is undermined and jeopardized in the workplace.

A second limitation is that our samples in our first three studies lacked the power to properly test for potential moderating effect of participants’ gender on the relation between benevolent sexism and support for EE policies. Nevertheless, in Study 4 we sought to address this issue with a larger sample size; in line with the findings from our first three studies, in Study 4 we also did not find an interaction with gender when predicting compassion toward women and attitudes. However, there was a marginal three-way interaction between benevolent sexism, position type, and gender when predicting behavioral intentions indicating that while women were likely to endorse behavioral intentions promoting the EE policy hiring women in both feminine and masculine jobs, men only supported the EE policy hiring women in feminine job. Yet the effect size of this three-way interaction was small, and overall our results suggest that both men and women who are benevolent sexists exhibit the same pattern of support for EE policies: they support the hiring of women in feminine and not masculine jobs.

We believe that these findings that gender is not an overly influential factor are illuminating and important as they show that both men and women may perpetuate the gender segregation in the workplace and may contribute to pushing women into traditional feminine positions (i.e., positions of lower power and status), while failing to help the hiring of women where needed the most—in more typical masculine positions (i.e., positions of power and status).

Further, in all of our studies we sought to rule out sadness as an alternate explanation for our results given that pity (an emotion invoked by perceptions of high warmth and low competence) consists of both compassion and sadness, but our theory argued for compassion specifically as an underlying mechanism. In all four studies we showed that compassion and not sadness underlies the relation between benevolent sexism and support for the EE policy. However, the lack of findings for sadness may be due to floor effects, as the mean values for sadness were generally low in our studies. Nevertheless, given that we observed a significant relation between benevolent sexism and sadness in Study 1 (although sadness did not underlie the relation between benevolent sexism and support for the EE policy) it seems there was enough variance in sadness to observe significant correlations, which may make floor effects potentially less likely as an explanation for the lack of results regarding sadness.

It should also be noted that in our mediational models we cannot infer causality of compassion on support for EE policies given that compassion and support were measured at the same time and from the same source. However, past research in which compassion was induced provides some casual evidence for the effect of compassion on helping behaviors and care for others (e.g., Oveis et al., 2010; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). Nevertheless, we encourage additional research manipulating compassion to extend, and provide further support for, our findings.

A final limitation is that our benevolent sexism prime in Study 2 may lead to more compassion because it primes ideas about protecting and helping others more generally, rather than women in particular, which in turn could lead to more support for EE policies. However, based on past research using this manipulation, there is good reason to believe that benevolent sexism is specific to helping women in particular. For example, Shnabel et al. (2015) showed that exposure to the same benevolent sexism prime as in our Study 2 (compared to a control condition) is specifically
related to dependency-oriented helping behaviors toward women, that is, a kind of help that reinforces women’s dependent position; whereas there were no condition difference (benevolent sexism prime vs. control condition) in dependency-oriented helping behaviors toward men (see their Study 2b). These findings show that he benevolent sexism prime is related to helping behavior directed toward women and not toward people more generally.

With respect to future research directions, although in our paper we have focused on employee reactions to gender-based EE policies, EE policies in Canada (and other countries) also promote the employment of other disadvantaged groups such as racial minorities, disabled people, and aboriginal people. We expect that the theoretical model that we have developed and tested in this paper may also apply to benevolent prejudiced attitudes against other groups (i.e., racial minorities). Past work on benevolent prejudice has mostly focused on benevolent sexism because the interdependence between men and women is far greater than between any other in-groups and out-groups due to procreation needs (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Yet, past research has also suggested that benevolent prejudiced attitudes also exist regarding other groups such as racial minorities and aboriginal people (Jackman, 1994; Werhun & Penner, 2010). Thus, more broadly our work may contribute to understanding of how benevolent prejudiced attitudes influence reactions to minority groups, and future work in this avenue is encouraged.

Practical Implications for Governments and Organizations

Our proposed theoretical model offers important practical implications for governments that mandate EE policies and for organizations that strive to successfully implement these policies. The theoretical model and empirical findings suggest that the effect of benevolent sexism may be particularly detrimental for promoting gender diversity in traditionally masculine positions in organizations. Benevolent sexism oftentimes is not perceived as sexism by both men and women (Becker, 2010), and, as such, its effects may go undetected. Moreover, while organizations and managers may appear to be quite supportive of gender-based EE policies, a more subtle undermining of these policies for traditionally nonfeminine positions may take place. Given that EE policies and other diversity initiatives are designed not only to support higher employment rates for women, but to actually promote higher quality employment for women (i.e., encouraging the employment of women in male dominated, high-status positions), benevolent sexism may undermine this goal.

A way for organizations and governments to tackle this problem is to raise awareness about this type of sexism and to communicate that even though benevolent sexism does not appear harmful but rather well-meaning it is still very harmful to women in the workforce. Supporting this notion, recent research has shown that raising awareness about harmful effects of more subtle forms of prejudice such as benevolent sexism can effectively lead to reduction in endorsement of such attitudes (Becker & Swim, 2012). Thus, organizations could offer training to managers and other employees who implement and use EE policies in hiring, promotions, and other HR functions to raise awareness about this subtle yet undermining form of sexism.

Conclusion

In this research we examined the effect of a less understood, but quite prevalent, type of sexism, namely benevolent sexism, on support for gender diversity in the context of gender-based EE policies. We show that, counter to past research showing sexism undermines gender diversity, one type of sexism, benevolent sexism, appears beneficial for gender-based EE policies due to an experience of compassion. However, this positive effect of benevolent sexism extends only to EE policies that promote the hiring of women in more feminine positions, but not in more masculine positions. Thus, benevolent sexism ultimately undermines gender diversity by contributing to gender segmentation in the workplace and leading to inaction and lack of social change in promoting the employment of women in roles in which they are underrepresented. Overall, our research points to the complex and subtle effects of benevolent sexism on promotion of gender diversity and contributes to a more comprehensive account of how sexist attitudes that are prevalent and socially accepted in our society may appear beneficial for gender equality while subtly contributing to gender segregation in the workplace.

References


Received December 23, 2015
Revision received June 9, 2016
Accepted June 14, 2016