Published in final edited form as:

Psychol Men Masc. 2020 October ; 21(4): 704–709. doi:10.1037/men0000314.

The “White Knight” effect: Benevolent sexism accounts for bystander intervention in party situations among high status men

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Abstract

Prior research indicates that adherence to the male role norm suggesting men should seek to attain social status (i.e., status) is positively related to prosocial bystander attitudes and behavior; however, moderators of this effect have yet to be examined. One construct that may influence this effect is benevolent sexism. The present study sought to fill this gap in the literature. Participants were 148 men 21–30 years of age from the metro Atlanta area who reported that they had engaged in heavy drinking at least three times in the past year. A moderation model was used to examine the independent and interactive effects of adherence to the status norm and benevolent sexism on bystander behavior within party settings for friends and strangers. The model predicting bystander behavior towards friends showed a significant interaction between status and benevolent sexism ($b = .59, p = .021$). The association between adherence to the status norm and bystander behavior was significant and positive among men who reported high benevolent sexism ($\beta = .96, p = .003$), but not low benevolent sexism ($\beta = .15, p = .619$). No such effects were detected for bystander behavior for strangers. Findings suggest that males who hold traditional male ideologies around chivalry may be more likely to engage in prosocial bystander behavior towards women in party situations, perhaps as a way of demonstrating their high status. These findings have implications for future programming for men.

Keywords

bystander effect; sexism; interpersonal violence; masculinity

“Well, of course, after this I was a knight, a hero.”

(Dostoevsky, 1918)

Sexual and dating violence are significant public health problems (Muehlenhard et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018). One evidence-based prevention strategy focuses on the role bystanders can play in prevention by activating individuals to intervene in high-risk situations for violence (Banyard et al., 2014; Coker et al., 2015; Salazar et al., 2014). Although adherence to traditional masculine norms can inhibit intervention (Leone & Parrott, 2019a), adherence to the belief that men should attain social status and dominate the social hierarchy (i.e., status) is also associated with greater prosocial bystander attitudes (Leone et al., 2016). One factor that may influence this association is benevolent sexism, or subjectively positive, yet patriarchal, views of women (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2011). The present study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the effects of adherence to status male role norms and benevolent sexism on bystander behavior in party situations.

Influences of Masculinity on Bystander Intervention

A focus of many bystander training programs is to challenge traditional masculine norms linked to violence against women (Gidycz et al., 2011; Katz, 1995; Orchowski et al., 2018). Adherence to norms that men should be tough and avoid stereotypical feminine behaviors likely inhibit bystander behavior due to men's expectation of negative peer consequences for intervening in another man's sexual conquest (Carlson, 2008; Casey & Ohler, 2012; Katz, 2018; Leone et al., 2016; McMahon & Dick, 2011). However, adherence to the *status* norm may promote intervention in certain situational contexts (e.g., around certain peers). Prior research indicates that community men with a stronger endorsement of the status norm reported more confidence in their ability to intervene when witnessing sexual aggression (Leone et al., 2016). Further, stronger endorsement of the status norm predicted a decreased likelihood of displaying bystander behavior when men were exposed to misogynistic, compared to ambiguous, peer norms (Leone & Parrott, 2019a). Thus, men who endorse the status norm may only feel confident to intervene when their masculine identity is not at risk, such as situations in which they are in a position of authority or power over other men (Casey & Ohler, 2012; Oesterle et al., 2018). This research begs the question of whether the relation between status and bystander behavior is moderated by men's idealization and chivalrous attitudes towards women. In other words, do men who adhere to the status norm view themselves as the "white knight" who can intervene to protect women?

The Effects of Sexism on Sexual Aggression

Ambivalent sexism theory posits that sexist attitudes have both hostile and benevolent components (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001, 2011). While hostile sexism refers to antipathy toward women who are viewed as insubordinate to men or sexually promiscuous, benevolent sexism refers to subjectively positive attitudes and chivalry towards women who are seen as sexually pure (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Benevolent sexism is often more subtle than hostile sexism, highlighting traditional gender roles, women's inferiority and inadequacy, and the need to protect and cherish women.

Benevolent sexism may act as a protective factor against sexual and relationship violence—at least when women appear to conform to traditional gender roles—although findings have

been mixed (e.g., Bosson et al., 2015; Renzetti et al., 2018). Similarly, the role of benevolent sexism in bystander intervention remains unclear. Research among undergraduate students found that higher levels of benevolent sexism was associated with less bystander behavior following a sexual assault and greater barriers to intervene pre- and mid-assault (Yule et al., 2020). Conversely, another study found that benevolent sexism was positively correlated with bystander efficacy (Parrott et al., 2012); however, it is unclear if these findings extend to bystander behavior.

The Present Study

Prior research has found that men who adhere to the belief that men should attain social status may be more likely to intervene in sexual aggression (e.g., Leone et al., 2016), however, the moderators of this association warrant attention. It may be that among men who adhere to the status norm, those high in benevolent sexism may perceive intervention as chivalrous and consider themselves a “white knight,” who sweeps in to rescue a woman in distress (e.g., Flood, 2011). This may be especially salient in party situations, where intoxicated women are often viewed as “easy targets” for sexual aggression (Graham et al., 2014). Men high in benevolent sexism, who idealize and have chivalrous attitudes towards women (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996), may intervene in these contexts because they believe their role is to protect women and that doing so will demonstrate their higher status in the social hierarchy.

Hypothesis 1.

Benevolent sexism would be positively associated with bystander intervention in party settings.

Hypothesis 2.

Adherence to the status masculine norm would be associated with bystander intervention in party situations among men who reported greater, but not less, benevolent sexism.

Exploratory Aim.

Bystanders may witness risky situations that involve both friends and strangers; however, prior research indicates college students self-report engaging in more bystander behavior for friends, compared to strangers (Banyard et al., 2014; Burn, 2009). Experimental research has confirmed this pattern of effects. Specifically, in response to a hypothetical scenario in which a man took an intoxicated woman upstairs at a party, undergraduate college students reported they were more likely to help the woman if she was a friend than if she was a stranger (Katz et al., 2015). Given these findings, the present study examines the effects of status and benevolent sexism on bystander intervention behavior towards friends and strangers separately.

Method

The present study was drawn from a larger study on acute alcohol intoxication and bystander intervention (Leone & Parrott, 2019b). All participants who presented to the laboratory

reported alcohol consumption during the past year (see below). Hypotheses tested herein are novel and the analytic plan was developed specifically to address these aims.

Participants

Men between the ages of 21 and 30 were recruited from the metro-Atlanta community through Internet advertisements and flyers for a study on alcohol, social behaviors, and social attitudes. Respondents were initially screened to confirm that on at least three occasions in the past year, they had consumed a quantity of alcohol that would result in intoxication. Those who reported past or present attempts to seek alcohol or substance use disorder treatment, a psychiatric disorder, a serious head injury, or a condition in which alcohol is medically contraindicated were also excluded.

Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants' age was confirmed and self-reported drinking patterns were re-assessed. Three participants were removed for not completing pertinent questionnaires. This resulted in a final sample of 148 men (age $M = 23.99$, $SD = 2.59$), 43.2% of whom were full-time college students. Most participants identified as either White (54.1%) or Black/African American (23.6%) and had never been married (87%). Men reported consuming an average of 4.07 ($SD = 1.99$) alcoholic drinks per drinking day approximately 2.19 ($SD = 1.54$) days per week. This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Demographic Form.—Age, self-identified sexual orientation, racial/ethnic identity, relationship status, and years of education were assessed.

Traditional masculinity.—The Male Role Norms Scale (Thompson & Pleck, 1986) is a 26-item Likert-type scale that assesses men's endorsement of three dimensions of traditional masculine ideology: Status (e.g., "I always like a man who's totally sure of himself"), Toughness (e.g., "I think that a young man should try to become physically tough, even if he's not big"), and Antifemininity (e.g., "It bothers me when a man does something that I consider 'feminine'"). Participants rate items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale, with higher per-item means reflecting greater adherence to the three dimensions of masculinity. A previous study (Sinn, 1997) showed that male role norms were positively associated endorsement of traditional male roles.

Ambivalent sexism.—The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) is a 22-item Likert-type scale that measures hostile and benevolent sexism. The hostile sexism subscale (11 items) assesses antipathy toward women (e.g., "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men"). The benevolent sexism subscale assesses subjectively positive, yet patriarchal, views of women (e.g., "A good woman should be put on a pedestal by her man"). Participants rate items on a scale from 0 (disagree strongly) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of hostile or benevolent sexism. Research indicates that benevolent sexism is was positively associated with positive attitudes and stereotypes about women (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Bystander behavior.—The Bystander Behavior Scale (BBS; Banyard et al., 2014) is a 44-item Likert-type scale that measures bystander behaviors for sexual and relationship abuse within the past two months. The 6-item Party Safety subscale was used to assess bystander behavior that may take place at a party (e.g., “I made sure a friend [stranger] didn’t leave an intoxicated friend behind at a party.”). Relative to other subscales (i.e., risky situation, access resources, proactive behavior), the Party Safety subscale most closely aligns with the aim to examine bystander behavior in party situations. Participants are asked to indicate whether they had engaged in each behavior separately for friends and strangers (0=no, 1=yes). Total scores could range from 0–6, with higher scores corresponding to more frequent bystander behaviors. Prior research has found that scores on the BBS were positively associated with bystander intentions (Banyard et al., 2014).

Procedure

Upon arrival to the laboratory, all participants were led to a private testing room. Participants provided informed consent and completed a questionnaire battery. After completion of the questionnaire battery, participants who were ineligible for the second session were compensated at a rate of \$10 per hour and thanked for their time. The remaining participants were scheduled for the second session of the study and compensated upon completing that session.

Analytic Approach

Prior to analyses, status and benevolent sexism variables were standardized and an interaction term was calculated by obtaining cross-products of pertinent first order variables. Two hierarchical linear regressions were used to examine the effects of status and benevolent sexism bystander behavior towards (1) friends and (2) strangers. For each model, covariates were entered into Step 1, status and benevolent sexism into Step 2, and the Status x Benevolent Sexism interaction in Step 3.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for pertinent study variables are displayed in Table 1. All three male role norms, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism were positively and significantly correlated. Age and adherence to the antifemininity norm were positively and significantly correlated with bystander behavior for friends. Bystander behavior for friends and strangers were positively correlated. A paired-sample t-test indicated that participants reported more bystander behavior towards friends ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 2.20$), compared to strangers ($M = .73$, $SD = 1.24$; $t(1,149) = 15.82$, $p < .001$). Given these preliminary hypotheses, adherence to toughness and antifemininity norms, age, and hostile sexism were included as covariates in all models.

Test of Hypotheses

Bystander behavior towards friends.—Contrary to Hypothesis 1, benevolent sexism was not associated with bystander behavior. In line with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant Status x Benevolent Sexism interaction. Explication of this interaction evidenced

that the association between adherence to the status norm and bystander behavior was significant and positive among men who reported high benevolent sexism ($\beta=.96$, $p=.003$, 95% CI=.34, 1.58), but not low benevolent sexism ($\beta=.15$, $p=.619$, 95% CI=-.46, .77).

Bystander behavior towards strangers.—No significant conditional main or interaction effects were detected. Table 2 presents effects for both models.

Discussion

The present work represents a novel extension of research examining the impact of adherence to male role norms and benevolent sexism on bystander behavior in party settings. Hypotheses were partially supported. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, there was no effect of benevolent sexism on bystander behavior. Though unexpected, it may be that benevolent sexism is not enough for men to engage in bystander behavior, likely because intervening in another man's sexual conquest may lead to derogation from peers (Carlson, 2008).

However, in line with Hypothesis 2, findings suggest that stronger adherence to the status male role norm was related to more reported bystander behavior towards friends in party situations, but only among men who were high, compared to low, in benevolent sexism. Men who view social status attainment as central to male identity and who are high in benevolent sexism may be more likely to assume the role of protector or "White Knight" via bystander behavior. These men, who define manhood as needing to be on top of the social hierarchy, see bystander behavior as consistent with this need and may intervene to protect women. While bystander behavior to prevent sexual and relationship violence is a prosocial behavior, the finding that effects were only present among those high in benevolent sexism is concerning. This is because benevolent sexism is inherently conditional and reinforces gender inequality (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1997; Hideg & Ferris, 2016); women who conform to gender role expectations are viewed as ideal, though weak and incompetent (Hammond & Overall, 2015), while those who do not may be subject to hostile sexism. It is possible that men high in benevolent sexism may be more likely to help *certain* women, who they perceive to be deserving of protection from sexual and relationship violence. Indeed, this finding was only significant for bystander behavior towards friends, not strangers, perhaps because men are more aware of whether friends meet such gender role standards. Such a phenomenon may actually contribute to perpetuation of social norms about sexism that promote sexual and relationship violence (e.g., Lisco et al., 2012).

Several limitations warrant discussion. This study's cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about temporality. For example, our measure of bystander behavior does not assess for peer context; thus, we are unable to determine if the individual who received help adhered to traditional gender roles. The measure of bystander behavior also did not take into account opportunity to intervene, making it unclear if some men's low reports of bystander behavior were a function of a lack of opportunity. Additionally, we were unable to directly compare bystander behavior towards friends and strangers; thus, future research should test the interactive effects of status, benevolent sexism, and bystander relationship on intervention. Finally, findings may not generalize across diverse cultures with different standards of masculine behavior. For example, among Latino men,

Caballerismo, a standard of masculinity that emphasizes how men should be nurturing, family centered, and chivalrous, may be positively associated with bystander behavior, whereas Machismo, a standard of masculinity that emphasizes aggression, hypermasculinity, and chauvinism, may be negatively associated with bystander behavior (see Arciniega et al., 2008).

Collectively, the present findings contribute to the literature by providing evidence for one potential explanation for why men who are high in the status norm are highly likely to engage in bystander behavior. Intervention programming that attempts to harness men's adherence to the status norm should proceed with caution, and be careful to combat benevolent sexism that may lead bystanders to only intervene to prevent violence among certain women.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism grant F31-AA-024369 awarded to Ruschelle M. Leone and grant T32-AA-007459.

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Men who endorse the status norm reported engaging in more bystander behavior for sexual and relationship violence, but only if they were high in benevolent sexism. These findings may ultimately be problematic because benevolent sexism only serves to protect women who conform to traditional gender norms which may lead men to only intervene to prevent violence against certain women.

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Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	24.04	2.61							
2. Antifemininity	1.86	.74	−0.03						
3. Toughness	2.76	.77	0.08	.56**					
4. Status	2.97	.73	−0.13	.55**	.59**				
5. Hostile Sexism	1.69	1.05	0.15	.61**	.64**	.57**			
6. Benevolent Sexism	2.24	.94	−0.01	.30**	.30**	.56**	.45**		
7. Party Safety for Friends	3.29	2.20	−.20*	−.19*	−0.06	0.09	−0.03	0.03	
8. Party Safety for Strangers	.73	1.24	0	−0.12	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.07	.45**

Note.

*
p<.05

**
p<.001

Antifemininity, Toughness, and Status were assessed using the Male Role Norms Scale (Thompson & Pleck, 1986); Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism were assessed using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996); Party Safety for Friends and Party Safety for Strangers were assessed using the Bystander Behavior Scale (Banyard et al., 2014)

Table 2.

Hierarchical Linear Regression Models Examining the Effects of Status and Benevolent Sexism Bystander Behavior Towards Friends and Strangers

<i>Model Predicting Bystander Behavior Towards Friends</i>										
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ²
Step 1							4.24 *	.32	.11	
Age	-.21	.07	-.25	-.34	-.07	.003				
Antifemininity	-.96	.31	-.32	-1.57	-.35	.002				
Toughness	.04	.31	.01	-.57	.65	.894				
Hostile Sexism	.41	.24	.20	-.06	.87	.084				
Step 2							3.62 *	.36	.13	.027
Age	-.17	.07	-.20	-.31	-.03	.015				
Antifemininity	-1.10	.32	-.37	-1.73	-.48	.001				
Toughness	-.19	.32	-.07	-.83	.45	.557				
Hostile Sexism	.32	.25	.15	-.17	.81	.198				
Status	.55	.26	.25	.03	1.07	.039				
Benevolent Sexism	-.12	.21	-.06	-.55	.30	.574				
Step 3							4.00 *	.41	.16	.03 *
Age	-.19	.07	-.22	-.33	-.05	.007				
Antifemininity	-1.18	.31	-.39	-1.79	-.56	.000				
Toughness	-.28	.32	-.10	-.92	.35	.382				
Hostile Sexism	.45	.25	.22	-.04	.95	.072				
Status	.56	.26	.25	.04	1.07	.034				
Benevolent Sexism	-.19	.21	-.09	-.61	.23	.369				
Status × Benevolent Sexism	.40	.17	.19	.06	.74	.021				
<i>Model Predicting Bystander Behavior Towards Strangers</i>										
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ²
Step 1							1.89	.22	.05	
Age	-.022	.04	-.05	-.10	.06	.583				
Antifemininity	-.478	.18	-.28	-.83	-.12	.009				
Toughness	.165	.18	.10	-.19	.52	.357				
Hostile Sexism	.201	.14	.17	-.07	.47	.144				
Step 2							1.37	.22	.05	.01
Age	-.015	.04	-.03	-.10	.07	.723				
Antifemininity	-.500	.19	-.30	-.87	-.13	.008				
Toughness	.131	.19	.08	-.25	.51	.493				
Hostile Sexism	.160	.15	.14	-.13	.45	.275				
Status	.078	.16	.06	-.23	.39	.617				
Benevolent Sexism	.051	.13	.04	-.20	.30	.690				

Step 3							1.18	.23	.06	.00
Age	-.013	.04	-.03	-.09	.07	.752				
Antifemininity	-.494	.19	-.29	-.86	-.12	.009				
Toughness	.138	.19	.09	-.24	.52	.476				
Hostile Sexism	.150	.15	.13	-.15	.45	.321				
Status	.077	.16	.06	-.23	.39	.621				
Benevolent Sexism	.056	.13	.05	-.20	.31	.663				
Status × Benevolent Sexism	-.031	.10	-.03	-.24	.17	.767				

Note.

*
 $p < .010$

LLCI= Lower Limit 95% Confidence Interval; ULCI = Upper Limit 95% Confidence Interval