

*Short Report*

# Loving Those Who Justify Inequality

## The Effects of System Threat on Attraction to Women Who Embody Benevolent Sexist Ideals

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People are often faced with threats to the legitimacy of their sociopolitical system. According to system-justification theory, when faced with such threats, people are motivated to restore their faith in the status quo by engaging in psychological processes that bolster its apparent legitimacy (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). How might such processes of system justification manifest themselves in everyday interpersonal functioning?

One way that system justification is revealed in social psychological functioning has been well-documented—through the endorsement and cognitive activation of stereotypes whose specific content justifies social inequality (e.g., Kay et al., 2007). Stereotypes of men and women, in particular, can serve as psychological tools that justify and maintain social inequality. For example, Jackman (1994) has suggested that ascribing favorable and flattering, but clearly stereotypical, traits to women reduces resistance to gender-based role divisions (also see Hoffman & Hurst, 1990) by subtly implying that women are well suited to the roles they have traditionally occupied, and that stereotypically feminine traits are valued by society (also see Jost & Kay, 2005).

Elaborating on this idea, Glick and Fiske (1996) developed a measure of such stereotypes and demonstrated, across 19 countries, that the tendency to engage in this form of “benevolent sexism” (i.e., viewing women as “pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored and whose love is necessary to make a man complete”; Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 109) was (a) highest in countries with the greatest level of gender inequality, but was also (b) positively correlated with explicitly negative, hostile views of women (Glick et al., 2000). It has also been demonstrated that exposure to benevolent sexist stereo-

types leads to strengthened beliefs in the fairness of the status quo (Jost & Kay, 2005).

Does the psychological link between benevolent stereotyping and system justification influence how women are treated and judged? We argue that it does, and specifically that when people experience a threat to the legitimacy of the social system, one factor that affects their attraction to a potential romantic partner is whether that partner embodies system-justifying stereotypes, such as those that align with benevolent sexist ideals.

We hypothesized that male participants whose faith in the federal system was threatened would show greater romantic interest in women who embody benevolent sexist ideals than in women who do not embody these ideals. We also hypothesized that they would show greater interest in women who embody benevolent sexist ideals than would male participants whose faith in the system was not threatened.

### METHOD

Told they were participating in a memory task, 36 single male Canadian undergraduates read an excerpt from a British newspaper. The excerpt used in the system-threat condition threatened their belief in the legitimacy of their federal system, offering the opinion of a foreign journalist who believed the social, economic, and political climate in Canada was worsening. In the no-system-threat condition, the excerpt described the social, economic, and political climate in Canada as relatively stable and positive (see Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005).

Participants then rated their romantic interest in each of eight profiled women. Each profile included a picture and self-description, ostensibly taken from a dating Web site. Half of the profiles portrayed the women as embodying the three dimensions of benevolent sexism identified by Glick and Fiske (1996); that is, these women were portrayed as vulnerable, pure, and ideal for making men feel complete. The portrayals in the other

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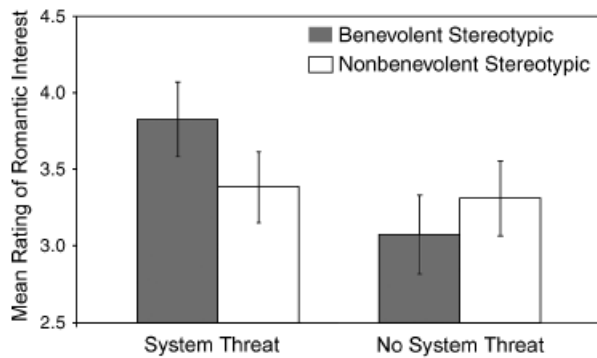


Fig. 1. Mean ratings of romantic interest in benevolent-stereotypic and non-benevolent-stereotypic women in the system-threat and no-system-threat conditions. Error bars indicate standard errors.

four profiles were inconsistent with the benevolent sexist stereotype in various ways; for example, the women were presented as career oriented, party seeking, active in social causes, or athletic. The profiles were presented randomly, with the only constraint being that two stereotypical or two nonstereotypical profiles could not be presented sequentially.

After viewing each profile, participants used 7-point scales to answer eight questions gauging their romantic interest. They reported the extent to which they found the woman attractive, were interested in chatting with her on-line, would like to get to know her better, would like to meet her personally, would likely invite her to a party, would be pleased to have a date with her, were interested in starting a relationship with her, and viewed her as the ideal romantic partner. We then calculated an index of romantic interest in the benevolent-stereotypic women ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and non-benevolent-stereotypic women ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

To ensure that any differences in romantic interest across the profiles were not due to differences in the pictures, we randomly paired pictures with self-descriptions for each participant; furthermore, pretesting verified that all pictures were viewed as equally attractive,  $F < 1$ .

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 2 (system threat vs. no threat)  $\times$  2 (benevolent-stereotypic vs. non-benevolent-stereotypic) analysis of variance conducted on the mean ratings of romantic interest revealed a significant two-way interaction,  $F(1, 34) = 5.89, p_{\text{rep}} = .93, \omega^2 = .02$ . As shown in Figure 1, participants showed greater interest in benevolent-stereotypic women than in non-benevolent-stereotypic women when their system was threatened,  $F(1, 34) = 5.25, p_{\text{rep}} = .91, d' = .74$ , but not when their system was not threatened,  $F(1, 34) = 1.38, p_{\text{rep}} = .68$ . Moreover, the system threat prompted participants to increase their interest in benevolent-stereotypic women,  $F(1, 34) = 4.53, p_{\text{rep}} = .89, d' = .71$ , but not in non-benevolent-stereotypic women,  $F(1, 34) = 0.05, p_{\text{rep}} = .26$ .

In sum, men who experienced system threat had greater romantic interest in women who embodied benevolent sexist ideals than did men who did not experience system threat, and they also had greater romantic interest in women who embodied these ideals than in women who did not embody these ideals. These results have important theoretical and practical implications. They are the first to connect processes of system justification with those of interpersonal attraction, by suggesting that the motive to see the sociopolitical system as just and fair can lead men to prefer women who embody traits that reinforce gender inequality. Such preferences can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging women to accept subordinate roles (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005). Thus, in times of system threat, people who uphold the system may be particularly valued.

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