AOSIS

The pervasive lack of gender diversity in the boardroom: The inconvenience of ambivalent sexism

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Orientation: Redressing gender inequality in the boardroom remains a persistent challenge for organisations, both globally and in South Africa.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to highlight the need for policymakers to ensure that efforts to redress gender inequality in the boardroom have a firmer, more ethical foundation based on exploring dimensions of sexisms.

Motivation for the study: Women continue to be under-represented in the boardroom. This study is concerned with determining whether benevolent sexism might provide some explanation for this form of gender inequality.

Research approach/design and method: A quantitative study was conducted, with 172 board members, C-suite executives, directors and senior managers of publicly listed companies completing a self-reported questionnaire and a survey that measured hostile sexism and benevolent sexism.

Main findings: The findings showed no significant difference between the different age categories in the sample. However, there was a significant difference in benevolent sexism between men and women, with women exhibiting higher scores, which was indicative of the condonation of benevolent sexism. The findings also showed a significant correlation between hostile and benevolent sexism, suggesting that benevolent sexism legitimises sexist behaviours.

Practical/managerial implications: Mechanisms to address gender inequality in the workplace need to be simultaneously clear and nuanced because of the deep psychosocial beliefs among men and women that constrain efforts to arrest gender discrimination.

Contribution/value-add: The pervasiveness of ambivalent sexism contributes to the persistent lack of gender diversity, particularly as it pertains to the condoning and perpetuation of sexist practices by both sexes. While no causation can be inferred, there is substantive corroborative research globally attesting to the effects of sexism on decision-makers' actions in different contexts, including in South Africa.

Keywords: sexisms; ambivalent sexism; benevolent sexisms; hostile sexism; boardroom gender inequality.

Introduction

Studies show that increased female representation in the boardroom is positively correlated with board monitoring (Zalata et al., 2019), preparedness (Trinh et al., 2020), attendance (Adams & Ferreira, 2004, 2009), conflict management (Furlotti et al., 2019), collaborative orientation (Oliver et al., 2018), navigation of complexity (Gul et al., 2011), ethical behaviour (Nekhili & Gatfaoui, 2013), and strategic implementation (Loukil et al., 2019). Despite these pro-social reasons for gender diversity in the boardroom, women continue to be underrepresented (Hideg & Shen, 2019; Humbert et al., 2019; Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020). Yet, there is widespread commitment among scholars (Jain & Jamali, 2016), practitioners (Martínez-Ferrero & García-Meca, 2020) and policymakers (Main & Gregory-Smith, 2018; Terjesen & Sealy, 2016) alike to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5, which focusses on gender equality (Yarram & Adapa, 2021).

The pro-social worldview that supports gender-diversity efforts in the boardroom finds consonance with a business community that is increasingly subscribing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Yarram & Adapa, 2021), and with scholars who are interested in the link between board diversity and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Rao & Tilt, 2016). However, when viewed through an ambivalent sexism theory lens, such pro-social intentions are

not so easily sustained (Compton et al., 2019; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997; Kumar & Singh, 2020). Ambivalent sexism, a refinement of the original concept of sexism, is defined as the coexistence of love and admiration for women, on the one hand, and resentment and prejudice towards women, on the other. Ambivalent sexism manifests as the fluctuation between a state of hostility (the overt or easily recognisable form) and benevolence (Glick & Fiske, 1996). If one understands that ambivalent sexism, as described in the seminal work by Glick and Fiske (1996), exists as an insidious, polysemic construct that vacillates on a spectrum between its two subfactors of hostile sexism (HS) and benevolent sexism, it is easy to comprehend why endogeneity can occur, and why it would be myopic to focus on the economic arguments for gender diversity at the expense of the psychosocial constructs underpinning it. Therefore, if sexist beliefs embedded in the personal and social identities of top leaders remain underexplored (Humbert et al., 2019; Martins & Parsons, 2007), then sexism at the top of organisations will continue to contribute to weak board-diversity efforts (Compton et al., 2019; Humbert et al., 2019). This, in turn, could lead to a regression in efforts to achieve gender equity.

We argue that the gap between the boardroom reality and scholarly evidence of the business case for gender diversity in boardrooms means that policymakers are informed by studies that overemphasise the economic arguments (Carter et al., 2010; Compton et al., 2019; Joecks et al., 2013; Martinez-Jimenez et al., 2019; Terjesen et al., 2016), as opposed to the normative dimensions of gender diversity. Economy-focussed studies inadvertently contribute to an androcentric worldview (Artz & Taengnoi, 2016; Bailey et al., 2019), which is sexist in a traditional sense, owing in part to its gender-essentialist underpinning (Humbert et al., 2019), and sexist in a modern sense in that (as revealed in the literature) it favours men (Glick et al., 2004).

Economic theories like agency theory (Halliday et al., 2021; Trinh et al., 2020), institutional theory (Tyrowicz et al., 2020), and Fama and French's valuation framework (Francoeur et al., 2008), used particularly in the finance domain, are not the only ones that have been unable to advance the cause of gender diversity in the boardroom. Social justice theories, like critical mass theory (Arena et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2010; Joecks et al., 2008: Yarram & Adapa, 2021), gender differences theories (Nielsen & Huse, 2010), glass ceiling theory (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020), glass cliff theory (Main & Gregory-Smith, 2018), Kanter's conjecture (Adams & Ferrera, 2004) and social roles theory (Chizema et al., 2015), have also failed to make a meaningful contribution. While each of these theories, and many more like them from multiple domains (i.e. economics, finance, psychology, sociology and social justice), bring different and rich perspectives to this important subject, they share a joint liability in that they assume that gender diversity in the boardroom is grounded in pro-social intentions – thereby skirting the implications of socially embedded sexism and inadvertently advancing gender-bias denialism (Begeny et al., 2020; Glick et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study was twofold. Firstly, it sought to highlight the need for policymakers to ensure that efforts to redress gender inequality in the boardroom have a firmer, more ethical foundation. This was grounded in the authors' interest in the gender beliefs of both proponents and detractors of gender diversity. Secondly, the study sought to determine whether benevolent sexism might explain why role incongruence persists, such that women continue to be underrepresented, despite sustained institutional interest in gender diversity in the boardroom (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020; Wolfram et al., 2020). This line of inquiry supported the notion that shifting the focus to an ethical foundation may provide a springboard to achieving gender equity more sustainably.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: In the literature review on sexism in the boardroom, we focus on the ambivalent sexism theory conceived by Glick and Fiske (1996, 1997) and further advanced by Glick et al. (2004). We apply the theory in an emerging market context, specifically South Africa. Consistent with Humbert et al. (2019), albeit in an under-researched, African context (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016), we then develop and quantitatively test hypotheses to establish that benevolent sexism may play a more salient role in undermining efforts to bring about gender equality in the boardroom. Furthermore, we offer suggestions on how ambivalent sexism can be ameliorated so as to uncover more impactful gender-equity initiatives.

Literature review

Ambivalent sexism theory posits that sexism has two subsets, namely 'hostile sexism' and 'benevolent sexism', which together create ambivalence. This, according to Fiske and Glick (1995) and Glick and Fiske (2001), is a form of prejudice beyond simple antipathy, manifesting as a strong gender bias that disadvantages a particular group. When a construct exists on a continuum, it can elude culpability. While HS is overt and singular, with a negative affective quality, benevolent sexism is more subtle, can assume three guises and displays a positive affective quality (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001, 2011, 2018; Hideg & Ferris, 2016). Ambivalent sexism theory contends that sexism is not a static construct but rather an ambiguous and polymorphic one, varying in intensity and form between HS and benevolent sexism. It therefore provides a plausible partial reason for the dearth of women in top management positions (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Throughout this discourse, ambivalent sexism – a refinement of the parent concept of sexism – is used to describe individuals' fluctuating ambivalent stance within a collective society. Crucially, both men and women can display ambivalent sexism towards women.

As shown in Figure 1, HS takes just one form, and that is overt and direct discrimination and stereotyping. However, benevolent sexism fosters gender inequality through three different means. These are protective paternalism, gender differentiation and heterosexual intimacy (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Protective paternalism, the first sub-construct, refers to
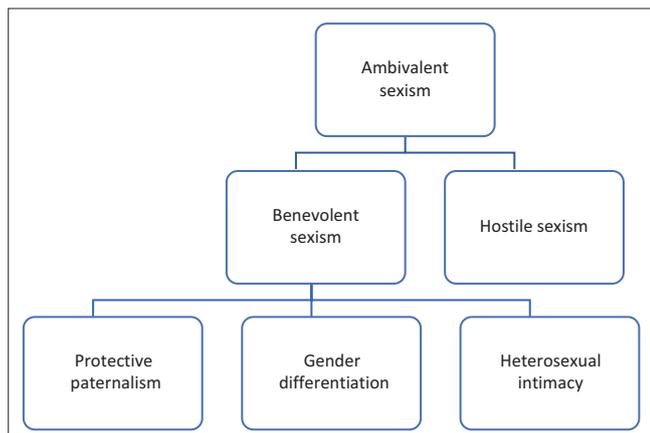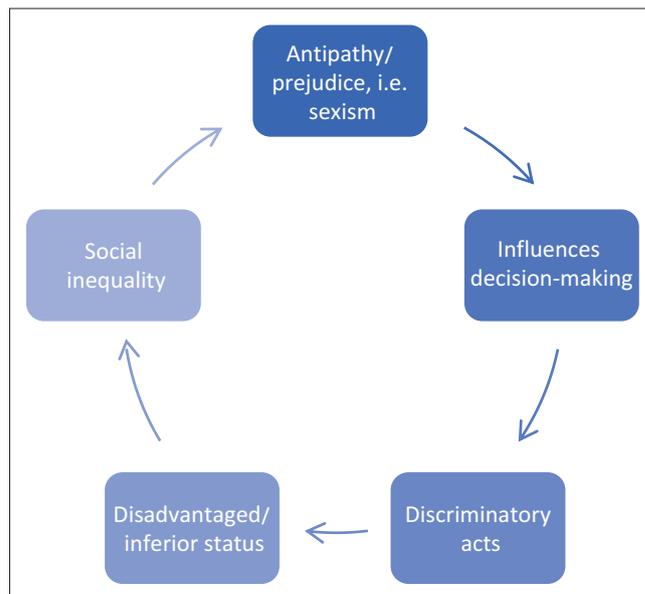
Source: Adapted from Glick, P., & Fiske, S.T. (1997). Hostile and benevolent sexism: Measuring ambivalent sexist attitudes toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*(1), 119–135

FIGURE 1: Theory of ambivalent sexism showing sub-factors.

Source: Adapted from Glick, P., & Fiske, S.T. (1997). Hostile and benevolent sexism: Measuring ambivalent sexist attitudes toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*(1), 119–135

FIGURE 2: Sexism as an insidious construct.

the protective stance that someone adopts towards women, offering security, assurances and even mentorship, provided the women behave in a manner regarded by their protagonist as being in keeping with their role, character or place. Gender differentiation relates to the conviction that men and women differ and that such differences are useful, for example, women gravitate towards more domestic or lower-level communal or nurturing occupations and positions that demand a more feminine role. This stance is affirmed in social roles theory (Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Finally, heterosexual intimacy relates to the desire for women, as life or sexual partners, to provide care, companionship and sexual satisfaction (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001, 2011).

Sexism seems to have evolved as a primordial concept, with the physical strength of men constituting their biological cue to dominate 'weaker' women, which in turn has validated men's claim to be the 'stronger' or 'superior' sex (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Sexism also infers male superiority in important leadership attributes, which can lead to discriminatory decision-making processes. It is purported that men both need and value women in their 'role as a woman', that is, as a nurturer, lover, romantic partner, caregiver, homemaker and mother, while at other times being equally vociferous in their stance that women should not play other, presumably 'masculine' roles, like those associated with leadership or executive positions (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001, 2011, 2018; Hideg & Ferris, 2016). Hostile or overt sexism is an 'adversarial view of gender relations' – in other words, women being perceived to control men using their sexuality or feminist ideology. Benevolent sexism, on the opposite end of the continuum, idealises and elevates women as being in need of protection and support, and being necessary to men.

The implication of HS and benevolent sexism, as explained above, is that women are perceived to be weak but essential. The authors of this article postulate that benevolent sexism is a subtler form of prejudice which places women at a distinct disadvantage (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Sexism stems from antipathy which, consciously and probably unconsciously,

culminates in discriminatory acts that put the target of such discrimination at a disadvantage.

An interesting observation gleaned from the literature is that because of the perceived benefits (of protection, provision or social advantages) accruing to the disadvantaged group (i.e. women), women often reinforce their inferior status by condoning sexism in its benevolent form. This is corroborated by Eagly and Mladinic (1994) who assert that benevolent forms of prejudice create positive feedback loops between social inequities and antipathy, thus leading to relative legitimisation or a desire to justify the existing social system (Figure 2).

These various presentations of sexism lead to the postulation of ambivalent sexism as a Machiavellian construct. As such, it appears favourable, but it is insidious and, at its core, patronising and disadvantageous since it condones underlying attitudes that maintain inequality (Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Oliver et al., 2018). Particularly in its benevolent form, it constitutes a type of pseudo support for women in corporate entities, as reflected in the favourable descriptions assigned to women, which women largely welcome (Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). This very support, though, becomes the mechanism used to control women and keep them in their societally designated place, ultimately reinforcing gender inequality (Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Oliver et al., 2018; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). As Hideg and Ferris (2016) explain, women are viewed positively and even promoted on condition that they adopt 'feminine' positions or roles. The point is, no matter how prejudice (be it racism, classism or sexism) is deconstructed, its net effect is to place the target group at a distinct disadvantage (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

Society's ambivalence towards sexism is compounded by the fact that it can be simultaneously understood as an 'objective reality and as a subjective interpretation' (Dick, 2013, p. 662). This paints a stark, though realistic, picture of society as intrinsically dualistic, where attitudes are modified according to the present company or context, or how socially acceptable or personally rewarding they will be (Dick, 2013). Glick and Fiske (2011) explain that women are both adored and vilified in a love–hate dichotomy, depending on whether or not they are 'in character', as prescribed by social norms. When they step beyond these boundaries, they are penalised. While sexism is crafted as an androgenic construct, men and women may display sexist attitudes in various forms and to varying degrees.

Hideg and Ferris (2016) assert that benevolent sexism is intrinsically more dangerous than HS. Society tends to act or react quite strongly against overtly negative prejudice, which can reduce its prevalence (Dick, 2013). In the case of benevolent sexism, with its characteristic dulcet tones, the danger lies in its well-concealed intention to keep women in distinctly feminine roles. This goes unnoticed under the guise of compassion and support. Benevolent sexism appears magnanimous and may, in some situations, produce positive outcomes, like swelling the ranks of female employees through the implementation of employment equity programmes. However, it may also contribute to gender inequality if it favours women for 'feminine' positions, while leaving women largely underrepresented in senior, male-dominated structures (Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Oliver et al., 2018).

Oliver et al. (2018), having probed the post-promotion environment following the appointment of female CEOs, and with reference to agency and stewardship theories, suggested that firms are more likely to adopt a collaborative rather than a control orientation, particularly in the board chair–CEO relationship. The collaborative stance of the board chair, while appearing to be generous and positive, is directly attributable to benevolent sexism. In this context, women are viewed as 'more conducive to or in need of, this kind of relationship' (Oliver et al., 2018, p. 113). This translates into women being regarded as 'weaker' or inept and therefore needing male guidance and mentoring. Notably, the more female board members there are, the less likely it is that benevolent sexism will be in evidence. This points to the persistence of tokenism and how greater numbers of women have an attenuating effect on stereotypical or benevolent sexist attitudes (Kanter, 1977; Konrad et al., 2008; Oliver et al., 2018).

With the above in mind, a further dissection of extant literature reveals the 'talent pipeline' and 'lack of skill or qualifications' as the usual explanations for sexist attitudes, but these can easily be disproven in the current climate of a highly qualified and skilled female labour force (Chizema et al., 2015; Eagly & Wood, 2011; Ely et al., 2011; Glass & Cook, 2016). Indeed, there is growing evidence, emanating from tertiary institutions worldwide, that the number of women

with degrees exceeds that of men, both in the graduate and postgraduate sectors. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) panel data, for example, provide evidence of the expanding female talent pool (OECD, 2019). Across OECD countries, 38% of men aged 25 years to 34 years have graduated from a tertiary institution compared to 50% of women in this age group. This qualification gap between women and men has been widening consistently over the past 10 years.

In addition, previous studies (see Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 2011, 2018) assert that there is a strong, positive correlation between HS and older participants, that is, > 64 years to 75 years of age, and an inverse correlation between education attainment levels and sexism. Benevolent sexism, however, was found to be significantly higher in men across all age categories (Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 2011, 2018). From these age-related findings, the relationships are moderated only when sexism scores are at their lowest, which is among those aged 34 years to 45 years with sexism levels reaching a peak among those aged 65 years and above. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how sexism manifests between men and women across different age demographics.

Extant literature clearly demonstrates the pervasiveness of gender inequality among the top management of corporate entities, with a golden thread of ambivalence arguably tying together all three barriers to the advancement of women – psychological, institutional, and organisational.

Research questions

Given the general sensitivity surrounding topics that imply direct discrimination against any target group, ambivalent sexism is measured using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Having been validated across a wide range of countries and cultures, the ASI was adopted to evaluate the concept of sexism in the South African corporate context.

The key literature that informed the development of the research questions came from Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001, 2011, 2018). Glick and Fiske not only measure ambivalent sexism at a societal level but also provide insights into the variables that form the construct. Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013) replicated the technique in a study conducted in Spain, using a similar scale to the original one by Glick and Fiske, which was used to confirm the hypotheses appearing in Table 1. Stamarski and Son Hing (2015), Hideg and Ferris (2016) and Oliver et al. (2018) arrived at specific gender-based conclusions about the barriers that women potentially face at senior levels, and these were utilised to develop questions and hypotheses, as shown in Table 1.

To understand the potency of sexism, it is important to establish whether there are intrinsic or significant differences

TABLE 1: Hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Research question	Literature
H_0: There is no significant difference in ambivalent sexism between men and women.	RQ 1: What are the differences in ambivalent sexism between men and women?	Eagly and Mladinic (1994); Eagly and Karau (2002); Heilman (1994).
H_1: There is a significant difference in ambivalent sexism between men and women.		
H_0: There is no significant difference in ambivalent sexism between different age categories.	RQ 2: What are the differences in ambivalent sexism between different age categories?	Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001, 2011, 2018); Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013).
H_2: There is a significant difference in ambivalent sexism between different age categories.		
H_0: There is no significant relationship between the higher-order constructs of ambivalent sexism (hostile and benevolent sexism).	RQ 3: What are the significant relationships between the higher-order constructs of ambivalent sexism (benevolent and hostile sexism)?	Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001, 2011, 2018); Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013).
H_3: There is a significant relationship between the higher-order constructs of ambivalent sexism (hostile and benevolent sexism).		

in the views of men and women when it comes to proposing levers or mechanisms to induce change.

RQ 1: What are the differences in ambivalent sexism between men and women?

In understanding if age contributes to current levels of sexism, then diversity of ages in top management structures could be motivated as another lever to minimise the impact of such sexist tendencies in decision-making.

RQ 2: What are the differences in ambivalent sexism between different age categories?

The relationship between hostile and benevolent sexism is critical for determining the strength of prevailing sentiments and for offering clues regarding which forms of sexism to be aware of, which can therefore be targeted among decision-makers in the upper echelons of corporate entities.

RQ 3: What are the significant relationships between the higher-order constructs of ambivalent sexism (benevolent and hostile sexism)?

Research methods

The research methodology, design, and strategy adopted in this study were aimed at testing the hypotheses outlined previously via the research questions. The psychosocial constructs under investigation could have benefited from a mixed-method approach, but previous work done in the area (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2011, 2018; Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Oliver et al., 2018.) seemed to produce a significant level of relational insights from quantitative analyses, using previously tested psychological scales. For this reason, a quantitative approach was chosen as the methodology for this study.

Participants and procedure

Participation in the study was organised through a web-based survey sent to 200 randomly selected companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) for the purpose of soliciting responses from board members, senior executives (e.g. chief executive officer, chief financial officer), directors, and senior managers of the listed entities. The time needed to complete the survey averaged from 7 min to 15 min. Table 2 provides the characteristics of the respondents. Respondents' companies were accessed from the JSE's publicly available knowledge database. Of the total 200 surveys sent, 172

TABLE 2: Participant characteristics ($N = 172$).

Sample	% of sample
Gender	
Male	47
Female	53
Age category (years)	
18–24	1
25–34	18
34–44	33
45–54	33
55–64	12
> 65	3
Position	
Board member	20
C-suite	30
Director	21
Senior manager	29

questionnaires were considered valid and usable for the research, representing an 86% response rate. We note that the current study's sample had $N_{males} = 81$ and $N_{females} = 91$, compared to similar studies by Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013) and Glick and Fiske (2018) with $N_{males} = 48$ and 46, respectively, and $N_{females} = 52$ and 55, respectively. All respondents held senior positions within their organisations.

All respondents were asked to complete demographic and company-specific questions (i.e. gender, age group, position, number of people in C-suite, Board, senior executive committee, senior management positions by gender) and a survey measuring HS and benevolent sexism as sub-scales of the ASI developed by Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001, 2011, 2018). In addition to the ASI, items measuring HS and benevolent sexism were included, primarily to add workplace context, which were adopted from Stamarski and Son Hing (2015), Hideg and Ferris (2016), Oliver et al. (2018), Heilman (2001), Heilman and Eagly (2008), Glick and Fiske (2001), Baker and Cangemi (2016), and Cook and Glass (2014). The final survey had a total of 38 items. All respondents were provided with a consent statement outlining the purpose of the research and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Validity of the measures was established on the basis of criterion validity through Pearson's correlations (Zikmund et al., 2013). In addition, the measures were rigorously tested across multiple contexts and were found to demonstrate high validity (Glick & Fiske, 2011, 2018). Reliability was established through Cronbach's alpha (Hair et al., 2019; Tswane et al., 2023).

Generally, a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.6 is advocated (Taber, 2017). However, Mertler (2015) suggests Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 and greater for social science research. Each of the measures achieved a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7, and is reported on below.

Measures

Hostile sexism

Hostile sexism was measured through 15 items. Eleven items were adopted directly from the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996). A sample item was 'Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist'. The first additional HS item was adopted from Heilman (2001) and Heilman and Eagly (2008); the second additional item was adopted from Glick and Fiske (2001) and Baker and Cangemi (2016); the third additional item was adopted from Heilman (2001), Baker and Cangemi (2016) and Cook and Glass (2014); and the fourth additional item was adopted from Oliver et al. (2018). A sample item was 'Men are likely to be technically more proficient'. Seven items were subsequently removed, as there were no inter-item correlations above 0.3. Eight remaining items had a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$.

Benevolent sexism

Benevolent sexism was measured through 15 items as well. Eleven items were adopted directly from the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996). A sample item was 'Many women have the quality of purity that few men have'. The first additional benevolent sexism item was adopted from Stamarski and Son Hing (2015); the second additional item was adopted from Hideg and Ferris (2016) and Oliver et al. (2018); the third additional item was adopted from Hideg and Ferris (2016); and the fourth additional item was adopted from Glick and Fiske (2001). Two items were subsequently removed, as there were no inter-item correlations above 0.3. The remaining 13 items had a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.

Response options for HS and benevolent sexism were measured on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree: (1) to strongly agree (5). A factor analysis was conducted to confirm the factor structure, using principal component analysis (PCA) and the Eigenvalue rule of 1. Hostile sexism's eight items, loaded on a single factor, accounted for 52.28% of the variance; therefore, we extracted one factor. In contrast, benevolent sexism's 13 items, loaded on three factors, accounted for 57.00% of the variance; therefore, we extracted three factors. We summed the benevolent sexism factors referred to in each sub-factor:

1. Sub-factor 1: Protective paternalism;
2. Sub-factor 2: Gender differentiation; and
3. Sub-factor 3: Heterosexual intimacy.

Controls

Following Glick and Fiske (1995, 1996, 2001, 2011), we did not account for control variables.

TABLE 3: Mean, standard deviation and Cronbach's alpha for variables under study.

Variables	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Hostile sexism	4.23	0.96	0.73
Benevolent sexism (protective paternalism)	3.67	1.05	0.77
Benevolent sexism (gender differentiation)	3.79	1.17	0.75
Benevolent sexism (heterosexual intimacy)	3.92	1.12	0.72

SD, standard deviation; M, mean.

TABLE 4: Mean, standard deviation and cross-correlations for variables under study.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Hostile sexism	4.23	0.96	-	-	-	-
Benevolent sexism (protective paternalism)	3.67	1.05	0.48*	-	-	-
Benevolent sexism (gender differentiation)	3.79	1.17	0.27*	0.50*	0.57*	-
Benevolent sexism (heterosexual intimacy)	3.92	1.12	0.33*	0.57*	0.41*	-

SD, standard deviation; M, mean.
*, $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations (SDs) and internal reliability of the variables of interest. Prior to testing our hypotheses, we checked our factor structure against the existing literature and found that the factor structure (single factor for benevolent sexism and three factors for HS) was congruent with previous studies by Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013) and Glick and Fiske (2018).

H1 stated that there are no significant differences between hostile and benevolent sexism constructs in different age categories. We omitted the 18 years to 24 years and > 65 years age categories because of small sample sizes of 2 and 5, respectively, when conducting the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test. We found no significant differences between hostile and benevolent sexism and the different age categories ($p > 0.05$). These results support prior work done by Glick and Fiske (1996).

H2 stated that there should be no differences between men and women in hostile and benevolent sexism scores. Results from the independent sample's t-test ($N_{males} = 81$; $N_{females} = 9$) showed that women exhibited higher HS scores ($M = 4.33$, SD = 1.05) than men ($M = 4.11$, SD = 0.83). In terms of benevolent sexism's sub-factors, for protective paternalism, women exhibited higher scores ($M = 3.98$, SD = 1.03) than men ($M = 3.31$, SD = 0.97); similarly, for gender differentiation, women exhibited higher scores ($M = 3.89$, SD = 1.27) than men ($M = 3.69$, SD = 1.04); and finally, for heterosexual intimacy, women again exhibited higher scores ($M = 4.33$, SD = 1.08) than men ($M = 3.59$, SD = 1.08). The results for H2 indicate no significant differences between men and women in respect of HS ($t = -1.52$, $p > 0.05$) and gender differentiation ($t = -1.13$, $p > 0.05$). However, we found significant differences between men and women in respect of protective paternalism ($t = -4.35$, $p < 0.05$) and heterosexual intimacy ($t = -3.85$, $p < 0.05$).

H3 stated that there should be no significant relationship between hostile and benevolent sexism scores. Results from the Spearman's correlation co-efficient (ρ) indicated that all

relationships between HS scores and each of the sub-factors of benevolent sexism scores were positive ($\rho > 0$) and significant ($p < 0.05$) (see Table 4).

Discussion

This study largely ratified previous findings from factor analyses and correlations, except for one significant finding in terms of both HS and benevolent sexism levels in women. Across the sample, women in senior management exhibited higher scores on both constructs, in direct opposition to previous work done by Glick and Fiske (1996, 2018) and Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013).

There were marginally more female respondents (91) than male respondents (81). This split was fairly consistent across the various studies. Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013) reported a similar split of 52% women and 48% men in their research, which was also comparable across the five studies conducted by Glick and Fiske (1996, 1997, 2001, 2011, 2018). This implies that no biases were brought into the study as a result of uneven ratios of male-to-female participants.

The majority of respondents (65.7%) were between the ages of 34 years and 54 years. The results of the Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013) study showed significantly higher HS scores among men in all age groups and higher benevolent sexism scores among men up to 54 years of age. Their conclusion was that sexism increases with age but not in a linear fashion. High benevolent sexism scores were found among those between the ages of 14 years and 18 years. Benevolent sexism scores then decreased among those between the ages of 34 years to 54 years and then increased progressively among those in older age categories, in a U-shaped graph.

The current study was firmly placed within the upper echelons of management. It therefore did not test the two outlying age segments mentioned in previous studies – that is, teenagers or very young adults (there were only two respondents < 24 years of age) and the elderly to geriatric populations (there were only five respondents > 65 years of age). These outlying groups were not the specific focus of this study. Generally lower HS and benevolent sexism scores were found among women (Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2018).

The majority of respondents held senior positions, ranging from direct board members, executive committee members, C-suite and executive members, to presidents and departmental heads (83.1%). Of this figure, 12.2% were senior managers and possibly decision-makers in their organisations. This clearly highlights that the appropriate sample given the objectives of the study was achieved. It should be noted that 16.9% of the respondents did not answer the question relating to position in their company, possibly indicating the expected sensitive nature of the study.

From the data collected in this study on HS, the mean score was 4.23 (SD = 0.96), highlighting that respondents were in

slight agreement regarding the constructs that revealed HS. This was expected, judging from previous studies in this area. What was not expected, however, was that this score would be higher among women. This means that HS is still a characteristic readily observed in the workplace in the upper echelons of management, despite declining levels of HS being observed worldwide (Glick & Fiske, 2011).

That women exhibited higher scores for HS, though, is open to interpretation. The scale breaks the constructs down into sentiments that a man would express to a woman, meaning that it measures sexism where the man is the perpetrator and the woman is the target. This is consistent with the original definition of sexism, cited in Glick and Fiske (1996), as antipathy or hostility towards women. A display of HS by women against women may confirm theories about high inter-female competitiveness, as would be evident at this level of corporates, or less tolerance of underperformance or domestic traits among women, by a subset of their peers (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Artz & Taengnoi, 2016). The results of this study seem to lend credence to those theories.

From the data collected in this study on benevolent sexism (BS 1) (protective paternalism), the mean score was 3.67 (SD = 1.05), highlighting that respondents were in slight agreement regarding protective paternalism. This finding is supported by corroborated findings across two comparative studies by Glick and Fiske (1996, 1997) and Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013). This suggests that men and women who exhibited similar scores for this construct have attitudes that either perpetrate or tolerate a protective, reassuring and mentoring approach to women or condone men's display of protective paternalism.

Other studies confirm the characteristic of women being more forgiving of people who, while still exhibiting some level of sexism, give women positive affirmation (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Oliver et al., 2018). We were disappointed to see that, despite higher levels of education and more robust discussions about legislation aimed at driving employment equity and gender parity in South Africa, women are still not discerning enough to distinguish positive affection from limiting behaviours. Women's lack of discernment or insight helps to explain the 'self-reinforcing nature' of sexism evident in Stamarski and Son Hing's (2015) discourse on gender inequalities in the workplace.

From the data collected in this study on benevolent sexism (BS 2) (gender differentiation), the mean score was 3.79 (SD = 1.17), highlighting that respondents were in slight agreement regarding gender differentiation. This finding is supported by Heilman and Eagly (2008) and Eagly and Karau (2002). It suggests that men and women have very prescriptive ideologies about the behaviours of each sex. Hence, they use serious lenses when viewing discrimination between the sexes. While a strong sense of identity could be seen as an

advantage in leaders, particularly those in powerful positions, it is also a potential source of weakness, from an organisational standpoint, when their chosen lens prompts some to impose agentic penalties on women who step out of their prescribed character. These findings ratify previous research on gender differentiation and prescriptive ideologies (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

From the data collected in this study on benevolent sexism (BS 3) (heterosexual intimacy), the mean score was 3.92 (SD = 1.12), highlighting that respondents were in slight agreement regarding heterosexual intimacy. This finding is supported by Glick and Fiske (1996, 1997, 2001, 2011). It suggests that both men and women value or positively accept their role as intimate partners but that this often leads to both sexes viewing it as their primary role or a tool with which to manipulate the opposite sex (Glick & Fiske, 2018). This is alluded to in several discussions on social roles theory and corroborates suggestions of the complicated interactions between men and women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Eagly & Wood, 2011; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Given that this study aligned with tests conducted over a larger sample size by Glick and Fiske (1996) and Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013), it was again surprising that all these constructs were marginally higher among women.

Conclusion

This study sought to advance the theory that ambivalent sexism is a contender for the reported dearth of women in the upper echelons of corporate entities globally, and particularly in South Africa where there is an entrenched culture of inequality. In attempting to explain the underrepresentation of women at the executive level in South African firms, it became evident that further research is required to confirm the pervasiveness of ambivalent sexism as a contributor to the phenomenon, particularly as it pertains to the condoning and perpetuation of sexist practices by both sexes. While no causation can be inferred, there is substantive corroborative research globally that attests to the effects of sexism on decision-makers' actions (Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Oliver et al., 2018; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015; Thams et al., 2018).

Despite the inability to say conclusively that sexism is at play, we were able to illustrate that the concept of gender differentiation can present as sexist beliefs and has an inherent ambivalence, as described by Glick and Fiske (1996, 2018). They also confirmed the findings from previous studies (Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 2011, 2018) by drawing similar correlations with respect to the age and gender constructs and their relationship with ambivalent sexism. The goal of arriving at conceptual clarity about the factors contributing to sexism was accomplished through a comprehensive analysis of previous literature on gender discrimination and its influence on decision-making

processes in the appointment of women to the upper echelons of management (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Hideg & Ferris, 2016; Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Konrad et al., 2008; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). Ambivalent sexism has an important influence on women's ascent up the organisational ladder, but mostly in its benevolent form, as the world is seeing a decline in HS (Glick & Fiske, 2011, 2018). The literature does confirm sexism as a key contributor to gender inequality at the executive level.

The findings from this study corroborate the work done on a much larger scale by Glick and Fiske (1996). No differences in the levels of ambivalent sexism were noted between different age categories. However, the category in which Glick and Fiske found significant differences in HS (64 years to 75 years) was not tested in this study as all participants were of working age. Consequently, Hypothesis 1 (H1) did not reveal any significance in terms of the influence of age on ambivalent sexism. The implication of this is that, short of having large numbers of elderly people (64 years to 75 years) in upper echelon management structures, age is not a factor that corporates must be mindful of when seeking to redress gender bias and the negative effects of sexism in the workplace.

Regarding Hypothesis 2 (H2) which suggests that there would be no differences between men's and women's scores, the null hypothesis was rejected, as there were statistically significant differences between the genders. Overall, ASI scores showed differences between male and female respondents, with a clear significance in benevolent sexism scores. These were higher for both men and women, compared to previous studies (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2011; Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2013), but, interestingly, were more significant among women in the current study. It would appear that, as much as sexism is purported in the existing literature to be directed by men towards women, sexism can go either way or be directed by women towards women. This finding further suggests that, in the quest to redress racial inequality in South Africa in the face of glaring historical evidence, gender discrimination may not have been given adequate attention – partly because of the clarity surrounding the concept of racism but the lack of clarity surrounding the concept of sexism in its many forms (Dick, 2013; Eagly & Wood, 2011).

Gender differentiation, as identified by the construct BS 2 in the current study, was significantly higher for women in South Africa as BS scores for women were higher than those for men, evidenced in a significant difference of 0.50, with a medium effect size of 0.57 ($0.5 < d < 0.8$) at the 95% significance level ($p = 0.00$). This clearly demonstrates that women have a very strong notion of what women are or should be, and affirms the concept of gender differentiation (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Eagly & Wood, 2011; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Eagly, 2008). The implications of these findings are significant in that they clear the way for an investigation of sexism as a female construct as well and

what this might mean for women's ascent up the corporate ladder, as alluded to in previous research (Maume, 2011; Maume & Ruppanner, 2015). At a pragmatic level in business, mechanisms to address gender inequality in the workplace need to be clearer and more nuanced because of the deep psychosocial beliefs among both men and women that continue to constrain efforts to arrest gender discrimination. As the results of this study indicate, protective paternalism may perpetuate or even tolerate a protective, reassuring and even mentoring approach aimed at providing a sense of 'protection' or 'assistance'.

While gender differentiation is strongly correlated with sexism in South Africa, protective paternalism ranks highest when one views the correlations between ambivalent sexism and women's representation in the upper echelons of management. A strong sense of a male or female identity is not necessarily seen as a problem (Eagly & Wood, 2011; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Eagly, 2008). In fact, strong identities are seen to contribute to confidence, self-belief and determination, which are regarded as predictors of successful leaders (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Barbuto & Gilford, 2010). Gender differentiation acknowledges that men and women have firm beliefs about their own and others' roles as men and women.

Study limitations

The study was significantly smaller than previous studies, thus limiting the generalisability of any of the findings. As a result, the study's scope and scale could qualify as limitations. In addition, the nature of the instrument elicited views that were based on, or interpreted from, an androgenic perspective. This could be construed as male bias. It was assumed that only men could answer specific questions, prompting the view that sexism is a male-led construct, which the findings from this study contest. Race was omitted from the analysis because of the complexities surrounding underrepresentation of certain race groups in the upper echelons of management in South Africa, where inequality has both a gender and a racial dimension.

Suggestions for future research

As pointed out, race was not factored in as a descriptive, as it would have added another layer of complexity (over and above sexism) to decisions surrounding upper-echelon appointments. It is therefore suggested that future research consider the impact of race on decision-making in the South African context. In addition, it may be more impactful to carry out this research as a mixed-method or qualitative study with a view to generating richer data and a more holistic understanding of the topic. It is also recommended that future research broadens the scope of the study and uses a larger sample.

Another possibility is to amend or extend the ASI to have a more gender-neutral tone or one that takes cognisance of the fact that sexism as a construct applies to both sexes, especially in the light of declining HS scores, as recorded by Glick and Fiske (2011, 2018) and Garaigordobil and Aliri (2013), and the high levels of sexism displayed by women in this study. The questions were largely weighted from the standpoint of sexism being a male-led construct, which predisposes them to having a sexist slant. The declining HS scores, while serving as a beacon of hope in the war against gender inequality in the upper echelons of corporate entities, also present an opportunity for a qualitative analysis of the topic, thus highlighting how society is evolving and what the implications are for the future of management.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

V.N., M.M. and M.D.C. contributed equally to this article.

Ethical considerations

The participation in the research was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without penalty. All data reported are without identifiers, and all information is anonymous and confidential. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) Research Ethics Committee.

Funding information

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, M.D.C.

Disclaimer

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