

Sexism, Vocational Goals, and Motivation as Predictors of Men's and Women's Career Choice

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Abstract In the present study we analyzed the impact of vocational goals, sexist attitudes toward women, and motivation on career choice, in a sample of 448 Spanish college students (65.2% women and 34.1% men). Although we found some similarities between men and women in terms of their motivational orientations (extrinsic vs. intrinsic) and vocational goals, men's extrinsic motivations appear to differ depending on the college major. We also found differences in sexist attitudes toward women by gender and chosen major: both male and female students enrolled in technical majors reported the most sexist attitudes (both hostile and benevolent). These findings underline the importance of taking sexist attitudes toward women into account in attempts to explain gender differences in career choice, something which has been largely overlooked in the research to date.

Keywords Sexism · Motivation · Vocational goals

The political and social changes that have taken place in Spain over the past few decades in the interest of equality between the sexes have allowed a large number of women to obtain a higher education and thus be guaranteed a place in the public sphere. Before such changes occurred, women generally were segregated from public life and relegated to the privacy of family life. Nowadays, as many Spanish women as men receive formal education, and women represent 60% of the Spanish college undergraduate student population (MEC, 2004).

Data on Working Population by Gender

Not only are women enrolled in formal education to the same extent as men are, they are obtaining excellent academic

results (more than one-half of the college valedictorians—only three are chosen nationally for each major—were women during the 2002–2003 academic year; BOE, 2004). However, what is surprising, and indeed discouraging, is that despite such academic achievements, women still have not attained the same presence in the working world that men have. In fact, there is still a relatively small percentage of women who work outside the home (35.9% of the total Spanish workforce are women, as compared to 43.9% in the European Union overall; Instituto de la Mujer, 2003).

Spain is, in fact, the country in the European Union with the greatest gap between men and women in terms of employment. In Spain, 25.1% more men than women are employed, followed by Italy (25.0% difference) and Greece (24.1%); the average European gender gap is 17.1% (MTAS, 2004). In addition, almost twice as many Spanish women as men are unemployed and looking for work (15.56% women vs. 8.2% men), and the difference between men's and women's gross annual income is 29% (INE, 2002).

Fields of Study by Gender

One possible explanation for such differences in men's and women's income and employment status may be the differential enrollment of women and men in the various college majors. In our country, the distribution of college students among the different fields of study is still largely determined by gender. Women represent only one-fourth of all graduates in technical fields, whereas in the remaining degrees, three of every four graduates is a woman (MEC, 2004). It is not surprising, this difference is similarly reflected in the working world, where women are notably under-represented in those fields associated with physical sciences, engineering, and applied mathematics (Gardner, 1998). This has led to vertical segregation, in which women and men are found on distinct levels of any given hierarchy, each of which has its corresponding degree of status and power. Occupational

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segregation is now considered to be largely responsible for the wage differential in the job market, as well as the difference in prestige in what are traditionally considered “men’s jobs” and “women’s jobs” (Reskin & Padavic, 1994).

Work Goals and Motivation

Men and women tend to choose different career paths, but it appears that for both genders it is the interest in a given career that plays the central role in choice of a future occupation (Morgan, Isaac, & Sansone, 2001). The key, then, is to understand why women and men are interested in different career options. Sansone and Harackiewicz (1996) offered a possible explanation; their Self Regulation Model is based on the premise that women and men differ in the goals they wish to achieve from a particular vocation and that their career choices are likely to depend in large part on their expectation that their objectives will be met. Motivation and vocational goals, then, appear to follow different patterns for women and men. When choosing a career, women continue to value interpersonal goals—such as self-determination, helping people, or working in a pleasant environment—more highly than other types of goals (Morgan et al., 2001; Morgan & Sansone, 1995; Strough, Berg, & Sansone, 1996). Men’s goals appear, however, to be more in line with models of extrinsic motivation; hence, they tend to aspire to such things as earning a good income or achieving a certain professional status (Eccles, 1994).

Thus, if women place a great deal of importance on interpersonal goals when choosing their future career, they will be unlikely to perceive scientific fields as enticing, given that these largely involve individual work and impersonal working environments, neither of which would satisfy their interpersonal objectives. In contrast, those individuals—more often men—who consider extrinsic sources of motivation more rewarding will tend to find scientific and mathematical fields appealing, because these are perceived as offering greater prestige and the opportunity to earn a higher income (Eccles, 1994). In this way, it appears that long-term vocational goals—or more precisely the expectation that these will be met—play a part in men’s and women’s different interest levels in various career options.

Stereotypes and Sexist Attitudes

It is important to bear in mind that men and women do not “construct” their preferences and interests in isolation, but rather are immersed in a broad social context, which includes social norms and values, most notably those that are considered “appropriate” for each sex. A recent meta-analysis by Fonad and Byars-Winston (2005) pointed out the need to incorporate external factors in attempts to

understand how women and men make their career choices, as well as the need to take gender into account in future studies of this phenomenon.

We suggest, then, that gender stereotypes which are present in most cultures are an important variable to consider in examinations of women’s and men’s divergent expectations and interests, as well as the decisions they make, both in their public and private lives. For instance, Jacobs and Eccles (2000) found that when young participants were asked what job they would like to have when they are 30 years old, the boys chose stereotypically “masculine” jobs, whereas the girls chose traditionally “feminine” jobs.

Gender stereotypes refer to characteristics (traits) and behaviors (roles) associated with gender in a given culture. In Western cultures, men are considered to be independent and aggressive and to live a largely public life, whereas women are considered to be dependent and emotional and to live a largely private life (i.e., men are agentic and women are communal; Eagly 1995). Instruments that measure sexist attitudes toward women make it possible to detect to what extent individuals have internalized or, on the contrary, overcome such gender stereotypes.

A recent theoretical addition to the study of gender stereotypes came from Glick and Fiske (1996), who offered a model of ambivalent sexist attitudes in interpersonal contexts (as compared to a social model elaborated by Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). According to those authors, sexist attitudes toward women function at two levels. The first is more overtly hostile with a negative affective tone, termed Hostile Sexism (HS), in which women who do not comply with their “legitimate” role of mother and wife are frowned upon. A second type of ambivalent sexism, called Benevolent Sexism (BS), has a more positive affective tone, but is in essence no less sexist; in this view, women are “valued” for their roles as mother and wife, but are scorned if they should fail to fulfill these roles adequately.

In the present study, we thought that it would be especially enlightening to examine the extent to which young people’s adherence to sexist attitudes influences their career choices. By doing so, we hoped to help shed light on how young people go about making long-term decisions about their future careers. The objective of the present study, therefore, was to identify any existing connections between the following variables as they affect choice of college major: motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic), work goals, and sexist attitudes toward women. We hypothesized, that those who are more extrinsically motivated and who value a good income and status more than helping others as a part of their jobs would also be more likely to choose traditionally masculine majors—typically associated with power and status—such as technical degrees and that the majority of students who choose these fields would be men. In addition, we predicted that those who subscribe less to

stereotypical attitudes regarding gender roles would be less likely to choose traditional careers along gender lines. Accordingly, we predicted that young women with less gender-stereotyped attitudes will be more likely to choose technical or scientific majors.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The sample was composed of 448 participants, 65.6% women ($n=293$) and 34.4% men ($n=155$), with a mean age of 20.6 years ($SD=3.6$). Participants were randomly selected from among the undergraduate student body at the University of Vigo (Spain). They agreed to take part in the study voluntarily and were not offered any financial compensation for their participation.

Instruments

Spanish translation of the Work Preference Inventory (WPI) and Personal Importance of Vocational Goals The Spanish spoken in Spain is referred to as Castilian. The Spanish participants completed a Castilian version of *Work Preference Inventory* (WPI) and *Personal importance of vocational goals*, which was developed using the back-translation method devised by Brislin (1980). Using standard Spanish–English and English–Spanish dictionaries, one Spanish person (who is bilingual) undertook the translation of the *Work Preference Inventory* (WPI) and *Personal importance of vocational goals* items into Spanish. Using the same dictionaries, a second bilingual individual (whose mother tongue was English) independently translated the material back into English. We then compared the back-translated version with the initial English version, arranged for the two translators to discuss discrepancies, and generated further translations until we arrived at a final set of Spanish *Work Preference Inventory* (WPI) and *Personal importance of vocational goals* items that both translators agreed best operationalized the condition of being symmetrically translatable to the English originals.

Questionnaires on sociodemographic variables Information was first obtained on the sex of the participants and the majors they were studying. The students were then divided into three groups by major: (1) *Social and Legal Sciences and Humanities degrees* (84.1% women and 15.9% men). This group included: 5-year degrees in history, special education, business administration, and law; and 3-year degrees in primary school teacher's training, social work, and business studies; (2) *Experimental and Health Sciences* (71.8% women and 28.2% men). This group included a 5-year

degree in food science and technology, and a 3-year degree in nursing; (3) *Technical degrees* (40% women and 60% men). The degrees included in this group were: computer engineering (both 3- and 5-year programs), agricultural engineering (3 years), and agricultural and food engineering (3 years).

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) Students were asked to complete the Spanish version of this inventory, which was adapted by Expósito, Moya, and Glick (1998). This scale measures stereotypical beliefs about women in to scales. *Hostile sexism* refers to attitudes toward women with a negative affective tone; it is defined as prejudice against women, which considers them as inferior to men. *Benevolent sexism*, on the other hand, refers to attitudes with a positive affective tone that idealize the traditional roles of women and emphasize their weakness and need for protection. The inventory is comprised of 22 items, each of which is answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale (0=“completely disagree”; 6=“completely agree”). Higher scores represent more sexist attitudes. The Cronbach's alpha obtained in the present study was 0.88 for the scale as a whole, 0.89 for the hostile sexism (HS) subscale, and 0.86 for the benevolent sexism (BS) subscale.

Work Preference Inventory (WPI; Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994) This scale was designed to assess individual trait differences in extrinsic and intrinsic motivational orientation. Extrinsic motivation is defined as the desire or urge to perform a certain behavior based on the potential external rewards that may be received as a result, whereas intrinsic motivation is the motivation or desire to do something based on the enjoyment of the behavior itself rather than relying on or requiring external reinforcement. The questionnaire contains 30 items which are answered on a 4-point scale, from 1 (*never true of me*) to 4 (*always true of me*). The inventory includes two main scales for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The Cronbach's alpha obtained for this inventory in the present study was 0.70.

Personal Importance of Vocational Goals (Morgan et al., 2001) This scale contains eight items that answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranges from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 5 (*Very important*). It was designed to evaluate goals that participants would like to attain from an occupation. Each goal is preceded by the phrase: *It is important to me to...* (to be completed with the specific goal). The eight vocational goals included in the scale are as follows: (1) Have a career, not just a job; (2) Be recognized in my work; (3) Be the best in my work; (4) Have an occupation that allows me to help others; (5) Have an occupation that pays well; (6) Have an occupation that allows flexibility; (7) Have an occupation that allows time with my family; (8) Have an occupation that allows time

for travel and leisure. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the present sample was 0.70.

Results

Gender Differences in Choice of College Major

To examine whether women and men opted for different types of majors and whether their choice of major followed the gender stereotypical pattern, we were used a Chi-square analysis. Significant differences were found in terms of the percentage of men and women enrolled in the various degrees, Chi-square=81.95; $p<0.001$. As hypothesized, the data indicate that more men than women were enrolled in technical majors, whereas more women than men were enrolled in experimental or health sciences, social or legal sciences and humanities majors.

Gender Differences in Psychological Variables

Sexist attitudes The results pertaining to sexist attitudes (Hostile versus Benevolent) appear in Table 1 and are arranged by gender and field of study. Significant differences were found in the hostile sexism subscale, in which men showed higher levels of this type of sexist attitude, $F_{(2, 429)}=12.76$; $p<0.001$, than women did. Additional differences were found in field of study; both men and women in technical fields revealed higher levels of hostile sexism, $F_{(2, 429)}=12.76$; $p<0.001$, than did students in other fields. No significant gender differences were found in benevolent sexist attitudes; however, benevolent sexism was found to be significantly related to field of study, $F_{(2, 431)}=7.69$; $p<0.001$. Once again it was women and men studying for technical degrees who reported the most benevolent sexist attitudes toward women, which makes students in these majors the most sexist overall.

The results from the one-way ANOVA for the female participants indicate that the type of majors in which they were enrolled was related to both hostile sexism, $F_{(278, 2)}=3.75$; $p<0.05$, and benevolent sexism, $F_{(278, 2)}=3.29$; $p<$

0.05. The women enrolled in the technical majors reported the highest scores for both types of sexism. Similarly, the one-way ANOVA for the male participants showed there to be a significant relation between the type of degree and the level of both hostile sexism, $F_{(148, 2)}=10.64$; $p<0.001$, and benevolent sexism, $F_{(150, 2)}=5.95$; $p<0.01$. The male students enrolled in the technical majors showed the highest levels of hostile and benevolent sexism.

Motivation In terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, no significant differences were found between men and women. The only difference found was by field of study, $F_{(2, 431)}=3.21$; $p<0.05$; both men and women in technical fields and in experimental and health sciences reported higher levels of extrinsic motivation than students in other areas (see Table 1).

Vocational goals When we analyzed the results for vocational goals, we found that both women and men placed great importance on spending time with their families and that what interested them least was being the best at their job (see Table 2). We found significant differences by gender for the following goals: women considered helping others to be more important in a job men did, $F_{(2, 431)}=3.21$; $p<0.05$, and women considered being acknowledged for their work more important than men did, $F_{(1, 446)}=6.29$; $p<0.05$.

However, the most notable results were found when we examined vocational goals by field of study (see Table 2). Significant differences were found for the following vocational goals: receiving recognition for one's work, $F_{(2, 446)}=5.21$; $p<0.01$, being the best at one's job, $F_{(2, 445)}=3.99$; $p<0.01$, helping others, $F_{(2, 446)}=4.50$; $p<0.01$, earning a good income, $F_{(2, 446)}=3.63$; $p<0.05$, having flexibility in one's job, $F_{(2, 445)}=8.03$; $p<0.001$, and being able to dedicate time to travel and leisure activities, $F_{(2, 446)}=4.91$; $p<0.01$. It was the men and women enrolled in technical majors and experimental and health sciences who were most interested in being the best at their jobs, earning a good income, having flexibility in their jobs, and being able to dedicate time to travel and leisure activities. However, it was those students (both men and women) in the social and legal sciences and

Table 1 Means and standard deviations to compare sexist attitudes, motivational orientation, and vocational interest by gender.

	Mean (SD)					
	Experimental and health sciences		Social and legal sciences, and humanities		Technical	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Hostile sexism	2.52 (0.94)	3.76 (0.71)	2.27 (0.82)	3.22 (0.85)	2.60 (0.96)	4.10 (0.92)
Benevolent sexism	2.93 (0.95)	2.80 (0.83)	2.75 (0.97)	2.60 (0.85)	3.13 (1.00)	3.17 (0.82)
Intrinsic motivation	3.12 (0.34)	2.97 (0.43)	3.09 (0.33)	3.15 (0.44)	3.14 (0.36)	3.09 (0.35)
Extrinsic motivation	2.64 (0.43)	2.50 (0.29)	2.52 (0.36)	2.46 (0.41)	2.60 (0.37)	2.63 (0.35)

Table 2 Means and standard deviations to compare vocational goals by gender.

Vocational goals	Mean (SD)					
	Experimental and health sciences		Social and legal sciences, and humanities		Technical	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Career (vs. job)	4.30 (0.83)	4.21 (0.96)	4.23 (0.96)	3.85 (1)	4.18 (0.99)	4.39 (0.82)
Recognition	39.9 (0.99)	3.54 (1.2)	4.16 (0.88)	4.07 (0.97)	4.27 (0.79)	3.98 (0.98)
Be the best	3.20 (1.1)	2.84 (1.2)	3.26 (1)	3.53 (1.1)	3.42 (1.0)	3.41 (1.1)
Helping others	4.64 (0.59)	3.84 (0.90)	4.65 (0.63)	4.17 (0.94)	4.39 (0.71)	3.83 (0.95)
High pay	4.07 (0.74)	4.15 (0.79)	3.87 (0.83)	4.0 (0.98)	4.19 (0.81)	4.25 (0.77)
Flexibility	4.10 (0.79)	4.03 (0.80)	4.25 (0.83)	4.53 (0.69)	4.37 (0.83)	4.54 (0.54)
Family time	4.59 (0.62)	4.42 (0.61)	4.60 (0.71)	4.57 (0.57)	4.60 (0.73)	4.75 (0.61)
Leisure time	4.20 (0.83)	4.06 (0.93)	4.09 (0.99)	4.35 (0.78)	4.37 (0.81)	4.56 (0.72)

humanities who were most motivated to be recognized for their work and to help others. The only vocational goal that revealed a significant interaction between gender and field of study was having a professional career, $F_{(2, 446)}=3.06$; $p < 0.05$, although there was independent no significant effect either in terms of gender or field of study.

Discussion

In terms of gender equality, many things have changed for the better over the past decades, but others remain much the same. The results of our study confirm that Spanish men and women continue for the most part to choose professions in line with gender stereotypes; men opt more for technical majors and women for the social sciences and humanities. What is more, there are still clear differences in the sexist attitudes reported by women and men; male college students show more hostile sexist attitudes toward women than do female college students, regardless of the major they are studying. However, there does not appear to be a significant difference between men's and women's espousal of benevolent sexist attitudes, which has been found in Spain and beyond our borders in other studies of both student and general populations (e.g., Glick et al., 2000).

The results of the present study also indicate that one's field of study is related to a greater or lesser adherence to sexist attitudes. Those who study technical fields (both men and women) report more sexist attitudes than do students in other fields, both in the case of hostile and benevolent forms of sexism. As we expected at the outset of our study, male undergraduates enrolled in technical majors showed the most sexist attitudes (hostile and benevolent). This constitutes a clear alignment with gender stereotypes, as these fields are the ones most associated with masculinity, status, and power (Van den Eynde, 1994). However, what we did not expect to find was that the women enrolled in technical majors held significantly more, rather than less,

sexist attitudes (hostile and benevolent) than did female students in other majors.

Another surprising result from our study is that there were few observable differences between the motivations and vocational goals of the male and female participants. The data show clear similarities in women's and men's levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientation, although the men and women in technical fields and in experimental and health sciences had the highest extrinsic motivation. For both genders, it was important to spend time with family, and the least important thing was to be the best in their jobs. These findings are in line with those from other recent studies which show that the concept of true "success" is being associated more and more with the ability to combine work and family life (Jacobs & Eccles, 2002). However, we must bear in mind that women continue to place more importance on helping others in their jobs, and less importance on having prestige and status, than men do, a tendency that has been observed in recent studies outside of Spain as well (e.g., Greene & DeBacker, 2004).

We can sum up our findings by focusing on two interesting and novel conclusions from the results obtained in the present study. First, there is a clear tendency for men's and women's vocational goals and motivations to converge, although there are notable differences by field of study. Second, we found that contrary to expectation, women who have chosen technical majors reported more rather than less sexist attitudes (hostile and benevolent) than women in non-technical majors.

The latter of those two findings seems to suggest that the women enrolled in technical majors tend to identify with men and with men's stereotypes and attitudes. This may indicate that what those women are striving for is to place themselves in a traditionally "masculine" sector in order to enjoy the privileges of being "like" men. Thus, by aligning themselves with masculine stereotypes and attitudes, including sexist attitudes, they may hope to achieve men's status and power. If this interpretation is accurate, this tendency may be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, we want women to overcome gender stereotypes by

breaking out of the career mold in which they have been imprisoned for so long, but, on the other hand, the mere fact of moving into men's sphere may undermine the very goal of "liberation" that women hope to achieve. This leads us to wonder whether women, perhaps, have not advanced as far as we would like to think in our efforts to shed gender stereotypes and to achieve equality for the sexes.

The impact of different forms of sexism (i.e. benevolent and hostile) on career choice is likely to be a complex phenomenon to comprehend. For this reason, we are hopeful that the present study may act as a springboard for future research on the topic of gender inequality in academic and professional settings. We also hope that future researchers will be able to confirm our results, both in other European countries and outside of Europe, as well as to propose new explanations and variables that will lead to a greater understanding of the factors involved in men's and women's choice of major and, ultimately, their career choices.

The potential importance of a more equal distribution of women and men in the various college majors and, ultimately, in all sectors of the job market is far-reaching, but by no means will it be an easy task. As we have seen, numerous factors affect the decision-making process as adolescents prepare to go to college and are faced with potentially life-altering choices. And, in terms of the financial repercussions for working men and women, the statistics speak for themselves. Perhaps what is needed are more complex, long-term programs designed to address the root of the problem (i.e., sexism and gender stereotypes) if any advances are going to be made toward the ultimate goal of gender equality.

To conclude, we believe that the results of the present study point out the importance of factors such as sexist attitudes in perpetuating the age-old problem of gender inequality in academic spheres and in the job market. If we truly desire a more egalitarian society with equal representation of the sexes, not only in academic settings but also in the working world, we must make ambitious changes in the way we deal with this issue. We, therefore, maintain that future interventions aimed at promoting equality, harmony, and mutual understanding among women and men should focus on one primary aim: to reduce the gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes that continue to burden our societies and impede true equality.

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