

Benevolent Sexism Predicts Gender Differences in the Distribution of Challenging Developmental Experiences at School

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Abstract

Existing research converges on the finding that females are attributed less agency than males, with one of the consequences being that they are allotted less challenging tasks than their male counterparts. We hypothesized that benevolent sexism accounts for this tendency. Hence, we predicted that parents advocate for the allotment of less challenging tasks to girls than to boys at school as a function of their endorsement of benevolent sexism. We tested for the effect using a sample of 153 Zimbabwean parents (103 female and 50 male; mean age of 34 years, $SD = 3.23$), whose female child was beginning form one. However, we also tested for other “control” variables—parents’ gender and their female child’s performance. Results indicated that benevolent sexism and the female child’s grade at grade 7 predicted the difference in scale of allotment of challenging tasks to boys versus girls. Taken together, these results suggest that benevolent sexism is the underlying sexist ideology that may limit girls’ exposure to challenging tasks and subjects at school, which may limit their chances of success and leadership later in their educational trajectories, and also in the occupations they would take in adulthood. Recommendations for changes in educational policy and related interventions are made in line with the present findings and existing literature.