Predicting gender awareness: the relevance of neo-sexism

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Predicting gender awareness: the relevance of neo-sexism

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Gender awareness implies the recognition of discrimination against women. Contemporary studies have shown that nowadays some people deny that gender inequality exists. This affirmation is based on covert sexist beliefs, which can go unnoticed, disappearing into the cultural norms. Those who consider themselves supporters of women’s rights may maintain non-traditional gender roles, but also exhibit subtle sexist beliefs. Therefore, neo-sexism is a useful concept in that it permits denial of the existence of discrimination and also upholds the belief that inequality is no longer a problem. Based on feminist identity research, this study shows that the effect of gender roles on gender awareness is mediated by neo-sexism. In women this effect was total, while in men it was partial. In this sense neo-sexism could be considered to be a factor in maintaining gender inequality and therefore an instrument of male dominance that impedes gender awareness.

Keywords: gender inequality; gender roles; neo-sexism; gender awareness; women; men

Introduction

At the socio-structural level, gender is a system of power relations. As Deborah Kerfoot and David Knights argue (1994), gender relations are a reflection of gendered subjectivities which in turn are constituted through power relations. On the individual level, gender is a social practice and is continually created and reconstituted by the activities of people (Connell 1987). Gender inequality does not involve repeated external coercion but can be reproduced and observed through the beliefs and actions of women and men who act in ways to generate male domination. These beliefs and actions are manifested both in the public and private spheres, as well as in different domains such as employment, family, care, policy, resources, etc.

Gender awareness implies the recognition of gender inequality and discrimination against women. Contemporary studies have shown that nowadays some people deny gender inequality and consider that discrimination against women is a thing of the past (Swim et al. 1995). One of the ways of changing gender inequality is by acquiring a feminist identity. Feminist identity should be understood as a process, not as a question of all or nothing. The model of feminist identity developed by Downing and Roush (1985) proposed the existence of a five-stage process, during which women change their attitudes.
The stages postulated were: (1) passive acceptance – the woman accepts traditional gender roles; (2) revelation – a time of crisis and of questioning previous roles; (3) embeddedness–emanation – the development of close emotional connections with other women for discharging anger; (4) synthesis – the integration of feminist values and development of a positive feminist identity; and (5) active commitment – characterized by involvement in collective action. An important stage in this process is ‘revelation’, the first step towards positive feminist identity, characterized by dualistic thinking regarding male–female relationships and in which women begin to question gender roles. In addition, intense self-examination and questioning of previous roles occur. Henderson-King and Stewart (1997) consider that this stage involves a change in the way in which the world is seen, but it cannot be considered as synonymous with feminist self-identification. In summary, this stage starts a crisis that could be considered as consciousness-raising and may or may not end up in a feminist identity. An assumption in the present research was that, before acquiring a politicized gender consciousness (Duncan 1999) it is necessary to recognize differences in power and status between women and men. Gender awareness is used in this study to refer to the experience of revelation, and to distinguish it from the Marxist meaning implicit in the concept of consciousness.

Although several studies have identified predictors of feminist identity (Henderson-King and Stewart 1994, Liss et al. 2001) there is less research regarding the relevance of these predictors in connection with gender awareness. However, we consider that research of this stage, both in men and in women, is extremely important because it is the first step in changing perspectives on gender.

Specifically, research into the predictors of feminist identity has shown that it is associated with liberal attitudes about gender roles (Cowan et al. 1992, Myaskovsky and Wittig 1997) and recognition of discrimination and the existence of sexism (Henderson-King and Stewart 1994, Williams and Wittig 1997).

A noteworthy theme in current socio-psychological research on sexism has been the refinement of the construct. Conceptualizations of sexism are not limited to old-fashioned indicators of sexism: negative attitudes and beliefs towards women. Currently, covert and subtle sexist beliefs are manifested in different ways (Swim and Campbell 2001). In fact, the concept of neo-sexism reflects the complexity of current beliefs about the status of women. For example, neo-sexist people are not necessarily opposed to equality and may even maintain non-traditional gender roles, but they deny the existence of discrimination against women (Swim and Cohen 1997). Therefore, this new form of sexism, that denies the existence of inequality and discrimination, can be related to non-traditional gender roles and it can prevent gender awareness, because this implies the recognition of discrimination against women. The focus of this study is to explore how gender role attitudes and this new form of sexism operate in the explanation of gender awareness.

**Gender roles and neo-sexism**

Gender roles derive from the general concept of the social role, which refers to the shared expectations that apply to people who occupy a certain social position or are members of a particular social category (Biddle 1979). Gender roles refer to beliefs, behaviors and attitudes that a society considers appropriate to women and men (Zucker 2001). Since they are to a great extent consensual, at the social level they exist as shared ideologies communicated among society members and they form an important part of the culture of society. Traditional gender roles are those in which there is an unequal distribution of power between men and women. Thus, it can be reasoned that traditional gender role
attitudes reflect individuals’ endorsement of social norms that link men to the public sphere and women to caring roles. Social research has shown that non-traditional attitudes towards gender roles are positively related to feminist identity (Cowan et al. 1992), and that people with a strong feminist identity reject traditional gender roles (Henderson-King and Stewart 1994).

Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) found that the recognition of discrimination and sex-based power inequities are related to feminist identity. According to the results of Renzetti (1987) and Rickard (1989), recognizing the existence of discrimination against women is a basic element in the process of becoming a feminist. Specifically, Henderson-King and Stewart (1997) point out that awareness of sexism is an outstanding predictor of the revelation stage. However, studies such as those by Cowan et al. (1992) and Williams and Wittig (1997) point out that the recognition of discrimination, although related, is not an appropriate predictor of feminist identity.

It is important to appreciate that nowadays the new form of sexism is manifested in people who do not recognize that discrimination exists. When researchers began assessing discrimination and sexism they measured this construct with visible, simple and unambiguous items, in which the word sexism was present. Currently, the danger is that as sexism becomes a less socially desirable trait, people are less likely to admit their attitudes.

The new forms of discrimination towards women are related to the rejection of changes in the status quo for gender relationships, and opposition to social policy changes that would benefit women. Modern sexist beliefs provide some indication of people’s orientation towards gender relations and feminist goals. Neo-sexism refuses to recognize that women are discriminated against and therefore that sexism actually exists. It is for this reason that, as a barrier to the recognition of the existence of discrimination, neo-sexism can be an explanatory element of gender awareness.

In general, new measures of sexism have proven more adequate in evaluating the perception of sex-based power inequities (Goodwin and Fiske 2001). An appropriate form of valuing neo-sexism is through instruments that measure the new form of negative feelings toward women. As Swim and Cohen (1997) show, the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim et al. 1995) and Neo-sexism Scale (Tougas et al. 1995), assess current levels of discrimination toward women. As Swim and Cohen said (1997, p. 105) neo-sexism scales ‘measure whether respondents tend to (a) deny the existence of discrimination against women, (b) resent complaints about discrimination, and (c) resent special “favors” for women’. Obviously, these three aspects are an obstacle to gender awareness. In fact, Tougas et al. (1999) have shown that the rejection of affirmative action programs, a feminist political strategy, has its origin in neo-sexism. Neo-sexist women and men are unsupportive of the women’s movement (Campbell et al. 1997), although they may maintain non-traditional gender roles. In fact, people who oppose programs of affirmative action are not necessarily opposed to equality. Since gender awareness implies the questioning of gender relations and the recognition of discrimination, it is probable that the neo-sexism mediates the relationships between gender roles and gender awareness. Specifically, it is hypothesized that the influence of gender roles on gender awareness is mediated by a new form of sexism.

Overview of the current study
As in other European countries, Swiss Constitutional Law has guaranteed equality of rights between the sexes since 1981. In addition, there are legislative measures (Equality Law, 1996) that aim to apply the equality principle which prohibits any form of
discrimination. So, in recent decades there has been progress but inequalities continue to exist. The Swiss Federal Statistical Office (http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index.html) shows that progress in the direction of equality is weak. For example, domestic tasks are shared by only 20% of couples (in all social classes), a third of women are ‘homemakers’ and more than half of other women have only a part-time job. According to Messant-Laurent et al. (1991) part-time work is a real trap, because it justifies the division of work by gender, the confinement of women in subordinate jobs and their assignment to domestic work. These inequalities are often considered to be a result of a natural order and not a social construction that divides and places individuals into a hierarchy on the basis of the sex assigned to them (Delphy 2001). Women, as well as men, tend thus to justify the gender relationships that organize the social roles. This process of justification allows men to maintain their privileges and it enables women to support the injustices with which they are confronted in daily life (Roux 2001).

In this context, this study analyzes attitudes towards gender awareness for the first time in Switzerland. Based on previous research, we would expect to find a negative relationship between neo-sexism and gender awareness and between traditional gender roles and gender awareness. We also expect to find lower levels of neo-sexism in women than among men and lower levels of gender awareness in men than in women. Finally, we expect to demonstrate that neo-sexism, as an indicator of gender inequality, mediates the relationship between gender roles and gender awareness.

Research method
Sampling framework
The participants in the study were 261 undergraduate students, 102 from different faculties of Geneva University and 159 undergraduate students of Political Sciences, at Lausanne University, Switzerland. Of these, 121 were male and 140 female; 90% were between the ages of 18 and 32. The mean age was 24.78 (SD = 8.92). The students were of different nationalities with the following distribution: 63.2% Swiss, 11.1% members of the European Union, 3.8% non-European Union members, 21.5% dual nationality (17.6% Swiss and European Union, and 3.8% Swiss and non-European Union). Data were collected during the spring of 2006. Surveys were administered to groups of students in class time and were submitted anonymously. The questionnaire took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

Questionnaire
Materials for this study were translated from English to French and afterwards from French to English once more to ensure the correct translation. Each questionnaire contains several measures which are listed below.

Neo-sexism
The Neo-sexism Scale (Tougas et al. 1995) was used to assess modern sexist beliefs. Neo-sexism is defined as the ‘manifestation of a conflict between egalitarian values and residual feeling toward women’ (Tougas et al. 1995, p. 842). This measure is covert because it measures attitudes toward feminist changes in society and not direct attitudes toward women. This scale has been used in several European samples with good results (Masser and Abrams 1999, Guimond et al. 2003). The Neo-sexism Scale consists of 11 items scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree).
Example items include ‘It is difficult to work for a female boss’ and ‘Women should not hold jobs ranking higher than men’. Higher scores in the scale indicate sexist attitudes. The reliability of the scale in this study was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.71$).

**Gender awareness**

As we are only interested in the first stage of feminist identity, the revelation subscale of the Feminist Identity Development Scale (Bargard and Hyde 1991) was used to assess gender awareness. This subscale evaluates the perception of the oppression of women and the beginning of consciousness of this situation as well as the crisis in which the traditional role is questioned. Bargard and Hyde’s Feminist Identity Development Scale (FIDS) is a suitable measure for male participants. Several research studies have proved the reliability and validity of the scale (Gerstmann and Kramer 1997). The FIDS was also tested by Ng et al. (1995) to determine its cross-cultural validity.

The revelation subscale is composed of seven items scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Example items are ‘When I see the way most men treat women, it makes me so angry’ and ‘It only recently occurred to me that I think that it is unfair that men have the privileges they have in this society simply because they are men’. In the item, ‘I am angry that I have let men take advantage of me’, the last word was replaced by the term ‘women’ in the men’s questionnaire. Responses were coded so that high scores represented higher gender awareness. In this study the reliability of the subscale was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.70$).

**Gender roles**

We measured gender roles using the Gender Role subscale of the Liberal Feminist Attitude and Ideology Scale (Morgan 1996). Specifically, 10 items compose the gender roles subscale, all of them referring to behaviors, beliefs and obligations that women and men should maintain in society. Example items are ‘If the husband is the sole wage earner in the family, the financial decisions should be his’ and ‘The first duty of a woman with young children is to home and family’. Other research studies have used this subscale to measure gender roles with adequate internal consistency (Roy et al. 2007). In order to adapt the subscale to Swiss society, two outdated items were eliminated: the first (‘It is insulting to the husband when his wife does not take his last name’) and the tenth (‘Women should be more concerned with clothing and appearance than men’). Items 7 (‘A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children’) and 11 (‘A man’s job is to earn money’) of the ISSP (2002) substituted these two items. The ISSP is a continuing annual program of cross-national collaboration on surveys covering topics of social science research. ISSP (2002) examined family and changing roles; participants included the USA, the UK, Germany, France and Switzerland. Thus a total of 10 items were used: four items refer to the woman’s role, four to the man’s role and two refer to the distribution of childcare and housework. The items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate more traditional gender roles. These items demonstrated very high internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$) in this study.

In addition, participants indicated their gender, age, qualifications and nationality.

**Research findings**

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for the scales are presented in Table 1.
A correlation analysis was performed to examine whether the constructs are related. The Pearson product-moment correlation matrix for the variables showed that the correlation between gender roles and neo-sexism is positive in men ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$) and in women ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). However, the correlation between gender roles and gender awareness is negative in both men ($r = -0.53$, $p < 0.001$) and women ($r = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$), with the difference being statistically significant ($z = -2.8$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the association of these elements differs according to sex, being much stronger in men than in women. Finally, gender awareness is negatively related to neo-sexism in men ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and in women ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$).

In order to test for the existence of statistically significant differences between men and women in the three variables measures, we carried out a variance analysis using gender as the factor. The results indicate that women maintain less traditional gender roles, are less sexist and show more gender awareness than men.\(^2\)

The result relating to the differential association found between roles and gender awareness is an indicator that there exists an element that can explain this difference. This is what we were testing for in the following analysis.

### Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for men and women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$r$</th>
<th>$z$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men ($n = 121$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Neo-sexism</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.64*</td>
<td>-0.52*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender roles</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gender awareness</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women ($n = 140$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Neo-sexism</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.52*</td>
<td>-0.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Gender roles</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gender awareness</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*p < 0.001.\)

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### Neo-sexism as mediator

To test our hypothesis that neo-sexism is an element that explains the relationship between gender roles and gender awareness we carried out a mediational analysis. Mediation represents the addition of a third element in the analysis of a two-variable system (MacKinnon et al. 2007). This kind of analysis demonstrates that the relationship $A \rightarrow B$ depends on another element $C$, such that $A$ together with $C$ causes $B$. The statistical procedure for demonstrating this is based on regression analysis, a procedure which informs us of the predictive capacity of one factor on another. In this sense it can be said that this statistical method is a way of proving a causal relation. We used Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three-step regression approach to test the hypothesis that neo-sexism would mediate the effect of gender roles towards gender awareness.\(^3\)

We carried out the three regression analyses to demonstrate that when we introduce neo-sexism as an explanatory element of gender awareness, the explanatory value of the gender role is modified. In the first regression analysis it was found that gender roles explained and predicted the values of neo-sexism both in men and women. In the second analysis we found that gender roles also predicted the values of gender awareness.\(^4\) Finally, we carried out mediational analysis\(^5\) to identify the strength of neo-sexism in the relationship. According to the data obtained, our hypothesis was confirmed. It was found
that the predictive capacity of gender roles decreases amongst men when we use both factors jointly. In relation to women it was shown that the predictive capacity of gender roles is annulled. The results of the mediation tests for men are presented in Figure 1.

In men, it can be seen that traditional roles decrease the effect and that neo-sexism is the cause of this decrease. This type of mediation is called partial mediation. On the other hand, the importance of neo-sexism in women seems to be much greater since it cancels out the weight of gender roles. This is known as full mediation. The results of the mediation tests for women are presented in Figure 2.

In summary, gender roles alone are not relevant in explaining gender awareness and it is necessary to turn to the new forms of sexism in order to understand this relationship.

Conclusions
The principal purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship among gender role attitudes, neo-sexism, and gender awareness, and to verify whether neo-sexism was a mediator between gender role attitudes and gender awareness. We found that men were
more traditional than women in gender role attitudes and more neo-sexist, a finding that has already been deduced by several researchers (Twenge 1999, Burn et al. 2000). In relation to gender awareness men score less than women, which is to be expected as feminism has traditionally been considered as 'women’s issues'. In fact, many feminists consider male feminism to be an impossible form of gender politics (Heath 1987), because male experience is patriarchal and sexist and also because being a woman and being a man are two separate experiences. However, deconstructive and poststructuralist analyses have recognized the existence of multiple gender identities and reviewed unitary accounts of gender experience (Butler 1990). As Ashe (2004) wrote, recent approaches to masculinity support a more diverse understanding of male experience and its possible connection to feminism. In this sense exploring men’s relationships with gender awareness is a new domain which ‘opens the possibility for the formation of trans-gender alliances that are in the direct interest of women’ (Hebert 2007, p. 33).

The present findings provide a framework for understanding how gender role is associated with gender awareness. Specifically, we have found that the effect of gender roles is mediated by neo-sexism. This means that (a) roles alone do not explain the acquisition of gender awareness, and (b) it is necessary to consider the joint effect of traditional gender roles and neo-sexism in the process of acquiring gender awareness. Whereas in the work of Henderson-King and Stewart (1997) the best predictor in the revelation stage of their study was sensitivity to sexism, our results show the significant effect of a new form of sexism that seems to be the mechanism responsible for the relation between gender roles and gender awareness, in both men and women. Neo-sexism has a greater effect in women, since it cancels out the strength of gender roles. In other words, gender consciousness in women is determined by their degree of neo-sexism, independent of their attitude towards gender roles. On the contrary, gender roles do seem to be more important in men, since neo-sexism does not cancel out the strength of these roles.

This result agrees with that obtained by Tougas et al. (1999) who found that, specifically in women, neo-sexism has a more important effect than the discrimination perceived by them in their attempts at social mobility. The present study offers empirical evidence that neo-sexism, understood as resistance to the modification of gender relationships, plays an important role in gender awareness. In line with the ideas of Griffin (1989), we consider neo-sexism to be a tool that conceals opposition to, and oppression of, women.

In practice we can say that the use of strategies to change the traditional roles in the name of equality is no longer enough; it is necessary to draw attention to and put an end to the more subtle forms of sexism that appear in European society today. The fact that some women hold high political or economic positions does not mean that equality has been achieved. The last report carried out by the EU ‘The life of women and men in Europe’ published in 2008 by Eurostat, indicates that the proportion of men of working age in employment exceeds that of women throughout Europe. Outside of the EU, there was an even wider variation in employment rates. In Switzerland, the proportion of men of working age in employment was slightly higher than in any EU member state, at just under 85% (p. 53). Even in Switzerland many more women than men work part-time hours (about 43%). However, it could be said that in relation to the member states of the European Union the situation of gender equality in Switzerland is good. According to the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) for 2007/2008 by the United Nations Developments Program, Switzerland is ranked seventh out of 177 countries, behind Iceland and Norway but above France, Germany and Italy.
Cultural beliefs about gender, constructed on differences, are a basic factor in the justification and maintenance of this situation of inequality. The importance of this study lies in testing how the new form of sexism, maintained by men and women, is related to gender awareness. In spite of the current adhesion to the values of equality in European society, which enables the appearance of gender awareness, we still see more women than men aged 18–59 in jobless households; a concentration of women into relatively few sectors of employment (generally service-driven and health/social work) and that men and women spend their free time in different ways (Eurostat 2008). These facts may be explained by neo-sexism, which shows evidence of the conflict between adhering to the abstract and general value of equality and rejecting its application in practice. The influence of neo-sexism on gender awareness is such that it seems to exercise the function of an element that justifies and legitimizes the status quo. Neo-sexism is useful in that it permits denial of the existence of discrimination and also upholds the belief that inequality is no longer a problem. In this sense it works as a factor in maintaining traditional gender roles and therefore as an instrument of masculine dominance that impedes gender awareness. Neo-sexism could prove to be another variable that helps to explain the difficulties men experience with feminism.

One possible limitation of this research is that the characteristics of the participants may limit the conclusions of this study. This prevents us from being able to generalize our results to the whole of the Swiss population. Future research should examine, in other social contexts and using different samples, the relationship between gender awareness, neo-sexism and gender roles. Furthermore, other relevant elements in understanding gender relations should be included in order to generate more complete theoretical models to explain the inequality between men and women. In this sense, longitudinal studies would be very valuable in order to follow the evolution of gender awareness and its relation with different indicators of equality. Finally, we believe that an analysis of sexist beliefs and individual meritocratic principles, which studies the relationship between neo-sexism and feminism in greater detail, would be of immense value in overcoming inequality.

Acknowledgements
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Notes
1. Findings from a regression analysis showed that sensitivity to sexism explained 44% of variance of revelation ($\beta = 0.44, p \leq 0.001$).
2. In relation to gender roles there was a main effect for gender, $F (1, 261) = 27.99, p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.101$, women ($M = 1.8$) were less traditional than men ($M = 2.43$), and were less neo-sexist ($M = 2.33$) than men ($M = 3$), $F (1, 261) = 29.51, p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.108$. Finally, women showed more gender awareness ($M = 5.35$) than men ($M = 4.73$) $F (1, 261) = 20.47, p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.075$.[0]
3. In testing a hypothesized mediated pathway, the requirements are as follows: (1) after controlling for the explanatory variable, the relationships between mediator and outcome should differ from zero; (2) after controlling for the mediator, the relationship between the explanatory variable and the outcome should not differ from zero (complete mediation) or should at least be reduced (partial mediation); and (3) the indirect effect of the explanatory variable on the outcome should be significant.
4. The first regression analysis, taking gender roles as the independent variable and neo-sexism as the dependent variable, confirms the relation both in men ($\beta = 0.64, p < 0.001$) and women
The second equation also shows the effect of gender roles on gender awareness in men ($\beta = -0.53, p < 0.001$) and women ($\beta = -0.27, p < 0.001$).

5. We used Baron and Kenny’s (1986) modification of Sobel’s (1982) test to assess the mediation.

6. The difference between the unmediated effect of gender role, $\beta = -0.53$, and the mediated effect of gender role, $\beta = -0.33$, was significant for gender awareness ($z = -2.86, p < 0.001$). In women, the difference between the unmediated effect of gender role, $\beta = -0.27$ and the mediated effect of gender role, $\beta = -0.13$ (n.s.), was significant for gender awareness ($z = -2.49, p < 0.01$).

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