

Thanks, But No Thanks: Women's Avoidance of Help-Seeking in the Context of a  
Dependency-Related Stereotype

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## Abstract

The stereotype that women are dependent on men is a commonly verbalized, potentially damaging aspect of benevolent sexism. We investigated how women may use behavioral disconfirmation of the personal applicability of the stereotype to negotiate such sexism. In an experiment ( $N = 86$ ), we manipulated female college students' awareness that women may be stereotyped by men as dependent. We then placed participants in a situation where they needed help. Women made aware of the dependency stereotype (compared to controls who were not) were less willing to seek help. They also displayed a stronger negative correlation between help-seeking and post help-seeking affect—such that the more help they sought, the worse they felt. We discuss the relevance of these findings for research concerning women's help-seeking and their management of sexist stereotyping in everyday interaction. We also consider the implications of our results for those working in domains such as healthcare, teaching and counseling, where interaction with individuals in need and requiring help is common.

*Keywords:* sexism, helping behavior, stereotyped attitudes, sex role attitudes, dependency-personality

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“Thus sexism is not merely reflected but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters.” (Cameron, 1990, p .14)

Our paper investigates women's reactions to the sexism that occurs during the everyday “banal encounters” described above. Whereas some forms of sexism are explicitly misogynistic, others are less so, and it is common to distinguish between *hostile* (“old-fashioned”) sexism and *benevolent* (“modern”) sexism (Becker & Swim, 2011; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Hostile sexism entails explicit prejudice and dislike of women. Benevolent sexism is more insidious. It incorporates the stereotype that women are warm yet incapable, and they should thus be cherished and looked after in a chivalrous manner by men (Glick & Fiske, 1997). We investigate this benevolent sexism, especially the stereotype of women as dependent on men, and consider how women may seek to negotiate interactions when this stereotype is invoked.

### **Women's Dependency**

The ideology of *protective paternalism* lies at the heart of benevolent sexism (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Sarlet, Dumont, Delacollette, & Dardenne, In press; Viki, Abrams, & Hutchison, 2003). The assertion that women require male protection and help may appear harmless. Indeed, some women may welcome the courtesy and practical support that such attitudes promote and sustain. However, research shows that endorsement of benevolent sexism correlates with measures of hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), indices of sexual harassment (Fiske & Glick, 1995), and negative attitudes toward rape survivors (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003). Moreover, benevolent sexist ideology works to limit women's autonomous participation in society (Viki et al., 2003).

The ideology of benevolent sexism is promoted and re-produced in various ways, including interactions in which men provide unrequested help to women (Viki et al., 2003). Helping transactions (i.e., the giving and receiving of help) are unequal by nature because they position one individual as capable and the other as dependent (van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2011). Helping transactions are therefore potent ways to convey power and authority, and research confirms that being in receipt of help can highlight one's inferiority and lack of autonomy (Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Moreover, observational research by Lee (2002) indicates that acts of giving and receiving help can reproduce gender roles. For example, men may refuse needed help in order to assert their masculinity.

Despite the significance of helping transactions in the reproduction of benevolent sexism, we know relatively little about how women negotiate and manage sexist assumptions about their dependence. Indeed, whereas there is much work investigating men's reluctance to seek help due to concerns that doing so will confirm an image of dependence (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Seymour-Smith, Wetherell, & Phoenix, 2002), few researchers have considered how benevolent sexism impacts women and how they may adapt their behavior accordingly. This may reflect the assumption that seeking help is inherently positive and worthwhile, such that women find help-seeking to be straightforward and problem-free. However, the fact that help-seeking can reproduce and highlight gender roles (particularly with regards to women being stereotyped as dependent) suggests that women's help-seeking may be more problematic than often assumed.

### **Negotiating Benevolent Sexism**

Negotiating everyday interactions featuring benevolent sexism is difficult. Some women may endorse such sexism and take pleasure in men's "chivalrous" help-giving (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). Although other women may not, they may find complaining difficult. This may reflect their uncertainty about the intent behind a male's behavior (e.g.,

opening doors). However, even women who are clear they find such help-giving objectionable may not confront those involved (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Often this is because the costs of doing so can be high. Indeed, research shows speaking out over such sexism can result in a woman being judged negatively (Becker, Glick, Ilic, & Bohner, 2011; Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012; Swim & Hyers, 1999).

Yet, although confronting benevolent sexism directly can be difficult, there are other strategies available. Our research addresses such strategies. More specifically, we focus on women's behavioral responses to the experience of benevolent sexism during a potential helping transaction. One response is to avoid situations where one is vulnerable to sexism. Perhaps the most basic strategy of this type is to distance oneself from those who may articulate such views (Oyserman & Swim, 2001). However, this is not always possible, and an alternative strategy is to avoid the personal applicability of the negative stereotype by presenting oneself as someone to whom the stereotype does not apply (von Hippel et al., 2005; von Hippel, Wiryakusuma, Bowden, & Shochet, 2011). We focus on this latter strategy and consider how women refrain from seeking needed help so as to avoid confirming the stereotype of female dependency propagated by benevolent sexism. Specifically, we explore women's help-seeking when experiencing a need for help, and how this is affected by their exposure to benevolent sexism.

Central to our work is the idea that exposure to benevolent sexist beliefs encourages women to think about how they are stereotyped by men (e.g., as dependent), and that these beliefs about how one's group is stereotyped by another group (*meta-stereotypes*; Vorauer, 2006) can motivate behavior discrepant with the stereotype. However, such a reaction is not always possible, with much depending on one's ability to control one's behavior. For instance, in a scenario where a woman is being assessed on a task at which women are stereotyped as deficient (e.g., a math test), the woman may have limited control over her

reactions and performance. Even if able to do the test, the anxiety about inadvertently confirming the stereotype may deplete her attentional resources with the consequence that her performance suffers (*stereotype threat*; Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006).

Yet, in other contexts there may be behavioral outcomes over which an individual has more control. Deciding not to seek help may be one such outcome. For example, in the context of a helping transaction, if a woman is aware that seeking help confirms the sexist stereotype of female dependency, she may avoid doing so in order to show that “I’m not like that.” This is precisely the issue addressed in our research. By manipulating participants’ level of awareness of a dependency-related stereotype and then measuring their help-seeking, we investigate whether believing men judge women to be dependent leads women to avoid seeking needed help, thus avoiding confirmation of the sexist meta-stereotype.

A moment’s reflection on such a scenario reminds us that there are various reasons why a woman may avoid seeking help, and we designed our research to control for one such important alternative. As already hinted, this alternative response to stereotyping is to avoid interacting with those espousing such stereotypes, a phenomenon Goffman (1963) defined as *defensive cowering*. For example, women may elect to study language-based courses over mathematics-based ones so as to avoid interactions where they are stereotyped negatively (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002). Because the domain of our research (help-seeking) requires participants to be open to approaching and interacting with others, any avoidance of men’s help may be driven by the simple desire to avoid interaction with a man who might subscribe to the sexist stereotype of women. That is, a woman’s disinclination to seek help may say less about her desire to avoid confirming the personal applicability of a sexist stereotype and more about her desire to avoid interacting with a potentially sexist man.

To disentangle such complexities, we designed our study with two factors. As well as manipulating participants’ awareness of the female dependency stereotype, we also

manipulated the source of help (a man versus a woman). We reasoned that if women's help-seeking avoidance in the context of the dependency stereotype was driven by a desire to avoid interaction with a man who may be sexist, we would only find reduced help-seeking when the source of help was a man. However, if women avoided seeking help to disconfirm the personal applicability of the sexist stereotype, we predicted participants would avoid help regardless of the helper's sex. Accordingly, we predicted a main effect of stereotype awareness.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Present Study**

We manipulated participants' awareness of men's stereotyping of women as dependent (Dependency Stereotype vs. No Stereotype), and then observed their subsequent help-seeking from either a man or a woman. Given the merits of behavioral data (as compared to merely measuring behavioral intentions; Hopkins et al., 2007; Wakefield et al., 2011), we created a design featuring a behavioral measure of help-seeking on a real task. Moreover, given our desire to investigate the "banal encounters" (Cameron, 1990) in which benevolent sexism operates (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001), we developed a methodology that captured this everyday quality by delivering the stereotype manipulation in a subtle real-world manner. We achieved this realism by staging a (fabricated) telephone conversation that participants overheard.

We made two predictions. First, when female participants believed men perceive them as dependent (i.e., they were aware of the dependency stereotype), we predicted these women would behave so as to avoid confirming that they themselves are dependent on others by refraining from seeking high levels of assistance (with the source of the help—a man versus a woman—having no effect on this outcome). Our second hypothesis is derived from evidence regarding the negative impact benevolent sexism can have on women's affect (Swim et al., 2001) and from research concerning the negative experience of receiving help in

inequitable power relationships (Halabi, Nadler, & Dovidio, 2011; Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Both research traditions imply that when participants are aware of the dependency stereotype, those requesting greater help should exhibit negative affect. We therefore predicted that participants in the Dependency Stereotype conditions (but not in the No Stereotype conditions) would exhibit a negative relationship between help-seeking and post help-seeking affect (such that the more they sought help, the worse they felt).

## Method

### Participants and Design

Female undergraduates studying psychology at a Scottish university ( $N = 86$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.21$  years,  $SD = 7.48$ , range = 17-59 years) were recruited via the university's online participant recruitment system, and they participated for partial course credit. Because the study involved a word-based problem-solving task, participants were required to be native English speakers. Using a random number generator, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of our 2 (Source of Help: Man/Woman) x 2 (Stereotype Awareness: Dependency Stereotype/No Stereotype) design.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants were tested individually in a laboratory session that lasted around 20 minutes. The female experimenter (a White Scottish doctoral student) introduced herself as a research assistant (rather than the person running the study) and explained she was helping an off-campus research team collect data from various universities remotely via computer. The research assistant explained that the participant would receive all instructions and questions via computer and would use the computer to enter her answers (which the off-campus researchers could observe and respond to directly). In reality, there was no such team. Instead, the computer was pre-programmed using *MediaLab* software.



The research assistant introduced the study as an investigation into differences between men's and women's reasoning strategies during problem-solving tasks (thus rendering gender identity salient). However, to avoid creating any gender-related task anxiety, the experimenter stressed that a large amount of evidence indicated that men and women do not differ in terms of problem-solving competence. The participant was told she would receive some basic questions about herself, and then she would be directed to try to solve 10 anagrams in 90 seconds. Without receiving any feedback on her performance, the participant would then have the opportunity to seek help on any of the anagrams she could not solve. This help would come from the off-campus research team (via computer). The experiment ended with some final questions about the participant's experiences of the session. The assistant then obtained the participant's consent, before inviting her to sit at the computer and begin the study.

The key elements of the study's instructions were reiterated on-screen (apparently as a message from the off-campus researchers). The Source of Help manipulation was achieved by highlighting the sexes of the off-campus research team members (because these ostensible individuals would be the potential source of help for the participant later in the study). To deliver this manipulation, the team referred to themselves by their first names at the end of the computer-mediated study instructions. In the Female Source of Help conditions these names were all female (Sarah, Emma, and Kimberley); in the Male Source of Help conditions, all male (Mark, Tony, and Rob).

The participant then began to receive and respond to questions via computer. First, the participant received two filler Likert-scale items: "Please rate how you feel at this moment," rated from 1 (*sad*) to 7 (*happy*) and from 1 (*tense*) to 7 (*relaxed*). The appearance of these items on-screen prompted the assistant to pretend to receive a telephone call, which contained the Stereotype Awareness manipulation. The assistant's desk was positioned behind the

participant, allowing her to view the participant's computer screen and thus see when the participant reached the filler items.

**Stereotype awareness manipulation.** A partition hid the assistant's desk from the participant's view, allowing her to activate her mobile-phone surreptitiously. On making it ring, she apologised and requested that the participant stop answering questions while she took the call. Before doing so, she said (as an aside) that the caller's identity on her phone showed that the caller was a plumber ("Joe") who was working in her flat, so she needed to answer in case there was a problem. The research assistant then read from a hidden script, which was approximately a minute in length and which differed slightly depending on the Stereotype Awareness condition. In both conditions, the assistant's verbalisations during the fictitious call made it clear Joe was a man, and he was asking if he could access a room in the assistant's flat. The assistant explained this would be alright, but she would have to remove items from the room first. As the conversation progressed, it became clear from the assistant's responses that Joe had already moved the items (i.e., that he had provided the research assistant with help she had not requested), and the research assistant was irritated by this realization. In the No Stereotype conditions, the assistant's responses implied she attributed Joe's behavior to his unusually impatient personality ("I didn't realise that you were in such a hurry...Yes, but you could have just waited a bit longer and I would have done it"). In the Dependency Stereotype conditions, she attributed Joe's behavior to his endorsement of the stereotyped male belief that women need men's help ("Really, I could have done it myself...No, they aren't that heavy at all...Seriously, I could have managed them fine.").

These two different attributions were reiterated to the participant after the call ended, when the assistant apologised about the interruption and explained her irritation regarding Joe. In the No Stereotype conditions, the assistant explained: "Sorry about that—my plumber

is the most impatient person in the world—I've never met anybody like him before!" In the Dependency Stereotype conditions, the assistant explained: "Sorry about that—my plumber is such a typical man—he thinks that women are incapable of doing anything on their own!" The script concluded with the rhetorical question: "Do you know what I mean?" So as to avoid any possibility of the participant starting a dialogue with the assistant at this point, the assistant then directed the participant to resume answering items (during the telephone call, the participant had simply been sitting at the computer waiting to proceed with the study).

**Anagram task and scoring.** After completing the filler items (i.e., the items the participant had been stopped from completing due to the telephone call interruption), the participant was presented with the on-screen anagram task. She was told that she would have 90 seconds (timed by the assistant via stopwatch) to attempt 10 anagrams (e.g., *sestaodrakb* = skateboards) that would appear on-screen. The participant was told to type in the answers for the anagrams she could solve, and to type "XXX" for any she could not solve. A time limit of 90 seconds was selected because it gave participants enough time to attempt the anagrams without becoming bored or anxious. To prevent participants from feeling overly helpless, three of the anagrams were easier (black, honey, and puppy). However, the other seven were harder (glockenspiel, nightingale, carnation, skateboards, zirconium, raspberries and restaurant). This combination meant that all participants were expected to be unable to answer most of the anagrams, thereby resulting in a need for help. The anagrams were selected from an anagram website.

**Help seeking requests.** After 90 seconds, the participant received an on-screen help-seeking request form. For each anagram, the participant was asked how much help she would like to receive from the off-campus research team. The participant was asked to select from one of four levels of help for each of the 10 anagrams: 0 (*none*), 1 (*a small hint*), 2 (*a large hint*) or 3 (*a full answer*).

When deciding how to convert these data into a continuous help-seeking scale, we concluded that because the participant would have no need to ask for help on the anagrams she answered correctly it made sense to restrict our analyses to the anagrams that the participant failed to answer (i.e., those to which she responded by typing “XXX”). To this end, we separated the participant’s responses into those she answered correctly and those she failed to answer. We then examined the nature of the participant’s help-seeking requests for the anagrams she failed to answer. We coded requests as 0 (*no help*), 1 (*small hints*), 2 (*large hints*), or 4 (*full answers*). These were then summed to create a measure of help-seeking. Because this help-seeking score does not take into account the number of anagrams the participant was able to answer without needing any help, we then calculated the participant’s maximum potential help-seeking score (i.e., the score obtained if she had asked for *full answers* on every anagram she was unable to answer). Finally, we divided the participant’s actual help-seeking score by her maximum help-seeking score and converted the resultant figure into a percentage. On this scale, scores could range from 0 (*no help* sought on every anagram the participant could not answer) to 100 (*full answers* sought on every anagram the participant could not answer; see also Wakefield, Hopkins, & Greenwood, In press, Submitted).<sup>2,3</sup>

**Affect and manipulation checks.** While ostensibly waiting for the off-campus researchers to send back any assistance she had requested (which actually never arrived), the participant was asked to complete a few final on-screen questions assessing their affect and containing manipulation checks. The participant’s post help-seeking affect was measured by asking her to rate her current mood: “How would you describe your feelings at this moment?,” rated from 1 (*very bad*) to 7 (*very good*) and from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*). These two items were strongly correlated,  $r(N = 86) = .84, p < .001$ , so we used

their mean as a measure of post help-seeking affect where higher values indicate more positive affect ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

Finally, as a Source of Help manipulation check, the participant was presented with a single item that asked her to recall the sexes of the researchers. As a Stereotype Awareness manipulation check, the participant received four items that inquired about the extent to which men endorse the meta-stereotype: “To what extent do you agree that men believe that these following statements apply to women like you?” (a) “Women often have to depend on men for help”; (b) “Women’s most distinguishing trait is their neediness”; (c) “Women seem to struggle to do anything without men’s help”; and (d) “It is common for women to have to rely on men to get things done,” rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The mean of these four items formed a composite measure of stereotype awareness such that higher scores indicated heightened awareness ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ). The participant was then debriefed.<sup>4</sup>

**Debriefing.** The participant was questioned verbally by the research assistant with regards to any thoughts or suspicions she had regarding the telephone call. This was done under the pretence that the research assistant was concerned that the telephone call may have distracted the participant during the study. The participant was also questioned with regards to her thoughts about the study as a whole. No participants voiced any suspicions regarding the genuineness of the telephone call, and no participant guessed the study’s hypotheses.

## Results

### Manipulation Checks

As all participants recalled the researchers’ sexes correctly, it was apparent that the Source of Help manipulation was successful. The Stereotype Awareness manipulation was also successful: participants in the Dependency Stereotype conditions perceived men as endorsing the dependency-related stereotype of women ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) to a greater

extent than participants in the No Stereotype conditions ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $t(84) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .015$ ,  $d = 0.54$ .

### **Number of Anagrams Participants Failed to Answer**

Of the 10 anagrams participants attempted, the number of anagrams participants failed to answer (i.e., those to which they responded with “XXX”) did not differ between the Woman ( $M = 7.29$   $SD = 0.66$ ) and Man conditions ( $M = 7.37$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 0.30$ ,  $p = .58$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ , nor between the Dependency Stereotype ( $M = 7.30$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) and No Stereotype conditions ( $M = 7.35$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 0.07$ ,  $p = .80$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ . Nor was there an interaction,  $F(1, 82) = 2.07$ ,  $p = .15$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .025$ . Because participants generally failed to answer 7-8 of 10 anagrams, this result confirms that participants found the task to be equally difficult in all conditions, and thus they experienced an equal material need for help. This means that any between-condition differences in help-seeking can be attributed to the experimental manipulations rather than to differences in ability.

### **Hypothesis 1: Levels of Help-Seeking**

To test whether participants in the Dependency Stereotype conditions avoided seeking needed help (regardless of the source of that help), we analysed help-seeking in a 2 (Source of Help: Man /Woman ) by 2 (Stereotype Awareness: No Stereotype/Dependency Stereotype) analysis of variance (ANOVA). This analysis revealed a main effect of Stereotype Awareness. Those women aware of the dependency stereotype sought less help ( $M = 48.20$ ,  $SD = 15.95$ ) than those in the No Stereotype conditions ( $M = 56.53$ ,  $SD = 14.29$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 6.46$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . There was no main effect of Source of Help, (Woman:  $M = 51.14$ ,  $SD = 14.17$ ; Man:  $M = 53.71$ ,  $SD = 17.16$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 0.52$ ,  $p = .47$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , nor a Source of Help x Stereotype Awareness interaction,  $F(1, 82) = 0.36$ ,  $p = 0.55$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ . This patterning provides clear support for our first hypothesis.

We also repeated the analysis with a potentially-important covariate (participant's age). This addition did not change the pattern of the results. The main effect of Stereotype Awareness,  $F(1, 81) = 6.63, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .08$ , remained significant, whereas the main effect of Source of Help,  $F(1, 81) = 0.92, p = .34, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , and the Source of Help x Stereotype Awareness interaction,  $F(1, 81) = 0.23, p = .64, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , remained non-significant. Moreover, age was a nonsignificant covariate,  $F(1, 81) = 1.71, p = .20, \eta_p^2 = .02$ .

### **Hypothesis 2: The Affective Consequences of Help-Seeking**

To test whether those in the Dependency Stereotype conditions (but not the No Stereotype conditions) experienced a negative relationship between their help-seeking and post help-seeking affect (with those seeking more help feeling worse), we investigated the correlations between these variables. As predicted, in the Dependency Stereotype conditions the correlation was negative and significant, such that seeking help was associated with feeling worse,  $r(N = 43) = -.42, p = .005$ . Also as predicted, in the No Stereotype conditions the correlation was non-significant,  $r(N = 43) = -.01, p = .97$ . The patterning of these correlations was unaffected by participant's age, which we included as a control variable in a partial correlation (Dependency Stereotype conditions:  $r(df = 40) = -.42, p = .006$ ; No Stereotype conditions:  $r(df = 40) = -.01, p = .94$ ). For information, neither of the experimental manipulations affected participants' affect, and the interaction between the two manipulations was also non-significant ( $ps > .47$ ).

In order to inspect the effect of condition (Dependency Stereotype versus No Stereotype) on the initial (non-partial) correlations, we investigated the magnitude of their difference. To do this, we converted the correlations into Fisher's  $z$  scores, found the difference between these values, and divided this difference by its standard error (see Howell, 2002). Following this procedure showed the correlations to differ significantly ( $z = -1.96, p = .05$ ). These analyses provide clear support for our second hypothesis. More specifically,

among those women made aware of the sexist stereotype, those requesting more help experienced more negative post help-seeking affect.

### **Discussion**

We opened with a quotation concerning the everyday “banal encounters” within which benevolent sexism can be propagated and experienced. However, this banality should not be mistaken for triviality. The potentially negative effects of benevolent sexism are well-documented (Baretto & Ellemers, 2005; Swim et al., 2001), as are women’s difficulties in confronting individuals endorsing such stereotypes (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Indeed, it is because of the social and psychological significance of such encounters that we sought to consider their negotiation. Specifically, we explored the degree to which women would avoid requesting help so as to avoid the personal applicability of a dependency-related stereotype. To do this, we developed a novel and realistic manipulation and used behavioral measures. We created a situation in which women required help (thereby bringing issues of dependency to the fore), and after manipulating their awareness of the sexist stereotype of female dependency, we investigated their level of help-seeking. We also tested whether, in such a context, requests for more help would be associated with poorer (worse) affect.

Our results supported both predictions. Participants in the Dependency Stereotype conditions (i.e., those made aware of men’s perceptions of women as dependent) sought less help than participants in the No Stereotype conditions (who did not experience this awareness). This was unaffected by whether the source of help was male or female, suggesting the reduction in help-seeking really is bound up with the participants’ desire to avoid the personal applicability of the stereotype (rather than simply wishing to avoid interaction with a sexist man). Furthermore, we found a negative correlation between help-seeking and post help-seeking affect (with those women who sought more help feeling worse) when participants were aware of the dependency-related stereotype, but not when they



were unaware. This implies help-seeking has an affective “cost” for participants in the Dependency Stereotype conditions.

### **Practice Implications**

We believe our research has a number of implications for practitioners and policymakers. Perhaps most importantly, it suggests that, contrary to common belief, women can find it very difficult to seek and receive needed help, especially in scenarios where doing so may risk confirming women’s dependency to others. Knowledge of this pattern may be particularly useful to those working in the domains of healthcare, welfare, teaching, and counseling. Whereas such practitioners are likely to be familiar with the barriers men face with regards to help-seeking, they may be less aware of the experiences of women in such scenarios. Initiatives to make seeking help an easier process for women (e.g., reducing the risk of the help-seeking being perceived as confirmation of dependency) may prove particularly fruitful.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are, of course, a number of limitations of our study, and these could inform future research. Some of these concern the details of our design. For example, the gender (female) of the research assistant may have affected the results observed in the present study. Perhaps participants experienced a sense of solidarity with a woman who (in the Dependency Stereotype conditions) has been offended via a telephone call. To investigate this possibility further, the stereotype could be presented in a manner that does not engage the researcher in the proceedings, or the researcher’s gender could be manipulated. On a related point, it may be useful to replicate our study with a third condition in which the participant did not hear a telephone call. This could provide a baseline against which the effects of our two telephone conditions could be compared.

Turning to more general issues, our research prompts a series of interesting questions. Most obviously, it encourages us to ask if and how the nature of the context moderates the effects observed in our study. For instance, in some situations the option of refusing help may be more limited. One such context is where the costs associated with failing to accomplish the task are higher, such that women may find it harder to avoid behaviorally confirming the dependency stereotype. Another is where the woman has reduced power (such as during a job interview chaired by a sexist man; von Baeyer, Sherk, & Zanna, 1981). In such contexts women may even conform to the sexist imagery of female dependence. Future work could address how these contextual factors shape women's strategies.

It would also be useful to investigate variables that may mediate the relationship between stereotype awareness and help-seeking avoidance. Stereotype threat research has shown that anxiety (e.g., Delgado & Prieto, 2008) and physiological arousal (e.g., Osborne, 2007) mediate the effect of stereotype awareness on poor test performance, so it would be useful to investigate the extent to which such variables mediate women's help-seeking decisions when they are made aware of a dependency stereotype. Other potential mediators may include a sense of anger or indignation at being perceived as dependent by men.

Although our research was designed to be as naturalistic as possible, it was a laboratory study with a small sample size. In any future work it would therefore be useful to garner data in a field-setting. Moreover, although our finding regarding the negative affective consequences of seeking help in the Dependency Stereotype conditions is interesting and informative, our measure of the psychological experience of exposure to benevolent sexism is limited. Swim et al. (2001) obtained rich accounts of the myriad consequences of sexism via diary studies, so future experimental research could use such insights to develop more complex measures of women's responses and reactions to sexism. This richness could help in

our exploration of the various ways that patriarchal paternalism can impact women's everyday lives.

Furthermore, although deciding not to seek help may sometimes be a viable strategy to negotiate sexism, it is important to remember that doing so has its own costs. Whereas in some contexts it can be advantageous to avoid or postpone help-seeking (such as when one wishes to experience the fulfilment of achieving something on one's own), not asking for help may mean that needs go unmet and problems go unsolved. Although there is research concerning men's reluctance to seek help and its deleterious consequences for their well-being (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003), future work could also investigate how women's desire to avoid benevolent sexist stereotyping comes at a cost.

More generally, future studies could explore the conditions in which women may be empowered to more directly confront instances of benevolent sexism. This may involve investigating the roles of social support and solidarity, particularly with regards to the presence of other women. Work by Levine and Crowther (2008) has shown that female participants are more likely to help a female confederate whom they saw being treated in a verbally aggressive manner by a male experimenter after the participants were in a group of women (compared to after they were alone or in a group of men). Such work suggests women may be more able to confront sexism directly when empowered by the presence of other women. Future research could also consider the mediators of such processes, as well as the individual differences that may moderate their occurrence. Such research would provide not only more understanding of women's reactions to benevolent sexism, but also practical advice for how women could best cope with sexism in everyday life.

Finally, it would be useful to consider the efficacy of the strategy investigated here. Does avoiding seeking help actually make a woman feel less dependent, and appear less dependent in the eyes of others? On a larger scale, does such behavior have the potential to

challenge sexist beliefs and stereotypes? Or could not asking for help trigger further sexism? Research by Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, and Grasselli (2003) found that men may be motivated to behave in a sexist manner when their masculine identity is threatened, and it is possible that in some contexts refusing offers of help may be seen as a threat to male identity, thereby prompting more sexism. We believe work investigating such topics would prove both theoretically interesting and practically useful.

### **Conclusion**

Despite all these unanswered questions, it is important not to lose sight of the significance of our own findings. Participants who were made aware of men's dependency-related views of women avoided seeking help, and the more they sought such help, the worse they felt. Moreover, it is important to remember that helping transactions may be particularly significant in women's everyday negotiations of sexism. Such transactions are directly relevant to the dependency-related beliefs associated with benevolent sexism and occur frequently. All in all, our findings underline the point that the benevolent sexism in everyday banal interactions can be consequential for women's emotions and behavior, and is therefore, anything but banal.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>We should note that women can be sources of sexist stereotyping as well as men (meaning that women may potentially avoid interaction with men or with other women, depending on the specific context). However, in our study the source of the stereotype was expressly male. We therefore expected that if defensive cowering was driving our results, we would only observe avoidance of a male, but not a female, helper.

<sup>2</sup> To aid comprehension of these calculations, imagine a hypothetical participant who failed to answer (i.e., responded with 'XXX' to) anagrams 1, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 9 and who answered anagrams 2, 5, 8 and 10 correctly. We would discount anagrams 2, 5, 8 and 10 (because she answered these on her own and therefore did not require any help on them). Instead, we would focus on anagrams 1, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 9. If the participant requested *no help* for anagrams 1 and 3, a *small hint* for anagram 4, a *large hint* for anagram 6 and *full answers* for anagrams 7 and 9, we would count her help-seeking as follows: two x *no help* (i.e.,  $2 \times 0 = 0$ ), plus one x *small hint* (i.e.,  $1 \times 1 = 1$ ), plus one x *large hint* (i.e.,  $1 \times 2 = 2$ ), plus two x *full answers* ( $2 \times 3 = 6$ ). Summing these gives us a value of 9 ( $0 + 1 + 2 + 6$ ). This gives a rough image of her level of help-seeking, but does not take into account her real need. That is, it does not take into account the number of anagrams she was able to answer without needing any help (in this case anagrams 2, 5, 8 and 10). So the next step is to calculate her maximum potential help-seeking based on the number of anagrams she could not answer (i.e., for which she had entered XXX). In this case the participant had six such anagrams, and if she had sought a *full answer* on every one of the six items she could not answer, she would have a total of 18 ( $6 \times 3$ ). Our scale score is then derived from taking the participant's actual help-seeking value (9) and dividing this by her maximum value (18) and converting the result into a percentage, giving her a score of 50%.

<sup>3</sup>There were 860 anagram-solving attempts in this study (86 participants x 10 anagrams). On 5 of the 860 (i.e., 0.58%), the participant entered an *incorrect* answer and did not seek help. We assumed this was because the participant believed their (incorrect) answer (e.g., *lightening* when the correct answer was *nightingale*) was correct, and accordingly, the calculation of their help-seeking proceeded without reference to this item (because from the participant's view the problem was solved).

<sup>4</sup>We also measured the extent of participants' modern sexist beliefs using Swim et al.'s (1995) Modern Sexism Scale, and the extent to which participants felt that their image as women was at stake during the help-seeking episode. Additionally, we asked participants to indicate the particular "category" of woman they perceived themselves to be (homemaker, professional, etc.). Because these variables added nothing to the interpretation of our results, we do not report them.