

## Psychological values as protective factors against sexist attitudes in preadolescents

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### Abstract

**Background:** Sexist attitudes are one of the factors that justify domestic violence. Positive psychology can provide keys to prevent sexist violence at an early age. Psychological values are a group of psychological strengths in a person's development. They provide important clues for the prevention of gender-based violence. **Method:** This study presents an assessment of two groups of variables, sexist attitudes and beliefs and psychological values, in a sample of 449 (213 boys and 236 girls) preadolescents from various schools (mean age: 12). We analyze the relationship between these variables. We used the Values in Action Inventory (VIA-Y), the Questionnaire of Attitudes towards Diversity and Violence (CADV) and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). **Results:** The results show that sexism variables are related to each other and negatively to the psychological values in boys and girls. **Conclusions:** We discuss the importance of prevention programs being appropriately developed and, probably, different programs for each sex.

**Keywords:** sexism, psychological values, prevention of domestic violence, positive psychology, adolescents.

### Resumen

**Valores psicológicos como factores de protección ante actitudes sexistas en preadolescentes.** **Antecedentes:** el sexismo y las actitudes sexistas son algunos de los factores precursores de la justificación de la violencia de pareja. La psicología positiva puede aportar claves al estudio y prevención de la violencia sexista en edades tempranas. Los valores psicológicos, como conjunto de fortalezas psicológicas para el desarrollo de la persona, aportan pistas importantes en la prevención de la violencia sexista. **Método:** este estudio presenta una evaluación de dos conjuntos de variables, por un lado, las actitudes y creencias sexistas y, por otro, los valores psicológicos en una muestra de 449 estudiantes preadolescentes (213 chicos y 236 chicas) de diversos centros escolares (edad media: 12 años), para posteriormente analizar la relación entre dichas variables. Se ha utilizado para la recogida de datos el Values in Action Inventory (VIA-Y), el Cuestionario de Actitudes hacia la Diversidad y la Violencia (CADV) y el Inventario de Sexismo Ambivalente (ISA). **Resultados:** los resultados muestran que las variables de sexismo se relacionan entre sí y de forma inversa con los valores psicológicos, tanto en los chicos como en las chicas. **Conclusiones:** se comenta su importancia para el desarrollo de programas de prevención que pudieran ser diferenciados para ambos sexos.

**Palabras clave:** sexismo, valores psicológicos, prevención violencia doméstica, psicología positiva, preadolescentes.

Sexism is considered one of the chief variables that maintains sex inequalities (Moya, 2004), and it can even be a precursor of domestic violence. Glick and Fiske (2001) underline two differentiated forms of sexism that coexist in contemporary society: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism reflects beliefs about women that consider them an inferior group, with negative stereotypes that foment discrimination. Benevolent sexism refers to beliefs about women considered a group that must be protected because they are weak. Numerous studies provide results about gender differences in hostile sexism, where men score higher than women. However, when studying gender differences in benevolent sexism, there are discrepancies. Some

authors, like Glick and Fiske (1996), found significant differences between men and women in five out of the six studies presented, with higher scores in the men in this variable. Other authors found significant differences, with women scoring higher (Lemus, Castillo, Moya, Padilla, & Ryan, 2008). There are also studies that have either found differences or no differences, depending on age (Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2011). And lastly, some works have found no significant differences in this variable (Ferragut, Ortiz-Tallo, & Blanca, 2011). Thus, benevolent sexism emerges as a complex variable that deserves more scientific contributions.

Diverse investigations have clearly established the relation between beliefs and attitudes towards violence (cognitive and affective components) and discriminatory behaviors and perpetration of violence (behavioral component) (Carrión, 2010; Díaz-Aguado, 2002, 2004). Women usually present significantly lower values in sexist attitudes and attitudes of justification of violence, whereas men have significantly higher values in authoritarianism (Díaz-Aguado, Martínez Arias, & Martín Seoane, 2004).

In the study carried out by Viniegra (2007) with the questionnaire “Actitudes hacia la Diversidad y la Violencia” (CADV; in English, Attitudes towards Diversity and Violence), girls expressed less agreement than boys with intolerant beliefs and justification of violence. Similarly, Díaz-Aguado (2004), in an investigation for the Instituto de la Mujer (Women’s Institute), found that boys justify violence more than girls. In contrast, girls obtain higher scores in the rejection of violence and sexist beliefs (Díaz-Aguado, 2003).

Alternatively, Positive Psychology is based on the values and psychological strengths that are also essential in the study of the problems of the human being. Peterson and Seligman (2004) focused on the study of these values and strengths that favor people’s growth. These authors propose a classification into six essential values that are divided into 24 strengths, understood as a series of positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behavior. These six values are: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Psychological values are essential for people’s development and of particular importance during developmental stages such as preadolescence. In this sense, they may protect youngsters from negative aspects such as sexism and violence during this stage.

However, despite the growing interest in the research of positive psychology, there is very little bibliography in the scientific literature about this essential stage of development, as well as about its relation with sexist attitudes and violence.

Some investigations have related sexism and attitudes towards violence to specific psychological strengths, for example, the work of Wellman, Czopp and Geers (2009), in which, along with the aim of egalitarian goals, the strength of hope is noted as a key factor to deal with prejudice. With regard to the strengths included in the value temperance, Vohs, Finkenauer, and Baumeister (2011) found a positive relation with the quality of the dating relation, whereas Finkel et al., (2009) suggest that a deficit in self-regulation may be related to the perpetration of gender violence by young people.

In recent years, numerous investigations have been carried out in Spain and important efforts have been made to study the diverse factors related to couple violence, sexism, and violent attitudes in adults (Andrés-Pueyo & Echeburúa, 2010; Echeburúa, Sarasua, Zubizarreta, & de Corral, 2009; Fernández-Montalvo & Echeburúa, 2008; Ferrer, Bosch, Ramis, Torres, & Navarro, 2006; Loñaz, Ortiz-Tallo, Sánchez, & Ferragut, 2011; Ortiz-Tallo, Cardenal, Blanca, Sánchez, & Morales, 2007; Ortiz-Tallo, Fierro, Blanca, Cardenal, & Sánchez, 2006). Most of the research in the field of psychology positive and psychological values was conducted with adult population and, to a lesser degree, with adolescents (Zubieta, 2008).

However, few investigations have studied the relation between the positive aspects of the human being—such as psychological values—that could serve as protection and prevention factors against sexist attitudes and beliefs. The relation between these variables could have an impact on future programs of prevention of domestic violence. Preadolescence is a crucial age in the formation of attitudes and beliefs that are consolidated throughout life. Previous studies have found gender differences in these variables at this stage of development (Ferragut, Ortiz-Tallo, & Blanca, 2011; Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2011; Karris, 2009; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Viniegra, 2007), which leads us to differentiate boys and girls in the present study.

Thus, the main goal of study is to analyze the relation between two sets of variables: on the one hand, sexist attitudes and beliefs

and, on the other, psychological values, differentiating between preadolescent boys and girls.

## Method

### Participants

In this study, there were 449 participants (213 boys and 236 girls) from the first grade of Compulsory Secondary Education, aged between 11 and 13 years ( $M= 12.14$ ,  $SD= 0.51$ ), belonging to 27 classrooms of 8 public schools of Malaga (capital city) and province.

With regard to the participants’ family situation, 84.7% of the sample has siblings, and of them, 47.4% has a single sibling. Of the sample of children, 72.8% live with their family of origin, that is, parents and siblings, 10.8% live with their mother and siblings, and 5.6% live in reconstructed families, that is, with the parent’s new partner. With regard to the country of origin, 83.4% of the sample is of Spanish nationality, and the rest belong to 21 different nationalities.

### Instruments

To assess sexism, we administered the “Inventario de Sexismo Ambivalente para adolescentes” (ISA, in English, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory for adolescences; Lemus et al., 2008). It has 20 items that are rated on a 6-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). The questionnaire yields a total score of sexism and two scores in the following factors: hostile sexism (reflecting negative attitudes towards women) and benevolent sexism (reflecting protective attitudes towards women, who are stereotyped and undervalued). In the general scale, a Cronbach reliability coefficient of  $\alpha= .83$  was obtained, for hostile sexism,  $\alpha= .84$ , and for benevolent sexism,  $\alpha= .77$ .

To assess attitudes towards violence, we administered the “Cuestionario de Actitudes hacia la Diversidad y la Violencia” (CADV, In English, the Questionnaire of Attitudes towards Diversity and Violence; Díaz-Aguado & Martínez Arias, 2004). This questionnaire has 56 items and is rated on a 7-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). It provides scores in four factors. The present study focuses on the factor called *Sexist beliefs and justification of domestic violence*, in view of our proposed goals. This factor had good internal consistency, with  $\alpha= .85$ .

Lastly, to assess psychological strengths, we used the Values in Action for Youth (VIA-Y; Park & Peterson, 2006). It has 198 items and is rated on a 5-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*Very different from me*) to 5 (*Very like me*). We used the Spanish adaptation of Vázquez and Hervás (2007). This questionnaire assesses 24 psychological strengths that are grouped into the following six values with scores that range between 1 and 5 points: (a) Wisdom and knowledge (which include the strengths of creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and perspective); (b) Courage (which includes bravery, persistence, authenticity, and zest); (c) Humanity (which implies love, kindness, and social intelligence); (d) Justice (in which are found teamwork, fairness, and leadership); (e) Temperance (which includes forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation); and (f) Transcendence (which includes appreciation of beauty, gratitude,

*Table 1*  
Differences of Means between Boys and Girls in all the Variables, using Student's *t* for Independent Samples and Effect Size (Cohen's *d*)

	Boys		Girls		T	d
	M	SD	M	SD		
Wisdom and knowledge	3.56	0.55	3.68	0.50	-2.53***	.24
Courage	3.59	0.54	3.78	0.52	-4.06***	.36
Humanity	3.71	0.51	3.98	0.46	-6.45***	.52
Justice	3.48	0.55	3.65	0.50	-3.64***	.31
Temperance	3.41	0.49	3.65	0.52	-5.14***	.46
Transcendence	3.69	0.52	3.85	0.47	-3.48***	.31
Hostile sexism	3.49	1.10	2.86	0.99	6.79***	.56
Benevolent sexism	4.19	1.02	3.81	1.05	4.17***	.36
Sexist beliefs and justification of domestic violence	2.98	1.01	2.43	0.85	6.64***	.52

hope, humor, and religiousness). The internal consistency of questionnaire ranges between the values of  $\alpha = .72$  and  $\alpha = .91$  for the diverse scales of the questionnaire.

### Procedure

The investigators informed the school directors and the school parents' association about the goals of the study and the procedure to be followed. The schools that accepted to participate in the investigation were in charge of requesting the parents' informed consent.

The data were collected during the first trimester of the course 2010-2011 in two 1-hour sessions. This data collection was proposed as an anonymous and voluntary group activity in the schools.

The students collectively filled out the numbered tests in their classrooms, during their normal class schedules.

### Data analysis

We performed Student's *t*-test for the comparison of means of independent samples in order to analyze gender differences in the scores, and the corresponding measures of effect size by means of Cohen's *d* for each variable.

Subsequently, we conducted a canonical correlational analysis for each gender. The first set of variables was made up of Hostile sexism, Benevolent sexism, and Sexist beliefs and justification of domestic violence. The second set was made up of the 6 Psychological values: Wisdom and knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence.

### Results

The comparison of means for gender differences was significant for each one of the variables studied, showing that the girls obtained higher scores in all six psychological values and lower scores in the variables that make up sexism. The effect size observed was small in most of the variables. This information is presented in Table 1.

Using Wilks' criterion, the canonical correlational analysis for the girls yielded the first statistically significant canonical variable,  $F(18, 642) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a canonical correlation of .407,

*Table 2*  
Correlations of the canonical variables with the original variables of the first and second sets in the group of girls

Variables	Loadings
<i>First set</i>	
Hostile sexism	-.92
Benevolent sexism	-.34
Sexist beliefs and justification of domestic violence	-.77
<i>Second set</i>	
Wisdom and knowledge	.49
Courage	.78
Humanity	.94
Justice	.61
Temperance	.67
Transcendence	.60

which explained 51.9% of the variance of the first set of variables, and 48.41% of the second set. The second canonical variable was also statistically significant,  $F(10, 456) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .002$ . However, the canonical correlation was .28, explaining less than 10% of the variance, so, following the guidelines of Tabachnick and Fidell (1996), it was not interpreted.

In contrast, in the group of boys, the analysis showed that only the first canonical variable was significant,  $F(18, 577) = 2.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a canonical correlation of .405, which explained 47.95% of the variance of the first set and 62.26% of the second set of variables. These results suggest the existence of significant intercorrelations between the two sets of variables included in a dimension. Tables 2 and 3 present the correlations of the canonical variables with the variables of the first and second sets.

Choosing a cut-off point of 0.35 to interpret the loadings, the results show that all the sexism variables from the first set are negatively related to the canonical variable, and all the psychological value variables from the second set are also positively related to the canonical variable. This pattern of results is the same for boys and girls, indicating that sexist attitudes are inversely related to the values that make up psychological strengths. That is, people who tend to obtain high scores in sexist attitudes tend to present low scores in wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence, and vice versa.

Table 3

Correlations of the canonical variables with the original variables from the first and second sets in the group of boys

Variables	Loadings
<i>First set</i>	
Hostile sexism	-.58
Benevolent sexism	-.35
Sexist beliefs and justification of domestic violence	-.98
<i>Second set</i>	
Wisdom and knowledge	.89
Courage	.86
Humanity	.69
Justice	.63
Temperance	.72
Transcendence	.90

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to analyze the relation between two groups of variables, sexism on the one hand, and psychological values on the other, in groups of preadolescent boys and girls.

In the results, firstly, significant gender differences were obtained in all the variables studied, as expected. The girls express a lower degree of agreement with sexist attitudes and hostile sexism. Other studies of adolescents have systematically found this same result (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Lemus et al., 2008). Likewise, in the present work, the preadolescent girls also scored lower than the boys in benevolent sexism. In this sample, the boys expressed more agreement with stereotyped beliefs about women that consider them as belonging to a group that should be protected; the opposite was observed in preadolescent girls.

Regarding the psychological values, at this age, the girls present significantly higher means than the boys in all six values analyzed. This result is congruent with data from diverse previous investigations that analyze the strengths, and it is a common constant in several countries (Ferragut, Ortiz-Tallo, & Blanca, 2011; Giménez, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2003; Shimai et al., 2006).

Thus, sexist attitudes differentiated between boys and girls at very early ages, so that, already in secondary school, boys display more negative attitudes towards women than girls. These boys also present fewer positive traits in comparison to the girls, obtaining lower scores in the psychological values.

The results of this study also show that sexist variables are related to each other, and inversely to the psychological values. This occurs both in the group of boys and of girls. Within this context, we can state that the psychological values are involved in the formation of sexist beliefs and attitudes. There are no studies of this aspect that provide evidence of this relation. Other authors have investigated the aspects that differentiate boys and girls, finding that the relational aspect of sexism differentiates the genders and is involved in sexist beliefs (García et al., 2010).

In the canonical correlational analysis, we observed in the girls that the variable with the greatest weight in the set of sexist variables was hostile sexism. In the psychological values, the variable with the greatest loading was humanity. That is, in the group of girls, the development of psychological values, especially those that include approaching others, empathy, and knowledge of social situations, is inversely related to the development of attitudes of rejection of women, considering them inferior, and in a stereotyped way.

But in the group of boys, the variable from the first set with the greatest loading is sexist beliefs and justification of domestic violence, and from the second set, the value of transcendence. Thus, sexist beliefs that justify violence towards women are related to a lower capacity of gratitude, hope, humor, or religiousness (the transcendence value).

Studies of the psychological strengths and values have related them with variables such as well-being, satisfaction, or even with psychopathology, such as depression or stress (Giménez, 2010; Park & Peterson, 2009), in which these variables always emerge as predictors of psychological health.

In this sense, preadolescents who have high scores in the psychological values show less sexist attitudes towards women. Considering these data, we can state that, in the study of sexist attitudes, education in psychological values should be taken into account as a preventive measure. Moreover, it would also be interesting to focus on support or intervention, especially in males.

This study is part of a longitudinal research project to study the variables presented herein throughout secondary education. Thus, we will attempt to progressively solve some of the current limitations. We think it would be interesting to study the evolution of these data during adolescence. Future research could have the goals of expanding the number of participants, and including different ages. Lastly, it would be relevant to carry out interventions in the psychological values and to observe whether changes are produced in the variables related to sexism.

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