Why still so few? A theoretical model of the role of benevolent sexism and career support in the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions

Abstract

We advance our understanding of women's continued underrepresentation in leadership positions by highlighting the subtle, but damaging, role of benevolent sexism, a covert and socially accepted form of sexism, plays in this process. Drawing on and integrating previously disparate literatures on benevolent sexism and social support, we develop a new theoretical model in which benevolent sexism of both women and those in their social networks (i.e., managers and intimate partners) affect women's acquisition of career social support for advancement at two levels, *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal*, and across multiple domains, *work* and *family*. At the interpersonal level, we suggest that managers' and intimate partners' benevolent sexism may undermine their provision of the needed career support to advance in leadership positions for women. At the intrapersonal level, we suggest that women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexism may undermine their ability to recognize and willingness to seek out career support from their family members (i.e., intimate partners) and managers for advancement to leadership positions. Implications for theory and future research are discussed.

Keywords: benevolent sexism, gender, social support, career support, leadership, work-family, discrimination

Women in Western countries today are achieving high levels of education and out earning men in degrees; women earn 52.7% of all university degrees in Canada (Catalyst, 2014a) and 57.3% of bachelor's, 59.9% of master's, and 51.4% of doctorate degrees in the United States (Catalyst, 2014b). Despite their superior educational attainment, and thereby greater human capital, women are still underrepresented in top leadership positions. As examples, women hold only 19.9% seats on boards of directors in S&P500 companies in the United States (Catalyst, 2016); 21.6% of board seats in Financial Post 500 companies in Canada (Canadian Board Diversity Council, 2016); and 25% of board seats and 4% of board chairs in the largest publicly listed companies in the European Union (European Women on Boards and ISS, 2016).

This underrepresentation of women in top positions is problematic from both a business and ethical standpoint. From a business standpoint, women make up almost half of the workforce (47.3% in Canada and 46.8% in the USA; Catalyst, 2014a, 2014b). By not promoting women into senior leadership roles, organizations are missing out on the opportunity to capitalize on the talent and skills of a large percentage of their workforce. In fact, increased female representation in top leadership roles has been linked to better firm financial performance (e.g., Herring, 2009; Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2016). From an ethical or moral standpoint, gender equality and concerns regarding fairness have long been a priority in many Western countries and organizations (Jones, King, Nelson, Geller, & Bowles-Sperry, 2013); however, the continued underrepresentation of women in top leadership roles indicates a failure to make significant progress toward the achievement of this goal.

A large literature has examined factors contributing to the dearth of women in top organizational positions. One prominent explanation is that prejudice and gender role stereotypes are preventing women's ascent into top organizational roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Koenig,

Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Oakley, 2000; Schein, 2001). Although this approach has generated a number of insights, this past work has typically been rooted in a conceptualization of prejudice and stereotypes as blatantly negative (i.e., women are inferior to men) or focuses on women's deficiencies (i.e., women do not 'fit' with the leadership role). In contrast, ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997) argues that in addition to this more traditional sexist attitude in which women are viewed with antipathy and hostility (i.e., *hostile sexism*), a second, more insidious type of sexist attitude also exists. Specifically, *benevolent sexism* refers to subjectively positive feelings (e.g., liking, warmth) toward gender role conforming women and tendencies to idealize and desire to protect these women.

In this paper, we seek to generate novel insights regarding women's underrepresentation in leadership positions by offering a new theoretical model depicted in Figure 1 that highlights the role of benevolent sexism. This model integrates previously disparate literatures on benevolent sexism and social support to highlight new directions for understanding and addressing the intractable problem of women's underrepresentation in leadership roles that complements existing approaches (e.g., focus on hostile sexism and gender differences in human capital). This model strengthens our understanding of the problem in several ways. First, we highlight the overlooked role that benevolent sexist attitudes, both of individuals in women's social networks in various domains (i.e., managers in the work sphere and intimate partners in the home sphere) and women themselves, play in women's ability to attain leadership roles. Second, we discuss how despite women's success in attaining certain forms of human capital, such as educational achievement, women have been lacking a crucial form of social capital needed for the attainment of leadership positions—the contextual resource of career support. Additionally, we link women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexism to their ability to

recognize and willingness to seek out career support (i.e., intrapersonal process) and the

benevolent sexist attitudes of those around women to their provision of career support for these

women (i.e., interpersonal process).

Our model moves the field forward in several ways. First, our model suggests that the

underrepresentation of women in top positions in many organizations and industries may stem, in

part, from subjectively positive and subtle prejudiced attitudes endorsed by both men and women

that may be particularly difficult to recognize and eradicate, but are just as harmful as more

blatant forms of prejudice (Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2016). Second, by highlighting

both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes, our model integrates the two dominant

perspectives in the literature on female underrepresentation in leadership positions, i.e., the so

called "opt out" (i.e., women opting out themselves of leadership careers due to their

preferences, values, and goals) and "pushed out" (i.e., women being discriminated and prevented

access to leadership positions by others; Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017) perspectives. Namely, our

model shows that these two perspectives, which have traditionally been seen as separate and

independent from each other, are linked via the common antecedent of benevolent sexist

attitudes and jointly influence women's career outcomes. Third, our model integrates multiple

life domains (i.e., work and personal life) to demonstrate how experiences in one domain

influence experiences in another. Thus, we highlight that increasing women's representation in

leadership positions likely requires that we address non-work, in addition to workplace, factors.

BENEVOLENT SEXISM: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997) specifies that sexist attitudes are

comprised of two complementary forms of sexism, hostile and benevolent, which together

maintain the status quo. Hostile sexism refers to traditional conceptualizations of sexism that

center on antipathy toward women, particularly those who challenge the existing social

hierarchy. Women are seen as generally inferior to men and as trying to control men through

feminist ideology and sexual seduction (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). Thus, hostile sexism refers

to a blatant form of prejudice, which in Western societies tends to be less socially acceptable

(Cortina, 2008; Dovidio, 2001), and maintains the status quo by punishing those who seek to

oppose or operate outside of it (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

In contrast, benevolent sexism refers to subjectively positive attitudes toward women

who endorse traditional gender role ideologies, and is characterized by feelings of protectiveness,

idealization, and affection. Ultimately, this perspective portrays women as wonderful, yet weak

(Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). For example, individuals who score higher on benevolent sexism

believe that women are delicate and should be protected and taken care of by men; that while

women, compared to men, may not have the traits necessary to lead and govern important social

institutions, they have traits that men generally lack, such as sensitivity to others' feelings; and

that women should be valued and protected because they fulfill men's romantic needs. Despite its

positive valence, benevolent sexism also contributes to maintaining the status quo by rewarding

those who operate within existing gender role ideologies (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Past research finds that both men and women often do not perceive benevolent sexism to

be gender discrimination (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Becker, 2010). In fact, women are just

as likely as men to hold benevolent sexist attitudes (Becker, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Sibley &

Becker, 2012). Women may even prefer a benevolent sexist as a romantic partner over a non-

sexist (Gul & Kupfer, 2018; Kilianski & Rudman, 1998), and a romantic partner's endorsement

of benevolent sexism enhances relationship security among women (Cross, Overall, &

Hammond, 2016; Hammond, Overall, & Cross, 2016). In comparison to hostile sexism,

benevolent sexism is more prevalent and socially accepted (Connelly & Heesacker, 2012; Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015). Thus, not surprisingly, research documents that women report greater exposure to references of benevolent rather than hostile sexist stereotypes and more frequent experiences where they are treated in a paternalistic (or benevolent sexist) compared to a hostile sexist manner (Becker & Swim, 2011; Oswald, Baalbaki, & Kirkman, 2018).

Although benevolent sexism is often not recognized as discriminatory or harmful and is endorsed by both men and women (Glick et al., 2000), accumulating empirical evidence paints a picture in which benevolent sexism is subtly eroding gender equality, including in the workplace. For example, past research has found that treating women in a benevolent sexist manner undermines women's self-efficacy and performance (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Jones et al., 2014) and others' perceptions of women's competence and hireability (Good & Rudman, 2010). Further, the endorsement of benevolent sexist beliefs is related to assigning women to less challenging roles and opportunities in the workplace (King et al., 2012) and support for the employment of women in feminine, but not masculine, positions (Hideg & Ferris, 2016). Finally, exposure to benevolent sexism undermines women's collective action and desire for social change (Becker & Wright, 2011).

Given its pervasiveness and general acceptance by both men and women, we suggest that benevolent sexism is imperceptibly influencing the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions by compromising a key resource: *social support* women receive and seek to pursue advancement. Namely, by integrating the literature on ambivalent sexism theory with the literature on social support, we first suggest that benevolent sexist attitudes of organizational decision-makers in the workplace (i.e., one's manager) and family members (i.e., one's intimate partner) influence to what extent they provide the needed career support to women to advance

into leadership roles. Second, we also suggest that the benevolent sexist attitudes of women undermine their perceptions of the importance and consequent acquisition of both workplace and family support to pursue leadership positions. In the next section, we describe why career support is such a critical resource for women to attain leadership roles and for advancement.

SOCIAL SUPPORT: AN IMPORTANT RESOURCE FOR ATTAINING LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Social support is a key resource that emerges from a social environment. The broader literature on social support defines it as a complex multi-faceted construct comprised of supportive interactions, perceptions of receipt of support, and feelings of being supported (Hobfoll, 2002; Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987). Given the complexity of this construct, past research has urged researchers to develop more precise models by examining specific support concepts (Barrera, 1986; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). In fact, recent work suggests that specific types of support better predict relevant outcomes compared to general forms of support (e.g., supervisor work-family support vs. general supervisor support in predicting work-family conflict; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). Therefore, in this paper, we focus specifically on social support for advancement into management, which we call *career support* throughout the rest of this paper. This kind of support can come from two domains, from the workplace and from one's personal life, and in two forms, instrumental (i.e., coaching, providing information) and emotional (i.e., encouragement, friendship; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Gleason & Iida, 2015).

Workplace Career Support

Workplace career support comes from mentors, senior staff, and other colleagues in the workplace. It entails the provision of specific career functions (e.g., coaching, challenging

assignments, and sponsorship) or psychosocial support (e.g., giving encouragement, enhancing sense of competence and effectiveness, counseling, and friendship; Kram, 1983; Tharenou, 2001). A large body of literature demonstrates the benefits of workplace social support on the career outcomes of recipients of this support. For example, mentorship is related to both objective career outcomes, including advancement into management positions, and subjective career outcomes, such as career satisfaction (e.g., Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lenz, & Lima, 2004; Burke, 1984; Fagenson, 1989; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Scandura, 1992). In this paper we focus specifically on managerial support given that managers play a central role in the development and advancement of their subordinates.

Past research suggests that career support is particularly important for women in attaining top leadership positions because they face greater barriers than men when trying to access these roles (Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Tharenou & Conroy, 1994; Tharenou, 2001). At the same time, relative to men, women are less likely to receive the quality mentoring they need, especially at the upper echelons, which ultimately undermines their ability to be appointed to top leadership positions (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). Moreover, research shows that women are much less likely than men to secure sponsorship (i.e., a crucial type of mentorship in which mentors go beyond giving feedback and use their influence with senior executives to advocate for the mentee; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). Ragins et al. (2000) also found that women with formal mentors were less satisfied with their mentoring and were less committed to their careers compared to their male counterparts and nonmentored men and women. This suggests that formal mentoring programs and relationships may be less effective for women and more informal sources of support may be particularly critical. Thus, although workplace career support appears to be very important for women's advancement, women are less likely to receive the

high quality social support needed to attain leadership positions compared to men. Overall, this past research shows the importance of workplace—particularly managerial—career support for women's attainment of leadership roles.

Family Career Support

The research on social support within the family domain has mostly focused on overall family support or support from an individual's intimate partner or spouse (French, Dumani, Allen, & Shockley, 2018). Moreover, although the majority of family social support research examines general family support or family support for non-work responsibilities, there is a small literature on family support for work (i.e., career support) that has developed in the work-family literature. This past research suggests that family career support is helpful in alleviating work-family conflict and enhancing employee well-being (e.g., King, Mattimore, King, & Adams, 1995; Lapierre & Allen, 2006). Thus, we anticipate that in addition to providing support for work generally, family members also have the opportunity to provide women with *career support to advancement into management*.

In particular, we focus on career support from one's intimate partner because past research suggests that women's spouses or partners have a tremendous influence on their careers (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014). Intimate partners' support could include emotional support and encouragement for women to achieve leadership positions as well as coaching or mentoring regarding how these positions could be attained (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Equally importantly, intimate partners' support could also include more instrumental forms of career support, such as taking on much more family and household responsibilities to facilitate women's pursuit of advancement, a factor that women who have attained leadership positions have called out as crucial to their success (Cheung & Halpern, 2010).

There is emerging evidence that family support, particularly from intimate partners, for work can positively influence women's careers. As an example, a recent study by Barth, Dunlap, and Chappetta (2016) found that more successful women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) had romantic partners who were supportive of their educational and career aspirations. This indicates that a partner's support for work may play an important role in fields where women are traditionally underrepresented. Similarly, in their interview study of 62 top women leaders (e.g., legislators, government ministers, business executives, chief of police) in three nations (i.e., China, Hong Kong, and the United States), Halpern and Cheung (2008) found that these successful women leaders very much credited the support of their spouses for their careers as reasons behind their success. Unfortunately, at the same time, prior research suggests that women generally report lower levels of spousal support compared to men (Xu & Burleson, 2001). Overall, this prior work demonstrates the importance of career support provided by intimate partners for women's attainment of leadership positions.

Below, we suggest that the benevolent sexist attitudes of managers and intimate partners as well as women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexist attitudes may influence women's acquisition of much needed career support to advance into management. In particular, we identify and model two different, yet related, processes through which one may garner career support: (1) interpersonal processes in which others grant or offer career support, and (2) intrapersonal processes in which women claim or seek career support.

BENEVOLENT SEXISM AND CAREER SUPPORT ACROSS DOMAINS

Interpersonal Processes: Benevolent Sexism and the Provision of Career Support

Managers' benevolent sexism and career support. Compared to men, women may be less likely to garner career support from managers to pursue top jobs in the company and this

lack of career support may be fueled in part by managers' benevolent sexist attitudes. This is problematic as help from above is often cited by women as critical to their career success (Morrison, White, Van Velsor, and the Center for Creative Leadership, 1992). As mentioned before, benevolent sexist stereotypes involve viewing women as in need of assistance and protection (Glick & Fiske, 1996). As such, individuals who more strongly endorse benevolent sexism may not find women suitable for positions of power and status where strong character and willpower may be needed, including in the workplace (Hideg & Ferris, 2016).

At the same time, benevolent sexist stereotypes emphasize the need to protect and shield women from any hardship. Pursuing leadership positions presents a challenge and presumably a lot of sacrifice (e.g., dealing with challenging assignments, working longs hours, and having to make difficult decisions; Lyness & Thompson, 1997). As such, individuals who more strongly endorse benevolent sexism may be less likely to encourage or prepare women to enter leadership roles in order to shield them from such challenges. Namely, managers may make decisions to not offer women challenging assignments, which are often needed for securing top jobs (Lyness & Schrader, 2006; Lyness & Thompson, 2000), as a way of protecting them. Supporting this notion, recent research showed that decision-makers who were higher on benevolent sexism were less likely to assign women challenging work assignments (King et al., 2012). Similarly, research has found that individuals who observed interviewers treating a female job candidate in a benevolently sexist manner inferred that the female candidate was less capable and hireable for management positions (Good & Rudman, 2010). In turn, not receiving adequate managerial career support will undermine women's chances of attaining top leadership positions.

Alternatively, it could be the case that managers who endorse benevolent sexism may be more likely to seek to help women by "taking them under their wing" given their desire to

protect them. However, although these benevolent sexist managers may perceive themselves as supporting women, their actual provision of career support toward these women may be less than optimal. Specifically, prior research highlighted that endorsement of or exposure to benevolent sexism among men results in more dependency-oriented (i.e., direct assistance) rather than autonomy-oriented (i.e., providing tools for independent coping) helping towards women (Shnabel, Bar-Anan, Kende, Bareket, & Lazar, 2016; Varty, Hideg, & Ferris, 2018). Converging with these findings, research on top management teams has shown that (male) board chairs are more likely to enact a "collaborative" orientation toward female rather than male CEOs. Researchers have interpreted this as a form of benevolent sexism to "help" female CEOs since this effect is attenuated when female board representation increases and gender is arguably less salient in the boardroom (Oliver, Krause, Busenbark, & Kalm, 2018).

Additionally, this type of assistance from a man could be problematic for women's advancement given evidence that women tend to receive less credit for their success when they are achieved as a part of a mixed-sex dyad or team (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). Finally, research indicates that although benevolent sexism among men is related to greater willingness to engage in protective action (against violence) on behalf of women, it was unrelated to willingness to engage in feminist action on behalf of women (Radke, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2018). Thus, this suggests that even if (male) benevolent sexist managers had a desire to support subordinate women, who they perhaps view as under their protection, the particular actions they may take on behalf of these women are likely circumscribed and unlikely to benefit women as a group at work. Overall, we suggest that these types of "helping" or paternalistic support behaviors that are likely to be provided by managers, particularly men, higher on benevolent sexism ultimately do not empower women with the tools needed for advancement. Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Managers' benevolent sexism is negatively related to their provision of career support for women's advancement.

Proposition 2: Lower managerial career support for women mediates the negative relationship between managers' benevolent sexism and women's attainment of leadership positions.

We further suggest that managers who endorse benevolent sexism may be inclined to provide high levels of family supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSB), behaviors exhibited by managers that are supportive of employee's family roles and encourage work-family balance (e.g., Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009), to women. Some examples of FSSBs include promoting the availability of family-friendly practices and encouraging employees to take advantage of those practices promoting work-life balance rather than those requiring long working hours (Straub, 2012). Given that individuals who more strongly hold benevolent sexist beliefs are more likely to subscribe to traditional gender roles in which women are seen as communal and as the main caregiver in the family (Glick & Fiske, 1996), benevolent sexist managers may seek to assist women in preserving their role as the a main caregiver in the family by providing them with FSSBs. Benevolent sexist managers may also perceive that women need assistance in balancing work and family duties and may feel compelled to help by providing support for work-family balance.

Past research has shown that managers' FSSBs are related to lower levels of employee work-family conflict and stress as well as lower turnover intentions and higher job satisfaction (e.g., Hammer et al., 2009; Odle-Dusseau, Britt, & Greene-Shortridge, 2012). However, we suggest that FSSBs, while beneficial in many ways for employees, may to some degree undermine women's chances of attaining leadership positions when enacted by benevolent sexist managers. This is because FSSBs may come at the expense of career support for advancement from these managers. For example, if benevolent sexist managers are concerned with women's

work-life balance, then they may be less likely to recommend challenging assignments that may

require long working hours and travelling, due to concerns about time away from family.

However, these kind of challenging experiences appear to be critical for obtaining top leadership

positions (e.g., King et al., 2012; Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994).

Finally, recent research demonstrates that helping in the workplace comes at some cost to

the helper (e.g., Lanaj, Johnson, & Wang, 2016; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016). This suggests

that there may be limits to the level of support managers are willing or able to provide to

subordinates. Thus, if managers are engaging in FSSBs with their female subordinates, then they

may be less likely to also provide career support to these women. In other words, managers

higher on benevolent sexism will be more likely to channel their support for women to the family

domain, which will leave fewer resources that can be offered in support of the work domain,

including advancement. In line with this discussion, we put forward the following propositions:

> *Proposition 3: Managers' benevolent sexism is positively related with their provision of FSSBs for women.*

> *Proposition 4: FSSBs for women is negatively related to career support for women's advancement.*

> *Proposition 5: Managers' higher FSSBs and lower career support for women sequentially mediate the negative relationship between managers' benevolent sexism and women's attainment of leadership positions.*

Intimate partners' benevolent sexism and career support. The more intimate partners

endorse benevolent sexism the less likely they will provide career support to women. Recent

research by Hammond and Overall (2015) found that men who more strongly endorse

benevolent sexist attitudes are more likely to provide dependency-oriented support to their

partners, which involves doing for rather than empowering their partner to do for themselves.

Thus, intimate partners who endorse benevolent sexism may seek to help women in a way that

undermines their personal growth and development and protect women from any perceived challenges or hardships, including obtaining leadership positions. For example, intimate partners may point out and emphasize how hard it would be to balance work and family if a woman was in a very demanding position, such as a leadership role. Alternatively or additionally, partners may highlight women's unique and irreplaceable value in the home sphere (e.g., as a caretaker or cook) and argue that they cannot be spared outside the home. As such, intimate partners may subtly (or not so subtly) discourage women from attempting to enter into leadership positions.

Further, intimate partners who endorse benevolent sexism may subscribe to more traditional gender role ideologies in which men should be breadwinners and provide for their families. As such, in heterosexual relationships, male partners may be more likely to work longer hours or in more demanding jobs themselves to provide for their family and protect their families from financial hardship. By doing so, these intimate partners may be less likely to provide their spouse with tangible help with household chores and caretaking duties. This type of more instrumental support is particularly important for women as, traditionally, women tend to spend more time on family roles than men (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010), and this time squeeze or 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1989) ultimately undermines women's careers. As discussed above, intimate partners' support is crucial for alleviating the work-family conflict that women tend to experience, but is also important for the success of women in fields in which they are traditionally underrepresented (Barth et al., 2016; Cheung & Halpern, 2016). We thus put forward the following propositions:

Proposition 6: Intimate partners' benevolent sexism is negatively related to their provision of career support for women's advancement.

Proposition 7: Intimate partners' lower career support for women mediates the negative relationship between intimate partners' benevolent sexism and women's attainment of leadership positions.

Beyond intimate partners' endorsement of benevolent sexism influencing their provision of career support toward women, we suggest that intimate partners' benevolent sexist beliefs also influence women's own endorsement of benevolent sexism, which has implications for their consequent career support seeking for attaining leadership roles. One of the central elements of benevolent sexism is the provision and protection of women in intimate relationships (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997), which positions such intimate relationships as particularly important for sustaining benevolent sexist attitudes among women. Namely, the putative benefits that benevolent sexism supposedly gives to women (e.g., protection, care) occurs primarily in such intimate relationships, and these benefits are promised to women by their intimate partners. As such, intimate partners' endorsement of benevolent sexism should act as a signal that they will invest in the relationship by providing protection and care (Gul & Kupfer, 2018). Consequently, this should increase women's endorsement of benevolent sexism.

Supporting this notion, Hammond et al. (2016) found that women who perceived that their partners endorsed benevolent sexism tended to endorse benevolent sexism more than women who did not perceive that their partners endorsed benevolent sexism. They further found that the reverence and security that benevolent sexism promises to women underlies women's higher endorsement of benevolent sexism when they perceive that their intimate partners endorse such attitudes. As such, intimate partners' benevolent sexism influence women's attainment of leadership positions not only through interpersonal processes (i.e., intimate partners' provision of career support to advance in management), but also through intrapersonal processes (i.e., women's own perceptions and seeking of career support for advancement from work and family sources). We describe these intrapersonal processes in greater detail in the section below.

Intrapersonal Processes: Benevolent Sexism and Women's Seeking of Career Support

We also suggest that women's own endorsement of benevolent sexism will undermine their seeking of career support both at work and at home. Specifically, we theorize that there are two reasons for this negative relationship. First, women who endorse benevolent sexism may misperceive patronizing behaviors from intimate partners and managers as supportive. Therefore, they may already feel supported and fail to seek actual career support from others to advance into management. Second, women who endorse benevolent sexism may be less likely to seek career support for advancement because they perceive that seeking such support is inappropriate because a woman's natural place is not in a powerful leadership role. Before we further elaborate on our arguments here, we first address the counterintuitive angle of this section.

A counterintuitive assumption of our propositions in this section is that there remains the possibility that women who hold benevolent sexist attitudes may nevertheless still seek to advance into management (though note that we are not arguing that such women are *more* likely to seek advancement than their female counterparts who hold less benevolent sexist attitudes). A fair question is if it is even possible that women who endorse benevolent sexism would even want to advance into management positions. We suggest that this is indeed a possibility under some circumstances, especially given that benevolent sexism is pervasive and widely endorsed by men and women alike. First, although women who hold more benevolent sexist beliefs may generally believe that women are not naturally suited to leadership roles, given their adherence to traditional gender roles, these women may be more likely to choose feminine academic majors, occupations, or industries (Montañés, de Lemus, Bohner, Megías, Moya, & Garcia-Retamero, 2012; Sakalli-Uğurl, 2010). Thus, these women may tend to find themselves in situations where those vying for management or leadership roles are primarily or exclusively women. As such, concerns regarding fit between gender and leadership roles may be less salient. After all, even in

settings where women are predominant, somebody needs to lead. Therefore, women who endorse benevolent sexism may see aspirations to lead and manage as a more natural fit with their gender role in more feminine contexts or where women are more numerically dominant.

Alternatively, recent research indicates that perceptions of leadership roles are changing, such that it is increasingly recognized that communal characteristics and skills are important for effective leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Koenig et al., 2011). In fact, besides enterprising interests (e.g., persuading and dominating), social interests (e.g., helping), in which women tend to score higher on than men (Su, Rounds, & Armstrong, 2009), also strongly predict motivation to lead (Chan, Rounds, & Drasgow, 2000). Thus, it may be the case that women who more strongly support benevolent sexist attitudes may still be attracted to leadership roles given these changes in how leadership roles are generally perceived, particularly when these roles are described or portrayed in a more feminine or communal manner (e.g., as supporting vs. directing others; Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011). Overall, we anticipate that endorsement of benevolent sexism may not *necessarily* prevent women from seeking advancement or leadership opportunities (though they may be more likely to seek leadership opportunities in more feminine contexts or when it is described in a more communal manner). Rather we expect that women who subscribe to benevolent sexist beliefs may have more difficulty garnering the support needed to attain these roles for the reasons described below.

Seeing patronizing behaviors as supportive. Prior to explaining our argument regarding links between women's benevolent sexism and their tendencies to seeing patronizing behaviors as supportive, we want to clarify that our intention here is not to "blame the victim" or argue that the responsibility for changing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles lies with women. However, we do think it is important to highlight how socialized beliefs

regarding gender roles may also subtly shape women's expectations, perceptions, and actions. Furthermore, if such intrapersonal processes are indeed at play and contributing to women's underrepresentation in top management, this indicates the need to recognize and challenge benevolent sexist views that are likely to be held by both men and women within our society.

We suggest that women who subscribe to benevolent sexism may be more apt to view others' patronizing behaviors toward them as support. Patronizing behaviors refer to instances where "members of negatively stereotyped groups receive few valued resources but a great deal of seemingly disingenuous praise" (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005, p. 659). For example, when a women gets passed over for a promotion, but is praised effusively for her performance and credentials. In the family domain, intimate partners may advise women to give more weight and consideration to family issues and work-family balance when planning their careers than they would to a man. Alternatively, they may praise women and highlight how well-suited and invaluable they are to their current, often lower status, roles.

Although this type of advice and encouragement is patronizing, women who endorse benevolent sexist attitudes may nonetheless perceive these actions as caring and supportive, given their desire to be protected and sheltered. In fact, prior research suggests that whereas the same patronizing behaviors are noticed and viewed as inappropriate when coming from work colleagues, these same behaviors are often viewed as more acceptable when coming from one's intimate partner (Sarlet, Dumont, Delacollette, & Dardenne, 2012). Moreover, research suggests that when women endorse or are primed with benevolent sexist attitudes, they are more likely to seek dependency-oriented rather than autonomy-oriented help from men (Shnabel et al., 2016).

In the workplace, managers have been known to encourage women to take on less (vs. more) challenging assignments (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2014; King et al., 2012),

potentially as a means to avoid work-family conflict (Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009).

Additionally, research suggests that women may be evaluated against lower standards than men

(e.g., Biernat, Crandall, Young, Kobrynowicz, & Halpin, 1998; Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997).

The use of these shifting standards could result in high subjective ratings for women that do not

match evaluators more objective evaluations or rankings. This, in turn, undermines women's

ability to develop their leadership potential and their ability to be promoted to higher ranking

positions in future (e.g., Lyness & Schrader, 2006). In the same vein as arguments we made for

the home sphere, women who endorse benevolent sexism may tend to see these patronizing

behaviors and actions by their managers as being very supportive of their careers and even

chivalrous. Consequently, women higher on benevolent sexism would be less motivated to seek

career support from others for advancement purposes because they believe they are already

receiving adequate support. Thus, we put forward the following propositions:

> *Proposition 8: Women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexism is positively related with perceiving patronizing behaviors as supportive.*

> *Proposition 9: Perceiving patronizing behaviors as supportive is negatively related to women's attainment of leadership positions.*

> *Proposition 10: Perceiving patronizing behaviors as supportive mediates the negative relationship between women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexism and their attainment of leadership positions.*

Seeking career support from managers and intimate partners. Next, we suggest that

women who endorse benevolent sexism may also be less likely to seek career support for

advancement because they perceive that seeking such support may not be appropriate or that

others will withdraw their current protections if they do so. Indeed, past research shows that both

men and women who endorse benevolent sexism are more likely to support the hiring of women

in more 'gender-appropriate' roles (e.g., feminine roles such as human resource management or

customer service representative) than in more traditionally masculine positions (e.g., finance, management; Hideg & Ferris, 2016). By seeking career support to advance in positions that may not be considered gender-appropriate (e.g., leadership roles), women who hold benevolent sexist attitudes may fear that they will actually lose the protection and support that they currently enjoy.

Ultimately, receiving patronizing behaviors and failing to seek appropriate career support for advancement should undermine women's chances of attaining leadership positions. This is because those on the receiving end of patronizing behaviors may not be gaining important information or accurate performance feedback that allows for effective self-improvement and career planning (Bear, Cushenbery, London, & Sherman, 2017; Hammond & Overall, 2015). In fact, past research demonstrates that career support is crucial in attaining and being successful in top leadership positions (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Ragins et al., 2000). This is especially the case because women are less likely to receive adequate career support to advance into management positions (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). As such, failing to seek an appropriate degree or kinds of career support for advancement would be particularly detrimental for women. We thus put forward the following propositions:

> *Proposition 11: Women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexism is negatively related with their seeking of career support from both managers and intimate partners.*
>
> *Proposition 12: Seeking career support from managers and intimate partners is positively related to women's attainment of leadership positions.*
>
> *Proposition 13: Seeking career support from both managers and intimate partners mediates the negative relationship between women's personal endorsement of benevolent sexism and their attainment of leadership positions.*

DISCUSSION

Despite the great strides women have made in educational achievements and in attaining other forms of human capital, factors that have traditionally been hailed as key reasons for the

dearth of women in management positions (as reviewed in Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011), the lack of women in top leadership positions continues to persist. In this paper, we proposed a novel model that expands our thinking in new directions—detailing how benevolent sexism may be subtly and potently contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions under the guise of protecting women. Moreover, given that both men and women tend to endorse this contemporary form of prejudice equally (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997) and benevolent sexists do not support the employment of women in positions in which they are traditionally underrepresented (Hideg & Ferris, 2016), the effects of benevolent sexism on women's underrepresentation can be profound, yet not easily detected. Our model thus offers an innovative lens with which to view barriers to women's advancement in the workplace.

A useful exercise that serves to highlight some of the contributions of our new model is to replace "benevolent sexism" in our theoretical model with "hostile sexism," which has been the historic and long-standing focus of sexism research. When doing so, several key differences between the effects of the two types of sexist attitudes emerges that exemplifies their distinctiveness. First, although the outcomes of both interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of benevolent sexism is proposed to be negative for women's attainment of leadership roles, this is not necessarily the case for hostile sexism. Specifically, although prior research indicates that others' hostile sexist attitudes and behaviors can negatively impact women's attainment of leadership roles (Masser & Abrams, 2004), somewhat ironically, some data also suggest that personal endorsement of hostile sexist attitudes on the part of women can be positively associated with attainment of leadership roles. For example, Martin and Phillips (2017) found that women who endorsed gender-blindness (i.e., downplaying gender differences), which is often deemed a modern form of sexism (Morrison, Morrison, Pope, & Zumbo, 1999),

were more confident and likely to take action compared to women who endorsed gender

awareness (i.e., celebrating gender differences). Additionally, the Queen Bee phenomenon refers

to senior women in male-dominated contexts who demonstrate hostility toward more junior

women (Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012). Although it may be the case that distancing

oneself from other women and hostile sexist attitudes are the result rather than the cause of

attaining senior leadership roles among these women, it does appear that there may be a positive

correlation between the two, at least in some situations.

Second, the hostile sexist attitudes of managers should be negatively associated with

support for women to advance into management *and* FSSBs (and, perhaps, even positively

associated with sabotage or incivility) as these individuals will tend to express antipathy and

hostility toward career women (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997). In contrast, our

arguments regarding the benevolent sexist attitudes of organizational decision-makers is more

nuanced in that we expect them to provide support to women in the workplace, but to channel

their support disproportionately toward family-related issues rather than advancement-related

concerns. Further, it seems somewhat unlikely that women interested in climbing the corporate

ladder would purposively seek out individuals who hold hostile sexist attitudes for support.

However, given that individuals who hold benevolent sexist attitudes are typically viewed very

positively (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998), they may be more likely to be sought out to be mentors

or sponsors and the patronizing or gender-stereotyped help they provide may be more likely to

be misperceived in a positive manner, particularly by women who themselves hold benevolent

sexist attitudes. In summary, the impact of hostile and benevolent sexism on women's attainment

of leadership roles are likely distinct and occur via different pathways and both need to be

understood should we wish to ultimately resolve women's continued underrepresentation in leadership roles.

Contributions to the Literature on Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions

One of the most prominent explanations for the lack of women in top positions is based on the mismatch between women's traditional gender roles of being feminine and communal and perceptions that effective leaders need to be masculine and agentic (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). However, recent work suggests that what it means to be a good leader is changing and the communal values typically associated with women are increasingly valued (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Koenig et al., 2011; Rosette & Tost, 2010). Thus, if norms are changing and leadership is being connected to communal and feminine traits and values, then we would expect to see more women in top leadership positions.

Yet, that is not what is occurring; if anything, we see a stagnation in women's accession to these positions (Conference Board of Canada, 2011). As such, the incongruence hypothesis may not be able to fully explain the underrepresentation of women at the top in the contemporary workplace, where norms regarding what constitutes effective leadership are slowly shifting and changing to value the more communal traits and skills usually associated with women. At the same time, our model offers an explanation for the persistent underrepresentation of women in light of these changing norms. Namely, benevolent sexist attitudes, which can be seen as a more contemporary and subtle form of prejudice, continue to exist and the desire to protect women or to be protected (among women) may subtly be undermining women's advancement to top positions by compromising women's acquisition of career support even as more overt and hostile forms of sexism have become less socially acceptable and may be disappearing.

Finally, our model also integrates multiple life domains, particularly work and family (i.e., intimate partners), which we argue influence women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. Most past work has only considered the impact of workplace social support on women's attainment of leadership positions, whereas the influence of any kind of family support has been mostly examined within the context of work-family conflict. Our model shows that although attainment of leadership position is a workplace issue, it is almost certainly influenced by more than workplace factors; family factors also play a substantial role. This suggests that the problem of women's underrepresentation is complex and deeply rooted in and likely sustained by multiple life domains. As such, to successfully overcome women's underrepresentation in leadership positions, it will not be enough to only address workplace factors, but deeper cultural and family related changes will also be needed.

Contributions to the Literature on Gender Prejudice

Our model offers several contributions to research on gender prejudice as well as the broader literature on sexist attitudes. First, despite a burgeoning social psychology literature on benevolent sexism, limited research involving this construct has taken place within an organizational context. Thus, despite evidence that benevolent sexist attitudes are common and prevalent, scholars have done little to explore their work-related consequences (for exceptions, see Hideg & Ferris, 2016; King et al., 2012). Our model proposes that these on the surface benign attitudes can actually have profound effects for gender (in)equality—especially the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

Second, existing research on both hostile and benevolent sexism has typically focused on interpersonal processes (i.e., how others' sexist attitudes or actions affect the focal individual) rather than on intrapersonal processes. Therefore, we know little about how personal sexist

beliefs may influence one's own outcomes, including work-related consequences. Our model begins to close this gap by specifying how benevolent sexism is related to the workplace phenomenon of women's representation in leadership via the *interplay* of interpersonal (i.e., "pushed out") and intrapersonal (i.e., "opt out") processes.

Finally, our model also identifies women's acquisition of career support for advancement as the key mechanism underlying the negative relationship between benevolent sexism and women's attainment of top leadership positions. Little past research on benevolent sexism has identified the underlying processes that explain its negative effects (for an exception, see Hideg & Ferris, 2016). However, identifying underlying processes is crucial as it will enable organizations and governments to create initiatives to target or overcome negative effects of benevolent sexism (e.g., through the enactment of gender equity-promoting public policies).

Contributions to the Literature on Social Support

Our model also makes several significant contributions to the literature on social support as it pertains to the workplace and women's careers. First, we build upon and contribute to the literature on family social support and women's career outcomes. Most previous work has examined the effect of family support on alleviating work-family conflict and increasing employees' well-being (e.g., King et al., 1995). Building on this foundation, our model suggests that intimate partners' support can also have important consequences for tangible career outcomes of women, such as the attainment of leadership positions. This may raise the question, "What about women no intimate partners (e.g., single women, single mothers, etc.), and why have they not made more progress in their careers relative to women with benevolent sexist partners?" One potential answer to this is that although single women may not have intimate partners who subscribe to benevolent sexist attitudes, they still likely live in a societal structure

where other family members and members of their social circle (e.g., friends) may subscribe to benevolent sexist attitudes. Moreover, single women and women with no children may be more likely to be targets of hostile sexist attitudes in their environment, due to the fact that they may be seen as "non-traditional" or highly agentic women (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Second, our work identifies a novel antecedent of social support in both the workplace and family domains. Although a large body of the research has examined the consequences of social support for workplace outcomes, very little research has actually examined what contributes to the provision of social support (Bowling, Beehr, Johnson. Semmer, Hendricks, & Webster, 2004). Our work identifies benevolent sexist attitudes as an important antecedent of both workplace and family support that is provided to women to attain leadership positions.

Finally, our model also suggests that some forms of supportive behaviors in the workplace may actually have a dark side and be detrimental for women's careers. In contrast to past work that posits universally positive outcomes of managers' FSSBs (e.g., Hammer et al., 2009), our model highlights the circumstances under which such behaviors may contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. That is, our model suggests that managers' FSSBs could potentially have the opposite effect as intended, which is to address the work-family demands of employees, and by extension, support gender equality by helping women to better manage their work-life interface.

Practical Considerations and Future Directions

Benevolent sexism and men's career outcomes. In our theoretical model, we focus on the impact of benevolent sexist attitudes on the attainment of leadership positions by women, given our interest in understanding women's underrepresentation in top leadership positions. However, it may be the case that benevolent sexist attitudes may also influence *men's* career

success and outcomes, including attainment of leadership roles. Given evidence that men who

endorse benevolent sexist beliefs are typically seen in a very positive light (e.g., Kilianski &

Rudman, 1998), it may be that more benevolently sexist men are actually more likely to get

ahead in the workplace (e.g., more promotions) than their less benevolently sexist or hostile

sexist counterparts. Unfortunately, this also suggests that key organizational decision-makers or

managers whom women interested in climbing the corporate ladder may need support from may

disproportionately hold benevolent sexist beliefs.

The role of formal and nationally mandated support for gender equality. In our

model, we focused on more informal means of support for advancement provided by key

individuals in one's social environment (i.e., managers, intimate partners), which have been

argued and shown to be important in prior research. However, the presence of more formal (i.e.,

nationally mandated) supports may buffer against the negative effects that result from lack of

informal support on women's attainment of leadership positions. For example, globally,

consideration of or preference by protected group status, including gender, is often permissible

or even legally required in some form in the employment context (Myors et al., 2008), such as

when governments mandate affirmative action policies (Hideg & Ferris, 2014, 2017; Hideg,

Michela, & Ferris, 2011) or female board member quotas (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

Recent work highlights that reporting requirements, setting targets, and use of quotas for

women in leadership positions (i.e., board of directors and legislatures) are all effective in

increasing women's representation in leadership roles (Sojo, Wood, Wood, & Wheeler, 2016).

Similarly, affirmative action policies (also known as employment equity policies in Canada and

positive action policies in the United Kingdom) are also effective in promoting diversity and

increasing the representation of traditionally disadvantaged groups in organizations (Archibong

& Sharps, 2013; Hinrichs, 2012; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018), including in the managerial ranks (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). These policies may be effective in increasing women's representation in management because increasing the number of women in the applicant pool changes the status quo (i.e., women are no longer tokens) and greatly increases the odds that minority applicants will be seriously considered and selected (Johnson, Hekman, & Chan, 2016).

Similarly, provisions regarding childcare and parental leaves may help mitigate the negative effects of lack of career support, particularly from one's intimate partners, on women's representation in leadership positions. Namely, one instrumental way that intimate partners could support women's advancement is via a more equitable division of paid and unpaid labor (Shockley & Shen, 2016). Yet, women are disproportionately responsible for the care of family members, including children (e.g., Craig & Mullan, 2010), and the widespread availability and acceptance of public childcare should serve to relieve part of women's time burden and increase their ability to pursue career goals, such as attaining top leadership positions. Similarly, parental leaves could serve as another resource that could buffer women against the effects of low levels of family support for advancement. However, existing research suggests that longer maternity leaves can have unintended negative consequences for women's careers, including advancement into leadership positions (Hideg, Krstic, Trau, & Zarina, 2018a). Recent research and writings suggest that parental leave policies that exclusively reserve time for men (i.e., "use it or lose it" policies that do not allow men's dedicated time to be transferred to women) are the most consequential for gender equality because they are more likely to promote changes in the division of labor in the household to be more equitable and allow women a chance to advance in their careers (Hideg, Krstic, Trau, & Zarina, 2018b; Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2010).

Thus, the presence of preferential treatment policies that benefit women within a society could serve as a key compensatory factor if fewer women are putting themselves up for top leadership roles due to perceived lack of workplace support or due to lack of sponsorship or nomination of women by colleagues or managers in the workplace. Similarly, nationally mandated and implemented provisions for childcare and parental leaves that encourage both men and women to take care of newborn children may have downstream consequences for women's representation in leadership roles. Future research should examine the intersection of informal support (i.e., managerial and spousal) and formal, nationally mandated support for gender equity, such as gender quota requirements, affirmative action policies, and parental leaves, in women's attainment of leadership positions.

Changing benevolent sexist attitudes. Given that our model highlights that benevolent sexist attitudes contribute to the status quo of gender inequality in the workplace, a reasonable question may be how do we change people's benevolent sexist attitudes? Unfortunately, to date, little research has attempted to address this problem. A study by Becker and Swim (2012) found that highlighting the harmful consequences of benevolent sexism reduces endorsement of benevolent sexist beliefs for men and women. However, other research indicates that changing benevolent sexist beliefs or actions may generally be more difficult than other, more blatant types of prejudice or discrimination (e.g., modern sexism and neo-sexism), especially among men (Becker & Swim, 2011). Thus, we encourage future research that examines novel ways by which we may be able to combat these socially accepted, but problematic, gender beliefs.

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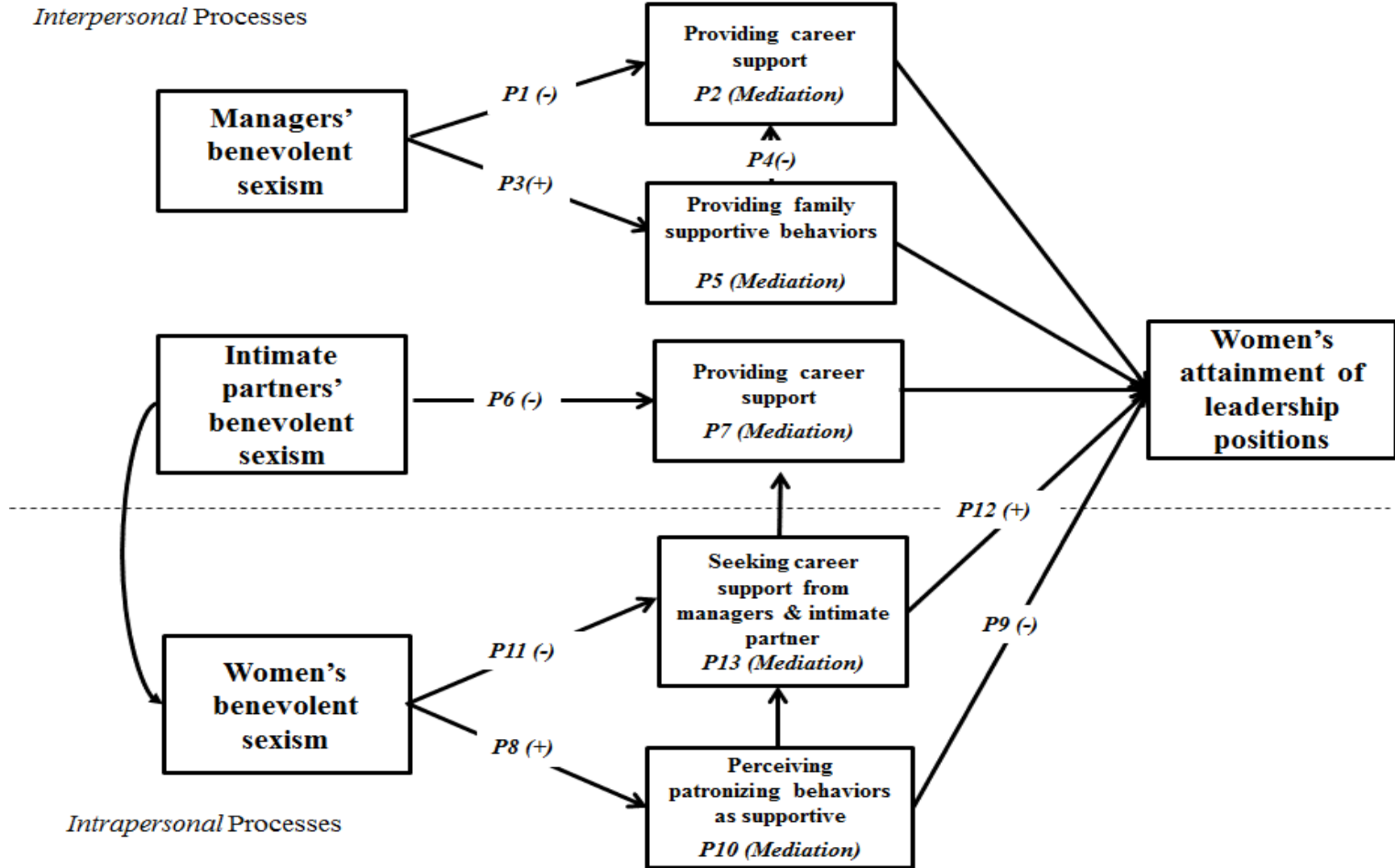
Figure 1. Theoretical model: Interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of benevolent sexism on women's attainment of

leadership positions. The direction of the relationship between two variables is indicated in brackets beside the proposition number.