

The Effect of Gender Psychology Courses on Sexism: A Prospective Study

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Abstract

Today, research are continued to be conducted to deal with the issues of sexism and discrimination in all layers of social life. In the studies conducted with mental health experts, it is understood that mental health experts do not have sufficient knowledge on this subject. This study, which aims to inform undergraduate psychology students on the issue of sexism, seeks to investigate the effect of the course specifically prepared to reduce sexism taken by the students during a semester. Participants were chosen from undergraduate psychology students, and it is a cross-sectional study. A sociodemographic form and The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) were applied to the participants. 35 students participated in the research, the research was conducted with the pre-test and the post-test. A certain amount of difference has been observed between the scores of the pre-education and post-education hostile and benevolent sexism of all participants. ($p<0.001$). Moreover, while there was no relationship between students' attendance and hostile sexism scores, students who regularly attended the course had a decrease in their implicit sexism score ($p<0.05$). According to the results of the research, it was seen that the gender equality course changed the sexist attitudes of undergraduate psychology students positively. Furthermore, similar studies on sexism and discrimination have provided much scientific data on this issue. The government and the public sector should aim to reach larger masses by using this scientific data to advance its interventions on this issue in Turkey.

Keywords: benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, gender, gender psychology

Öz

Toplumsal Cinsiyet Psikolojisi Derslerinin Cinsiyetçilik Üzerindeki Etkisi: Prospektif Bir Çalışma

Günümüzde toplumsal yaşamın tüm katmanlarında cinsiyetçilik ve ayrımcılık konularını ele alan araştırmalar yapılmaya devam edilmektedir. Literatürde ruh sağlığı uzmanları ile yapılan çalışmalarda ruh sağlığı uzmanlarının bu konuda yeterli bilgiye sahip olmadıkları anlaşılmaktadır. Psikoloji lisans öğrencilerini cinsiyetçilik konusunda bilgilendirmeyi amaçlayan bu çalışma, öğrencilerin bir dönem boyunca aldıkları cinsiyetçiliği azaltmaya yönelik özel olarak hazırlanmış dersin etkisini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Katılımcılar psikoloji lisans öğrencilerinden seçilmiştir ve kesitsel bir çalışmadır. Katılımcılara sosyodemografik bir form ve Çelişik Duygulu Cinsiyetçilik Ölçeği (ASI) uygulanmıştır. Araştırmaya 35 öğrenci katılmış, araştırma ön-test ve son-test ile yürütülmüştür. Tüm katılımcıların eğitim öncesi ve eğitim sonrası düşmanca ve yardımsever cinsiyetçilik puanları arasında belirli bir miktar fark gözlemlenmiştir. ($p<0,001$). Ayrıca, öğrencilerin derse katılımı ile düşmanca cinsiyetçilik puanları arasında bir ilişki bulunmazken, derse düzenli olarak katılan öğrencilerin örtük cinsiyetçilik puanlarında düşüş görülmüştür ($p<0,05$). Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği dersinin psikoloji lisans öğrencilerinin cinsiyetçi tutumlarını olumlu yönde değiştirdiği görülmüştür. Ayrıca cinsiyetçilik ve ayrımcılık üzerine yapılan benzer çalışmalar bu konuda pek çok bilimsel veri sağlamıştır. Kamu kurumları, Türkiye'de bu konudaki müdahalelerini ilerletmek için bu bilimsel verileri kullanarak daha geniş kitlelere ulaşmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Korumacı cinsiyetçilik, düşmanca cinsiyetçilik, toplumsal cinsiyet, cinsiyet psikolojisi

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INTRODUCTION

Many articles, academic publications, and books have been written to eliminate sexism, but despite these efforts, sexism has not disappeared. Therapists have a diagnostic role and are mainly focused on understanding the client and on the client's recovery. Whether the language used in therapy is sexist or not plays a vital role in the client-therapist relationship, so the language used during therapy is of great importance. The connection between gender and perspectives on sexist language seems to be influenced by wider belief systems that aim to confine women to specific roles (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). After work on sexism began as a result of feminist movements, the American Psychological Association (1978) published *Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals*. Following this directive, articles and books were published to ensure that the language used in therapy is not sexist. Among these, the purpose of all this scientific research was to reduce sexist discourse and better understand clients (American Psychological Association (APA), 1978).

Sexism in mental health has historic roots. It results in underdiagnosing mental disorders in women or non-scientific, non-empathetic treatment regimes (Yılmaz-Karaman, 2018). Gender bias in mental health treatment refers to the discriminatory treatment of individuals based on their gender and can have negative effects on the therapeutic relationship and outcomes of therapy. Therefore, mental health workers in particular need to be sufficiently informed about this issue. In an article written by Albee, the importance of education and social change for the prevention of sexism was emphasized; however, the author mentioned that the role of psychology in changing an unhealthy society should encompass a larger part of these measures (Albee, 1981).

Scientific research that has been conducted so far in Turkey indicates that students in general, regardless of their department, tend to have sexist attitudes (Bakioglu, 2019; Baykal, 1991). In a study of medical students, Altınöz et al. observed that there was no change in medical students' sexist attitudes from their freshmen to senior year (Altınöz, Günel, Altınöz, Köşger, & Eşsizoglu, 2018). Moreover, this research stressed that medical students internalized traditional gender stereotypes. Çavdar's (2013) thesis stated that sexism among university students did not vary depending on their department (Çavdar, 2013).

Although no concrete steps have been taken to prevent sexism in therapy in Turkey, some attempts have been made to raise public awareness on this issue. In 1986, Turkey put into force the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* issued by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. Since then, studies on the attitudes of mental health professionals have observed that these professionals have sexist attitudes, and these studies recommended providing training to reduce these attitudes (Ezgi, 2019; Koçyiğit & Gülgün, 2020).

University students in Turkey need to be informed about gender equality to change their sexist attitudes, but this is especially true for mental health students. Mental health students need to be familiar with the gender attitudes of the culture in which they live, as this is essential for addressing the problems experienced by clients in a culturally sensitive manner. Mental health professionals should be able to examine how sexism is learned, know the effects of gender roles on the individual, and help their clients to change these patterns when necessary (Koçyiğit & Gülgün, 2020). For this reason, it is essential that mental health workers be trained on sexism and have the knowledge and professional competence to provide necessary support to their clients. Otherwise, the mental health service provided may not achieve its purpose or may even harm the client.

Government support is crucial to work on an issue such as sexism, which affects the whole of society. Turkey does not have such policies on this issue. In order to provide functional mental health services, it is necessary to take measures to reduce sexism. This research presents the results of a semester-long course with psychology students who were taught a curriculum to reduce sexism. In this context, our research examines whether a gender equality course taught to psychology students for one semester will decrease their sexism scores.

METHOD

Participants

The present study recruited psychology students from Rumeli University who were 18 years of age or older and who agreed to participate. Exclusion criteria were being younger than 18 years old or refusing to participate. Data collection was carried out between October 2021 and March 2022.

Information such as the age and gender of the participants, the education level of the participants and their parents, and the employment status of the participants' parents are as follows. The sample consisted of 35 participants, 30 (85.7%) of whom were female and 5 (14.7%) who were male. The age range of participants was 19–31 years, with a mean age of 21.37 years. Regarding background, 16 participants (45.7%) were born in the urban and 19 (54.3%) in the suburban. Additionally, 15 participants (42.9%) lived the most in the urban and 20 (57.1%) in the suburban. Mothers of 7 participants (20.0%) were illiterate. Mothers of 10 participants (28.6%) were elementary school graduates, mothers of 11 (31.4%) were high school graduates, and mothers of 7 (20.0%) were university graduates. In general, mothers of 28 participants (80%) had pre-undergraduate education, and 7 (20%) mothers had a post-undergraduate education. Among the participants, 19 (54.3%) had mothers who were employed and 16 (45.7%) who were unemployed. The father of 1 participant (2.9%) was illiterate. Fathers of 12 participants (34.3%) were elementary school graduates, fathers of 11 (31.4%) were high school graduates, and fathers of 11 (31.4%) were university graduates. In general, fathers of 23 participants (68.6%) had a pre-university education, while 11 (31.4%) had a university education. All of the fathers of the students participating in the study were working. Finally, 22 participants (62.9%) stated that they had been exposed to sexism, and 13 (37.1%) stated that they had not.

Google Forms was used to distribute the study questionnaire. Online informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study was approved by Eskişehir Osmangazi University's Clinical Research Ethics Committee on 21/09/2021 with decision number 51.

Measurements

Sociodemographic data form: The authors created a form to evaluate the participant's sociodemographic properties such as age, sex, level of education of the participant and their parents, and employment status of the participant's parents. The item 'score of achieving goals' in the demographic form is a question in which students rate their expectations from the course and how useful the course is for students. Students answered this question as 1 (least satisfied), 10 (most satisfied).

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), is a psychometric tool designed to assess individuals' attitudes towards

gender roles and gender-based discrimination. It was developed by social psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske in 1996, and has been widely used in research and practice (Glick & Fiske 2001). This scale was adapted into Turkish by Sakalli in 2002. Cronbach alpha was revealed as 0.85 and test-retest reliability were found 0.87 (Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2002). This scale includes 22 items, each question evaluated by Likert type scale between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The ASI consists of two subscales: hostile sexism, which refers to negative and derogatory attitudes towards women, and benevolent sexism, which refers to positive but paternalistic attitudes towards women. The ASI aims to capture the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of sexism, which involves both hostile and benevolent attitudes that can coexist and reinforce each other. The ASI has been validated in various cultural and linguistic contexts and has contributed to our understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of gender attitudes and their effects on individuals and societies.

Procedure

One of the researchers as also the lecturer and developed the course in line with the current literature. The goal of the gender awareness course was to increase students' knowledge and understanding of the ways in which gender influences individuals and societies. The key points of the course included exploring the social and cultural constructions of gender, the role of gender in shaping experiences and identities, and the impacts of gender-based discrimination and inequality. Through examining gender from various perspectives and contexts, students were expected to develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a commitment to social justice. Ultimately, the aim of the gender awareness course was to empower students to recognize and challenge gender-based biases and injustices in both their personal and professional lives and to contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive world.

The content of the course is presented in Table 1. Throughout the course, students engaged in various learning activities, such as readings, lectures, group discussions, case studies, and reflective assignments. By the end of the course, students were expected to develop a critical understanding of gender issues and acquire the skills and competencies to contribute to gender justice and empowerment in their personal and professional lives. Course contents are available at the end of the article as an additional file.

Table 1: The content of the gender course

Week 1	Introduction to Gender Studies
Week 2	The Biological Basis of Sex
Week 3	Gender Socialization
Week 4	Gender and Language
Week 5	Masculinity and Femininity
Week 6	Gender-Based Violence
Week 7	Women's Health
Week 8	LGBTQ+ Issues
Week 9	Feminism and Women's Movements
Week 10	Gender and Work
Week 11	Men and Masculinities
Week 12	Gender and Development
Week 13	Gender and Environment
Week 14	Gender in the Future
Week 15	History of Gender Studies

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics for continuous data included means, standard deviations, medians, and minimum and maximum values, while percentages were used for discrete data. The normal distribution of the data was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test. For the comparison of pre- and post-training scale scores, the dependent *t*-test was used for groups with sufficient numbers, and the Wilcoxon test was used for groups with insufficient numbers. For the comparison of continuous data with two independent variables, the *t*-test was used for normally distributed data, while the Mann–Whitney U test was used for non-normally distributed data. The correlation between the change in scale scores and the attendance and achievement points was examined using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient. IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program version 20 (IBM) was used for the evaluations, and a significance level of *p* less than 0.05 was accepted.

RESULTS

There were 35 participants in this research (Table 2). The average age of the participants was 21.37 ± 2.43 years. The minimum age was 19 years, and the maximum was 31 years. Women comprised 85.7% of the participants, and men comprised 14.3%. Regarding location, 45.7% of participants were born in a urban areas and 54.3% in a suburban, and 42.9% of participants had lived in a urban areas for the majority of their lives. Regarding the educational level of the participants' parents, 20% of participants' mothers and 31.4% of participants' fathers had a university education or higher. Additionally, 45.7% of participants' mothers had never worked. It was observed

Table 2: Sociodemographic variables of the participants

Age Mean \pm SD, (Min-Max)	21.37 \pm 2.43 (19–31)
Score of achieving goals* Mean \pm SD, Median (Min-Max)	8.97 \pm 1.22 9 (6–10)
Course attendance Mean \pm SD, Median (Min-Max)	8.80 \pm 1.47 9 (4–10)
Sex n (%)	
Female	30 (85.7)
Male	5 (14.3)
Place of birth n (%)	
City	16 (45.7)
County	19 (54.3)
The longest-lived place so far n (%)	
City	15 (42.9)
County	20 (57.1)
Mother educational level n (%)	
Illiterate	7 (20)
Elementary School	10 (28.6)
High School	11 (31.4)
Graduate	7 (20)
Mother educational level n (%)	
Pre-undergraduate	28 (80)
Post-undergraduate	7 (20)
Father Educational level n (%)	
Illiterate	1 (2.9)
Elementary School	12 (34.3)
High School	11 (31.4)
Graduate	11 (31.4)
Father educational level n (%)	
Pre-undergraduate	24 (68.6)
Post-undergraduate	11 (31.4)
Whether mother works or not n (%)	
Working	19 (54.3)
Non-working	16 (45.7)
History of migration of last three generation n (%)	
Yes	16 (45.7)
No	19 (54.3)
Exposure to sexism n (%)	
Yes	22 (62.9)
No	13 (37.1)

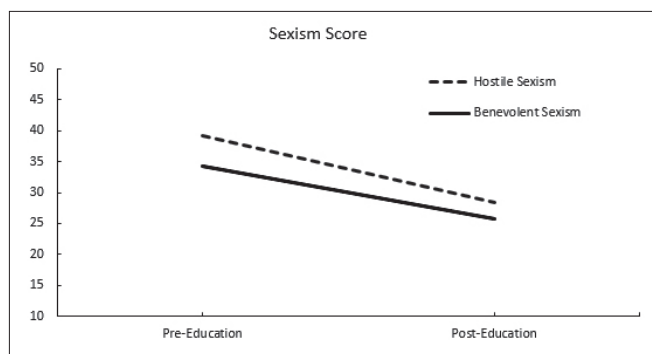
*A score for students to rate their expectations from the course and how useful the course is for students from 1 to 10.

Table 3: Comparison of participants' hostile sexism and benevolent sexism scores before and after the education

	Before the course		After the course		Test statistics	p value*
	Mean ± SD	Median (min-max)	Mean ± SD	Median (min-max)		
Hostile sexism	39.26±10.11	41 (19–55)	28.46±10.93	31 (11–47)	t=10.514	<0.001
Benevolent sexism	34.20±8.77	33 (19–52)	25.71±8.20	27 (11–44)	t=11.286	<0.001

Table 4: The relationship between sexism score changes and course variables

	Hostile sexism scores		Benevolent sexism scores	
	r	p	r	p
Score of achieving goals	-0.116	0.509	-0.190	0.273
Course attendance	-0.329	0.053	-0.374	0.027

**Figure 1.** Participants' hostile sexism, benevolent sexism scores before and after the training.

that 45.7% of the participants had a history of migration in the last three generations. Finally, 62.9% of the participants stated that they had been exposed to sexism. Participants' post-education hostile sexism scores were significantly lower than their pre-education scores ($p < .001$). Participants' post-education benevolent sexism scores were also significantly lower than their pre-education scores ($p < .001$) (Table 3, Figure 1).

The amount of decrease in participants' hostile sexism and benevolent sexism scores after the education compared to before education was as below: Hostile sexism-score difference Mean ± SD, Median (min-max) -10.8 ± 6.07 –10 (-26 – 2); Benevolent sexism-score difference Mean ± SD, Median (min-max) -8.48 ± 4.44 –8 (-18 – 1).

The benevolent sexism score of the students who attend the lesson regularly has decreased more than the students who attend the lesson occasionally ($r = -0.374$, $p < 0.05$).

No relationship was found between hostile sexism and attendance, but a significant negative correlation existed between benevolent sexism scores and attendance (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Gender is a fundamental aspect of the human experience and social organization that affects all individuals in various ways. As such, understanding gender and its influence on psychological processes and well-being is essential for psychology students, who are expected to have a broad and deep knowledge of human behavior and society. The field of gender psychology examines the ways in which gender shapes cognition, emotion, behavior, and identity and how it intersects with other social categories such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class. Through studying gender psychology, students can gain insights into the causes and consequences of gender-based discrimination, violence, and inequality and develop skills and strategies for promoting gender equity and social justice.

Despite the increasing sensitivity to the issue of sexism in the 21st century, there is still a need for education programs to ensure gender equality and eliminate discrimination (Verdonk, Benschop, De Haes, & Lagro-Janssen, 2008). Kuruvilla underlined that there is a need for all higher education programs and staff to be educated with gender equality studies courses and programs to raise awareness about this issue (Kuruvilla, 2014). Studies have reported that gender equality– and discrimination-focused courses raised awareness among participants (Case, 2007; Sparks & Mullally, 1978). Likewise, our research shows that a gender equality course can help reduce benevolent and hostile sexism. A study of clinical psychology graduate students showed that the gender course resulted in significant positive improvements in therapists' attitudes towards women in therapy (Johnson, Searight, Handal, & Gibbons, 1993). Although education seems to be beneficial, unfortunately, this issue is not something that can be resolved immediately. Therefore, gender– and discrimination-focused education should be taught from an early age. Reimers emphasized that teachers should have knowledge about gender equality in order to help students develop a non-heteronormative and non-discriminatory attitude throughout their school lives (Reimers, 2017).

As stated above, the problem at hand cannot be solved immediately. This matter of temporality can be observed

perfectly in comparisons between countries. Studies of medical students in Sweden and the Netherlands showed that Dutch students' sexism scores were higher than those of Swedish students (Andersson, Verdonk, Johansson, Lagro-Janssen, & Hamberg, 2012; Hammarström, 2003).

Understanding that the problem of sexism and discrimination cannot be solved all at once, academics have tried to change sexist attitudes with early education programs: Undoubtedly, graduate education programs are important to raise awareness among individuals. However, research shows that more effort is required on these gender equality and discrimination issues (Hammarström, 2003; Lee & Coulehan, 2006). For this reason, as seen in studies in Sweden and the Netherlands, while governments should aim to teach gender equality and discrimination education at an early age in the long term, it has been recommended to provide training to healthcare workers and mental health workers in the short term. In order to raise awareness about gender equality and ensure gender equality in Turkey, it may be useful to provide intensive training to professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, psychological counselors and social workers in the short term.

As mentioned before, there have been numerous studies on trainings for both mental health professionals and university students. The varied findings of these studies should be considered to improve the steps taken in the field of gender equality and discrimination.

The most important finding of our study is that psychology students who attend the course regularly at the end of the course have a lower benevolent sexism tendency than students who do not attend the course. However, the decrease in hostile sexism scores was not associated with absenteeism. Benevolent sexism includes cultural elements and norms and leads to women accepting traditional roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Throughout our lives, we are exposed to traditional roles and gender norms from our culture. Many sexist attitudes can be found among these norms. For this reason, longitudinal studies are needed to learn how to effectively reduce benevolent sexism.

Certain demographic variables are known to affect sexist attitudes. One of them is the education level of the mother (Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2012; Kuzlak, Çuvaş, & Sakalli-Uğurlu, 2017). However, the education level of the mother did not affect the sexism scores in our research. This result contradicts the findings of Kuzlak et al., who indicated that the parents' educational level and working status were negatively correlated with hostile and benevolent sexism (Kuzlak et al., 2017). Aylaz

et al. likewise found that sexist attitudes were lower in participants whose mothers had a higher level of education. People with higher education are still influenced by culture (Aylaz, Güneş, Uzun, & Ünal, 2014). However, their culture is often different from that of people with lower education because there are many factors involved in culture, and there are many subcultures within a single country or community. Additionally, people with higher education are more likely to question traditional values, though that doesn't necessarily mean that they will reject those values. Mothers with a higher level of education may be more likely to instill traditional gender roles in their children (Kodan, 2013). However, the sample size in our study was smaller than in this study, which is probably why similar results could not be reached. Moreover, Aylaz et al.'s study showed that participants who lived in the urban areas were less prone to sexism (Aylaz et al., 2014). City life offers a different lifestyle than rural life, and this lifestyle often does not reinforce gender roles as much as rural life (McDowell, 1983). Likely we did not reach this finding due to our sample size.

Several studies have shown the benefits of gender psychology education for students in terms of increasing their knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward gender issues (Johnson et al., 1993; Siller, Komlenac, Fink, Perkhofner, & Hochleitner, 2018). Moreover, gender psychology education has been found to enhance students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills and to prepare them for diverse and inclusive professional practice (Liao & Wang, 2020; Sander & Sanders, 2007). Therefore, incorporating a gender psychology course into the psychology curriculum can provide students with valuable and relevant knowledge and skills that can benefit them personally, professionally, and socially.

Although academic research shows that gender equality courses help reducing sexist attitudes, Turkey has not taken firm steps regarding this issue. It is obvious that society needs time and education to internalize this issue, which requires great cultural and sociological change. Certain professions, such as psychology, psychiatry, psychological counseling, and social work, have a responsibility to start this transformation. In this case, the government should prepare a comprehensive plan on the subject based on scientific data and collaboration with these professions.

Limitations

The most important limitation of this study was using a self-reported scale to measure students' attitudes. Students may have altered their answers to appear more

open-minded than they were. Additionally, the online nature of the course may have been a limitation for students who were used to face-to-face classes and may have reduced their motivation. Adnan and Anwar found that most of the students in their study were dissatisfied with online education (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Another limitation is the inherent absence of a control group. Lastly, the fact that one of the researchers was also the teacher of the course may have affected the results. Finally, this research was conducted with psychology students, since students chose this department, their personal characteristics may include traits such as being open-minded and empathetic. Therefore, they may have benefited more from the study than other university students.

Ethics Committee Approval: The study was approved by the Clinical Research Ethics Committee of Eskişehir Osmangazi University (date and number of approval: 21/09/2021 / 51).

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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