

Professors as Transmitters of Sexist Attitudes: Gender and Discursive Practices in Academe

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This study explored female and male academics' sexist attitudes and discursive practices; narratives that subtly subordinate women. Using questionnaires, data was collected from 102 academics from an institution with a gender policy and another institution without. Results showed that there are still high levels of sexism in both types of institutions. Males exhibited more hostile and ambivalent sexism although their benevolent sexist attitudes were comparable to the females. Similarly, male academics were found to endorse more inequitable discursive practices and a tendency to use language that subordinates female academics. There was very low knowledge of gender appropriate language in both institution types. Overall, hostile and ambivalent sexism levels were comparable in both types of institutions with higher levels of benevolent sexism more prevalent in the institution without a gender policy. The findings suggest that despite efforts at achieving gender equity, sexist attitudes still prevail; it further suggests that women prefer patronizing attitudes to outright hostility. It is suggested that the rhetoric needs to change and the conversation on gender needs to be modified to foster a more equitable rather than patronizing narrative.

Keywords: Academia, gender, sexism, discursive practices, gender appropriate language

Introduction

Considerable progress has been made generally in efforts to achieve gender equity in the workplace, however, women in academia still face biases in their careers (Iaria, Schwarz and Waldinger, 2022; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Briscoll and Handelsman, 2012; Madera, Hebl, Martin and Valian, 2018). The nature of the challenges women face in their academic careers is unclear, particularly in a culture characterized by high levels of paternalism and high power-distance. Hence, it is necessary to understand those factors that might explain gender biases in academia. The focus of previous research has mostly been on overt discrimination towards women in the workplace. Beyond addressing overt discrimination there is also a need to address indirect or unconscious forms of discrimination that continue to marginalize professional women, especially in their academic careers.

The education system is a strong agent of socialization and change. Although, one might expect the academic environment to be more gender sensitive, the world of work is socially

constructed and accordingly, women and men have internalized patriarchal construction of gender roles even in their professions as academics (Iaria, Schwarz and Waldinger, 2022; Atkinson-Bonasio, 2015; Katila and Merilainen, 1999; Saul, 2015). Gender role theory posits that gender differences occur because of hierarchical patterns of social interactions where men and women are ascribed to different roles in the social structure (Carli and Eagly, 2001; Eagly, Wood and Diekmann, 2000). The theory further suggests that men have extended gender roles into the professional space and see women through traditional lenses rather than as peers. Consequently, this perception may be reflected in sexist attitudes and discursive practices that could impact negatively on staff and students (Poppenhaeger, 2019).

Sexism is the view that men are superior to women and is generally expressed in hostility towards women (Benson and Vincent, 1980; Udegbe, 2003a). It is the belief that one sex is under the submission of another. In most cases the women are under the subordination of men. Discursive

practices refer to verbal inequality in the use of language, especially language that subordinates or diminish women (Champagne, 2009; Katila and Merilainen, 1999). Linguists assert that language is fundamental to gender inequality, and it is an important determinant of thoughts and attitudes, reflecting the prejudices of society (DeFranza, Mishra Mishra, 2020; Jacobson and Insko, 1985; Miller and Swift, 1976; Sarasin, Gabriel and Gyax, 2003).

Narrative strategies that subordinate women reflect men's attempts to retain power. Use of such discursive practices or gender subordinating language is a means of depriving women of their status, indirectly casting doubts about their competencies. Instances of discursive practices have been documented in literature. Friedrich (2017) reported that women with doctorates face biases in their careers. According to her, women with doctorate degrees are less likely than their male colleagues to be addressed by their professional titles as "Dr", especially by men. Friedrich and her colleagues found that at a meeting of professionals, male speakers were introduced as "Dr" by women 95 per cent of the time but men introduced female speakers, as "Dr" only 45 per cent of the time. The behaviour is said to be inadvertent, so men brush aside the behaviour, considering it to be insignificant. Still, stripping women of their professional titles, whether deliberately or inadvertently, while men are accorded theirs deprofessionalizes women. The behaviour only serves to reinforce gender inequality and the perceptions of women as having lower status (Files, Mayer, Ko, Friedrich, Jenkins and Hayes, 2017; Files, Mayer and Haynes, 2017).

Iaria, Schwarz and Waldinger (2022) claim that gender gaps in academia can be linked to behaviour and may be one of the areas that inform the disparity. According to these authors, despite improvements in the latter part of this century, the representation of women in academia is still less than adequate in prestigious universities in most disciplines and most countries (e.g Iaria, Schwarz and Waldinger, 2022; Poppenhaeger, 2019).

Glick and Fiske (1996) conceptualized sexism as two sets of attitudes toward women that present simultaneously. Hostile sexism is a negative or derogatory attitude towards women and benevolent sexism is a subjectively positive attitude toward

women. Consequently, an individual that endorses highly hostile sexist attitudes may at the same time endorse highly benevolent sexist attitudes.

Carnes, Bartels, Isaac, Kaatz and Kolehmainen (2017) likewise, report that stereotypical perceptions of men and women informs the career of women in academic medicine, science, and related fields. For example, some areas of medicine are considered agentic with higher status and pay whilst others are considered communal, with lower status and lower pay. In this wise, men are considered suitable for the high status specialties such as orthopaedics, neurosurgery, and urology. Women are found to be more suited to lower status specialties such as paediatrics, family medicine, etc (Carnes *et al.*, 2017). These authors describe the behaviour as a cognitive bias that may be imperceptible and unintended. They further suggest that perpetrators may not even be aware that they are exhibiting the behaviour. The perception however informs how female physicians are treated. Female physicians in turn exhibit a self-fulfilling prophecy which acts as an impediment to career opportunities and growth.

Madera, Hebl, Dial, Martin and Valian (2018) examined gender differences in academia as expressed in letters of recommendation and its implications to raise doubts about the competence of women in academia. They assert that doubts can be conveyed in letters of reference. In their assessment of 624 letters of recommendations for 174 men and women applying for jobs in academia, both male and female recommenders used more doubt raisers for women than for men. Statements such as she has a "challenging personality"; or "might make a good colleague subtly convey a lack of confidence in the woman's ability for the job. The letters of recommendation were vaguer and more negative for women than for men.

Madera, Hebl and Martin (2009) had previously found that there were significant differences in descriptions of women and men in letters of recommendations for application for academic positions. The authors reported that men were described in more agentic terms than women while women were described in communal terms. Women were depicted as warm, affectionate, kind nurturing. On the contrary men were depicted as ambitious, dominant, and self-confident. Similarly, Saul (2017) reports glaring differences in letters of

references for women and men aspiring to academic positions. Women were described as “works hard”, “friendly”, “surprisingly successful”, “friends with my wife”, “very attractive” while men were described as “brilliant”, “outstanding” and “original”. Saul explains that sexism is reinforced because people tend to make quick and unconscious biases based on social stereotype of groups, even by members of the target group. Carnes *et al.* (2017) agrees with the notion that stereotypical perceptions of men and women lead to differential evaluations in the medical profession, with both men and women associating women with subordinating roles.

Savonick and Davidson (2017) outlined several studies, which support the notion that “unconscious and unintentional gender bias in academe” may be driven by cultural stereotypes. In Nigeria, Garba (2014) stated that gender subordinating behaviour towards female academics is expressed in mild flirtation, suggestive jokes, inappropriate touching, repeated requests for dates, etc. Her observations are consistent with Saul’s assertion that men often distract a female colleague’s formal presentation by paying her a complement. Here also, perpetrators regard the behaviour as harmless, believing that they are simply joking; they accuse female academics of being overly sensitive when they protest. Garba also noted that female academics are deprofessionalized; often introduced as “Mrs” rather than by their professional titles at formal meetings.

Aina (2014), like Savonick and Davidson (2017), noted that the extension of patriarchy and other gender stereotypes explains the persistence of gender inequality, making academia male – centric. She advocates gender mainstreaming and development of a gender equity policy for each university, which would include promoting a gender-friendly, inclusive, and secure teaching and learning environment.

The purpose of this study was to explore sexist attitudes and discursive practices among academics in Nigeria. Based on gender roles theory which ascribes different social roles to men and women, and findings from the review of literature, the following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: There will be significant gender differences in sexist attitudes among academics with male academics more likely than female

academics to endorse hostile sexist attitudes.

Hypothesis 2: Male academics will endorse more inequitable discursive practices than female academics.

Hypothesis 3: Academics affiliated to the institution without a gender policy will exhibit lower levels of awareness of gender appropriate language.

Hypothesis 4: Academics in institutions without a gender policy will significantly exhibit more sexist attitudes than academics in institutions with a gender policy.

Method Design

The research was a survey and approach to data collection was the use of questionnaires. Independent variables in this study were academics’ gender (male, female) and institution type (institution with gender policy/institution with no gender policy.) The dependent variables were sexism (hostile/benevolent/ambivalent evaluations of women); discursive practices (gender subordinating language) and recognition of gender appropriate language.

Sample

Participants for the study consisted of 102 female and male academics drawn from two universities situated in the southwest region of Nigeria. Participants varied across levels and faculties. Convenient sampling technique was utilized. The universities picked for the study was to explore differences from an institution with a gender policy and an institution without. Participants from the institution with a gender policy comprised 42.6 per cent while 57.4 per cent were from the institution without a gender policy. Mean age of participants was 44.8 years. Females comprised 43.1 per cent while males comprised 56.9 per cent of participants; 12.7 per cent were Muslims and 83.7 per cent were Christians. Participants who had a doctorate degree were 59.8 per cent, 6.9 per cent had M.Phil., 20 per cent had M.A/M.Sc. and 13.7 per cent were doctoral students. Approximately 75.5 per cent were married and 20.6 per cent were single. Professors accounted for 11.9 per cent, associate professors 5.9 per cent, senior lecturers

19.8 per cent, lecturer I 15.7 per cent, lecturer II 13.7 per cent, assistant lecturer 15.7 per cent and graduate assistants 9.8 per cent.

Measures

Discursive practices was measured using a 4-item scale derived from a qualitative study on gender by Katila and Merilainen (1999). Four distinct behaviour related to professionalism in an academic community were tapped and given to four subject matter experts, two psychologists and two sociologists in gender studies. The scale was further presented to four other faculty members in the two disciplines for comments. Responses measured on a 5-point Likert type scale ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Lower scores reflect more inequitable or subordinating language. Higher scores reflect endorsement of equitable language. An example of an item is: "A male professor's flattery of his female colleague at a faculty board meeting, referring to her as the "fairer sex" or "the pretty lady on my right" is appropriate behaviour because he is simply paying her a compliment". A pilot test of the items reported a Cronbach Alpha of .51 while the Cronbach Alpha for this study was .63.

Participants were also administered a 7-item test to assess awareness of contemporary gender appropriate language. The measure was derived from the Language Portal of Canada based on UN Guidelines for contemporary gender-neutral language. Participants were asked to respond to use of language that reflects the way they write. Example of an item on the test is: "Stella loves to write and dreams of becoming a famous *poetess*, *poet*, *female poet*". Correct responses were coded 1 and incorrect responses coded 0. The higher the score, the more sensitive respondents' recognition of gender appropriate language. Pre-test of the GAL measure recorded a Kuder-Richardson coefficient of .72 (See Akingbade, Mayungbo and Osamika, 2022).

Sexism was measured using Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). The ASI is a 22-item scale designed to tap two elements of sexist evaluations of women. Eleven items measure hostile sexism, and 11 items measure benevolent sexism. Overall scores predict ambivalent attitudes toward women. Response on a 6-point Likert scale ranged from disagree strongly

to agree strongly. Higher scores on the scales indicate higher levels of the behaviour. Reliability and validity of the scale was established in 16 countries including Nigeria. The authors reported the Cronbach Alpha as .78 for hostile sexism and .73 for benevolent sexism.

Procedure

Data was collected from two universities in Ibadan with the support of two trained research assistants. One of the universities has had gender-based policies in existence for over five years whilst the other does not. The purpose was to compare the two institutions based on the gender policies. Questionnaires were administered at the different locations to capture academics from the two universities as well as scholars from other institutions that were at the two institutions for academic engagement at the time. The sampling was based on convenience. Data was collected over a period of four weeks. It is noteworthy that the period of data collection coincided with industrial action in one of the universities and a vacation in the other which affected the availability of respondents. Faculties and departments that participated in the gender appropriate language pilot were precluded in the selection of participants for this phase of the study. All together data was retrieved from 102 respondents. Data obtained was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Intercorrelations were computed to assess the relationship between the independent variables of gender and institution type, and the dependent variables of sexism, discursive practices, and recognition of gender appropriate language.

Results

The intercorrelations among the variables in this study, including their means and standard deviation, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means, standard deviation and intercorrelations amongst variables of study

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Gender	1							1.6	0.5
2. Institution	-.12	1						1.5	0.5
3. Ambivalent Sexism	.33**	-.01	1					3.9	0.5
4. Hostile Sexism	.37**	-.06	.80**	1				3.4	0.9
5. Benevolent Sexism	-.04	-.01	.60**	-.00	1			4.4	0.7
6. Discursive Practice	-.24*	.22*	-.34**	-.29**	-.25*	1		3.2	0.9
7. GAL	-.19	.11	-.19	-.10	-.08	.08	1	1.1	0.8

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; Gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male; Institution type was coded as 1 = Institution with gender policy and 2 = Institution without gender policy. GAL = Gender Appropriate Language

The results show that the gender of respondents was significantly correlated with hostile sexism ($r = .37$; $p = .01$) and ambivalent sexism ($r = .33$; $p = .01$). Also, gender and institution type significantly correlated with discursive practices ($r = -.24$; $p < .05$ and $r = .22$; $p < .05$ respectively). The results suggest that gender of an academic significantly influenced sexist attitudes with males exhibiting more hostile and ambivalent sexism. It also suggests that there is a relationship between an academics' gender and discursive practices with males exhibiting more inequitable language. Table 1 also showed that respondents' recognition of gender appropriate language (GAL) was not related to ambivalent sexism ($r = .19$; $p = n.s$), hostile sexism ($r = -.10$; $p = n.s$), benevolent sexism ($r = -.08$) and discursive practices ($r = .08$; $p = n.s$). The correlation between gender and benevolent sexism and was not significant ($r = .04$, $p = ns$). However, the higher the ambivalent sexist attitude ($r = .34$) or hostile sexist attitude ($r = .29$) of academics, the more inequitable their discursive practices.

Table 2: T – Test showing gender differences and hostile, benevolent and ambivalent sexism

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	T	P	D
Hostile Sexism	Female	34	3.02	.89	79	-3.6	<.001	.80
	Male	47	3.68	.75				
Benevolent Sexism	Female	35	4.41	.69	85	.37	ns	
	Male	52	4.36	.67				
Ambivalent Sexism	Female	29	3.64	.53	71	-2.91	<.005	3.70
	Male	44	4.00	.51				

Hypothesis one stated that male academics were more likely than female academics to endorse hostile sexist attitudes. A comparison of the differences on sexism scores between female and male academics reflect gender differences in academics' hostile sexist attitudes [$t(79) = -3.6, p = .001; d = 0.80$]. Male academics ($M = 3.68, SD = 0.75$) reported significantly higher levels of hostile sexism than female academics ($M = 3.02, SD = .89$). However, female academics ($M = 4.41, SD = 0.69$) and male academics ($M = 4.36, SD = 0.67$) were comparable on levels of benevolent sexism [$t(85)$

$= .37, p > .05 = ns$). Results further showed that differences were observed in ambivalent sexist attitudes, [$t(71) = -2.91, p < .005; d = .70$]. Male academics ($M = 4.00, SD = 0.51$) reported higher levels of ambivalent sexism than female academics ($M = 3.64, SD = 0.53$). Overall, these results suggest that male academics exhibited more hostile and ambivalent attitudes toward women while both gender exhibited comparable levels of benevolent sexism. Thus, hypothesis one was partially supported.

Table 3: T – test showing gender differences and discursive practices

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	T	P	d
Discursive Practices	Female	42	3.40	0.78	95	2.40	< .001	.51
	Male	55	2.98	0.91				

As shown in Table 3, there was a significant difference between female and male academics' use of discursive practices [$t(95) = 2.40, p < .001; d = .51$]. The results indicate that male academics ($M = 2.98, SD = 0.91$) were found to endorse more inequitable discursive practices than female

academics ($M = 3.40, SD = 0.78$). These findings suggest that male academics are more likely to use gender subordinating language than female academics. Thus, hypothesis two was supported.

Table 4: T – test showing differences between the institution with a gender policy and the institution without a gender policy and gender appropriate language

	Gender Policy	N	Mean	SD	Df	T	P
Gender Appropriate Language	IWGP	40	1.18	0.84	83	1.18	> .05
	IWNGP	45	0.98	0.69			

Note: IWGP = Institution with Gender Policy; IWNGP = Institution with no Gender Policy

Table 4 shows that although the mean recognition of gender appropriate language was higher among respondents in institutions with gender policy (mean = 1.18) than those from institutions without (mean = 0.98), the difference was not statistically significant ($t(83) = 1.18$, $p = n.s.$). The hypothesis was not supported.

Table 5: T – test showing gender differences and hostile, benevolent and ambivalent sexism

	Gender Policy	N	Mean	SD	df	T	P
Hostile Sexism	IWGP	37	3.43	0.83	68	0.38	>.05
	IWNGP	33	3.35	0.95			
	IWGP	37	4.30	0.65			
Benevolent Sexism	IWNGP	39	4.55	0.67	74	-1.11	<.05
	IWGP	33	3.81	0.56			
	IWNGP	30	3.90	0.55			
Ambivalent Sexism	IWGP	33	3.81	0.56	61	-.59	>.05
	IWNGP	30	3.90	0.55			
	IWGP	37	4.30	0.65			

Hypothesis four posited that academics in institutions without a gender policy will significantly exhibit more sexist attitudes than academics in institutions with a gender policy. The results in Table 5 showed a significant difference in benevolent sexist attitudes between academics affiliated to the institution with gender policy ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.65$) and those in the institution without ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.67$) ($t(74) = -1.11$, $p < .05$). However, the respondents from the two types of institutions did not significantly differ in their hostile [$t(68) = 0.38$, $p > .05 = ns$] and ambivalent sexist attitudes [$t(68) = 0.38$, $p > .05 = ns$]. The findings suggest hostile and ambivalent sexism levels were comparable in both institutions while higher levels of benevolent sexism was prevalent in the institution without a gender policy. Thus, hypothesis four was partially supported.

Discussion

The findings in this study indicated discriminatory mindsets toward women reflected in sexist attitudes and discursive practices. The results not only confirm, but also extend previous research that sexist attitudes are real and still prevail; and that they are sometimes subtle and inadvertent (e.g. Iaria *et al.*, 2022; Poppenhaeger, 2019; Madera, 2018; Carnes, 2017; Biernat and Fuegen, 2001; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Fiske, 1993; Savonick and Davidson, 2017; Udegbe, 2003a) even among academics who are expected to serve as agents of change in societal sexist attitudes. These findings are also consistent with gender role theory which perceives women in the workplace through socially prescribed roles. Compared with previous studies, indications are that sexist attitudes have not changed much over the years. Even among those teaching, there are still high levels of hostile sexism despite institutional, national and international efforts to eliminate gender discrimination. Indeed, hostile sexist attitudes in this study were higher than observed in several countries including Nigeria (e.g., Glick *et al.*, 2000; Udegbe, 2003b).

The findings for discursive practices indicate the use of gender subordinating language, which suggests implicit internalization of gender roles. It confirms findings from literature that the world of work is socially constructed and accordingly, women and men have internalized patriarchal construction of gender roles even in their professions as academics (e.g. Atkinson-Bonasio, 2015; Katila & Merilainen, 1999; Saul, 2015;

Savonick and Davidson, 2017). This is consistent with Katila and Merilainen's assertion that discursive practices serve to reinforce the perception that female academics lack competence in academic work; a perception that is also held by other female academics. Unlike the mentoring that comes with "the old boy's network" there is a glaring absence of female role models who can act as mentors. Ironically, it was benevolent sexist academics affiliated to the institution without a gender policy that reported significantly higher levels of benevolent sexism. This paradox might, perhaps, be ascribed to this category of academics' exposure to contemporary messages on gender appropriate language through attendance at international workshops and conferences. These academics also publish in high impact journals and may have noted the need to comply with requirements to be gender sensitive.

More importantly, the findings indicate that the messages, so far, on gender equality and equity are inadequate and patriarchal ideology is proving difficult to change. It is reflective of confirmation bias, a cognitive bias that is skewed towards favouring preexisting information. This has implications for changing stereotypical thinking of women. Are gender sensitivity discussions and campaigns emphasizing gender patronizing attitudes rather than engendering equitable postures? The findings call for the need to analyze the content of the conversations on gender in different spheres of life. Programming, policy content and advertisements should pay more attention to the content of their messages to ensure that the content is not promoting patronizing attitudes since language is a basic constructive element of the content. Furthermore, the findings imply that there is need for clearer conceptualization and clarification of gender equity and gender equality as well as gender sensitivity concepts. For instance, what informs the "critical mass" of 30 and not 50 per cent in advocating for women's participation in government and decision making from different quarters? The messages appear to be a call for gender inclusivity rather than gender equality and appear to endorse societal patronizing attitudes towards women. Indeed, gender mainstreaming tends to promote a less derogatory perspective. The lack of significant findings for gender appropriate language suggests that gender policies have not had the anticipated effect since there is very low awareness of these terms. The

study also has implications for the way female researchers construct their professional identities and the social reality and power relations. The findings are not only important for women in academia, but also women in leadership and decision-making.

There are limitations to the present study as it was exploratory in nature and a convenient sampling technique was utilized. The lack of significant findings in the knowledge of gender appropriate language between the institution with gender policy and the institution without suggests the need to evaluate current policies and intensify strategies to achieve gender inclusive language.

Future studies, using a larger sample size may wish to look at differences across all faculties and departments in the university, especially analyzing trends between faculties. Future studies may also be guided by the suggestions of Iaria *et al.* (2022) to further explore other areas such as hiring, publications, promotions and citations that may promote gender gap.

Conclusion

This exploratory study suggests that despite several calls for gender equity (e.g. World Economic Forum, 2023; UN Women, 2017, 2018; Affirmative Action for Women, 2014; MacArthur Foundation/Gada, 2004) there are still implicit discriminatory practices toward female academics. Consequently, institutional gender policies should be strengthened to foster more favourable and equitable narrative that is not patronizing. Strategies should be multilevel and should go beyond policies to include programmes and activities that will significantly reduce sexism and impact on appropriate use of language that is not sexist. Clearly, the rhetoric needs to change. Professors, as people who work with words, should be more sensitive to the content and how they put words together and ultimately impact on their students. Women need to recognize the subtle forms of discrimination in the workplace so that they can respond appropriately. This may be achieved through workshops on unconscious bias awareness. Determining these issues will make it possible to modify or intensify current strategies for more sustainable change and the attainment of parity in the workplace. Older female academics should also make more concerted efforts to mentor younger academics to assist women to strive for self-actualization and advancement in their careers. Marginalizing women in academia invariably deprives the

academic community of valuable ideas and potential.

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