WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH BENEVOLENT SEXISM

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WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH BENEVOLENT SEXISM

A Dissertation

submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Lesley University
December 2020
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Division of Counseling and Psychology
Lesley University

This dissertation, titled:

WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH BENEVOLENT SEXISM

as submitted for final approval by Sarah Schwerdel
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation sought to explore the ways in which adult women make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives. By highlighting the meaning-making process of women who have experienced benevolent sexism, this research provides an important perspective on what it is like to experience gender-based oppression. Understanding that covert forms of sexism have implications for women’s well-being is an essential aspect of social-justice oriented mental health counseling. This phenomenological study focused on the perspectives of twelve adult women who have experienced benevolent sexism. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. Line by line data analysis of the findings revealed three major categories related to the lived experience of benevolent sexism: coping responses, gender comparison, and affective experiences. Synthesis of these results indicated that power is a key aspect of the lived experience of benevolent sexism; therefore, it is experienced as a threat to psychological safety. This was reflected in participants’ use of vigilance as a coping response as well as associated affective responses indicative of feelings of vulnerability. Intersectionality, power comparison, degree of personal choice, and fluctuations in response over time were perspectives of meaning making that participants used to wrestle with power dynamics. Binary thinking and relationality were the two final aspects of the lived experience to emerge from the data. This study provides recommendations for mental health counselors that address power, perspectives of meaning making, binary thinking, and relationality when working with women.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It would seem that how successful the women’s movement has been depends on whom one asks (Avellar & Smock, 2003; Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Misra & Murray-Close, 2014). There is a certain push and pull in the analysis of this progress. On the one hand, gender-based gaps in employment and education in the United States have shrunk, but on the other hand, a substantial wage gap remains, especially when comparing women of color to white men (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Scarborough & Risman, 2017). While women make up a greater portion of the workforce than ever before, intersecting identities—being a woman and a person of color or a woman and a mother, for example—widen this wage gap, with the latter example being identified as the motherhood wage penalty (Avellar & Smock, 2003; Barreto et al., 2009; Scarborough & Risman, 2017). At home with heterosexual couples, men help out with child rearing responsibilities more than in decades past, but it appears that fathers do more of the play-based childcare and mothers tend to the routine responsibilities; this is a discrepancy that adheres to traditional gender-based roles (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Scarborough & Risman, 2017). These contradictions in the progress of gender equality can be confusing and have led to stagnation in the reconciliation of structurally-based gender inequality.

Naming sexism as a cause of this uncertain progress has proven to be challenging. While the women’s movement has succeeded in making explicit sexist acts socially unacceptable, there still exists a foundational level of gender inequality that is subtly perpetuated (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Moreover, although some might say that the feminist movement has succeeded in leveling the playing field between men and women, others argue that the very assumption of success has blinded us to the ways in which gendered
power relations still limit women (Valentine, Jackson, & Mayblin, 2014). In turn, women still experience the negative effects of sexism but sometimes lack the perspective and support needed to articulate this experience.

Research in psychology has taken heed. Specific to gender equality, Glick and Fiske (1996) created ambivalent sexism theory (AST) as a means of better understanding contemporary forms of sexism. This work was inspired by race theorists who recognized that changing social norms meant not that racism had disappeared, but rather that it had become subtler and more ambiguous. AST proposed that sexism’s trajectory was following that of racism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). That is, the phenomenon still existed but had morphed to fit changing societal norms. Thus, more outwardly aggressive forms of prejudice were becoming less socially acceptable and were replaced by forms of discrimination that took on a more ambivalent tone, although leading to similarly oppressive outcomes (Glick & Fiske, 2011). Moreover, the Attitudes Toward Women scale (AWS) (Spence & Helmreich, 1972), which was the most commonly used tool to measure sexist attitudes in the United States during the 1970s, was becoming out of date, showing “a steady decline in endorsement” (Glick & Fiske, 2011, p. 531). These factors led to the construction of a theory that could account for obvious, hostile forms of sexism, yet also describe a complementary type of sexism that is expressed covertly and could even appear benevolent in nature. Glick and Fiske (1996) captured this nuance with their construction of ambivalent sexism theory (AST). AST posits that both hostile and benevolent forms of sexism work together to maintain gender inequality. They specifically identified “benevolent sexism” as sexism that attributes positive characteristics and qualities to women that are based on gender-specific stereotypes.
These subjectively positive evaluations of women appear to reward women for compliance with gender norms, but they ultimately are damaging to women as they reinforce cultural ideology that places women at a disadvantage to men (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

This chapter includes an outline of the context and goals of the research. This is followed by the research question, a review of conceptual and theoretical frameworks with an explication of social justice perspectives, and a brief summary of existing literature on this topic. Next, key terms are defined. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the research design.

**Context and Reflexivity**

As a cisgender White woman, I have understood there to be cultural ambivalence around gender equality. My gender is a primary psychological category, affecting how I am perceived by others and how I perceive myself (Glick, 2006). There is no doubt in my mind that I have been affected at the individual, relational, and systems levels by the gender norms that have informed my life since childhood. As I navigate this piece of my identity, I have come to understand that it has been through the development of a critical consciousness (Brown, 2018; Miller, 1987) that I have been able to better understand how my life has been shaped by dominant culture, including gender norms.

Despite my relative awareness of the ways in which patriarchy profoundly impacts my life, there are times when this experience is highlighted by others in a way that I find surprisingly meaningful. A few years ago, I noticed that I was seeing a particular blog post pop up repeatedly on Facebook. It was being posted by friends, by strangers, and in groups. I even saw a segment about it on television one day. This post,
a cartoon portrayal of a woman and her male partner at home went on to be published in print (Emma, 2017). The woman juggles a series of chores, such as cooking dinner, hosting friends, and taking care of the kids. Things start to unravel, as they sometimes do, and there is a big mess in the kitchen. She is frustrated. Her male partner says she “should’ve asked” for help. The author goes on to describe this as an illustration of the mental load: the mental and emotional labor tied to making sure the routine household and childcare responsibilities are attended to (Emma, 2017; Scarborough & Risman, 2017). This may seem pedantic to some, but it struck a chord with me and was a sentiment I have heard expressed by many women in my work as a mental health counselor.

The blog post was meaningful to me personally, but also professionally. In the almost 20 years that I have been a mental health clinician, I have worked with many people who have identified similar challenges that have shared roots in hierarchy, systemic oppression, marginalized identity, and personal struggle. As a licensed mental health counselor, I perhaps think about things like “You Should’ve Asked” (2017) from a more psychologically-minded standpoint. For me, the success of that post and its personal resonance reminded me that voices matter. This inspired me to build my research around elevating those voices to further expose the fact that the work of the women’s movement is not done.

**Research Purpose and Goals**

The purpose of this study is to give voice to the lived experience of benevolent sexism as it is experienced by women in middle adulthood. This reflects gaps in research which have largely focused on college-age research participants and the effects of
endorsing or holding benevolently sexist beliefs. Thus, the goals of this study are as follows: First, this study seeks to center and highlight voices of women who have traditionally been underrepresented in psychological research. Moreover, it is the goal of this study to center and highlight experiences that, because they are couched in covert forms of oppression, go largely unrecognized. A third goal is to contribute to the establishment of consistent language and dialogue about women’s experiences of benevolent sexism. It is my hope that this consistent language and dialogue can be used to inform clinical practice around how best to support women in developing critical consciousness.

**Research Question**

The primary research question that this study explores is: how do adult women make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives?

**Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

As a researcher, my epistemological stance is constructivist/interpretivist, although also influenced by critical feminism. While feminist theory is more succinctly categorized within the critical/ideological paradigm, I tend to take a constructivist/interpretivist interest in research, with the perspective that reality is socially constructed (Ponterotto, 2005). Meanwhile, an essential component of a feminist epistemology in research is attention to context (Fine, 1985, 1992, 2017). For instance, the context of the relationship between psychology and sociopolitical phenomena leads to an understanding that sociocultural factors influence individual well-being. In addition to this emphasis on relationships in the broader societal context, the role of power in interpersonal relationships is also an important dynamic to attend to (Ballou, Matsumoto,
& Wagner, 2002). I find these epistemological frameworks are complementary and in alignment with the conceptual frameworks used. The first framework is ambivalent sexism theory, which posits that sexism works through two separate but corresponding mechanisms: benevolent, or covert, sexism, and hostile, or overt sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The second, supporting, conceptual framework used is gender structure theory, which describes gender as a social construct (Risman, 2004).

The current research is guided by the counseling profession’s conception of social justice. That is, social context is never separate from one’s well-being; oppression and mental health are inextricably linked (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010). This is reflected at many locations in this project. I have maintained my commitment to social justice through my choice of epistemological stance, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and research goals.

**Existing Research**

The vast majority of research has focused on effects of someone’s *having* benevolently sexist beliefs and attitudes, but relatively little research has sought to explore what the experience of benevolent sexism is like for women who are on its receiving end (Lewis, 2017; Oswald, Baalbaki, & Kirkman, 2019). There is also a dearth of research with participants older than the traditional undergraduate age range, as well as relatively few qualitative studies on benevolent sexism. The literature review for this dissertation revealed only one study (Fields, Swan, & Kloos, 2010) that expressly identified use of qualitative methods. However, these methods were narrow in scope in that participants’ responses were limited by the questions asked. The current study seeks to fill these gaps in existing research.
Definition of Key Terms

The current study uses several key terms. **Sexism** is generally understood as prejudice and discrimination based on gender (Bearman & Amrhein, 2014) and is a consequence of **patriarchy**, which is the institutional and hierarchical stratification of men above women in society (Brown, 2018). **Androcentrism**, a function and consequence of patriarchy, holds the male experience as the norm (Bem, 1993). The construct of **ambivalent sexism** is foundational to this study. Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) contends that sexism consists of two opposing and complementary forms of sexism: **benevolent sexism** and **hostile sexism**. Benevolent sexism, which the current research explores, is sexism based on traditional gender roles, some of which are subjective valuations of women, however positive. Hostile sexism is more obviously aggressive and misogynistic sexism. Given that this study looked at gender-based oppression, it used **gender structure theory** as a way to frame how women may be experiencing benevolent sexism as a result of their gender. Gender structure theory interprets gender as a result of social mechanisms that operate at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman, 2004). To further elucidate the lived experiences of benevolent sexism, the concept of internalized oppression was used. **Internalized oppression** involves an oppressed group or individual incorporating the dominant, oppressive, and prejudicial ideology into their self-conceptualization (David, 2009; David & Derthick, 2014; Pheterson, 1986; Pyke, 2010). **Internalized sexism** (Bearman & Amrhein, 2014) and **internalized misogyny** (Szymanski, Gupta, Carr, & Stewart, 2009) are examples of internalized oppression that are gender-based. To further develop the concept of the lived experience as it relates to sexism and gender, the term...
critical consciousness is used. **Critical consciousness** asserts that one mechanism of oppression is a limited awareness that one is being oppressed (Miller, 1987) and that to overcome this, one must engage in **consciousness raising** (Brown, 2018). Consciousness raising entails developing an awareness of how one has been oppressed and that this oppression is based on cultural hierarchies rather than individual deficits (Brown, 2018).

### Research Design

The current study used a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of adult women, centering their experiences of benevolent sexism. This qualitative, phenomenological study utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). The participants in this study were adult women between the ages of 30 and 49. Purposive and snowball sampling were done through social media outreach (Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). Data collection consisted of one semi-structured individual interview for each participant. Analysis was aided by the use of MaxQDA qualitative analysis software. Line-by-line analysis of individual interviews was conducted, followed by cross-case analysis which allowed me to identify themes that emerged consistently across cases.

### Conclusion

Ambivalence around gender equality permeates our everyday lives (Barreto et al., 2009). Social media reflects this; in 2017, one blogger captured frustration with the “mental load” (Emma, 2017). These examples highlight the common, but often unnamed, experiences of sexism that women continue to endure. Although research has explored the degree to which ambivalent forms of sexism impact women, there is a dearth of qualitative research with non-undergraduate participants (Lewis, 2017; Oswald
et al., 2019). Moreover, the majority of research on benevolent sexism has been quantitative in nature and not focused on what it is like to be a woman who has experienced benevolent sexism. This creates a substantial void that displaces a woman’s lived experience as the focal point and further perpetuates the cultural norm of silencing women’s voices when it comes to experiences of oppression in their lives. Thus, the current study asks, how do adult women make meaning of and experience benevolent sexism in their everyday lives?
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although gender equality in the United States has improved, there are still great disparities at the individual, interpersonal, and structural levels (Avellar & Smock, 2003; Barreto et al., 2009; Misra & Murray-Close, 2014). This deeply rooted systemic inequality is perpetuated by many social mechanisms. While some of these mechanisms are based on obvious patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes, others are so embedded within dominant culture that they often go unnoticed. In an attempt to better understand the ways in which gender equality has seemed to stall in the wake of the women’s movement, researchers have begun to explore and conceptualize more contemporary forms of sexism. Research on benevolent sexism has yielded valuable data detailing its negative effect on women’s well-being (Hammond, Overall, & Cross, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2011).

Given the far-reaching effects of benevolent sexism but lack of strictly qualitative research that looks at benevolent sexism in the lives of a non-undergraduate sample, the current study explored adult women’s lived experiences with benevolent sexism in their everyday lives. Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to provide the reader with conceptual, theoretical, and empirical data in support of the current inquiry. This literature review names the theories and concepts that inform the approach to the research, suggesting how they will influence goals for this project. The first section, on sexism, offers a brief review of the development of ambivalent sexism theory, including the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and of benevolent sexism. After research on benevolent sexism is discussed, the notion of the lived experience, as understood through internalized oppression (Pheterson, 1986), is brought to foreground
of the discussion on benevolent sexism. This literature review next discusses how gender undergirds sexism and has been understood in previous psychological research. This section introduces Gender Structure Theory (Risman, 2004), and discusses how it will be used as a foundational support to tie ambivalent sexism theory to critical feminism. This is followed by a critique of the use of gender in research. Next, it reviews the primary epistemology of the current research, critical feminism, which is used as a lens throughout the study. These theoretical relationships ultimately help to further contextualize the current research that begins with the question: how do women make meaning of and experience benevolent sexism in their everyday lives?

**Ambivalent Sexism Theory**

This section of the literature review introduces ambivalent sexism theory (AST) and includes a discussion on its origins in previous social justice research. This is followed by an introduction to the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). The section concludes with a critique of AST.

**Development of Ambivalent Sexism Theory**

Popular and social media have captured the role of ambivalence in the stagnated progress of gender equality (Barreto et al., 2009; Emma, 2017). However, ambivalence as a social justice issue is by no means a novel concept. Myrdal (1944) coined the phrase the “American dilemma” to capture the United States’s paradoxical relationship to racial equality. That is, the ostensibly held values of equality and justice are at odds with the actual lived experience of many racial minorities in the United States (Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009). Dovidio and Gaertner’s (1986) aversive racism theory aimed to capture the psychological forces behind this disparity.
In their writing on aversive racism theory, Dovidio and Gaertner (2004) identified ambivalence as key to “the paradox between historical egalitarian values and racist traditions in the United States” (p. 1). Undergirding ambivalence, in this case, is an outwardly non-prejudicial stance juxtaposed against unconscious negative thoughts and beliefs toward minorities (Pearson et al., 2009). This juxtaposition seems to imply that endorsing equality is more important than actual equality and that unless outwardly aggressive or hostile prejudice is displayed, one is not questioned as to whether they support the dominant, oppressive ideology.

The discussion of how oppression can be perpetuated by seemingly benign ideology has also been presented by McIntosh (1990) in her discussion of White privilege and Jackman (1994) in her comparative study of intergroup relations based on differences in race, gender, and social class. Jackman (1994) places benevolence in the foreground of her analysis of ambivalence as an oppressive maneuver. Focusing on the ways in which intergroup relationships are manifestations of social ideology, she writes, “The agenda for dominant groups is to create an ideological cocoon whereby they can define their discriminatory actions as benevolent” (Jackman, 1994, p. 14). Synthesizing this with aversive racism theory (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), White privilege (McIntosh, 1990), and ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), one common thread is that not being horrible is good enough when it comes to equality. Perceived benevolence is complicit in the maintenance of hegemonic social structures.

**Ambivalent Sexism Theory Explained**

Overt, or hostile, sexism may be what most people think of when they think about sexism in general. Examples of thoughts that reflect hostile sexism are “the world would
be a better place if women supported men more and criticized them less”; “a wife should not be significantly more successful in her career than her husband”; or “there are many women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 497). However, this singular conceptualization of sexism fails to capture its true, multidimensional nature (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Understanding that sexism, like other forms of oppression, has a dynamic relationship to both oppressor and oppressed, contemporary research has sought to create concepts that reflect the more nuanced aspects of sexism. Such conceptual distinctions, which are different terms for somewhat similar phenomena, highlight that sexism is not always evidenced by aggressive or hostile behavior. Examples are subtle sexism, modern sexism, everyday sexism, gender microaggressions, and, finally, benevolent sexism (Bearman & Amrhein, 2014). AST, of which benevolent sexism is a component, is comprehensive in its inclusion of both hostile and benevolent sexism. Moreover, AST addresses the way in which seemingly benign attitudes, beliefs, and actions can contribute to gender-oppressive outcomes. Because AST is uniquely situated to address ambivalence in this way, I chose it as a guiding theory with which to understand sexism in this study.

Glick and Fiske (1996) created ambivalent sexism theory when considering what they noticed to be ubiquitous, subtle forms of sexism prevalent in daily life. Their understanding of benevolent sexism was pulled in part from racism research that was focusing on less obvious, yet still powerful, forms of prejudice (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, 2004), but also from literature on gender stereotypes. An example of the latter is Eagly and Steffen’s (1984) work, which sought to explore whether or not stereotypic
beliefs about women were related to the distribution of their social and occupational roles. Gender stereotypes were defined as “beliefs that certain attributes differentiate women and men” (p. 749). For example, women are stereotypically believed to be more selfless, more concerned with others, more communal, and less self-assertive and agentic than men (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). These authors discovered that it was the subjectively positive valuations of women (as being communal, selfless, etc.) that served to reinforce social roles and that unequally distributed social roles in particular (homemaker, employee) reinforced gender inequality (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Similarly, in their study on stereotypes and attitudes, Eagly and Mladinic (1989) concluded that “social power and evaluation often do not go hand in hand” (p. 555). That is, even if women are viewed positively, this does not equate to social or systemic power. This prior work (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Eagly & Steffen, 1984) supported Glick and Fiske (1996) in situating their theory of ambivalent sexism.

Ambivalent sexism theory posits that sexism is comprised of two distinct, yet related, forms of sexism toward women: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Though conceptually different, hostile and benevolent sexism share three core components: paternalism, gender differentiation, and heterosexuality. Glick and Fiske (1996) note that “each component reflects a set of beliefs in which ambivalence toward women is inherent … and which serves to justify or explain the underlying social and biological conditions that characterize relationships between the sexes” (p. 493). This is reflected in the categories within each type of sexism. Hostile sexism is comprised of many behaviors one would expect to find under such a category, and for the purposes of the measure, was divided into three categories: dominative paternalism, competitive gender differentiation,
and heterosexual hostility. Dominative paternalism reflects the assumption that women are less capable than men and therefore in need of their care and control as in this example: “Most women interpret innocent remarks as sexist” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 500). Competitive gender differentiation supports male structural power by contending that only men possess the requisite traits for leadership. For instance, “Women fail to appreciate all men do for them” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 500). Lastly, heterosexual hostility ties heterosexuality and domination: “Once a man commits, she puts him on a tight leash” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 500). Benevolent sexism, a slightly more nuanced category, was organized, for this measure, into these three categories: protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Protective paternalism implies that men are responsible for women, given men’s greater competence. Complementary gender differentiation references that men and women have traits that complement each other yet give men more power. Heterosexual intimacy romanticizes women as objects of men’s sexual desires. These concepts will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter.

**Ambivalent Sexism Inventory.** The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) was created as a tool to measure both benevolent and hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) is comprised of 22 questions and is designed to be completed by both women and men. Each item assesses either hostile or benevolent sexism on a Likert scale ranging from zero (disagree strongly) to five (agree strongly). Examples of items measuring hostile sexism are: “Women exaggerate problems they have at work” and “Women are too easily offended” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 512). Examples of items on the scale that measure benevolent sexism are: “No matter how
accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman” (heterosexual intimacy); “Women should be cherished and protected by men” (protective paternalism); and “Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility” (complementary gender differentiation) (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 512). In their original presentation of the ASI, the authors presented six investigations that supported the convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity of the ASI. Through sampling, which included both undergraduate and non-student samples, the ASI was found to be reliable in measuring both forms of sexism. Connor, Glick, and Fiske (2016) reported that reliability and validity have continued to be evidenced in international and domestic studies.

**Critique of Ambivalent Sexism Theory**

In discussing the limitations of their theory, Glick and Fiske (1997) identified that its structure was built on the assumption of a heterosexual participant, and I agree that this is a shortcoming. However, given that internalized oppression theory posits that members internalize the value system of the majority (Pheterson, 1986), it could stand to reason that the internalization of a heteronormative values system would be strong enough to ensure perpetuation of ambivalent sexism, regardless of assumptions around sexual orientation. Moreover, given the recursive nature of gender roles (Risman, 2004), one could conceive of traditional gender roles being played out in dynamics where gender is assumed but sexual orientation is not. People may possibly adhere to gender-assigned roles regardless of sexual orientation; gender identity and sexual orientation should not be conflated. Nevertheless, it is problematic that the scale was theoretically undergirded by heteronormative assumptions. Further, it opens up a potentially
interesting area of research: future work can and should explore the ways in which ambivalent and/or benevolent sexism affects all women. The present study aimed to include a diverse sampling of women and did not intend to exclude women based on sexual orientation.

Ambivalent sexism theory is built upon the recognition that benevolent sexism is perpetuated by men against women (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Although the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory can be administered to both men and women, studies have generally not focused on the ways in which women may engage in benevolently sexist behaviors with women other than themselves. Additionally, given that ambivalent sexism theory was constructed with heteronormativity in mind, it is not surprising that much of the subsequent research on benevolent sexism has explored the way ambivalent sexism manifests itself in heterosexual relationships. Notably, none of the studies reviewed have discussed exploring ambivalent sexism theory or benevolent sexism within non-heteronormative relationships. This could be an interesting area for future research given the likelihood that benevolent sexism could be perpetrated via protective paternalism and complementary gender differentiation, which is discussed in the following section.

**Benevolent Sexism**

Glick and Fiske (1996) introduced benevolent sexism as part of their Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), which measures two complementary types of sexism: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. The premise of this theory is that sexism is primarily ambivalent, comprised of benevolence and hostility toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1997). In this framework, the two aspects of sexism work in concert to punish (hostile
sexism) noncompliance and/or reward (benevolent sexism) compliance with traditional gender roles. Although hostile sexism seems to be more obviously identified as harmful, benevolent sexism still plays an important role in perpetuating gender inequality. Glick and Fiske (2001) acknowledged this role in their statement that "despite the greater social acceptability of benevolent sexism, our research suggests that it serves as a crucial complement to hostile sexism that helps to pacify women's resistance to societal gender inequality” (p. 109). This indicates that benevolent sexism is experienced by both women and men as a more palatable form of sexism that is also considered more socially acceptable. Remembering that ambivalent sexism theory was driven, in part, by research done on gender stereotypes, and that some stereotypes cast women in a favorable light (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly & Steffen, 1984), it becomes easier to understand how such valuations do not appear to be prejudicial. After all, how could being thought of as “good” be bad?

Ambivalent sexism theory identifies three major components of sexism: paternalism, gender differentiation, and heterosexuality (Glick & Fiske, 1996). These three components are parts of both hostile and benevolent sexism. The three components of benevolent sexism, protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and intimate heterosexuality, are explored in more depth in the following sections. This is followed by a review of research on benevolent sexism.

**Protective paternalism.** Glick and Fiske (1997) cite paternalism as a mechanism of patriarchy that results in power differences between men and woman. Ambivalent sexism theory has divided paternalism into two factors: protective paternalism and dominative paternalism. While dominative paternalism “is the belief that women ought
to be controlled by men” (p. 121), protective paternalism takes on a benevolent tone (Glick & Fiske, 1997). This benevolence stems from the protective aspect of protective paternalism, which implies that men have greater authority, power, and physical strength, thus making them responsible to care for women (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Complementary gender differentiation. The concept of gender differentiation attends to the gender stereotypes that exist regarding both men and women (Glick & Fiske, 1997). These stereotypes “help to reinforce and maintain men’s power by characterizing men as being fit for high-status work roles and women as only being suited to domestic and lower status roles” (Glick & Fiske, 1997, p. 122). This certainly reflects earlier work done by Eagly and Steffen (1984) by recognizing that gender stereotyping contributes to the process of gender differentiation. Ambivalent Sexism Theory takes this notion and separates competitive gender differentiation from complementary differentiation. The former contends that, because of negative stereotypes of women, men are, in essence, better. The latter, complementary gender differentiation, refers to positive traits that women, but not men, are assumed to have, for example, purity. Such beliefs underpin referring to women as men’s “better halves” (Glick & Fiske, 1997, p. 122).

Heterosexual intimacy. The third component of ambivalent sexism theory addresses heterosexuality, which is described as “men’s sexual desires and fears with respect to women” (Glick & Fiske, 1997, p. 122). Hostile heterosexuality is the notion that women are only sexual objects and/or that they use sexuality as a means of gaining control over men. Intimate heterosexuality, on the other hand, still views women as
sexual objects, but is a romanticized view in which having a female partner is “necessary for a man to be ‘complete’” (Glick & Fiske, 1997, p. 122).

Protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation and intimate heterosexuality (Glick & Fiske, 1996) combine to form the underlying structure of benevolent sexism. Given this dynamic interplay, benevolent sexism has the potential to affect many aspects of women’s lives. The next section of this chapter discusses research that has been done on benevolent sexism. These studies were chosen for their ability to demonstrate the impact benevolent sexism has in multiple domains of women’s lives.

**Benevolent Sexism Research**

The idea that a positive evaluation could be harmful may seem counterintuitive, but psychology research has played an important role in examining the ways in which benevolent sexism impacts women. The following studies on benevolent sexism covered a broad range of research questions. These studies show the implications of benevolent sexism, which serves to validate the importance of continuing to study how benevolent sexism impacts women in their everyday lives.

**Benevolent sexism and sexual health.** Durán, Moya, and Megías (2014) discuss three studies done on the impact of perceived sexist ideation has on college women’s responses to hypothetical acts of sexual violence against women by intimate male partners. The participants in each study (n = 83, 103, and 130, respectively), were female college students aged 17–35, with mean ages in the early twenties. Other than identifying these participants as students at a university in Spain, no other racial or ethnic data were provided. Participants read scenarios depicting intimate partner violence and then completed questionnaires. Results found that women showed less active coping
responses when the perpetrator was described as benevolently sexist, which seems to suggest that benevolent sexism makes it easier for a woman to let down her guard. An active response, for example, might include higher likelihood of contacting police or a higher likelihood of being angry. This study has implications for understanding responses to sexual violence and for deepening our understanding of the role that sexist ideology, even seemingly benign types, has on maintaining and perpetuating abuse and oppression. This certainly underscores the importance of continued research on benevolent sexism.

Exploring how benevolent sexism may affect sexual health-related behaviors, Fitz and Zucker (2015) investigated the relationship between condom use, experiences of benevolent sexism, and relational sex motives in 158 heterosexual female college students (mean age = 19.51 years). The authors hypothesized that condom use would decrease as experiences of exposure to benevolent sexism increased. This study found that everyday experiences of benevolent sexism were associated with less condom use. This result connects to previous research that related female passivity (a female gender “norm”) to less self-care behavior in sexual relationships. This article makes the important point that “personal, sexual behaviors may be shaped by larger societal forces” (p. 255), so the degree to which a woman ascribes to benevolently sexist mandates impacts her well-being on both a physical and emotional level.

One limitation of this study (Fitz & Zucker, 2015) is the racial homogeneity (79.1% of the sample was White) of the participants studied and the mean age of the participants ($M = 19.51$). This provides justification for sampling a more diverse female population, since this study showed a connection between benevolent sexism and health-
related behavior. It is likely that there are physical and mental health implications of benevolent sexism for women of any age. Although studies conducted with undergraduate participants are often generalized to the larger population (Chang & Sue, 2005), it is possible that research on a group with a higher mean age could uncover additional information. Nevertheless, Fitz and Zucker (2015) did a particularly nice job naming limitations of their study, such as recognizing that women themselves may perpetuate ambivalent sexism toward other women. Taken together, these studies (Durán et al., 2014; Fitz & Zucker, 2015) corroborate previous research and highlight that awareness of sexism is key in lessening its impact.

**Benevolent sexism, work, and education.** Barreto, Ellemers, Piebinga, and Moya (2010) presented results of three studies done to explore how benevolent sexism affected women’s self-presentation, with regard to relational terms and task-related characteristics. This study focused on the way in which benevolent sexism ultimately affected women’s adherence to traditional gender roles. The research was framed around ambivalent sexism theory and previous research that described the impact of sexism on gender discrimination and women’s representation in the workplace. Three studies were done with female Dutch college students, with mean ages of 20.13, 20.39, and 22.2 years. No other racial or ethnic data was provided. These studies found that female students defined themselves in more relational and less task-oriented terms when exposed to benevolent sexism, especially when benevolent sexism was expected (Barreto et al., 2010). Relational behavior, such as tending to others, was considered to be a feminine trait. Task-orientation, such as being able to follow through with a work project, is considered a masculine trait. Thus, women behaved in a way consonant with traditional
gender roles when exposed to and when anticipating benevolent sexism. Overall, this study spoke to the impact benevolent sexism has on women’s role presentation and disputed that these roles were inherent gender differences. This leads to the question of what may be underpinning women’s experiences of benevolent sexism or, more specifically, how women themselves understand this experience. Given that a goal of my research is to explore women’s meaning-making as it relates to experiences of benevolent sexism, these studies provide support for the assumption that the internal response to sexism is an important mechanism in the perpetuation of social structures organized around hegemonic principles.

Similarly, Kuchynka et al. (2018) explored the role of benevolent sexism in college women’s experiences in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). They found that the social acceptability of benevolent sexism allowed it to be perpetuated in the workplace under the guise of paternalistic helpfulness. However, they observed that “this sort of treatment may instead backfire by undermining women’s self-efficacy, sense of engagement, and performance” (p. 85). This study used ambivalent sexism theory as a lens through which to explore women’s experiences with STEM in the university setting. Researchers found that protective paternalism challenged women’s STEM identities, ultimately having a negative effect on STEM achievement. For example, women with an already low STEM identity who reported more experiences of protective paternalism also reported less likelihood of majoring in a STEM field and a lower STEM GPA (Kuchynka et al., 2018), suggesting that benevolent sexism had the potential to discourage such women from pursuing STEM careers. Not all types of benevolent sexism were found to negatively interact with women’s STEM identities, and
the negative effects on STEM identity were most profound in women with weak STEM identities. STEM identity was defined as “the importance of STEM domains to women’s self-concept” (Kuchynka et al., 2018, p. 74). This quantitative study used an undergraduate sample and the participants, the majority of whom were White and in their early twenties (Kuchynka et al., 2018). This age range is consistent with research discussed previously and indicates a gap in qualitative research on benevolent sexism experiences of women older than thirty.

A particular strength of Kuchynka et al. (2018) is its attention to the experiential component of sexism, which is a useful means of identifying specific mechanisms of benevolent sexism. This angle is not frequently taken in research on benevolent sexism. Compared to some other studies, Kuchynka et al. (2018) specified one particular component of benevolent sexism: protective paternalism. Protective paternalism takes the position that men, as greater in authority, power, and physical strength, ought to protect women (Glick & Fiske, 1997). This study showed that such behavior ultimately undermined women’s engagement in the field. Professional domains, especially as they relate to fields in which women are under-represented, are an important avenue of benevolent sexism research. This study demonstrated the usefulness of understanding the types of benevolent sexism women experience as a means of developing a better understanding of how it negatively impacts them. Though not necessarily a shortcoming of this study, it would have been interesting to obtain qualitative data from the women participating in this study. The body of knowledge on benevolent sexism may be enhanced through data on the lived experience of it as voiced by those who experience it.
**Benevolent sexism and identity.** Fields et al. (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study in which 78 female undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 24 were given the prompt, “what does it mean to be a woman?” and asked to write an essay in response. The racial and ethnic identities of the participants were as follows: Caucasian (n = 55), African American (n = 16), and other ethnicities (n = 7). Participants were then asked to write about how their beliefs about being a woman may differ from that of their mothers or grandmothers. Finally, participants completed the ASI. Of note, 99% of participants generated themes related to ambivalent sexism, which “indicates that ambivalent sexism is highly relevant and salient to women in framing their gendered experience” (p. 563). For example, one participant wrote, “Growing up I remember my grandfather telling me I could not become a vet because I was a girl” (p. 560), which was coded as an example of competitive gender differentiation. Given the salience of ambivalent sexism in women’s lives as demonstrated by this study, there is clear reason to continue research in this area. A particular strength of this study is that by comparing qualitative findings with ASI scores, construct validity of the ASI was supported. Additionally, this study stands out due to its focus on women’s perceptions versus their relational, academic, or professional experiences. Although this study is unique in its use of a qualitative approach to researching ambivalent sexism, it seems to lack the epistemological underpinnings of a truly phenomenological study. That is, there was a lack of reflexivity presented in the study, as well as lack of thick, or thorough, description which would elevate the voice of the participants (Morrow, 2005). Indeed, the authors concede that their findings in this area were limited by the nature of questions. Within the parameters set by the line of questioning, women were limited in how they could
respond. Another limitation of this study is its use of an undergraduate sample with a mean age of 20.47. The tendency of research in the field of psychology to focus on undergraduate students serves as justification for research to be done with participants from other age groups.

**Benevolent sexism and intimate relationships.** Hammond et al. (2016) explored the way in which heterosexual intimate relationships may or may not support endorsement of benevolent sexism in women. This study sought to investigate how a male partner’s level of endorsement of benevolent sexism may impact his female partner’s internalization of benevolent sexism. The authors carried out two pairs of longitudinal studies (for a total of four studies) of individuals in committed, heterosexual relationships. The sample group for the first two studies consisted of 122 individuals, both male and female, with a mean age of 23.05. The sample group for study three consisted 151 individuals, both male and female, with a mean age of 36.74. Study four included 321 male and female participants with a mean age of 35.90 (Hammond et al., 2016). These participants were identified as undergraduates from a New Zealand university or survey participants from the United States or Canada. No other racial or ethnic data were offered. Participants were administered the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) to assess either their own benevolent sexism or their partner’s perceived benevolent sexism. The authors determined that a male partner’s benevolent sexism was positively correlated with his female partner’s acceptance of benevolent sexism. This indicated that a woman was more likely to endorse benevolent sexism if her male partner also agreed with benevolent sexism (Hammond et al., 2016).
Functions of benevolent sexism. Fischer (2006) speculated that women’s endorsement of benevolent sexism was an action used to defend against what they perceived to be hostility in their environment, with hostility defined as “hostile sexism in men.” To test the hypothesis that “women’s endorsement of benevolent sexism should change in response to information about men’s attitudes toward women” (Fischer, 2006, p. 411), 105 undergraduate women were randomly assigned to one of three conditions and then asked to complete the ASI. The participants were identified as 96% Caucasian and 95% heterosexual. No other data about ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation were provided. Results show that if women were led to believe that men had inherently negative attitudes about women, those women would have higher scores on the ASI than those women who were led to believe that men favored, or were neutral toward, women. Like many other benevolent sexism researchers, this author framed benevolent sexism as a more socially acceptable form of sexism that served to facilitate adherence to traditional gender roles. For this study, however, it was also conceptualized as a survival mechanism; collusion with benevolent sexism was a means of avoiding hostile sexism (Fischer, 2006). For example, by conforming to the idea that women needed to be cared for — an example of protective paternalism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) — a woman was less likely to be more aggressively targeted by hostile sexism. This unique perspective was a particular strength of the study, as it speaks to how women cope with benevolent sexism as a response to the context of socially structured relationships. That is, the framework of gender and associated power differentials (which will be discussed vis-à-vis gender structure theory later in this literature review) serves as context to the experience of benevolent sexism. Further, this study’s emphasis on context is useful in terms of
considering educational and preventative interventions for forms of prejudice that are subtle and masked as benevolence. Additionally, it supports a more socially just mindset that moves away from “victim blaming.” The mean age of participants in this study was 18.89 years (Fischer, 2006), which is a limitation. This study lends credence to the notion that a woman’s response to sexism is an important factor to consider in research. These results parallel the results of previously discussed research (Barreto et al., 2010; Durán et al., 2014; Fitz & Zucker, 2015; Hammond et al., 2016; Kuchynka et al., 2018) in that they found women’s endorsement of benevolent sexism to increase in relation to knowledge of men’s actual or perceived benevolent sexism.

Looking again at male–female dynamics, Hopkins-Doyle, Sutton, Douglas, and Calogero (2019) discuss the outcomes of seven studies (one archival and six experimental) done to explore the role of warmth in concealing benevolent sexism. These researchers were interested in exploring “the psychological processes that cause deep-seated gender inequality to be legitimized and held in place” (p. 1). In the first study, anonymized archival data were procured through a website that collected data on everyday experiences of sexism. This study found that women were less likely to report benevolent sexism, and more likely to report hostile sexism, on an anonymous website (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019).

Study two was designed to assess whether the results of study one indicated that benevolent sexism was less easily recognized, or occurred less often than hostile sexism, and whether or not perceived warmth affected this assessment (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). Two hundred fifty-two British women with an average age of 38.73 rated the warmth of perpetrators of sexism, reporting on whether or not they protested either
hostile or benevolent sexism, depending on which group they were randomly assigned to. Participants were reported to be 94.4% White British, 2.4% Black British, 1.2% Asian British, and 2% other. No other identifying information was provided. Although the authors stated that women’s recall may have been biased, they concluded that women may have been less likely to report experiences of benevolent sexism due to its perceived warmth (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019).

In study three, 219 British women, mean age 40.74, provided rating for perceived sexism, warmth, and protesting sexism (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). Participants were 90% White British, 3.7% Black British, 3.2% Asian British, and 2.3% other ethnicities. Results of this study indicated that benevolent sexism was perceived as less sexist than hostile sexism and that men who displayed benevolent sexism were seen as warmer than men who displayed hostile sexism (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019).

Study four sampled 296 American men, with a mean age of 34.26 and 126 American women, with a mean age of 40.57 (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). Among the participants of this study, 81.8% were White, 7.8% were Black, 4.7% were Asian, and 5.8% identified as either Hispanic, Native American, Pacific-Islander, or other ethnicity. This study sought to explore whether seeing a man as benevolently sexist had any effect on whether he was seen as also being hostilely sexist, and vice versa. Results found that the presence of benevolent sexism in a man led him to be perceived as endorsing hostile sexism less (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019).

Study five was a conceptual replication of study four, and notably, found that the warmth associated with benevolent sexism helped to mitigate its negative effects, in particular as they related to support of gender equality (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). This
study’s participants were 363 Americans, who were identified as 143 men (mean age 34.89), 230 women (mean age 37.79) and three transgender individuals (mean age 29.33). Despite including three transgender participants, the researchers did not explicate any further analytical data relating to the gender of the participants (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019).

Study six contributed to the research by assessing how people understand benevolent sexism (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). The study found that people are likely to understand the overall negative effect of benevolent sexism. This study sampled 43 men (mean age 20.44), 239 women (mean age 20.21), and 1 transgender individual (age 20). The participants were White/White British (72.4%), Asian/Asian British (11.7%), Black/Black British (8.1%), or other (7.8%).

In the final study in this article, the researchers explored whether warmth has a causal role in how people misunderstand benevolent sexism (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). The participants of this study were 110 men, 100 women, and 1 transgender person. They were 91% White/White British, 6.2% Asian British/Asian, 1.4% Black British/Black, and 1.4% other. Overall, research found that “the warm affective tone of [benevolent sexism], particularly when displayed by men, masks its ideological functions” (p. 1). These studies help to shed light on the ways in which people misunderstand benevolent sexism, which appears to be part of the dynamic leading to higher susceptibility to its negative consequences (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). Notably, and in contrast to the vast majority of studies on benevolent sexism, these studies included participants with higher mean ages, as well as transgender individuals, who are
not well represented in research on benevolent sexism. However, the discussions of these studies did not elaborate upon these demographics.

The fact that this study highlights misunderstanding of benevolent sexism as part of what gives it so much power, points to the need to not just understand benevolent sexism, but also to better understand how meaning is made of these experiences (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). This essential piece points to the necessity of developing consciousness around experiences of oppression, which is an idea Miller (1987) speaks to in her writing on sexism and women’s psychology. Developing an awareness and ability to articulate experiences of benevolent sexism is a necessary component to mitigating its effects.

**Moving forward and shifting focus.** Oswald et al. (2019) have pointed out that the vast majority of research on benevolent sexism thus far has centered on the impact of benevolently sexist beliefs on research outcomes. Far less research has been done on what experiencing benevolent sexism is like. In one of the first studies that looks at benevolent sexism from the perspective of the person experiencing it, these authors developed an Experiences with Benevolent Sexism Scale. This scale was created based on the three main components of benevolent sexism: heterosexual intimacy, complementary gender differentiation, and protective paternalism (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Two studies were conducted for this article (Oswald et al., 2019). The first study was to review validity and reliability of their benevolent sexism measure. Participants were 489 women in the United States. They identified as White (78%), Asian American (10.4%), Latina (10.2%), African American (4.5%), and other race (10.8). To identify sexual orientation, participants rated their sexuality from one, completely heterosexual, to seven, completely homosexual. Seventy-eight percent of participants identified as
completely straight, 1.8% identified as completely lesbian, and the remaining participants rated themselves between two and eight. They found that women report benevolent sexism more often, but as less sexist or distressing than overt sexism (Oswald et al., 2019).

In order to confirm the factor identity of their benevolent sexism measure and replicate the results from their first study, Oswald et al. (2019) conducted a second study with different participants. To obtain a more diverse sample for this study, they used an anonymous crowdsourcing service called Mturk. The authors regarded samples from Mturk as more diverse than college samples. The structure of their benevolent sexism measure was supported and demonstrated adequate validity and reliability. Moreover, the scale was found to be theoretically consistent with ambivalent sexism theory (Oswald et al., 2019).

In sum, Oswald et al. (2019) found that although women did not always experience benevolent sexism as highly distressing, such experiences were still correlated with negative effects to women’s well-being in other ways, such as increased self-doubt. Continued research on benevolent sexism ought to explore the relationship between distress and negative effects on well-being.

In the next section of this paper, I discuss internalized oppression as one framework this study uses to understand lived experience. The concept of internalized oppression will be presented, along with studies on both internalized oppression and benevolent sexism. The current study will attempt to frame women’s lived experiences of benevolent sexism through these lenses.

Women’s Lived Experience
If there is a cultural ambivalence toward gender equality, women certainly experience it on many levels. Just as the feminist mantra states, the personal is political. Despite the progress made, many women struggle to reconcile advancement with their personal experiences of sexism, and their voices are often lost in the sea of research that, while priceless in its ability to account for these disparities, fails to capture the lived experience of women in relation to their deep familiarity with being ambivalently valued. In thinking about how this lived experience could be articulated, the notion of “internal” and “external,” as they apply to social justice has been a particular point of struggle. That is, in asserting that context is always implicated in the relative well-being (or lack thereof) of any particular person, the degree to which it is understood as an internal problem versus external means that one runs the risk of conflating the issues, which then risks undermining the social justice imperative. In essence, blaming one’s negative response to oppression on internal, psychological factors may seemingly imply that it is a personal deficit that has led to such suffering. Yet, people do indeed experience a myriad of negative, personal consequences resulting from oppression and prejudice. One concept that addresses this is internalized oppression. In this section, I introduce the concept of internalized oppression, which provides a lens to understand the lived experience of benevolent sexism. This is followed by a discussion of studies that demonstrate the relationship between internalized oppression and benevolent sexism.

**Internalized Oppression**

Pheterson (1986) defines internalized oppression as “the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society” (p. 148). Oppression can be based on many factors such as
race, religion, class, or gender. Other literature offers similar definitions, including David (2009) and Pyke (1996). From this perspective, oppression is understood as both a “state and a process” (David & Derthick, 2014, p. 3), meaning that marginalized groups are being oppressed and persons or groups who hold power and privilege over another are engaged in the act of oppression.

**Understanding internalized oppression.** In her discussion on internalized racial oppression, Pyke (2010) further pushes the subject/object dichotomy of Pheterson (1986) and David & Derthick (2014), by stating what internalized oppression is not:

Due to the tendency to misconstrue internalized oppression as reflecting some problem of the oppressed, I begin by noting what it is not. Like all forms of internalized domination, internalized racism is not the result of some cultural or biological characteristic of the subjugated. Nor is it the consequence of any weakness, ignorance, inferiority, psychological defect, gullibility, or other shortcoming of the oppressed. The internalization of oppression is a multidimensional phenomenon that assumes many forms and sizes across situational contexts, including the intersections of multiple systems of domination. (p. 553)

But what, then, does internalized oppression *look* like as a lived experience?

When Pheterson (1986) writes, “Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the groups” (p. 148), she accurately captures one of the nuanced ways in which oppression affects the lived experience of the oppressed.
In order to occur, the cycle of internalized oppression requires certain contextual and mechanistic conditions external to the individual.

There are several different ways to conceptualize the manifestation of internalized oppression, and it is not disputed that the oppressed individual experiences costs to psychological well-being (Pyke, 2014). David (2009) similarly depicted internalized oppression as having psychological consequences, which underscores the importance of recognizing that the effects of internalized oppression may present themselves in mental health settings. In the same vein, Pheterson (1986) stated that self-hatred, resignation, isolation, and powerlessness were some of the experiences of internalized oppression. These conceptualizations of the lived experience of oppression speak to oppression as a general term. But what about oppression based on gender in particular? As an act of oppression, sexism’s consequences are uniquely varied for women (Miller, 1987). The following section discusses research on internalization of oppression and sexism, as well as research done on benevolent sexism’s intersection with internalization.

**Internalized Sexism**

This discussion focuses on how internalized oppression represents the lived experience of women in response to sexism. This representation is uniquely situated within the psychology of women (Miller, 1987). The frameworks used in this section are objectification, internalized misogyny, and stereotype threat.

**Objectification.** Bearman and Amrhein (2014) identified six manifestations of internalized sexism: powerlessness, objectification, loss of self, invalidation, derogation, and competition between women. Objectification, in the form of self-objectification, has garnered the attention of researchers. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed
objectification theory as an understanding of the “experiential consequences” (p. 173) of internalized objectification, which was understood as a form of internalized sexism (Bearman & Amrhein, 2014). Objectification theory was thought to be one way of explaining mental health risks to women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

In their 2011 research, Calogero and Jost (2011) explored the relationship between self-objectification and exposure to sexist ideology, primarily benevolent sexism. This study offered three experiments on male and female participants recruited from a British university. Mean ages for the participants in each of the three experiments were 20.38, 33.85, and 19.99, again highlighting that research on older participants is needed. In the first experiment, participants were identified as British (94.8%) and Nigerian (5.1%). The second experiment’s participants were identified as White British (82%) or other (18%). The third experiment’s participants were White British (74.3%), Asian (11%), and Black African (7.9%). This study found that benevolent sexism was a strong antecedent to self-objectification (Calogero & Jost, 2011).

Similarly, in their study of 93 female college students between the ages of 18 and 25, Shepherd et al. (2011) also looked at the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-objectification, a form of internalized sexism. Participants were identified as European American (81.5%), Asian (5.4%), multiracial (5.1%), Latina (3.3%), African American (2.2%), American Indian (1.1%) and other (1.1%). Participants completed the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998), with half of the participants witnessing an act of benevolent sexism beforehand, and the other half not witnessing benevolent sexism prior to completion of the questionnaire. This study suggested that exposure to benevolent sexism served as a reminder of expected gender
roles and led to increased body surveillance, a construct that is associated with self-objectification. The study did not find that exposure to benevolent sexism increased overall scores on a measure of self-objectification; however, the authors speculated that this could be due to participants’ difficulty completing the SOQ and that the SOQ was a less sensitive measure of self-objectification (Shepherd et al., 2011). Taken together, the two aforementioned studies highlight that there is a positively correlated relationship between benevolent sexism and internalized oppression.

**Internalized misogyny.** Along these lines, Szymanski et al.’s (2009) study investigated the role of internalized misogyny in the experience of psychological distress resulting from sexism. The authors concluded that experiencing sexism led to psychological distress in heterosexual college women. Here, psychological distress was assessed with the Hopkins Symptom Checklist, a 58-item, Likert scale questionnaire with items such as “Feeling easily annoyed or irritated” (Szymanski et al., 2009). These results were consistent with previous research detailing the positive correlation between sexism and distress. The female participants (mean age = 18.88 years) in this quantitative study all identified as heterosexual. Participants were Asian American/Pacific Islander (84%), African American/Black (11%), European American/White (2%), Hispanic/Latina (1%), Native American (1%), and other (1%). Qualitative inquiries with a non-heteronormative and older participant grouping would have been useful in gaining a more nuanced understanding of how such matters impacted women, in their own words, versus through measures constructed by others. In spite of its limitations, the study provides useful support around the importance of researching the impact of sexism on women.
**Stereotype threat.** In their 2004 study, Schmader, Johns, and Barquissau explored the role of internalized oppression vis-à-vis stereotype threat with respect to female college students. This research was completed using two studies. Participants in study one identified themselves as White/European American ($n = 68$), Asian or Asian American ($n = 8$), Hispanic or Latina ($n = 7$), Native American ($n = 2$), or Black/African American ($n = 1$). Participants in study two were all identified as White (Schmader et al., 2004).

Stereotype threat is defined as “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797; for further discussion of stereotype threat, see Steele, 2010, and Steele & Aronson, 1995). This study found that women who felt that gender-based status differences in society were legitimate were more likely to also endorse math-related gender stereotypes. These stereotype endorsements were found to be predictive of lower self-esteem related to performance in male-dominated domains such as math (Schmader et al., 2004). This seems to imply that internalization of oppression is one mechanism through which gender inequality directly impacts women’s engagement in male-dominated fields. This study highlighted the internal mechanism of internalized oppression.

The effects of benevolent sexism, as understood through a lens of internalized oppression, offer a particular vantage point from which to understand the psychology of women. But how are women themselves situated within a sociopolitical context? The next section of this paper discusses the way in which gender is framed in this study.
Gender

To understand how women make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives, more research is needed. It is important to consider how the concept of gender factors into the dynamics behind sexism. In practical terms, gender is the concept upon which sexism is based. Contextually, the social concept of gender has an active role in how women make sense of instances of sexism in their lives. This section of the literature review discusses gender, beginning with a brief review of the relationship between psychology and gender. This is followed by a discussion of gender structure theory, which is a useful frame for research that explores the lived experience of sexism.

Gender and Psychology

The fields of psychology and sociology each contain extensive research on gender. Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger, & McHugh (2012) reviewed research conducted on women and gender between 1960–2009. They found that research on women and gender has generally lacked an expressly feminist theoretical orientation, likely due to variations in labeling and feminism’s “internal diversity in terms of approaches and assumptions” (Eagly et al., 2012, p. 221). This is somewhat surprising given that it is widely assumed that the inclusion of women and women’s interests in psychological research was a product of the feminist movement of the 1960s. (For a more thorough analysis of the history of psychology, gender, and feminism, please see Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly et al., 2012; Rutherford & Pettit, 2015).

Nonetheless, gender as a construct in research has followed its own evolutionary course. Risman (2004) identified four theoretical traditions within gender research: research exploring the origins of sex difference; research exploring the role of social
structures in the creation of gender; research focusing on how gendered social interaction leads to inequality; and a fourth tradition which included integrative approaches that “treat gender as a socially constructed stratification system” (p. 430). Research on gender has matured, growing from a focus that lacked attention to the social nature of gender development to a more dynamic conceptualization of gender and gender inequality (Risman, 2004). This maturation seems to reflect the ways in which gender itself, as a concept in research, has evolved, with the earliest discussions of gender having to do mostly with understanding biological differences between women and men (Risman & Davis, 2013). This paper’s attention to the social functions of gender is one way that the current research acknowledges the essentialist nature of current gender-based oppressive systems. Given that this feminist study is framed around an acknowledgment of stratification of privilege and power based on gender as a social construct, a theory of gender based on sociological research is most appropriate. Likewise, feminist critiques of psychology have focused on psychology’s propensity to center, privilege, and normalize a White, straight, cisgender male perspective, because this tendency pathologizes feminized perspectives. Therefore, this study uses Risman’s (2004) gender structure theory as a framework of gender that recognizes gender as a social construct.

**Gender Structure Theory.** Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, & Wahab (2013) asserted the following: “Researchers [should] attend to how the categories inherent in their research or practice are experienced by their research participants or client groups” (p. 288). Risman’s (2004) gender structure theory is useful in its stance that centers the voice of the participant rather than that of the theory itself. Gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) presents gender as a structure based on three dimensions: individual level,
interactional cultural expectations, and institutional domain. Within each of these dimensional categories are social processes wherein “there is a reflexive relationship between structure and individual action, such that individual action is always responding to existing structures in ways that either reinforce or challenge them” (Scarborough & Risman, 2017, p. 2). Risman (2004) listed examples in each category, stating explicitly that her lists were by no means exhaustive. Examples of gender structure at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels were as follows, respectively: internalization, othering, and organizational practices. Risman’s (2004) use of “status expectations,” as an example of interactional cultural expectations exemplifies how gender-specific ideology, such as benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), can be perpetuated. Thus, benevolent sexism could be said to rest on a foundation provided by gender structure theory.

**Gender Structure Theory and benevolent sexism.** Gender equality is thought of as being stuck, situated between hostile and benevolent expressions of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). As such, ambivalent sexism theory frames benevolent sexism as a form of oppression. In framing these concerns as social justice issues that counseling research ought to be concerned with, gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) is useful in helping to place benevolent sexism within a larger cultural milieu. While ambivalent sexism theory uses the term “benevolent sexism” to frame subjectively positive gender assumptions and prejudices, gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) operates with a similar, yet somewhat varied, functionality. This concept refers more broadly to societal and structural norms than to psychological processes and benefits. Further, it attends to
institutional norms by considering the active ways in which dominant groups covertly and overtly maintain power.

**Critiquing Gender as a Construct.** It could be argued that using a feminist lens on gender research is a form of collusion with patriarchy rather than a challenge to it (Wu, 2013). This idea seems to mirror concerns offered by critics of feminist therapy in general (see Becker, 2005; Lorde, 1984), who call for dismantling patriarchal structures rather than utilizing them. Wu (2013) expresses concern that research using gender is inevitably non-neutral because gender is such a strong piece of one’s identity. While I appreciate this perspective, I see this particular critique as justification for the use of a qualitative, critical inquiry, speaking particularly to the ways in which qualitative inquiry has sought to address this positionality through the use of reflexivity (Goldstein, 2017; Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2015). Yet the development of critical consciousness requires the analysis of how identity factors into experiences of power, privilege, and oppression (Miller, 1987).

Extending this critique to apply to issues of intersectionality, Wu (2013) stated that traditional feminism has tended to be exclusionary. She directly acknowledged this by stating that gender may not necessarily be the primary site of oppression for many women (Wu, 2013). Similarly, Risman (2004) notes that, “gender research and theory can never again ignore how women’s subordination differs within racial and ethnic communities or is constructed within class dynamics” (p. 443). Wu’s (2013) attempt to parse a conflicting or juxtaposed relationship between “gender” and “feminism” seems to highlight that the two are necessarily related, especially when considered with a more structural conceptualization of gender. Despite this, the assessment of intersectionality is
appropriate, and mirrors concerns shared by many other researchers. The application of intersectionality to feminist research is discussed later in this chapter.

**Feminist Epistemology and Social Justice**

The counseling profession, of which I have been a member for nearly 20 years, has incorporated a social justice focus (Chang et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2004) into its practice. A logical assertion is that research by counselors ought to follow suit. The recognition of privilege, status and power, oppression, and identity is a necessary aspect of transformative treatment that addresses the environmental factors of one’s social ecology (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Chang et al., 2010). The feminist perspective, vis-à-vis feminist theory, has contributed much to the field of psychology, in both research and clinical formulations.

Although the use of a feminist framework supports exploration of social justice research, the pairing of feminist theory to psychology has not been without conflict. In this section of the literature review, the relationship between feminism and psychology is discussed in order to provide some historical background. This is followed by a discussion on the feminist approach to research. In particular, this addresses the ways in which privilege, status, power and oppression (Chang et al., 2010) are integrated with an understanding of benevolent sexism.

**Feminism and Psychology**

The longstanding tension between feminism and psychology has many origins, one of which is the tendency of the field of psychology to pathologize traits most commonly attributed to women (Worell, 2001). The largely positivist zeitgeist of early and mid-century psychology was reflected by research that permeated initial work in the
field. Such research tended to be quantitative and experimental, had questionable
generalizability, and did not recognize power differentials (Eagly & Riger, 2014). While
these factors do not negate research done in these traditions, they sometimes neglect
social construction, cultural frameworks, and more postmodern research assumptions that
do attend to context and its role in influencing the lived experience of a research
participant (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Indeed, the individualistic framework of early
psychology has been challenged by feminists who note that these approaches have lacked
recognition of the contextual influences that undoubtedly impacted a person’s well-being
(Worrell, 2001).

Regarding the historical tendencies of psychological research, Fine (1985) wrote
that “feminist psychology needs to illuminate how women’s constricted political,
economic, and social conditions affect personal psychologies, not to collude with the
more general tendency to hold women personally responsible” (p. 175). This stance
reflects feminism’s shift away from a strictly intrapsychic inquiry and toward a critical
one that acknowledges the importance of sociopolitical factors, as well as recognizing the
dynamic between psychologizing and power (Teo, 2015). That is, psychology, including
the use of psychological concepts, has been used as an instrument of power, contributing
to how peoples’ experiences of sociopsychological reality are framed as psychological
problems. Teo (2015) noted that “psychologists successfully apply psychological
categories to individuals” (p. 246) but also that individuals “interact with their assigned
categories, and … even change their self-understandings and actions based on these
assignments” (p. 246). This is not to say that one’s internal psychology ought to be
ignored; on the contrary, this stance mandates inclusion of these principles in the
conceptualization of diagnosis and treatment. Rutherford & Pettit (2015) noted that “psychologists who hold feminist values have had to employ myriad strategies to navigate a relationship characterized by a strict policing of what counts as knowledge, who counts as a knowledge producer, and what methods count as legitimate” (p. 226). The methodological framework of qualitative research plays an important role in shaping the process and interpretation of one’s work. Within the qualitative tradition of research, the choice of theoretical framework informs not just what is studied, but also how it is studied, interpreted, and discussed (Ponterotto, 2005).

Interestingly, Rutherford and Pettit (2015) discuss the relative dearth of interaction between feminism and psychology, even calling the relationship contentious. They wrote, “Feminist epistemologies are often antagonistic to generating the kind of reductionist but portable ‘immutable mobiles’ (Latour, 1990) that social scientists usually rely upon when engaging public or policy science” (Rutherford & Pettit, 2015, p. 232). This is a thought-provoking consideration, as it acknowledges that the goals of feminist research have been considered oppositional to traditional, positivist research. One could also interpret this as a statement on the ways in which hegemony has subjugated feminist and qualitative research.

**Feminism in Research**

Within the counseling profession, one theoretical and epistemological orientation that aligns well with a social justice framework is feminism. Social justice in counseling is concerned with attention to power, privilege, oppression, and identity (Goodman et al., 2004). Feminism in research likewise attends to these matters through explicit epistemological aims, authentic alignment of personal and political/academic agendas,
and articulation of how the research contributes to a social justice framework (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2013; Lykke, 2017). Epistemological habits in feminism are necessary to maintaining and pushing forward transformative and socially just movements in academia, as well as in the political sphere (Lykke, 2017). That is, one way to produce research concerned with social justice is through methodology: a reflexive and iterative process that is transparent, with clearly identified positionality, such as that used with a critical feminist framework (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2013; Lykke, 2017).

Lykke (2017) noted that “important prerequisites for catalyzing change in the current situation [are] attentiveness to the effects of changing conditions of academic knowledge production [italics original], and in-depth reflections on its geopolitical grammars [italics original]” (Lykke, 2017, p. 8). Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), internalized oppression (David, 2009; Pyke, 2010), and gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) are theories undergirded by an understanding of context as inherent to people’s experiences of sexism, oppression, and gender.

In her book on feminist research possibilities, Fine (1992) suggested that feminist research that examines gender ought to proceed with the understanding that power differentials structure gender relations. She wrote, “Contextualized research [italics original] is necessary to unearth women’s psychologies as they reflect, reproduce, resist, and transform social contexts, hegemonic beliefs, and personal relationships” (p. 3). She further asserted that meaning around social experiences must be constructed from women’s own words, for instance through the use of qualitative inquiry.

**Critiques of feminism.** It ought to be noted that some forms of feminism, particularly mainstream feminism, are not without controversy. For an overall critique of
the intersection of feminism and clinical work, Becker (2005) focused on the inherent contradiction in utilizing a structure to dismantle the very confines it has built, an idea similar to Audre Lorde’s (1984) notion that one cannot dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools. This critique is a statement on positionality and an acknowledgment of the reciprocal relationship between society and psychology, even feminist psychology (Becker, 2005). In particular, her critique of the construct of empowerment is valuable, as it speaks to holding oneself accountable to the language used. In assessing the usefulness of a construct or theory, it is necessary to consider the context of its use. As Becker (2005) pointed out, “Even feminist therapists cannot assume that they are helping achieve the aims of social change in psychotherapy when the cultural milieu makes upon therapists and clients alike the individualistic claims that have marked us as a nation” (p. 2). Cultural ambivalence is pervasive, travelling across domains as a thread tying together the women’s movement, social justice as a whole, and influencing how helping professions such as psychology, counseling, and social work are conceptualized.

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality is a term first coined by Crenshaw (1989), to emphasize the stratification of identities that may be sources of oppression for an individual. This is a concept that emerged from Black feminist academic and activist work (Grzanka, 2018). Because intersectionality recognizes the relationship between identity and oppression, it necessarily understands this to be a reflection of identity-based power differentials (Grzanka & Moradi, 2017).

Central to intersectionality is the notion that identity politics often ignores intragroup differences, rather than acknowledging these differences. Such approaches
downplay the particular sources of oppression that result from not just gender, but from other identities such as race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. This concept is foundational to any critique of feminism, because feminism has tended to ignore intersectionality in favor of focusing solely on gender (Crenshaw, 1993).

Cole (2009) suggested inquiring into the diversity within a category. Following this suggestion, I attempted to actively recruit participants from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. During the interview process, I was attentive to the ways in which intersectionality may have factored into participants’ responses. I actively inquired about race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic factors and also employed the use of open-ended questions during the interview. My goal was to explore who, beyond identifying as a woman, each participant was, and where there might have been inequalities or similarities (Cole, 2009). An important aspect of intersectionality is the recognition that there is in-group variation based on social identity and that different identities represent structural categories and social processes (Cole, 2009). This conception correlates with the constructivist/interpretivist epistemological stance and guiding theories of the study.

**Conclusion**

*Ambivalence* is one word that could be used to characterize the success of the women’s movement. This is because, despite the progress that has been made, there still appear to be barriers to gender equality. While it seems that, on the one hand, women’s progress renders sexism less ubiquitous; on the other, the presence of ambivalence toward gender equality indicates otherwise. In gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying this stagnated progress, research in psychology has directed its
attention to theories that move beyond a cursory understanding of sexism. Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) has captured one nuanced form of sexism, benevolent sexism. To understand this, however, requires a deeper understanding of the foundational components that serve as context, such as gender as a social construct (Risman, 2004).

Research on gender has historically ignored the relational and contextual aspects that are inherent to the creation of gender roles and has also failed to explore power (Fine, 1992). This is why a feminist approach to research is useful: it challenges this disregard of context in favor of approaching research with an acknowledgment of positionality, critical assessment of assumptions, and awareness of power structures (Fine, 2017). This speaks to current needs in the field of psychology that address gender as a systemic and social dynamic influencing women’s well-being and mental health. Given that the concept of gender is tied to societal norms, research involving gender then needs to reference and uncover the assumptions therein, especially as it relates to power differentials. Aranda (2018) suggested that this type of conceptual literacy could, in part, occur through developing an awareness of meaning-making and knowledge construction about these concepts (i.e., gender and related power issues). This is comparable to the development of a critical consciousness (Miller, 1987). As Aranda (2018) noted, “Gender shapes people’s lived experiences across the life-span and influences their ability to secure access to resources and opportunities, to education and work or to health and wellbeing” (p. 76). Benevolent sexism has been shown as one way that this access is moderated. Thus, a phenomenological study that looks at women’s meaning-making around experiences of benevolent sexism aligns well with the goal of developing
conceptual literacy around how gendered experiences affect access to or restriction from power and privilege. When viewed from this angle, it becomes clear that the understanding of gender that the current study takes should mirror the vastness of meaning inherent to the demands of a feminist and social justice-oriented inquiry.

In addition to a lack of in-depth research investigating the lived experience of a noncollege-age sample group of cisgender women, previous studies investigating benevolent sexism have not tended to use a qualitative, nor feminist, approach. In sum, current research on benevolent sexism, using ambivalent sexism theory, lacks a qualitative, phenomenological, feminist-oriented focus on women over the age of thirty. Critical research tied to constructs that intimately affect any population ought to center that population’s voice and lived experience through diverse sampling lest it run the risk of perpetuating the very hegemony it seeks to challenge. To challenge power discrepancies and prejudice, people must become aware of their existence (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Next, they need to recognize it in themselves, as to “forge effective methods of resistance, it is necessary to understand how oppression is internalized and reproduced” (Pyke, 2010, p. 552). Researching concepts related to power discrepancies achieves this purpose. Once it is understood that the development of critical consciousness is necessary to mitigate the consequences of oppression, it then becomes essential to define and articulate this experience.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Women and men have disparate life experiences when it comes to power, social status, and well-being (Avellar & Smock, 2003; Barreto et al., 2009; Misra & Murray-Close, 2014). While it is clear that society privileges men over women, society also seems to hold women in high regard, valuing them for their perceived traits. These traits are based on stereotyped gender roles (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Scarborough & Risman, 2017). Being explicitly prejudiced or sexist is generally frowned upon; however, the mainstream understanding of sexism is narrow in scope, as it is centered on egregious, hostile forms of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This creates a blind spot that obscures some mechanisms behind sexist ideology, particularly sexist behaviors that are not outwardly aggressive. An example of a more veiled type of sexism is benevolent sexism, which is a covert form of sexism centered on subjectively positive valuations of women that are couched in traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Although benevolent sexism may seem benign, it is a harmful form of sexism that undermines gender equality.

This chapter outlines the methodology for the current study and includes a discussion of the rationale for the research design. After the methodology is introduced, a discussion of epistemology and theoretical lenses follows. The chapter then details data collection, ethics, data analysis, and validity.

Qualitative Research Design

This study employed qualitative research design. Qualitative research is “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 2). Given that this study aimed to explore how women make sense of
their experiences of benevolent sexism, it was imperative that the methodology used allowed for the participant’s perspective to be centered. Qualitative research amplifies the voice and experience of the participant so that a phenomenon of interest can be better understood through the participant’s eyes. Additionally, the emergent design of qualitative inquiry supports space being made for the participant’s perspective to be elevated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These characteristics make this research tradition suited for the current research question.

This study asked the question: How do adult women experience and make meaning of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives? The assumptions underneath the current research question are twofold and reflect specific elements of qualitative research design. First, the question assumes that there is a particular essence to the experience of women who have been subjected to benevolent sexism. This assumption is consonant with a qualitative approach to research, which accepts that by taking an exploratory approach, the participant’s perspective emerges (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Second, the research question is structured around the concept of benevolent sexism, which is undergirded by certain sociocultural premises regarding power, hierarchies, and gender. Given that the concept of benevolent sexism is sustained by these contextually based concepts, an approach that similarly acknowledges context is appropriate. Fittingly, qualitative research prioritizes context during all phases of research (Patton, 2015).

**Phenomenological Approach**

Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy. Thus, when used as a research methodology, phenomenology is similarly rooted in the epistemological and theoretical constructs of a study (Vagle, 2018). A qualitative study using a phenomenological
approach “proceeds from the central assumption that there is an *essence* [italics original] to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 18). A phenomenological study’s goal is to investigate how the individual makes meaning of the lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The current study explored the phenomenon of benevolent sexism as it is experienced by women, as opposed to how it exists as a concept by definition (Giorgi, 2009). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the specific approach used in this study.

**Interpretive phenomenological analysis.** Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative research that is based in phenomenology. IPA is comprised of three elements: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2012). Phenomenology refers to the essence, or lived experience of a phenomenon, as experienced by the subject. Hermeneutics refers to a theory of interpretation. IPA subscribes to the hermeneutic understanding that interpretive meaning of the whole can be understood through its parts, and the parts can be understood through the whole (Smith et al., 2012). Parallel to Ricoeur’s notion of a hermeneutics of faith and hermeneutics of suspicion (Josselson, 2004), IPA also employs use of a double hermeneutic. This is to say that with hermeneutic analysis, it is interpretation, rather than true and direct meaning, that the researcher produces (Josselson, 2004). This double hermeneutic indicates that there is the meaning-making of the research participant, yet also a second layer of meaning-making by the researcher. IPA’s particular hermeneutical stance is a hermeneutic of empathy and a hermeneutic of questioning. “Hermeneutics of empathy” refers to the fact that the researcher is interested in the participant’s meaning-making of their own experience, while
“hermeneutics of questioning” means that the researcher takes an investigative approach to analyze and draw out an interpretation of the participant’s experience (Smith et al., 2012). When combined, this interpretation-understanding approach intends to “lead to a richer analysis and to do greater justice to the totality of the person” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54).

The third foundational element of IPA is idiography (Smith et al., 2012). An idiographic focus of inquiry is the individual (Ponterotto, 2005). Particular to IPA, this element influenced the study in two ways. First, the depth of analysis was particular, specific, and detailed. Second, as IPA investigates the way in which experiences are understood by the people who experience them (Smith et al., 2012), the sampling procedure was purposive. More details on this are provided in the method section of this chapter. The next section discusses the epistemological underpinnings of the current study, including theoretical concepts that inform the goals for data collection and analysis.

**Epistemology**

This study of how women make meaning of benevolent sexism is guided by certain epistemological and theoretical assumptions. When tasked with identifying and naming the epistemological stance for this research, I found it helpful to consider the overall project and how the epistemology aligns with the research question and methodology (Sprague, 2016). I proceeded with this study using a constructivist/interpretivist stance, meaning that I take a “transactional and subjectivist stance” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131) in which reality is socially constructed and in which “the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant is central to capturing and
describing the ‘lived experience’ [Erlebnis] of the participant” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). I now discuss how the epistemological assumptions of this project are informed by a feminist theoretical approach and a social justice perspective.

**Feminism.** Best practices in feminist research indicate that use of a feminist framework ought to guide all steps of the research process, rather than just be used to conceptualize the work (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2013). Thus, this choice of theoretical orientation is an ideological commitment that itself constitutes context within the study (Levitt et al., 2018). Given that one of the goals of this study was to maintain a feminist-oriented framework, and that methodological integrity of qualitative work relies, in part, on utility in achieving these goals (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017), it is necessary to discuss the ways in which the theoretical mandates of a feminist-oriented inquiry inform and guide the work. Explicit attention to epistemic habits, in particular the use of critical frameworks, can serve as one piece of challenging hegemonic agendas that promote “xenophobic, racist, transphobic, anti-queer, anti-feminist views,” (Lykke, 2017, p. 2). Critical frameworks do this by challenging the very power dynamics that support such oppressive beliefs. This is part and parcel of critical research.

Use of a feminist, phenomenological approach to research privileges the voice and lived experience of the research participant, necessitating an acknowledgment of context. Feminism espouses what is referred to as a contextually valid psychology (Fine, 1985). Participants in the current study gave voice to their own contexts as they experienced them; however, concepts within the study itself were also contextualized. For this study, context was thought of as the sociopolitical mechanisms that contribute to
gender inequality, as the lived experience of the participant is inherently tied to the context of social construction (Fine, 1985). Feminism’s attention to context is well suited for qualitative research, which similarly places importance on the ways in which context is implicit to the phenomena under study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Thus, a feminist perspective aligns well with a context-focused qualitative study that has a constructivist/interpretivist epistemological stance (Patton, 2015).

**Social justice.** In this study, the issue of benevolent sexism is understood as a social justice issue. My definition of social justice is guided by how the counseling profession has come to regard it. Thus, social justice refers to theories that integrate an understanding of how oppression intersects with mental health (Chang et al., 2010). It was my hope that by highlighting the ways in which women make meaning of subtle experiences of sexism, this study would help to deepen awareness and knowledge of how tacitly experienced forms of oppression are experienced. In turn, this may help mental health practitioners recognize similar patterns in their own clients, thus infusing social justice principles into the clinical milieu.

Benevolent sexism is founded upon differences in privilege, power, and oppression that are based on gender, importantly at both the personal and institutional levels (Glick & Fiske, 1996), making it a matter of social justice. The use of a feminist theoretical perspective was one way in which the current study maintained its gaze on understanding women’s experiences with benevolent sexism as based upon existing power differentials. This lens is further supported by theoretical concepts within the exploration and interpretation phases of the current study, specifically, benevolent sexism
(Glick & Fiske, 1996), gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) and internalized oppression (David & Derthick, 2014; Pyke, 2014).

**Role of the Researcher**

As I proceed with this study, I am conscious about what it means to be aligning myself with a feminist framework given that “an extensive body of literature has pointed out that feminist literature has historically represented a White, middle class, straight, cis-gender, colonial perspective” (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017, p. 192). Mainstream feminist research has had a tendency to look at women’s issues from a privileged perspective, ignoring intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). As Fine writes, “We are still vulnerable to hegemony, this time representing as true that which we believe, instead of that which men proclaim. It is sometimes hard to remember that our hegemony is little better than theirs” (1992, p. 15). This is a challenging, yet important point to remember, and I have done my best to be transparent about the origins of some of my own biases.

I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman, which frames and limits my worldview. It has been my personal observation that my gender impacts how I am treated in the world. I have experienced sexism, both overt and covert, and this has contributed to the ways in which I view myself and my roles. Yet, while I was an insider to the research in some ways, being a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman meant that I was also likely to underemphasize or completely miss other types of marginalization. The reflexive statements found throughout this dissertation are sources of explicating my positionality and staking claim to it. Since reflexivity requires not just understanding one’s own perspective but also owning it (Patton, 2015), I engaged in reflexive practice in several ways. Memoing during the interview and analysis process is another source of
naming my location relative to the various phases of the study. Additionally, throughout
the process of dissertation completion, I engaged in peer debriefing. This has been done
through group doctoral work and individual peer support.

I have chosen a feminist framework to guide this research. I understand that in
order to grasp the entirety of any one person’s life experience, it is essential to know the
context. This includes not only the circumstantial context, but also the varying pieces of
their identity. In addition to recognizing the differences inherent to any group, I also
wanted to be aware of times when commonalities emerge through the storytelling that is
highlighted with qualitative research. This is one of the reasons I chose to do a
qualitative inquiry. The context of this study is shared with the reader through dialogue
around power, explication of study participants’ socially stratified identities, and
researcher reflexivity.

Another likely source of bias on my part is a result of having worked as a mental
health counselor for the past two decades. I have used a feminist-oriented stance to
explore issues related to oppression, particularly how oppression may manifest with my
clients. This lens has been useful in aiding my clients in exploring their own
marginalized identities, and it has certainly been prevalent in discussions with female-
identifying clients who have wanted to consider how their gender identity has been a
source of oppression and, subsequently, internalized oppression. Clients experience their
own power, privilege, and oppression in unique yet consistent ways. I am perhaps likely
to see the same patterns in this study. However, I took great care to remain in a
researcher’s frame of mind, as the role of mental health counselor is distinctly different.
To address this, I adhered to the protocol outlined by my choice of qualitative analysis.
Moreover, I engaged in peer feedback around analysis and utilized memoing in order to bracket my assumptions about research. Bracketing is commonly used in qualitative research and refers to the researcher making note of their own positionality in order to reduce the impact their biases have on analysis (Morrow, 2005; Smith et al., 2012).

The epistemology of any type of research helps to guide the researcher’s choice of theories, concepts, and methodology. This section of the chapter discussed my epistemological foundation as related to feminism, social justice, and reflexivity as a researcher. In the next section, I outline the research methods that were employed for this study.

Method

This section of the chapter outlines the methods I used for this research. This begins by discussing the participants, sample description, sampling method, and recruitment. Next, I share the data collection method and the process of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The section concludes by discussing validity and ethics.

Sampling Method and Recruitment

This qualitative, phenomenological study utilized the approach outlined by interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As discussed previously, the theoretical orientation of IPA is based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The goal of such an approach is to access a deep and rich level of detailed information from the study’s participants. In keeping with that goal, “The primary concern of IPA is with a detailed account of individual experience” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 49), so participants for this study were selected based on their desire and
willingness to be interviewed about the research question. The specificity required of the participants lends itself to purposive sampling, combined with snowball sampling. Snowball sampling, a form of purposive sampling, is a technique often used in IPA (Smith et al., 2012). Snowball sampling works through referral: participants were asked to refer potential participants to the study (Patton, 2015).

The process of participant recruitment was initiated after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained. I posted recruitment material in various online women’s groups and sent the recruitment material to my personal connections. In an attempt to get a more diverse sample of women, I purposely posted in groups that have participants from different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses. While I did not interview personal friends for the study, this form of snowball sampling led to appropriate participants. In the message, I described the study and included a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B). I asked individuals whether they would mind forwarding the recruitment flyer to people who fit participant criteria. The recruitment message can be found in Appendix A.

All participants responded to the research advertisement by either email or Facebook Messenger. I was able to respond to all informational requests and did not have to turn away any participants. Initial correspondence continued either via email or text message until the interview was scheduled. Ten of the 12 participants requested to be interviewed in their homes. Two of the 12 were interviewed in my office space. During our meetings, and prior to beginning the interview, participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form for the individual interview (see Appendix C). To show appreciation for their willingness to be interviewed, each participant was
compensated for their time with an Amazon.com gift card in the amount of $25. The gift card was given before the start of the interview.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were 12 cisgender women between the ages of 30 and 49, with a mean age of 41.8 years. This sample size was appropriate given that this qualitative research project was intended to create an in-depth understanding of women’s experiences with benevolent sexism. The goal of IPA is to obtain a detailed account of an individual’s experience of a particular phenomenon, and the commitment to this endeavor would be challenged by a sample size that is too great in number (Smith et al., 2012). I selected participants above the age of 30 as a means of having participants distinctly removed from an undergraduate college-age sample, since much of the existing research conducted on benevolent sexism has been done using college-age participants. The upper age limit allowed for the study to focus on a generation of women who came of age after the women’s movement of the 1960s (Brown, 2018), but have benefitted from it. Participants had to self-identify as women, be English speaking, know how to read, and be able-bodied enough to be able to travel or host an interview. Since intersecting aspects of identity contribute to the contextual data, demographic data were collected for the following identifiers: age, ethnicity and race, marital status, sexual orientation, employment status, and socioeconomic status. This demographic information may also help other researchers to locate this study amongst existing research on benevolent sexism. The primary inclusion criteria were that the participant identify as a woman, be over the age of thirty, and be willing and able to participate in the interview process.
Demographic information was collected using a questionnaire that asked participants to fill in responses for the following information: name, age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, highest level of education, employment status, and socioeconomic status. Nine of the 12 women identified as White of European descent, one identified as White Latina, one identified as Chinese, and one identified as Indian. All of the women were citizens of the United States. Of the 12 participants, 10 identified as straight, one as lesbian, and one as bisexual. Eight women reported being married, two single and divorced, and two single and never married. In terms of socioeconomic status, one participant identified herself as upper class, seven as upper middle class, and four as middle class. Highest levels of education for the women were as follows: professional certification (1), doctorate degree (2), master’s degree (4), and bachelor’s degree (5). At the time of the interviews, all but one woman reported full-time work either in the home, outside of the home, or a combination of both. One participant was between jobs. Table 1 shares the demographic characteristics of the participants.
Table 1

Demographic Data for Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Professional Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Some graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gillian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Some graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

**Interviews.** Phenomenology approaches research from a perspective that values the depth and meaning of the lived experience of the participant (Hays & Wood, 2011). Interviews are one approach to accessing this kind of detailed information, and they are a method often used with qualitative, phenomenological research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviewing, which is a relatively flexible data collection instrument (Smith & Osborn, 2003), is commonly used for IPA studies and was the method I chose for this study. The 12 interviews did fall within these expectations.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) relies on the use of thick description to illuminate how someone makes meaning of a particular phenomenon they have experienced in their life (Smith et al., 2012). This study used individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews to research the question, “How do adult women make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives?” Semi-structured interviews were constructed with questions to frame the interview; however, these questions did not dictate the course of the entire interview. Emphasis was placed on establishing rapport with the participant, flexibility during the interview, and the emergence of rich data (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It was estimated that the interviews would each last between one and two hours (Smith et al., 2012).

**Interview schedule.** The interview schedule, rather than a strict set of guidelines, allowed me to identify what areas to cover and to prepare, to a certain degree, for potential difficulties (Smith & Osborn, 2003). “The aim of developing a schedule is to facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant which will, in turn, enable them to
provide a detailed account of the experience under investigation” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 59). Thus, questions were open-ended, and the participant was encouraged to elaborate and speak freely. Approximately six to 10 questions, along with prompts, are recommended (Smith et al., 2012) and I wrote seven. Questions and prompts were constructed using material that incorporated concepts from work done on benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and internalized sexism (Bearman & Amrhein, 2014). This ensured that the interview material was tied to the conceptual underpinnings of the study, without forcing participants to have conceptual literacy around these topics. For instance, I asked, “When people say things like ‘Women are the fairer sex,’ or ‘Women are naturally more compassionate than men,’ some women find it to be distressing, while others may not be bothered by it at all. If I said to you, ‘Women are the fairer sex’ or that ‘women are more refined than men,’ I wonder what comes to mind for you?” This question uses wording from the ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Setting. It was important to me that the research participants felt comfortable during their interviews. Likewise, I wanted to ensure a confidential and relatively quiet location. Ten of the 12 participants requested to be interviewed in their homes. The remaining two participants travelled to my office space for their interviews.

Recording procedures. I audio recorded all 12 interviews and used two recording devices in case one device malfunctioned. I took minimal handwritten notes throughout the interviews to document any immediate observations or clarifying questions for the participant. After each interview, I wrote analytic memos to document my observations, first impressions, and initial analytical considerations.
Pilot Focus group. As a pilot exercise, I conducted a focus group with three women between the ages of 38 and 42. The focus group had two objectives. First, I wanted to see to what degree it would be possible to talk about sexism and gender without being overtly leading and without the conversation’s becoming overly focused on conceptual understanding, as my focus was on the participants’ experiences. This goal was achieved, and I found that discussing statements from the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996) to be useful as ways of initiating discussion and stimulating reflection. This has influenced the construction of interview questions. The second goal of the focus group was to practice interview skills, namely, asking open-ended questions. This focus group yielded a rich discussion, in which I observed the members reflecting on their female identities and how they have navigated cultural schema of gender. I noticed in particular that the interactions amongst group members produced a dialogue that brought varying understandings of sexism to the forefront of the discussion. This appeared to be both challenging and validating for the group members, which allowed me to observe a degree of self-disclosure that may not have emerged in an individual interview.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis in IPA is iterative, conceptualized by what is referred to as a “double hermeneutic,” in that the participant makes meaning of their experience, and the researcher then analyzes and interprets the participant’s meaning-making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Following each interview, I journaled initial impressions as a way of bracketing my responses, so that I could remain open to additional interpretations and keep my initial focus on the participant (Smith et al., 2012). Next, I used a transcription service in order to have a verbatim account of the interview. I
wanted to get an overall sense of the interview and to establish familiarity with the material, so after an interview was transcribed, I listened to it while reading over the transcript. I started this after the first interview was transcribed and continued this process for all 12 interviews. This meant that I was in the process of analysis before completing all interviews. I based this choice on practical matters, such as the time required to conduct, transcribe, and analyze data. However, this method also reflected the idiographic nature of IPA, as each individual case required its own analysis (Smith et al., 2012).

The next reading involved initial noting using MaxQDA coding software. During this stage, I made descriptive comments, looking at the use of language and concepts that appeared to emerge. This stage is thought to be the “most detailed and time-consuming” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 83) because it requires many iterations of exploration, and because, despite appearances otherwise, it is not a sequential process. Rather, it is cyclical, iterative, and complex (Smith et al., 2012). Throughout this process, reflexive practice was maintained by note taking of how my identity might be influencing pieces of the research process, such as rapport with the participant, interpretation, and analysis.

In the next step of data analysis, I looked for emergent themes, taking care to ensure that “the thread back to what the participant actually said and one’s initial response [was] apparent” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 68). This was done by either highlighting or excerpting the specific text that led to theme emergence. This continued throughout the transcript. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommend, at this stage, working with researcher notes rather than with the transcript. While this would still be grounded in the participant’s interpretation, it would be at a higher level of abstraction.
Further, the concept of the hermeneutic circle became evident, as the emergent themes were influenced by the interview as a whole, and the themes in turn influenced the identification of other themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). After emergent themes were identified, I looked for relationships and patterns amongst the themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2012). This resulted in lists of major themes, with subthemes and associated excerpts from the text (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

I repeated the preceding analytic process each interview. Once all interviews were analyzed, a master list of themes was created, and I searched for patterns within the data as a whole (Smith et al., 2012). The goal of this cross-case analysis was to search for connections between the themes that emerged in the individual case analyses, as well as any discrepant data. This resulted in lists of themes and subthemes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Validity

Within the traditions of qualitative inquiry, the concept of validity is situated to reflect the underlying goals of qualitative research itself, which in this case are epistemologically constructivist-interpretivist (Ponterotto, 2005): there were “no fixed criteria for establishing truth and knowledge, since to limit the criteria for truth would mean restricting the possibilities for knowledge and would also privilege the perspective of the cultural group whose criteria for truth was deemed ‘correct’” (Yardley, 2000, p. 217). Rather, validity was maintained by procedural and analytic components that were tied to the constructivist-interpretivist epistemological stance (Ponterotto, 2005). For instance, I monitored for disconfirming data, which was information that was counter to my findings or in contrast to extant research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This served
an important role in ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of the research by increasing its credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

An additional goal of this study was psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003). Psychopolitical validity emphasizes the social justice facet of research and constitutes another form of contextual and hermeneutic validity in that it encourages the researcher to consider how their own work ties to the broader political sphere, yet also how the political sphere is necessarily implicated within the study as well. This type of validity entails “accounting for power dynamics operating at psychological and political levels in efforts to understand phenomena of interest” (Prilleltensky, 2003, p. 199). Psychopolitical validity was achieved through my choice of epistemological and theoretical orientations and by addressing power at multiple locations in this dissertation.

A third layer of validity has to do with whether the research promotes transformative validity (Prilleltensky, 2003), which I viewed as parallel to the feminist concept of critical consciousness (Brown, 2018; Miller, 1987). This study intended to shed light on women’s experiences of benevolent sexism, in support of creating a consistent language and dialogue about subtle forms of sexism. This can be used by clinicians to aid clients in developing critical consciousness, thus leading to psychopolitical and transformative validity in the study (Prilleltensky, 2003).

**Validity strategies.** In order to maintain the theoretical bases of validity, the study followed criteria that are commensurate with the goals of the underlying epistemology. To this end, Yardley (2000) has outlined four evaluative criteria to assess the overall validity of phenomenological research. These criteria are sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance
The application of these criteria, which echo validity points cited by Morrow (2005), are outlined next.

I employed several strategies as a means of enhancing the validity of the study, and some of these strategies are implicit in the research design. Context was considered from multiple standpoints. First, for example, sensitivity to context is reflected in the choice of the guiding theoretical orientation, feminism, which espouses attention to context (Ballou et al., 2002; Fine, 1985; Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007; Yardley, 2000). This was built into the research design in part by use of framing theoretical concepts of gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) and ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). It was also considered through the lens of the ethical practices of the study, for example the choice to interview participants who were not undergraduate students (Chang & Sue, 2005). Implicit in these concepts is that context must be acknowledged when exploring gender oppression, as it is its sociopolitical context that maintains that oppression (Miller, 1987). The literature review provided conceptual context by identifying existing research and gaps therein. Within the interview process, context was acknowledged further in that the voice of each participant was centered, thus allowing for her own contextual perspective to be considered (Fine, 1985; Smith et al., 2012). Additionally, I noted that the sociocultural setting of the interview itself constituted context (Yardley, 2000). To address this, I engaged in reflective practice during the interview process through the use bracketing via memoing (Smith et al., 2012). These strategies enhanced psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003), while at the same time referencing the constructivist-interpretivist epistemological stance of the study (Ponterotto, 2005).
Commitment, rigor, transparency, and coherence were similarly nested within this study’s research design. Commitment was reflected by data immersion (Yardley, 2000). This was achieved in part through the literature review and during the process of engaging with committee members and faculty around the research process, but also occurred in the data collection and analysis processes.

The process of IPA utilizes detailed exploration of data, which further supports both commitment and rigor (Smith et al., 2012). Given that reflexivity was incorporated into this process, transparency was further supported, as evidenced by inclusion of the reflexive statement as well as reflective analysis through the use of analytic memoing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Transparency was ensured by detailed and exampled documentation of the data collection process and analysis. Reflexive practices are also considered as a means of achieving transparency (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017).

Coherence was demonstrated by the fit of research question to epistemology which was detailed in the literature review and discussion of epistemological assumptions in the methods chapter (Levitt et al., 2017). Coherence was further displayed during the analysis phase of research, in which findings were discussed in relation to the theoretical and conceptual concepts that guided the work throughout its inception and development (Yardley, 2000).

Impact and importance speak most directly to transformative and psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003; Yardley, 2000). They were guided by the social justice aims of the study. This refers, in particular, to the goal of creating a consistent language and dialogue around experiences of ambivalent sexism. This was intended to encourage
a deepened awareness and knowledge of these issues that can be applied to clinical practice.

**Ethics**

An overarching ethical concern tied to the epistemological and theoretical orientations of qualitative and feminist research was context. Here, the interview and the research process itself constituted context, meaning that I considered how power dynamics emerged between the participants and myself. As such, the notion of power hierarchies as they apply to ethics and social justice in research (Ballou et al., 2002; Suzuki et al., 2007) is worth considering. Within feminist research, as previously discussed, attention to context is essential (Fine, 1985). While this certainly applies to the subject matter of the study itself, it likewise references the relational dynamic between researcher and research participant (Josselson, 2013; Suzuki et al., 2007). Researcher reflexivity is an important tool to help manage the ethics and social justice concerns of resulting power dynamics (Suzuki et al., 2007). As Haverkamp (2005) wrote, “Applied psychologists are encouraged to pursue a contextualized, process-oriented approach to ethical decision making, one informed by trustworthiness and professional reflexivity” (p. 155).

While I viewed the ethical considerations of confidentiality and informed consent as being relatively straightforward, both Ballou et al. (2002) and Suzuki et al. (2007) took issue with how the very nature of qualitative research impacts ethical considerations. Both spoke to the open and reflexive process of data collection and the way in which the research participants’ disclosures may implicate other people’s consent or indirect participation in the research. I took several measures to protect participants’ safety in the
study. Participants had the opportunity to review and sign the informed consent form, and to ask any questions they had. Next, I assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Third, data were stored and kept in a password protected location for the duration of the study and will be destroyed after a period of five years.

Conclusion

Through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this study explored the question of how adult women make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their lives. This research is grounded in feminist epistemology that seeks to engage in contextualized research acknowledging the social structures that maintain systems of oppression. Because existing research has tended to emphasize quantitative data from college-aged participants, this study centered the voices and lived experiences of research participants who are often not included in psychological research. It is my hope that this study contributes to a body of knowledge on women’s experiences of sexism and helps mental health clinicians develop an increased awareness of themes that may emerge when women share experiences of sexism.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and feature the ways in which adult women have made meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives. Benevolent sexism encompasses subtle sexism that is often couched within subjectively positive assessments of women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This study sought to fill gaps in existing research on benevolent sexism by interviewing women in established adulthood, which is considered to be ages 30-45 (Mehta, Arnett, Palmer, & Nelson, 2020), and by centering their experience as targets of benevolent sexism. Twelve women between the ages of 30 and 49 were interviewed individually, using a semi-structured interview protocol. During their interviews, participants discussed experiences of benevolent sexism that occurred in both personal and professional settings. The interview protocol and subsequent analysis were informed by principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). This approach centers the individual’s experience of a particular phenomenon. Thus, the interviews themselves, while guided by the interview questions, unfolded organically as participants engaged in conversation. Analysis similarly focused on participant meaning making, so that resulting themes emerged from the data and were not predetermined. This chapter reviews the findings that emerged from analysis. The results outlined in this chapter fell into three categories: coping responses, gender comparison, and affective experiences.

Overview of Analysis and Themes

This study was analyzed using the MaxQDA qualitative data analysis program. Line-by-line analysis of 12 transcribed interviews was completed sequentially, starting with interview one. Analysis of each subsequent interview contributed to existing codes
and/or generated unique codes. First cycle coding generated 1,298 coded segments from the 12 interviews. This coding process employed an eclectic mixture of coding types. These included affective coding that looked for emotion and value statements and elemental coding, which was descriptive in that it labeled nouns or actions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). These coding strategies were chosen because they allowed me to maintain focus directly on the transcribed content of the interviews.

Second cycle coding employed pattern coding to group similar codes together and focused coding, as a means of exploring frequency of codes and thematic similarity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This coding strategy allowed the data to be condensed, organized, and compared against the existing research done on benevolent sexism. During the course of coding, I consulted with peers around interpretation and fit of codes. No discrepancies were noted by peer consultants. The main objectives of this phase were to assess the codes for fit, to look at each coded item to see whether there were codes that could be more accurately named, and to locate coded items that were thematically similar and could be grouped together. An example of changing for code accuracy occurred when I changed “expressions of internalization” to “coping strategies.” I made this decision because it seemed to me that the coded items reflected statements related to coping, rather than statements in which participants were talking about having internalized anything. Other code review tasks involved categorizing in-vivo (direct quote) codes, merging similar categories, and beginning to look for emergent codes, which were ideas or concepts that appeared during the coding process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).
After parent (primary) codes and subcodes were created, I began to export data from MaxQDA into the findings chapter. This iteration of analysis allowed me to organize the data more coherently and evaluate coded statements against their codes. In total, analysis yielded three major categories: coping responses, which included three associated themes and four subthemes, gender comparison, which included four themes and three subthemes, and affective experiences, which included three themes. These four major categories and the associated themes are presented in Table 2.
Table 2

*Categories and Themes from Interview Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Categories</th>
<th>Themes and Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coping Responses</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Rationalizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Biological Gender Justification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Reframing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relational Coping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Engaging with Men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Responsibility to Other Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vigilance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender Comparison</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Gender Trait Disparity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Implicit Messages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Women Need Help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Women Need Intimate Partners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Appearance Determines Value</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Role Expectation: The Caregiver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affective Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lack of Confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Additional Negative Emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coping Responses

When asked about incidences of benevolent sexism in their lives and how they have made meaning of them, all 12 participants engaged in discussions about how they have coped with benevolent sexism. Participants seemed to engage in “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage … the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction” (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986, p. 572). Participants’ coping responses varied, with the most common being rationalizing. Other coping responses were relational coping and vigilance.

Rationalizing

For over half of the participants in this study, coping with benevolent sexism involved rationalizing, which I defined as attempts at justifying or explaining the conditions under which they experienced benevolent sexism. Clark (1991) portrays rationalization as “justifying objectionable behavior with plausible statements” (p. 232). Within this primary theme were two subthemes: the presence of biologically based traits they assumed were underlying their experience, or reframing experiences into lessons on how to avoid similar situations in the future.

Biological Gender Justification. All participants interviewed for this study offered thoughtful insights into how they personally have made meaning of benevolently sexist experiences in their lives. Four of the 12 research participants incorporated rationalization by using biologically based gender traits as justification for benevolent sexism. Such statements appeared to explain possible reasons for benevolent sexism. For example, Chloe said,
There’s also noted, biologically sexed, gendered roles within the animal kingdom … it’s like built into our thinking. And I think human beings by nature like to categorize things because it helps us understand stuff. … It’s like once you learn something, maybe it grows, it contracts, but it’s fixed in some way. Right? So, and we all do it. But it’s, I think that’s partly where the, like, sexism comes from.

Mary also suggested that gender-specific traits could have biological roots and be constantly present, perhaps shedding light onto why benevolent sexism occurs. She explained,

If you think of, like, hunter-gatherer type of things, that women needed other women they could trust to help them raise their kids. You know, men were going out of the house. Yes, they needed to protect themselves from danger, but, you know, women had to be very good at observing the skills of other people and who’s going to be trustworthy, who’s going to put my kid in danger and stuff … that’s why I think women have to be more aware of, like, power dynamics and, like, threats to, like, their kids and stuff.

Time as it is related to biological aging was another construct that seemed to help participants make meaning of benevolent sexism. Examples of this were Emily and Catherine who both shared anecdotes involving their fathers, and Jennifer, who shared many work-related anecdotes involving “older White men.” Each woman interviewed for this study spoke about “White men” or “a White guy” as being perceived to hold the most systemic power in the work or personal dynamics they discussed. For example, Gillian said,
There are only a certain number of spots in this top section, whatever. “Are you a White guy? We have been saving a seat for you.” You know, “You either, you all have a shot at it, but really we wanna fill that spot with a White guy.”

Meaning-making for these participants appeared to engage a process of contextualizing that helped them to cope with benevolent sexism by rationalizing why it may have occurred. This contextualization centered on an understanding of gender-based social dominance that participants observed or experienced within their cultural and social milieus.

**Reframing.** For seven women, thinking about and making meaning of their experiences of benevolent sexism seemed to engage a reframing perspective, which was essentially a way of giving themselves a different way of looking at the experience. Rather than explaining benevolent sexism as a result of biology, this method of rationalizing entailed a nuanced shift in how they viewed the situation, which seemed to be an effort toward making it feel less painful or offensive. For example, when asked about women being the “fairer sex,” Bridget said, “I mean I think that you know, in some ways, it's true, because my dad could not have been as successful in his career as he was if he hadn't had my mom, right?” Yet, this statement seems to contain a hint of uncertainty or reasoning, as she continued, “but it's, I think it's, you know … but I don't think it's like, male/female. I think that behind every successful person is the relationships that that person had—that is helping them to be successful.” In this instance, the experience of benevolently sexist ideology was reframed as a generalizable statement.
In another example, Catherine shared that her perspective on benevolent sexism depended on context. Appearing to frame exchanges that happen in personal relationships differently than professional relationships, Catherine stated,

And it's like that revelation of, like, I'm telling my dad, but is he next week gonna say oh, you can't borrow the power tool because you're a woman, yes, you know so, um, and I let it go. If it happened [at work], I'd fight, you know?

Jennifer, on the other hand, has framed some of her experiences of benevolent sexism as opportunities to challenge the status quo related to gender hierarchies in the workplace. After sharing the story of how she has managed full time work and motherhood, she said, “Doing the right thing for my family is showing my girls that you can have a really fulfilling career and you can have it on your terms. Um, whatever those may be. And they're different for everybody.”

Similarly, Athena has reframed her experiences as opportunities. She stated,

You think of every job as an opportunity for you to learn and build skills… versus an opportunity to be validated, or in other ways be identified. … you're kind of infiltrating the system but … you're never gonna change who they are … you're gonna get the skills you need to understand how they work, to take that with you, that they can never take from you.

When talking about how she has made meaning of benevolent sexism at work, Grace shared that benevolent sexism had led her to feel powerless at times. To counter this, she has reframed such experiences as opportunities to work hard, in this sense restoring power to herself. She said,
I can't do anything about it, so let me just work hard. And that would end up being my, coping mechanism ... [to] control the thing that I can control, which is the quality of my work, and just keep doing that. And sort of, try not to think about the other stuff. Yeah, just try to move on. And that's like, yeah that's what a lot of people do to try to, to cope.

Grace, like Athena, has reframed her experiences of benevolent sexism so that her focus was on something she could control, such as her effort at work.

Other participants also used reframing as a way to shift the narrative from one of helplessness to one of increased control. For example, by using her awareness of gender stereotypes, Jennifer was able to reframe her gender identity as a malleable trait, noting that she has felt compelled to suppress typically feminine traits as a means of avoiding sexism. She shared that although she manages to remain calm and unemotional at work,

It's been way harder to sort of not let the gendered stereotypes or the, “You're just a hysterical woman,” or, “You're just the mom,” kind of stuff control me in the parenting realm. ... It feels like it saps your strength, and it puts back squarely that you're, like, the “hysterical woman.”

Mia also discussed separating oneself from traditionally female characteristics as a coping skill. She shared Jennifer’s concern for the difficulty of it, noting, “if you're trying to fight against the system as a woman, you know that that's part of it. And so how only a few people can actually separate themselves from that expectation.”

When talking about how they navigate their lives within the context of benevolent sexism, some women seemed to eschew femininity and to reframe benevolent sexism as
being a byproduct of individual traits rather than systemic biases against women. Mary remarked,

Maybe I have a little bit of a more masculine personality in some ways, naturally.
And so, maybe that lets me toe the line between masculinity and femininity in a way ... I'm saying I have a personality such that I definitely demand equality.

Many of the study participants engaged in a process of rationalizing as a way to explain experiences of benevolent sexism to themselves. Rationalizing took on two general approaches: referring to biological gender characteristics that justify benevolent sexism or reframing benevolent sexism as something that could be overcome through personal action. These examples of rationalization seem to reframe benevolent sexism as a derivative of femininity in women, rather than a result of a gender-based hierarchical structure. This process may have allowed women to regain a sense of power and control in situations where benevolent sexism led them to feel powerless. The forms of rationalizing used by this study’s participants, namely biological gender justification and reframing, were forms of coping that enabled participants to view their past and future experiences of benevolent sexism from a particular perspective. These forms of coping were intrapersonal and based on cognitive processes, meaning that the participant internally processed in some way. However, not all coping was done intrapersonally. The next section of this chapter discusses relational, or interpersonal, coping used by participants in response to benevolent sexism.

**Relational Coping**

Ten women described interpersonal, relational coping as a mechanism for managing experiences of benevolent sexism. As opposed to the intrapersonal and
internal thought processes discussed previously, relational coping was a technique that engaged another person. Through engaging with men or taking responsibility for other women, relational coping was an interpersonal method of coping these participants used in response to experiences of benevolent sexism.

**Engaging with men.** Five of the women interviewed described forms of meaning making that included interactions in which they attempted to moderate the experiences of benevolent sexism by connecting with men. Similar to intrapersonal acts of coping which aimed to produce a feeling of increased power and control, having positive interactions with men also appeared to be a way to bolster one’s feelings of safety. Some participants shared stories of specific interactions with men and spoke about how they approached these situations. Chloe, for instance, told me about her interactions with a former coworker. She shared,

So, so um, I would just always like sort of redirect the conversation and find different points of connection … my whole thing is that when you see somebody as a human being, you're less likely to see them as an object. And so, when somebody sees that you care, or you can, or they can connect with you about something that's, that matters to them, you become a human. This response seemed to be a thought-out approach for Chloe, who went on to say, “Well, I just try not—I don't try to meet, like, what feels like kind of aggression with aggression.” Similarly, Rosa described the importance of relating to male coworkers on a personal level as a means of connection. She stated,

I personally like to engage with, uh, my male peers on a personal level first. Before I need anything, uh, any help or assistance with them professionally. Let's
say I have a male peer who is one level higher than me…. So, if I show a level of expertise on something that may or may not be related to work and is something I can connect with him—and share that with him—it'll be an easier way for him to identify me, and an easier way for me to get knowledge or information or assistance from him without him being in a role of, like, “I'm here to help you, oh, young one that knows nothing.”

Grace also acknowledged the perspective of bonding with men in the workplace:

I think what I noticed, when I started was I, I immediately got along with everyone including the male executives, and it was great. And I was almost like on the other side. And I, and I could see why people, people would be okay with that. They're in the “in” group. Right?

Other participants sought to consider the positionality of men in their lives, and how gender inequality harms them as well. Some women included other sites of oppression, such as race and socioeconomic status, while also recognizing their own relative privilege. Rosa, who identifies as a White Latina lesbian, spoke extensively about the intersections of her gender, race, and sexual orientation. In particular, she noted hierarchical designations within groups, such as being a lighter-skinned Latina, or a Latina who spoke English fluently. Rosa, Mary, and Grace, who identified as Latina, Indian, and Chinese, respectively, each spoke about the cultural implications of their families of origin within the larger American cultural context. These three participants noted that the cultural backgrounds of their families of origin heavily emphasized patriarchal dominance. Other participants such as Bridget, a White woman, noted their privilege relative to race. She stated,
Being the mother of a son of a white, middle class boy ... I don't have the fears for him that I might have if I was raising him in the neighborhood where my school was. Um, and I think that plays into gender also, and like, he has the luxury of not having to be a tough guy all the time. And the Patriots won the Super Bowl. One of the boys in my class the next day said to me, "Tom Brady cried." And I was like, "Boys cry too." You know? And I'm, like, I'm so glad he did that. You know?

Some women, such as Catherine, thought about ways in which they attempted to avoid conflict in situations where they had experienced benevolent sexism because it involved a family member. When speaking about how she wrestled with confrontation versus keeping the peace, Catherine stated, “So I'm like fine, it's my dad, you know, love my dad, I don't wanna cause a war over this.” Catherine took a stance of valuing peacekeeping at certain times. She noted that, “I really feel like I try to be the person that is giving people a benefit of the doubt.” She reflected that this positionality was modeled for her by her mother. Remembering a time that she had wanted to borrow the family car, she shared,

My dad goes, “Oh, well, I have to drive with you.” Like my, my brother had had it for two weeks … and then when I wanted to drive it, he's like, “Oh, no, I have to drive with you because you can't drive by yourself.” And I looked at my mother, and I was like, “Really?” and my mother, you know, my mother's like, “Just be peace, like just peace.”

Engaging with men as a way of coping with experiences of benevolent sexism seemed to have two primary objectives. First, it was a way of increasing personal power.
Second, and relatedly, it was a way of increasing and managing safety. This relational coping mechanism was interpersonal, but also had intrapersonal effects related to feelings of power and safety. Responsibility for other women, the next type of relational coping that appeared in this study, appeared to have similar, yet distinct functionality.

**Responsibility for other women.** When recalling and discussing experiences of benevolent sexism, the idea of how to support other women came up. This seemed to be connected to reflections on what might have helped them to get through their own experiences of benevolent sexism. For most of the women interviewed, the notion of support from an ally seemed to feel important. Thus, their own feelings of responsibility were directly tied to personal experience and the desire to have an ally.

Six participants specifically stated that they felt it was their responsibility to look out for other women, within the context of benevolent sexism. This was represented by statements such as, “I think I need to like stand up for, for other women” (Catherine); “I think women have to help to open doors for other women” (Karen); and “I should strive to make the world better for all women” (Gillian).

Jennifer shared other participants’ viewpoints around responsibility toward women, and she articulated why doing so was necessary. She noted,

> We each have our own responsibilities to try and make it better, or to provide good examples for the ones that are coming after us. Once you get into upper echelons of [employment], we've barely made progress, and I think a lot of that has to do with sort of the, the quiet culture. You know, the messages that we get, and the way things are sort of set up, and the assumptions that are included.
For those women who felt some responsibility toward helping other women navigate forms of benevolent sexism, it seemed to come from a place of reflecting on what may have been helpful in their own lives, or what they wished they had done. Grace, for example, wondered how she might have been able to prevent other women from having to experience benevolent sexism by being more attentive to her own experiences. She said,

Maybe I could've also paid more attention to instances of, things that happened to me that were happening to other people, that I didn't really notice or, wasn't open to. … Now that I think about it, like, I definitely heard stories of things that were happening or people would be, like, oh, I was thinking just happened to me. But I never really saw it directly. But if something had happened to someone else, I think I would have been a much more emboldened to be like, “Hey, like that wasn’t cool.”

Participants seemed to imply a sense of solidarity in their responsibility to other women, for the most part due to having had the shared experience. Mia said, “Like, why haven't I talked to my husband about it? Because I think he wouldn't get it. … When you do talk you want to talk to someone who has empathy for it. And you can say, like, ‘Oh, I feel that way too.’” Empathy and solidarity were identified by other participants, including Karen, whose statement on the importance of having a confidante indicated that experiences of benevolent sexism can ultimately affect one’s emotional well-being. She shared,

And the comfort of knowing I wasn't alone, that I wasn't the only person who had ever been in this position, that I wasn't going to be the only person that was ever
in this position, that there was a large network of women who feel the same way and who've shared experiences and who don't talk about it, but would talk about it. … So, the emotional support, solidarity, um, someone to sort of validate and normalize, I guess. ‘Cause I do think it's harder to fight past any of this when you end up in a position where you are second-guessing your instincts, which I think is what these types of power dynamics do.

Responsibility to other women was one way that women transformed their own experiences of benevolent sexism into opportunities to support others. This may have been a way of achieving a sense of power or mastery over benevolent sexism, similar to the way rationalizing may have conjured a sense of power and safety for some participants. Rationalizing and relational coping were intrapersonal and interpersonal coping mechanisms, respectively. Vigilance, for study participants, appeared to have both qualities, as the internal state of vigilance sometimes inspired external behavior.

**Vigilance**

In addition to a perspective of rationalizing or relating, six women referred to states of watchfulness or vigilance. This stemmed from knowledge that benevolent sexism occurred covertly, often under the guise of a compliment or similar expression of gender-based prejudice. Subsequently, participants felt the need to watch for such paradoxically positive valuations. Chloe expressed a general sense of being on guard: “You do feel vigilant. Regularly. And it's like even when you kind of let your guard down, it's there.” Catherine, too, spoke of vigilance and a feeling that she should not “let anybody get away with anything.” Athena talked about having to be on guard in the
workplace, which she generalized toward being alert and aware of overall gender-related power dynamics and how they are expressed through benevolent sexism. She stated,

You have to be alert; you have to be on guard, yeah. Be aware of it. And they could be aware of, in a business context, you could be aware of politics all the time. But, um, but it's, in business, like you can say it's not political, but it's all political.

Other women also generalized the notion of vigilance toward a broader sense of responsibility for keeping oneself safe. Catherine, for example, stated that as a woman she felt she should not be, “a victim, vulnerable,” and similarly, Karen related vigilance about adhering to prescribed gender roles as a function of self-preservation. She said,

Women have had to fall into the roles that men expect of them, and so to say, “Women are the fairer sex,” well, sure, women over the course of history have had to be the fairer sex because that is the role that men have ascribed to them.

Although vigilance came up as a preventative response, some women talked about vigilance in an after-the-fact evaluative sense. As an example, Athena said,

There's really no good way to process that. The only thing that I could do is say, “Okay, how could I have seen this coming earlier, and protected myself a little bit, or have exited and gotten into a better position?”

Gillian expressed an overarching sense of vigilance. She said,

We feel bad about shit all the time. We're constantly watching ourselves and we're just really, you know, we're, we're monitoring ourselves, like, “Oh, did I say something stupid?” or, “Oh, did I, you know, did I wear the wrong thing? Did I make that person feel a little strange when I said that one little thing?”
Karen’s thoughts were similar. She stated, “you try to like, read the crowd, and try to do the right thing. But I think you end up just feeling uncomfortable all the time.”

Grace’s perspective on vigilance matched what other participants have noted. Yet, she also expressed frustration about needing to be vigilant in the first place. She stated,

I do think that's one piece I've gotten better at, too. Just reading people, and like interpreting signals. But, it kind of sucks, too, that it has to be on you, right?

Like, why do I have to be the one to process all that?

Similarly, Gillian expressed what seemed to be a sense of hopeless and frustration when considering the state of alertness she has found to be necessary. She remarked, “As a woman I should not expect too much of the world.”

The participants in this study engaged in a range of coping strategies in response to experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives. In the category of coping strategies, the first theme discussed was rationalizing, which consisted of identifying concrete characteristics related to biological sex differences, and reframing. Relational coping, the second coping mechanism used by this study’s participants, included engaging with men and feeling responsible for other women. The final coping response used by participants in this study was vigilance. The next section discusses the second major theme, gender comparison.

**Gender Comparison**

All 12 participants expressed an understanding that aspects of their lives were experienced in a particular way because of their gender, and that this differed from men’s experiences. As opposed to coping responses, gender comparison was a more passive
response to benevolent sexism and appeared when participants were given an opportunity to reflect on the implications and meaning of benevolent sexism. Gender comparison was evidenced by the identification of language indicating disparities between what is allowed and expected of different genders.

Gender comparison was expressed by all participants as part of the lived experience of benevolent sexism, but each woman seemed to experience it differently. Gillian shared the following metaphor:

I think that men prefer to be the hunters, and they expect women to be the farmers when in fact we're—some of us are hunters and some of us are farmers. It doesn't matter our gender. But it makes the farmer role, like farmer role is subservient in this dynamic. But if you're a woman who's a hunter, they don't want you. They want you to be a farmer … if you're a shitty farmer, you're useless. You know what I mean? I'm a shitty farmer. Like, I'm a hunter. I'm not a farmer. There's no space to be a female hunter.

Gender comparison also seemed to be a source of frustration for other women, such as Grace, who said,

I think it just feels like there's so many expectations, and you can't win. No matter what you do. I'm confident in myself now, so I'm just gonna do what I know is right. But, when you're not sure of that, and you're in that middle space, it's very tough.

Gillian also expressed that with gender comparison has come a feeling of frustration. She noted,
I just like, I can't, I don't know, I feel like I can't win and it, it feels like bullshit.

And I don't think, I don't think that where we are is, is necessarily fair to men by any means either. I just, I'm just so sick of this shit.

Grace and Gillian’s expressions of frustration about navigating the subtle nuances of gender-based comparisons were significant responses to having experienced benevolent sexism.

Gender comparison was divided in three categories. The first category was gender trait disparity that highlighted discrepancies in how traits were named depending on gender. The second category, implicit messages, highlighted the deeper meaning participants made of benevolent sexism. The third category was role expectations, which surfaced as participants tried to make sense of the pressure that benevolent sexism put on them. When addressing gender comparison, a common focal point for study participants was the disparity in how qualities were attributed based on gender. Whether or not women were favorably judged seemed to be based on how closely they aligned with traditional gender-based roles. Benevolent sexism’s function was to teach participants these roles. In domains such as work and parenthood, the participants in this study reported that their experiences of benevolent sexism effectively and subtly communicated different sets of gender-based rules.

**Gender Trait Disparity**

Seven of the 12 participants interviewed for this study discussed gender disparities in trait-naming between men and women. This facet of gender comparison meant that women displaying traditionally male traits were labeled negatively, whereas men with these traits would be positively assessed. Benevolent sexism occurred through
language-specific references which participants experienced as an attempt by others to corral them into meeker, more submissive roles that held less power. Catherine explained, “If we're assertive and we stand up for ourselves as women, like, we're bitches.” Chloe appeared to understand a similar nuance when she stated, 

And again, women are supposed to be the less aggressive sex. … Like, it gets tricky, because if you're a bitch, you're a bitch … with this like sort of power dynamic, if the woman is aggressive and fighting. You know, she's fiery and she fights back, then there's this kind of bitch that comes out, right? That kind of female that you don't want to be and that you don't want to see, and that, you know, is unacceptable to men.

Jennifer’s experience of the discrepant labeling received by women was communicated in a childhood story she shared:

Apparently, my assertive tendencies have always existed. … I got in trouble after the parent-teacher meeting, because [my teacher] told my parents that I was bossy. Specific word that she used. … I mean, if I'd been a boy I, I can't imagine her going to a seven-year-old boy's house and saying, “Your son is bossy.”

Grace remembered hearing similar messages in childhood. As the oldest child in her family, she was often tasked with watching out for the other children and was referred to as “the bossy one.” This paradox has carried into adulthood for Grace. She shared that as a young adult entering the workforce, she felt conflicted regarding how to address benevolent sexism. She said, “I think it was a combination of being, you know, new into the workforce, and being not so confident in myself. And also, I think trying to be assertive without seeming bossy or too aggressive.”
Athena also communicated the theme of women’s strength-based traits being labeled negatively when she compared women’s and men’s workplace evaluations. She said,

So, you will hear things, like how people handle aggressive—directness, like comments like sharp elbows, warmth … those things will come up relative to women, and not relative to men. And I think when people like me came into the company, they didn't know what to do because … there was kind of organ rejection for women who came in and were too [assertive] … [it] can be seen as a downfall. … It's code-switching … how much do you give up before you feel like you're giving up too much of yourself, and this depends on what are you getting out of it, right?

Similarly, Mia stated, “I think that there is a huge identity struggle. As, as a woman, I think you have to make choices, right? I mean, you have to say, ‘Okay, I'm going to be a bitch at work.’” Her statement about workplace assertiveness seems to reflect a similar understanding that some traits are perceived in a negative light when attributed to women and that language is an effective way of achieving this. These anecdotes reflect the negative influence benevolent sexism has had. While benevolently sexist ideology is expressed in a seemingly positive tone, it holds women to an oppressive standard of docility.

Beyond language that reflects inconsistencies between how women and men are assessed, some participants shared specific examples that highlighted this disparity. For instance, Grace shared a workplace anecdote in which she was chastised for having made
a joke that a male coworker had made many times before. Grace’s example is one in which her noncompliance with the dictates of benevolent sexism was met with resistance.

Paradoxical workplace expectations directly related to benevolent sexism were summed up by Jennifer. She explained,

I've seen in [the workplace] where, you know, associates get to that sixth or seventh year and … female associates, and their reviews start saying, “Well, they don't seem intellectually curious.” Or, you know, “They don't seem like go-getters.” Well, for the past six years, you've told them you'd like them to be quiet, or you've rolled your eyes when they've asked questions.

Jennifer’s statement acknowledges the existence of boundaries that benevolent sexism places around gendered behavioral expectations, and how these expectations undercut women’s progress at work.

Similar to work experiences, participants identified disparate rules around parenting that reflect traditional gender roles and have been communicated through benevolently sexist ideology. Nine of this study’s participants identified themselves as mothers; however, all 12 women discussed motherhood and differences in parenthood for women versus men. Some women spoke about their own experiences in becoming a parent while others reflected on their families of origin. Both perspectives indicate that the ideology behind benevolent sexism is communicated through both direct experience and also observation. For this study’s participants, the expectation that women are naturally more nurturing seemed to translate into higher demands being placed on them, versus on their partner, in parenthood. For instance, Mia stated, “I have not felt limited
by my gender until I had a kid or until I decided I was going to have a kid. That's when I felt limited by my gender. … Identity crisis. Yeah, identity crisis 101.”

Similarly, Gillian recognized that with the addition of her responsibilities as a mother came the added mental weight of organizing the household responsibilities. She stated, “I really didn't anticipate the constant mental cycling of these additional, of this additional to-do list, you know? I didn't have any concept of that. And that takes up so much space and so much energy.” The unequal share of domestic labor in parenting directly reflects benevolently sexist ideology that portrays women as the primary source of nurturance in the family. Chloe noted, “The threshold for, like, being a good dad or being, like, a good husband is—the bar is so low. And the bar is so high for women. Like the expectations are so imbalanced. And you don't even question it while you're in the middle of it until you get pissed off about it.”

The gendered role expectation of a gentle, nurturing and caring woman is often at odds with her professional identity. When motherhood is introduced, the behavioral expectations set forth by benevolent sexism are in direct competition with her professional identity. Mia shared,

It's funny because we're having this conversation about work, and now all I can do is associate work with family life … my life is just going to be different. And you know, there's nothing I can do about that now except for trying to manage around it. But that means, like, waking up at 5:00 a.m. to get work emails done. You know, it doesn't mean that the same work doesn't have to happen. It just has to happen now around my whole new identity.
Relatedly, Gillian described the effect this has on women’s upward mobility compared to that of men. She explained it as a cultural issue in which peer-level employees seem to have unequal experiences as they become parents. She shared,

It's when men are having children that that's when things really escalate for them. When, where their careers really take off. Whereas for women, for the most part, you know, we're the ones who are, you know, we're the default parents a lot of the time. Oh, someone's, you know, your child is sick, you know … you're gonna scramble. Somehow what you're doing is less important than whatever your spouse is doing or whatever.

Through knowing mothers or being mothers, the women interviewed for this study became acculturated to the way gender informs parenting, from a perspective that was informed by benevolent sexism. This process was comparable to what participants noted experiencing in the workplace, in that gender expectations were communicated subtly but strongly. Positive valuations of feminine traits, although seemingly benign, challenged participants when the demands of their day-to-day lives became more difficult because of gender-based expectations.

Benevolent sexism played a powerful role in communicating gender-based expectations to the participants of this research. This has been most prominent in the workplace and in parenting. Not only have positive estimations of women’s traits created expectations around behavior, they exist in stark contrast to what is expected and allowed for men. This creates a double bind for women, where equality is expected yet not truly allowed. This perspective accentuates the gender-based guiding principles that result
from benevolent sexism. For the participants in this study, these principles have been translated into implicit messages about their worth as women.

**Implicit Messages**

As they were being interviewed, many women processed and explored why benevolent sexism bothered them so much, especially when it is based on attributing seemingly positive traits to women. These messages seem to distill to a common theme, which Gillian summarized as, “You're so fair and beautiful but delicate, very delicate. So, know your place; we’ll take care of you. You know?” Gillian’s statement indicates her awareness that positively regarded traits—being delicate, for example—create a deficit that leaves women incapable and in need of assistance. For the participants in this study, three primary implicit messages became apparent during analysis: women need help, women need spouses/partners, and appearance determines value. These implicit messages reflect aspects of benevolent sexism including protective paternalism, heterosexual intimacy, and complementary gender differentiation.

**Women need help.** Protective paternalism informs men and women that women cannot adequately care for themselves (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The idea that women need assistance in order to achieve academic success was a message Bridget remembered receiving from one of her college professors. She stated,

I remember talking to my mom and my sisters. It's like, this guy doesn't think women are capable scientists. … Instead of, like, being harder on us because we were women, it was almost like, “Oh, oh, wow, you wrote a summary of that article, good for you!” It was almost like patting on the head like … paternal. Like being paternalistic.
The implication, according to Bridget, was that without such coddling, she may have been unable to pass the class. Catherine recalled receiving a similar message about her competence from her parents. She recalled that her younger brother was given less supervision as a young adult, and although she did not feel that her father was particularly sexist, “All these things that he's just ingrained in his head that, like, I can't be trusted with the car until he checks it out, you know, until he sees me drive it, but my brother can go drive it.” Interestingly, Grace also recalled seeing a distinct difference between how her parents treated her versus how they treated her brother. She said,

So, my parents were definitely way more protective of me … even now, like they always have said things like, “Oh, you know, we don't worry about your brother. He's a boy, like he can take care of himself. Like girls have to be careful.”

Many of the women interviewed made comments that indicated that they felt women were viewed with a deficit-based framework. This viewpoint seemed to be based on the idea that men represent the functional norm, thus perpetuating the benevolently sexist notion that women are in need of paternalistic care. Women needing intimate partners was another theme that emerged when women discussed implicit messages about female identity that benevolent sexism perpetuates. The need for intimate partnership represents heterosexual intimacy, the idea that men need women as romantic partners.

**Women need intimate partners/spouses.** When asked about how they make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism, another theme that emerged related to incompleteness was the notion of needing an intimate partner. The idea that one of the functions of a woman is to be a man’s intimate partner is one that was propagated in early childhood, according to Emily, who stated, “Like, who grows up and talks to their son
about their wedding? Right? Like, does anybody? And yet, I remember as a kid talking about my wedding, like, weirdly. Or like, what you might wear to your wedding.” The importance of being married is communicated to young girls through play and idealization of the ritual of the wedding.

Likewise, Grace acknowledged that being partnered was valued and encouraged by her parents to such an extent that a few years after college, she felt pressured by her parents who seemed to express that although they did not like her boyfriend at the time, they would rather she be in a relationship than single. For Grace, the message she heard from this was,

Even though you know you're accomplished, you're, I mean, I'm 30 now. But you—despite all these outward signs that you're self-sufficient, very independent, you still need to get married. That's still like a milestone for you because, you're a woman … your brother, like, he's a little younger. And, like, it doesn't matter when he gets married, because he has a ton of time and he can, you know, be fine on his own.

The need for a partner reflects a heteronormative value system and communicates an essence of deficiency within the female identity. For heterosexual women, this was tethered to having a male partner, but this sentiment was also expressed by Rosa, a lesbian. She said,

Let me tell you, um, when I was a single lesbian, I was the black sheep of the family because I was a lesbian. So, now that I'm a married lesbian, it's okay, because I'm fulfilling at least one of the institutional, like, ticking one of the boxes.
Rosa’s statement suggests an implicit message indicating that partnership is an essential aspect of being a woman and necessary in order for a woman to live a more complete and fulfilling life.

Appearance determines value. Seven of the women interviewed for this study acknowledged that both their physical appearance and perceptions about their “self” were part of the expectations communicated to them by benevolently sexist attitudes of others. Mia expressed this when she said, “Women just have to care about their bodies. Women have to care about the presentation.” Athena went on to share two anecdotes in which it was brought to her attention that, as a woman, her appearance was being scrutinized. She shared,

Two things happen to me a lot, very subtle, one, I've had people stop me on the street, I had a man pull over his car, roll his car window and go, “Smile, it's not that bad.” I have had that my whole life.

In the second anecdote, she shared a story about a male colleague who would walk by her office multiple times per day, gesturing for her to smile. This focus on women’s physical appearance was also described by Jennifer, who said,

And I mean, I've had so many situations where. ... If I get my hair done, they blow it out straight. I've had men walk up to me and say, “Oh, you look so much more professional when your hair is straight (laughs).” And like, they really don't get that that's not an okay [thing to say]. ... It's become very ingrained.

For Bridget, this seems to have translated into the message that,
We don't care, you know, who you are as a person, or what your strengths are, or what your challenges are or anything about you, what you have to contribute to the world. It's, you know, do you fit some standard of beauty?

Comparatively, some participants expressed that men do not seem to have the same pressure put on them around their appearance, particularly when it comes to aging. Chloe explained, “Like men as they get older get more refined. Right? And women get more sort of like, they become less tasty. And it's gross. But it's like how, it's the—I think it's the societal perception.” Chloe’s example reflects her understanding that societal influence is felt at the individual level. Similar to the way benevolent sexism succeeded in sparking gender comparison, experiences of benevolent sexism have helped to communicate gender-based roles. Gender comparison highlighted the differences between expectations of women and men, which communicated a subtle yet clear message to participants about what role they were meant to take in relation to others.

**Role Expectation: The Caregiver**

When talking about how they have made meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives, all of the participants interviewed for this study talked about ways in which they felt that their gender informed other’s expectations of the types of roles and responsibilities they would have—at home, at work, and in society in general. The idea that women are more nurturing and compassionate was encouraged and supported in a way that may have been validating, despite its negative correlation to professional productivity. Thus, study participants identified that they were often put in the position of caregiver, regardless of any actual responsibility toward others, and that this role was reinforced when others appealed to a woman’s kind and considerate nature.
This differed from the gendered differences in parenting discussed earlier in that caregiving is implicit in the role of parent, whereas being prescribed the role of caregiver in professional settings is generally inappropriate. In this study, the primary societally-based role expectation women identified was caregiver. In this context the role of caregiver implies responsibility for the well-being of others, often to the exclusion of one’s own well-being or achievement of one’s goals.

Each participant interviewed for this study indicated an awareness that women are expected to take on a caregiver persona as well as actual caregiving tasks. This seemed to reflect a sense of expected responsibility for others, in combination with being requested to actually engage in domestic chores. Some of the participants, such as Grace, have found that the caregiver role was at odds with their professional identity. Grace shared that this has been challenging for her as she navigates her identity at work. She shared,

I started getting really into baking. So, I would like make stuff, and bring it into work. Yeah. And then someone made a comment of like, “Oh, Grace is like the office mom.” Like, “She's always like baking, and bringing stuff in.” Another woman … was just like, “Oh, I used to do that, but like I don't wanna be seen as, you know, the secretary or whatever.” So, I like stopped doing that. Which I had never thought of before. I was like, “Oh, I'm just being nice. Like, it's the activity I can share,” but apparently I shouldn't do this.

Grace’s concerns around not wanting to be the “office mom” was a theme shared by other participants. Karen, however, noted that this type of responsibility seemed to be relegated to women regardless of hobbies or interests. She explained,
Women are the people managers. So, it's this weird … It is literally like there's the structure in place where, like, the women do the taking caring of the things and the people, and the men are the ones that are, like, at the top. I think, I think another thing that kind of stands out uniformly across my professional experience is just the idea that, like, the women do all of, like, the household tasks in the office. After a meeting it's always, like, the women who actually end up, like, cleaning up after the lunch meeting.

Bridget’s take on women as caregivers has a somewhat different tone than that of Grace or Karen. Whereas Grace and Karen work in the business world, Bridget has worked in early childhood education for the majority of her professional life. So, while Bridget did not necessarily eschew the role of caregiver, she did seem to understand that early childhood education, a field comprised mostly of women, is not valued in the same way that male-dominated fields are. She stated,

That's a whole other discussion, is, like, the role of preschool teachers and how they're seen, and how their, their work is valued. I mean, I have 25 years of experience. I've taught public school, I've been an administrator… I think that it's not seen as being real education. It's really seen as being more babysitting. And you know, I think that, um, preschool teachers are grossly underpaid.

Mary, a mother of three, considered the female caregiver role from the perspective of parenting. She noted that, “When a girl has the natural personality to be helpful, we push her, and we help teach her how to become more and more and more helpful.” Mary seems to have identified that gender role expectations start in early
childhood. This thread apparently carried through to electronics, as noted by Rosa, who wondered,

Why is Siri a woman? Why is the Google assistant a woman? Yeah, you can change it to a man, but it's a man with a British accent. Like, that's something else to unpack, you know? Why is it a woman?

The role of caregiver is viewed by many as a correlate to traditional female gender traits such as being nurturing, patient, and selfless. While those idealized versions of womanhood are generally thought of as positive, for the women in this study, being a caregiver has often conflicted with other life roles and has undermined their achievements. Benevolent sexism serves as a mechanism through which compliance with traditional gender roles is rewarded.

Gender comparison emerged as a thematic category when study participants reflected upon their experiences of benevolent sexism. By looking at the differences in the roles of women and men, participants began to clarify the areas in which they experienced gender comparison most prominently. Disparities in trait-naming led participants to understand the implicit messages that benevolent sexism communicated and, ultimately, the primary role they were expected to adhere to. As interviews progressed, the women interviewed for this study also began to consider the internal implications of their experiences of benevolent sexism. These implications centered on affect. Affect refers to subjective reflections about the experience or, in some cases, particular emotions. Coping responses and gender comparison reflected the more cognitive, or thought-based, aspects of participant’s experiences of benevolent sexism, while discussions of affect centered more emotional aspects.
Affective Experiences

All 12 participants identified emotional responses, or affect, when talking about their experiences of benevolent sexism. These often centered the participant’s feelings about an experience of benevolent sexism. These responses represented a wholly internal aspect of lived experience. The affective experiences reported and explored by the research participants varied, but all were generally negative in tone. Affective experiences reported by participants in this study were organized into three themes: uncertainty, lack of confidence, and additional negative emotions.

Uncertainty

Some participants appeared to respond to benevolent sexism by questioning whether or not the experience had occurred. This is a common response to covert acts of prejudice and discrimination, such as microaggressions (Sue, 2010), which can be motivated by benevolently sexist beliefs and ideology. In this study, expressions of uncertainty were evidenced by participants who stated that something may not have been sexist at all. Participants’ expressions of uncertainty were routinely followed by full discussions about benevolent sexism, which indicates that despite claims otherwise, benevolent sexism was a prominent experience in these participants’ lives. An example is Mary, who elaborated upon several experiences of benevolent sexism yet initially stated, “I don’t feel that I’ve had a ton of experiences. So, I was curious, you know, about your questions—and if they would lead me to be more aware of it.”

Other participants shared this feeling of uncertainty around identifying and responding to benevolent sexism. Their discrepant voices seemed to highlight how difficult such ambiguity made it to assess whether one was, in fact, experiencing it. Mia,
for example, who went on to identify and discuss experiences of benevolent sexism, began her interview with, “I don't actually know of a time that I've experienced sexism.” Catherine expressed a similar ambiguity around her ability to identify and respond to benevolently sexist events. She said that,

I've always been the kind of person that, um, doesn't feel like I am being, um, you know, like I had to stand up to sexism when I had experienced it. … I do what I need to do, and I try to overcome my obstacles, so I kind of never saw sexism, but now that it's talked about more, I'm like, “oh yeah, sexism.”

Grace went on to share similar doubt in assessing another woman’s experience. She noted that she struggled with whether to believe what she was told. She wondered,

Was there real stuff that was happening that I didn't know about? Possibly. But I think I felt very confident at the time that most of the stuff that [my coworker] was talking about was kind of imagined. And that makes me feel bad. When I look back, I thought I didn't wanna believe her.

Grace went on to also say, “I think part of it … I was brainwashed a little to be like, oh, it's not that big of a deal, and that people will make it a huge deal. They're just like, looking for, to stir something up.” Grace was not the only participant who noted the challenge in deciphering benevolent sexism. Catherine shared,

Sexism is, it's very interesting. I am like learning, I'm trying not to be that person who’s like oh, I'm treated differently 'cause I'm a woman, but I'm also trying to pay attention when I'm being treated differently 'cause I'm a woman.

Covert types of sexism, such as benevolent sexism, can go unnoticed because they are camouflaged within seemingly positive gender stereotypes (Glick & Fiske, 1996).
For this reason, women who are subjected to benevolent sexism often question the event, as well as their own reactions and responses. Uncertainty around whether or not benevolent forms of sexism were actually sexism seemed to be related to confidence for the participants of this study.

**Lack of confidence**

The idea of benevolent sexism impacting one’s confidence was identified by eight out of the 12 participants. For the women who discussed issues with confidence, they seemed to indicate that uncertainty about whether they were experiencing sexism led them to experiences of self-doubt. Such experiences were interpreted by participants as having intrinsic messages that deeply impacted their sense of self. Gillian noted,

Well, I would say it also turns into self-doubt. And that is the bottom line. I think that for me it's something that I've really internalized. I'm really good with self-doubt and really good at coming down with a bad case of imposter syndrome.

Likewise, Mia shared,

Well, it's saying do more, right? Like you have to do more than you're doing. You're not, you know, the fraud alert theory where it feels like you actually are a fraud because you're not, you're not as good as this person because of your gender or sex.

Uncertainty about benevolent sexism, as well as the impact this had on confidence, were important aspects of meaning-making for the participants of this study. Additional negative emotions were also identified and discussed.

**Additional Negative Emotions**
In addition to the uncertainty and lack of confidence expressed by some participants, other participants identified more specific emotional responses to events or conditions caused by benevolent sexism. In these cases, participants connected benevolently sexist ideology to overt expressions of sexism, indicating an understanding that despite its positive tone, covert sexism is often a precursor to overt sexism. Mia made this connection, relating benevolent sexism to overt discrimination in the workplace, noting “The pay part really pisses me off.” Significantly, it seemed that connecting benevolent sexism to overt sexism enabled some participants to more resolutely express anger. This highlights that overt sexism is experienced with less uncertainty than covert types of sexism, such as benevolent sexism.

Half of this study’s participants identified feeling angry as they reflected upon the benevolent sexism they had experienced in various contexts. Gillian, for example, also expressed an overarching sense of anger regarding her nuanced experiences of sexism:

As I've gotten older, I think, you know, it's less the sexism that I experience overtly in my life and more the sexism that I experienced just as a woman and part of womankind in the world. That makes me just want to fucking bury the patriarchy and burn it down … makes me feel a little angry.

Gillian’s clear expression of anger countered by a calm presentation and downplaying of emotional intensity was a common manifestation of anger during this interview process, indicating a shared theme around how women manage their own anger. Overt sexism is easier to identify and respond negatively to, whereas benevolent sexism is more covert and can be difficult to identify.
Echoing this intense emotion, both Emily and Mia used the word, “infuriating,” when exploring how they have made meaning of benevolent sexism in their lives. Although she did not use angry gestures or an angry tone of voice, Jennifer also expressed deep-seated feelings about benevolent sexism and how it may someday affect her daughters. She said,

As challenging at times as, as the gender stuff has been for me in my job, I do feel like I'm older. I've seen it so many times that now I'm just like, “Really? Again?”

Okay. Um, and then … it really gets under my skin. You know, when I see it being applied potentially to my daughter, you know, I want to, I want to shred somebody limb from limb.

Some participants, such as Grace, expressed sadness, which seemed to also be an expression of frustration at both the commonality of her experiences, and the seeming persistence of the ideology underlying them. When reflecting on experiences of benevolent sexism at work, she stated,

Yeah. Like, I hadn't reflected on [it], probably, at all at the time, or even later. Because it just felt like, no, I, like, something I can control, and I don't like feeling like I'm not in control. … But it does make me sad and [I] think, like, a lot of people go through this and this pattern hasn't really changed.

Three of the 12 research participants identified frustration. This seemed to be tied to feelings about not being able to reach goals that are more easily accessible to male counterparts. Gillian stated,

It's just kind of how it is. It's so deeply frustrating. It's so deeply frustrating. It just feels like no matter how accomplished you are, no matter how intelligent you
are, that's it. I mean, the glass ceiling, whatever, the—that's just, it's just what it is. We just can't get ahead. Our voices count less.

Similarly, Mia tied frustration to feeling disempowered. She expressed a sense of hopelessness and stated that, since she was unsure of being able to effect change in her immediate environment, she was not sure systemic change would be possible either.

Two participants identified anxiety resulting from their experiences of benevolent sexism. Gillian simply stated, “Yeah. Women, women-anxiety, women. Yeah. We're carrying around this shit all the time.” Grace fleshed out this expression of distress a bit more when she explained that incidences in which she questioned how her gender may have affected the encounter led her to question herself:

If I were able to understand where it's coming from, the person, is it just ignorance? I don't know. Um, you don't mean anything by it, but you're too, like, assuming that all I do is, fake all day, it's like my identity … there's a lot of layers that, I feel like I was mulling on all those times. I was, like, replaying the incidents, over and over again that caused me anxiety.

In response to the statement that women are the fairer sex, a sentiment that reflects benevolent sexism’s positive valuations of women, Gillian seemed to feel disgust. She replied, “It makes me feel sick. I mean, nobody should be saying those things anymore. The fairer sex, I mean, that's … aggressive, I mean, it's a compliment, but it's just … it's, yeah. It's just absolutely, it's passively hostile.” Athena’s response was similarly discordant:
When people say things like women are the fairer sex, or women are naturally more compassionate than men, I think we're tolerating. I mean, I think it's very limiting, right? And how does it feel for women who aren't that way, right?

Another dissonant theme that appeared was feeling invalidated. Rosa used the term “dismissive” to label how she experiences gender inequity perpetuated by benevolent sexism, saying, “It fucking hurts.” Similarly, Emily described feeling dismissed by men who do not seem empathetic about forced gender roles negatively affecting women. She said, “It just seemed to me like a total lack of appreciation for what it might be like to be a woman in that situation, and an inability to say to himself, like, "What if that was me? How would I feel about that?"

The perspectives of this study’s participants show that responses to benevolent sexism are multidimensional yet related. For these women, dissonance was experienced as internal conflict leading to uncertainty and compromised confidence. Negative emotions, in combination with expressions of dissonance, uncertainty, and decreased self-confidence, indicate that the lived experience of benevolent sexism has been burdensome for the women in this study.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter four presented the findings of this study, which explored the question, “How do adult women make meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives?” Data from 12 semi-structured individual interviews were collected, transcribed, and analyzed. Analysis yielded three major themes: Coping Responses, Gender Comparison, and Affective Experiences. Excerpts from participant interviews
were provided to offer the reader a thick description of women’s lived experiences of benevolent sexism and to provide thematic evidence.

When prompted to discuss benevolent sexism in their lives, each of the participants brought up how they coped with such experiences. Half of the participants engaged in rationalizing as a coping mechanism, and this involved either rationalizations about biologically based gender traits or reframing the experience so as to lessen the negative impact. Relational coping was a second coping response that participants engaged in, and this theme had two subthemes, which were engaging with men and responsibility to other women. The third coping mechanism that participants discussed was vigilance.

The second major category that emerged during analysis was gender comparison. While coping responses represented cognitive and emotional management (Folkman et al., 1986) of benevolent sexism as a stressor, gender comparison was a more reflective response. This response was a result of participants’ contemplation about how benevolent sexism had impacted them. The three themes under the category of gender comparison were gender trait disparity, implicit messages, and role expectation of caregiver. The theme of implicit messages had three subthemes which were that women need help, women need intimate partners, and appearance determines value.

The third and final analytic category was affective experiences. This category reflected the emotional aspects of experiencing benevolent sexism and was comprised of three themes: uncertainty, lack of confidence, and additional negative emotions. This category highlighted the nature of participants’ affect related to times they had
experienced benevolent sexism. It also gave some insight into the development and progression of these affective experiences.

In the next chapter, I synthesize and discuss the findings presented in chapter four. These interpretations integrate the key findings and expound upon how they are related. Synthesis yielded four primary interpretations. First, I discuss power as a primary touchstone of both theory and lived experience. Next, the idea of power is scaffolded with participants’ use of contextualization, including a focus on intersectionality. Power and contextualization are built upon by a discussion on binary thinking. Binary thinking emerged in findings but was also observed as a pattern throughout analysis. Finally, I discuss the ways in which relationality was implicated in the perpetuation of benevolent sexism. The chapter concludes by discussing limitations of the research, areas for future research, and social justice and counseling implications.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A review of the literature found that while there has been extensive research done on benevolent sexism, most of it has been quantitative in nature and has focused on college-aged participants (Lewis, 2017; Oswald et al., 2019). This chapter interprets the findings of the current research, which sought to take a phenomenological approach toward centering the voices of adult women who have experienced benevolent sexism. Following the synthesis of findings, this chapter discusses the counseling implications of the research, limitations and directions for further research, and researcher reflections.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

This phenomenological study emphasized how women understand experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives. Twelve women, ages 30–49, completed individual, open-ended interviews. Interviews were transcribed and imported into MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) guided the process of thematic coding.

The previous chapter outlined the three primary analytic categories: coping responses, gender comparison, and affective experiences, each of which had associated themes and subthemes. These findings revealed that women responded to and processed benevolent sexism in ways that reflected its ideological underpinnings. The three components of benevolent sexism—protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and intimate heterosexuality (Glick & Fiske, 1996)—are each mechanisms of power delegation. Thus, women’s responses to benevolent sexism represent responses to loss of power and control. Each of the three components of benevolent sexism conceptualize women as weaker than and subservient and deferential
to men. For instance, complementary gender differentiation identifies women by how they differ from men with so-called feminine traits such as kindness and purity. On the surface, this appears benevolent; however, in order to have these traits, women forfeit characteristics that would make them stronger and more capable. Similarly, heterosexual intimacy references women from a masculine perspective, one that perceives women as mainly romantic, sexual, and reproductive partners for men. Finally, protective paternalism views women as in need of protection and help from men (Glick & Fiske, 1996). In sum, these three perspectives allow men to maintain positions of power and influence, while women exist in reference to and as complements to men. Elucidation and integration of these findings sheds further light on the lived experience of benevolent sexism.

**Synthesis of Findings**

My interpretation of the findings grew from the understanding that experiences of benevolent sexism are the result of patriarchal ideology that centers maleness and assigns power to some, but not others, based on gender, and also race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This initial interpretation is key and serves as the basis for further interpretations in this study.

In the next section of this chapter, I share how I synthesized the findings presented in chapter four. The discussion will begin with my interpretations related to power and will be followed by my interpretive analysis of participants’ meaning-making, binary thinking, and relationality. After the discussion, I share the counseling implications of this study, its limitations, areas for future research, and researcher reflections.
Power

Power is psychological and political (Prilleltensky, 2008). In their work, both Foucault (1980) and Prilleltensky (2008) noted that power is inherent to oppression, liberation, and wellness, and that it is intrinsic to all relationships. All types of sexism are forms of oppression and therefore utilize the mechanism of power. Thus, acts of benevolent sexism are exercises in power that impact women’s well-being.

The lived experiences of women in this study support the use of benevolent sexism as a frame to examine the role of gender-related power differentials. It is important to scrutinize gender-related power differentials not just because of the role of power in benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), but also because the findings of this study indicate that women’s lived experiences relative to benevolent sexism reflect loss of power. For instance, protective paternalism, a category of benevolent sexism, suggests the belief that due to their gentle nature, women are in need of men’s help when it comes to certain tasks. Participants in male-dominated fields experienced this kind of protective paternalism when they were offered assistance in a way that felt patronizing, even if they did not encounter direct resistance. Such illustrations of the relationships between theory and real-life experience provide confirmation that benevolent sexism has occurred.

Women’s experiences of decreased power surfaced in varying ways for participants. The participants in this study demonstrated that as adult women, they experienced benevolent sexism as a threat to their psychological safety. This was most apparent in participants’ identification of vigilance as a coping response.

It has been noted that, due to its positive tone, benevolent sexism can go unrecognized by women, masked by the seemingly benign act of attributing positive
characteristics to women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Nevertheless, it did not seem that this study’s participants had any difficulty identifying benevolent sexism in their lives. Rather, they became vigilant in an attempt to shield themselves from benevolent sexism. Half of the women interviewed for this study identified a state of alertness in direct response to the threat of benevolent sexism, making them more likely to notice acts of benevolent sexism, in spite of their nonthreatening tone. Being alert to benevolently sexist interactions may be distressing to women, as maintaining vigilance would require steady attention to not just negative, but also to positive assessments of women. Coping responses represented the participants’ attempts at shifting the power imbalance apparent in experiences of benevolent sexism. This is consistent with the extant research on benevolent sexism, which has detailed its nefarious effects on multiple domains of women’s lives such as sexual and physical health (Durán et al., 2014; Fitz & Zucker, 2015), self-concept (Barreto et al., 2010), and relationships (Hammond et al., 2016).

This study’s findings around vigilance as a coping response to benevolent sexism are both counter to, and in agreement with, some of the preexisting research. Extant research has found that, in some settings, benevolent sexism lowers women’s active coping responses because it appears harmless (Durán et al., 2014), yet the participants in this study seemed to be troubled by their experiences of benevolent sexism. This may be due to the higher mean age of the current study’s participants (41.8), which has afforded these women more experience in various life roles. Thus, they may have had life experiences that informed them that the veil of positive stereotypes has perhaps guided them into distinctly less advantaged positions than men. This happens on an ongoing
basis in the workplace, but also exists in educational settings where the deleterious effects of positive stereotypes establish educational privilege for men (Kuchynka et al., 2018).

When reflecting on experiences of benevolent sexism in their lives, some research participants constructed a narrative that created psychological space between themselves and either an experience of benevolent sexism or traits that may make someone vulnerable to benevolent sexism. Pheterson (1986) construes this phenomenon as an example of internalized oppression, whereby an individual incorporates prejudices against a group to which they themselves belong. For some participants, this was represented by efforts to separate themselves from supposedly feminine traits, with the implicit message that these women perceived the traits as undesirable. These statements are interpreted as recognition of a gender-related structural hierarchy that places higher value on supposedly masculine traits. For instance, more than one participant correlated women’s professional success with having adopted traits generally considered to be masculine, implying that stereotypically feminine traits were perceived as negative in the workplace. If internalized, this attitude reflects the influence of androcentrism and could be interpreted as internalized sexism.

The policing of women’s bodies is a topic commonly discussed in literature on sexism (Connor, Glick, & Fiske, 2016) that also figured prominently in the findings of the current study. Such an emphasis on physical appearance devalues women’s perspectives, again reinforcing patriarchal power. The women interviewed for this research expressed having a keen awareness that their physical presentation was disproportionately more relevant to their value than it was for their male counterparts. Experiences related to gender and appearance seemed to represent feelings of
objectification, which previous research has also linked to benevolent sexism (Calogero & Jost, 2011; Glick & Fiske, 1997; Shepherd et al., 2011) and mental health risks to women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Miller, 1987).

The women who discussed their affect noted that their emotional responses to benevolent sexism were a primary hallmark of the experience. Although benevolent sexism is based on subjectively positive valuations of women (Glick & Fiske, 1996), none of the women interviewed for this study reported positive affect as a response. This reflects the complicated and multifaceted meaning-making process that is engendered when women experience benevolent sexism. The affect identified by participants was overwhelmingly negative. Participants reported anger, frustration, sadness, disappointment, anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty. These feelings gave rise to a sense of vulnerability, which was addressed by ten of the twelve participants interviewed for this study. Vulnerability may give rise to coping mechanisms such as vigilance. The relationship between vulnerability and vigilance once again underscores that sexism, even covert experiences, are intimately tied to lack of safety.

Data from the current research show that the process of meaning-making around experiences of benevolent sexism varies by individual, depending on their own process of contextualizing. Implicit to the process of contextualization is an assessment of power. The perceived power differential framed how the participants seemed to understand the situation and their agency within it. Thus, contextualization is reflective of attempts to shield oneself from the lack of safety produced by hierarchy and power.

**Perspectives of Meaning-Making**
With the understanding of benevolent sexism as a mechanism of power, I began to question how participants wrestled with this loss of power, particularly in the absence of a theoretical understanding of benevolent sexism. Participants seemed to create personal meaning around experiences of benevolent sexism by using four key perspectives as anchors to aid them in processing it. These perspectives, namely, intersectionality, power comparison, degree of personal choice, and fluctuations in response over time, helped participants map out their meaning-making of the incident. Doing so highlights why context is necessary to consider when researching gender-based oppression, such as benevolent sexism, through a feminist lens, and why qualitative research is so valuable (Fine, 1992; Levitt et al., 2017; Levitt et al., 2018; Patton, 2015; Risman, 2004).

**Intersectionality.** An assessment of the ways in which experiences of power, privilege, and oppression emerged for participants led me to consider sources of power that are tied to aspects of their identity in addition to being a woman. Context is a foundational component of feminism (Ballou et al., 2002), and as I reflected upon how participants seemed to make meaning of benevolent sexism, I recognized that in each of their stories, context consisted of identity, situational factors, and other details interwoven into how they experienced complementary gender differentiation, heterosexual intimacy, and protective paternalism. In turn, when I considered how they coped, compared genders, and shared their affect, I necessarily had to incorporate the constellation of identities that they shared with me. To explore this, I applied intersectionality as a contextual lens. Intersectionality, the idea that one’s oppression cannot be wholly understood via discrete categories of membership, means that marginalization does not
occur equally for all individuals within a given group (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, although they were all women, the participants of this research made meaning of benevolent sexism and loss of power in unique ways. This variety “only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Intersectional identity was both addressed and ignored by participants, as each woman came to the study with her own history, which included her own experiences with oppression, but also power and privilege. This study utilized gender oppression as a focal point, and the majority of the participants were White women. Subsequently, I wondered how to fully incorporate an intersectional lens. By reflecting on how participants contextualized their experiences of benevolent sexism, I understood there to be a process of power analysis that relied upon, as Cole (2009) suggests, the diversity within and between the participants as a group and as individuals.

This study has explored how women in established adulthood have made meaning of benevolent sexism as a way of challenging patriarchy. Yet, this perspective is incomplete, as it falls short of an assessment that is truly intersectional. For some participants, their race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status were implicit in the ways in which they experienced benevolent sexism. From an intersectional lens, the scaffolding of identities, such as race and sexuality, imparts an understanding that power reflects systemic and structural factors that create marginalization and oppression. Notably, both White participants and participants of color discussed race and ethnicity or sexual orientation within the context of intimate and personal relationships. This highlights the relational foci many participants had, which reflects the commonality of
participants’ experiences related to their gender. However, these discussions also
included participants’ awareness of their own intersectional identities.

The three participants of color each discussed racism similarly to benevolent
sexism, in that they framed it as non-membership in the dominant group (e.g., White,
male). Other participants did not have such clear examples of identities intersecting, but
likewise shared their own accounts of how being a woman seemed to be complicated by
being non-White, non-heterosexual, or poor. These other identities added challenges in
their own ways, but participants did not seem to quantify them in the sense of rating one
type of oppression differently than another. That sites of oppression and systems of
power are not mutually exclusive is also a point emphasized by Moradi and Grzanka
(2017). Rather, these layers of identity sometimes made women feel more vulnerable,
which is a point that emphasizes perceived lack of power. Despite the theoretical and
academic understanding that power stems from structural and systemic practices that
privilege particular identities, systemically endorsed oppression is often experienced or
felt as an individual deficit.

Participants of color spoke about their families of origin in ways that included
their ethnic heritage. Because they were being interviewed about sexism, their narratives
were especially focused on how their racial or ethnic identity informed their gender
identity development. Each of these participants noted the particular gender-based norms
that were expressed to them through acts of benevolent sexism as well as, in some cases,
more explicit instruction. Gender norms were heavily centered on women taking
domestic, child-rearing roles, maintaining a pleasing appearance, and deferring to their
male partners. This was uniform across participants of color. While White participants
expressed knowledge of similar gender norms, they were not as specific about this coming from a particular ethnic or racial influence. Despite this difference, both White participants and participants of color discussed learning about expected gender identity through their family of origin and through having experienced or witnessed benevolent sexism as children. This presentation characterizes aspects of both intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and White privilege (MacIntosh, 1990). Participants of color did not necessarily have different gender-related experiences than their White counterparts, but their racial and ethnic identities were blended into how they made meaning of benevolent sexism. For instance, when talking about concerns of gender discrimination at work, Grace simultaneously spoke of her Chinese identity as relevant to the situation.

Other aspects of participants’ identities were key factors in their lived experiences of benevolent sexism. For instance, the two participants who did not identify as straight considered their sexuality as another source of oppression that sometimes stood independent of their gender, and sometimes combined with it. Race also factored into this. For instance, Rosa stated, “I don’t know if this woman is giving us the hairy eyeball because I’m Mexican or because we're lesbians. So, pick one, lady. Pick one,” in reference to an incident she was unsure how to label, but which made her feel uncomfortable. All participants with additional marginalized identities acknowledged that it was not always clear to which aspects of their identities others were responding. Given that uncertainty was a key affective response identified by participants, having multiple marginalized identities would compound uncertainty related to experiences of benevolent sexism. This point is in keeping with research on other forms of covert gender oppression, including microaggressions, and serves to underscore the importance
of recognizing uncertainty as a key to the lived experience of benevolent sexism (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2019).

Benevolent sexism was an effective means of gender-based power differentiation for study participants. Given that power differentials exist in multiple oppressed identities, experiences of benevolent sexism necessarily brought with them power assessments that were driven by intersectionality. While this aided participants in making meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism, it did not capture the full picture of participants’ meaning-making. Participants juxtaposed experiences of benevolent sexism against traumatic events in their lives as another way of mapping out how to make meaning of benevolent sexism.

**Power comparison.** Each participant was able to share accounts of both hostile, overt sexism and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Several participants also talked about past trauma in their lives, including but not limited to physical abuse, sexual assault, and discrimination. At the same time, participants articulated that the type of sexism discussed in the interviews was subtle and hidden in seemingly positive assessments of women. Thus, our conversations became framed around an understanding that, although distinctly different from more obvious forms of sexism, benevolent sexism was still an overall negative experience that sparked a need for a coping response. This indicates that women rated benevolent sexism along the same scale, but not as explicit or damaging, as other trauma. In addition, I was struck by this type of comparison, because participants often described the significant impact benevolent sexism had on them, yet were inclined to downplay it in comparison to other trauma. For instance, one participant detailed extensive examples of benevolent sexism experienced in the workplace, yet
spoke of this in tandem with sharing that she had been sexually assaulted. To me, this indicated that she characterized both experiences as traumatic, yet understood that benevolent sexism would be thought of as less extreme.

Intersectionality and comparison of power were two aspects of meaning-making that helped participants understand power within the context of experiences of benevolent sexism. Agency within the contexts surrounding benevolent sexism also appears as a way participants navigated personal meaning-making.

**Degree of personal choice.** Some participants associated personal choice, or lack thereof, in their assessments of whether or not an experience in their lives represented benevolently sexist ideology. This seemed to be a way of assessing situational power. For example, Mary stated that her experience as a stay-at-home mom was not indicative of benevolent sexism since it was her choice to take on that role. Although being a stay-at-home mom may inspire images of complementary gender differentiation, protective paternalism, and intimate heterosexuality (Glick & Fiske, 1996), what seemed more relevant in these instances was whether or not the participant felt she was a willing participant and accepted the traditional gender role. A converse example was Grace, who rejected a caretaking role in the office due to the perceived effects it may have had on her professional development. This assessment of the degree of personal choice is essential to how someone makes meaning and it can influence how that individual experiences their situation. Contextualization, in this way, is an assessment of power that places the locus of control at the individual level, rather than at the relational or societal level. The individual lived experience is nuanced such that the presence of traditional gender roles does not necessarily mean that a woman feels oppressed. Moreover, it is important to
recognize that a woman’s lived experience of benevolent sexism is unique to her, and while some women may live with benevolent sexism in a way that challenges traditional gender roles, another woman may choose to live in alignment with traditional gender roles. In sum, this highlights that lack of personal choice equates to lack of power. Intersectionality, comparison of power, and degree of personal choice helped participants to construct meaning relative to experiences of benevolent sexism. Lastly, meaning-making involved reflections on fluctuating responses.

**Fluctuations in response over time.** The women interviewed for this study talked about experiences of benevolent sexism across the lifespan, in essence assessing the role of developmental time in their assessment of power. Participants often spoke about childhood experiences of benevolent sexism with as much vigor as more recent experiences. When talking about specific experiences of benevolent sexism, narratives around the event often included participants’ current reactions, even if the event itself had happened months or years earlier. In fact, many participants emphasized this aspect, sometimes tying it to their initial uncertainty around the incident. This implies that the effects of benevolent sexism can persist well beyond the incident itself and that despite being couched in apparently innocuous gender expectations, benevolent sexism is experienced as profoundly impactful. Moreover, it shows that emotional or mental fluctuations in response to the event should be considered typical. This is a key interpretation, as having the expectation that one’s reactions to oppression will remain constant is counter to the prevailing knowledge on trauma, which states that people’s trauma responses are likely to vacillate over time (Bonanno & Mancini, 2012). Additionally, this finding is worth noting given that most of the previous research done
on benevolent sexism has focused on younger participants and whether or not they endorse benevolent sexism. In contrast, the current research points to longer term consequences of experiencing, rather than endorsing, benevolent sexism.

Intersectionality, power comparison, degree of personal choice, and fluctuations in response over time were perspectives used by participants to assess power and make meaning of benevolent sexism. These perspectives emphasize identity-based power differentiation. Subsequently, the lived experience of benevolent sexism recognizes androcentrism and centers essentialized, binary thinking.

**Binary Thinking**

Building upon the discussions on power and contextualization, I was drawn to the ways in which binary thinking presented itself in the findings. Gender polarity, an example of binary thinking, is a mechanism of power differentiation that contributes to the dichotomizing nature of sexism. Ambivalent sexism theory captures this with its own structure, which categorizes sexism as existing on either a hostile or benevolent plane (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The presence of polarized or essentialized experiences makes articulating the nuances of lived experience of benevolent sexism challenging. Given that gender comparison was a primary category to emerge during data analysis, I was especially interested in how it contributed to the overall meaning-making process of the participants. Accordingly, I looked at binary thought from its literal presentation in participants’ coping behavior of gender comparison to its more subtle presentation as a mechanism of power differentiation and its role in contextualization. Chapter four discussed findings relative to participants’ use of rationalizing to cope with experiences of benevolent sexism. Although they have shared roots in gender polarization and
androcentrism, rationalizing and gender comparison served separate functions for this study’s participants. While rationalizing was a coping mechanism used by participants, gender comparison was based on experiential reflection that participants engaged in during their interviews. For the women interviewed for this study, acts of comparison were shown by participants identifying disparities in gender trait designation, an understanding of implicit messages, and the role expectation of being a caregiver. Although participants’ discussions about experiences of benevolent sexism often included reflective gender comparison, that did not necessarily reflect that they themselves accepted or concurred with benevolent sexism. Rather, it indicated that the lived experience of benevolent sexism included a keen awareness of the ways in which women are judged from an androcentric and patriarchal perspective. Each participant’s engagement in gender comparison may indicate some degree of having internalized the dominant narrative regarding gender differentiation. Although participants engaged in gender comparison, they also expressed their disdain for it. Thus, a key interpretation is that even if women do not endorse benevolent sexism, they are likely to have internalized some of its underlying ideology and therefore find themselves engaging with and internalizing the dominant value system, which is an aspect of internalized oppression (Pheterson, 1986).

Through participants’ descriptions of gender comparison, it became clear that one aspect of the lived experienced of benevolent sexism was a keen awareness of gender polarization, a mechanism by which power is assigned based on gender. Gender polarization is “the ubiquitous organization of social life around the distinction between male and female” (Bem, 1993, p. 80). Functionally, gender polarization is one of the
ways androcentrism takes shape in life. The women interviewed for this study acknowledged androcentrism, or a male-centered perspective, by giving multiple examples of how traits that are disparaged in women are accepted, even valued, when they are displayed by men. When discussing disparities in trait naming, participants were clear in their assertion that these disparities send conflicting messages. On the one hand, there is a sense that success is tied to a host of traits that are traditionally considered to be male. Yet, when attempting to take on such characteristics, women are labeled negatively, with the distinction between being assertive or being a “bitch” a common example. The mixed messages inherent to this paradox are perhaps why, relative to the other thematic categories identified during analysis, acts of comparison seemed to elicit notable affect in the women who discussed it. Many women seemed to become visibly frustrated and angry when discussing prejudices that they had experienced via disparate trait naming. Thus, the ramifications of binary thinking presented themselves not just through participants engaging in acts of gender comparison, but also in the negative affect they experienced because of the binary thinking encouraged by benevolent sexism.

One way that benevolent sexism perpetuates gender polarization and androcentrism is through complementary gender differentiation (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Because this mechanism exists at the interpersonal level and is carried out through relational dynamics, it is an apt demonstration of the ways in which gender is a social construction experienced at the interactional level (Risman, 2004). As an example, participants engaged in biological gender differentiation as a coping response. Likewise, participants reported gender comparison as a primary source of implicit messaging regarding gender. Thus, the findings of the current study offer confirmation that adult
women experience benevolent sexism through complementary gender differentiation, which encourages binary categorization of traits based on traditional gender roles and creates a cycle that is sustainably maintained through repetition.

Binary thinking has particular ramifications for women who may use this form of rationalizing, because the type of dialogue it hinges on, gender polarization, is psychologically divisive for women. The polarization of gender-based expectations emphasized by participants confirms that benevolent sexism has both a descriptive and prescriptive influence, meaning that it asserts both how something is as well as how it should be. This is problematic because such influence is often unexamined; therefore, its relationship to power and benevolent sexism is misunderstood. Intersectionality asks individuals and society to interrogate and integrate identities, inclusive of associated power, privilege, and oppression. Binarism and intersectionality are at odds with one another because binarism essentializes aspects of identity such as gender, thereby reducing an understanding of gender to what would be considered single-issue analysis (Crenshaw, 1989).

Traditional gender roles describe women as warm, caring, and gentle, which in turn dictates that women are best suited for work that includes caring for others. Examples include instances of complementary gender differentiation that conceptualize women as gentle and passive, reserving characteristics like boldness and assertiveness for men. The two most common locations discussed in reference to disparities in trait designation were the workplace and parenting. This is likely due to a few factors. First, the relative proportion of time spent in these two locations/relationships makes them likely to be sources of benevolent sexism. Second, both are particularly polarized entities
in terms of traditional gender roles and expectations, with domestic and caregiving work relegated to women and work outside of the home assigned to men. When considered together, the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between workplace and home gender-based identities is highlighted. This issue was evident in the workplace for the participants, all of whom discussed professional settings as locations of benevolent sexism. For instance, it was often in the milieu of the workplace that participants noted their assertiveness being interpreted negatively. Likewise, trait naming disparities were most likely to occur in the workplace. In this sense, women’s warm natures and caretaking personae seemed to be experienced by the women in this study as inversely correlated with competence at work and in some cases directly limiting their workplace contributions. For example, women who clean up after meetings lose work time. Similarly, the assumptions underlying heterosexual intimacy relegate women to domestic work and child-rearing. As several of the study’s participants noted, being assumed to have these attributes seemed to have an undermining effect on their perceived competency in the workplace. Gender roles are thus both descriptive in that they describe how women are, yet also prescriptive in nature, by giving direction around what constitutes acceptable behavior according to gender. While this is directly and clearly reflected by participants engaging in gender comparison, binarism is also incorporated within affective experiences. Power and its inverse relationship to safety indicates that when it comes to gender-based oppression, uncertainty and certainty, being confident or not confident, and having positive or negative emotions, binarism is inherent to the lack of power women experience as a result of benevolent sexism.
Work and parenting were not the only ways participants encountered benevolent sexism. Seven of the 12 participants also relayed stories about experiences of benevolent sexism in their families of origin. These anecdotes almost always involved the participant reflectively identifying an implicit message about their competence or the need for them to be more protected than a male sibling. Although meaningful, these did not tend to be areas of focus for most participants. Likewise, while parenting was an area frequently discussed as a source of benevolent sexism, women who were in intimate relationships with men rarely spoke of benevolent sexism in their relationships outside of parenting roles. I speculate that, on the one hand, had we had more time or if I were to conduct second interviews, there might have been robust data around benevolent sexism in intimate relationships. On the other hand, I also recognize that speaking of a loved one’s benevolent sexism may be difficult, presenting challenges that are beyond the scope of this research.

Several of the women interviewed for this study offered justifications for benevolent sexism that were based on characteristics of either the perpetrator or victim. The first category that participants used focused on biological differences between men and women. Bem (1993) refers to this as “biological essentialism.” One of the most problematic aspects of biological essentialism is that “the importance of the individual’s situational context is massively underestimated, and the importance of the individual’s biology is massively overestimated” (Bem, 1993, p. 29). This process tends to deemphasize the cultural influence on gender stereotypes, and instead attributes them to immutable, static characteristics.
It became apparent during my interpretation of the findings that the participants were experiencing essentialized versions of both coping responses and affective experiences, which were two of the major categories identified. As demonstrated by participants’ use of binary thinking as a coping response and their observations that gender comparison is a structural component of patriarchy and androcentrism, binarism was a through line in experiences of benevolent sexism. As such, it creates a foundational framework that normalizes binarism and challenges a more integrated or nuanced perspective. In this way, binary thinking starkly contrasts with intersectionality.

Through engaging in acts of comparison, maleness is centered, prioritized, and elevated as the norm. Subsequently, the differentiation between men and women is emphasized, and included in this is the dichotomy between power and oppression. In the next section, I integrate relationality into the discussion of power, contextualization, and binary thought.

**Relationality**

The dynamic interplay between power, contextualization, and binarism led me to realize that relational factors were a key component of the lived experience of benevolent sexism. Interpersonal relationships were reported as both a primary source of benevolent sexism as well as an aspect of coping. What became apparent to me as I synthesized the findings was that the duality inherent to binarism allowed for and exacerbated power dynamics. Because participants related to power, context, and binary thought at multiple levels, I used gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) to explore relationality in the synthesis of my findings.
Gender structure theory posits that gender itself is a social construct created by interactions at individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman, 2004). This emphasizes the interpersonal and relational aspects of gender co-creation. Interpersonal coping strategies were discussed by ten women, supporting prior research that has shown that as benevolent sexism increases, so does a woman’s propensity to identify herself in relationally oriented terms (Barreto et al., 2010). Likewise, women are generally thought of as relationally oriented, utilizing interpersonal connection as a way of problem-solving (Gilligan, 1993). This appears to be a culmination of internalized messages about gendered expectations for behavior, combined with the seemingly benign tone of benevolent sexism, which makes it more difficult to reject than hostile sexism. These points are underscored by the recursive and transactional nature of gender, which is a point emphasized by gender structure theory. Gender structure theory frames gender as dynamic, resulting from the interactions people have with themselves, others, and society (Risman, 2004). This study shows that benevolent sexism is a specific mechanism that occurs at these interactional levels.

**Individual.** One’s relationship to self is emphasized at the individual level of gender structure (Risman, 2004), thereby making the internal, affective experience of interest when juxtaposed against benevolent sexism. My research found that women’s affect was influenced by benevolent sexism in two distinct ways. First, participants reported experiencing uncertainty around experiences of benevolent sexism, which negatively impacted their confidence. This is a common experience for persons experiencing more subtle forms of prejudice (Sue, 2010). Next, participants identified negative emotions resulting from their experiences of benevolent sexism. For many
participants, these negative emotions began with a feeling of discomfort, or a sense that something about the interaction did not feel right. The challenge of identifying whether or not something was benevolent sexism contributed to this discomfort. Questioning benevolently sexist experiences led to participants’ experiencing self-doubt, which indicates that when faced with benevolent sexism, some women may attribute how they are treated to a personal deficit, rather than to gender inequity.

Several participants expressed negative emotions, particularly anger, during their interviews. Participants expressed anger in ways that appeared paradoxical, in that they might report extreme anger or rage, yet minimize it or label it as a less intense emotion. This presentation offers a glimpse into the lived experience of benevolent sexism from three angles. First, and most obvious, is that women feel angry when confronted with benevolent sexism, because they have come to understand that although some gender-specific attributes are presented as positive, they are ultimately constraining. Second, and more insidious, is that in conjunction with the traditionally valued female trait of caring for others at one’s own expense, women often expressed this anger in a manner that intended to minimize its effect for me, the listener. As an example, several participants tended to use the phrase “it’s fine” when contextualizing their experiences of benevolent sexism. Lastly, the uncertainty surrounding experiences of benevolent sexism may contribute to difficulty in presenting anger. These factors demonstrate that a woman’s relationship with herself is negatively impacted by benevolent sexism.

Interactional. The expectation of women as caregivers highlights that women often experience their gender as occurring at the interactional level, which attends to status expectations and othering (Risman, 2004). Being seen as a caregiver is likely less
controversial than being seen as a sexual object, yet from the functional perspective of heterosexuality, it helps to achieve a similar goal, which is heterosexual pairing. This is an important interpretation that recognizes the less sexualized ways in which heterosexual intimacy, one component of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), is perpetuated. In addition to being under higher scrutiny than men and restricted by gender roles, the women in this study reported that there was a strong inherent message that women ought to always be considering others. This appeared in both the workplace and at home for participants, where it was clear that an aspect of this role was the inherent benefit to men juxtaposed with undermining of independent goals for the participant. This aspect of complementary gender differentiation, a key component of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), encourages men to be more self-focused.

This part of the lived experience of benevolent sexism was nuanced, and each participant had her own interpretation of the meaning behind her experiences. Nonetheless, the implicit messages that women identified were centered on a model of gender that regards women from a deficit-based perspective. In particular, the message is that women are perceived as incomplete because they lack male characteristics and capabilities. This particular manifestation of androcentrism correlates with benevolent sexism’s construct of protective paternalism, which justifies “patriarchy by viewing women as not being fully competent adults, legitimizing the need for a superordinate male figure” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 493). This translates into culturally embedded messaging that informs women that they can make up for their inherent shortcomings through accepting help from men, having an intimate partner, and maintaining an
aesthetically pleasing physical appearance for men. These implicit messages further reveal ways in which gender is enacted as a social construct.

Participants’ coping responses were attempts at equalizing the power imbalance brought about by benevolent sexism. Some responses to benevolent sexism involve women’s self-objectification (Calogero & Jost, 2011). As a response to benevolent sexism, women in this study engaged relationally with men. Since benevolent sexism represents a threat to safety and power, aligning oneself with hierarchically privileged individuals engenders a feeling of safety for those who choose to use it as a coping mechanism. Although reasonable, this response can be considered problematic when filtered through the lens of feminism, which necessitates a critical understanding of context in assessing the functionality of a coping response. Particular feminist therapeutic approaches, such as relational cultural therapy (RCT), assert that the benefits of relational connection only develop from mutual empathy (Jordan, 2017; Jordan & Hartling, 2002), making relational coping attempts in response to benevolent sexism counterproductive. Thus, it may be that the process of engaging with men around experiences of benevolent sexism may ultimately undermine the attempt to feel safe and in control due to its being a unilateral effort. This explains why the participants in the current study identified relational connection as a coping strategy, rather than a solution, to benevolent sexism. While it has been one way that participants have personally survived benevolent sexism, relational connection has thus far not proven effective in preventing benevolent sexism or gender-based discrimination and prejudice. Solidarity with other women as a means of mitigating the negative effects of benevolent sexism, particularly as they relate to well-being, underscored the degree to which the participants
themselves experienced such events as distressing. This additional lens suggests that it is not necessarily deference to traditional gender roles that motivates women’s relational coping mechanisms.

**Institutional.** Institutional dimensions of gender structure include organizational practices, legal regulations, distribution of resources, and ideology (Risman, 2004). This research demonstrates that women experienced benevolent sexism at the institutional level, including in educational settings as well as the workplace. Likewise, extant research has found that protective paternalism negatively impacts women’s engagement in some male-dominated fields, such as math, science, technology, and engineering in particular (Kuchynka et al., 2018). Moreover, women with multiple marginalized identities are impacted by institutional oppression at higher levels than their White counterparts. Such experiences in the workplace communicate particular messages about women’s abilities even though outright or hostile sexism may not be present.

The idea of women needing help aligns directly with the benevolent sexism subcategory of protective paternalism, which states that women need protection and assistance (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This study’s participants expressed that paternalistic attitudes implied that they were not independently capable of adequate job performance. Moreover, the women I interviewed provided clear examples of ways in which protective paternalism was evident in their lives, as well as the implicit messages such acts held. These examples occurred in various domains of life, such as work, higher education, and family of origin. Existing research has shown that protective paternalism undermines women’s overall feelings of competence (Hammond & Overall, 2015) and has a negative effect on feelings of competence in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
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(STEM) education (Kuchynka et al., 2018). Likewise, Oswald et al. (2019) found that protective paternalism “was rated as the most distressing and sexist component of benevolent sexism and stands out as most problematic for women’s well-being” (p. 375).

The current study’s finding relative to the theme of incompleteness confirms that women experience benevolent sexism, protective paternalism in particular, as an assessment of their deficits, and in particular that these deficits represent a deviation from the androcentric norm.

This study’s participants were aware that their experiences of benevolent sexism were infused with implicit messages that communicated restrictive and essentialized versions of women’s limits. One of the most powerful directives, the expectation of being a caregiver, appeared in various aspects of their lives, including the workplace, family of origin, and intimate relationships. Themes related to the benevolent sexism category of heterosexual intimacy successfully communicated that women’s worth is operationalized through their engagement in intimate relationships with men. This subcategory of benevolent sexism centers heteronormativity, perpetuating the idea that women’s existence is always a function of men’s sexual needs. Sexual needs can be seen as any iteration of responsibility related to heterosexual functioning, including physical intimacy, reproduction, and domesticity. This places women in the role of a maternalized caregiver. Participants seemed to experience maternalization, which is the process of being put into a mothering role, in multiple settings. This finding is supported by the existing literature, which has likewise found that even in environments where there is no imposed limit on behavior, women tend to have more care-based responsibilities (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Scarborough & Risman, 2017).
Maternalization ties to all three components of benevolent sexism. Shades of protective paternalism (e.g., that “women should be cherished and protected by men” [Glick & Fiske, 1996]) and complementary gender differentiation (e.g., that women serve domestic roles and are the “weaker sex” [Glick & Fiske, 1996]) support the assignment of a caregiver role to women. Likewise, heterosexual intimacy is influential in the maternalization of women. Heterosexual intimacy places women at the center of men’s heteronormative functioning, serving a reproductive role as well. This role extends to not just sexual acts, but also acts of child rearing and responsibilities that go beyond a woman’s reproductive functionality. Further, caregiving is a role assigned to women even in cases where it is not an intrinsic part of the situational requirement. As an example, for this study’s participants, the process of maternalization, or being placed in a motherly, caregiving role, often appeared as women cleaning up after meetings, having more people-managing responsibilities, or having reputations based on domestic capabilities. It was not necessarily that the women interviewed for this study felt that such labels or identities alone were offensive; rather, it was that these identities became primary and undermined their being seen as professionally competent. It was the opinion of the participants that benevolent sexism reinforced gender stereotypes, leading to women having maternalized identities that undermined their progress compared to men.

**Summary of Discussion**

In chapter four, I discussed the three major categories of findings: coping responses, gender comparison, and affective responses. My understanding of sexism as a social justice issue informed how I synthesized and interpreted these findings. The psychological, political, and relational (Foucault, 1980; Miller, 1987; Prilleltensky, 2008)
essences of power are played out through benevolent sexism, which has the overarching goal of perpetuating an androcentric and patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, power as the basis of benevolent sexism was the starting point for this synthesis, and it is a thread that served to integrate my interpretations. In wrestling with power, participants’ meaning-making involved utilizing intersectionality, power comparison, degree of personal choice, and fluctuations in response over time as anchors for assessing power. Intersectionality emerged as a key component of power assessments, because participants’ experiences of benevolent sexism did not exist in the absence of societal structures, which include multiple marginalized identities and dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. In contrast to intersectionality, binary thinking encourages a unilateral, polarized version of the lived experience of benevolent sexism. Finally, relational aspects of benevolent sexism highlighted its impact at three key relational levels: individual, interactional, and institutional.

This synthesis of my findings highlights key points that reflect the structural, systemic, and power-based ideologies that benevolent sexism both perpetuates and results from. Given the tendency of individuals to conflate systemic barriers with personal deficits (Lewis, 2017), it is important that individuals working in the field of mental health understand the ways in which their clients have experienced oppression, particularly sexism, in their lives. This has generated several considerations for mental health clinicians to incorporate a social justice framework into their clinical work.

**Counseling Implications**

Benevolent sexism, like all types of oppression, has its roots in power. Given that gender-based power differentials are enacted at the systemic level, yet are experienced by
women at the individual level, mental health counselors must approach benevolent
sexism as a social justice issue, rather than a personal deficit. A synthesis of the findings
indicated that participants’ responses to benevolent sexism—coping strategies, gender
comparison, and affective responses—reflected loss of power. Subsequently, meaning-
making perspectives represented how participants engaged in power analysis. A
discussion on binary thought and relationality expounded upon both the theoretical and
experiential realities of benevolent sexism. These connections reaffirm that these
experiences are significant and would likely contribute to clinical presentation during
assessment by mental health clinicians. Based on this interpretation of the research, there
are several recommendations for mental health clinicians engaged in clinical work with
adult women and girls. Beyond the development of critical consciousness, which is a
useful frame for building awareness of how people are affected by systemic oppression
(Brown, 2018; Miller, 1987), there are some additional recommendations that incorporate
the findings from this research. These include addressing power, meaning-making
perspectives, binary thinking, and relationality.

Development of Critical Consciousness

The current research confirms that awareness of benevolent sexism is necessary in
mitigating its impact (Durán et al., 2014; Fitz & Zucker, 2015), a point that also supports
the development of critical consciousness (Miller, 1987). Feminist theory and therapy
has historically emphasized the importance of developing critical consciousness. This is
a means of acknowledging systemic oppression and supporting mental health amidst
societal inequity that makes achieving well-being truly challenging (Diemer et al., 2006;
Diemer et al., 2017). As Miller (1987) wrote,
Psychological problems are not so much caused by the unconscious as by deprivations of full consciousness. If we had paths to more valid consciousness all along through life, if we had more accurate terms in which to conceptualize (at each age level) what was happening, if we had more access to the emotions produced, and if we had ways of knowing our own true options—if we had all these things, we could make better programs for action (p. 94).

By sharing and elaborating upon their meaning-making of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives, the women in this study began to develop a deeper understanding of why these experiences have influenced them. This confirms that in counseling, addressing benevolent sexism could play a role in the evolution of critical consciousness (Brown, 2018; Miller, 1987).

**Exploring Context and Its Relationship to Power**

Intersectionality, power comparison, fluctuations in response over time, and degree of personal choice were implicated in the degrees to which participants experienced power. Counselors can use these as checkpoints to guide discussions with their clients around how they have navigated experiences of benevolent sexism. This may help clients to develop insight around intersections of identity and patterns of thought and behavior.

**Intersectionality.** The guiding question is: what other aspects of their identity affect how the client experiences power? The field of counseling psychology has prioritized an understanding of the ways in which power presents itself within the counseling relationship and in the lives of clients (Hays & Chang, 2003). Clinicians have an implicit responsibility to support their clients in exploring the ways in which they
experience power, privilege, and oppression. The predominant model of mental health emphasizes the individual and their presenting symptoms, which can obscure the fact that symptomatology can have external, systemic roots. Therefore, clinicians can provide psychoeducation around the ways in which power dynamics affect mental health.

Addressing forms of systemic oppression, such as those exemplified by benevolent sexism, requires an understanding that sociopolitical factors affect the counseling relationship. It is essential that this frame be applied not just to gender, but to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and disability status. As an example, participants of color reported that their racial identity was an implicit part of their experiences of benevolent sexism. White participants did not discuss their own racial identity in the same way, which is consistent with White privilege, where whiteness is considered the neutral or the norm (McIntosh, 1990). A single layer focus would fail to address the entirety of that client’s lived experience relative to power and, given the higher likelihood of participants with multiple marginalized identities to experience numerous forms of oppression, discussions should include attention to all of their client’s identity. This is a move away from binary thinking, in support of a more intersectional approach.

**Power comparison.** The guiding question is: how does this experience rank against other times when the client experienced a deficit in power? It was common for participants to explore a wide array of gender-based stressors, ranging from feeling offended to instances of trauma. This affirms the need to assess a client’s trauma history when beginning the therapeutic relationship. In addition to being an essential aspect of case conceptualization, understanding a client’s trauma history can aid the clinician in
recognizing the degree to which the client may use a comparative frame when discussing issues of gender related oppression. First, this helps the clinician establish the appropriate level of trauma-informed care required and second, it can support both clinician and client in being able to appropriately name benevolent sexism. Both benevolent sexism and trauma are experiences of power loss; therefore, it is essential that the client’s safety needs be established through trauma assessment. Moreover, verbalizing experiences of more overt traumatic experiences can help client and clinician establish the range of comparative loss of power. This discourages dismissal of benevolent sexism, as it allows the client to recognize it along a continuum.

**Degree of personal choice.** The guiding question is: how much choice does the client have in their situation? Participants noted that their autonomy in situations helped them to respond to benevolent sexism and the associated gender expectations with authenticity. This seemed to represent alignment between core values and behavior. This part of the meaning-making process reflects that each person’s response to acts of benevolent sexism and the ideology behind benevolent sexism is quite individualized. In acknowledging their clients’ experiences with benevolent sexism, it is important for counselors to be alert to locus of control in their clients’ narratives while keeping intersectionality in mind. Counselors must attend to the intersecting identities of their clients because these identities have direct implications for the level of control and power in a person’s life. Whether or not a participant felt she experienced benevolent sexism may have been related to the way in which she assigned locus of control to the events surrounding the experience. Counselors can work with clients to gain a general understanding of where clients see choice and locus of control, as well as related
concepts, in their experiences of gender-related stressors. Further, clinicians need to remember that choice is often related to power, and the presence of choice should be explored against clients’ intersecting identities. The goal is not to errantly problematize client behavior in favor of overarching and oppressive social systems. While a client may espouse traditional roles, she will still benefit from exploring how the messages of benevolent sexism are harmful.

Fluctuations in response over time. The guiding question is: how does historical and developmental time affect how the client is assessing power? Clients may have varying understanding about feminism, the women’s movement, and what constitutes sexism. Assumptions about the progress made may obscure the fact that gender-based oppression is still being perpetuated, often through covert actions. Clinicians can support their clients in developing awareness and knowledge of subtle manifestations of sexism, such as benevolent sexism. This is foundational to clients’ being able to appropriately attribute individual difficulties to systemic disparities, rather than personal failings.

Thoughts and feelings about instances of benevolent sexism fluctuated over months and years for participants, meaning that developmental time will be a factor in the lived experience of benevolent sexism. Clinicians can help to normalize this experience by providing psychoeducation and assurance to clients that such fluctuations are typical responses to the uncertainty caused by benevolent sexism. This is important to emphasize, as clients may feel that their fluctuating emotions reflect a personal deficit and that their experiences of benevolent sexism are invalid.

Binary Thinking
The use of binary constructs, either in process or context, appeared at several locations in this study. Binary thinking played a critical role in participants’ responses to benevolent sexism, as a coping process they engaged in. This is a distinct behavior that therapists can monitor for and highlight in their work with clients. Highlighting clients’ use of binary thought processes such as gender polarization can alert clients to the contextual aspects of binarism that may be informing their behavior.

This study found that participants experienced deficit-based assumptions about their functioning. One way that discussions about implicit messages were demonstrated were through acts of gender comparison. Given the tendency for essentialist and polarized thinking to support internalized oppression, clinicians and supervisors should monitor for binary thinking patterns; for example, clinicians can avoid phrases that reduce individuals to gender-based traits.

Binarism directly challenges intersectionality by essentializing gender and obscuring the inherent power issues. Counselors can use this understanding to provide psychoeducation to their clients, including cognitive behavioral interventions that highlight binary thinking and power dynamics. Mental health clinicians who work with women should consider ways in which their clients may be using binary constructs and examine how such use affects diagnosis and client functioning.

**Relationality**

Participants experienced benevolent sexism in three key relational domains—internal, interactive, and institutional (Risman, 2004). These domains can be used as a framework for assessment. Counselors can assess whether intervention or support is
needed at any of these entry points. Support would include addressing the transactional nature of gender and corresponding problem areas as informed by this study.

**Individual.** Participants’ experiences of uncertainty centered on whether or not what they were experiencing was based on sexist ideology. This led to general self-doubt, which indicated that these women tended to internalize experiences of benevolent sexism rather than attribute them to societal gender inequality. This would likely affect a client’s perception of locus of control. Mental health clinicians can use this information to monitor their clients’ discussions about uncertainty. Such expressions can be an entry point toward offering support around navigating benevolent sexism in their clients’ everyday lives. This may include role-playing a challenging situation or strategizing cognitive and behavioral techniques to bolster self-concept.

Participants reported that their affective experiences fluctuated, decreasing or increasing in intensity as time went on. For some women, there was a delay in experiencing negative affect, which they attributed to not knowing how to respond at the time or, in some cases, having taken time to process the event. For yet others, the seemingly positive tone of benevolent sexism led them to feel confused and unsure how to name the experience. For these women, it sometimes took months or years to process an incident. This highlights that women may experience benevolent sexism in conflicted or uncertain ways, and it reaffirms that critical consciousness would be a useful means of developing the ability to identify and verbalize such dissonant experiences. Therapists can support their clients by introducing reframing techniques that reflect understanding and knowledge of systemic and widespread practices that disempower them because of their gender. In addition to establishing a mutual understanding of how sociopolitical
influences may factor into how a person processes benevolent sexism, clinicians can support clients through normalizing clients’ affective processes.

**Interpersonal.** This research found that women coped with benevolent sexism through rationalizing, relational coping, and vigilance. These results offer some insight into what behaviors women may exhibit in response to benevolent sexism. Mental health practitioners can utilize their understanding of these coping strategies when performing diagnostic interviews, developing rapport, and supporting their clients throughout treatment. First, counselors can observe and identity these strategies, which can help clients recognize patterns in behavior. Engaging clients in conversations that link their use of coping strategies to covert sexism can help clients develop insight into their behavior.

Psychoeducation and development of critical consciousness provides a baseline from which clients can begin to assess their coping skills. Once they have established a mutual understanding of how power represents both systemic and individualized oppression based on gender and other identities, the client and clinician can work together to explore whether the client’s current coping mechanisms adequately represent the client’s core values and goals as well as whether these coping strategies provide functional relief to the client. Then, the client and clinician can work together to determine how the coping skills can be calibrated to more appropriately align with the client’s values and goals. Clinicians should monitor how this work affects symptom reduction with their clients.

**Institutional.** Participants in this study were affected by benevolent sexism at the institutional level, which was the result of the cyclical and reciprocal relationship
between all three relational domains. This manifested in participants’ experiences of overarching patriarchal, androcentric, and paternalistic ideology, experienced by participants as expected gender roles. One way that traditional gender ideology was operationalized by clients in this study was through role expectations being perpetuated through benevolent sexism. For some women, this may include a process of maternalization, which refers to the act of being put into a motherly role. It may be useful for clinicians to explore with their clients the ways in which gender oppression has been operationalized for them in particular. Depending on the client’s stance, it may be prudent to provide psychoeducation around benevolent sexism and its underlying ideology. Additionally, some clients may benefit from exercises that clarify core values so that they can determine whether their gender-specific roles are in sync with their personal values and ethics. Similar to the interventions recommended at the individual and interpersonal levels, interventions targeted to support clients at institutional levels of benevolent sexism can be geared toward strategizing ways to realign their thought patterns to reclaim power.

In their article on disarming racial microaggressions, Sue et al. (2019) listed four strategic goals for bystanders to engage in when witnessing racial microaggressions. They included making the invisible visible, disarming the microaggression, educating the perpetrator, and seeking external support (Sue et al., 2019). Given that benevolently sexist ideology underpins many covert forms of sexism such as microaggressions, and that microaggressions can target any marginalized group including women (Sue, 2010), clinicians ought to explore the creation of similar frameworks that can be integrated into their work with women. In working with clients, clinicians can focus in particular on
making the invisible visible and providing support. The remaining targets, disarming the microaggression and educating the perpetrator, are likely out of the purview of the therapist given the nature of the individual counseling relationship. However, clinicians can counsel their clients on how to address this in their lives. Additionally, clinicians ought to keep this in mind for group and family work, as well as for organizational dynamics within their professional organizations.

Section Summary

At its core, counseling psychology is a field that centers social justice (Motulsky, Gere, Saleem, & Trantham, 2014; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). Consequently, mental health counselors can use the recommendations outlined in this chapter to give voice to their clients’ experiences of benevolent sexism and to support them in developing competencies in challenging the systems and structures that perpetuate inequality. To encourage this, an understanding of power as it relates to the client’s various lived identities is essential. For benevolent sexism, this understanding begins with the foundational development of critical consciousness, which acknowledges that sexism is a product of overarching patriarchy. From there, intersectionality, power comparison, degree of personal choice, and fluctuations in response over time, are frames recommended to identify and assess the ways in which the client experiences power in their lives, and how this relates to their experiences of benevolent sexism. Intersectionality forms the basis of the exploration of context. Knowing how a client experiences power, privilege, and oppression with respect to their various identities and recognizing that these various lived identities “function in shaping psychosocial
phenomena” (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017, p. 501) helps to frame the effects of benevolent sexism as stemming from structural, rather than individual, deficiencies.

Following the introduction of critical consciousness and assessments of context and power, there are two areas of recommended discourse. These are binary thinking and relationality. Binary thinking has specific ramifications for women experiencing benevolent sexism, in particular that benevolent sexism encourages gender polarization and disregards context. Clinicians should support behavioral shifts that incorporate a less binary, more intersectional, approach. Likewise, relationality should be addressed by assessing the three domains occurring at the internal, interactional, and institutional levels. Each of these recommendations is based on what this study found to be the lived experience of benevolent sexism in 12 adult cisgender women, with varying sexual orientations and racial/ethnic identities. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the limitations of my research and some suggestions for future research. This is followed by researcher reflections, discrepant data, and the conclusion.

Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experience of benevolent sexism as voiced by adult women. Because this study is qualitative, it is descriptive and emergent in nature; thus, the observations made in this study are not generalizable. Although generalizability was not a goal of the current research given its theoretical and epistemological underpinnings, it is important to emphasize that the experiences of some do not reflect the experiences of all. The perspectives addressed in this study were those of middle- to upper-class, educated, primarily White, and primarily heterosexual women. Moreover, the participants of this study were U.S. citizens living in what is generally
considered to be a socially liberal area of the United States. These factors are important to note, as the relative privilege of the study’s participants may have swayed the interview data in a way that would not fully represent the experiences of a less privileged group of women.

Future research ought to explore the lived experience of benevolent sexism for residents from other areas of the United States and other parts of the world. There is a remaining gap in research that explores the lived experiences of benevolent sexism from a more intersectional lens, and that is a limitation of the current study. Likewise, given that the majority of this study’s participants identified as heterosexual and cisgender, future research ought to consider how benevolent sexism impacts women who do not identify as straight or do not consider themselves cisgender. Finally, participants in this study identified themselves as either middle, or upper middle class, with the lowest educational level being professional certification. This is certainly not representative of all women, and relative socioeconomic privilege removed financial strain as a compounding source of oppression. Specifically, future research would benefit from investigating the experiences of queer and trans women and women from different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as women with disabilities and from various age groups. Additionally, there is need for more qualitative research that focuses on women’s lived experiences of benevolent sexism (Lewis, 2017), women’s agentic and problem-solving responses, and research that explores this in older participants. Finally, given that participants focused primarily on benevolent sexism perpetuated by men in work and parenting, future research should explore how women make meaning of benevolent sexism within their intimate relationships or among other women. This
would allow a more diverse set of voices and perspectives to be featured in research on benevolent sexism, thus creating a richer discourse and more nuanced approaches to anti-sexism work.

Although several participants named relational bonding with men as a coping mechanism, it is unclear to what degree these participants were contextualizing these responses with an understanding of the underlying gender-based power hierarchies. Rather than being consonant with the purported relational proclivities of women, this stance could undermine and exploit relational approaches that require mutual empathy (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Thus, future research should continue to explore how women who utilize relational bonding strategies perceive their actions within the context of these hierarchies, and whether or not these relationships constitute mutual empathy.

**Researcher Reflections**

On the first day of my undergraduate social psychology class, the professor asked us to describe ourselves. I believe I wrote something along the lines of “daughter, sister, friend, student.” After we were finished, the professor went on to say that women generally tend to describe themselves in relational terms or in reference to others. I found that interesting but did not think much about what that really meant, or about the societal critique it was prompting. I merely attributed it to some type of genetic predisposition that made women more inclined to think about others when defining themselves. Even today, if you were to ask me who I am, I may say that I am a wife, mother, friend, daughter, sister, and counselor. However, this now comes with the recognition that much of who I am, or even how I experience who I am, has a lot to do with my context. That is, being a White, cisgender, straight woman, who has a graduate education, and is at this
moment able-bodied. There are more nuanced aspects of my identity, but what I have mentioned is much of what a new acquaintance might be able to observe about me.

Like the majority of my participants, I grew up in the United States, post-women’s movement, but before the “me, too” movement. We seemed to share, for the most part, this generational similarity, which felt like a point of connection. Likewise, as a cisgender woman, I was an insider to the research, and some participants noted that the interview process would have felt much different to them had I been a man. Particularly, they supposed that they would not have felt as comfortable or believed. Similarly, the knowledge that I am a mental health counselor seemed to add an additional layer of trust that allowed participants to feel as though I could hear both the good and the bad. This seemed to hold true in other aspects of our identities; I found that my education, socioeconomic status, parenting status, and relationship status aligned with those of the majority of my participants. Perhaps my role as researcher felt novel or intimidating to some, but the overarching attitude I perceived was one of gratitude and interest.

On the other hand, my identity made me an outsider to some participants in important ways. I wonder whether I was able to provide enough safety to my participants of color or those who were not straight. Did I seem too scholarly to some with different levels of education? I made every attempt to acknowledge my positionality as a person who values diversity, equity, and inclusion; however, it is not for me to assert whether that was enough. In terms of the impact on my research, I feel that it is possible that participants may have spoken more about their intersectional identities had I been perceived as an insider to them or done a better job at creating an inclusive space. While I did not receive any negative feedback about my ability to provide a safe place for this
exploration, I cannot ignore the effect my presence as a straight, White, educated, cisgender woman could have had on my participants.

In juggling my insider and outsider identities, I was aware that my own biases would be present for the duration of my research. I assumed this would be the case going in and worked diligently to bracket (Smith et al., 2012) my expectations around what this study would or should look like. It is always true that wherever I go, there I am. My identity in my personal and professional life is always there, and it is always bound to the meanings society assigns it as well as to whatever context exists between me and the people I interact with. This may be why I was drawn to phenomenology in particular. I believe that before I even knew what benevolent sexism was theoretically, I understood what it was. My sense is that many people—my family, friends, clients, and acquaintances—have lost power in ways that they cannot quite understand or articulate. The lived experience of something is important, even if one does not have the right words for it. Because of this, and because of the methodological and theoretical bases of this study, I am confident that the data from this study are robust and appropriately assessed.

Of course, my life does not consist only of relationships with women, and three of the most important people in my life are cisgender males. Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian activist and artist, is credited with saying, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come here because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us work together.” It reminds me that while benevolent sexism takes from women, it also takes from men. Sexism prescribes ways of being that place limits on men too. I keep this in mind when considering how my project centers feminism and
criticizes patriarchy, because it would be a shame if someone took this to mean that such a study was narrow-minded in its focus or that it was only serving one particular gender.

Thus, this study has forced me to reflect on my own positionality, including how it has changed over the years and is now informed by more critical thought, sociopolitical analyses, and life experience. How I view my gender in relation to my context has shifted as a result of time, but also because of this study. It is not lost on me that over twenty years ago, as I sat in my social psychology class, I was navigating my own experiences of benevolent sexism.

**Discrepant Data**

Discrepant, or disconfirming, data are findings that differ from the primary themes and categories. Including discrepant data serves an important function in constructivist research, as it allows for multiple perspectives to be included, thereby serving as a validity check and trustworthiness strategy (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Looking for discrepant data in this study was less straightforward than I expected, because no one participant explicitly rejected having experienced subtle forms of sexism, nor did anyone oppose its existence. This could be for several reasons. First, I was likely perceived as an insider or ally to the research participants and this might have made them feel more comfortable emphasizing the negative aspects of benevolent sexism. Likewise, since recruitment material stated that I was researching less obvious forms of sexism, it might have been assumed that I was looking to focus on its negative aspects. Moreover, sexism is generally thought of as negative, which might have dissuaded participants from discussing positively toned experiences with any form of sexism.
Thinking back over the findings and discussion, I am somewhat surprised to see that there was not much talk about benevolent sexism between women. Certainly, as people who are in the same sociocultural environments in which we experience sexism, we are also able to be perpetrators. I might speculate that this lack of reported benevolent sexism between women has to do with binarism and the ease with which we dichotomize many experiences in our lives. This makes it fairly easy to fall into an “us and them” dichotomy.

While there was no explicitly discrepant data in the form of participants denying the existence of benevolent sexism, some participants had responses that stood out and differed from those of other participants. For example, contrary to the finding that uncertainty was a hallmark of the experience of benevolent sexism, two participants stood out in that they expressed confidence that their experiences of benevolent sexism had occurred. This adds value to and highlights one of the most interesting pieces of phenomenology, that lived experiences are unique to the participant. The meaning-making process is nuanced. There is always some excitement around finding commonality, but the differences amongst the participants demonstrate that intersectionality is a necessary lens to use in research with a social justice focus. Additionally, it is my hope that readers not only approach the study data with intersectionality in mind, but that they use intersectionality as a lens in their own work.

**Conclusion**

Ambivalence to equality as a social justice issue originated in research done on racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Myrdal, 1944). This earlier work addressed ambivalence around racial equity and encouraged the evolution of the concept of racism
to include that which was subtle yet still oppressive. This research inspired the development of ambivalent sexism theory (AST) (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which similarly named ambivalence toward gender equality as a result of two complementary forms of sexism, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Because of its overtly misogynistic tones, hostile sexism is what one commonly thinks of when referring to sexism. Yet benevolent sexism, although generally positive in tone, is similarly effective in perpetuating gender inequality.

Studies document that benevolent sexism impacts women on varying levels, for example in interpersonal relationships (Hammond et al., 2016) and self-image (Shepherd et al., 2011), due to its oppressive and undermining nature (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The current study addressed gaps in existing research by employing phenomenology to explore the question of how women between the ages of 30 and 50 made meaning of experiences of benevolent sexism in their everyday lives. Findings from the 12 semi-structured interviews of women ages 30–49 found that when making meaning of benevolent sexism, women’s responses focused on three major categories: coping responses, gender comparison, and affective experiences. Coping responses were comprised of rationalizing, relational coping, and vigilance. Notably, coping responses were acts participants engaged in as a response to benevolent sexism. Gender comparison, on the other hand, represented what participants observed of benevolent sexism, including gender trait disparity, implicit messages, and the caregiver role expectation. The third major category that emerged in the findings was affective experiences, which included uncertainty, lack of confidence, and additional negative emotions.
My synthesis of findings recognized that participants experienced benevolent sexism as loss of power and safety. To wrestle with this loss, they engaged in meaning-making by integrating the perspectives of intersectionality, power comparisons, degree of personal choice, and fluctuations in response over time. Binary thought, which emerged in coping responses and gender comparison, was also an implicit piece of the experience of benevolent sexism as well as a challenge to intersectionality. The synthesis and interpretation of findings concluded with a discussion on relationality, which drew together the relational dynamics of benevolent sexism through the lens of gender structure theory (Risman, 2004).

My goal with this research was to contribute to social justice research for counselors, with the intention of using the findings to both add to existing research and also to contribute to the development of mental health clinicians’ competency around addressing benevolent sexism in the clinical setting. Because benevolent sexism is a social justice issue, it is important to the mental health profession. The cultural milieu within which an individual resides is complicit in creating and sustaining social and individual dysfunction. This is counter to the prevailing cultural and psychological frame that places dysfunction at the individual level (Lewis, 2017). Thus, development of critical consciousness is a necessary aspect of understanding how systemic inequities are implicated in individual well-being (Brown, 2018; Miller, 1987). Mental health professionals must understand this if they are to incorporate a social justice framework into their treatment approaches (Goodman et al., 2004).
References


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Hi (name),

I am reaching out because I’m currently recruiting for the research phase of my dissertation and thought you may be able to help. My project is about how women experience more subtle forms of sexism. I’m looking for women between 30-55 who would be interested in being interviewed for my study and then participating in one post-interview focus group. I’m not interviewing women I know personally, but I am wondering if you know anyone who meets the study criteria and if so, would you be willing to send them the attached flyer? Thanks so much and please let me know if you have any questions.

Sarah
Recruitment Flyer

Are you:

★ Someone who identifies as female?
★ Between the ages of 30-55?
★ Interested in talking about your experiences with subtle forms of sexism?

If so, I’d love to speak with you! I’m currently doing research for my dissertation on how women experience a particular form of sexism. This would require a time commitment of 1-2 hours for an interview. For more details, please contact Sarah at: 617-842-8480 or sschwerd@lesley.edu

Thank you!
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Title: Experiences of Benevolent Sexism in Women’s Everyday Lives
Individual Interview

Principal Investigator: Sarah Schwerdel, Ph.D. Candidate at Lesley University
sschwerd@lesley.edu
617-842-8480

Thank you for your time. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study on how women make meaning of subtle forms of sexism

Your participation will entail completion of demographic information and one in-depth interview, which will last approximately one to two hours. You will also be invited to a post-interview focus group, which will be discussed in a separate informed consent form. The interview will be held at location we mutually agree upon. This location must be free from interruption. The interview will be audiotaped, and I will be taking handwritten notes. Results of this research will be included in my dissertation. Direct quotes from your interview may be used in the dissertation. By signing this consent form, you give the researcher permission to use statements you make during the interview.

Your records, including name and identifying information will be kept confidential. I will use pseudonyms on study records. Your name and other facts that might identify you will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. Materials will be destroyed after five years.

Minimal risk is anticipated with this study. It is possible that you may experience some distress when discussing experiences of sexism; however, you are welcome to take a break or refuse to answer a question should you wish. There are some potential benefits to participating in this study that might include: the opportunity to explore how you make meaning of experiences of sexism, excitement over having a new and unique experience, and a feeling of satisfaction from contributing to knowledge production and research on subtle forms of sexism.

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right withdraw at any time. You may skip questions or decline to answer any part of the interview.

If you have any questions about this study or your involvement, please ask the researcher before signing this form.
You will be given a copy of this form. Both the investigator and the subject should keep a copy of the signed form. To compensate you for your time, you will receive a $25 Amazon.com gift card prior to the start of the interview.

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at irb@lesley.edu.

I am 18 years of age or older. The nature and purpose of this research have been satisfactorily explained to me and I agree to become a participant in the study as described above. I understand that I am free to discontinue participation at any time if I so choose, and that the investigator will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.

ResearcHer Signature__________________________________________________

Name of participant (please print)_____________________________________________________________________________________

Signature __________________________________           Date ______________________
Appendix D
Interview Schedule

Script:
Hello, I am Sarah Schwerdel
Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this project. I am a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology Program at Lesley University. I’m conducting research on how women think and feel about their experiences of sexism.

This study is investigating women’s experiences with less obvious forms of sexism. The main purpose of this interview is for me to explore, with you, what these experiences were and how you have made meaning of them. This could be thoughts, feelings, actions, or any other type of response you may have had. There are no incorrect answers during this interview. Even though I have some knowledge about the subject matter, you are the expert on yourself, and I am most interested in hearing your responses.

This interview will be approximately one to two hours long. I will be audio recording this interview and taking handwritten notes. Following our interview, I will invite you to schedule an optional focus group that will be held with other participants.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Are you ready to begin? (If yes, proceed).

Questions
1. Can you tell me about a time you believe you experienced sexism?
   a. Possible prompts: Where did it occur? With whom? Could you share another example? What does “sexism” mean to you? How did you know it was sexism? What do you think makes something sexism? What happens? How does it make you feel? How do you define it? Are there different levels of sexism?

2. Some researchers say that sexism exists on a range, from very obvious hostile sexism to less obvious, more subtle forms of sexism. Please tell me about a time you have experienced sexism that wasn’t blatant, yet you still felt was sexism.
   a. Possible prompts: Does anything come to mind when I say that? Could you tell me about a time when something like that happened to you?
3. When people say things like “women are the fairer sex” or, “women are naturally more compassionate than men,” some women find it to be distressing, while others may not be bothered by it at all. If I said to you, “women are the fairer sex” or that “women are more refined than men,” I wonder what comes to mind for you?
   a. Possible prompts: What might be some implications of saying that statement?

4. How would you finish the phrase “as a woman, I should…”? How would you complete the phrase, “as a woman I should not…”?
   a. Possible prompts: How would you complete these phrases: “As a woman, I am allowed to be…”? “As a woman, I am forbidden to be…”?

5. After talking about these different types of sexism, I am wondering if you think these experiences might have impacted your sense of self.
   a. Possible prompts: In what ways? How?

6. If you were to give another woman advice on how to handle subtle forms of sexism, what might you say to her?
   a. Possible prompts: Is there anything you wish anyone had told you about sexism?

7. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know for this research study?

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me.