Do Students in Secondary Education Manifest Sexist Attitudes?

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Abstract

Introduction. Sexism and sexist attitudes can give rise to gender violence. It is therefore important to analyze these variables at an early age (in secondary school classrooms); from this analysis we will have a basis for intervention.

Method. The study sample consists of 962 secondary school students. Measuring instruments were used to assess the relevant variables, for both male and female respondents.

Results. High levels of sexism were found in both boys and girls. In addition, the boys demonstrate more sexist attitudes than the girls and they are more inclined to differentiate persons according to gender roles.

Discussion and Conclusion. Results reveal a need to carry out non-sexist educational programs. In this respect, school can be a change vehicle and contribute to social transformation for the benefit of gender equality and non-violence towards women.

¿Manifiesta actitudes sexistas el alumnado de Enseñanza Secundaria?

Resumen

Introducción. El sexismo y las actitudes sexistas en la adolescencia pueden desencadenar en violencia de género. Resulta fundamental, por tanto, analizar estas variables a edades tempranas (aulas de Secundaria), cara a una futura intervención.

Método. La muestra objeto de estudio está formada por 962 estudiantes de Enseñanza Secundaria. Los instrumentos de medida utilizados sirven al propósito de evaluar las variables objeto de estudio, tanto en la muestra de hombres como en la correspondiente a las mujeres.

Resultados. Se han encontrado niveles medios-altos de sexismo tanto en chicos como en chicas. Además, los chicos manifiestan más actitudes sexistas que las chicas y son más proclives a diferenciar a las personas por roles de género.

Discusión & Conclusión. Los resultados encontrados muestan la necesidad de llevar a cabo programas de educación no sexista. Así, la Escuela puede ser un elemento de cambio y contribuir a la transformación social en beneficio de la igualdad de género y la no-violencia hacia las mujeres.

*Palabras Clave***:** Seximo ambivalente, actitudes sexistas, violencia de género, roles de género

Introduction

In recent years there have been numerous studies regarding gender violence, both in our country (Expósito & Moya, 2005; Ferrer & Bosch, 2005; Herrera & Expósito, 2005; Palacios, Torrico, Millán, Pérez, Puertas, Moya & López-Megías, 2005; Pozo, Alonso Morillejo, Hernández & Mellado, 2005) and outside our borders (Eagly, Beall & Sternberg, 2004; Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen & Johnson, 2003; Johnson, Frattaroli, Campbell, Wright, Pearson-Fields & Cheng, 2005; Robinson, 2003; Russell & Trigg, 2004; Sakalh, 2001). In studies that deal with certain precursors of gender violence, the development of sexist attitudes has been emphasized for its important role (Glick & Hilt, 2000), as well as violent behaviors in boy/girl relationships during adolescence (Hickman, Jacox & Aronoff, 2004; Lemus, Rodríguez & Megías, 2007; Próspero, 2006). Regardless of the perspective or theoretical approach adopted in each study, they all underscore the complexity of the phenomenon, whose roots lie in factors that may be socio-political, cultural, economic, inter-group, interpersonal and/or individual, and that the phenomenon is beginning to be seen at younger and younger ages (Eagly *et al.*, 2004; Lips, 2003).

Discrimination for gender-based reasons continues to be a reality in our day, with evidence in every context of daily life, and it can eventually lead to domestic violence against women. This category encompasses all actions that result in physical, sexual or psychological harm, including behaviors that go from threats and insults to the death of the victim (Delgado, 2001; Videra & Gómez, 2003).

From the time we are born, we are constantly receiving influences that will determine who we are and how we act in the world (Alatario & Anguita, 1999). Along these lines, García (1988) reaches the conclusion that the Spanish language in itself is not sexist, but the way we use it can become so. Thus, language is one of the most important vehicles in the configuring of stereotypes.

In all educational and informational media, sexism is present, and language is the key element of transmission, giving shape to a culture where masculine and feminine roles are established and even placed in hierarchy (López, 1994). For this reason, preventive education becomes necessary, as well as lines of action for the purpose of consciousness raising among the youth, showing the need to eradicate any manifestation of sexism and gender violence.

Thus, the education of children and adolescents is what can truly drive social change toward equality, beginning with respect for differences (Barragán, 2005).

One of the variables that can explain violent behaviors toward women is the ideology of gender, or the set of beliefs that justify inequalities and power differences. This ideology is manifested mainly through sexism, understood as a set of attitudes and beliefs regarding the roles considered appropriate for men and women, and about the relationships that these groups should have between them (Moya, 2003). Traditionally, sexism has often been expressed through attitudes of prejudice, and discriminatory behaviors based on the supposed inferiority and difference of women as a group. Traditional gender ideology is articulated around three ideas (Glick & Fiske, 1996): (1) a dominating paternalism, which holds that women are weaker and inferior to men; (2) gender differentiation by competence, whereby men and women have different qualities, such that women are more appropriate for the home and care of the family, but not for fulfilling roles of leadership in the workplace; and (3) heterosexual hostility, which considers women dangerous and manipulative with men, due to their sexual power. Sexism due to its very nature is closely related to violence (Díaz-Aguado, 2006).

"Classical sexism", although it still persists, is on the decline in Western society, and more so in the case of young people. It has thus given place to new forms of sexism, less open, more subtle and disguised. One of these new modalities of sexism is the so-called "ambivalent sexism" (Glick & Fiske, 1996), where gender ideology tends to be manifest through the coexistence of both positive and negative beliefs and sentiments toward women. According to Glick and Fiske (1996), ambivalent sexism presents two clearly differentiated components: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism.

Hostile sexism to a large extent coincides with traditional gender ideology. Benevolent sexism, for its part, comprises a set of attitudes toward women that are sexist in that they consider women in stereotyped fashion, limited to certain roles, but at the same time carrying a positive affective tone. The basic components of benevolent sexism are: (1) protective paternalism, where the man should care for and protect the woman as a father cares for his children; (2) complementary gender differentiation, which continues to assume that men and women present different qualities, in this case maintaining that women possess numerous positive characteristics that complement those of men; and (3) heterosexual intimacy, based on the

consideration that man is incomplete without a woman. All these characteristics that comprise benevolent sexism continue to be discriminatory and continue to delineate unreal differences between men and women. Thus is it important to detect these types of attitudes from early ages in children and adolescents, so that they do not become established in their behavioral routine as adults.

In order to understand the nature of sexism in its totality, it is necessary to keep in mind that it includes several components (Díaz-Aguado, 2006):

- The cognitive component: confusing social and psychological differences between men and women with biological differences linked to one's sex, having the erroneous belief that these differences arise automatically and unavoidably as a consequence of one's sex, without taking into account the influence of history, culture, learning, and so on.

- The affective or intrinsic value component: based on a sexist manner of constructing one's identity, associating feminine values with weakness and submissiveness, and masculine values with strength, control, emotional invulnerability, or use of violence, especially on those occasions where one's "manliness" is being threatened.

- The behavioral component: consisting of the tendency to put sexism to practice through discrimination and violence. The risk increases when there is a lack of positive alternatives for responding to certain psychological and social functions without resorting to these destructive behaviors.

Attitudes toward gender roles are another essential component of gender ideology (Moya, 2003), relating specifically to the beliefs, sentiments and behavioral tendencies pertaining to roles that are appropriate for men and women. During recent years in Western countries, women have begun to take on a large diversity of roles that were traditionally assigned to men, whether in interpersonal, family and couple relations; in employment, education, politics, and so on. Even though attitudes toward the adoption of such roles is increasingly positive, there is still a long way to go before we reach full egalitarianism in the positions and roles adopted by men and women in our society. It is fundamental to underscore that such egalitarianism is necessarily bi-directional, involving both the adoption of traditionally male roles by women, and the fulfillment of traditionally female roles by men (King & King, 1990;

King, King, Gudanowski & Taft, 1997). These behaviors can be demonstrated in the class-room, not only by students, but also on the part of teachers. It is essential that teachers maintain egalitarian, non-sexist behaviors in class, and that by doing so they can serve as a positive model for the students, rather than the opposite. In order to grasp how experiences from childhood and adolescence are especially significant in this area, we must recall that human beings are born with great plasticity for adapting to their environment, at its peak in infancy and progressively declining throughout the maturing process (Díaz-Aguado, 2006).

Sexist stereotypes are present in our society of today, and they lead us to the polarization of male and female behaviors in opposite directions, resulting in a societal sexism that is harmful to women and men (Alario & Anguita, 1999). Furthermore, there is the so-called "stereotype threat", referring to certain men's fear of being judged and treated according to the negative stereotype applied to members of the group they belong to, and their concern over the possibility of doing something "inadvertently" to confirm that stereotype (Barnad, Burley, Olivarez & Crooks, 2008; Osborne, 2006; Roberson & Kulik, 2007). In other words, a man who believes that the male role is that of protecting and dominating the woman, may end up adopting that role and, by adapting to it, comes to perpetrate violent attitudes; or he may even feel continually threatened by the possibility that any behavior he undertakes may be interpreted in this fashion. In this case, we see once again the need to educate children early on with regard to gender roles and that young people clearly grasp that they need not fulfill any specific role because they are male or female. This way we can avoid adolescents having to behave in a certain way in order to fit into a stereotype that they feel corresponds to them.

An ideology based on the acceptance of traditional gender roles sustains, legitimizes and promotes asymmetrical power relations between men and women, and although it does not necessarily cause violence directly, it may lay a foundation for it to appear. Several studies along these lines have shown that positive attitudes toward traditional gender roles are related to greater levels of violence in couple relationships, in both perpetrators and victims (Lichter & McCloskey, 2004). Such an ideology may come to justify use of aggression as an instrument of dominance, through a manifestation of positive attitudes towards violence against women. These types of beliefs have also been related to greater indices of violence in couple relationships in different population groups (Lichter & McCloskey, 2004; Sakalh, 2001).

Having said all this, are there signs that precede gender violence and violent attitudes toward women? In this study we try to respond to this question, and to understand and identify such signs so as to carry out classroom interventions for eradicating sexist or violent behaviors in adolescents.

Based on the theoretical aspects described above, the main purpose of the present study is to analyze, within a sample of adolescents from different secondary schools in Almeria (Spain), the extension, characteristics and determinants of sexism, gender roles and attitudes of violence toward women. Gender violence usually appears in the early stages of a couple's relationship (Echeburúa & De Corral, 1998), making it essential to detect as early as possible the factors that trigger aggressive behaviors in youth, in order to keep such patterns of violent interaction from becoming chronic.

More specifically, while accepting the complexity and multi-causality of attitudes of violence toward women, the present study focuses on analysis of the role of gender ideology as a possible determining factor in the manifestation of violent attitudes in young couples. The specific objectives of this research are:

1. Determine the extent to which the population of adolescents and youth in Almería manifest beliefs typical of hostile or benevolent sexism.
2. Understand this population group's attitudes toward egalitarianism in gender roles.
3. Analyze the frequency and type of violent attitudes that are seen in couple relationships in the youth population of Almeria province.
4. Examine the impact of ambivalent sexism and egalitarianism in gender roles on violent attitudes toward women in this population group.

The ultimate purpose of this research is to acquire a greater understanding of the possible factors involved in violent attitudes and in violence toward women in young and adolescent couples, as a starting place for planning interventions that help prevent or reduce the incidence of this serious social problem.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study included a total of 962 students from seven secondary schools and from the School of Fine Arts, all located in Almeria city (Spain). School selection was based on establishing eight geographic areas of this provincial capital that have different characteristics. In other words, each of the participating schools is located in a different district of Almeria city, such that the sample includes representation from different socio-economic and contextual conditions. Of the total number of students, 908 (94.3%) are studying compulsory secondary education, including 443 (46.3%) in their third year, and 465 (48.1%) in their fourth year. The 54 remaining students are in their first year of *Bachillerato* (post-compulsory, university preparatory). The total sample includes 488 male (50.7%) and 474 female (49.3%) students.

The mean age of our sample is 15.44 years (s.d.: 1.01), with a minimum age of 14 and a maximum of 18. Taking the sample as a whole, 667 young people claimed to have a boyfriend/girlfriend at the current time or to have had one at some time in their life (69.33%), while the remaining 295 claimed never to have been involved in such a relationship (30.77%).

Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study is made up of a series of scales, some were designed *ad hoc* for this investigation, others were used in other countries and translated to Spanish for this study, and finally, others were already adapted for use in the context of Spain. The variables and measuring instruments we used are described below.

Ambivalent sexism toward women was measured using the Spanish version by Expósito, Moya and Glick (1998) of Glick and Fiske's (1996) *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory*. The scale comprises 22 items, 11 belonging to the hostile sexism subscale (example item: "Women try to gain power by controlling men") and 11 belonging to the benevolent sexism subscale (example: "Women should be loved and protected by men"). Responses were made on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 means "totally disagree" and 5, "totally agree"). Internal consistency of the total scale and the subscales was adequate (with a Cronbach alpha of .88 for the

total scale, .86 for hostile sexism and .83 for benevolent sexism), with coefficients close to those obtained on the Spanish adaptation of the original inventory.

Egalitarianism in gender roles was measured by the *Sex Role Egalitarian Scale,* which seeks to analyze to what extent subjects consider individuals to be equal regardless of their sex, version KK, by King and King (1990), and translated by the present research team for this study. The scale consists of 25 items and includes 5 dimensions: marital roles, roles within the couple, social-interpersonal-heterosexual roles, educational roles and professional roles. An example item is: "Women ought to have the same opportunities as men to be leaders at work". Responses were likewise on a scale of 1 to 5 (1="totally disagree", 5="totally agree"), such that the higher the score, the more egalitarian the gender roles. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .64, such that internal consistency of the items seems to be relatively adequate.

In order to assess gender violence, we used a scale that does not analyze violent behavior in itself, but rather attitudes towards this behavior. We applied the *"Scale of attitudes towards physical violence in men"*, one of three scales that make up *The Attitudes Towards Dating Violence Scales* by Price, Byers and the Dating Violence Research Team (1999), translated and adapted to Spanish for this study. The scale contains a total of 12 items; one example is "A boy should hit his girlfriend if she cheats on him". The response scale was from 1 to 5 (1="totally disagree", 5="totally agree"). The internal consistency coefficient for this scale was .52 (Cronbach alpha).

Procedure

As indicated in the Sample section, the first step consisted of selecting schools whose students would make up the set of study participants, taking into account different geographic areas of Almeria city.

All participating students voluntarily agreed to complete an anonymous questionnaire. In administration of the questionnaire we received collaboration from the Almeria branch of the Andalusian Institute for Women, and from the teachers and pupils of the eight participating schools. School principals granted access to the sample students, including class time and

periods when the pupils were able to properly complete the questionnaire. Teachers also assisted in gathering students in the classroom or in the auditorium.

Data analyses

Analyses were performed using the statistical package SPSS version 15.0 for Windows. First, a number of descriptive analyses were carried out in order to understand different parameters of the variables being studied, both in male and female students; afterward, an ANOVA was carried out in order to compare the means of boys and girls, and a correlations analysis was also performed in order to determine the most significant relationships among the different variables. Finally, a regression analysis was carried out, allowing us to learn which variables are predictive of violent behaviors from young men toward women.

Results

To begin our study of the research variables, we performed certain descriptive analyses. As can be seen in Table 1, both hostile sexism and benevolent sexism obtained a similar mean of nearly three points. Since the scale is from 1 to 5, we can consider that pupils in this study display or are accepting of sexist behaviors to a degree that is mid to high. Sexism is expressed equally in its two forms, whether in hostile or offensive attitudes toward women, or in the case of paternalism and overprotecting attitudes toward them (benevolent). Means for egalitarianism in gender roles and for violent attitudes are also reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. *Levels of sexism, egalitarianism in gender roles and violent attitudes*

	Hostile Sexism	Benevolent Sexism	Egalitarianism in Gender Roles	Violent Attitudes
Total Sample				
Mean	2.93	2.93	2.72	2.40
Standard deviation	.71	.68	.41	.58
Boys				
Mean	3.20	3.14	2.84	2.46
Standard deviation	.62	.63	.45	.65
Girls				
Mean	2.66	2.71	2.59	2.33
Standard deviation	.70	.68	.33	.50

In order to confirm a possible difference in the variables as a function of gender, several analyses were performed. Differences in means were found for hostile sexism (F=160.31, p=.000), benevolent sexism (F=99.11, p=.000), egalitarianism in gender roles (F=90.04, p=.000) and perception of violent attitudes of men toward women (F=13.21, p=.000). It can be seen that the girls have a lower level of both hostile and benevolent sexism. In addition, the boys hold beliefs or attitudes that involve the consideration of women as more suitable for certain actions, according to gender roles. Finally, boys were more accepting than girls of certain violent attitudes as normal or suitable within certain situations.

If we look at both hostile and benevolent sexism scales, items that are scored highest among the boys are: "women should be loved and protected by men", for benevolent sexism, and "there are many women who make fun of men by first being sexually suggestive and then rejecting their advances", for hostile sexism. In the case of girls, the highest scored item for hostile sexism concurred with the boys; however, for benevolent sexism, the highest scored item was "women, as compared to men, tend to have higher moral sensitivity". What is remarkable about these data is the fact that such markedly sexist attitudes exist in such a young population (adolescents). Furthermore, it is striking that both girls and boys believe that many women use men sexually, a point which ought to be eradicated with preventive programs at school.

Regarding the scale for egalitarianism of gender roles, the item that was scored highest by both boys and girls was "technical schools ought to admit women who are more qualified than men". In addition, in the case of boys, discrimination due to gender roles was noted for this highly scored item: "one ought to be kinder to a woman than to a man". For girls, non-egalitarianism was most evidenced in the item "fathers are not as competent as mothers to care for their children when they are sick", demonstrating the unquestionable presence of gender roles in these very young people.

Regarding leniency toward different violent postures taken by men on certain occasions, the item that received highest scores (from male and female students), and is therefore most representative of these attitudes, is: "on some occasions, a boy cannot avoid hitting his girlfriend when she makes him mad". This statement is a perfect demonstration of how students continue to accept, allow or at least not oppose certain violent behaviors on the part of

men. This issue is quite significant and unexpected, that such a young population would have or allow attitudes of this type and consider them normal.

On the other hand, the data indicate that there are significant correlations between violent attitudes and gender, school, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism and egalitarianism in gender roles. Moreover, gender roles correlate significantly with gender, school, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Finally, there is a significant correlation between benevolent and hostile sexism.

Table 2. *Correlations between variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1	.027	-.028	-.380(**)	-.307(**)	-.294(**)	-.118(**)
2. Age		1	.200(**)	-.012	-.028	-.002	.039
3. School			1	.045	.015	.066(*)	.113(**)
4. Hostile sexim				1	.704(**)	.500(**)	.233(**)
5. Benevolent sexism					1	.552(**)	.238(**)
6. Egalitarianism in gender roles						1	.427(**)
7. Violent attitudes							1

*p<0.05; **p<0.01*

For an analysis of which variables influenced violent attitudes in pupils, several regression analyses were carried out (stepwise method). Thus, gender, school and egalitarianism in gender roles appear to be good predictors of violent attitudes for this group of young people. Since gender was a predictor of violent attitudes in the young people, regression analyses (stepwise method) were performed separately with the sample of boys and the sample of girls. In the case of male students, the variables predictive of violent attitudes continued to be the school and gender roles. In the case of the female students, hostile sexism also appeared, in addition to the school they attended, as effective predictors of violent attitudes.

The most important aspect of these results is that gender roles appear as precursors of violent attitudes of men toward women, whether speaking generally, or when the data from boys and girls are analyzed separately. Furthermore, in the case of the girls, hostile sexism is also a good predictor of acceptance of certain violent attitudes from men. It seems logical to think that if women manifest attitudes related to hostile sexism, certain violent behaviors on

the part of men might not be sufficient punishment. Thus, understanding the beginnings of violence in a couple and which variables can trigger it may help in prevention.

Table 3. *Regression analyses (stepwise method): variables that predict violent attitudes*

Predictive Variables	R^2	F	B	T
Gender			-.11	-3.50***
School			.11	3.30***
Gender Roles			.42	13.45***
Sample total	.18	69.62***		
School			.14	3.45***
Gender Roles			.49	12.22***
Boys	.27	87.61***		
Gender Roles			.24	5.27***
Hostile Sexism			.14	2.76**
Girls	.07	17.91**		

**p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Discussion

The objective of this study has been to ascertain the level of sexism presently existing in secondary classrooms. To do so, pupils from different high schools in different socio-cultural districts of Almeria were taken as our sample.

Results show that the adolescents have a high level of sexism (in both its aspects, hostile and benevolent), that there is still an acceptance of different gender roles for boys and girls, and that there is a certain leniency about violent behaviors toward women. There are significant differences between boys and girls with regard to the research variables. Girls showed lower levels on the scales for hostile and benevolent sexism, boys showed higher scores on violent attitudes and manifest stronger attitudes in favor of maintaining different gender roles for men and women. These results concur with findings from other studies, where sexist attitudes and beliefs are rejected to a greater extent by female adolescents than by their male counterparts. From this we infer that sexist attitudes are present at school and may trigger gender violence, hence the need for guidance toward preventing this problem. Such guidance must strengthen a rejection of sexism and of gender violence in the boys also, since at times their rejection is only at a superficial level, acknowledging what is "politically correct" more than incorporating it as part of their identity (Díaz-Aguado, 2006).

As for variables that predict violent attitudes in the young people, gender roles (stereotypes) had the greatest influence on developing such attitudes. If we analyze the data separately according to gender, in the girls' case, hostile sexism also appears in explaining violent attitudes toward women. Thus, the representation of a person or of a group as inferior is closely related to their possible victimization. As a function of this, it is not surprising that violence suffered by women on account of being women is closely related to sexist stereotypes; these stereotypes may go so far as to justify violence from men instead of condemning it, by associating it with masculine attributes around which some men still build their identity (Díaz-Aguado, 2006).

On the other hand, in the thinking of Welzer-Lang (2007), some men may confuse virility, strength, violence and domination. "If I have authority, there is no reason why I should not exercise it, and violence is a *spontaneous tool* for exercising it" (Welzer-Lang, 2007, pp. 96). Naturally, in some cases we are dealing with gender roles of the past, but as we have confirmed in this study through observation of adolescents who have been educated in a co-educational environment from the beginning, some of these stereotypes continue to manifest. In short, in the classic role division where one dominates the other, there are many possibilities that violent attitudes will appear later on. It is evident that not all men are dominant by nature, nor do they try to impose their wishes for the pleasure of doing so. What leads them to fall into the role trap is rather the absence of other possible scripts, as well as difficulty in expressing and sharing their fears. The ideal would be for these young people to have other models to follow, since this is the stage when very significant changes in gender identity are taking place, and the first couple relationships are being established.

Non-sexist education should not be the task of a few, but the responsibility of the entire community. The school can be an element for change, and as such, the surrounding school community is an agent of social transformation (López & Encabo, 1999). Taking into account that youth are fundamental elements in the functioning of society, it is of vital importance to carry out strategic action and intervention projects that foment young people's integrated development in equality, including the instruction that spans all areas of the curriculum (Barragán, 2005).

This way, coeducation is considered to be an intervention process that encourages the development of children and young people grounded in the reality of two different genders,

and directed toward personal development and the construction of society in common and not in opposition. This point involves a coexistence of attitudes and values that were traditionally considered as belonging to men or to women in such a way that they can now be accepted and adopted by persons of either sex. Furthermore, this type of intervention is based on a complete development of the personality without barriers due to gender, correcting cultural and ideological sexism and the social inequality of women (Alatario & Anguita, 1999; Núñez, 2002). Along these lines, there are several programs for preventing gender violence within the context of education (Díaz-Aguado, 2002, 2004; Díaz-Aguado & Martínez, 2001; Iáñez, 2007).

In summary, and in the words of Díaz-Aguado (2006), although there has been considerable progress in recent years in overcoming sexism among adolescents, this progress is far from complete. This may be due to social pressure for the male stereotype being more rigid and coercive than pressure for the female stereotype, and that women generally perceive the rise over sexism as a gain, while men tend to see it as a loss. For these reasons, there is still a long way to go, and further research is vital toward addressing this plague in current society.

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