

The Benevolent Sexist in a Mannerly Man

Little boys are sexist.

At least, that's what recent headlines want us to believe.

A new study [hit newsstands](#) the other day, claiming that young children, boys especially, exhibit indicators of sexism even into early middle school. This sexism, however, is not likely to be aggressive, mean-spirited behavior toward females. In fact, it could be far worse. *Benevolent* sexism, the study implies, can look harmless on the surface, but it still "undermines women".

Just what does benevolent sexism look like? Apparently, it's been around for a long time – we've just known it by another name: chivalry. David McGlynn's conversation with psychologist Peter Glick in [The New York Times](#) reveals how chivalry became an aggressive attack on women:

"‘One thing you want to be careful of,’ he said, ‘is teaching boys to be chivalrous. We need to stop socializing boys to see women as needing protection.’

‘Wait a minute,’ I said, remembering my mother's lessons about holding open doors and giving up my seat on crowded buses. I'd long taught my sons to show respect, especially to women. ‘Isn't chivalry a *good* thing?’

‘Holding doors and giving up seats are prime examples of courtesy,’ Peter said. ‘Of course those are good things. But the idea that women should be cherished and put on pedestals fosters what's known as benevolent sexism, which subtly demeans women as fragile and less competent. It reinforces a sexual script in which a man takes charge while a woman remains passive.’”

Just how did researchers discover that little boys exhibit tendencies of benevolent sexism? They read them the [following statements](#), which many little boys agreed with:

1. Men need to protect women from danger.
2. Women should be rescued before men when there is an emergency like a fire.
3. Men are only truly happy when they marry the love of their life.
4. Good women should be rewarded and given nice things by their husbands.
5. Fathers should work as hard as they can to take care of their families.

Funny. Along with holding a door or giving up a seat, this list largely indicates that little boys are thinking about women in a kind, mannerly way, genuinely desiring to treat them well. Maybe I'm weird, but I have trouble figuring out what female would not want to be treated kindly by men – young or old – who are looking out for her welfare.

Why is such behavior frowned upon?

Perhaps it has something to do with the spirit in which it is received. According to Christopher Lasch in [The Culture of Narcissism](#), close contact with feminist thinking may lead women to reject the natural, kind behavior of men, causing cognitive dissonance when it comes to finding a marriage partner:

“On the one hand, feminism aspires to change the relations between men and women so that women will no longer be forced into the role of ‘victim and shrew,’ in the words of Simone de Beauvoir. On the other hand, it often makes women more shrewish than ever in their daily encounters with men. This contradiction remains unavoidable so long as feminism insists that men oppress women and that this oppression is intolerable, at the same time urging women

to approach not men simply as oppressors but as friends and lovers.”

This type of thinking clearly causes problems for women – but what does it do to men? When we teach little boys to be kind, gentle, mannerly, and gracious to others, then turn around and tell them that such manners are benevolent sexism, what kind of message are we giving them?

If little boys grow up and throw up their hands in despair, retreating from women and mannerly behavior all together, then we’ll know exactly what kind of message we’ve sent. When that happens, we shouldn’t be a bit surprised, either.

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