

Book Review

Understanding Inequality: How Dichotomies Hold Past and Present Women Back

Boryczka, J. M. (2012). *Suspect Citizens: Women, Virtue, and Vice in Backlash Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. ISBN: 978-1439908945 (216 pp., \$26.95).

Sexism continues to be an everyday problem for women (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Stereotypes based on traditional gender roles disadvantage women in work environments, politics, and other leadership positions. But where do these stereotypes originate? Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) suggests that the gendered division of labor leads to stereotypes about the traits and roles appropriate for men and women. In *Suspect Citizens*, Boryczka (2012) provides further historical evidence of gendered divisions relevant to traits and roles, which have created a double bind for women.

More specifically, Boryczka proposes that women's morality has been tied to political power, which has resulted in tenuous citizenship and backlash politics. The author examines the conceptual history of virtue and vice using gender as a lens. This analysis is built on historical events surrounding women's struggles for equality (and resulting backlash) from the Puritan era to present, and it is geared toward an audience interested in political theory and feminist ethics. As such, the analysis is beyond the scope of the individual that is often the focus in psychology; however, it is relevant to the development of current conceptions of gender and challenges faced in the struggle for equality.

Throughout each chapter in the book, Boryczka shows how gendered patterns of virtue and vice influenced political events. Chapter 1 introduces ways in which women have historically represented a moral threat. For example, Plato and Aristotle believed that women were less able to reason, and Christianity blamed Eve with the downfall of humanity. Paradoxically, women are also seen as responsible for morality in the private and public spheres (i.e., separate spheres in Victorian America, described by Tocqueville). Thus, women have been treated with

suspicion while simultaneously being given the responsibility as moral guardians. This virtue-vice dualism makes women always under suspicion. Although Boryczka does not make this tie explicitly, Freud called this duality the Madonna-whore complex, in which women are seen as either virtuous or vice-ridden.

In Chapter 2, Boryczka compares the writings of Cotton Mather, a Puritan minister, and Mary Daly, a second-wave feminist who challenged patriarchy in the Church. The virtue-vice duality provides an interesting view of gender in Puritan America. For example, charges of witchcraft (i.e., charges of vice) served as backlash against women who pushed gender boundaries. Modern research suggests that women acting outside of their roles are still subject to backlash (e.g., Rudman & Glick, 2001). Similarly, “traditional values” can be seen as a weapon against women who challenge the status quo. Although Daly attempts to reframe the virtue-vice dualism to empower women, Boryczka argues that the dichotomy and hierarchy remain, which maintains inequality.

When women step out of their traditional role, their virtue is attacked, which functions to deflect attention away from structural inequalities. Challenging inequality results in the perception of vice rather than virtue. Historical examples of the system-justifying nature of the virtue-vice dualism are provided, including Puritans accused of witchcraft (Chapter 2), Victorian women working in textile mills (Chapter 4), Republican era women seeking further education (Chapter 3), and second-wave feminist lesbians accused of sexual deviance (Chapter 4). Throughout the book and across several centuries, the treatment that boundary-challenging women receive highlights how all women are treated as suspect citizens. In later chapters, Boryczka discusses contemporary political theory, including feminist care ethics, and argues that any dualism is problematic. The author proposes using a collective responsibility frame as an alternative.

Boryczka’s intention was to provide a conceptual history of virtue and vice. The analysis is interdisciplinary in that it draws on political and ethical theory; however, social science theories and research could have contributed to the analysis. Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) similarly proposes that women are caught in a Madonna-whore complex, in which they are seen as either virtuous, pure, and good (but weak and in need of chivalrous protection; i.e., benevolent sexism) or vice-ridden, impure, and bad (and deserving of domination; i.e., hostile sexism). Ambivalent Sexism suggests that benevolent sexism serves as a reward for women who act within their traditional role, whereas hostile sexism serves as a punishment for women who challenge their traditional role. Thus, these diametrically opposed views of women create system-justifying beliefs that maintain the status quo. As a psychologist reading *Suspect Citizens*, I found examples of Ambivalent Sexism in the historical and contemporary issues Boryczka discusses. As such, I would recommend this book for psychologists who study gender and are interested in the historical roots and contemporary consequences of gender roles.

Chapter 3 (“‘Back to Virtue’ Backlash Politics: Privileging Irresponsibility”) may be of special interest to those who teach courses related to gender. If the course is interdisciplinary, this chapter may fuel discussion on the roots of gender roles and how they continue to influence gender today. Boryczka examines conceptions of gender in education by comparing Republican era women’s push for access to education and the modern debate about sex education. Given the current political relevance of sex education, I think students will find Boryczka’s analysis of sex education materials (and the gender roles ascribed therein) interesting. In a sexual double standard often seen in abstinence-only materials and rooted in Puritan- and Republican-era concepts, girls/women are assigned a greater responsibility for sexual morality (i.e., sexual gatekeepers and responsible for maintaining modesty), whereas boys/men experience privileged irresponsibility (i.e., “boys will be boys”). Historical conceptions of womanhood/manhood in this chapter also relate to Ambivalent Sexism.

Overall, Boryczka weaves historical and modern examples together to show how the virtue-vice dualism has functioned to prevent equality, which is similar to how Ambivalent Sexism has been shown to function cross-culturally (Glick & Fiske, 2001). This book may be useful in providing further historical examples for existing psychological theory and/or generate new theories. In some ways, it was disheartening to see how events from the founding of America mirror those that we continue to face today. However, by highlighting women’s constant struggle and suspect citizenship, it does present a new way forward. As with Ambivalent Sexism, we must move beyond the dichotomy.

References

- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 491–512.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2001). An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications for gender inequality. *American Psychologist, 56*, 109–118.
- Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., & Ferguson, M. J. (2001). Everyday sexism: Evidence for its incidence, nature, and psychological impact from three diary studies. *Journal of Social Issues, 57*, 31–53.
- Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2001). Prescriptive gender stereotypes and backlash toward agentic women. *Journal of Social Issues, 57*, 743–762.

— Amy L. Hillard

AMY L. HILLARD (ahillard@adrian.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Adrian College. Her research examines subtle sexism and interventions to reduce prejudice, including the effects of confronting “everyday” prejudice and workplace diversity training.