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# Benevolent Sexism at Work: Gender Differences in the Distribution of Challenging Developmental Experiences

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*The current research draws from ambivalent sexism theory to examine potential gender differences in the quantity and quality of developmental work experiences. In a sample of managers in the energy industry, men and women reported participating in a similar number of developmental experiences (with comparable levels of support), but men rated these experiences as more challenging and received more negative feedback than did women. Similarly, a sample of female managers in the health care industry reported comparable amounts, but less challenging types, of developmental experiences than their male counterparts'. The results of three complementary experiments suggest that benevolent sexism is negatively related to men's assignment of challenging experiences to female targets but that men and women were equally likely to express interest in challenging experiences. Taken together, these results suggest that stereotype-based beliefs that women should be protected may limit women's exposure to challenging assignments, which in turn may partially explain the underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of organizations.*

*Keywords:* gender; developmental work experiences; sexism; glass ceiling

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Although there has been tremendous progress in the status of women in the past century, there is little doubt that gender inequities persist (Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). For example, women hold less than 15% of the board seats in *Fortune* 500 companies and earn less than 7% of the top salaries (Catalyst, 2007). One explanation for these discrepancies is that despite the decline of old-fashioned sexist attitudes (Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), women continue to experience subtle forms of sexism that accumulate over time and can lead to the asymmetrical representation of men and women at the highest levels of organizations (Martell, Lane, & Emrich, 1996). Consistent with this, recent research (Hebl, King, Glick, Kazama, & Singletary, 2007) found that women can encounter expressions of sexism that reflect dual beliefs that women should be protected and revered (i.e., benevolence) and that women are inferior to men (i.e., hostility). The current research proposes that such beliefs may influence the extent to which formative work experiences are assigned to men and women and ultimately their unequal rates of advancement.

Developmental work experiences (DWEs) can be defined as incidents individuals encounter at work and learn from in such a way that over time, across multiple experiences, they develop job-relevant knowledge and skills (Speitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). These experiences are important components of employees' overall professional development (Bennis, 1989; Howard & Bray, 1988) and are significantly related to performance, behavior modification, and advancement in organizations (R. F. Morrison & Brantner, 1992; R. F. Morrison & Hock, 1986; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986). Systematic gender differences in access to these experiences may be problematic because without skills and knowledge obtained through such assignments, women may not qualify for (Rosen, Miquel, & Peirce, 1991) or receive advancement opportunities (Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994). In addition, women who advance without obtaining relevant skills and knowledge may not be as prepared as their male counterparts for the challenges of senior positions. Organizations, unknowingly and subtly, may be setting women up to fail and inadvertently creating a self-fulfilling cycle of gender inequity in which experiences unfairly justify continual disparities in the advancement of men and women (Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994).

The goal of the current research is to examine the degree to which men and women engage in similar developmental experiences, with a particular focus on the extent to which gender determines the distribution of challenging assignments. Challenge is consistently considered a critical element to developmental experiences (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994; Van Velsor, McCauley, & Moxley, 1998) and therefore is largely the focus of recent research on developmental experiences (see De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer, & Van Ginkel, 2009), including the current research. We argue that extant equivocal findings may be explained by a lack of attention to the nature (rather than number) of developmental experiences and to the potential impact of benevolent sexism. To begin, we describe contemporary notions of developmental experience. We then outline research and theory concerning gender and developmental experiences and suggest that consideration of benevolent ideologies may clarify when gender differences in development emerge. Finally, we present five studies that address the objectives of this research. The first two studies assess gender differences in developmental experiences through surveys of managers in the U.S. energy industry (Study 1) and the UK health care industry (Study 2). Studies 3 through 5 focus on the qualitative characteristic of challenge and experimentally test gender as a causal factor

in the distribution of challenging experiences and consider the potential alternative explanation that men and women might be choosing to engage in challenging experiences at different rates. This complementary combination of field and experimental studies allows us to examine the relationship between gender and development in a real-world context as well as to assess the causal nature of this relationship. As such, this research applies and extends ambivalent sexism theory to the meaningful workplace outcome of challenging developmental experiences, thereby offering an explanation for persistent gender inequities.

### *DWEs*

As activities that facilitate job-related learning and skill acquisition (Quiñones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995), DWEs are key determinants of success in organizations. Indeed, most of the learning that occurs at the managerial level comes from on-the-job developmental experiences (Lowy, Kelleher, & Finestone, 1986), which are especially important methods of gaining abstract competencies required of high-level managers (Lindsey, Homes, & McCall, 1987; A. M. Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; Wick, 1989; Zemke, 1985). Drawing initially on interviews with executives (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), and refined across several studies (e.g., McCauley et al., 1994; McCauley, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 1989), McCauley (1999) concluded that developmental experiences can be grouped into five categories: experiencing a job transition, creating change, managing at high levels of responsibility, managing boundaries, and dealing with diversity. It is theorized that such experiences offer a chance to explore outcomes and gain exposure to what works and what does not work in professional environments (Feldman & Brett, 1983; McCall et al., 1988; R. F. Morrison & Hock, 1986). Despite the promise of DWEs, however, such experiences vary in the extent to which they actually provide employees with meaningful knowledge and skill (Van Velsor et al., 1998). Managers may encounter DWEs that are developmentally poor, for example, a manager who has responsibility for managing a straightforward, low-risk, noninterdependent project. Such variability in the nature of DWEs has led to the development of models that capture the quality of development.

Although work experience is typically examined through quantitative elements such as length of time, tenure, or amount of experience (Borman, Hanson, Oppler, Pulakos, & White, 1993; McDaniel, Schmidt, & Hunter, 1988; McEnrue, 1988), these components cannot account for exposure to radically unique aspects of those experiences. Recognizing this limitation, Quiñones and colleagues (1995) and Tesluk and Jacobs (1998) considered additional aspects of work experience that are important to measure in any given context. In the context of employee development, researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership (Van Velsor et al., 1998) have argued that there are three important qualitative characteristics of DWEs—challenge, feedback, and support—that provide motivation and resources for learning, thereby determining the developmental potential of an experience.

*Challenge.* A challenging DWE is a difficult work event that is external to the individual and is not the direct result of the individual's behavior (Van Velsor et al., 1998). A challenging work experience consists of an activity that is “demanding, stimulating, new, and calls

on their ability and determination” (De Pater et al., 2009, p. 5). A challenging work experience is an effective tool because it presents an individual with the opportunity to learn (McCauley et al., 1994) by creating a situation in which there is a gap between the skills and abilities one currently has and those that are required by the situation. For example, an employee may be required to go beyond his or her typical task performance, challenging his or her capabilities by engaging in starting-from-scratch assignments wherein the employee must initiate a task from nothing. This gap leads an individual to feel imbalanced, which in turn motivates the individual to learn the skills and abilities required of the situation (Brett, 1984; McCauley et al., 1989; McCauley et al., 1994; Nicholson & West, 1988; Van Velsor et al., 1998). Challenging work experiences are predictive of individual success and advancement. For instance, the early AT&T studies revealed that the amount of challenge individuals experienced was related to job advancement (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Bray & Howard, 1983). Furthermore, entry-level job challenge is predictive of employee success and effectiveness up to 7 years later (Hall, 1986; Vicino & Bass, 1978).

*Feedback.* Accurate and well-delivered feedback is essential to employee learning and effectiveness (Baldwin & Padgett, 1994; Van Velsor et al., 1998). Feedback affects development by helping individuals understand which workplace behaviors are successful and rewarded, by acting as a guide toward appropriate goals, and by giving individuals realistic information about whether their behavior currently meets performance standards (London, 1997). Of particular importance is the communication of negative feedback that implicitly or explicitly presents goals for further development (Van Velsor et al., 1998). Receiving negative feedback is related to increased performance and learning outcomes (Hazucha, Hexlett, & Schnieder, 1993). Moreover, research shows that even poor performers substantially increase their performance after receiving feedback about the behaviors and outcomes in need of improvement (Smither et al., 1995).

*Support.* Although research suggests that there are several sources of support including support from coworkers, friends, and families (A. M. Morrison, 1992), supervisor support has emerged as one of the most influential types of support (Becker & Klimoski, 1989; Huffman, Watrous, & King, 2008). Supervisory support is central to DWEs because supervisors are in the unique position of knowing what an employee needs and being able to respond to such needs (Kaufmann & Beehr, 1986) and because supervisors are seen by subordinates as representatives of the global organization (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Levinson, 1965). Thus, support can help employees understand what is valued by the organization (Van Velsor et al., 1998) and can facilitate the implementation of new knowledge and skills (Kontoghioghes, 2001). Given the potential career implications, it is important to consider whether gender differences in exposure to developmentally rich DWEs exist.

### *Gender and DWEs*

Indeed, researchers have struggled to understand and assess gender differences in DWE. On one hand, research has demonstrated that women were frequently denied access to positions

that acted as “stepping stones” into executive-level jobs (Kanter, 1977; A. M. Morrison et al., 1987), were less likely to participate in high-risk projects central to businesses’ success (Gold & Pringle, 1988; Ohlott et al., 1994; Powell, 1980; Ruderman & Ohlott, 1992), and rarely had opportunities to turn a business around or start something from scratch (Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990). However, on the other hand, additional studies have found little evidence of differences in developmental experience. For example, a matched sample of male and female executives (Lyness & Thompson, 2000) reported similar rates of participation in most developmental experiences. As another example, Ryan and Haslam (2007) argued that women are actually more likely than men to be assigned to risky leadership roles.

One explanation for these disparate findings is the manner in which DWEs were assessed; the largely numerically based measures that have been used to examine differences in experience may not be adequate for capturing the more nuanced qualitative differences in the type or nature of assignment that may be occurring. In other words, unmeasured variance in the quality of DWEs reported in previous studies may have obfuscated subtle (yet systematic) differences. Whereas quantitative or numerical differences in exposure to DWEs might represent socially unacceptable, blatant forms of sexism, subjective distinctions in the nature or quality of DWEs may represent covert, subtler forms of discrimination. Thus, although men and women may be exposed to similar numbers of DWEs, these experiences may differ in their quality.

Another explanation for previous inconclusive findings is the common theoretical lens through which potential gender differences were considered. The majority of gender discrimination research, including that on the topic of DWEs, has drawn from tokenism (Kanter, 1977), lack-of-fit (Heilman, 2001), or role congruity (Eagly, & Karau, 2002) theories, each of which predict that women will be seen as lacking competence required of effective leadership (and by extension, development). Glick and Fiske (1996, 1999) argued that in addition to being perceived as incompetent, women might also be viewed as objects to be protected and revered. The notion of ambivalent sexism makes somewhat different predictions than do more traditional theories and thus may offer a new direction for considering gender differences in employee development.

### *Theoretical Approaches to Sexism*

Traditional theories of gender bias have fueled decades of fruitful and important research. Kanter’s (1977) tokenism theory and subsequent research (e.g., King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2010) draws attention to the importance of gender underrepresentation in creating heightened visibility, social isolation, and stereotypical role constraint. According to tokenism theory, women who work in contexts dominated by men will experience difficulty gaining access to high-status positions. Heilman’s (2001) lack-of-fit theory postulated that stereotype-based expectations of women are inconsistent with the attributes that are believed to be necessary in many jobs, and research continues to support the premise that denigration of women is greatest when perceptions of fit are lowest (e.g., Lyness & Heilman, 2006). From these perspectives, women’s participation in male-dominated jobs or high-level DWEs may increase the salience of stereotypes that accentuate women’s lack of fit in the organization.

Similarly, Eagly's (1987) social role theory and its extension to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), suggest that the feminine gender role is incongruent with the prototypical worker and leader roles. Meta-analytic work confirmed the predictions of role congruity theory by demonstrating that women received less favorable evaluations of leadership and leadership potential (see Eagly & Karau, 2002). Clearly, negative stereotypes of women continue to persist and reflect beliefs that women are less competent and credible in work-related domains than their male counterparts (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Heilman, 2001; Lyness & Heilman, 2006).

However, recent theoretical and empirical work suggests that attitudes toward women are not exclusively negative. Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1999) purports that women face not only hostile sexism (which comprises the common negative expressions of incompetence reflected by the lack of fit and role congruity theories) but also seemingly more positive expressions of benevolent sexism. According to Glick and Fiske (1996), ambivalent reactions toward women were created through men's historical domination over women and simultaneous dependency on women for their survival. Examples of benevolent sexism might include "feelings of protectiveness toward women, the belief that men should provide for women, and the notion that women are men's 'better half,' without whom men are incomplete" (Glick & Fiske, 1999, p. 211), whereas hostile sexism includes beliefs that "women's incompetence at agentic tasks characterize women as unfit to wield power over economic, legal, and political institutions" (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 492). Both hostile and benevolent beliefs are related to traditional ideas about the roles of women, and ambivalent sexism theory goes beyond gender role traditionality to consider both subjectively positive and negative components (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Thus, sexism can be expressed not only through verbal and nonverbal expressions that denigrate women but also through positive expressions that seek to reward women for being subservient and dependent. These aspects of sexism are moderately correlated and can operate in conjunction to one another but represent distinct beliefs and attitudes toward women (see Glick & Fiske, 1999).

It is important to note that lack-of-fit and role congruity theories are not exclusively negative; according to these perspectives, women who fulfill feminine gender roles are evaluated and responded to positively. However, given that previous studies have drawn from theories that emphasize perceptions of women's incompetence (akin to hostile forms of sexism), we focus here on the predictions that might be made from the perspective of benevolent sexism. The essential difference is that rather than operating from the idea that decision makers will expect women to perform tasks poorly, we take the perspective that decision makers may enact benevolent ideologies that encourage providing for and protecting women and that consideration of these perspectives will illuminate new rationale for examining gender differences in DWEs.

*Challenge and Gender.* Recognizing the importance of challenge in determining the developmental potential of DWEs, researchers have attempted to examine gender differences in access to challenging experiences but have largely failed to isolate qualitative measures of challenge. For example, Ohlott and colleagues (1994) focused on "developmental challenges" by measuring participation in tasks that were presumed to be challenging. Similarly,



participants in Lyness and Thompson's (2000) study described "significant" developmental experiences. Here we consider the extent to which a range of activities was characterized by challenge (as well as feedback and support), thereby isolating central qualities of DWEs. Whereas traditional (e.g., lack of fit, role congruity) perspectives of sexism might anticipate that women would be punished for their enactment of leadership roles and thus receive particularly challenging experiences, we propose that benevolent notions about women will give rise to attempts to "protect" women from the difficulties, struggles, and frustrations that are inherent in challenging work. That is, supervisors may act to "help" female subordinates by giving them easier or less challenging assignments. Formally, Hypothesis 1 is as follows:

*Hypothesis 1:* Female managers have developmental experiences that are less challenging than male managers'.

*Feedback and Gender.* Past research has shown contradictory findings with respect to subordinate gender and type of feedback. Studies have shown that contradictorily, women are given harsher feedback, more positive feedback, and feedback equally harsh as that given to men (Dobbins, 1986; Dobbins, Pence, Orban, & Sgro, 1983). The predictions of traditional (or hostile) perspectives of sexism can be contrasted with what would be anticipated from a benevolent sexism perspective. On one hand, if expressions of sexism are linked to perceptions of women as inferior and incompetent, managers may denigrate the performance of women relative to men and believe that female subordinates are more deserving of criticism than male subordinates. On the other hand, sexist behaviors may reflect beliefs about women as nurturers, deserving protection and reverence (i.e., benevolent sexism). Such beliefs may lead managers to avoid discussion of performance deficits or to provide false positive feedback (Vescio, Gervais, Synder, & Hoover, 2005). From the perspective of benevolent sexism, women should be protected from negative experiences, including criticism; that is,

*Hypothesis 2:* The content of feedback given to male managers is more negative than that given to female managers.

*Support and Gender.* Research examining general forms of support suggests that women may receive less support than men in organizations (McGuire, 1999; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). This withholding of support has been linked with traditional forms of sexism, wherein it is argued that perceptions, resentment, and hostility toward female subordinates by superiors may preclude the supportive relationships those same superiors have with male subordinates (A. M. Morrison, 1992). Recent evidence suggests that benevolent sexism manifests as subtle encouragement for traditional roles coupled with discouragement from nontraditional roles (Hebl et al., 2007). Extending this rationale, women who participate in DWEs (i.e., tasks that emphasize work-related behaviors and are therefore nontraditional in nature; Heilman, 2001; Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995) may not receive encouragement in the form of support. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 3:* Female managers receive less support than do male managers.



## Study 1: Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

To examine instances of gender differences in developmental experiences, an email introducing a study on managers' experiences containing a link to a Web survey was sent to approximately 316 managers in the energy industry. We received a total of 155 responses, of which 1 was eliminated because gender was not recorded. In total, we had a response rate of approximately 49% (115 male, 40 female, 87% Caucasian). The majority of respondents (81 men, 12 women) were identified through their attendance at a mid-level management training class (response rate 48.4%) from a single organization. The remaining 62 participants (28 women, 34 men) were direct reports of organizational sponsors who were asked to provide contact information for mid-level managers who might participate in a study on leadership development at 12 organizations. The most frequently reported age of respondents was between 46 and 55. Participants most frequently reported having a company tenure of between 21 and 25 years, an industry tenure of between 21 and 25 years, and a job tenure of between 0 and 5 years.

### *Measures*

*Quantitative Measures of Work Experience.* Participants rated the frequency with which they had engaged in 10 experiences during the prior 5 years on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very frequently/always*). McCauley (1999) argued that there are 10 components of developmental jobs that are grouped into five categories: experiencing a job transition, creating change, managing at high levels of responsibility, managing boundaries, and dealing with diversity. The 10 components are (a) new responsibilities, (b) making strategic changes, (c) fixing problems created by others, (d) dealing with difficult subordinates, (e) high stakes positions, (f) large tasks, (g) external pressure, (h) influence without authority, (i) interaction with different cultures, and (j) managing a diverse group.

*Qualitative Measures of Work Experience.* For each of the 10 quantitative experiences that participants reported engaging in more than *never*, participants rated the developmental content or nature of the experiences according to the dimensions of feedback, challenge, and support that were suggested to be of theoretical importance by Van Velsor and colleagues (1998). Participants indicated for each experience the amount of challenge provided by the experience (i.e., "Overall, these experiences were challenging for me," "The interpersonal aspects of these experiences were challenging for me," "The task-related aspects of these experiences were challenging for me"), the amount of negative feedback they received on their performance (i.e., "I received extensive negative feedback about my performance"), and the amount of support they received (i.e., "Overall, I felt supported by my supervisor," "I felt emotionally supported by my supervisor," "My supervisor provided me with sufficient monetary resources to complete my job tasks," "I received sufficient time from my supervisor," "I received sufficient information from my supervisor," "I received sufficient authority from

my supervisor”). Ratings ranged from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). Thus, composites were created across the 10 tasks that represented participants’ reports of the nature of DWEs with regard to challenge (3 items with each task, 30 items altogether;  $\alpha = .94$ ), negative feedback (1 item per task, 10 items;  $\alpha = .95$ ), and support (6 items per task, 60 items;  $\alpha = .92$ ).

*Job History.* To control for the effects of tenure on DWEs, participants provided job history information including the number of industries and types of industries for which they had worked during the previous 5 years, the number of jobs they had held in the previous 5 years, the length of time spent with their current organization, the length of time spent in their current industry, and the length of time spent in their current job. On average, participants had held 2.06 jobs ( $SD = 1.09$ ) in 1.23 industries ( $SD = 0.80$ ) with 1.36 organizations ( $SD = 0.77$ ).

*Demographic Information.* Participants answered basic demographic questions regarding age, race, and sex.

## Study 1: Results

Intercorrelations of all variables are shown in Table 1. To examine whether male and female managers engaged in similar amounts of DWEs (controlling for job, company, and industry tenure), we used a between-subjects MANCOVA with the 10 quantitative measures of DWEs as the dependent variables.<sup>1</sup> The analysis indicated that using the Wilks’s Lambda criterion, the combined quantitative dependent variables were not related to sex,  $F(10, 150) = .90, p = .53, \eta^2 = .07$ , after adjusting for job history and demographic information. Thus, our findings provide no evidence of gender difference in amounts of DWEs.

To examine our hypotheses regarding the qualitative measures of experience, a MANCOVA was conducted on the qualitative measures of DWEs (experiential challenge, negative feedback, and supervisor support), controlling for job, industry, and company tenure.<sup>2</sup> The analysis indicated that using the Wilks’s Lambda criterion, the combined qualitative dependent variables were related to sex,  $F(3, 150) = 2.90, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$ . Separate between-subjects ANCOVAs were performed on each of the qualitative variables to probe this multivariate effect. We predicted (Hypothesis 1) that men would report greater levels of challenge in their developmental experiences than would women. Supporting this hypothesis, sex was related to challenge,  $F(1, 149) = 5.17, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ . Men tended to report greater amounts of challenge in their experiences (adjusted mean = 4.71,  $SE = .09$ ) than did women (adjusted mean = 4.23,  $SE = .19$ ).

We also predicted (Hypothesis 2) that men would report greater levels of negative feedback in their developmental experiences than would women. Consistent with this, results indicated that sex was related to negative feedback,  $F(1, 149) = 4.67, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ , such that men reported higher rates of negative feedback than did women (adjusted mean = 2.75,  $SE = .09$ ; adjusted mean = 2.27,  $SE = .20$ ). Confirming our expectation, men received more negative feedback than did women.

**Table 1**  
**Correlation Matrix of Study 1 Variables**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Sex	—												
2. Make strategic changes	.18*	—											
3. Fix problems	.01	.44**	—										
4. Deal subordinates	-.00	.30**	.31**	—									
5. High-stakes position	.02	.19*	.39**	.30**	—								
6. Large task	-.05	.34**	.57**	.25**	.37**	—							
7. External pressure	-.06	.26**	.50**	.40**	.33**	.46**	—						
8. Influence with authority	-.02	.21**	.35**	.11	.34**	.52**	.30**	—					
9. Influence without authority	.10	.32**	.32**	.14	.14	.39**	.22**	.27**	—				
10. Interact with cultures	.16*	.23**	.19*	.16	.17*	.30**	.14	.30**	.25**	—			
11. Manage a diverse group	.04	.22**	.45**	.09	.26**	.43**	.34**	.27**	.32**	.17*	—		
12. Experiential challenge	-.18*	.24*	.17*	.24**	.17*	.18*	.27**	.18*	.10	-.10	.07	—	
13. Negative feedback	-.18*	-.04	-.20*	.08	-.07	-.16*	-.08	.02	-.12	.06	-.33**	.17*	—
14. Supervisor support	-.07	.11	.05	-.02	-.03	.04	.05	.03	.00	.05	-.02	.19*	-.01

Note: Gender is coded such that 0 = male, 1 = female.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

We expected (Hypothesis 3) that men would report greater levels of supervisor support in their DWEs than would women. Contrary to our expectation, supervisor support was not related to sex,  $F(1, 149) = 1.05, p = .31, \eta^2 = .01$ . Thus, male and female managers did not report significantly different amounts of support from their supervisors.

### Study 1: Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the patterns of developmental experiences engaged in by male and female managers. Our results suggest that female managers engage in similar amounts of experiences as male managers, with comparable support, but may encounter experiences that are qualitatively different from those undertaken by male managers with regard to challenge and negative feedback. These findings support the utility of examining qualitative measures of experience and isolate previous unidentified gender differences in leadership development activities in the areas of challenge and negative feedback. In addition, the pattern of results suggests that benevolent sexism, rather than more traditional forms of hostile sexism, may underlie gender differences in DWEs.

Using McCauley's (1999) typology of work experiences, we explored subtle differences in the distribution of DWEs through the examination of quantitative and qualitative measures of experience. Corroborating previous studies (e.g., Lyness & Thompson, 2000), our study also found no significant differences in the rates of undertaking DWEs that male and female managers reported. Integrating the predictions of ambivalent sexism theory, however, provides a more complex picture. In support of our hypotheses and consistent with the notion that supervisors may enact benevolent ideologies to protect women, female managers reported receiving less negative feedback and engaging in less challenging tasks than did male managers. Although differences in negative feedback could be attributed to women's superior performance, this explanation does not extend easily to the differences in challenge; we argue that benevolent sexism offers the most parsimonious explanation for gender differences in challenge and negative feedback in DWEs. It is possible that negative feedback may also be less likely when experiences are not as challenging; follow-up analyses suggest that after controlling for participants' ratings of challenge, the effect of gender on negative feedback was somewhat weaker ( $B = .15, p = .07$ , compared to  $B = .18, p = .03$ ).

Contrary to our hypotheses, however, male and female managers reported receiving similar rates of supervisor support in their developmental experiences. Although we expected subtle forms of discouragement for managerial development to be communicated to women in the form of less support, it may be that men and women receive comparable levels of support or that subtle differences in these behaviors are less perceptible. Patronizing behaviors may emerge as subtle distinctions between psychosocial forms of support and instrumental support that were not captured through the current measures. Participants' ratings of a range of different types of support, from emotional to financial support, were highly intercorrelated ( $\alpha = .92$ , comprising a single factor accounting for 78% of variance across items), suggesting that they considered support to be a unitary rather than multidimensional construct.

These interpretations point to several limitations in this study. First, we had hoped to obtain a greater number of participants, as well as equivalent representation of male and female managers; the discrepancy in participant gender and small sample size reduces the power to find effects where they may exist and calls into question null effects. A second limitation of this study is that the energy industry tends to be a male-dominated field wherein the effects of tokenism may be especially pronounced (Kanter, 1977), limiting the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the developmental opportunities evaluated in the first study may represent informal assignments rather than more structured or formal opportunities in which benevolent sexism could potentially play a smaller role. That is, it is important to consider whether gender differences emerge in more formalized DWEs. Finally, all ratings were made by a single source—the managers themselves. Thus, the possibility that perceptions of DWE quality (rather than the actual quality) vary systematically as a function of gender cannot be ruled out as an alternative explanation for the results.

To address these limitations, we identified an archival data set that included reports of the developmental experiences encountered by managers in the health care (a more gender-balanced) industry. Given the importance of challenge in development and the nature of data available for this research, we focus on developmental challenge (and do not include negative feedback) for the additional studies reported here. We focused on challenging DWEs by asking coders to consider the extent to which each of the DWEs represented challenging

opportunities for these managers. The second study allowed us to consider the generalizability of the results of the initial sample; that is, to test whether a larger sample of male and female managers in a gender-balanced industry would report similar rates of participation in more formal DWEs and whether the experiences of men and women would differ from an external perspective with regard to the critical qualitative dimension of challenge. In line with the findings and rationale of Study 1, we anticipated the following:

*Hypothesis 4:* Female managers have developmental experiences that are rated by coders as less challenging than male managers’.

## Study 2: Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Data were taken from the 2005 English National Health Service staff survey, in which questionnaires were sent to 362,454 staff in 560 health care organizations (known as “trusts” in the National Health Service). Individuals were sampled randomly within each organization, recruiting a sample of 850 in organizations with more than 3,000 employees, ranging down to a census in organizations with no more than 600 employees. In total, 209,124 questionnaires were returned completed—a response rate of 58%. This included responses from 5,733 (nonclinical) managers who function in similar roles and are responsible primarily for financial and workforce matters across multiple departments. Although it is not possible to calculate the exact response rate for managers because it is not known how many of the 362,454 original sample were managers, analysis of 20 organizations from which this information was supplied suggests this would be higher than average, at about 72%. Of the managers, 3,946 were female, 1,657 were male, and 130 did not declare their gender. Because gender is a key feature of this article, these 130 were excluded from further analysis, giving a usable sample size of 5,603, of which 70% were female.

### *Measures*

*Nature of Developmental Experiences.* The questionnaire included the question, “Have you had any training, learning or development (paid for or provided by your organization), in the following areas?” followed by six specific types of developmental activities of particular relevance to health care: (a) health and safety, (b) what to do if there is a major incident or emergency, (c) how to prevent or handle violence and aggression toward either staff or patients, (d) infection control, (e) computer skills, and (f) how to handle confidential information about patients. *Yes* responses were coded as 1, and *no* responses were coded as 0.

*Control Variables.* The analysis controlled for age, organizational tenure, whether the employee had a disability, ethnic background (White, Black/Black British, Asian/Asian British, mixed background, or Other), and type of organization (hospital trust, primary care trust, mental health trust, or ambulance trust).

*Challenging Quality of Developmental Experiences.* A snowball sample of managers with supervisory experience (6 men, 5 women) who were blind to the study's hypotheses evaluated the extent to which each of the aforementioned experiences represented a challenging experience using a scale anchored by 1 (*not at all challenging*) and 6 (*extremely challenging*). Coders were asked to consider the job of managers in the health care industry and read, "These individuals are responsible for a range of positions, including administrative and clerical personnel, healthcare scientists, paramedic and ambulance operations, nursing staff, and other healthcare professionals. To be optimally prepared to be a manager in the healthcare industry, individuals may engage in a variety of training, learning, or development opportunities." These ratings were reliable across coders (intraclass correlation coefficient = .70).

## Study 2: Results and Discussion

The number of different types of developmental experiences for individual managers ranged from 0 to 6, with an average of 3.31 and a standard deviation of 1.8. The raw average for men was 3.33 and for women was 3.31. To determine whether there were differences between men and women when the control variables (i.e., job history and demographic information) were taken into account, the number of developmental experiences was analyzed using ordinal logistic regression. Results are shown in Table 2. Unsurprisingly, given the small raw difference, this was not statistically significant, and there is little or no evidence of difference between the number of developmental experiences encountered by men and women.

However, the types of experiences in which men and women participated were also analyzed using binary logistic regression. Results are shown in Table 3. There are significant differences in five of the six types of development: the largest effect is in training around what to do in a major incident or emergency (adjusted percentages: 70% for men compared with 64% for women;  $p < .01$ ); in the other cases, women were more likely to have had the experience than men (health and safety: 88% for women, 86% for men; violence and aggression: 55% for women, 51% for men; infection control: 71% for women, 67% for men; handling confidential information: 62% for women, 58% for men;  $p < .05$  in all cases). Thus, it appears that the types of DWEs experienced by men and women may indeed differ.

To explore the extent to which gender differences in the type of DWEs reported were aligned with the qualitative dimension of challenge, we conducted a one-way within-subjects ANOVA on coders' ratings of challenge in each of the experiences. A main effect emerged,  $F(5, 11) = 3.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .23$ , and a paired-sample  $t$  test suggests that coders rated the major incident or emergency DWE as more challenging ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) than the mean of all other experiences ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ;  $t = 2.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These results suggest that men and women who work as managers in the health care industry reported similar amounts, but different types, of developmental experience. Men were more likely than women to participate in the DWE that was rated most challenging by objective raters: managing major incidents and emergencies. This pattern of findings is consistent with notions derived from benevolent sexism; to the extent people believe that women should be protected from harm, they likely also believe that they should not be subjected to crisis situations. In addition, the overall pattern of results is supportive of the conclusions of Study 1; men were more likely than women to report participating in DWEs that might be considered challenging.

**Table 2**  
**Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis of Number of Developmental Experiences on Gender and Control Variables**

Predictor	<i>B (SE)</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>
Age	.17 (.03)	33.68	.000
Tenure	.17 (.02)	102.03	.000
Disability	-.17 (.15)	1.21	.271
Organization Type 1	-.05 (.14)	0.12	.725
Organization Type 2	-.52 (.14)	15.03	.000
Organization Type 3	-.14 (.16)	0.76	.383
Ethnic Background 1	-.01 (.40)	0.00	.982
Ethnic Background 2	.14 (.48)	0.08	.775
Ethnic Background 3	-.05 (.43)	0.01	.913
Ethnic Background 4	.02 (.43)	0.00	.968
Gender	-.05 (.50)	0.89	.347

Notes: Organization Type 1 = hospital trusts, 2 = primary care trusts, 3 = mental health trusts, 4 = ambulance trusts (reference category). Ethnic Background 1 = White, 2 = mixed, 3 = Asian/British Asian, 4 = Black/Black British, 5 = Other (reference category). Gender reference category is female.

**Table 3**  
**Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of Type of Developmental Experiences on Gender and Control Variables**

Predictor	Type of Training/Development					
	Health and Safety ( <i>M</i> = 2.64)	Major Incident ( <i>M</i> = 4.55)	Violence and Aggression ( <i>M</i> = 3.91)	Infection Control ( <i>M</i> = 3.27)	Computer Skills ( <i>M</i> = 3.36)	Confidential Information ( <i>M</i> = 2.91)
	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>
Age	0.17 (.05)**	.22 (.04)**	.19 (.04)**	.22 (.04)**	.06 (.03)	.17 (.04)**
Tenure	0.20 (.03)**	.13 (.0)**	.18 (.02)**	-.01 (.02)	.19 (.02)**	.12 (.02)**
Disability	0.10 (.27)	.33 (.20)	.10 (.19)	.10 (.22)	.07 (.19)	.09 (.19)
Organization Type 1	0.73 (.24)**	-.43 (.22)*	-.10 (.18)	-.03 (.21)	.38 (.17)*	-.16 (.18)
Organization Type 2	0.36 (.22)	-.84 (.21)**	-.32 (.17)	-.94 (.19)**	.08 (.16)	-.30 (.17)
Organization Type 3	1.02 (.29)**	-.82 (.23)**	.24 (.20)	-.65 (.22)**	.42 (.19)*	.21 (.20)
Ethnic Background 1	0.40 (.64)	-.02 (.52)	-.33 (.50)	-.38 (.69)	.23 (.47)	.42 (.50)
Ethnic Background 2	0.72 (.80)	.35 (.62)	-.46 (.60)	.14 (.79)	.29 (.56)	.05 (.58)
Ethnic Background 3	0.32 (.69)	-.18 (.55)	-.25 (.54)	-.43 (.73)	.32 (.50)	.33 (.53)
Ethnic Background 4	0.30 (.69)	.18 (.55)	-.33 (.54)	-.31 (.73)	.13 (.50)	.53 (.53)
Gender	-0.19 (.09)*	.24 (.07)**	-.18 (.07)*	-.16 (.08)*	-.12 (.06)	-.15 (.07)*

Notes: Organization Type 1 = hospital trusts, 2 = primary care trusts, 3 = mental health trusts, 4 = ambulance trusts (reference category). Ethnic Background 1 = White, 2 = mixed, 3 = Asian/British Asian, 4 = Black/Black British, 5 = Other (reference category). Gender reference category is female. Means represent mean level of challenge rating by naïve coders.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.



Thus, these results imply that supervisors may consciously or unconsciously shield women from harsher situations and in doing so deny them access to experiences that could help them further develop. Nevertheless, neither of the first two studies directly examines personal choice of developmental assignments as a potential explanation for the gender differences. That is, Studies 1 and 2 do not consider whether men and women simply choose different kinds of assignments and projects. From the self-development perspective, individuals are motivated actors in their own development and thus make personal choices regarding the experiences they undertake. Indeed, a burgeoning area of scholarship addresses the issue of self-development (Noe & Wilk, 1993; Orvis, 2007; Piskurich, 1993) as a strategy through which individuals might enhance their job-relevant knowledge and skills. It follows that personal choices and self-motivated developmental experiences represent an obstacle for interpreting the results presented here; it may be that women are simply choosing to engage in less challenging experiences than are men, as suggested by De Pater et al. (2009). Thus, we explore the choices of men and women with regard to challenging developmental opportunities.

### **Study 3: Method**

#### *Participants*

A total of 193 introductory psychology students (114 women, 68 men, and 11 individuals who did not indicate their gender and were excluded from analyses) at a large mid-Atlantic university, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (58.6% Caucasian, 5.5% African American, 9.4% Hispanic, 14.4% Asian American, 3.3% multiracial, and 7.2% from other backgrounds), participated in this study. The median age of participants was 19, and the range was 18 through 52 years. Ten percent of participants reported working full-time in a paid position, and an additional 59.1% reported that they worked part-time.

#### *Procedures*

Students who volunteered to participate (in exchange for course credit) in an online questionnaire titled Evaluating Developmental Work Experiences were asked to think about the kinds of tasks that they would prefer in a job. To ensure that participants understood the concept of developmental experiences, they read, "On the one hand, you may be interested in developing your knowledge, skills, and abilities by participating in tasks that represent developmental opportunities. On the other hand, you may prefer to engage in activities that allow you to use your current level of knowledge, skills, and abilities." Immediately after reading this information, participants reported the extent to which they would choose the 10 tasks described in Study 1 (e.g., fixing problems created by others, interacting with different cultures). Finally, participants completed several demographic items.

## Measures

*Choice of Challenging Tasks.* Participants indicated the extent to which they would choose to participate in each of 10 basic tasks described in Study 1 on a 7-point scale anchored with 1 (*strongly oppose*) and 7 (*strongly choose*). Each of these tasks was described (and classified via pretesting<sup>3</sup>) in two forms: “challenging” and “not challenging.” Each participant evaluated 5 of the former and 5 of the latter. The specific tasks were counterbalanced across participants so that each task was evaluated in both forms. Because half of the participants evaluated one set of 5 challenging tasks and the other half of the participants evaluated a second set of 5 challenging tasks, which task grouping each participant received was noted and controlled in analyses. A sample challenging task is “a task requiring this person to learn significantly new or very unfamiliar responsibilities,” and its less challenging counterpart is “a task requiring this person to learn somewhat new responsibilities” (see the appendix). Separate composites were created to represent the criteria by computing the average for each of the challenging tasks (Cronbach’s alpha = .67) and not challenging tasks (Cronbach’s alpha = .69).

## Study 3: Results and Discussion

We anticipated that men and women would choose to participate in challenging assignments at comparable levels. Consistent with this, an independent-samples *t* test suggests that women indicated that they would choose challenging assignments ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) to a similar degree as men ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $t = -.28$ ,  $p = .78$ . We also conducted a regression analysis in which we first controlled for desire to experience nonchallenging assignments before entering the effect of participant gender. In line with the *t* tests, participant gender was not a significant predictor of desire to experience challenging assignments ( $B = -.02$ ,  $p = .79$ ).

Given the problematic nature of null hypothesis testing (see J. M. Cortina & Folger, 1998), it is important to ensure that the sample size is sufficient to detect significant differences when they exist. Power analysis procedures suggest that given the effect size detected in this study, a significant difference between men’s and women’s choices would require more than 100,000 participants. In addition, to provide some indication of the external validity of these findings, we also ran all analyses using only those participants (41 men, 66 women) who indicated that they were working in paid positions. The pattern of results was identical; women indicated that they would choose challenging tasks ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) at a level comparable to that of men ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ),  $t = -.06$ ,  $p = .95$ .

In summary, male and female participants in this study indicated comparable tendencies to choose challenging tasks. As such, this study provides no evidence that personal choice is a viable alternative to ambivalent sexism as an explanation for gender differences in DWEs. Instead, given the opportunity to engage in challenging developmental tasks, it seems that women may be just as likely as men to desire to participate. This is consistent with a recent survey of 900 senior-level managers in *Fortune* 1000 companies that suggested men and women reported comparable levels of desire to be the CEOs of their organizations (Catalyst, 2004).

Together, the results of Studies 1 through 3 suggest that women report less challenging developmental experiences than do men, but women report similar levels of desire to engage in these experiences. Nevertheless, we were unable to directly test a causal relationship between gender and the nature of development. In addition, these studies do not include explicit measurement of the assumed mechanism of benevolent sexism. To directly examine whether challenging assignments are assigned at different rates to men and women, and to explicitly examine whether benevolent sexism influences these assignments, we conducted an experimental study.

### Study 4: Background

Drawing from research on ambivalent sexism and the preliminary evidence reported here, we anticipate that decision makers will assign more challenging assignments to men than to women. Stereotypes about the roles of women are expected to influence decisions about the experiences that are appropriate for women at work such that challenging assignments will be assigned to male targets to a greater extent than female targets; that is,

*Hypothesis 5:* Decision makers assign challenging tasks to male targets at a greater rate than to female targets.

According to ambivalent sexism theory, there are individual differences in the extent to which women are viewed as objects for protection and subordination (Glick & Fiske, 1996). If such ambivalent ideologies underlie gender differences in the allocation of challenging tasks, then only those individuals who endorse such beliefs will demonstrate bias. However, we expect that the effects of ambivalent sexism on task assignment will be primarily attributable to its benevolent, rather than hostile, component. In other words, those who believe that women are pure, have moral sensibility, and should be protected are expected to be most likely to withhold tasks that could place women under stress, difficulty, or uncertainty, consequently denying women opportunities for advancement. Whereas individuals who are high in hostile sexism may punish women by giving especially difficult tasks, individuals high in benevolent sexism might strive to protect women from such experiences. Because benevolent sexism is more socially acceptable than its hostile counterpart (see Glick & Fiske, 1999), it is likely that benevolence drives assignment of DWEs. Thus, the subjectively positive, benevolent form of sexism (but not the traditional hostile form of sexism) will influence the extent to which male targets are favored for challenging assignments above female targets. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 6:* The degree to which decision makers hold benevolent beliefs moderates the relationship between target gender and assignment of challenging tasks; the effect of target gender on task assignment is stronger for those higher in benevolent sexism.

Research by Glick and colleagues (2000) suggests that American men typically indicate greater hostile, but equivalent benevolent, sexism compared to American women. It is possible, then, that decision makers who are women may be just as likely as those who are men

to withhold challenging assignments from women in work contexts. However, it is also possible that the behaviors of men and women are differentially influenced by ambivalently sexist attitudes. As an example, women who endorse benevolent beliefs are unlikely to hold the door for other women, although this behavior would be consistent with benevolent ideologies if performed by a man. Whereas men who maintain benevolent beliefs may actively behave in ways that attempt to protect women, women who maintain such beliefs may instead passively wait for protection. Benevolent ideologies essentially dictate that women are not responsible for (and potentially incapable of) enacting protective behaviors. Consistent with this, Vescio and colleagues (2005) found that when in powerful positions, male participants enacted more patronizing behaviors than did female participants. Women do not perceive it to be their role to protect other women, nor do they find it out of role for men to demonstrate benevolence toward women. In the case of developmental assignments, women and men may manifest benevolent attitudes differentially. Whereas benevolent sexism is expected to lead men to assign less challenging assignments to women, beliefs about women may have less of an impact on women's treatment of other women. Thus, the following is expected:

*Hypothesis 7:* The effect of benevolent beliefs on the differential assignment of challenging tasks to men and women is moderated by gender of the decision maker; benevolence is more negatively related to men's than women's assignment of challenging tasks to female targets.

## Study 4: Method

### *Participants*

A total of 210 introductory psychology students (149 women, 61 men) at a large mid-Atlantic university, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (59.9% Caucasian, 7.2% African American, 5.3% Hispanic, 16.9% Asian American), participated in this study. The median age of participants was 19. Nearly two thirds of these participants (64%) worked at least part-time for pay outside of school. Of these participants, 199 (141 women, 58 men) responded correctly to the manipulation check and were included in the analyses.

### *Procedure*

Participants assumed the role of a manager and considered whether "to increase an employee's productive potential through the assignment of developmental opportunities." Developmental opportunities were defined as tasks that enhance a subordinate's knowledge, skills, and abilities. To inform this decision, a random half of the participants read a fictitious performance review for a male target (i.e., Kenneth Smith), and the remaining half read an identical review for a female target (i.e., Katherine Smith). The performance ratings reflected in this review were designed to be somewhat positive (i.e., between "achieves" and "exceeds" expectations). After reading the performance appraisal, participants reported the extent to which they would recommend that the target be assigned the 10 tasks described in Study 1

(e.g., fixing problems created by others, interacting with different cultures). Finally, participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), several demographic items, and a manipulation check requiring participants to correctly recall the gender of the target individual.

### Measures

*Assignment of Challenging Tasks.* Participants indicated the extent to which they would recommend assignment of each of 10 basic tasks described in Study 1 for the target individual on a seven-point scale anchored with 1 (*strongly oppose*) and 7 (*strongly recommend*). As in Study 3, tasks were counterbalanced in challenging and not challenging forms. Separate composites were created to represent the criteria by computing the average recommendation for each of the challenging tasks (Cronbach's alpha = .68) and not challenging tasks (Cronbach's alpha = .70).

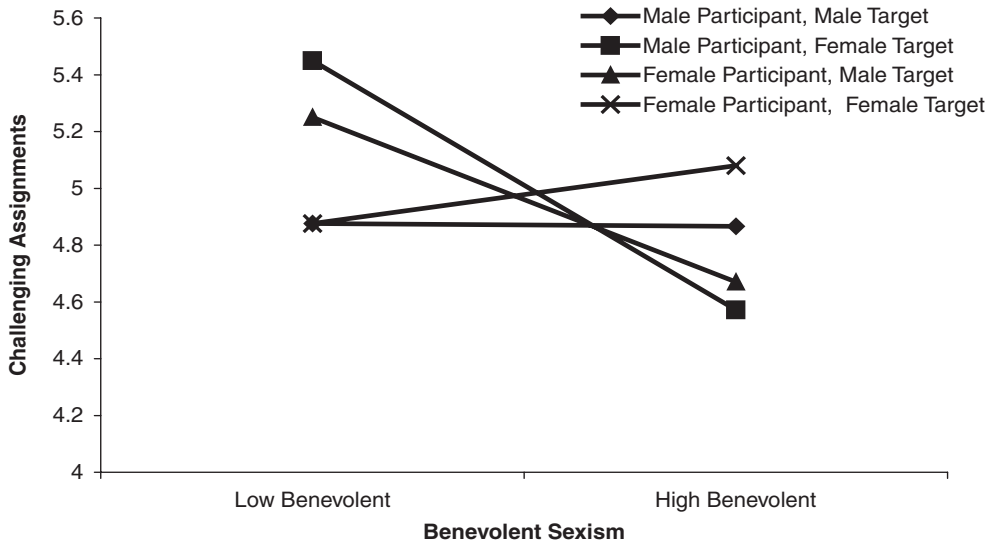
*Ambivalent Sexism.* Participants indicated their agreement with 22 statements concerning men and women and their relationships on a 7-point response scale anchored with 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). The benevolent sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) comprises 11 items (Cronbach's alpha = .80) such as, "Women should be cherished and protected by men." The hostile sexism subscale includes 11 items (Cronbach's alpha = .82) such as, "Women exaggerate problems they have at work."

## Study 4: Results

We expected that male targets would be recommended for challenging tasks to a greater extent than would female targets. We further anticipated that this effect would be moderated by benevolent sexism, such that the effect of target gender would be strongest for participants high in benevolent beliefs. We also reasoned that these effects could be moderated by participant gender. To test these hypotheses, we conducted separate hierarchical regression analyses for benevolent and hostile sexism. In the first step of these regression equations, we entered control variables, including which half of the 10 challenging tasks were evaluated and the extent to which nonchallenging assignments were made (see Table 4). In the second step, the interaction of target and participant gender with benevolent or hostile sexism was entered as a predictor of the assignment of challenging tasks. In the third and fourth steps, the two- and three-way interactions were added, respectively. The results of these analyses suggest that the main effects and two-way interactions anticipated by Hypotheses 5 and 6 were not supported.

Instead, supporting Hypothesis 7, the effect of the interaction of target gender and benevolent sexism (but not hostile sexism) on the assignment of challenging tasks was moderated by participant gender,  $p < .1$ . Three-way interactions can be interpreted by graphing the pattern of relations and by conducting simple slope comparisons (Aiken & West, 1991). Figure 1 shows men's and women's assignment of challenging tasks as a

**Figure 1**  
**The Interaction of Target and Participant Gender and Benevolent Sexism in Predicting Challenging Task Assignment (Study 4)**



function of benevolent sexism (standardized variables, plotted at  $\pm 1 SD$ ) and male and female targets. Because point estimates are based on single values of benevolence, it is important to consider the pattern of relations rather than the apparent mean levels. In accordance with the expectation that the level of men's benevolence would reduce the assignment of challenging tasks for female targets, we expected and found that the relationship between benevolence and task assignment was more negative for men evaluating female targets ( $\beta = -.34, p = .09$ ) than for men evaluating male targets ( $\beta = .20, p = .24$ ) or women evaluating female or male targets ( $\beta = .16, p = .17$  and  $\beta = .25, p = .03$ , respectively). That is, benevolence was negatively related to challenging assignments only for men who evaluated female targets. Following the recommendations of Dawson and Richter (2006), we also conducted significance tests of the differences between slopes. The results suggest that among male participants, the relationship between benevolent sexism and assignments was significantly more negative for female targets than for male targets ( $t = -2.16, p < .05$ ). In addition, the relationship between benevolent sexism and assignment of challenging tasks to female targets was significantly more negative for male participants than for female participants ( $t = 1.97, p < .05$ ).

In conjunction with the lack of a significant three-way interaction involving hostile sexism (see Table 4), these findings suggest that benevolence has a more influential effect on challenging assignments than does hostility. To directly test the relative importance of benevolent and hostile sexism in relation to the assignment of challenging experiences (as a

**Table 4**  
**Target and Participant Gender and Sexism as Predictors of**  
**Assignment of Challenging Tasks (Study 4)**

	Benevolent Sexism		Hostile Sexism	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1		.42**		.42**
Nonchallenging assignments	.61**		.61**	
Order of presentation	.22**		.22**	
Year in school	-.02		-.02	
Race	-.02		-.02	
Native English speaker	-.11***		-.11***	
Work status	.01		.01	
Step 2		.01		<.01
Sexism	.07		.01	
Target gender	.03		.03	
Participant gender	-.02		-.03	
Step 3		.01		<.01
Sexism $\times$ Target Gender	-.05		-.02	
Sexism $\times$ Participant Gender	.10***		.07	
Target $\times$ Participant Gender	-.01		<.01	
Step 3		.01***		<.01
Sexism $\times$ Target $\times$ Participant Gender	.11***		-.01	
Overall $R^2$		.45**		.42**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

function of participant and target gender), we conducted an additional hierarchical regression analysis. In this analysis, we entered the covariates, main effects, and two-way interactions relevant for both hostile and benevolent sexism. In the last step of the regression model, we entered the three-way interaction terms for benevolent sexism ( $\times$  Participant Gender  $\times$  Target Gender) and hostile sexism ( $\times$  Participant Gender  $\times$  Target Gender). Consistent with our expectations, the interaction term relevant to benevolent sexism was related to challenging work assignments ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .07$ ) but not hostile sexism ( $\beta = -.01$ ,  $p = .87$ ).

### Study 4: Discussion

The results of Study 4 demonstrate that gender influences the assignment of challenging tasks but that female targets are disadvantaged only when male decision makers are high in benevolent sexism. That is, men who held paternalistic ideologies regarding the status of women were less likely to recommend challenging developmental opportunities for female subordinates than men who did not hold these beliefs. However, women who held these beliefs did not distinguish between male and female targets, and there was no main effect of target gender overall, suggesting that gender alone (whether of the target or perceiver) does not give rise to differential DWEs. Instead, and supporting the rationale of Studies 1 through



3, gender can act as a determinative factor of the challenging nature of developmental experiences depending on benevolent beliefs and gender of the decision maker. Consistent with the tenets of ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), it appears that men who view women from a subjectively positive lens (i.e., women as nurturers who should be protected) may be precisely those individuals who limit the challenge experienced by, and ultimately the advancement of, women in organizational contexts.

Although these findings were generally consistent with ambivalent sexism theory and the results of Studies 1 through 3, the reliance on undergraduate student participants raises questions about the generalizability of the findings to individuals with decision-making power in organizations. Similar concerns apply to the findings in Study 3, which suggest that undergraduate men and women do not differ in their desire to undertake challenging assignments. In addition, the marginal significance of the three-way interaction points to the need to replicate the effect in another sample. To address these questions directly, we conducted a fifth study in which individuals with management experience (professional MBA students) completed the procedures described in Studies 3 and 4. We anticipate that the findings of these studies will generalize to working adult populations. Specifically, we expect to replicate the findings that (a) men who are high in benevolent sexism assign less challenging tasks to women than to men and (b) there is no evidence of difference in the desire of men and women to engage in challenging experiences.

## Study 5: Method

### *Participants*

A total of 50 students in a professional MBA (geared for working professionals) class at a business school in the Southwest were invited to participate in this study in exchange for extra credit. Nearly all (including 14 women and 33 men) agreed to participate. A large portion of the participants were White (44.7%), and 14.9% were from Asian, 1.6% from African American, and 8.5% from Hispanic backgrounds (the remaining 21% indicated an Other category). The range of highest level of completed education reported by participants was MBA (14.9%), MA (12.8%), some graduate work (44.7%), and BA (27.7%). The majority of participants (75%) reported that they are currently employed. Job titles of these individuals included HR manager, systems engineer, project leader, and broker.

### *Procedure*

Using the materials and procedures described in Study 4, participants were randomly assigned to read details of a performance system for either a male or a female target before indicating developmental experience assignment. Next, participants indicated their own interest in the same developmental experiences. Finally, participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and demographic questions.

## Measures

*Assignment of Challenging Tasks.* Participants indicated the extent to which they would recommend assignment of each of 10 basic tasks described in Studies 1, 3, and 4 for the target individual on a 7-point scale anchored with 1 (*strongly oppose*) and 7 (*strongly recommend*). Half of the tasks were challenging, and half were not challenging forms. Counterbalancing was not used in this study to preserve power. Separate composites were created to represent the criteria by computing the average recommendation for each of the challenging tasks (Cronbach's alpha = .68) and not challenging tasks (Cronbach's alpha = .54).

*Choice of Challenging Tasks.* Participants indicated the extent to which they would choose to participate in each of 10 basic tasks described in Study 1 (half described as challenging, half as less challenging) on a 7-point scale anchored with 1 (*strongly oppose*) and 7 (*strongly choose*). Separate composites were created to represent the criteria by computing the average for each of the challenging tasks (Cronbach's alpha = .67) and not challenging tasks (Cronbach's alpha = .60).

*Ambivalent Sexism.* As in Study 4, participants responded to statements about ambivalent beliefs on a 7-point response scale anchored with 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). The 11-item benevolent sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) was internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha = .85), as was the 11-item hostile sexism subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .71).

## Study 5: Results and Discussion

### *Gender and Benevolent Sexism as Predictors of Assignment of Challenging Tasks*

As in Study 4, we conducted two separate hierarchical regression analyses. In the first step of these regression equations, control variables were entered. In the second step, we entered target and participant gender with benevolent or hostile sexism as predictors of the assignment of challenging tasks (see Table 5). In the third and fourth steps, the two- and three-way interactions were added, respectively. The results confirm the findings of Study 4 and support Hypothesis 7; the effect of the interaction of target gender and benevolent sexism (but not hostile sexism) on the assignment of challenging tasks was moderated by participant gender (see Figure 2). As in Study 4, we interpreted these findings by graphing the pattern of relations and conducting simple slope comparisons. Consistent with our expectations and the results of Study 4, the relationship between benevolence and task assignment was more negative for men evaluating female targets ( $\beta = -.48, p = .05$ ) than for men evaluating male targets ( $\beta = .34, p = .10$ ) or women evaluating female or male targets ( $\beta = -.23, p = .41$  and  $\beta = .04, p = .81$ , respectively). Consistent with the analyses of Study 4, we also conducted significance tests of the differences between slopes (see Dawson & Richter, 2006, for the procedure). The results suggest that the relationship between benevolent sexism and challenging assignments for female targets was significantly stronger among men

**Table 5**  
**Target, Participant Gender, and Sexism as Predictors of Assignment**  
**of Challenging Tasks (Study 5)**

	Benevolent Sexism		Hostile Sexism	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1		.63**		.63**
Nonchallenging assignments	.72**		.72**	
Race	.12		.12	
Highest level of education	.03		.03	
Native English speaker	-.32**		-.32**	
Work status	.22*		.22*	
Step 2		.02		.01
Sexism	-.13		-.11	
Target gender	.01		.00	
Participant gender	.02		.04	
Step 3		.01		.01
Sexism $\times$ Target Gender	-.06		.05	
Sexism $\times$ Participant Gender	.03		.02	
Target $\times$ Participant Gender	.06		.06	
Step 4		.06**		.04
Sexism $\times$ Target $\times$ Participant Gender	-.27**		-.20	
Overall $R^2$		.72**		.68**

*Notes:* The effect of the native English speaker variable could be due to two separate possibilities: (a) the subtlety of the language used to describe the different types of assignments and/or (b) cultural influences. With regard to the first explanation, each assignment was described in a brief phrase that was altered only slightly to reflect the intended level of challenge (see the appendix), which may have affected interpretations of these assignments. With regard to the second explanation, it is also possible that nonnative English speakers have different cultural values than native English speakers. Cultural values certainly might affect whether challenging experiences are seen as positive or negative and thus could have affected the extent to which these assignments were recommended.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

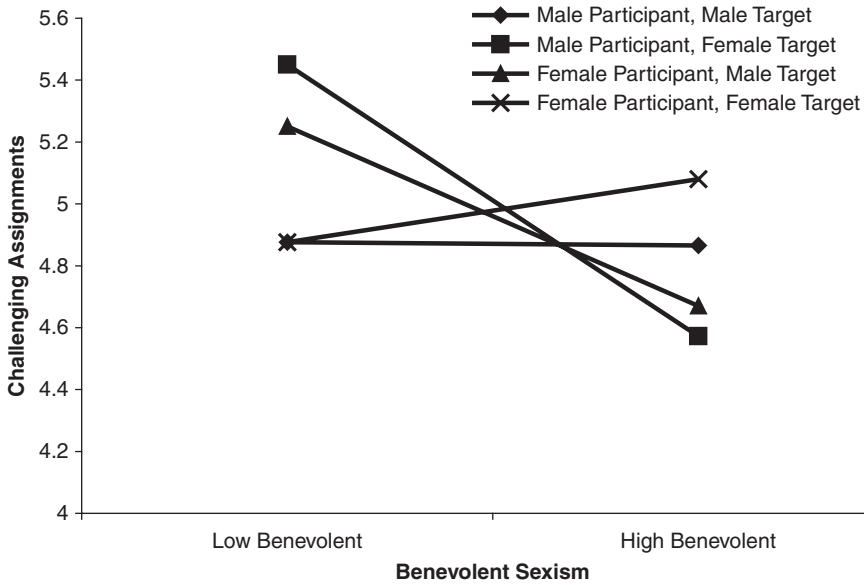
than women ( $t = -2.39, p < .05$ ) and stronger among men who evaluated women than those who evaluated men ( $t = -1.89, p < .05$ ).

### *Gender as a Predictor of Personal Choice of Challenging Tasks*

Supporting the results of Study 3, there was no evidence of difference between men ( $M = 5.59, SD = 0.78$ ) and women ( $M = 5.64, SD = 0.88$ ) in their likelihood of choosing to experience challenging developmental opportunities,  $t = .59, p = .56$ . Similarly, in a regression analysis controlling for desire to experience nonchallenging assignments, participant gender was not a significant predictor of desire to experience challenging assignments ( $B = .05, p = .66$ ).

Together, these results support the findings of Studies 3 and 4 and suggest that women may be assigned less challenging tasks than men due to men's benevolent ideologies rather than personal choices. Thus, the findings of the initial experiments generalize to a sample with more work experience.

**Figure 2**  
**The Interaction of Target and Participant Gender and Benevolent Sexism in Predicting Challenging Task Assignment (Study 5)**



## General Discussion

Overall, the current results suggest that although overt, numerical differences in developmental experiences engaged in by male and female managers have been minimized, subtle differences continue to persist. Extending previous research (e.g., Ohlott et al., 1994), the pattern of qualitative experiences that emerged suggests that male managers engage in more challenging experiences than female managers, that male targets are assigned more challenging experiences than female targets when their evaluators are male and high in benevolent sexism, and that these patterns are not necessarily due to personal choices. These five studies are complementary in function; Study 1 provides evidence of qualitative differences in men's and women's evaluations of their developmental experiences, whereas Study 2 uses reports of more formal training activities that were rated by experienced coders as qualitatively distinct. Study 3 addresses an alternative explanation of personal choice. The experiment described in Study 4 takes the perspective of decision makers and directly addresses the influence of benevolent sexism on, and the causal relationship between, gender and the assignment of developmental experiences. Finally, Study 5 integrates both perspectives in a sample of professional MBA students, confirming that benevolence is negatively associated with challenging task assignments among male decision-evaluating female targets and that men and women did not differ in their desire for such opportunities. This combination of

samples, perspectives, and laboratory and field methods provides compelling data with theoretical and practical implications.

From a theoretical perspective, this research suggests that benevolent sexism can be manifested in inhibiting women's participation in challenging developmental opportunities. Because challenging assignments (e.g., experiences that require new skills) are those that are most likely to lead to advancement opportunities (e.g., Bray & Howard, 1983), ambivalent sexism theory can help to explain the underrepresentation of women in the highest levels of organizations. Thus, this research provides evidence that (in addition to the traditional and hostile forms of sexism) subjectively positive forms of sexism might have negative consequences for women. We propose that the predictions of role congruity, lack-of-fit, and tokenism theories should be supplemented by consideration of the manner in which protective paternalism and benevolent ideologies about women may influence stereotyping in organizations.

Recent theorists point to selective forms of incivility, which involve mistreatment in the form of subtle behaviors that defy social norms, including acting in a discourteous or disrespectful manner, as the manifestation of modern discrimination (L. M. Cortina, 2008). Although incivility certainly characterizes a wide range of contemporary forms of discrimination, it does not address the seemingly civil but ultimately detrimental effects of benevolence. Indeed, in addition to its effects on the types of development women access, benevolence may have implications for any employment decision involving perceived challenge or risk. Moreover, experiencing protective forms of paternalism may have negative effects on women's self-views; if others think that they should be protected from challenging situations, women may begin to believe that they are not capable of high performance in these situations. This process could decrease self-efficacy or even create a stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) that leads to underperformance on challenging tasks.

In addition to highlighting the importance of benevolent sexism, the current research also underscores the need to examine both quantitative and qualitative measures of experience (Quiñones et al., 1995; Waldman & Avolio, 1993). The differential pattern of results for these measures suggests that additional information is being captured by qualitative measures that are not explained by quantitative measures. Beyond questions of gender equity, researchers should integrate qualitative constructs in their conceptualization of leader development.

From a practical perspective, these results suggest that women seeking advancement, as well as the organizations in which they work, should strive to ensure that men and women have equal opportunities for all types of developmental assignments. This may be particularly important (and complicated) when situations arise in organizations that do not originally present as DWEs. For example, a need arises in an organization that requires a manager to quickly identify an employee to fill this need. The individual who fills this need reaps the benefits of engaging in challenging DWEs. Time-sensitive situations such as the above example demand quick responses, preventing more slow, structured, and controlled processing. However, it is controlled processing that is required to inhibit the behavioral outcomes of automatically activated stereotypes (Devine, 1989). Therefore, these situations may be precisely the circumstances where we find significant gender differences in the assignment of challenging DWEs. As recommended by De Pater et al. (2009), female managers should seek out challenging developmental experiences. Raising awareness of one's desire to

engage in challenging DWEs may be an effective approach to obtaining a challenging DWE for a female employee interested in advancement. In addition, supervisors should be made aware that even seemingly kind attitudes about women might lead to discrimination and limit women's advancement to the highest levels of organizations. Thus, supervisors should be given specific guidance regarding how to avoid stereotype-based judgments regarding the allocation of developmental opportunities.

The current findings must be considered in light of the limitations of the samples and methodology. Both field samples are limited to self-reported experiences, so it is impossible to discern whether these reports are truly representative of the experiences in which men and women are engaging. There may be differences in the way men and women interpret the questions or bias in the self-report data. However, the findings of the fourth and fifth studies mitigate this concern to some extent by demonstrating that the pattern of distribution of challenging assignments mirrors that reported by actual male and female managers. The undergraduate student participants used in the third and fourth studies also bring generalizability into question, although it could be argued that undergraduate students will soon be in a position to make decisions about which DWEs they will undertake. Another potential limitation is the low reliability of the experiences in Studies 4 and 5. A few of the assignments seemed to be less consistent with other items (e.g., interaction with diverse workers), and removing these items did improve the reliabilities. However, we chose to retain all of the items to be consistent across the studies and to maintain alignment with McCauley's (1999) taxonomy of DWEs. Although many of the effect sizes that emerged in this research are small, such differences may accumulate over time and create much larger disparities in the representation of men and women at the highest levels of organizations (see statistical modeling by Martell et al., 1996).

In addition to these methodological limitations, it is also important to recognize that several of the proposed hypotheses were not supported or were not supported consistently across studies. Whereas data from the field samples suggested that there was a main effect of gender on challenging developmental experiences, findings from the lab studies suggest that experiences assigned to men and women differ only when considering both gender and benevolent ideologies of the decision maker. These discrepancies may be explained in part by the diverging methodologies; unlike genuine supervisors, participants in laboratory experiments may be less sensitive to the requirements and outcomes of assignments as they are likely not invested in how well the target of their evaluation would perform a given task. It may also be that naturally occurring variability across employees (which was methodologically controlled in the experiments) contributes to the distribution of developmental assignments; male and female managers may engage in behaviors, such as those that reflect ingratiation (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982) or work-life conflict (e.g., King, Botsford, & Huffman, 2009), that affect the developmental opportunities they are assigned. The extent to which individuals—both men and women—are effective active agents in their development and promotion deserves more attention.

There is also some inconsistency across Studies 4 and 5 with regard to women's developmental assignment tendencies. Although neither slope was statistically significant, the relationship between benevolence and task assignment was negative for women who evaluated female targets in Study 5 ( $\beta = -.23, p = .41$ ) and positive for the same conditions in Study 4 ( $\beta = .16, p = .17$ ). These differences could be due to the different samples (the former

involved working professionals, the latter students), instability in the estimate (partly a function of a small sample in Study 5), or an unmeasured moderator that explains women's beliefs about challenging developmental assignments. It could be that specific aspects of the individual or situation, such as gender identification or work-family culture, affect how women reflect their own ambivalence about women's roles. Nevertheless, these limitations should be weighed against the generally consistent pattern of findings across samples and methodologies.

Indeed, integrating data from the field and the lab, the results of the current research suggest that benevolent ideologies may contribute to differences in the extent to which men and women experience challenging developmental work. These data demonstrate that women's advancement may be stifled not only by traditional (hostile) forms of sexism but also by seemingly positive (benevolent) decisions and behaviors. Moreover, the current research suggests that the realization of gender equality in the workplace may depend on the attention of researchers and practitioners to both types of sexism.

## Appendix

### Challenging and Non-Challenging Tasks

1. A task requiring this person to learn significantly/**slightly** new or very/**somewhat** unfamiliar responsibilities
2. A task requiring this person to start something radically/**somewhat** new in the organization or make strategic changes in business
3. A task requiring this person to fix major/**minor** problems created by a predecessor
4. A challenging/**straightforward** task requiring this person to deal with subordinates who lack adequate experience and are resistant to change
5. A high-/**low**-stakes task in which there was **not a great deal of** pressure from senior managers, high visibility, clear deadlines, and responsibility for key decisions
6. A large/**small** task including responsibility over multiple/**a few** functions, groups, products, or services
7. A task that requires this person to interface with important/**trivial** groups outside the organization, such as customers or other organizations
8. An unusual/**routine** task that requires this person to influence peers, higher management, or other people over whom they have no direct authority
9. A novel/**standard** task that requires this person to work with people from different cultures or with institutions in other countries
10. A task that requires this person to **go beyond their comfort zone and** have responsibility for the work of people of both genders and different racial and ethnic backgrounds

*Note:* Boldface components represent the challenging versions of items.

### Notes

1. A factor analysis revealed that these variables did not load consistently on any factor structure other than a forced single factor. As they can be conceptualized as distinct events, they were examined individually.
2. A test of gender differences in a composite of all of the qualitative experiences ( $\alpha = .89$ ) revealed that men had an adjusted mean of 4.65 ( $SE = .07$ ) and women had an adjusted mean of 4.33 ( $SE = .10$ ),



indicating that the male managers reported significantly more qualitatively rich experiences than the female managers,  $F(1, 143) = 3.51, p = .03, \eta^2 = .04$ .

- The coders used in Study 2 (six male and five female managers with supervisory experience) also evaluated the extent to which each of the 10 tasks (in either challenging or not challenging form, counterbalanced across pilot participants) were challenging on a 7-point scale anchored with 1 (*not at all challenging*) and 7 (*extremely challenging*). Independent-samples  $t$  tests on each item confirmed that assignments designed to be challenging were rated as more challenging (overall  $M = 5.43, SD = 0.94$ ) than those designed to be not challenging (overall  $M = 3.35, SD = 0.45$ ). Only one comparison (“a task that requires this person to go beyond their comfort zone” versus to “a task that requires this person to go beyond their comfort zone and have responsibility for the work of people of both genders and different racial and ethnic backgrounds”) did not reach the .05 level of significance. To be consistent with the typology of tasks used in the first study, this task was retained in the experiment.

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