

Ambivalence Toward Men: Understanding Conflicting Feelings

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Defining Ambivalence toward Men (ATM)

Ambivalence toward Men (ATM) is a complex psychological construct characterized by the simultaneous existence of opposing attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses directed toward men as a social group. This duality typically involves a combination of positive, often idealized or dependent viewpoints, coexisting with negative, critical, or hostile sentiments. Unlike simple prejudice, which is generally unidirectional (either positive or negative), ATM involves an inherent tension and **cognitive conflict** arising from these contradictory evaluations. This concept is crucial for understanding contemporary gender relations, as it highlights that attitudes toward a target group can be multifaceted, rooted deeply in societal structure, cultural norms, and historical power dynamics. The ambivalence is not merely confusion, but a structured psychological response to the perceived dual role of men in society: as powerful oppressors or competitors, and simultaneously as necessary providers or protectors.

The formal study of ATM often draws parallels from the broader framework of Ambivalent Sexism Theory, initially developed by Glick and Fiske, which posits that sexism operates through both overtly hostile and seemingly positive, benevolent components. When applied to men, ATM suggests that individuals--regardless of their own gender--may harbor resentment toward men's perceived societal dominance and privilege, while simultaneously valuing or relying upon men who fulfill traditional, often restrictive, gender roles, such as the strong provider or the rational leader. Understanding this interplay is essential because the benevolent dimensions often serve to justify and maintain the status quo, making the hostile dimensions more difficult to articulate or challenge openly. This complex emotional landscape contributes significantly to the instability and challenges observed in intergroup interactions between genders, maintaining a delicate balance between admiration and resentment.

The experience of ambivalence is inherently stressful because it requires the individual to navigate contradictory impulses. For instance, a person might strongly advocate for gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures, yet find themselves unconsciously seeking or admiring traits in individual men that align with traditional masculine stereotypes of strength and authority. This internal negotiation results in fluctuating behaviors and judgments, where men as a group might be globally criticized, while individual men who conform to favorable stereotypes are exempt from that criticism, or even praised excessively. Therefore, ATM is not focused on individual relationships, but rather on the generalized, culturally reinforced schema applied to the male collective, reflecting the deep impact of societal expectations on psychological processing.

Theoretical Foundations and Historical Context

The theoretical grounding for ATM is firmly established within social psychology, particularly in theories dealing with stereotyping, prejudice, and social dominance. Historically, attitudes toward

men have been shaped by their dominant position in most industrialized and pre-industrial societies, often holding the majority of political, economic, and institutional power. This historical context necessitates a dualistic emotional response from non-dominant groups: recognizing the power that men wield (leading to fear or hostility) and acknowledging the resources and security that access to that power can provide (leading to dependence or admiration). The existence of ATM is thus a byproduct of rigid gender stratification, where men occupy the high-status, high-power category, and the associated stereotypes are functional for maintaining social order.

While the study of Ambivalence toward Women (ATW) focuses on the objectification and infantilization of women, the analysis of ATM focuses on the burden and privilege associated with the male role. Traditional masculinity mandates qualities such as stoicism, competitiveness, and resourcefulness. The positive pole of ATM often represents an appreciation for these qualities when they translate into societal benefits, such as protection or economic stability. Conversely, the negative pole arises from the perception that these same traits lead to aggression, emotional unavailability, and the systemic exclusion of others from power. Early sociological research on gender roles implicitly laid the groundwork for ATM by demonstrating how the prescribed roles for men--the **instrumental roles**--create both respect and resentment simultaneously within the social fabric.

Furthermore, the historical construction of gender roles creates a paradox known as the "male dilemma." Men are expected to be physically and emotionally strong, yet this strength often precludes them from expressing vulnerability, leading to emotional distance and interpersonal difficulties. ATM reflects society's complicated reaction to this dilemma: admiration for the man who overcomes obstacles and provides, coupled with hostility toward the man whose rigidity and emotional suppression cause harm or distance. This theoretical perspective emphasizes that ATM is not merely random dislike, but a structured response to the inherent contradictions within the culturally idealized image of manhood, an image that is both highly valued and profoundly restricting.

The Dual Dimensions: Hostile and Benevolent Components

Similar to the structure of Ambivalent Sexism, Ambivalence toward Men can be separated into two primary, correlated yet distinct dimensions: Hostile Ambivalence Toward Men (HATM) and Benevolent Ambivalence Toward Men (BATM). HATM represents the overtly negative and antagonistic component. It encompasses beliefs that men are inherently selfish, aggressive, overly competitive, prone to violence, or undeserving of their current societal privileges. Individuals scoring high on HATM often view men as a monolithic group actively working to maintain patriarchal control and suppress women and other marginalized groups. Expressions of HATM can manifest as generalized suspicion, overt criticism of male behavior, or the belief that men are fundamentally flawed or morally inferior due to their historical actions and continued dominance.

In contrast, Benevolent Ambivalence Toward Men (BATM) is a seemingly positive, yet ultimately patronizing set of attitudes that idealizes men when they conform to traditional, restrictive roles. BATM includes the belief that men are naturally stronger, more rational, or better suited for leadership and financial provision. While these views appear complimentary--for instance, admiring a man for his protective nature--they ultimately enforce a narrow definition of masculinity and perpetuate dependence. BATM supports the idea that men should occupy certain roles because they are inherently superior in those domains, thereby justifying gender inequality. The danger of BATM lies in its seductive nature: it rewards men who adhere to outdated stereotypes (e.g., the stoic provider) while simultaneously punishing those who deviate (e.g., the emotionally expressive or nurturing man).

The synergy between HATM and BATM is critical for the stability of gender relations. BATM acts as a psychological reward system, softening the harshness of HATM. When men are perceived as fulfilling their benevolent duties--protecting, providing, and being honorable--the hostility (HATM) is suppressed or directed only toward men who fail to meet these idealized standards. This dual system ensures that societal structures remain relatively intact: men who conform are praised and protected by the benevolent dimension, while those who step outside the prescribed roles, or men as a whole when they fail the group, become targets of the hostile dimension. This mechanism maintains the structural power of the male collective while allowing for individual admiration, making the overall system of gender hierarchy highly resilient to change.

Cognitive Mechanisms and Internal Conflict

The experience of Ambivalence toward Men is intrinsically linked to **cognitive dissonance**, a psychological tension arising from holding two or more contradictory beliefs, values, or attitudes simultaneously. In the context of ATM, an individual might highly value the principles of egalitarianism and autonomy (a belief system that generates hostility toward male dominance), while simultaneously having a deep-seated, culturally instilled need for the security and resources traditionally provided by men (a belief system that generates benevolence). This conflict is not easily resolved because both the need for equality and the need for security are powerful psychological drivers. To manage this dissonance, individuals often engage in complex mental gymnastics, such as compartmentalizing their views, where they accept egalitarianism in the abstract but rely on traditional roles in personal relationships, or by selectively focusing on evidence that supports one side of the ambivalence while ignoring the other.

Socialization plays a paramount role in establishing this cognitive conflict. From a young age, individuals are exposed to media, cultural narratives, and family dynamics that reinforce the dual image of men: the heroic, successful, and capable figure versus the aggressive, emotionally distant, or morally corrupt figure. These pervasive cultural scripts establish the psychological framework for ATM. For instance, action films often portray men as saviors (benevolent), while

news reports frequently highlight male-perpetrated violence or corporate malfeasance (hostile). The constant bombardment of these opposing images makes it psychologically efficient to adopt an ambivalent stance, allowing the individual to cope with the complexity of the social world without having to fully resolve the inherent contradictions in gender roles.

Furthermore, the mechanism of **system justification theory** helps explain why BATM persists despite the push for equality. System justification suggests that people are motivated to defend and bolster the existing social, economic, and political arrangements, even if those arrangements disadvantage them. By idealizing men in their traditional roles (BATM), individuals implicitly justify the existing hierarchical structure, which reduces psychological threat and uncertainty. If men are inherently better leaders or providers, then the current distribution of power seems fair and natural. This cognitive process stabilizes the social system by mitigating the desire for radical change, demonstrating how the benevolent component of ambivalence serves a powerful, unconscious function in maintaining the status quo, even while the hostile component acknowledges the negative realities of inequality.

Societal Manifestations and Intergroup Dynamics

Ambivalence toward Men manifests clearly across various societal domains, impacting everything from workplace interactions to political participation. In the professional sphere, men may experience the dual nature of ATM through the "glass escalator" effect--where they are rapidly promoted in female-dominated fields (benevolence)--but simultaneously face heightened scrutiny and pressure to conform to rigid standards of emotional resilience and leadership (hostility toward perceived weakness). For women in leadership, ATM can complicate their interactions with male subordinates and peers; they may be prone to over-relying on male input in traditionally masculine tasks (BATM) while simultaneously being overly critical of male errors or displays of self-interest (HATM), leading to inconsistent management styles and communication breakdowns within mixed-gender teams.

In the political arena, ATM profoundly influences public opinion regarding social policy and gender equity initiatives. Hostile ATM often fuels cynical reactions to male political figures and generalized demands for accountability, particularly regarding issues of corporate power or military action. Conversely, Benevolent ATM can lead to the unquestioning acceptance of male authority figures, especially those who project an image of paternalistic strength and stability, often resulting in a preference for male candidates during times of perceived crisis. This ambivalence ensures that men are simultaneously held to an impossible standard of moral perfection and yet given undue deference simply for occupying a position of power, creating a volatile dynamic in public discourse where men are both idealized symbols and primary targets of societal frustration.

Furthermore, ATM shapes the cultural response to male-focused social movements, such as those

addressing men's mental health or father's rights. When these movements advocate for men to embrace vulnerability or emotional expression, they often conflict with the expectations of BATM, which values stoicism and strength, leading to public skepticism or dismissiveness. However, when these movements focus on men as victims of societal pressure or false accusations, they may tap into the hostile dimension, as HATM can sometimes be misdirected toward blaming the system rather than the individuals involved. The societal reaction is thus rarely unified; it is fragmented by the underlying ambivalence, making it difficult to achieve consistent support or understanding for issues that affect men outside of traditional, approved frameworks.

Measurement and Research Tools

The empirical measurement of Ambivalence toward Men presents unique methodological challenges, primarily due to the subtle and socially undesirable nature of some components. Researchers typically rely on self-report questionnaires adapted from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) or the Ambivalence toward Women Inventory (AWI). A standardized tool, often called the Ambivalence Inventory toward Men (AIM), is designed to separately measure the Hostile Ambivalence Toward Men (HATM) and Benevolent Ambivalence Toward Men (BATM) subscales, ensuring that the two dimensions are captured independently rather than collapsing them into a single prejudice score.

Items designed to measure HATM might include statements such as:

"Most men are overly competitive and will step on others to get ahead."

"Men are generally unwilling to share power or privilege with others."

"Many men use their societal position to manipulate others."

In contrast, items measuring BATM focus on the positive idealization and dependence:

"Men have a natural ability to take charge and lead effectively in a crisis."

"The world would be much better off if men embraced their natural role as protectors."

"A true man should be willing to sacrifice his personal needs for the well-being of others."

A significant challenge in research is mitigating **social desirability bias**. Since overt hostility (HATM) is often socially frowned upon, respondents may underreport these attitudes. Similarly, while BATM appears positive, acknowledging dependence on traditional male roles can conflict with modern egalitarian values, leading to potential underreporting of benevolent items as well. Researchers often employ implicit measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), to capture the automatic, unconscious associations individuals hold toward men, providing a more

candid assessment of the deeply ingrained nature of this ambivalence that self-report measures might miss. Valid and reliable measurement is crucial for demonstrating how ATM correlates with various outcomes, including voting behavior, hiring decisions, and relationship satisfaction.

Impact on Interpersonal and Familial Relationships

The pervasive nature of Ambivalence toward Men significantly influences the dynamics within interpersonal and familial relationships, often creating unstable and contradictory expectations. In romantic partnerships, ATM can lead to the "pedestal-to-pitfall" phenomenon. An individual high in BATM may initially idealize their male partner, viewing him through the lens of the strong, capable provider, leading to intense admiration and dependence. However, when the partner inevitably fails to meet this impossible standard--perhaps by showing vulnerability, failing economically, or needing emotional support--the hostile dimension (HATM) is activated. This sudden shift results in disappointment, criticism, and devaluation, characterized by the belief that the man has failed his fundamental societal role. This oscillation between idealization and contempt makes long-term relationship stability difficult.

In familial contexts, particularly between parents and sons, ATM shapes expectations regarding emotional expression and career paths. Parents high in BATM may inadvertently pressure their sons to pursue high-status, high-earning careers, emphasizing stoicism and discouraging emotional vulnerability, thereby reinforcing the restrictive nature of traditional masculinity. Conversely, parents struggling with HATM might view their sons' natural competitiveness or assertiveness with suspicion, constantly monitoring them for signs of toxic behavior, leading to a strained and overly critical environment. This ambivalence places immense pressure on men to perform traditional roles while simultaneously being judged harshly for the very traits required to succeed in those roles (e.g., assertiveness).

Crucially, ATM also impacts men's mental health. When men internalize the high standards set by BATM, they face intense pressure to be successful, emotionally resilient, and financially dominant. Failure to achieve these ideals can lead to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and increased rates of depression and anxiety, often exacerbated by the inability to seek help due to the HATM-fueled societal stereotype that emotional neediness is a sign of weakness. Thus, ATM acts as a double-edged sword, both setting the bar for male success impossibly high and penalizing men for the emotional repercussions of attempting to meet it.

Critiques and Future Research Directions

While the framework of Ambivalence toward Men provides a powerful lens for examining gender dynamics, it is not without its critiques. A primary limitation is the tendency for existing models to treat men as a monolithic group, often failing to adequately address the complexity introduced by

intersectionality. The experiences of men of color, gay men, transgender men, or men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often fundamentally different from the experiences of privileged, heterosexual, white men, yet current ATM scales may not capture these nuances. Future research must develop more nuanced instruments that assess how race, class, and sexual orientation modify the specific content and intensity of both hostile and benevolent attitudes directed toward different subgroups of men. For instance, the benevolent idealization (BATM) of the "protector" might be reserved only for men who fit specific racial or class profiles, while hostile attitudes (HATM) are disproportionately applied to others.

Another theoretical critique centers on the directional nature of the ambivalence. While ATM is typically studied as attitudes held by non-men toward men, research increasingly suggests that men themselves can internalize ATM, viewing their own gender group through the same dualistic lens. This internalized ambivalence--where a man simultaneously admires the ideals of masculinity while resenting the emotional cost and societal expectation--can be highly detrimental to self-esteem and identity formation. Future studies should focus on the psychological consequences of internalized ATM and its relationship to male identity conflict and help-seeking behaviors.

Finally, as gender roles continue to evolve, particularly in Western societies, the specific content of BATM and HATM is likely to shift. Traditional benevolent ideals (e.g., physical strength, financial dominance) may be replaced by modern benevolent ideals (e.g., emotional literacy, supportive partnership). Researchers must continuously update measurement tools to capture these evolving targets of ambivalence. Understanding these shifts is essential not only for theoretical accuracy but also for developing effective interventions aimed at promoting healthier, more equitable, and less stressful gender relationships by dismantling the rigid, dualistic expectations imposed by Ambivalence toward Men.