

# Attitudes Toward Men: A Modern Perspective

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## Introduction: Defining Attitudes Toward Men

Attitudes toward men (ATM) constitute a crucial area of study within social psychology, focusing on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral evaluations individuals hold regarding men as a social group. Unlike the extensive research dedicated to sexism against women, the systematic study of attitudes specifically directed toward men is a relatively newer, though increasingly vital, field. These attitudes are not monolithic; they vary significantly across cultures, generations, and individual experiences, encompassing a wide spectrum from profound respect and positive valuation to intense hostility or dismissiveness. Understanding ATM requires moving beyond simple prejudice models to acknowledge the complex interplay of power dynamics, societal expectations, and the inherent ambivalence often associated with gender roles. Scholars emphasize that ATM are deeply embedded in the prevailing social structure, often reflecting and reinforcing traditional patriarchal norms even when the attitudes themselves appear to be negative toward specific male behaviors or characteristics. This field seeks to categorize, measure, and analyze the pervasive societal schemas that dictate how men are perceived, judged, and treated in various contexts, including professional settings, interpersonal relationships, and media representations, providing a necessary counterpoint to the traditional focus on attitudes toward women.

## The Ambivalence Model of Gender Attitudes

The most influential framework for understanding attitudes toward men is rooted in the concept of ambivalent sexism, originally developed to explain attitudes toward women. When applied to men, this model posits the existence of two distinct, yet correlated, components: **Hostile Attitudes Toward Men (HAM)** and **Benevolent Attitudes Toward Men (BAM)**. HAM reflects overtly negative evaluations, characterized by resentment, suspicion, and perceived competition with men as a group. This component often arises from the perception that men exploit women, dominate social resources unfairly, or are fundamentally aggressive and morally deficient. For example, HAM includes beliefs that men exaggerate their problems or that they are generally insensitive and overly focused on sexual conquest. Conversely, BAM consists of seemingly positive, yet ultimately patronizing or restrictive, evaluations that serve to maintain traditional gender hierarchies. BAM often manifests as the belief that men are the natural protectors, providers, or intellectual superiors, but simultaneously implies that men must adhere rigidly to specific, often burdensome, masculine roles, such as emotional stoicism or financial self-sufficiency. This duality is critical because BAM, while appearing favorable, places immense psychological pressure on men and justifies the social system that limits their emotional expression and flexibility, thereby reinforcing the status quo through seemingly benign means.

The co-existence of HAM and BAM reveals the complexity inherent in gender prejudice. These attitudes are rarely expressed in isolation; rather, they often operate simultaneously within the

same individual or across different social contexts. A person might harbor HAM in response to perceived male dominance in the workplace, while simultaneously expressing BAM by expecting a man to handle all household repairs or financial decision-making. Researchers utilizing scales like the Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory (AMI) have demonstrated that these components, though conceptually distinct, are often positively correlated, meaning that individuals who hold high levels of HAM often also endorse high levels of BAM. This finding suggests that negative and positive stereotypes function together to stabilize gender inequality. The hostile component punishes deviations from the male role, while the benevolent component rewards conformity, ensuring that the societal structure remains largely intact, even as explicit expressions of prejudice become less socially acceptable. Furthermore, understanding the interaction between these two dimensions is crucial for developing interventions aimed at reducing gender bias, as addressing only hostile attitudes ignores the subtle, systemic damage caused by benevolent attitudes.

## Stereotypes and Social Expectations

Societal attitudes toward men are largely shaped by pervasive and deeply ingrained stereotypes that categorize men into predictable, often restrictive, social roles. These stereotypes can be broadly classified into positive and negative attributes, although even the positive traits often carry significant psychological costs. Positive stereotypes frequently emphasize agency, competence, and status; men are expected to be **strong**, decisive, rational, ambitious, and financially successful. These expectations define the ideal masculine standard, failure to meet which often leads to severe social sanction and internal distress. The negative stereotypes, however, portray men as emotionally repressed, overly aggressive, sexually objectifying, insensitive, and lacking in nurturing qualities. These negative traits are often highlighted in discussions of social problems such as violence, corporate greed, or emotional unavailability, creating a societal narrative where men are simultaneously lauded for their success and condemned for their presumed emotional deficits. This dualistic portrayal contributes significantly to the formation of ambivalent attitudes, where men are admired for their perceived strength but feared or pitied for their presumed inability to form deep emotional bonds.

A key aspect of gender stereotyping is the concept of the "prescriptive" versus "descriptive" stereotype. Descriptive stereotypes simply describe what men are believed to be (e.g., strong), while prescriptive stereotypes dictate what men *should* be (e.g., successful provider). Attitudes become particularly punitive when men violate these prescriptive norms. For instance, a man who displays vulnerability, expresses distress, or chooses a traditionally feminine career path (e.g., nursing or early childhood education) often faces significant attitudinal backlash, including social exclusion, ridicule, and professional marginalization. This backlash is a direct manifestation of negative attitudes designed to police gender boundaries. Research confirms that these societal expectations are highly correlated with men's reluctance to seek mental health assistance, their higher rates of risky behavior, and their difficulty in navigating shared parenting roles, illustrating

how negative attitudes, even those framed as expectations, can severely limit individual freedom and contribute to significant social costs.

## The Impact on Men's Mental Health and Well-being

The societal attitudes and rigid expectations placed upon men have profound and documented effects on their psychological and physical well-being. The constant pressure to adhere to the restrictive standards of traditional masculinity--often encapsulated in the benevolent expectation of **stoicism** and the hostile condemnation of emotional weakness--can lead to chronic stress and poor coping mechanisms. Men are frequently socialized to suppress emotions such as sadness, fear, and vulnerability, viewing them as signs of failure. This emotional constriction is a direct result of pervasive negative attitudes toward male emotional expression, which often label such behavior as "unmanly" or weak. Consequently, when men experience psychological distress, they are significantly less likely than women to recognize their symptoms, seek professional help, or utilize supportive social networks, leading to higher rates of untreated mental illness. This phenomenon is directly tied to the societal attitude that equates self-sufficiency with masculinity, making the admission of need a perceived failure.

Furthermore, the internalization of hostile attitudes toward men can manifest in destructive behaviors. For example, the pressure to prove oneself through risk-taking or aggression, often rooted in societal expectations related to dominance and fearlessness, contributes to higher rates of accidental injury, substance abuse, and suicide among men compared to women. The prevailing societal attitude often normalizes male aggression as a natural byproduct of masculinity, rather than viewing it as a learned behavior shaped by social context. This normalization, while seemingly descriptive, acts prescriptively, making it difficult for men to opt out of aggressive roles without facing social censure. Addressing these negative outcomes requires a shift in societal attitudes, moving away from rigid definitions of masculinity toward a more inclusive acceptance of diverse male experiences and emotional landscapes. This involves challenging both the hostile attitudes that punish perceived weakness and the benevolent attitudes that restrict men to the role of the infallible provider.

## Cultural and Historical Context

Attitudes toward men are not static; they evolve significantly across historical periods and vary dramatically across different cultures. Historically, in many Western societies, attitudes were heavily influenced by industrialization and military necessity, reinforcing the view of men primarily as economic producers and protectors. This led to high valuation of traits like physical strength, endurance, and rational decision-making, which formed the bedrock of benevolent attitudes toward men. However, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed significant shifts, particularly driven by feminist movements, changes in economic structures, and greater emphasis on

emotional intelligence. These shifts have led to increased scrutiny of traditional male privilege and dominance, resulting in a rise in **Hostile Attitudes Toward Men (HAM)** focused on dismantling perceived male hegemony. Contemporary attitudes often reflect a tension between the lingering respect for traditional male roles (BAM) and the growing skepticism and critique directed at male power structures (HAM).

Cross-cultural research further illuminates the variability of ATM. In cultures characterized by strong collectivist values, attitudes toward men may emphasize communal responsibility, filial piety, and group protection over individualistic achievement, contrasting sharply with the emphasis on personal success prevalent in many individualistic Western nations. Moreover, the specific targets of hostility or benevolence differ based on local norms regarding kinship, labor division, and religious beliefs. For instance, in societies where military service is mandatory or highly venerated, attitudes toward men who fulfill the protector role might be overwhelmingly benevolent, whereas in societies dealing with high levels of gender-based violence, attitudes may skew significantly toward hostility and distrust. Analyzing these cross-cultural variations is essential for disentangling universal cognitive biases from attitudes that are purely products of specific socio-historical contexts, thereby preventing the generalization of findings derived solely from Western samples.

## Intersectionality and Diverse Male Experiences

A comprehensive understanding of attitudes toward men necessitates an intersectional approach, acknowledging that the experience of masculinity--and the attitudes directed toward it--are profoundly shaped by race, class, sexual orientation, disability, and other social categories. The prevailing societal attitudes often center on a normative ideal: the successful, heterosexual, middle-class, white male. Attitudes toward men who deviate from this norm are layered with additional prejudices. For example, attitudes directed toward Black men are frequently characterized by heightened hostility, incorporating racial stereotypes related to criminality, physical aggression, and hypersexuality, often overriding or intensely complicating the benevolent attitudes associated with traditional male success. This results in a unique pattern of prejudice where the man is simultaneously feared and dehumanized, regardless of his individual achievements or conformity to other masculine ideals.

Similarly, attitudes toward gay men often involve unique forms of prejudice rooted in the violation of prescriptive heterosexual norms. While some hostile attitudes may target perceived effeminacy or failure to adhere to traditional masculine aggression, other attitudes may be characterized by specific benevolent forms, such as the stereotype that gay men are inherently more artistic, sensitive, or fashionable. These seemingly positive stereotypes still function to categorize and marginalize, placing gay men outside the normative definition of masculinity. Furthermore, socioeconomic class significantly mediates attitudes; working-class men may face attitudes that emphasize physical labor and toughness but deny them the intellectual competence attributed to

upper-class men. An intersectional lens forces researchers and policymakers to recognize that attitudes toward the category "men" are far less unified than initial research might suggest, demanding that interventions address the compounded prejudice faced by men who inhabit marginalized identities.

## Measurement and Future Research Directions

The rigorous study of attitudes toward men relies heavily on standardized psychological instruments designed to capture the nuanced and often conflicting components of these attitudes. The primary tool utilized is the **Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory (AMI)**, which operationalizes HAM and BAM into measurable scales, allowing researchers to quantify the levels of hostility and benevolence present in a population. Other methodologies include implicit association tests (IATs) to measure automatic, unconscious associations with male targets, and qualitative methods such as thematic analysis of media content and focus group discussions to uncover the lived experiences of men facing these attitudes. A critical challenge in measurement remains ensuring that scales are culturally relevant and validated across diverse populations, as the specific content of hostile and benevolent beliefs varies globally.

Future research in ATM is poised to expand into several critical areas. Firstly, there is a growing need to explore the developmental origins of these attitudes, investigating how children acquire and internalize gender stereotypes about men from parents, peers, and media, and how these attitudes change across the lifespan. Secondly, researchers must focus more intently on the behavioral consequences of ATM, moving beyond self-report measures to observe how specific hostile or benevolent attitudes translate into hiring discrimination, unequal judicial treatment, or differences in political representation. Finally, given the contemporary cultural debates surrounding masculinity, future studies must develop and test robust interventions aimed at reducing hostile attitudes and mitigating the restrictive effects of benevolent attitudes, thereby promoting healthier and more flexible definitions of manhood in society. This ongoing work is essential not only for understanding gender relations but for improving the overall well-being of men globally.