



The Mediating Role of Gender Stereotypes in the Relationship between Psychological Flexibility and Discrimination

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to analyze the relationships between psychological flexibility and discrimination, as well as the role of gender stereotypes within this relationship. The study was attended by 151 people aged between 18 and 49, $M = 27.02$, $AS = 9.98$, of which 56 men (37%) and 81 women (54%) and 14 people with different gender identity (9%). The instruments used were the Beliefs about Women Scale (BAWS) (Belk & Snell, 1986), the Agreeableness [A] Facets, Flexibility [A:Flex] (Goldberg et al., 2006) and for analyzing the discrimination, a scale was developed, targeting four facets: sexism towards women, sexism towards men, homophobia and racism. The scale was developed in order to measure the specific cultural context of discrimination. The results show that psychological flexibility is a strong predictor for discrimination, presenting negative associations with sexism towards women, sexism towards men and racism, but not with homophobia. Gender stereotypes did not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, with no semnificative effect on the relationship. The practical implications of the study were discussed, in terms of developing educational and social settings for improving psychological flexibility in order to decrease the attitudes of prejudice and to promote equality, diversity acceptance and interpersonal relationships based on tolerance.

Keywords: psychological flexibility, gender stereotypes, forms of discrimination

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the mediating role of gender stereotypes in the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination. Specifically, it examines how high or low levels of psychological flexibility relate to pro- or anti-diversity attitudes, and to what extent gender stereotypes contribute to the formation of negative prejudicial views.

Understanding the factors that lead to discriminatory attitudes can have critical implications for mitigating their negative effects, both on those targeted and on those exhibiting discrimination. By fostering greater cognitive flexibility, individuals can develop better adaptation strategies for challenging life situations and cultivate the resilience needed for personal growth and social change (Doorley et al., 2020).

In today's society, flexibility has become a valuable and essential trait, particularly in the context of navigating new and changing situations, as people need to develop adaptive responses (Vylobkova & Heintz, 2023). These economic, political, and social changes affect both personal and professional spheres, requiring individuals to respond effectively. This study will examine the extent to which an individual's cognitive processing style, conceptualized as psychological flexibility, influences their response to social changes, such as advances in gender equality and support for minority rights.

There is a need for an in-depth study of the factors that lead to discriminatory attitudes. Specifically, it is important to investigate which personality, cognitive, or emotional factors create a predisposition towards judgmental and intolerant attitudes. Additionally, the focus is on understanding the type of cognitive processing that occurs and individual differences in psychological flexibility to determine the causes of either acceptance or the risk of exclusion and violence.

The research aims to answer the question of how low levels of flexibility may lead to intolerance and rejection, and how high levels may promote acceptance and openness. To date, the relationship between these three variables has not been thoroughly explored in research, despite a significant body of studies examining the connection between cognitive flexibility and political attitudes, such as liberalism and prosocial behavior, as well as the impact of political attitudes on diversity acceptance and the role of gender stereotypes in shaping cognitive style.

In the existing literature, research has been conducted on political attitudes and cognitive style. Therefore, the objective

of this study is to fill this gap by highlighting psychological flexibility as a predictor of discrimination.

Psychological Flexibility

The current state of knowledge lacks a common perspective on the definition of psychological flexibility, with several viewpoints proposed in research (Vylobkova & Heintz, 2023). To analyze the role of flexibility in the development of discriminatory attitudes, it is essential to examine the existing perspectives on this construct across multiple studies. Various conceptualizations have been proposed, exploring the term from both a cognitive perspective, as a thinking and reality-processing style, and as a dispositional trait. Recent efforts have been made to integrate these perspectives into a generally accepted definition (Zhang et al., 2020). This has been studied in the realms of social, political, cognitive, and personality research.

The present study aims to explore how psychological flexibility manifests in social behavior by observing its effect on multiple discrimination, using self-assessment questionnaires to provide an integrative approach to flexibility from the perspective of personality psychology.

Flexibility, facet of agreeableness, refers to the ability to adapt to new situations and an individual's way of coping with change. A person's reactions, especially in social settings, reveal their adaptability to new or unpredictable situations (Ashton et al., 2014). Agreeableness, as a dimension of the HEXACO model, involves caring, prosocial, and people-oriented attitudes and behaviors (Ashton et al., 2014). High scores indicate a tendency to forgive others, show empathy, offer help, make compromises, and cooperate, alongside strong emotional control and a high willingness to adapt one's behavior depending on the situation. In contrast, low levels predict stubborn behaviors and a predisposition for conflict (Ashton et al., 2014).

Over time, flexibility has become an essential trait in an individual's optimal development, given the constant changes in society (Ananiadou et al., 2009; Lavy, 2020). Whether in career choices or personal life, flexibility provides the opportunity to be open to unexpected events and to adapt to the discomfort they may cause (Peiró, 2019). Vylobkova and Heintz (2023) propose researching psychological flexibility as a component of personality, focusing on its conceptualization as the ability to develop adaptive cognitions when faced with difficult feelings or emotions. This involves the capacity to experience a certain degree of discomfort that comes with encountering new information, which may contradict previously held beliefs. By

increasing psychological flexibility, people develop the resilience needed to cope with challenges in various areas of life. On the other hand, inflexibility can be associated with a heightened need for order, manifesting as high control and rigidity or a need for stability, often caused by excessive exposure to change (Vylobkova & Heintz, 2023).

Discrimination

Over time, discrimination in all its forms (e.g., racial, based on gender identity, disabilities, sexual orientation) has had significant negative effects on the quality of life of individuals from targeted groups (Hester et al., 2020). Belonging to a specific gender, sexual, or romantic identity, or to a particular ethnicity, are significant factors in the development of discriminatory attitudes both from outside and within the targeted communities. Discrimination often occurs intersectionally, as a reaction to multiple combined identities, which together increase the risk of vulnerability (Hester et al., 2020).

The term "multiple" or "intersectional discrimination" refers to the combination of multiple vulnerable identities that are at risk of being treated unfairly (Cea D'Ancona & Valles Martínez, 2021). Thus, when a person belongs to several groups simultaneously, each with a high likelihood of experiencing discrimination, they are at increased risk for multiple discrimination. For example, in the case of Black women, the risk of discrimination is higher, and the scale of this phenomenon requires a perspective that integrates both racism and sexism without treating them separately, as they often occur concurrently (Cea D'Ancona & Valles Martínez, 2021). In these cases, both "additive" discrimination, introduced by Beal (1970), and the concept of "multiple jeopardy," introduced by King (1988), which explains the perpetuation of inequality, are present.

Sexist attitudes towards women

Although most research has focused on understanding and predicting sexist behaviors, there is a need to conceptualize their effects on women (Croft et al., 2021). Regarding discrimination against women, it manifests in several forms of sexism: hostile, benevolent, and ambivalent sexism. The theory of ambivalent sexism highlights how the interdependence between men and women and power differentials are sustained by two ideologies: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Bareket & Fiske, 2023).

Numerous studies have indicated that the manifestation of hostile behavior occurs in both public spaces (workplace) and private settings (intimate relationships) with the objective of protecting the privileged social status and dominance of men (Fisher & Hammond, 2019). Women are less engaged in leadership positions as a consequence of these roles being more often associated with traits typically held by men, such as a desire for power and ambition (Feenstra et al., 2023).

Sexist attitudes towards men

Sexism is present in men's personal lives through the effects that masculinity standards impose on them, limiting their ability to express vulnerability (Croft & Block, 2015). The American Psychological Association has even proposed a set of best practices, based on 40 years of research, asserting that traditional gender standards have harmful psychological effects on boys and men (Pappas, 2019). These studies indicate a series of alarming data: in the United States, men are more likely than women to die by suicide, and their life expectancy is five years shorter (Pappas, 2019). The reasons behind these statistics are diverse; however, numerous studies suggest that the emotional rigidity promoted as a necessary standard of masculinity plays a significant role in reducing help-seeking behaviors, thereby affecting connections with others and leading to isolation (Croft et al., 2021).

Homophobia

The minority stress theory, developed by Meyer (1995), emphasizes that the mental health and quality of life of LGBTQ+ individuals are affected by stressors in the social environment (Mills-Koonce et al., 2018). These minority identities lead to a specific form of stress generated at multiple levels, including institutional discrimination in the form of lack of equal rights and interpersonal discrimination, such as fear of victimization, rejection, or aggression.

In recent years, significant changes have occurred in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in the workplace, evidenced by development programs indicating employees' willingness to become informed. However, serious forms of discrimination still exist in the workplace, such as the low rate of hiring individuals with non-heterosexual identities, or distal discrimination manifested through microaggressions and harassment, presented in subtle or direct ways (Maji et al., 2024).

Racism

Social exclusion and various forms of discrimination remain a significant issue for Roma individuals, the largest ethnic community in Europe, who continue to face these challenges (Guerrero et al., 2024). In the labor market, several studies show that the number of employed Roma individuals is increasing only in specific sectors, primarily concerning physical tasks (Aisa & Larramona, 2014). These aspects may result from a lack of professional qualifications due to low participation in the educational system, as well as discrimination from employers or colleagues. There is a pressing need to study and deepen the understanding of the impact of racism on the mental and physical health of the Roma community to implement appropriate measures in creating safe and accessible spaces that aid in their integration.

Relationships between Psychological Flexibility and Discrimination

At this stage of the research, the relationship between psychological flexibility and the development of discriminatory attitudes has not been addressed. The literature reveals significant correlations between intolerance toward diversity and conservatism (Beyer, 2020), between conservatism and low psychological flexibility (Zmigrod et al., 2020), and between dehumanization and outgroup bias (Borinca et al., 2023).

Research on the factors associated with discrimination began after World War II, a period during which studies highlighted the importance of examining the relationship between extreme right totalitarian regimes and cognitive biases to understand the foundations of prejudice-related actions and attitudes (Beyer, 2020). The notion that certain personality traits may lead individuals to adhere to ideological doctrines resulting in extreme discrimination was proposed by Hoffer (1951).

Given the extent of the discrimination phenomenon since the early 20th century, researchers have sought to uncover the cognitive foundations of extreme political orientations. Early studies on the factors leading to extremist political attitudes focused on measuring perception, stimulus processing, and cognition (Van Heil et al., 2016). Numerous investigations have centered on exploring the cognitive basis of right-wing politics to find associations between the two. If a direct link were found between a specific cognitive style and a political orientation, then that mode of processing reality could potentially be challenged through scientific studies (Zmigrod et al., 2020).

In psychological research on political orientations, the rigidity hypothesis of right-wing ideology has been frequently

tested in various studies. First introduced by Tetlock et al. (1984), this hypothesis posits that conservative orientation is based on cognitive and motivational rigidity. It refers to the motivation of individuals who adopt a conservative political stance stemming from a need to simplify reality in order to create a sense of control and order (Costello et al., 2021).

Liberalism and conservatism are the two political orientations studied in relation to tolerance or intolerance toward minorities and diversity (Zmigrod et al., 2020). These orientations influence perceptions of society and diversity, exhibiting differences in cognitive style. For example, conservatism, particularly in the U.S., is associated with the avoidance of uncertainty caused by information that contradicts existing knowledge (Jost et al., 2003), thus becoming a predictor of inequality and resistance to social change. Conservatism rejects novelty and diversity, upholding traditional values, while liberalism promotes analytical thinking that breaks phenomena down into parts (Talhelm et al., 2015). Research by Hodson and Dhont (2017) supports the idea that conservative perspectives on social issues, such as support for abortion or LGBTQ+ rights, correlate with high levels of racial discrimination and homophobia.

Social psychologists are developing models to study cognitive styles. It has been observed that the tendency toward authoritarianism is more frequently found among individuals who perceive their environment as unpredictable and difficult to understand (Jost et al., 2003; Van Hiel et al., 2004). These individuals simplify reality to create a sense of control. Thus, the concept of "Need for Cognitive Closure" has been introduced, showing significant correlations with conservative ideology (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2006). This concept aids in understanding the thought processes of those with this political attitude and in exploring their motivations. Prejudices and stereotypes can also arise from spontaneous cognitive processing, influencing social perception. In this processing, social categorization occurs automatically, which can lead to biases (Sassenberg et al., 2021).

In a 2020 study, Beyer investigated the relationship between conservatism and negative stereotypes toward various social groups, measuring these attitudes among undergraduate students in the United States. Participants completed questionnaires assessing conservatism, social dominance orientation, belief in a just world, religiosity, sexism, and prejudicial attitudes toward 15 social groups. One hypothesis, that conservatives would exhibit negative stereotypes at higher rates than liberals, was supported by the data. Conservatism was associated with negativity toward racial and religious

minorities, while liberalism correlated with negative stereotypes toward more powerful groups, such as Caucasians and Christians.

To gain a deeper understanding of discrimination, studies that explore the phenomenon of dehumanization and its associated factors are essential. Dehumanization refers to the denial of human traits to others, leading to a group being perceived as less human than others (Borinca et al., 2023). Consequently, certain groups are seen as more akin to animals or objects. This extreme process has strong negative effects on those considered nonconformists. Dehumanization is based on perceived differences, and in addition to empathy and social norms, cognitive processes mediate the relationship between group bias and dehumanization (Borinca et al., 2023).

Therefore, at this stage of the research, no direct links have been established between an individual's psychological flexibility and their tendency toward discrimination, indicating the need for future studies to explore this relationship for a clearer understanding. Considering the discussions above, one of the proposed research directions will be to examine the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, leading to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H1: *Psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with discrimination.*

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are formed from the expectations related to the common traits and behaviors of members of a social group (Ellemers, 2018). These gender roles represent organized thoughts about the behaviors attributed to women and men (Eagly et al., 2020). They help construct an overall picture of reality, influencing individuals' attitudes and behaviors to conform to traditional gender norms (Smith et al., 2021).

Gender classification arises when an individual exhibits traits associated with a perceived social role more frequently than a person of the opposite sex (Eagly et al., 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, kindness is seen as a common trait among women, rather than as an individual characteristic. This polarization explains behavioral differences by attributing motivations to gender, leading to the exaggeration of differences between women and men and to the perception of gender as a distinctive component (Ellemers, 2018). This belief underestimates variations within groups. The need to understand the social environment is based on quick information from those we interact with (Krieglmeyer & Sherman, 2012). Information associated with a specific category becomes stereotypes (Contreras et al., 2012). If the evaluation

of a group or an individual from that group is negative, negative prejudice is formed, and the stereotype is considered validated, as the traits of the individual align with the stereotypical ones (Gilmour, 2015).

Looking at the history of gender stereotypes, a picture of today's perceived differences emerges. Historical changes reflect the division of labor, with traditional roles assigned to women and men: women were responsible for child-rearing and household care, while men provided food through hunting or work (Wood & Eagly, 2002). These traits continue to be encouraged (Rudman & Glick, 2001), shaping assumptions about each gender's performance in various contexts (Eagly et al., 2000; Eagly & Wood, 2012). As a result, women developed traits such as care and empathy, while men developed ambition and aggressiveness. Women's primary responsibility for raising children limited their professional opportunities, allowing men to advance from roles as hunters to those of leaders or employers (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

In contemporary society, the modernization of production methods and the decreasing need for physical strength have gradually altered gender roles. In the past, men had an economic advantage due to physical labor, which provided income and social status (Alesina et al., 2013), and this event gave value to other traits and behaviors (Schmader, 2002). Industrialization reduced the importance of physical strength, allowing women to access more jobs and advance in education (Schneider & Bos, 2019). However, in post-industrial societies, a gender imbalance persists: about 60% of lawyers, doctors, programmers, and engineers are men, while women make up over 80% of nurses, teachers, and librarians (Hegeswich et al., 2010). This disparity continues to reinforce traditional gender roles, partly explained by women's greater responsibility for child care and domestic work, which hinders career advancement (Yavorsky et al., 2015).

In essence, gender stereotypes create expectations for individuals to adhere to certain roles and develop characteristics in line with them, which limits their personal and professional growth. Industrialization reduced the importance of physical strength, allowing women to access more jobs and advance in education (Schneider & Bos, 2019). However, in post-industrial societies, a gender imbalance persists: about 60% of lawyers, doctors, programmers, and engineers are men, while women make up over 80% of nurses, teachers, and librarians (Hegeswich et al., 2010). This disparity continues to reinforce traditional gender roles, partly explained by women's greater responsibility for child care and domestic work, which hinders career advancement (Yavorsky et al., 2015).

The Role of Gender Stereotypes in the Relationship Between Psychological Flexibility and Discrimination

Stereotypes simplify reality schematically, reducing the time required for information processing. Several theoretical models suggest that stereotypes serve the purpose of enabling fast processing, which requires less cognitive effort. Therefore, it is expected that a processing style based on psychological flexibility would reduce the acceptance of stereotypes as valid. People often seek to simplify their reality by using stereotypes. The theory of an information filtering model posits that a person is more inclined to accept information consistent with schemas developed through memory rather than information inconsistent with these schemas, leading to a simplified reality, especially when cognitive resources are low (Tao & Chen, 2017). Stereotypes act as filters of reality, which individuals use to represent the external world and differentiate consistent information over time from new information. Information consistent with pre-existing beliefs is easier to process than new information, increasing the likelihood of using stereotypes instead of processing new information. New and different information requires more cognitive processing resources (Bodenhausen, 2006; Sherman et al., 2000).

The application of stereotypes is often unconscious and difficult to inhibit, especially in older adults due to reduced cognitive flexibility. Older adults tend to rely on stereotypes and

2. METHOD

Participants and Procedure

A total of 151 individuals aged between 18 and 49 years ($M = 27.02$, $SD = 9.98$) participated in this study, including 56 men (37%), 81 women (54%), and 14 others (9%). In terms of background, 54 participants were from rural areas (36%), and 97 were from urban areas (64%). Regarding occupation, 80 were students (53%), 57 were employed (38%), and the remaining had other occupations. For 74 participants (49%), the highest level of education completed was high school, 6 had post-secondary education (4%), 51 had a university degree (34%), and 20 participants had completed a master's degree (13%).

Inclusion Criteria: Participants had to be Romanian citizens aged 18 or older. The sampling method used was convenience sampling. Out of the 200 people invited to participate, only 151 agreed to complete the study (75%). Preliminary information was provided via email, and no

past experiences to process information, making them more prone to negative biases (Radvansky et al., 2010; Hunzaker, 2014). Studies show that individuals between 60 and 80 years old are more inclined to draw stereotype-based conclusions than younger individuals (Radvansky et al., 2010). Heuristic strategies can amplify the phenomenon of over-categorization, leading to group-related stereotypes. Generalizing traits across an entire group of people is a stereotyping phenomenon that leads to erroneous impressions. In a 2021 study, Sassenberg et al. aimed to investigate the potential of flexible thinking styles to reduce stereotypes and negative biases. They conducted several experiments to explore how activating a creative mindset could reduce the spontaneous formation of stereotypes. The mindset was conceptualized as being composed of cognitive processes involving the selection and application of mental operations to make decisions (Sassenberg et al., 2021).

Thus, it can be observed that stereotypes play a role in shaping broad perceptions of certain groups, which are often invalid

Given the above, the study aims to measure the role of gender stereotypes in the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, thus formulating the following hypothesis:

H2: Gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination.

incentives were offered to participants. The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms. Participants were informed about the estimated response time (5-10 minutes) and given clear instructions on how to answer the items.

Ethical research conditions regarding data processing, interpretation, and data security were fulfilled. The data was initially organized in encrypted Excel tables accessible only to the study's author. No names or other identifying information were requested to maintain participant anonymity.

The sample size determined using GPower analysis was 107 participants, providing a power of .95, with an effect size of 0.15 and a significance level of .05. However, the final study included 151 participants.

Instruments

The data collection method used in this study was a questionnaire.

Sociodemographic variables were collected through a list of questions regarding age, gender, background, education level, and professional status.

Psychological flexibility was measured using the Agreeableness [A] Facets, Flexibility [A:Flex] scale (Goldberg et al., 2006). The instrument consists of 10 items and measures psychological flexibility, a facet of agreeableness and a component of the HEXACO model (HEXACO Personality Inventory). Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = very little, 2 = somewhat, 3 = neutral, 4 = considerably, 5 = very much. Scores were obtained by summing the points for each item.

Gender stereotypes were measured using the Beliefs About Women Scale (BAWS)(Belk & Snell, 1986). The instrument includes 75 items, but for time considerations, 10 items relevant to the study were selected to assess attitudes.

Discrimination was measured with a self-developed questionnaire containing four subscales to investigate the dimensions of sexism toward women, sexism toward men,

homophobia, and racism. Each scale consisted of five items. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree. Scores were calculated by summing the points for each item. A literature review of these four dimensions was conducted, and the items were adapted for the cultural context. In the absence of questionnaires examining racism toward Roma people, five items were created to reflect culturally and socially adopted attitudes. Examples of items include: "I do not take women's equality efforts seriously; they already have enough rights," "I believe it is a man's duty to earn more than his partner," "I believe homosexuality is a disease," "I believe Roma people are more violent than the rest of the population."

Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional, descriptive, correlational design.

3. RESULTS

To organize the data and test the hypotheses, the statistical analysis programs IBM SPSS 24 (IBM Corp, 2016) and the medmod module from Jamovi (The jamovi project, 2024) were used.

Descriptive Statistics

The mean scores, standard deviations, internal consistency coefficients, and correlations between variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistency Coefficients, and Correlations Between Variables

	M	AS	α	ST	FL	SXF	SXB	HOM	RAS
GS	22.28	7.27	.79	1					
PF	33.86	6.69	.78	-.05	1				
SXW	6.95	3.08	.78	.66**	-.21*	1			
SXM	7.81	3.52	.73	.69**	-.21*	.71**	1		
HOM	8.17	4.51	.91	.60**	-.07	.51**	.76**	1	
RAS	7.38	3.37	.84	.59**	-.18*	.66**	.66**	.64**	1

Note: **. $p < .01$, *. $p < .05$

GS = Gender Stereotypes, PF = Psychological Flexibility, SXW = Sexism Towards Women, SXM = Sexism Towards Men, HOM = Homophobia, RAS = Racism

The results show that participants scored low on gender stereotypes (M = 22.28, SD = 7.27) and relatively high on psychological flexibility (M = 33.86, SD = 6.69). Scores for sexism towards women (M = 6.95, SD = 3.08), sexism towards men (M = 7.81, SD = 3.52), homophobia (M = 8.17, SD = 4.51), and racism (M = 7.38, SD = 3.37) were all low.

There were significant correlations between gender stereotypes and sexism towards women ($r = .66, p < .01$), sexism towards men ($r = .69, p < .01$), homophobia ($r = .60, p < .01$), and racism ($r = .59, p < .01$). Additionally, psychological flexibility negatively correlated with sexism towards women ($r =$

-.21, $p < .05$), sexism towards men ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$), and racism ($r = -.18$, $p < .05$), but not with homophobia ($r = -.07$, $p > .05$). The skewness and kurtosis values fall within the range of (-3, 3), indicating a normal distribution of the data. There were no missing cases or data exclusions in any of the statistical analyses.

Hypotheses testing

H1: *Psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with discrimination.*

H1.a: *Psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with sexism toward women.*

H1.b: *Psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with sexism toward men.*

H1.c: *Psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with homophobia.*

H1.d: *Psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with racism.*

To test this hypothesis, four simple linear regression analyses were conducted, using psychological flexibility as the predictor variable and sexism towards women, sexism towards men, homophobia, and racism as the dependent variables, respectively.

Table 2

The simple linear regression analysis for psychological flexibility as a predictor of sexism toward women

Model	B	SE	β	t	p
PF	-.10	.04	-.21	-2.57	.01

Note: $R^2 = .04$, PF = Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility accounts for 4% of the variance in sexism toward women, with the regression equation being statistically significant, $F(1,149) = 6.61$, $p < .05$. A significant negative association was found between psychological flexibility and sexism toward women, $\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$.

Table 3

Simple linear regression analysis for psychological flexibility as a predictor of sexism toward men

Model	B	SE	β	t	p
PF	-.10	.04	-.21	-2.57	.01

Note: $R^2 = .04$, PF = Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility accounts for 4% of the variation in sexism toward men, with the regression equation

being statistically significant, $F(1,149) = 6.76$, $p < .05$. Psychological flexibility is significantly and negatively associated with sexism toward men, $\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$.

Table 4

Simple linear regression analysis for psychological flexibility as a predictor of homophobia

Model	B	SE	β	t	p
PF	-.05	.06	-.07	-.91	.36

Note: $R^2 = .01$, PF = Psychological Flexibility

It was observed that psychological flexibility accounts for only 1% of the variation in homophobia, with the regression equation being statistically insignificant, $F(1,149) = 0.83$, $p = .36$. Psychological flexibility is not significantly associated with homophobia, $\beta = -0.07$, $p = .36$.

Table 5

Simple linear regression analysis for psychological flexibility as a predictor of racism

Model	B	SE	β	t	p
PF	-.09	.04	-.18	-2.21	.03

Note: $R^2 = .03$, PF = Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility explains 3% of the variation in racism, and the regression equation is statistically significant, $F(1,149) = 4.90$, $p < .05$. There is a significant negative association between psychological flexibility and racism, $\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$. Based on this result, we can conclude that hypothesis H1 is largely supported by the data.

H2. *Gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination.*

H2a. *Gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward women.*

H2b. *Gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward men.*

H2c. *Gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and homophobia.*

H2d. *Gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and racism.*

To test this hypothesis, four mediation analyses were conducted, using psychological flexibility as the predictor, gender stereotypes as the mediating variable, and sexism toward women, sexism toward men, homophobia, and racism as the dependent variables, respectively (Tables 6, 7, 8, 9).

Table 6*Mediation estimation for gender stereotypes in the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward women*

Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	95% CI		Z	p	% Mediation
				Min.	Max.			
Indirect	a × b	-.01	.02	-.06	.03	-.57	.57	14.80
Direct	c	-.08	.03	-.13	-.03	-.96	.03	85.20
Total	c + a × b	-.10	.04	-.17	-.02	-.59	.01	100.00

Table 7*Mediation estimation for gender stereotypes in the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward men*

Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	95% CI		Z	p	% Mediation
				Min.	Max.			
Indirect	a × b	-.02	.03	-.07	.04	-.57	.57	15.26
Direct	c	-.09	.03	-.15	-.03	-3.08	.02	84.74
Total	c + a × b	-.11	.04	-.19	-.03	-2.62	.09	100.00

Table 8*Mediation estimation for gender stereotypes in the relationship between psychological flexibility and homophobia*

Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	95% CI		Z	p	% Mediation
				Min.	Max.			
Indirect	a × b	-.02	.03	-.08	.05	-.57	.57	37.45
Direct	c	-.03	.04	-.12	.05	-.71	.50	62.55
Total	c + a × b	-.05	.05	-.16	.06	-.92	.40	100.00

Table 9*Estimation of mediation for gender stereotypes in the relationship between psychological flexibility and racism*

Effect	Label	Estimate	SE	95% CI		Z	p	% Mediation
				Min.	Max.			
Indirect	a × b	-.01	.02	-.06	.03	-.57	.57	15.28
Direct	c	-.08	.03	-.14	-.01	-.34	.02	84.72
Total	c + a × b	-.09	.04	-.17	-.01	-.23	.03	100.00

The results show that gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward women, with the indirect effect being $b = -.01$, 95% CI(-.06, .03), $Z = -.57$, $p = .57$, gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward men, with the indirect effect being $b = -.02$, 95%

CI(-.07, .04), $Z = -.57$, $p = .57$, gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and homophobia, with the indirect effect being $b = -.02$, CI95% (-.08, .05), $Z = -.57$, $p = .57$, gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and racism, with the indirect effect being $b = -.01$, CI 95% (-.06, .03), $Z = -.57$, $p = .57$. Considering this result, we can conclude that hypothesis H2 is not supported by the analyzed data.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The present research aimed to measure the relationship between discrimination attitudes (sexism toward women, sexism toward men, homophobia, and racism) and psychological flexibility, as well as the role of gender stereotypes in this relationship.

Descriptive statistical procedures revealed that participants' scores on gender stereotypes were relatively low, indicating that respondents do not tend to rely on gender roles in their interactions with others. This may be due to advancements in gender equality and the integration of both women and men into diverse fields. Regarding psychological flexibility, participants scored relatively high, reflecting a strong ability to adapt in new situations and effective functioning on both personal and interpersonal levels. These results could be attributed to the age of the participants, as predominantly younger individuals completed the questionnaire.

Specific dimensions of discrimination were measured through various specific attitudes to capture the forms of prejudice adopted by participants. Sexist attitudes toward both women and men were present to a lesser extent, with relatively low scores. Scores on sexism toward men were higher compared to those on sexism toward women, which may indicate an expectation for men to adhere to traditional gender roles. These findings can be explained by research from Croft et al. (2015) and Eagly et al. (2020), which suggest that gender stereotypes regarding women are no longer as strongly adopted, given that women are now involved in numerous fields. However, gender stereotypes concerning men have remained less changed. The scores for homophobia and racism were low, suggesting tolerance and acceptance of diversity.

Furthermore, significant positive correlations were observed between gender stereotypes and sexism toward women and men, indicating that individuals with pre-established mental images of gender may also adopt sexist attitudes. Additionally, significant correlations were found between gender stereotypes and homophobia and racism, indicating a tendency to hold prejudiced attitudes when gender stereotypes are present. These stereotypes may act to filter reality and perceive individuals based on how they fit into traditional roles.

Psychological flexibility shows significant negative correlations with sexism toward women, sexism toward men, and attitudes of racism, but not with homophobia. The latter dimension may represent an attitude adopted by participants for various reasons, different from a lack of cognitive flexibility. It may correlate with other aspects of the participants'

personalities; however, flexibility does not indicate a lower presence of homophobic attitudes. Nonetheless, the correlations do not support a causal relationship. Determining this would require more thorough research.

The current study highlighted the predictive role that psychological flexibility can have in shaping prejudice attitudes. The hypothesis that psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with discrimination is largely supported by the data.

The first hypothesis examined the extent to which psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with discrimination by analyzing four distinct facets: sexism toward women, sexism toward men, homophobia, and racism. The present study revealed the predictive role of psychological flexibility in shaping prejudice attitudes, with the hypothesis that psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with discrimination being largely supported by the data.

Analyzing the facets of discrimination revealed that psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with sexism toward women. These connections were also investigated in the study by Davis et al. (2021), where flexibility was inverted to see how it might relate to sexism and racism. The results indicated a small negative correlation between psychological inflexibility and helping behaviors in sexual assault situations. Thus, individuals with low levels of flexibility are less likely to assist in sexist situations, tolerating such behaviors. Psychological inflexibility negatively correlated with intervention behaviors in cases of sexual assault, and flexibility showed a low negative correlation with intervening in situations of sexual assault against women (Davis et al., 2021). The statistical results further indicated that psychological flexibility is significantly negatively associated with sexism toward men. In line with the current findings, other studies have supported a connection between sexism and psychological flexibility (Davis et al., 2021). Ambivalent sexism was evaluated, which dictates traditional gender roles and has negative repercussions for both women and men. Although research has not focused on sexism toward men, other variables, such as conservatism, have been shown to play an important role in upholding traditional gender roles that, in some cases, may limit the emotional and social development of men (Croft et al., 2021). Conservative individuals are more likely to negatively judge those who do not conform to gender roles (Prusaczyk & Hodson, 2020) and to adopt prejudiced attitudes toward others to fulfill their epistemic need for certainty and order (Crawford & Brandt, 2020).

Psychological flexibility is not significantly associated with homophobia. This may be explained by the fact that

homophobia can be a culturally accepted attitude, and even cognitively flexible individuals may be influenced to adopt it. Additionally, both education level and personal experiences may impact this dimension, as well as the small sample size.

Regarding racism, it has been significantly negatively associated with psychological flexibility. Similar results have been found in other studies. The findings of the study conducted by Van Hiel et al. (2004) support that a high need for certainty creates a predisposition toward authoritarianism, leading to conservative attitudes and racism. Two mediating variables, right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, were also included. Similar to cognitive inflexibility, the need for structure has been associated with the need to simplify reality, a predisposition to use heuristic strategies, and reduced effort in processing new information, ultimately leading to prejudices (Van Hiel et al., 2004). The effects of the need for structure manifest significantly in racism and conservatism through authoritarianism.

The second hypothesis, which posited that gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, was not supported by the data. Thus, while there is a connection between the level of psychological flexibility and discrimination, this effect is not mediated by the presence of gender stereotypes. These findings indicate that gender stereotypes can be present without leading to discriminatory attitudes.

It is observed that gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and sexism toward women or men. These results are consistent with the existing literature. For instance, a study conducted by Krieglmeier and Sherman (2012) suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt negative stereotypes to form an impression of those they interact with when time pressure is present or cognitive resources are low. The existence or invocation of stereotypes does not always lead to the creation of negative prejudices, especially when they are not considered to be true.

It is noted that gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and homophobia. In this case, it may be helpful to review the existing literature, as stereotypes about the LGBTQ community shape homophobia, rather than gender stereotypes. For example, in a 2016 study, Mole emphasizes that in Poland, due to far-right ideology and conspiracy theories based on stereotypes, there is pronounced discrimination. Homosexuality is viewed as a threat to traditional values, leading to a lack of rights for the LGBTQ community.

Furthermore, it is observed that gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and racism. Although gender stereotypes do not act as an intermediary factor between flexibility and discrimination, studies highlight that other types of stereotypes can lead to complex forms of racism. For example, in cases of violence against Black men, the stereotypes influencing their accusations are racial, suggesting that criminality is perceived to be higher among them (Thiem et al., 2019). Thus, racism is linked to specific racial stereotypes.

These results highlight that gender stereotypes can exist at the individual level, but their mere presence does not indicate a tendency towards reduced psychological flexibility and, implicitly, towards discrimination. Over time, the social roles into which individuals are placed change, and as a result, they no longer have such extensive negative repercussions, as they are far too simplistic methods for evaluating another person. A significant role in diminishing gender stereotypes is attributed to gender equality movements, which promote the idea that women are capable in multiple fields (Croft et al., 2021).

Therefore, while it has been shown that gender stereotypes do not mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, the second hypothesis is supported by the data and may have useful implications for combating prejudice.

Practical implications of the study

Considering the analyzed data, the present study can be useful in various contexts, both theoretical and practical. Based on the findings, recommendations can be developed for future interventions and programs aimed at enhancing psychological flexibility to combat prejudiced attitudes.

Often, stereotypes and biases remain ingrained in individuals' minds due to a lack of information about others. In this case, an approach that promotes contact between members of one group and those perceived as fundamentally different may be beneficial. By getting to know individuals who are perceived as different, people can form a better perspective on their personalities, emotions, and abilities, leading to a process of individualization. This positive impact will increase the likelihood of future interactions and thus foster equality among members.

Additionally, programs targeting inclusion and diversity in the workplace can be adopted. Through specialized training aimed at accepting minority communities, employees can become aware of their own biases and prejudices, making them

more inclined to change. This can create a pleasant and inclusive organizational climate.

Furthermore, a type of intervention focused on increasing psychological flexibility is proposed by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). This therapy emphasizes developing the ability to adapt in new and unfamiliar contexts by promoting resilience. The therapeutic model aims to reduce psychological inflexibility by decreasing cognitive fusion, which leads to experiential avoidance (Ciarrochi et al., 2010). This way of thinking can also promote prosocial behaviors. These suggestions have the potential to foster an adaptive attitude and promote acceptance and tolerance behaviors.

Limitations and future directions for research

The present study succeeds in providing a new perspective in the field of research on attitudes of discrimination and prejudice, combining variables that have not been studied together before by examining the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, as well as the impact of gender stereotypes on this relationship. Therefore, there are also limitations that deserve consideration for evaluating the implications of the study and for future research directions.

The constructs analyzed in the study were based on self-report measures, which can affect the accuracy of responses due to possible social desirability bias and a lack of understanding or awareness of one's own behaviors or attitudes being evaluated. Given that the current questionnaire measures attitudes related to social issues such as gender stereotypes and discrimination, it is expected that participants may have lower self-disclosure due to the desire not to present behaviors seen as undesirable or morally incorrect.

Another important limitation of the research is the measurement of psychological flexibility, as there is no consensus in psychological research regarding the definition of the term, which has been analyzed in multiple domains in different ways. Previous studies have examined the term from a cognitive perspective, through practical tasks focusing on attention and observation. In the current study, the term is analyzed from the personality perspective, as part of the HEXACO model (Ashton et al., 2014), and it is important to consider the narrow implications of the construct concerning its role in shaping social attitudes. There is a need to study the construct through a variety of methods that integrate multiple research domains.

Another limitation is the small number of participants. Furthermore, a large portion of the participants are students and employed individuals, primarily young. Thus, it remains to be

explored to what extent gender stereotypes and flexibility relate to discrimination when analyzing responses from older individuals. As a result, future studies will use larger samples, encompassing greater diversity regarding participants' living environments, occupations, and personal characteristics.

Additionally, given that the study's design is cross-sectional and correlational, causal relationships between the investigated variables cannot be established. Based on the obtained results, it cannot be definitively stated that discrimination can be explained or caused by an individual's level of psychological flexibility, or whether gender stereotypes impact the current relationship. For a detailed analysis of the components of the complex phenomenon of discrimination, longitudinal studies are recommended, as prolonged monitoring of changes in psychological flexibility and their implications is needed.

Moreover, the questionnaire for measuring the facets of discrimination is a new one that has not been validated in other studies, which may influence the quality of the instrument and, consequently, the responses received. Further studies are needed to measure the construct within multiple samples.

Another limitation is that other variables influencing discrimination attitudes, apart from psychological flexibility and gender stereotypes, were not studied. A useful direction could be researching additional social, cultural, and personality factors. Gender stereotypes did not mediate the relationship between flexibility and discrimination. Thus, future studies can investigate other mediating variables to account for more factors.

Therefore, future research in this area will be able to provide an improved perspective on the tested variables, outlining a clearer picture of psychological flexibility, discrimination, and gender stereotypes.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate the multiple facets of discrimination and the variables that may be responsible for its existence. Therefore, psychological flexibility was analyzed as a predictor of attitudes towards sexism against women, sexism against men, racism, and homophobia, with gender stereotypes serving as a mediating variable in the relationship between flexibility and the facets of discrimination. The results indicated that psychological flexibility is a significant predictor of discrimination, correlating with sexism towards both women and men, as well as racism, but not with homophobia, indicating a need for more detailed research on this approach. Gender stereotypes did not mediate the relationship between

flexibility and the facets of discrimination, highlighting that they do not play a significant role in the adoption of prejudiced behaviors, with other factors being responsible and requiring further investigation. The first hypothesis clarifies the importance of psychological flexibility in continuing acceptance studies. Based on this finding, programs aimed at enhancing psychological flexibility can be developed. Considering the significant negative consequences of discrimination on the mental health of individuals from minority groups, it is crucial to discover as many components of personality that lead to prejudiced behaviors as possible. This can facilitate the

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identification and application of complex intervention programs that promote prosocial attitudes.

Despite its limitations, this study represents a first step toward integrating multiple research topics (cognitive flexibility, gender stereotypes, and attitudes towards discrimination) by uniting various fields such as social psychology and personality psychology. The current research has provided a new perspective for understanding the relationship between psychological flexibility and discrimination, mediated by gender stereotypes. It is anticipated that these results will stimulate further research in the field.

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