



# MOTHERS' HELPING INTENTIONS IN DOMESTIC TASKS

## HOW GENDER BELIEFS SHAPE SUPPORT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN



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### Introduction

Helping can appear prosocial but often reinforces gender roles—especially when it takes the form of *dependency-oriented help*, which provides direct solutions rather than fosters autonomy (Nadler, 2016).

In masculine domains like math or technology, women often receive such help from men, reinforcing assumptions of male competence and female dependence (Bareket et al., 2022; Shnabel et al., 2016).

This dynamic is fueled by *benevolent sexism* — an ideology that idealizes women as nurturing yet less capable (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Glick & Fiske, 2001).

In domestic settings, the pattern reverses. Men facing household or caregiving tasks often receive dependency-oriented help from women—who complete the task for them rather than encourage autonomy (Bareket et al., 2021). This dynamic reinforces caregiving roles for women and domestic passivity for men.

### Current Study

This study tested whether similar gendered helping dynamics appear in parenting. Specifically, do mothers who endorse benevolent sexism show greater intentions to provide dependency-oriented help to sons over daughters in traditionally feminine household tasks?

### Method

**Participants:** 491 cisgender, heterosexual American mothers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.00$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.18$ ) with at least one child aged 3–6, recruited via Prolific.

**Procedure:** Mothers first reported their child's gender, then responded to 20 scenarios depicting domestic tasks (e.g., clearing the table, tidying a room), imagining their child struggling with each. For each scenario, they indicated the likelihood of providing autonomy-oriented help (supporting the child's effort) or dependency-oriented help (doing the task for the child). They then completed the Benevolent Sexism Scale (Glick & Fiske, 2001) and additional related measures (e.g., perceived child expertise).

[Child's name] is having a hard time clearing their dishes after dinner



**autonomy-oriented help**  
(supporting the child's effort)

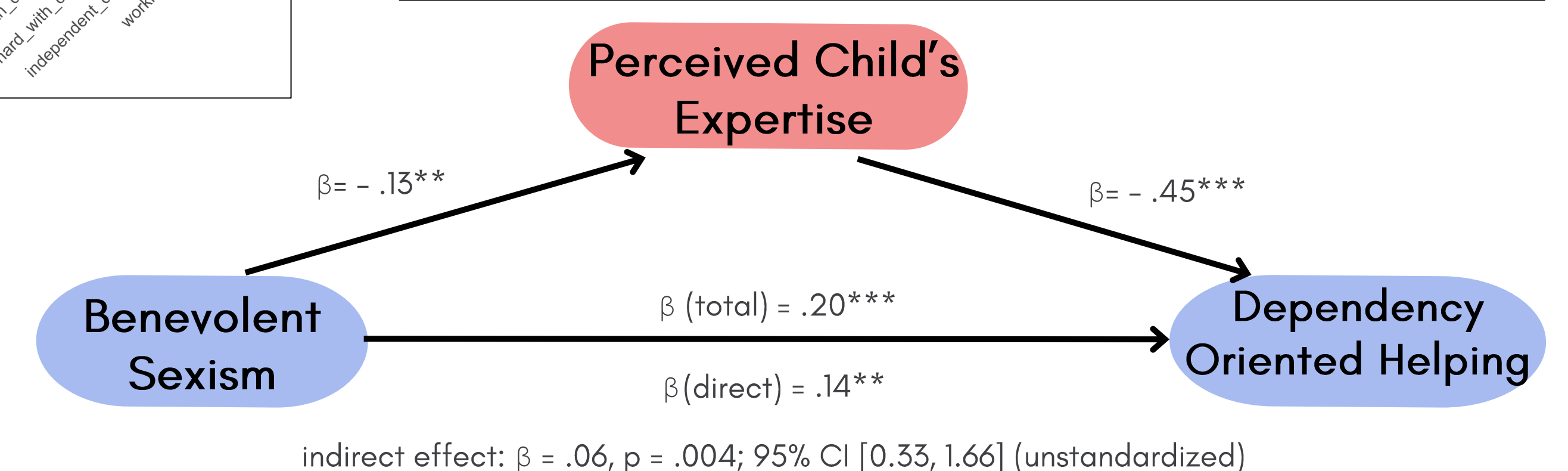
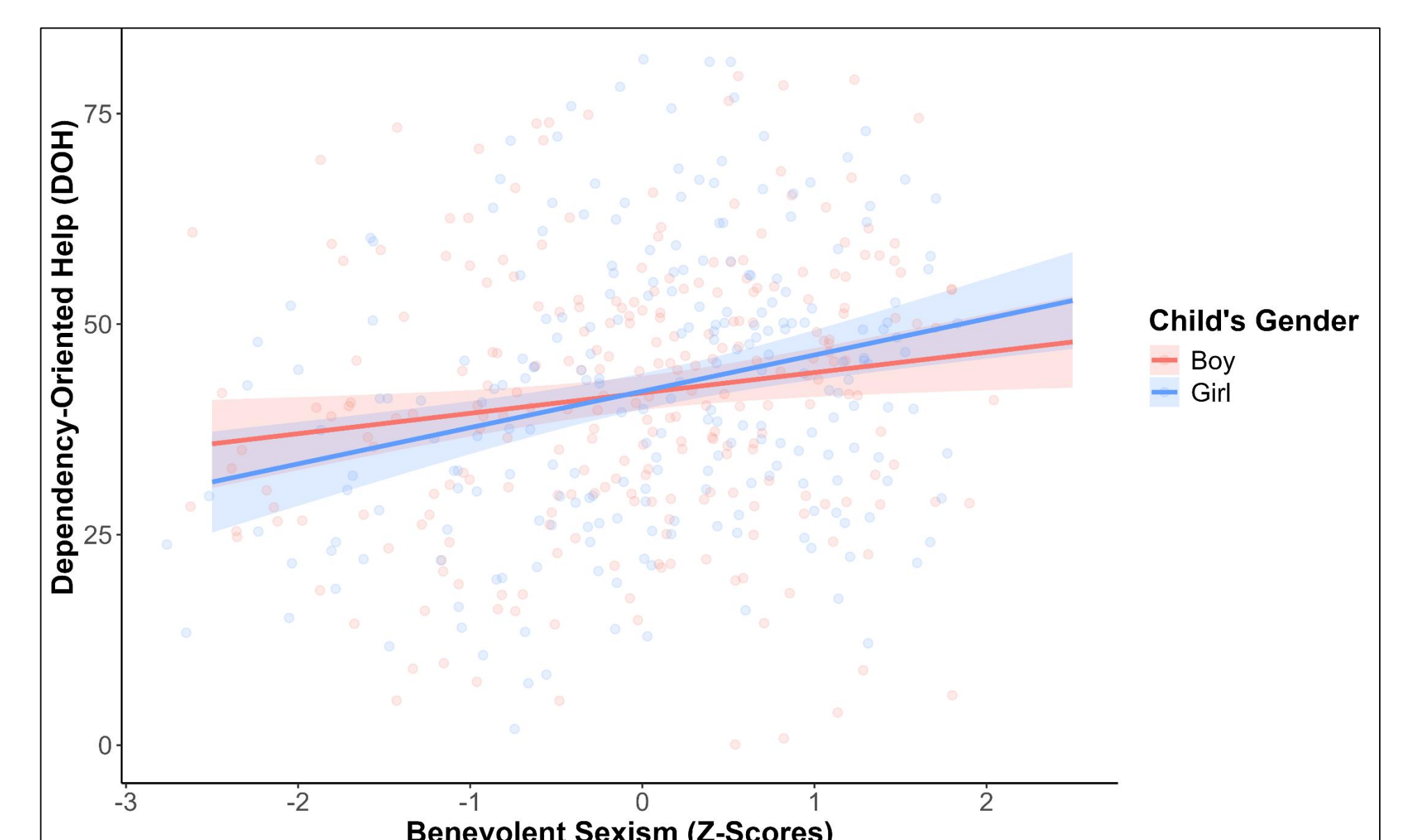
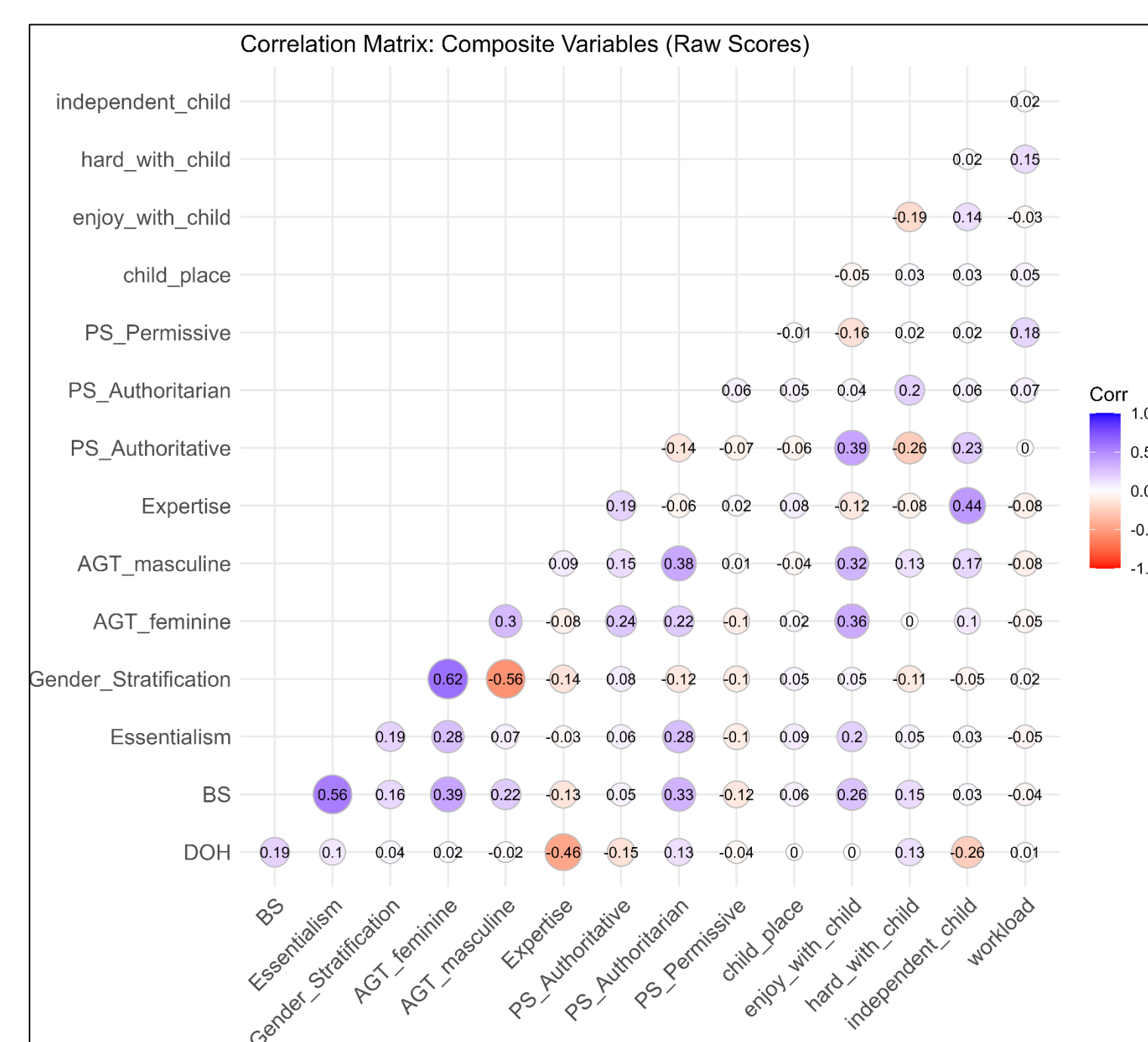
**dependency-oriented help**  
(doing the task for the child)

### Results

A multiple regression predicting dependency-oriented help was significant,  $F(3, 487) = 6.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ .

Benevolent sexism predicted higher intentions to provide such help,  $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < .001$ . Neither the effect of child gender ( $\beta = -0.006$ ,  $p = .898$ ) nor the expected interaction with benevolent sexism ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $p = .209$ ) was significant.

An exploratory mediation model showed that mothers' benevolent sexism was associated with lower perceptions of the child's competence in daily tasks, which in turn predicted greater dependency-oriented helping.



### Discussion

Benevolent sexism predicted greater dependency-oriented helping, but the expected interaction with child gender was not supported. The observed pattern, however, ran counter to predictions: mothers' high in benevolent sexism reported more dependency-oriented helping for daughters than for sons—possibly reflecting maternal role modeling or assumptions about boys' competence.

Further research should examine different child age groups, cultural contexts (e.g., Israeli families), parents' helping in traditionally masculine tasks, and fathers' helping intentions.

### References

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