

# Confronting or Self-silencing in Response to Sexist Behavior: Exploring Women’s Willingness to Confront Sexism

By: Marie Sabbagh, Tess Hare, Erika Wheelhouse, and Holly McFarland  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Erin Murdoch

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**ABSTRACT:** Past studies on confronting sexism suggest that sexism is not an innocuous annoyance but a serious issue with negative psychological impact. To the best of our knowledge, no research has yet utilized a high-impact design to explore how to encourage women to confront sexist behavior. The present study was designed to explore women’s willingness to confront sexist comments and whether it is possible to increase the level of confrontation by modeling confronting behavior. Twenty-nine female psychology students were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, one in which confronting behavior was modeled, and one in which it was not. In both conditions, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to evaluate group decision-making processes; in fact, each participant was grouped with two confederates who were following a script that included two prejudicial comments. The participants’ choices to confront or self-silence were evaluated in terms of condition and questionnaire responses. Although initial analysis indicated that modeling behavior is not an effective way to increase confrontation of sexist remarks, certain factors (e.g., age, level of self-monitoring, degree of confrontation) suggest that confronting can be influenced. The present research also suggests that women lose tolerance for sexist remarks when the behavior appears to indicate a pattern, rather than a one-time deviation. A surprising number of women indicated that they had confronted when they had not; they even transcribed confrontational comments they had not made.

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## INTRODUCTION

As women go about their daily lives, it is not uncommon for them to encounter some form of sexist behavior (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson 2001). Sexism is not an innocuous annoyance but a serious issue with negative psychological impact (Swim et al. 2001). When a woman encounters sexism, she must choose whether to confront such behavior or to remain silent. Although most women want to confront and even believe they would speak up in the face of sexism, research has shown that most choose silence (Swim & Hyers 1999). Those who speak up report feeling better about the situation as compared to those who choose silence (Hyers 2007), but researchers need to find ways to encourage women to challenge prejudicial behavior even under the strain of social disapproval. Gender-related social pressures are the main reason women fail to oppose sexism, preferring to avoid conflict rather than addressing inappropriate remarks (Hyers 2007). Concerns about personal image are not unjustified: research demonstrates that individuals who confront discriminatory behavior are judged harshly (Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran 2001; Kaiser & Miller 2001). Our research focused on whether we could increase the likelihood that a woman will choose to oppose sexism. We hypothesized that women would be more likely to confront a sexist remark after witnessing another person confront such behavior.

Sexism can take many forms, ranging from subtle, nonverbal behaviors to overt and openly hostile expressions of prejudice (Hyers 2007). Utilizing daily diary reports, Swim et al. (2001) examined the impact such encounters bear on the emotional well-being of the women involved. They found that not only were there more sexist incidents aimed at women than at men, but the emotional impact these encounters had upon women was overwhelmingly negative. On average, women experienced sexist incidents one to two times weekly. Such incidents usually took the form of tradition-al gender-role prejudices, including derogatory comments and sexual objectification—both of which demeaned the women involved. The researchers noted that by using diaries to record incidents as they occurred, participants became more aware of subtle types of sexism, such as behavior related to inequality. The prior lack of awareness suggests that covert forms of prejudice may be so common as to blend in with a woman's daily experiences.

Sexist behavior is not always displayed by strangers or superiors. Ayers et al. (2009) demonstrates that 70% of

those responsible for sexist incidents were familiar to the women (e.g., friends, family, employers), and 59% had equal social status to the woman's standing. The most common incident was unwanted sexual attention (38%), with unfair treatment occurring nearly as often at 37%, and sexist comments occurring 25% of the time. Unfair treatment came predominantly from higher status persons (66%) and would include those in the role of employer or teacher. With the majority of sexist encounters occurring between women and men who share a familiarity and who are of equal status, daily occurrences discussed in previous research (Swim et al. 2001) potentially indicate that women face these perpetrators on a regular basis, which would undermine the feelings of security one might expect from people within their intimate social group.

Sexist encounters typically bear a negative effect upon the women involved. In the Swim et al. 2001 study, 75% of participants reported anger as their emotional response to the prejudicial behavior, and their anger increased with a rise in the number of incidents. In addition, women reported more incidents of depression and lower social self-esteem, with an increased level of discomfort and anxiety due to exposure to sexism. Although the participants were undergraduate college students, which may limit generalizations to the larger female population, the results of this study suggest that sexist incidents are not uncommon and present themselves in many forms, both subtle and overt. The possible psychological impact of these events illustrates the need for more studies like this one so researchers can identify additional ways to encourage women to resist prejudicial behavior.

Understanding the motivations behind a woman's decision to respond is an important step. Hyers (2007) focused on three aspects of the decision-making process: the goals that guide a woman's decision, the frequency with which women choose to be assertive or non-assertive, and the consequences they face after confronting sexist behavior. The study looked at different types of prejudicial behavior, including verbal stereotyping, verbal hostility, nonverbal manifestations such as bad service, and sexual harassment, which included unwanted flirting and objectifying comments. Avoiding conflict was the most frequent reason women gave for deciding against confrontation. Thirty-seven percent of the women in the study reported that they wanted to avoid interpersonal conflict when dealing with inappropriate behavior. Slightly over 20% wanted to educate the perpetrator, and 17% acted upon a need for self-validation. Not wanting

to expend energy on the individual who makes a sexist comment was also listed as a motivation behind the respondent's silence. Some women remarked that the person was not worth their time or that responding would have strained them emotionally. As the researcher predicted, women who held activist-minded beliefs were more likely to speak up than women who identified with more traditional gender roles (Hyers 2007). Conflict avoidance and ignoring the remark are behaviors consistent with traditional gender-roles, and a desire to educate and self-validate are more congruent with activist norms. These findings again show that women who consciously decide to confront such behaviors are more likely to do so when faced with such a situation.

Predicting one's own behavior, however, is not as simple as having made a prior decision to be an activist; it is complicated by factors including how many people will witness the confrontation, whether there is another female present, how obliquely the confronting comment is made, and whether the audience is male or female. Swim and Hyers (1999) investigated the likelihood of a woman responding to three separate sexist comments in the presence of another silent female versus the likelihood of her responding if she were the lone woman in the group. The overall results showed that 45% of women made some form of confrontational response to sexist remarks, with only 16% directly confronting the perpetrator. Participants were more likely to confront the first of the three comments made if they were the only woman present in the company of men, but no other significant differences were found between having another woman in the group or being the sole female. Women were more likely to respond if they were already opposing sexism in their daily lives, a conclusion echoed in Ayers et al. (2009) and consistent with Hyers's (2007) findings. However, those who confronted sexist behavior did so in a more polite manner, as opposed to addressing the remarks directly. This reluctance to label and challenge objectional behavior suggests that even when facing prejudicial comments, women feel pressure to conform to socially acceptable gender-related behaviors or risk facing significant social costs (Hyers 2007; Kaiser & Miller 2001).

One of the reasons for this reluctance is that women often face social repercussions for confronting sexism, especially from men. Women, as found by Dodd et al. (2001), like other women more when they confront sexism. However, while men may not lose respect for a woman who confronts another woman's sexism, they

consider such women less likeable. Women, then, may be justified in their concerns for their public image when making decisions on how to deal with sexism. Couple this dynamic with the gender-related social ideals that influence women to avoid conflict, and it becomes even more important to find ways to encourage women to confront the issue rather than to succumb to social influences.

Speaking out against discriminatory behavior entails making a mental cost-benefit analysis on behalf of the confronter. A study conducted by Kaiser & Miller (2001) examines how stigmatized groups are viewed by others when making a claim of discrimination for a failing exam grade rather than attributing it to their own failing. The results indicate that the repercussions for speaking out include being labeled a complainer and being devalued as an individual, even if those judging the person are fully aware that discrimination was the true reason for the failing grade. These findings indicate that, even though the discriminatory behavior is not in question, the person who speaks against it faces public scrutiny and is dismissed as "hypersensitive, emotional, argumentative," among other negative characterizations (Kaiser & Miller 2001). The desire to avoid the social cost of speaking out was also highlighted by Stangor et al. (2002), who showed that members of stigmatized groups were less likely to claim discrimination when receiving a failing exam grade if it required having to make the claim publicly in front of a member of a non-stigmatized group. Privately, those who were the target of discrimination were more likely to state that prejudice was the dominating factor, rather than attributing the failure to their own ineptitude. The authors suggest that people who are members of stigmatized groups are well aware of the social costs associated with confronting discriminatory behavior and choose to avoid the penalty, even if it means blaming themselves for failure.

Research shows that a woman's level of optimism influences her decision to confront sexism. In Kaiser & Miller's (2004) study on optimism as a contributing factor for confronting, researchers hypothesized that the level of a woman's optimism, as reflected in her anticipation of a greater potential for gain, would predict how likely she was to confront sexist behavior. Utilizing a retrospective method, participants were asked to recall two recent sexist experiences and their reactions to them. Participants who indicated a higher level of optimism were more likely to confront sexism relative to pessimists, suggesting that the optimists viewed the prejudicial

incidents as a less-threatening experience with lower personal costs and minimum risk for benefits achieved. Optimists also indicated that the incidents were less anxiety-provoking for them, whereas their pessimistic counterparts did not echo this sentiment. The researchers concluded that some women confront sexist behaviors because they believe that doing so has a higher interpersonal benefit than accepting the behavior, so they do not view the social costs as prohibitive.

Although risks arise in opposing prejudicial behavior, there are also positive reasons to confront sexism and negative repercussions for not confronting it assertively. In the Hyers (2007) study, women who responded assertively to sexism reported feeling more satisfaction with their actions versus those who chose a non-assertive response. Non-assertive responses include using humor, laughing, or removing themselves from the situation, which comprised 60% of the incidents. Assertive responses were defined as direct verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as questioning the perpetrator and displaying negative facial expressions. This study illustrates that women who use a less assertive approach are not as happy with their choice as more assertive females, and many less-assertive women hope to respond differently in the future. In fact, nearly 75% of the women who chose a non-direct response wished they had responded differently, whereas many of the assertive participants reported that their responses gave them a “liberating boost” and they were in a better mood after the incident. After the choice is made and the incident is over, there are repercussions for the non-assertive responders: they may have avoided conflict and retained their social image, but they must now expend energy and cognitive resources to mentally prepare for future incidents (Hyers 2007). In addition, 35% of the women who employed a less confrontational approach reported seeking some form of social support after the incident (Hyers 2007), suggesting the likelihood of emotional issues.

While holding feminist ideals is a common motivating factor in determining whether a woman speaks out against sexism, other factors can be at play, especially defending fellow ingroup members or perceiving a lack of personal control over a situation. Sechrist et al. (2004) conducted an experiment utilizing a failing grade scenario similar to the Stangor et al. (2002) study. Their results indicate that members of stigmatized groups find it easier to claim discrimination on behalf of another member of their group, especially if the claim is made

publicly. The focus on protection of another deflects some of the social pressure to be well-behaved and proper. Additionally, the results of this study indicate those who were deprived of control during the experiment were more willing to confront discrimination; perhaps the need to reassert control may outweigh the threat of social repercussions, as the authors suggest.

When one understands the regularity with which women face prejudicial behavior and the negative psychological impact of sexism, the need for research focused on increasing confrontation becomes clear. The extant research shows that many women believe they will confront sexist behavior, and most want to, but in reality few actually take an assertive stance. This study is an important step toward understanding how researchers can and cannot encourage women to confront social pressure. To the best of our knowledge, no other research has utilized a high-impact design to explore methods for encouraging women to confront sexist behaviors. We predicted that by modeling assertive behavior, the frequency with which women will take an assertive approach when facing derogatory remarks made by women toward women will be increased.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample consisted of 29 female undergraduate students from the University of Central Florida with a mean age of 28.40 years ( $SD = 8.80$ ). The majority of students participated to earn extra credit in psychology courses. The sample was predominantly White (79.3%) with the remaining participants disclosing their ethnic group as Hispanic (13.8%) and African American (6.9%). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions.

### Procedure

Prior to the participant entering the experiment room, two female confederates who were posing as participants were seated. Eight European-American female research assistants took turns, based on availabilities, posing as one of the two confederates. The research assistants varied in physical appearance and age from the mid-20s to mid-40s. An experimenter informed participants that the purpose of the study was to evaluate decision-making processes involved in choosing contestants for a reality-based show. The participants were told their discussion would be audiotaped, and consent disclosures were signed. Each participant, along with two confederates,

was asked to review twenty mock applications of potential contestants and choose ten of these potential contestants to undertake specific duties. The reality show was described as a mock televised program where ten people would live under the same roof. Contestant applications included contestants' first names, marital status, employment description, number of children, level of academic achievement, and five words contestants supposedly wrote to describe their personalities. The household positions consisted of Head of Household, Main Housekeeper, Groundskeeper, Activities Coordinator, General Maintenance, Athletic Trainer, Main Cook, Finance Manager, Main Shopper, and Assistant Shopper. The experimenter started the audiotape and exited the room, leaving the group ten minutes to select contestants for the ten positions.

The study was designed with two conditions. In Condition 1, a sexist remark made by Confederate #1 was confronted verbally by Confederate #2; in Condition 2, the sexist remark was ignored by Confederate #2. The two-condition design presented the opportunity to study any possible effect of modeling confronting behavior on the participants' willingness to confront sexist remarks.

In both conditions, Confederate #2 left the room before a second sexist remark was made by Confederate #1, leaving the participant free to self-silence or to confront the comment without the presence of another person. Confederate #2 pretended to receive an important phone call in order to exit the room. The first sexist comment was made in regard to choosing a main housekeeper and scripted as, "Here's Amanda, a stay-at-home mom; they'll need someone to do the cleaning." The second comment was made pertaining to choosing a main cook and scripted as "They'll definitely need a woman in the kitchen. A man shouldn't have to do the cooking." Although the selection process was scripted, the Housekeeper comment and the Cook comment were the main focus of the study. In Condition 1, the first sexist remark was confronted verbally by Confederate #2 and scripted as "That's a little sexist; a woman doesn't have to do the cleaning."

After all selections had been made, or at the end of the ten minutes allotted, the experimenter re-entered the room, stopped the tape recorder, and collected the materials. The experimenter asked the participant to

move to a different room to complete a questionnaire in privacy and informed the two confederates to wait in the conference room while other private rooms were located.

### Measures

The study questionnaire consisted of several individual difference measures and a demographic survey.

#### Self-Silencing Scale (Jack & Dill 1992)

The Silencing the Self Scale assesses the extent to which women suppress their internal thoughts and feelings. Participants completed this 31-item measure using a 5 point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ).

#### Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann 2003)

The TIPI is a 10 item measure of the Big Five dimensions. The TIPI uses only two characteristics to measure each personality dimension, and has been shown to be a valid measure for personality (Gosling et al. 2003).

#### Public Self-Consciousness Scale (Scheier & Carver 1985)

This 7-item scale measures participants' concern with how they appear to others. Participants responses were made using a 5-point scale (0 = extremely uncharacteristic of me, 4 = extremely characteristic of me) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ).

#### Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder 1974)

The Self-Monitoring Scale determines to what extent people are concerned about how they are perceived by others and if they will change their behavior to adapt to different situations. Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (-2) to strongly agree (+2) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ).

#### Demographics

This survey, created by the experimenters, included questions for gender, age, and race. Several questions were also aimed at determining if the participant was aware of the sexist remarks made throughout the contestant selection process. The inquiries were stated such as, "During the study, did you think any remarks made by the other participants were inappropriate?" and "If yes, did you say anything?" and "If no, why?"



## RESULTS

Participants' responses to the second sexist comment proved difficult to label as simply confronting or non-confronting, forcing us to devise a rating system for "confronting behavior" in order to assign a number to how forceful the confrontation was. For example, we needed to decide as a group whether nervous laughter could be interpreted as some kind of mild confrontation, or whether it was just a reaction. We had to determine whether refusing to choose the stay-at-home mother as the main housekeeper could be interpreted as confronting the "cleaning is woman's work" comment. Ultimately we chose to interpret participants' behavior as either 1 - Forcefully Confronting ( $n = 9$ ), 2 - Mildly Confronting ( $n = 10$ ), or 3 - Non-Confronting ( $n = 10$ ). Higher numbers on this scale indicated greater self-silencing. "I don't appreciate that comment" and "we shouldn't assume she can cook just because she's female" are examples of statements identified as Forcefully Confronting.

We conducted a 2 (Condition: modeling, no modeling) x 2 (Comment: comment 1, comment 2) mixed design ANOVA on confrontational behavior. There was no evidence of a significant difference between conditions,  $F(1, 27) = .004, p > .05$ . That is, participants in the presence of confederates who confronted a sexist statement were no more likely to confront ( $M = 2.27, SE = 0.15$ ) than were participants in the condition without a confronting confederate ( $M = 2.25, SE = 0.18$ ). However, participants were more likely to confront the second sexist comment ( $M = 2.03, SD = 0.82$ ) than the first ( $M = 2.48, SD = 0.69$ ),  $t(28) = 2.78, F(1, 27) = 6.76, p < .05$ . In other words, this analysis shows that, although modeling confronting behavior was not more likely to increase confronting behavior, a higher number of sexist remarks will result in unmistakable confronting behavior.

The Condition X Comment interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 27) = .35, p > .05$ . However, although these results were not significant at the multivariate level, exploratory analysis revealed that increased confrontations after the second sexist statement occurred only in the modeling condition. Participants in the modeling condition were significantly more likely to confront the second sexist statement ( $M = 2.00, SD = 0.87$ ) than the first sexist statement ( $M = 2.53, SD = 0.62$ ),  $p = .02$ . A significant increase in confronting did not occur when the confederate remained silent.

Next, we conducted analyses of our individual differences measures to determine whether any of these variables contributed to participants' confronting behavior. Results indicated that only self-monitoring made a significant difference in confronting. To categorize participants' level of self-monitoring and present a clear relationship between confronting and self-monitoring, a median split was used to create high and low self-monitoring groups. An independent samples t-test indicated that high self-monitors ( $M = 2.53, SD = 0.64$ ) were less likely to confront than were low self-monitors ( $M = 1.50, SD = 0.65$ ),  $t(27) = -1.53, p < .05$ . In other words, participants who are more careful with how they appear to others are less likely to confront sexist statements.

We also explored whether the age of participants could be a factor. We used a median split for age that resulted in a mean of 21.85 years ( $SD = 1.41$ ) for younger participants and 34.00 years ( $SD = 8.60$ ) for older participants. An independent samples t-test showed that older participants ( $M = 1.73, SD = 0.80$ ) were somewhat more likely to confront sexist behavior than were younger participants ( $M = 2.31, SD = 0.75$ ),  $t(26) = 1.08, p = .06$ .

Careful review of the Comments section of the demographic survey yielded the curious finding that 10% of the participants who were labeled as not verbally confronting the sexist comments attested in writing that they did in fact confront.

## DISCUSSION

We anticipate that the present study is only the beginning of the use of high-impact designs to discover how to encourage women to confront sexist behaviors. In our study, we did not have a member of a non-stigmatized group present, in this case men, who could have acted as a barrier to confronting (Stangor et al. 2002). In addition, we offered the participants the opportunity to speak up on the behalf of a member of their own social group, should they not want to risk publicly acknowledging their own feelings of anxiety when faced with prejudicial behavior (see Sechrist et al. 2004). Even within these carefully created conditions, we did not find significant results for modeling the confronting behavior.

However, several of our findings are compelling. For instance, we did not expect to see an increase in intolerance for sexist remarks irrespective of the modeling. The increase in confrontational behavior following the second comment agrees with current

research indicating that those who choose silence initially may be more likely to forgo silence if the behavior continues (Swim & Hyers 1999). Perhaps the worry over social disapproval is overridden by the anger women feel as their gender is repeatedly belittled, an idea supported by the results found in Swim et al. (2001). Indeed, Swim (2001) found that the average woman experiences sexist incidents one or two times weekly. We exposed our participants to two demeaning comments in a matter of minutes; it seems reasonable to conclude that women choose to brush off those one or two weekly incidents as not indicative of the social norm. Another possible explanation for the increase of confronting behavior with the second comment is the elimination of the bystander effect when Confederate #2 left the room to take the mock cell-phone call. Without another person in the room either to depend on for an appropriate response or to acquiesce with in silent acceptance of inappropriate behavior, the participant may have felt more comfortable with confronting or even experienced more pressure to confront.

One of the factors that proved difficult to analyze was how to categorize the participants' responses when they were not overt, even after the confronting behavior was modeled in the confronting condition. Although it was a simple matter to decide that "I don't appreciate that remark" was certainly confrontational, by far the most common reaction to the sexist comments was nervous laughter. The second most common reaction was an attempt (not always successful) to find a male candidate to fill the Housekeeper or Cook role, in direct opposition to Confederate #1's blatant sexism. These two responses are probably not the kind of confrontational behavior to which other researchers refer; however, they are also not passive silence. Indeed, because the number of women who indicated on the demographic survey that they were offended exceeded the number of women who directly confronted, we surmise that the social costs of speaking up are powerful enough to mute comments but not powerful enough to compel a woman to remain completely passive in the face of insults. The participants themselves may have believed that less overt forms of confronting count as confronting behavior, while still remaining within the socially acceptable gender-specific roles and lowering the risk of negative labels often associated with speaking out against discrimination (Kaiser & Miller 2001). It may indeed be important to study the nature of confronting in females versus males, as we may be overlooking confronting behavior that subtly guides others without risking the social costs of

speaking aloud. Both Hyers (2007) and Ayers et al. (2009) found that more than half of participants' responses to sexism were non-assertive. This is consistent with our findings and warrants study of whether non-assertive confronting is as effective or nearly as effective as direct confronting, especially when dealing with men, in which social liabilities are associated with confronting. In other words, we were seeking evidence of direct confronting, when it is possible that indirect confronting is more pervasive and equally effective.

Our finding that only self-monitoring made a significant difference for confronting also has implications for the social cost of confrontations. Self-monitoring refers to the extent a person is concerned with how they are perceived by others, and the tendency to alter their behavior to ensure a more favorable impression (Snyder 1974). Those who are high self-monitors are far more concerned with their image than those who are low self-monitors, and as such, are willing to adjust their demeanor depending upon the situation. Our analysis showed that although high self-monitors confronted less often than low self-monitors, they did so in a more assertive manner (e.g., direct verbal confrontations rather than passive commenting). We were not monitoring for facial expressions or other non-verbal behavior, but in light of our results and coupled with Hyers's (2007) findings regarding the high percentage of women who respond in a non-assertive manner, we must consider the possibility that high self-monitors would confront under different circumstances. For example, further provocation or a safer, more intimate environment might lead high self-monitors to confront sexist remarks.

Our results indicating that older women were more likely to confront sexism also sparked much discussion. We believe that there were most likely two factors at play. Perhaps older women have toughened up. Having paid the price for making unpopular comments and surviving relatively unscathed, they may have learned that the social cost is not prohibitive. These older women could now identify with a higher level of optimism and acknowledge the risks as minimal when weighed against the interpersonal benefits of speaking up (Kaiser & Miller 2004). The second factor could be that our confederates were almost always younger than the participants, and it is possible that the older women slipped into the role of moral advisor, feeling the need to speak out when a younger woman entered dangerous territory. This supposition seems to be borne out by the nature of the comments that were made by older women,

such as “You know, I don’t appreciate that remark. It really hurts me.” Future studies could add to the current body of knowledge by focusing on women in their post-college years, thereby broadening the understanding of the implications of confrontation.

By far the most unexpected result was that one in ten participants believed they had confronted and actually wrote out sentences they had spoken aloud in response to the questionnaire items, when in fact (as evidenced by our audio recording), they had said nothing. This surprising result suggests two possible explanations. Recall bias is the most obvious possibility. Women who truly did find the comments offensive may have spent more time thinking about them and pondering what they should have said, and in recall the comments erroneously became reality. Perhaps the participants were feeling the emotional cost of not overtly responding to the prejudicial remark, and by annotating it on the questionnaire, they were seeking some sort of social comfort (see Hyers 2007). Response bias is another possibility: when called upon to explain why they did not react, participants may have found it less objectionable to claim that they had, perhaps the session was recorded. Whether the participants’ claimed responses were the result of social desirability or a failure of memory, the fact that 10% of women report having confronted when they did not confront is intriguing and suggests that there may be some degree of cognitive dissonance in our everyday recall.

In retrospect, the present study has several limitations. First, the design proved to have great variability. Several students played the role of Confederate #1, and personality differences resulted in different presentations of the offensive comments, possibly influencing participants’ reactions. It is possible that some participants were more likely to feel critical of confederates who were naturally more aggressive in their presentation and more tolerant of those who were soft-spoken; conversely, it is conceivable that other participants were intimidated by outspoken confederates and more likely to confront one who was less threatening. Furthermore, because the confederates were following a memorized script, the comments themselves were subject to error or at least great variability and possibly elicited different degrees of reaction merely by the specific words spoken. This flaw could be corrected by presenting a videotape of confederates choosing candidates, rather than a real-time “skit.”

Another limitation was the time pressure experienced by participants. For consistency and time purposes, we imposed a ten minute deadline for each trial, which in effect limited participants to only sixty seconds to choose each household position. The effects of this time limit showed up on the demographic questionnaires, where several participants who did not confront the sexist behavior explained that they had been offended by the sexist comments but believed there was insufficient time to debate or confront. Because we were exploring how to increase confronting behavior, the time limit proved to be a major stumbling block. It is apparent that some percentage of women will actively ignore objectionable behavior if they are focused on a specific task that must be completed, a factor that we did not anticipate.

A final limitation that must be mentioned is a design flaw regarding the Reality House contestants who were presented. To facilitate the presentation of the scripted comments, the contestants were crafted simplistically. For instance, Amanda was the only unemployed candidate, and she was identified as a stay-at-home mother. When the position of Main Housekeeper arose early on in the script, she was too obvious a choice. In real time, confederates realized that without another candidate who clearly knew or enjoyed maintaining a household, the selection of Amanda as the Main Housekeeper was difficult to dispute. After the sexist comment about her, participants often looked for someone else, but there was no better option. In retrospect, the design would have been more definitive if it had included, for instance, an unemployed man who was a former hotel manager, a stay-at-home father, or a male chef. We facilitated the sexism by design, but inadvertently made it more difficult for participants to contest.

Although it is true that, as is often the case with psychological studies, the participant pool was composed of undergraduate psychology students, this group was drawn from a regional campus, so there was diversity of background, home situation, and age. This we viewed as one of the strengths of our participant pool, despite the small sample size. However, this was a group of psychology students, many of whom had taken or were taking psychology courses in prejudice or women studies and have been exposed to the positive examples of confronting behavior. In addition, the older students were women who have chosen to forgo the traditional female role for higher education and job opportunities. It seems logical to speculate that as a group, these women



would have greater intolerance for attempts to assign women to traditional roles of housekeeper and cook. Therefore, the degree of confronting exhibited may be higher than it would be in the general population.

## CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, this study is a critical step in identifying the confusion surrounding confrontation of sexism. In all of its forms, sexism has an undeniable psychological impact upon recipients. Increased anger, anxiety, and discomfort are often reported by those who have experienced prejudicial behavior, and those who confront sexist remarks report higher satisfaction about how they coped with the incident. A majority of women claim they would not remain silent when faced with derogatory remarks, but our study joins others in demonstrating that this is not factual and that women themselves do not understand why they confront, how they confront, or even if they confronted sexist behavior. Just under half of women (46%) report confronting sexism at some point in their past (Ayers et al. 2009). Finding ways to identify and increase confronting behavior will not only initiate a shift in social norms but will also improve the psychological welfare of women in general.

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