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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fq2k0z1>

### Journal

Emerging Adulthood, 10(3)

### ISSN

2167-6968

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### Publication Date

2022-06-01

### DOI

10.1177/2167696820934687

Peer reviewed

# Ambivalent Sexism and Reported Relationship Qualities in Emerging Adult Heterosexual Dating Couples

Emerging Adulthood  
2022, Vol. 10(3) 776–787  
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Study of Emerging Adulthood  
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DOI: 10.1177/2167696820934687  
journals.sagepub.com/home/eax



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## Abstract

We investigated the relations between the endorsement of ambivalent sexism and relationship qualities in heterosexual romantic couples during emerging adulthood. The sample included 94 heterosexual emerging adult dating couples attending a public university ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21$  years; 39% White, 25% Latinx, 11% Asian, and 18% Other). Each partner separately completed survey measures of ambivalent sexism and perceived relationship satisfaction and conflict. Dyadic analyses were performed using structural equation modeling. Results indicated men's hostile sexism predicted lower satisfaction and more conflict for men and their partners, whereas men's benevolent sexism (BS) predicted more satisfaction and lower conflict for men and their partners. Women's BS was negatively related to the length of the couple's relationship. The results are discussed in relation to ways that ambivalent sexism may affect the dating relationships of many emerging adults in college settings and how these effects may change over time in relationships and at later life stages.

## Keywords

sexism, gender attitudes, romantic relationships, relationship qualities, conflict

According to Glick and Fiske's (1996, 2001) ambivalent sexism theory, benevolent and hostile forms of sexism operate in synergy. That is, women are promised the reward of men's protection (benevolent sexism [BS]) in a society in which many men are antagonistic to women who seek equal status and power (hostile sexism [HS]). Increasing evidence suggests that ambivalent sexism undermines relationship qualities in heterosexual couples (Hammond & Overall, 2017). However, most of the existing research has focused on married or cohabiting couples—with fewer inquiries considering dating relationships during emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a key stage in which youth are beginning to develop more intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000; Norona et al., 2016; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Thus, to build on prior research, we investigated whether HS and BS predicted reported relationship qualities for both partners in heterosexual dating relationships among emerging adults.

We investigated possible links between ambivalent sexism and romantic relationship qualities in a sample of young heterosexual adults in dating relationships. Emerging adulthood represents a period when many youth are exploring what it means to be involved in a romantic relationship and how to coordinate these relationships with their overall life goals (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). They are also navigating new gendered dynamics within more serious relationships than may

have been typical during adolescence (Arnett, 2000, 2015; Eaton & Rose, 2011). For heterosexual emerging adults, ideals about appropriate relationships might include the expected roles of women and men that coincide with ambivalent sexism (Rudman & Glick, 2008). Longitudinal research demonstrates that both HS and BS were more prevalent during young adulthood than in middle and late adulthood (Hammond et al., 2018). However, there has been little examination of how ambivalent sexism and perceived dating qualities might be interrelated during emerging adulthood. To provide background for the present study, we first explain how ambivalent sexism theory guided our research.

## Ambivalent Sexism Theory

Glick and Fiske's (1996, 2001) ambivalent sexism theory posits that prejudice toward women functions through ambivalent

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attitudes that encompass both negative and seemingly positive beliefs toward women. Hostile sexist attitudes include misogynistic beliefs that women are inferior and they attempt to gain control over men through manipulative tactics, especially within romantic relationships. HS is directed at women who violate traditional gender roles or threaten men's power. In addition, it exists as a warning to other women not to challenge the status quo (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Benevolent sexist attitudes function to facilitate women's and men's interdependence in heterosexual relationships (Glick & Fiske, 1996). They are comprised of three facets: heterosexual interdependence, complementary gender differentiation, and protective paternalism (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 1996). As described by Connor and colleagues (2016), heterosexual interdependence is based on the belief that women and men need to be in heterosexual relationships. Complementary gender differentiation reflects the essentialist ideology that women and men are fundamentally different in their personal-social attributes, and they thereby complement one another's strengths (e.g., women as nurturing and men as self-assertive). Thus, complementary gender differentiation perpetuates society's traditional divisions of roles and status (Connor et al., 2016). Finally, protective paternalism refers to the chivalrous belief that men need to protect and provide for women (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 1996). This is manifested in traditional heterosexual courtship scripts endorsed by many young adults (e.g., the man initiates and pays for the date; Paynter & Leaper, 2016). Also, women may expect that in a heterosexual marriage that the man will be the primary economic provider, while the woman will be the primary caregiver (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005).

Many of these courtship practices associated with protective paternalism are considered desirable to many women and men who might otherwise disavow sexism (e.g., Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019; Kilianski & Rudman, 1998; Robnett & Leaper, 2013; Viki et al., 2003). Despite many women's expectation that they will be protected by their partners, romantic relationships with men are the context in which women face the greatest risk of violence (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Indeed, research found married women who endorsed BS were more likely to fear violence from their husbands (Expósito et al., 2010). Furthermore, ambivalent sexism has been associated with women's and men's endorsement of victim-blaming myths regarding intimate partner violence and sexual assault (Megías et al., 2018) as well as men's violence against romantic partners (e.g., Cross et al., 2017).

Support for the ambivalent sexism model has been indicated in at least three ways. First, evidence indicates HS and BS are related yet distinct from one another. Across multiple cultures, the two forms of sexism were moderately correlated (e.g., Glick et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2002; Sibley & Becker, 2012). In addition, individuals were more likely to endorse both (or neither) HS and BS than to endorse only one form of sexism (Sibley & Becker, 2012). Second, cross-national comparisons found average endorsements of HS and BS were negatively correlated with the overall level of gender equality (Glick et al., 2000). That is,

fewer people tended to endorse these ideologies in cultures with greater gender equality. Finally, as reviewed in the next section, HS and BS show good predictive validity in relation to relationship qualities in heterosexual couples (e.g., Hammond & Overall, 2017; Sibley & Overall, 2011).

## **Ambivalent Sexism and Reported Relationship Qualities in Heterosexual Couples**

Prior research indicates that lasting and fulfilling romantic relationships are typically characterized by high levels of positive feelings and low levels of negative feelings regarding one's partner (e.g., Battaglia et al., 1998; Cate et al., 2002). Positive feelings can be characterized by the overall relationship satisfaction experienced. A meta-analysis of the potential correlates of romantic relationship dissolution for nonmarried couples indicated that overall relationship satisfaction was a moderate predictor of less dissolution (Le et al., 2010). In contrast, experiencing conflict often reflects negative relationship quality. Indeed, relationship researchers have documented that unresolved and recurring conflict is one of the strongest predictors of relationship dissolution (see Gottman et al., 2014; Norona & Welsh, 2017). As reviewed next, these dimensions of relationship quality may be affected by the gender ideologies held by members of a couple.

### *Potential Impact of Ambivalent Sexism on Relationship Qualities*

The present study examined an ethnically diverse sample of heterosexual emerging adults to test the unique associations of women's and men's HS and BS to their own and their dating partner's evaluations of relationship satisfaction and conflict. Despite the relevance of ambivalent sexism theory to understanding heterosexual relationship qualities (Connor et al., 2016; Hammond & Overall, 2017), to our knowledge, only seven published studies (with nine samples) have tested associations between ambivalent sexism and romantic relationship qualities (Bareket et al., 2018; Casad et al., 2015; Hammond & Overall, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Overall et al., 2011; Sibley & Becker, 2012). Also, only one of these reports (Overall et al., 2011) conducted dyadic analyses examining each partner's ambivalent sexism in relation to both their own and their partner's reported relationship qualities. The samples in the prior studies comprised mixtures of married and dating young adults in New Zealand (e.g., Hammond & Overall, 2013a, 2013b; Overall et al., 2011), middle-aged married couples in New Zealand (Sibley & Becker, 2012), young women engaged to be married in the United States (Casad et al., 2015), or men either currently or recently in a committed relationship in Israel (Bareket et al., 2018).

None of the previous studies focused exclusively on dating relationships in emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a period when many heterosexual youth are navigating their roles in romantic relationships and are beginning to commit to more

serious, intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000, 2015; Eaton & Rose, 2011). Young adults in colleges may be exploring romantic relationships that are relatively short or vary in length before dissolution (Norona & Welsh, 2017; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). In emerging adulthood, beliefs about gender may inform how heterosexual youth think about romantic relationship ideals (Le et al., 2010; Norona et al., 2016). Thus, a focus on heterosexual couples in emerging adulthood may help illuminate how ambivalent sexism may be related to early romantic relationship experiences. Furthermore, in our dyadic analysis, we took into account the interdependence of both partners' attitudes and relationship experiences (Kenny et al., 2006). The background and rationales for our specific hypotheses are presented next. We first discuss how HS may be related to reported relationship qualities for men and women. Afterward, we posit how BS may predict reported relationship qualities for men and women.

**HS and experienced relationship qualities.** HS reflects misogyny toward women and grants men greater power over women (Glick & Fiske, 2001). These attitudes are antithetical to attaining true reciprocity in an intimate relationship. The potential negative consequences are lower positivity and greater conflict in the relationship (see Hammond & Overall, 2017, for review).

For women's relationship experiences, men's hostile sexist attitudes may have especially pernicious effects—as suggested in two prior studies (Hammond & Overall, 2013b, 2014). In contrast, women's endorsement of HS was unrelated to their reported relationship qualities (Hammond & Overall, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Overall et al., 2011). Even if women might endorse HS, the impact on their relationship may largely depend on whether their partners exert dominance and misogyny. Thus, with both women's and men's HS being included in our dyadic model, we anticipated that the men's HS would be more likely than women's HS to predict negative relationship qualities for women.

Men's HS similarly may negatively affect their own relationship experiences. In prior research, men's HS was negatively related to satisfaction with their relationship (Hammond & Overall, 2013b; Sibley & Becker, 2012) and positively related to reported conflict (Hammond & Overall, 2014). Only one study tested whether women's HS predicted their male partner's satisfaction and it did not find an association (Overall et al., 2011). Hence, we hypothesized that men's endorsement of HS would be negatively related to their reported relationship qualities (lower satisfaction, higher conflict). Once again, with both partners' HS in our dyadic analysis, we did not expect that women's HS would contribute to men's reported relationship qualities.

**BS and experienced relationship qualities.** Features associated with BS—such as protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual interdependence—can be attractive to many men and women (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019; Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). Moreover, these facets of heterosexual relationships may be more likely favored during

emerging adulthood than at later ages (Hammond et al., 2018). As explained below, the subtle inequities underlying BS may not be recognized among undergraduates in dating relationships.

For men, BS is designed to afford them several benefits (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Endorsing protective paternalism can lead them to feel empowered as the chivalrous protector. Also, the emphasis on attaining heterosexual interdependence in BS may contribute to positive feelings when involved in a dating relationship. Indeed, two prior studies of mostly married or cohabiting couples observed that men's BS was positively associated with their own perceived relationship quality (Overall et al., 2011; Sibley & Becker, 2012). Furthermore, men may experience greater satisfaction when their partners endorse BS. BS includes the expectation of complementary gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001), which traditionally for women emphasizes nurturance and conflict mitigation in social relationships (Leaper, 2019); therefore, women who endorse BS may be more likely to provide socioemotional support to their male partners—and thereby increase men's satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Therefore, we hypothesized that men would be more likely to report positive relationship qualities (higher satisfaction, lower conflict) when either they or their partners endorsed BS.

For women, the problem of BS is that its ideology is premised on gender inequality (Connor et al., 2016; Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019; Oswald et al., 2019). Nonetheless, many women endorse benevolent sexist attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Among emerging adults who are dating, studies indicate many women continue to favor manifestations of men's BS (e.g., paying for dates), especially if they endorse BS (Bermúdez et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2014; Paynter & Leaper, 2016). In addition, given the expectation of heterosexual interdependence associated with BS (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 2001), simply being in a dating relationship may be a source of satisfaction for young women (and men) who endorse BS. Prior studies including a combination of married, cohabiting, and dating couples did not find an association between women's BS and their reported relationship qualities (e.g., Hammond et al., 2013a, 2013b; Overall et al., 2011). However, the limitations of BS may be less restrictive for young adult women in dating relationships during college compared to women in long-term relationships such as marriage (Casad et al., 2015; Hammond & Overall, 2017); that is, dating relationships during college do not usually require women to compromise their professional pursuits or to attain balanced role-sharing in family life. Hence, with our emerging adult dating couples, we hypothesized that women's reported experiences of positive relationship qualities (higher satisfaction, lower conflict) would be more likely when they or their male partners endorsed BS.

## The Current Study and Hypotheses

We investigated possible links between young heterosexual adults' endorsement of ambivalent sexism and their reported

satisfaction and conflict in dating relationships. As reviewed above, our hypotheses (H) were as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Women's relationship satisfaction would be predicted (a) negatively by their partner's HS, (b) positively by their partner's BS, and (c) positively by their own BS.

**Hypothesis 2:** Men's relationship satisfaction would be predicted (a) negatively by their own HS, (b) positively by their own BS, and (c) positively by their partner's BS.

**Hypothesis 3:** Women's reported conflict would be predicted (a) positively by their partner's HS, (b) negatively by their partner's BS, and (c) negatively by their own BS.

**Hypothesis 4:** Men's reported conflict would be predicted (a) positively by their own HS, (b) negatively by their own BS, and (c) negatively by their partner's BS.

We utilized structural equation modeling to conduct dyadic analyses that included measures for both partners. Separate models were run with the partners' reported satisfaction and their reported conflict. In each model, we included each partner's HS, BS, and reported relationship quality (satisfaction or conflict). We additionally included the interaction between each partner's HS and BS in the model in the event that there was any moderation (e.g., Sibley & Becker, 2012). Also, given prior indications that the negative impact of ambivalent sexism might increase over time in a relationship (e.g., Casad et al., 2015), we controlled for the couple's relationship length in each model.

## Method

### Participants

The sample included 94 heterosexual romantic partner dyads (50% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.05$ ,  $SD = 3.82$ ) from a public university on the west coast of the United States. Participants' self-identified ethnic identities included 74 (39.4%) as White or European American, 47 (25.0%) as Latinx, 34 (18.1%) as Asian or Asian American, 21 (11.2%) as multiethnic, and 12 (6.4%) as other.

On average, the couples had been in their romantic relationship for 23.58 months ( $SD = 21.82$  months, range = 6–91 months). The majority characterized their relationship as "dating" (94.7%), while one couple reported being engaged (1.1%) and four characterized their relationship as "other" (4.3%). The analyses did not differ between the full sample versus when the engaged couple and those described as "other" were excluded; therefore, all couples were kept in the sample used in the present report.

A post hoc power analysis conducted using G\*Power (Version 3.1.9.4) indicated that our sample size had adequate power (.80) to detect small effect sizes set at  $F^2 = .20$ . Our sample size is comparable to most of the prior studies testing ambivalent sexism and relationship qualities in couples (Bareket et al., 2018; Casad et al., 2015; Hammond & Overall, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Overall et al., 2011).

## Procedure

Participants were recruited for a study on heterosexual couples using flyers posted at a public university campus and at coffee shops in the surrounding town. Participating couples came into our lab together and, after providing informed consent, completed online surveys in separate but adjoining rooms. In one of these rooms, the researcher sat at a desk facing away from the participant; women and men were alternately placed in the room with the researcher to counterbalance any effects of the presence of a researcher. The two participants were asked to refrain from speaking to each other until both had completed the survey. After completing the survey, the participants were debriefed and each was provided with a gift certificate.

## Measures

**Ambivalent sexism.** Participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The ASI includes a Hostile Sexism Scale (e.g., "Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash") and a Benevolent Sexism Scale (e.g., "Women should be cherished and protected by men"). Each scale consists of 11 items rated on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The HS subscale and the BS subscale each had excellent internal consistency (women's HS:  $\alpha = .83$ ; men's HS:  $\alpha = .88$  and women's BS:  $\alpha = .89$ ; men's BS:  $\alpha = .91$ ). We used average ratings across items for each subscale. See Table 1 for means.

**Relationship qualities.** Participants completed the Friendship and Love Relationships Scales (Davis & Todd, 1982). These scales have been shown to have good factor structure and predictive validity (Davis & Latty-Mann, 1987; Levy & Davis, 1988). In addition, several researchers have used these measures to evaluate relationship qualities (e.g., Chen & Wu, 2017; Goodcase et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2012). To infer romantic *relationship satisfaction* in participants' dating relationships, we averaged across two subscales with 3 items each assessing experiences of relationship success (e.g., "Are you happy in your relationship with this person?") and reciprocity (e.g., "Does this person really care about you as a person?"; women:  $\alpha = .89$ ; men:  $\alpha = .89$ ). We additionally used one subscale, averaged across 3 items, to assess experiences of *relationship conflict* (e.g., "Does this person treat you in unfair ways?"; women:  $\alpha = .73$ ; men:  $\alpha = .82$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely or extremely*. See Table 1 for means.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are among the measures presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. There were no missing data for any of these measures across the 94 couples in our sample. Although no hypotheses were advanced regarding relationship length, as seen in Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2, there was a negative association between relationship length and women's BS. That is, women's endorsement of BS



**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Gender Comparisons for Measures.

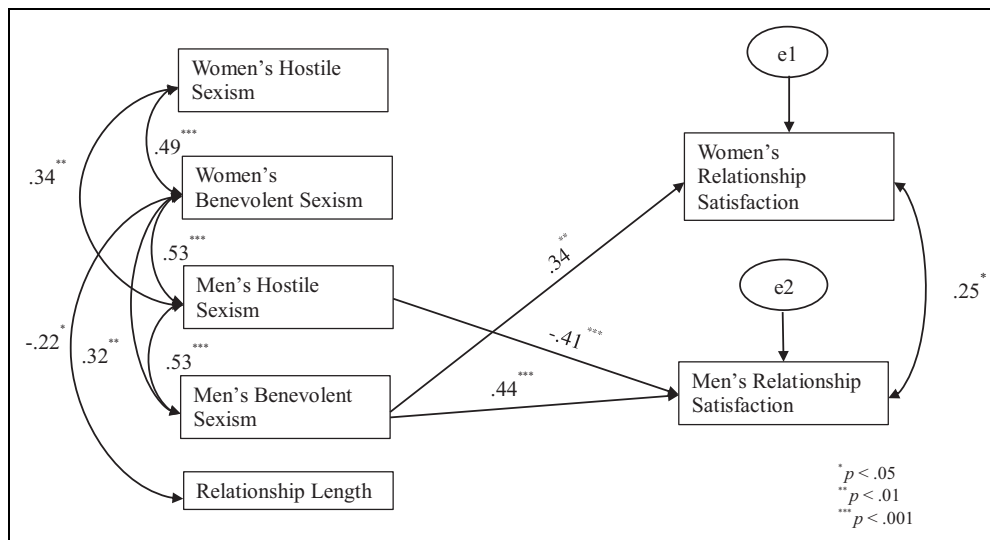
Measure	Overall M (SD)	Gender Comparisons				
		Women M (SD)	Men M (SD)	<i>r</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
Relationship length	23.58 (21.82)					
Hostile sexism	3.33 (1.26)	3.25 (1.22)	3.40 (1.31)	.34**	-1.03	-.12
Benevolent sexism	3.42 (1.20)	3.33 (1.11)	3.52 (1.28)	.32**	-1.32	-.16
Relationship satisfaction	6.21 (0.85)	6.33 (0.75)	6.09 (0.94)	.37***	2.42*	.28
Relationship conflict	2.05 (1.01)	1.96 (0.89)	2.15 (1.11)	.43***	-1.71	-.19

Note. Relationship length is measured in months. Items in sexism and relationship qualities scales were rated on a 7-point scale and were averaged. Higher scores reflect stronger endorsement of the scale construct. Paired-samples correlations, paired *t* tests, and paired Cohen's *d* effect sizes are presented above. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2.** Bivariate Zero-Order Correlations Between Measures.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Relationship length (months)	—								
2. Women's hostile sexism	-.11	—							
3. Women's benevolent sexism	-.22*	.49***	—						
4. Women's relationship satisfaction	-.02	-.14	-.15	—					
5. Women's relationship conflict	.13	.17	.17	-.43***	—				
6. Men's hostile sexism	-.08	.34**	.53***	-.15	.28**	—			
7. Men's benevolent sexism	-.13	.12	.32**	.23*	-.13	.35***	—		
8. Men's relationship satisfaction	.10	-.07	-.15	.37***	-.25*	-.29**	.26**	—	
9. Men's relationship conflict	.16	.03	.14	-.24*	.43***	.24*	-.18	-.49***	—

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

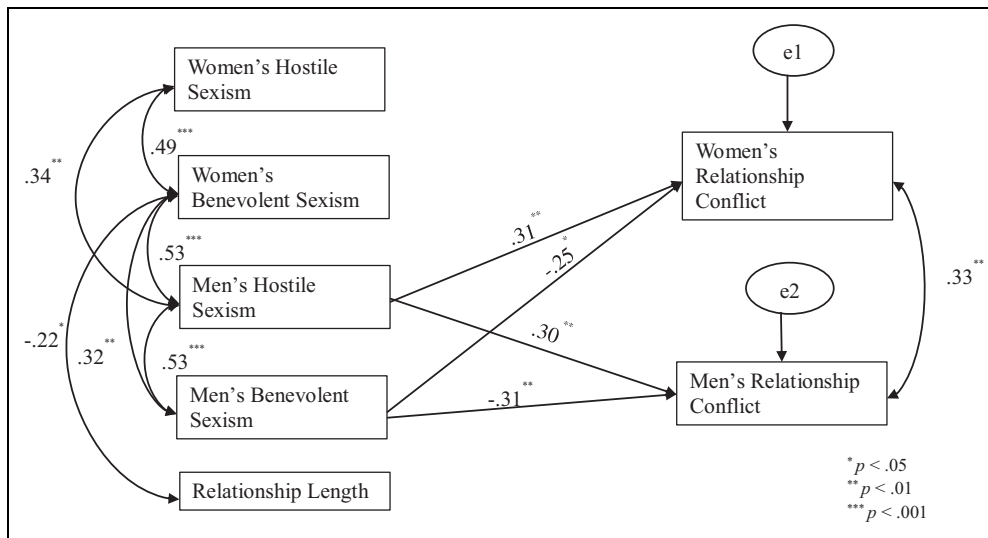


**Figure 1.** Hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and relationship length of heterosexual romantic couples predicting young women's and men's relationship satisfaction. All possible paths were tested and only significant paths are depicted for clarity.

appeared less likely when they had been in longer dating relationships. Also, HS and BS were moderately correlated with one another for both women and men (see Table 2).

To test our hypotheses, we tested two structural equation models predicting (1) women's and men's relationship

satisfaction and (2) women's and men's relationship conflict. By including both partners' scores in the model, it was possible to account for dyadic dependence (Kenny et al., 2006). The model included the following for both the female and the male partners: HS, BS, HS × BS interaction, and the



**Figure 2.** Hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and relationship length of heterosexual romantic couples predicting young women’s and men’s relationship conflict. All possible paths were tested and only significant paths are depicted for clarity.

relationship outcome (satisfaction or conflict). In each model, we also controlled for the length of the relationship for the dating couple.

In both of the initial models with relationship satisfaction and conflict, the HS × BS interaction terms were not significant for either the male or the female partner. Therefore, the models were retested omitting the interaction terms to simplify the analyses. We additionally tested differences in paths for each member’s sexism to women’s and men’s reported relationship qualities as well as differences in paths for women’s and men’s corresponding sexism to the reported relationship qualities. The full models tested were saturated and, thus, model fit statistics were not available. Figures 1 and 2 depict significant paths observed for the models with relationship satisfaction and conflict, respectively. Below, these results are summarized.

**Relationship Satisfaction**

The results from the path model predicting relationship satisfaction are presented in Figure 1, and Table 3 lists all estimated coefficients. The results partially supported the hypotheses that HS and BS would be negatively and positively related to relationship satisfaction, respectively, for either the actor or the partner. As expected, women’s satisfaction was positively predicted by men’s BS (Hypothesis 1a). However, neither men’s HS nor women’s BS predicted women’s relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 1b, Hypothesis 1c). As hypothesized, men’s satisfaction was predicted by both their own HS and BS in negative and positive directions, respectively (Hypothesis 2a, Hypothesis 2b). However, men’s satisfaction was unrelated to women’s BS (Hypothesis 2c).

Tests of differences between paths revealed that men’s BS differed from women’s BS as predictors of women’s relationship satisfaction,  $p = .004$ . Specifically, men’s BS demonstrated a positive, significant association with women’s relationship satisfaction, whereas women’s BS demonstrated

**Table 3.** Estimated Coefficients From Path Analysis Predicting Relationship Satisfaction.

Variable	$\beta$	B	SE
Predicting women’s relationship satisfaction			
Relationship length	-.025	-.001	.003
Women’s hostile sexism	-.055	-.034	.068
Women’s benevolent sexism	-.145	-.098	.086
Men’s hostile sexism	-.180	-.103	.067
Men’s benevolent sexism	.344***	.202	.061
Predicting men’s relationship satisfaction			
Relationship length	.111	.005	.004
Women’s hostile sexism	.067	.051	.082
Women’s benevolent sexism	-.085	-.072	.103
Men’s hostile sexism	-.410***	-.293	.080
Men’s benevolent sexism	.442***	.323	.073

\*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

a negative, nonsignificant association with women’s relationship satisfaction. No differences emerged between women’s and men’s HS in predicting women’s relationship satisfaction,  $p = .465$ .

As predictors of men’s relationship satisfaction, men’s HS and BS significantly differed from women’s HS and BS,  $ps = .002, .001$ , respectively. Specifically, men’s HS demonstrated a negative, significant association with men’s relationship satisfaction, whereas women’s HS demonstrated a positive yet nonsignificant association with men’s relationship satisfaction. Conversely, men’s BS demonstrated a positive, significant association with men’s relationship satisfaction, whereas women’s BS demonstrated a negative, nonsignificant association with men’s relationship satisfaction.

In predicting women’s versus men’s relationship satisfaction, no differences emerged between paths for women’s HS ( $p = .351$ ), women’s BS ( $p = .689$ ), men’s HS ( $p = .085$ ), and

**Table 4.** Estimated Coefficients From Path Analysis Predicting Relationship Conflict.

Variable	$\beta$	B	SE
Predicting women's relationship conflict			
Relationship length	.143	.006	.004
Women's hostile sexism	.075	.055	.080
Women's benevolent sexism	.080	.064	.100
Men's hostile sexism	.311**	.212	.078
Men's benevolent sexism	-.250*	-.174	.072
Predicting men's relationship conflict			
Relationship length	.165	.008	.005
Women's hostile sexism	-.095	-.086	.099
Women's benevolent sexism	.164	.165	.124
Men's hostile sexism	.304**	.258	.097
Men's benevolent sexism	-.305**	-.265	.089

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

men's BS ( $p = .385$ ). That is, neither women's nor men's HS or BS demonstrated a stronger relationship in predicting their own versus their partner's relationship satisfaction.

### Relationship Conflict

Figure 2 presents the path model with relationship conflict, and Table 4 lists all estimated coefficients. As predicted, women tended to report more relationship conflict when their partners scored higher in HS (Hypothesis 3a) or lower in BS (Hypothesis 3b). Their reported conflict was unrelated to their own BS (Hypothesis 3c). Also, as hypothesized, men's reported conflict was positively associated with their own HS (Hypothesis 4a) and negatively with their own BS (Hypothesis 4b). But their reported conflict was unrelated to their partner's BS, contrary to our prediction (Hypothesis 4c).

When predicting men's reported conflict, differences occurred between men's HS and women's HS,  $p = .014$ , and between men's BS and women's BS,  $p = .005$ . Specifically, men's HS demonstrated a positive, significant association with men's reported conflict, whereas women's HS demonstrated a negative, nonsignificant association with men's reported conflict. Conversely, men's BS demonstrated a negative, significant association with men's reported conflict, whereas women's BS demonstrated a positive, nonsignificant association with men's reported conflict.

When testing associations with women's relationship conflict, no differences emerged between women's and men's HS,  $p = .158$ , nor between women's and men's BS,  $p = .055$ . When testing links to women's versus men's relationship conflict, no differences were revealed between paths for women's HS ( $p = .177$ ), women's BS ( $p = .554$ ), men's HS ( $p = .954$ ), and men's BS ( $p = .629$ ).

### Discussion

The current study investigated ambivalent sexist attitudes and relationship qualities among a sample of emerging adult heterosexual dating couples. According to ambivalent sexism

theory (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 2001), heterosexual relationships traditionally combine elements of BS (protective paternalism and complementary gender role differentiation) with HS (male dominance and antagonism toward nontraditional women). However, surprisingly little research has examined these processes in the contexts of dating relationships among emerging adults. This is a developmental period when many individuals are consolidating their identities and attitudes regarding romantic relationships and gender roles more broadly (Arnett, 2000, 2015; Eaton & Rose, 2011). As Arnett (2000, p. 473) observed, a central question for many young adults is: "Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?" In the context of emerging adults' heterosexual relationships, these questions are closely tied to their conceptions of gender roles and status (Connor et al., 2016).

### Ambivalent Sexism and Reported Relationship Qualities

We investigated whether heterosexual women's and men's ambivalent sexism would predict satisfaction and conflict in their dating relationship. Prior research examined ambivalent sexist attitudes in relation to heterosexual couples' relationship qualities (see Hammond & Overall, 2017, for a review); however, unlike these prior studies, we conducted dyadic analyses to test whether individuals' sexist attitudes predicted their own or their partners' relationship experiences. Also, we looked at these processes in young adults in dating relationships, whereas prior studies included samples of mixed or older ages as well as a mixture of long-term dating or married relationships. In this way, we could focus on how college students' ambivalent sexism might affect potentially formative dating relationships. As discussed next, support was seen for many of our predictions.

In our results, men's HS predicted lower relationship qualities as reported by either the men or their female partners. More specifically, men's HS predicted lower relationship satisfaction and higher conflict for both partners. Our findings are consistent with earlier studies reporting men's HS negatively predicted their relationship satisfaction (Hammond & Overall, 2013b; Sibley & Becker, 2012) and positively predicted their reported relationship conflict (Hammond & Overall, 2013a, 2013b). Adding to this prior work, we discovered that men's HS similarly predicted women's reported relationship satisfaction and conflict.

The misogynistic attitudes underlying men's HS may result in antagonism toward their female partners—which can undermine the relationship for both women and men (Hammond & Overall, 2017). Our measure of conflict included items assessing the extent to which the couple fights or argues as well as whether they perceive tension or that they are being treated unfairly. Thus, young women who are dating men high in HS may experience more of these kinds of conflict because HS is premised on women's submission in romantic relationships. Thus, our results lend support to the notion that hostile sexist attitudes are not conducive to healthy, positive relationships for either member of the relationship (Hammond & Overall, 2017).



Further support for our hypotheses was indicated when men's BS predicted greater relationship satisfaction and lower conflict—as reported by men as well as their female partners. Men's BS has been associated with their own reported positive relationship qualities in previous studies of heterosexual couples (Hammond & Overall, 2014; Overall et al., 2011; Sibley & Becker, 2012). This pattern is consistent with the underlying ideology of BS, whereby men are expected to find a romantic partner to protect and cherish; in return, that woman will provide socioemotional support (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Being involved in a dating relationship may be fulfilling and lead to feelings of satisfaction for men who embrace this view.

Some readers may find it surprising that men's BS predicted higher satisfaction and lower reported conflict in their female partners. However, especially at younger ages or in early stages of a romantic relationship, many women may enjoy aspects of BS such as having their partner pay for dates and feeling protected (Bermúdez et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2014; Paynter & Leaper, 2016). Perhaps these acts are interpreted as signs of caring among young dating couples, which accounted for the associations with women's relationship satisfaction and conflict. Furthermore, many emerging adults may hold unrealistic expectations about future romantic and marital relationships (Coyle et al., 2015). That is, they may not recognize the potential costs of BS (Connor et al., 2016; Glick & Fiske, 2001)—despite surveys suggesting that many U.S. undergraduates profess preferences for egalitarian gender role arrangements in the future (Sells & Ganong, 2017).

Only three prior studies tested whether men's BS predicted conflict in heterosexual relationships (Hammond & Overall, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). None indicated a significant association. However, one study found that men who endorsed BS tended to underestimate their partners' negative behavior (Hammond & Overall, 2013b). In another investigation, men's BS predicted more caring behaviors during conflict, which resulted in greater success in influencing their partner (Overall et al., 2011). Thus, in these ways, men's BS may possibly result in lowered *perceived* conflict in some dating couples.

We did not find that women's BS or HS were related to their own or their male partner's reported relationship qualities. First, women's BS was unrelated to either reported satisfaction or conflict. Whereas some young women who endorse BS may experience positive relationship experiences, other women who endorse BS may be finding they are not getting enough care and attention from their partners. Consistent with this conjecture, Hammond and Overall's (2013b) longitudinal research conducted in New Zealand did not find significant relations between undergraduate women's BS and current relationship satisfaction; however, BS predicted declines over time in satisfaction—especially when the partner did not live up to women's relationship ideals. In our study, we observed a negative association between women's endorsement of BS and the length of their relationship. Therefore, the declines in satisfaction associated with BS seen in Hammond and Overall's study may become more likely in longer relationships or when

relationships transition to a more serious status (e.g., cohabitation or engagement).

In addition, we did not observe that women's HS was related to either their own or their partner's reported relationship qualities. Among seven prior studies testing associations between HS and women's reported relationship satisfaction, six of them also did not find a significant association. One indicated a significant and negative correlation in a sample of mostly married couples in New Zealand (Sibley & Becker, 2012). Because HS reflects men's dominance and misogyny, perhaps what is most important for women's or men's experienced qualities in a dating relationship is whether the man endorses HS attitudes—as we saw in our results. Thus, even if a woman supports these attitudes, their relationship may be less likely to suffer unless the man somehow expresses HS toward his partner. However, women's endorsement of HS may put them at risk if they are involved with abusive partners. Prior research indicates that women's and men's HS was related to a greater likelihood of them endorsing myths regarding violence against women (e.g., Cross et al., 2017; Megias et al., 2018).

Because women and men have comparable statuses as students within a coeducational university, dating in this context does not pose the kinds of tensions that might occur when adults are no longer students. In marital relationships, determining each partner's work and family roles presents greater challenges regarding if and how gender roles are differentiated. For example, prior studies indicated that couples' gender attitudes and roles commonly became more traditional after the arrival of their first child (Abele & Spurk, 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2010). Despite average increases over the decades in men's participation in childcare and housework in the United States, these responsibilities typically fall more on the shoulders of women than men in dual-career, heterosexual marriages (Parker & Wang, 2013). In a heterosexual marriage, the allure of BS may tarnish as its implicit costs become more apparent over time (Hammond et al., 2018). Relatedly, in longer lasting and more established relationships, women may become more likely to seek equal power and reciprocal support (Casad et al., 2015; Hammond & Overall, 2017).

In sum, our study among emerging adults in heterosexual dating relationships revealed that the male partner's endorsement of HS was associated with lower relationship satisfaction and greater conflict as reported by both the male and the female partners. These patterns lend support to the premises of ambivalent sexism theory that HS is detrimental to young adults' developing relationships (see Connor et al., 2016; Hammond & Overall, 2017). Furthermore, we found the male partner's BS was associated with higher relationship satisfaction and lower conflict as reported by both the male and the female partners. Perhaps at later ages or stages of the relationships, the associations of BS and relationship qualities shift (e.g., Hammond & Overall, 2013b). Finally, it is important to reiterate that BS and HS operate in tandem (e.g., Glick et al., 2000; Sibley & Becker, 2012). Indeed, we observed that both attitudes were moderately correlated with one another among women and men. That is, BS perpetuates traditional gender roles,

whereby the men's protection comes at the cost of the woman's autonomy (Connor et al., 2016).

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Looking ahead, we note some limitations of the current study and offer suggestions for future research. First, our study was correlational and therefore we have not established any causal links between sexist attitudes and relationship qualities. Relatedly, the effects of sexist attitudes on relationships may change over time. Longitudinal studies could better reveal how sexist attitudes might predict changes in relationship quality over time (e.g., Hammond & Overall, 2013b).

Second, our investigation focused solely on a sample of emerging adults around 21 years of age in dating relationships. With few exceptions, both partners in these couples were undergraduate students (and at least one person in all couples was an undergraduate). As we previously explained, a focus on this type of sample complements and builds upon prior studies that focused on mixed dating and married couples or only married couples. In future research, however, we recommend comparing emerging adult students in dating relationships, nonstudent emerging adults in dating relationships, and young or middle-aged adults in married relationships. With an older population or a predominately noncollege population with a greater range of attitudes and other relationship qualities, perhaps different patterns would be detected. For example, dual-career couples with children likely encounter greater challenges in reconciling ambivalent sexism with their life demands compared to the relatively unencumbered lifestyles of undergraduate dating couples (Abele & Spurk, 2011; Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Oswald et al., 2019).

Third, although our sample was diverse in participants' ethnic backgrounds (60% non-White), we did not have the statistical power to consider ethnic background as a possible moderator. Given the nexus between cultural practices and gender (e.g., Miville et al., 2016), we would like to see if and how the enactment of gender attitudes and roles might vary across different sociocultural and socioeconomic communities.

A fourth suggested direction for new research is to investigate if and how individuals manifest ambivalent sexism during social interactions in romantic relationships. An underlying assumption of our research is that variations in behavior mediate the association between sexist attitudes and relationship outcomes. Hammond and Overall (2017) recently presented a model proposing that men's HS may lead to negative and aggressive behavior toward their partner, whereas men's BS may generate dependency-oriented support. At the same time, women's BS may foster relationship-oriented behaviors at the cost of their own personal fulfillment.

Research is increasingly documenting how ambivalent sexism can undermine the relationship qualities of heterosexual couples (Connor et al., 2016; Hammond & Overall, 2017). Accordingly, our final plea is to encourage scientists and practitioners to develop interventions to increase awareness and reduce endorsements of ambivalent sexism as well as to

promote psychologically healthy relationships from childhood into emerging adulthood—before adults are likely to enter into long-term relationships. In contrast to work on reducing other forms of prejudice, relatively little research has examined ways to reduce sexist beliefs (see Becker et al., 2014). Nonetheless, there are a few studies pointing to effective strategies for increasing awareness of sexism, changing sexist beliefs, and learning how to confront sexism during childhood and adolescence in schools (e.g., Bigler & Wright, 2014; Grose et al., 2014; Pahlke et al., 2014), emerging adulthood in colleges (e.g., Becker & Swim, 2012; Case et al., 2014; Cundiff et al., 2014), and in couples counseling (e.g., Schneider, 1996). Notably, however, most of these studies focused on forms of HS and did not address BS.

### **Conclusions**

The present study builds on prior theory and research pointing to the need for reciprocally supportive relationships that are not predicated on sexist beliefs and gender inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Hammond & Overall, 2017). Holding ambivalent attitudes toward women within heterosexual relationships may be detrimental to women's and men's relationship satisfaction (Hammond & Overall, 2017). Furthermore, ambivalent sexism has been associated with women's and men's tolerance of intimate partner violence and endorsement of sexual assaults myths (e.g., Megías et al., 2018) as well as men's perpetration of intimate partner violence (e.g., Cross et al., 2017). Hence, disavowing sexist attitudes and embracing more egalitarian relationships can benefit the psychological and physical health of women and men. When both persons are happy and mutually supportive in the relationship, their relationship is less likely to dissolve (Gottman et al., 2014); moreover, individuals may live longer when their romantic partner is happy in the relationship (Stavrova, 2019).

### **Authors' Note**

Preliminary findings from this study were presented at the 2019 Biennial Society for Research in Child Development Conference in Baltimore.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors thank the following for their help: Antoinette Wilson, Veronica Hamilton, Christine Starr, and Abigail Walsh offered useful suggestions during the planning of the study. Amanda Cerro, Payton Small, and Laura Boden were excellent research assistants during data collection. Doug Bonett graciously shared his statistical expertise.

### **Author Contributions**

Timea Farkas and Campbell Leaper designed and carried out the study. Brenda C. Gutierrez conducted the statistical analyses. Campbell Leaper and Brenda C. Gutierrez wrote the paper, and Timea Farkas helped with editing.


### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the University of California, Santa Cruz, with an Academic Senate Committee on Research grant to Campbell Leaper and a Cota-Robles Graduate Fellowship to Brenda C. Gutierrez.

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## Open Practices

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

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