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# Confronting and Reducing Sexism: A Call for Research on Intervention

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*This article presents the current state of research on confronting and reducing sexism. We first provide a systematic overview about prior work on confronting sexism. We identify gaps in the literature by outlining situational and contextual factors that are important in confronting sexism and introduce how these are addressed in the current volume. Second, we review prior work on reducing sexism. Compared to research on reducing other forms of prejudice, research on interventions to reduce sexism is rare. We explain why mechanisms that are successful in reducing other forms of prejudice cannot simply be adapted to reducing sexism. We then outline how the articles of this issue promote research, theory, and policy on reducing sexism. In conclusion, the aim of this issue is to bring together novel theoretical approaches as well as empirically tested methods that identify key antecedents and consequences of diverse ways of confronting and reducing sexism.*

Sexism can be defined as "individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative assessments of individuals based upon their gender or support unequal status of women and men" (Swim & Hyers, 2009, p. 407; see also Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Rudman & Glick, 2008). This special issue brings together and

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promotes research, theory, and policy on confronting and reducing sexism. We have divided the issue into separate sections for confronting and reducing sexism as they are related, but also differ, in how they operate and can effect change. Confronting sexism is a volitional process aimed at expressing one's dissatisfaction with sexist treatment to the person or group responsible for it (Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006). Thus, confronting sexism can potentially reduce sexism by educating the perpetrator to prevent future encounters with sexism (e.g., Hyers, 2007) or more broadly through changing social norms (e.g., Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994). While confronting sexism is most often a short-term and spontaneous response in reaction to a sexist incident, planned interventions to reduce sexism target a certain group of people with the defined goal of changing individual's endorsement of sexist beliefs and respective behaviors. In addition, interventions are often developed from theory rather than being, like confrontation, a response in the moment.

The main aim of the first section of this issue (Confronting Sexism) is to bring together research that identifies key aspects of situations and individuals that are associated with confronting sexism, and highlight variables that moderate the target's and ally's confronting behavior. The aim of our second section (Interventions for Reducing Sexism) is to present articles that examine optimal ways to reduce sexism, identify factors that affect the efficacy of interventions, and highlight structural and cultural influences that bolster sexism and prevent the acceptance of interventions.

Across all papers, consequences of confronting and reducing sexism for women are discussed. Although sexism can also be directed at men, women are overwhelmingly the main target of sexism and have historically suffered as a result of it. In contrast, men have different experiences with sexism compared to women (see, for instance, Brinkman & Rickard, 2009), and sexism against men may actually work as a means to stabilize gender inequality and to further disadvantage women (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1999). However, a goal across both sections is to highlight the situated nature of gender and the social location of a person in studying experiences of and responses to sexism, and the feasibility and efficacy of interventions to reduce sexist attitudes and behaviors. This is important because, as theory and research on intersectionality shows (e.g., Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008), the various social identities we embody profoundly influence our beliefs about and our experience of gender, and thereby, sexism. Each contribution to this special issue incorporates discussion of the relevance of the research to experiences of individuals at different intersectional positions. Research on sexist attitudes and behavior, confronting sexism, and interventions to reduce sexism have, implicitly or explicitly, almost exclusively focused on white, middle-class experience. In this issue, we explicitly aim to consider how efforts to reduce sexism may play out differently or need to be tailored specifically for particular target groups. In the

following section, we first review research on confronting and reducing sexism and then connect past research with the contributions in this special issue.

## An Overview of Research on Confronting and Reducing Sexism

In addition to confronting, women have a variety of options to deal with gender discrimination. For example, they can engage in cognitive coping strategies (for an overview, see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002) or they can respond with humor, sarcasm, or nonverbal responses that do not clearly communicate their displeasure with sexist treatment. However, when faced with sexism, behavioral coping such as directly challenging and confronting the perpetrator(s) by communicating one's displeasure with sexist treatment is one of the most important tools to address interpersonal gender discrimination because it is externally focused and therefore has the potential to reduce sexism (for an overview, see Hyers, 2007; Swim & Hyers, 1999). There are a number of recent studies that have focused on psychological antecedents and consequences of directly confronting sexism.

Confronting prejudice can have positive as well as negative consequences for the confronter. Targets who confront prejudice can potentially experience a range of positive psychological outcomes such as an increased sense of competence, self-esteem, empowerment (Gervais et al., 2010; Swim & Thomas, 2005), and satisfaction (Hyers, 2007). Thus, confronting discrimination can be seen as a way of coping with a stressful situation (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Another positive outcome of confronting prejudice is that confronting can reduce stereotype use in perpetrators (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006) and observers (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). In the case of racism, for instance, people who were confronted with their racism reported negative emotions, guilt, and discomfort and reduced their subsequent usage of stereotypic responses (Czopp et al., 2006). Moreover, confronting can increase the perpetrator's compensatory efforts to increase mutual liking between the confronter and the confronted (Mallett & Wagner, 2011) and the confronter is perceived as competent by female and male observers (Becker, Glick, Ilic, & Bohner, 2011).

Although women are generally inclined to confront sexism when imagining a sexist encounter, in reality most women remain silent despite these positive consequences (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Swim, Eyssell, Quinlivan Murdoch, & Ferguson, 2010). Several models and explanations have been offered to explain why women do not confront sexism. Staircase-models such as the "ask, answer and announce" model (Stangor et al., 2003) or the "confronting prejudiced responses" model (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008) suggest that an individual faces different hurdles in confronting sexism. For instance, they suggest that before taking action, individuals have to detect discrimination, deem the incident an "emergency," take responsibility to confront, and decide how to confront. Whether or not they detect discrimination is strongly dependent on the type of incident the

woman was faced with. For example, women were less likely to confront sexism when sexism involved unwanted sexual attention compared to sexist comments (Ayres, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009). Cultural norms also influence the likelihood of women's confronting. Lee, Soto, Swim, and Berntstein, (2012) found that African American women were more likely to directly confront racist behavior than were Asian American women, though there was no difference between the groups in likelihood to respond indirectly. Group differences in unwillingness to confront was accounted for by Asian American women's culturally consistent desire to maintain peace with their interaction partner.

Major barriers to confronting include social costs to the confronter (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Swim et al., 2010). Female confronters of sexism and black confronters of racism are often perceived as overreacting, whiny, oversensitive troublemakers, interpersonally cold, or fearful of retaliation (e.g., Becker et al., 2011; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran, 2001; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). Female confronters are also less liked by men (Dodd et al., 2001), and the confronting target is at risk to be perceived as self-interested and egoistic. Thus, not surprisingly, evidence suggests that confrontations by nontargets can be more effective than confrontations by targets (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). In sum, although there is already important literature on confronting prejudice, the role of situational moderators and context effects has been neglected. For instance, women have a variety of options to confront sexism—they can confront directly or indirectly, they can confront in a friendly manner or act aggressively. Yet, little is known about "optimal" ways of confronting, about how confrontation is perceived in different social contexts. One aim of this special issue is to promote research on situational and contextual factors that are important in confronting sexism, particularly as they may inform development of tailored interventions. Additionally, this issue presents work on the importance of others—allies, observers, organizational climates—in considering when confrontation occurs and how it is perceived. A second goal of this special issue is to further promote the idea that addressing sexism, including confronting it, is the responsibility of everyone—not just the targets of sexism.

Compared to research on confronting sexism and reducing other forms of prejudice, research on interventions to reduce sexism is rare. Some have argued that sexism has a special status compared to other types of prejudice such those based on racial ethnicity, age, or disability (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). Specifically, Fiske and Stevens (1993) argue that gender is special because of the enormous prescriptive aspects of gender stereotypes, the inherent power asymmetries between women and men (physically as well as power over resources), close contact, and the sexual and biological facets of intimate relationships. In line with this reasoning, people do react differently when they are confronted about racial-biased versus gender-biased responses. In one study, for example, participants felt more guilt

and less amusement, and displayed more apologetic responses when they were confronted about racial-biased responses compared to gender-biased responses (Czopp & Monteith, 2003).

Thus, mechanisms that are successful in reducing other forms of prejudice (e.g., ethnic prejudice; racism), such as intergroup contact, cannot simply be adapted to sexism research. For instance, the most prominent intervention to reduce prejudice toward an outgroup is through bringing the two outgroups together in an intergroup contact situation (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Among other things, intergroup contact reduces prejudice by reducing intergroup anxiety. Yet, women and men are in continuous close contact and thus are unlikely to experience anxiety when being around one another because of unfamiliarity. Even when women and men are not involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship or do not have close other-sex friends, they have at least contact with each other in their family, work, or school. Moreover, most often, women and men like each other (Jackman, 1994). For example, Glick and Fiske (1996) argue that the intimate close contact between women and men creates a situation in which men are dependent on women's "dyadic power" that produces a special form of prejudice, namely benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism is a subtle expression of male dominance and expressed in a protective behavior toward women and an idealization of women as caregivers and romantic partners (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Thus, it would be odd to create an intergroup contact situation between women and men in order to increase intergroup liking. Furthermore, the ascribed status men are generally given (at least in U.S. society) is hard do away with, even when people are put in groups ostensibly as "equals," because interactions within groups tend to occur in ways that reproduce individuals' status outside that situation (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Obviously, attempts to reduce benevolent sexism must be different from attempts to reduce negative attitudes toward other nondominant groups.

In conclusion, prejudice reduction research may have neglected sexism because prominent interventions such as intergroup contact or the reduction of intergroup anxiety cannot be applied to reducing sexism. To our knowledge there are only a few studies that have examined specific ways to reduce sexism. Most studies have looked at the effect of providing individuals with certain information to change their attitudes. For example, Shields, Zawadzki, and Johnson (2011) introduced the Workshop Activity for Gender Equity Simulation in the Academy (WAGES-Academic), which is a simulation of the cumulative effects of unconscious bias in the academic workplace. By playing WAGES-Academic, participants discover their bias and experientially learn that the accumulation of apparently minor biases hinder advancement, that different gender-relevant factors are significant at each stage in work life, that stereotypes impair the ability to notice bias, and that cumulative patterns reveal inequality. Results show that participants who play WAGES-Academic show increased knowledge and retention

of gender equity issues (Zawadzki, Danube, & Shields, 2012), and show reduced endorsement of sexist attitudes both immediately after playing WAGES and 1 week later (Zawadzki, Shields, Danube, & Swim, 2013). In another intervention, Becker and Swim (2011) reduced women's endorsement of modern, neosexist, and benevolent sexist beliefs by asking them to keep sexism diaries as a means to heighten their sensitivity for sexism in their everyday lives. Although heightening sensitivity for sexism was sufficient to reduce women's sexist beliefs (an effect that was still present in a one-week follow up measure), men needed to increase their empathy for the target of sexism to change their endorsement of modern and neosexist beliefs, though their endorsement of benevolent sexist beliefs remained unaffected. In a further study designed to reduce endorsement of benevolent sexist beliefs, Becker and Swim (2012) provided participants with information about the harm and prevalence of benevolent sexism. They illustrated that information about harm reduced women's and men's endorsement of benevolent sexist beliefs, while information about both harm and prevalence was necessary to change endorsement of modern sexist beliefs.

Together, as these papers illustrate, successful interventions to reduce sexism are possible. Therefore, the aim of this special issue is to bring together and promote novel theoretical approaches as well as empirically tested methods that identify key antecedents and consequences of diverse ways of confronting and reducing sexism. Moreover, this issue aims at presenting interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing sexist beliefs.

Overall, a goal of this issue is to provide readers with the knowledge of effective and reliable methods to confront and reduce sexism. If the programs and interventions in this issue are to inform policy and be used in organizational settings they must be evaluated. As a result, many contributions rely on experimental methodology to test the efficacy of certain ways of confrontation or interventions to reduce sexism.

## Overview of Contributions to this Issue

All articles in this issue explore ways to confront and reduce sexism. The articles are organized according to two major themes: the first section deals with predictors, moderators, and strategies of confronting sexism; the second section is comprised of articles on predictors, moderators, and strategies of interventions to reduce sexism.

### Confronting Sexism

In the first paper, Ashburn-Nardo, Blanchar, Petersson, Morris and Goodwin (2014) point to the role of an important moderating situational variable, namely the perpetrator's power in confronting sexism. Results of two experiments illustrate

that perpetrator power inhibits direct confrontation intentions. Because the costs of confronting a high power perpetrator are perceived to be high, others in the situation feel less responsible and indecisive about what to do.

The second paper, written by Drury and Kaiser (2014), focuses on the role of bystanders (allies) in confronting sexism. In their review, they highlight that although men are less likely to confront sexism compared to women (with an analysis of the barriers to men's confronting), when men do confront, they are perceived as more legitimate than women who confront. The reasons as to why men's confronting is seen as more legitimate are then discussed, including that men are not seen as direct beneficiaries to the sexism reduction that comes with confronting and that men are not stereotyped as hypersensitive and thus their confrontation is seen as reflecting objective reality more so than women's. Finally, the policy implications of men's confronting is discussed, both in terms of encouraging men to become allies, and how women's confronting can gain insights from the legitimacy that is often ascribed to men's confrontations.

In the third paper, Gervais and Hillard (2014) report the results of a study that tested perceptions of leaders who confront prejudice. They manipulated the message of confronting (direct vs. indirect), the source (male leader vs. female leader), and the context (public vs. private). Results show that in line with gender role prescriptions, participants evaluated a male leader more favorably when he confronted indirectly and publically, and evaluated a female leader more favorably when she confronted indirectly and privately. Moreover, participants perceived the statement as more sexist when it was confronted publically than privately. The authors discuss the potential costs to women of confronting sexism privately.

Next, Becker and Barreto (2014) examine different ways of confronting sexism. They investigated how a female target is perceived by women and men depending on whether she confronts a sexist perpetrator nonaggressively, confronts aggressively, or chooses not to respond to the sexist incident. Results show that perceivers evaluated the nonaggressive confrontation most favorably and supported it more than the aggressive way and the nonresponse. In particular, women weakly identified and men highly identified with their gender felt more hostility towards and had a less positive impression of the aggressive confronter (compared to the nonaggressive confronter).

In the last paper of this section, Buchanan, Settles, Hall, and O'Connor (2014) review system-level interventions designed to reduce the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace, and organizational responses to those who confront or report sexual harassment. They first describe why sexual harassment occurs, namely that certain workplaces create a permissive climate or espouse hyper-masculine values. Next, they discuss how this insight into the reason why sexual harassment occurs informs ways to reduce harassment. They then highlight effective strategies for reducing harassment. Finally, using the U.S. military as a case study, they detail the consequences to individuals who confronted

and reported sexism, especially women, concluding with a discussion of how organizations can reduce sexual harassment by removing or reducing the barriers that accompany reporting on sexual harassment.

*Interventions for Reducing Sexism*

Cundiff, Zawadzki, Danube, and Shields (2014) report two intervention studies that examine how reactance and self-efficacy elicited during an intervention influence the recognition of sexism as harmful and the intention to engage in behaviors to address subtle sexism. They compare experiential learning, in the form of the WAGES-Academic, either to a condition in which information is provided without experiential learning or to a group activity control condition. Results indicate that WAGES, compared to providing only information, increased the recognition of everyday sexism as harmful, and promoted behavioral intentions to seek information about gender equity and discuss it with others. The different outcomes obtained by WAGES compared to information only were due to WAGES evoking less reactance and promoting self-efficacy. Results are then discussed in terms of how policy regarding diversity training could be shaped to increase its utility and effectiveness.

Case, Hensley, and Anderson (2014) report two intervention studies aimed to raise awareness of heterosexual and male privilege among college students. They test different elements of learning in both studies compared to a control condition, namely the effectiveness of reading a list of privileges of being heterosexual or male combined with reflective writing, or the effectiveness of watching a video after which volunteers discuss ways that heterosexual and male privileges brings advantages to their lives combined with reflective writing. Both studies were successful in that the interventions increased awareness of heterosexual privilege and increased internal motivations to respond without prejudice (Study 1), and reduced endorsement of modern sexism (Study 2).

De Lemus, Navarro, Megías, Velásquez, and Ryan (2014) report three intervention studies to reduce hostile and benevolent sexism in Argentina, Spain, and El Salvador. They developed a 20-hour gender-training program for women and men based on Pratto and Walker's (2004) power and gender model, including information about gender as a social construction, recourses, and social obligations and ideologies. Following the intervention, they measured participants' hostile and benevolent sexism and intention to engage in collective action. All three studies were successful in reducing participants' sexist beliefs.

Calogero and Tylka (2014) discuss a particular manifestation of sexism, the sexual objectification of women's bodies, and the consequences that sexual objectification has for women. They note the prevalence and seeming normativity of objectification, and describe these factors as a large part of why it is so difficult to reduce sexual objectification. Drawing from system justification theory and

objectification theory, they propose that the key targets to disrupting the system of sexual objectification include adjustments to both a self and societal perspective on women's bodies.

Finally, Glick (2014) comments on this issue by highlighting that this issue brings about increased efforts to develop theory-inspired and research-tested interventions for confronting and reducing sexism.

## Conclusion

Sexism continues to be pervasive in society despite years of policy and research aimed at reducing sexism. Thus, a multipronged approach is needed to understand when and how sexism can be confronted, and endorsement of sexist attitudes can be reduced. Moreover, good intentions to prevent sexism are not enough as individuals may hold, and act on, sexist beliefs that are implicit. The articles presented in this issue represent important starting points for how to approach sexism with the aims of addressing and eliminating it. Optimistically the presented work demonstrates that sexism is neither permanent nor inevitable. Yet, it also suggests that much more work needs to be done as sexist actions continue to be performed, and people, women and men alike, continue to hold sexist attitudes. For progress, it is vital to recognize that sexism harms everybody, men as well as women, either directly or indirectly, and therefore efforts to create lasting change must come from all individuals.

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