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Social Psychology Quarterly 2005 68: 75
DOI: 10.1177/019027250506800106

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://spq.sagepub.com/content/68/1/75
The Perils of Political Correctness: Men’s and Women’s Responses to Old-Fashioned and Modern Sexist Views*

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In this study we examined the responses of male and female research participants to information about the endorsement of either old-fashioned or modern sexist views by a sample of either men or women. We predicted that expressions of modern sexism may seem unobjectionable but can have negative consequences. Moreover, they can impair behavioral responses and therefore remain unchallenged. The results show that female participants in particular were relatively disinclined to recognize expressions of modern sexism as prejudicial. Furthermore, while old-fashioned sexist views generally elicited hostility, exposure to modern sexist opinions evoked anxiety in female participants, while it decreased anxiety among male participants. We conclude that modern forms of prejudice may prove perilous: although they may undermine the self, they seem inoffensive and as a result remain unchallenged.

One of the most striking results of the social sanctioning of prejudice has been the development of more subtle forms of prejudice expression that seem more “politically correct.” This development has been at the core of research on intergroup attitudes during the past decade (also see Devine, Plant and Blair 2001; Dovidio 2001). Researchers have examined the conditions under which people refrain from expressing more blatant forms of prejudice, the various ways through which it is currently expressed, and the origins of contemporary forms of prejudice (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Glick and Fiske 1996; McConahay 1983; Pettigrew and Meertens 1995; Plant and Devine 1998; Ronai, Zsembik and Feagin 1997; Swim et al. 1995). Yet it is still unclear how members of society at large perceive and experience these newer forms of prejudice. The goals of the present investigation are to examine the conditions under which contemporary expressions of prejudice are indeed recognized as prejudicial, and to assess the affective and behavioral consequences of exposure to these views.

In the research reported here we assess how people respond when they are exposed to prejudicial beliefs that are seen as prevalent, and that are not connected to any single event. In fact, much previous work on this topic examines how people who receive some negative treatment interpret that event, and assesses the circumstances under which they are inclined to attribute the event to prejudicial attitudes (for a review see Major, Quinton and McCoy 2002). In addition, whereas prior investigations examine the consequences of exposure to prejudice for its victims, we examine the reactions not only of those whose social self is most directly implicated by these prejudicial views (members of the negatively stereotyped group), but also of members of the dominant group; the perceptions and responses of the latter are crucial in determining the success of any attempts at challenging the status quo. In sum, we examine how societal views advocating prejudice in blatant or subtle ways are experienced by both subordinate- and dominant-group members.

* We sincerely thank Cecilia Ridgeway, Spencer Cahill, Peter Glick, and two anonymous reviewers for several valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Address correspondence to Manuela Barreto and Naomi Ellemers, Social and Organizational Psychology, Leiden University, PO Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands; barreto@fsw.leidenuniv.nl or ellemers@fsw.leidenuniv.nl.
Old-Fashioned and Modern Sexism

In the present study we focus on prejudice towards women, because sexism is a form of prejudice that is found consistently across nations. Various researchers have pointed out that sexism, far from having disappeared, still prevails in modern societies, even though it has taken new forms of expression (Benokraitis and Feagin 1995; Glick and Fiske 1996; Jackman 1994; Sigel 1996; Swim et al. 1995; Tougas et al. 1995). In particular, in parallel to the distinction between “blatant” and “modern” racism (McConahay 1986; Sears 1988), Swim et al. (1995) have defined the concept of “modern” sexism, in contrast to “old-fashioned” sexism. As with different forms of racism, both old-fashioned and modern sexism are seen to indicate prejudicial beliefs and to result in discriminatory behavior. Modern sexists, however, differ from old-fashioned sexists in the sense that they express their prejudiced attitudes in veiled ways, presumably because they are sensitive to normative societal pressures to display “politically correct” behavior. That is, old-fashioned sexists clearly display negative attitudes towards women by endorsing statements such as “Women are generally not as smart as men,” while modern sexists would be less inclined to explicitly claim women’s inferiority. Instead, modern sexist views emerge from statements showing denial of gender discrimination, antagonism towards women’s demands, and resentment of special favors to women (see Swim et al. 1995).

For the present purpose of comparing the consequences of old-fashioned and modern sexism, denial of gender discrimination is particularly relevant: it conveys the same belief as old-fashioned sexism (i.e., women’s inferiority) but does so in covert ways. That is, in view of existing social differences between women and men (for instance, in the workplace), those who insist that women enjoy equal opportunities imply that any lack of career success can stem only from women’s inferior abilities and/or effort compared to men’s: women either are unable or do not wish to pursue a career. Therefore old-fashioned sexism and denial of discrimination are parallel in that they both state women’s inferiority to men, but they differ in the extent to which this belief is expressed explicitly.

Researchers in this domain seem to agree that modern sexism may reflect underlying attitudes towards women similar to old-fashioned sexism. Yet it is not clear how fully this similarity is acknowledged by those who are exposed to such expressions of prejudice, nor how affective and behavioral responses to modern sexism are similar to reactions to old-fashioned sexism. To further examine this issue, we consider how different forms of sexism are likely to affect detection, affect, and behavioral responses.

Detecting Prejudice

In a recent review, Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002) argued that the detection of prejudice may be affected by situational cues and perceiver factors (also see Feldman-Barrett and Swim 1998). The specific form in which sexism is expressed may constitute a situational cue that may either facilitate (in old-fashioned sexism) or inhibit (in modern sexism) the perception of an underlying prejudicial attitude (also see Major, Quinton and Schmader 2003). This is particularly the case when we restrict our analysis of modern sexism to “denial of discrimination.” The idea that individual achievement in the society is due to merit, rather than to discrimination, is associated with the belief that unequal outcomes fairly reflect differences in ability, effort, and choices (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Kluegal and Smith 1986). For instance, many believe that if women are underrepresented in high places in organizations, this is either the case because they are not able, because they are less highly motivated, or even because they choose to stay at home rather than to pursue a career.

All of these interpretations correspond to attributions internal to women themselves for their disadvantaged position in society—the reasoning underlying the meritocratic ideology. As a consequence, when members of disadvantaged groups hold such meritocratic beliefs, they are reluctant to perceive themselves as targets of prejudice (Major, Gramzow et al. 2002; Major and Schmader 2001; Wright 2001). In fact, beliefs in a meritocratic society (such as those implied by
modern sexist views) also have been designated as legitimizing beliefs precisely because they appear fair and inoffensive, and therefore contribute to the maintenance of the status quo (also see Jost & Banaji 1994; Lerner 1980; Sidanius and Pratto 1993; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Therefore we propose that modern sexism is less likely than old-fashioned sexism to be detected as prejudicial.

Turning to characteristics of the perceiver—in this case, perceiver’s gender—one can identify two contrasting tendencies that may lead to opposing predictions. On the one hand, portrayals of women as inferior to men help to legitimize men’s social advantages (Jost and Major 2001). For that reason, men should be less likely than women to see these statements as reflecting prejudicial attitudes. This prediction is supported by the finding that men report more agreement with sexist statements than do women (Glick and Fiske 1996; Swim et al. 1995). On the other hand, exposure to sexist attitudes may be psychologically harmful for women because these views derogate part of their social self (Branscombe, Schmitt and Harvey 1999; Klonoff, Landrine and Campbell 2000). To protect themselves from such harmful consequences, women should be inclined to deny that they are victims of sexism; such denial may lead women to perceive sexist attitudes as less prejudicial than do men (Crosby 1984; Ruggiero and Taylor 1997).

In sum, prior research suggests that women may be both more and less inclined than men to perceive sexism. This paradox may be resolved when we consider the different ways in which sexism is expressed. When facing old-fashioned forms of sexism, women cannot deny that they face sexism, and they are likely to be motivated to point out that statements describing women as inferior to men are prejudicial. Because modern sexism is considerably more ambiguous, however, it allows for the operation of self-protective mechanisms, making women less likely to acknowledge the sexist attitude implied in modern sexist statements. In sum, we predict that situational cues (form of prejudice) and perceiver characteristics (participants’ gender) interactively determine detection of prejudice against women. Specifically, we predict that women are more likely than men to detect prejudice when facing old-fashioned sexism, but are less likely than men to regard modern sexist statements as prejudicial (Hypothesis 1).

Affective Consequences

Prior research demonstrates extensively that exposure to blatant prejudice has negative affective consequences (Branscombe et al. 1999; Clark et al. 1999; Crocker, Cornwell and Major 1993; Dion and Earn 1975; Klonoff et al. 2000). Research also has begun to reveal that exposure to more subtle forms of prejudice can carry such consequences (Satterfield and Muehlenhard 1997; Schneider, Hitlan and Radhakrishnan 2000). In fact, it seems that threats to self can cause negative consequences even when the targets are not fully aware of their nature (Windmann and Kruger 1998). This past research, however, does not clarify whether the nature of these affective consequences differs according to whether people are exposed to more blatant or more subtle forms of prejudice, because the effects of exposure to these two forms of prejudice have not been compared.

We propose that although both old-fashioned and modern sexism are likely to carry negative affective consequences, the nature and the focus of these consequences are likely to differ depending on the type of prejudice one encounters. With regard to women’s affective responses, because sexism not only is antinormative but also constitutes a relevant threat for women, the classic distinction between “fight or flight” reactions to threatening circumstances seems pertinent (Cannon [1932] 1939; also see Lazarus and Folkman 1984). People may react to threat by directing their anger towards the source of threat and by searching for confrontation in order to regain control over the situation—an active response, also designated as a “fight” reaction. Alternatively, people may respond to threat by focusing on the self and experiencing negative self-directed affect, such as anxiety and insecurity, which tend to result in inaction. This “flight” reaction is more typical of circumstances deemed uncontrollable—for instance, a difficulty in
recognizing the nature or the source of the threat.

When we apply this distinction to the current context, it seems plausible that women may react to the threat posed by blatant sexism by engaging in a “fight” response, as evident from the experience of anger-related emotions. Thus we predict that women are likely to experience more anger-related emotions (hostility) when exposed to old-fashioned sexism than when exposed to modern sexism. In contrast, because modern sexism poses a more ambiguous threat, it should be associated with a pattern reminiscent of “flight” responses and should elicit emotions such as anxiety among women. Also, although modern sexism is not clearly derogatory, it implies that existing gender inequalities stem from women’s inherent inferiority and/or from their choice not to pursue a career. Such implications also are likely to elicit anxiety, in contrast to old-fashioned sexism. This pattern would be consistent with prior findings, which show that exposure to prejudice sometimes elicits anger, but may elicit insecurity when the exposure is more ambiguous (for a review, see Crocker, Major and Steele 1998).

Accordingly we predict that female participants exposed to old-fashioned sexism are likely to report more hostility-related emotions than those exposed to modern sexism (Hypothesis 2a). At the same time, we hypothesize that female perceivers exposed to modern sexism will report more anxiety-related emotions than those exposed to old-fashioned sexism (Hypothesis 2b).

Behavioral Responses

In previous research, the recognition that one is a victim of prejudice has emerged as an important precursor of active coping responses intended to challenge and redress prejudicial treatment (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Miller and Kaiser 2001; for a review, see Major, Quinton and McCoy 2002), such as derogation of the prejudiced source (e.g., Dion 1975) and protest in the form of collective action (e.g., Jetten et al. 2001). Thus the perception of sexism as a clear threat is likely to elicit not only affect but also behavioral responses reminiscent of a “fight” reaction (Cannon [1932] 1939; also see Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In view of our argument that old-fashioned sexism tends to be recognized as prejudice more easily than modern sexism, old-fashioned sexism should lead people to challenge the perceived violation of social norms primarily by derogating those who hold these views and protesting against their attitudes. By contrast, more ambiguous threats should be associated with “flight” responses, and often should result in inaction (also see Gramsci 1971; Jackman 2001). Therefore women exposed to modern sexism should be less likely to engage in such actions, thus failing to challenge the sexism expressed.

A similar pattern also is likely to emerge among male perceivers. Although it would not make sense in this case to speak of behavioral coping strategies, men also are likely to derogate the source of blatant sexism, and to protest against its expression to express their
disagreement and to distance themselves from such clearly biased attitudes. Therefore we hypothesize that both men and women are likely to derogate the source of sexism and to express a greater wish to protest when exposed to old-fashioned sexism than when exposed to modern sexism (Hypothesis 3). Although we predict a similar tendency in both genders, we acknowledge the possibility that because men’s social self is not implicated directly by these sexist statements, they may be less inclined than women to engage in these behavioral responses.

**METHOD**

*Design and Participants*

We examined men’s and women’s responses to others’ agreement with old-fashioned and modern sexist statements. In addition, we varied whether these statements came from male or from female sources, because prior research has revealed that the gender of the source may affect recognition of these views as prejudicial. That is, a given behavior is more easily perceived as sexist when displayed by a male source than by a female source (Baron, Burgess and Kao 1991; Dion 1975; Inman and Baron 1996). In this study we examine whether this effect may be obtained when both old-fashioned sexism and modern sexism are expressed.

The study therefore consisted of a 2 (participant’s gender: male, female) x 2 (type of sexism: old-fashioned, modern) x 2 (gender of the source: male, female) between-participants design. Participants completed the questionnaire at the beginning of a class. A total of 132 male and 235 female students at a Dutch university took part in this study and were assigned randomly to the experimental conditions (93 males and 205 females). Participants were debriefed, and received the results of the study in a class that met two weeks later.

*Manipulations*

Participants read a short description, purportedly of a prior study concerning public opinions about the position of women in Dutch society. We manipulated gender of source by varying how the sample of the prior study was described. Half of the participants were told that the study examined the opinions of a female sample about the position of women in Dutch society (female source); the remaining participants were told that the study investigated the opinions of a male sample on that subject (male source).

The ostensible results of this study then were summarized, in which we manipulated the type of sexism. In the old-fashioned condition, participants read that most women/men in the sample agreed that women are generally not as smart as men, that they would have a problem with having a woman as a boss, that it is more important for boys than for girls to have a good education, that women are simply less good at thinking logically, and that men are better than women at making decisions. These opinions correspond to items of the Swim et al. (1995) scale of old-fashioned sexism. In the modern sexism condition, participants read that most women/men in the sample agreed that currently men and women have equal chances of achievement, that discrimination against women is no longer a problem, that the fact that few women hold high positions in organizations is not due to discrimination, that in Dutch society men and women are generally treated equally, and that women are almost never treated in a sexist manner. These statements convey denial of gender discrimination, as formulated in the Swim et al. (1995) modern sexism scale. These statements also can be viewed as sexist in the particular context of Dutch society: for instance, Dutch men earn on average 20 percent more than Dutch women and are twice as likely to occupy managerial positions, despite equal levels of education (Eurostat 2002).

*Dependent Measures*

All responses to the following were made on seven point scales ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 7 (“very much”). To check our basic assumption that politically correct forms of prejudice, such as modern sexism, generally seem more acceptable than more blatant forms of prejudice, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the (sexist) opinions allegedly expressed by the source, as suggested in the
coverstory. To assess how strongly sexist the participants considered the opinions presented to them, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought that people who held those opinions were prejudiced against women.

Participants then indicated how strongly they experienced each of six negative emotions after reading the (sexist) messages. These emotions were hostility-related as well as anxiety-related. Factor analysis on the six emotion terms resulted in a solution in which two factors had eigenvalues greater than 1, explaining 68 percent of the variance in the individual items. As intended, emotions were clustered in terms of hostility versus anxiety. Accordingly we constructed two emotion scales: hostility-related (angry, indignant, disappointed; alpha = .77) and anxiety-related (weak, tense, sad; alpha = .72).

We included a second indicator of anxiety, which we designated social insecurity. Participants were instructed to indicate their response to the information received using three items from the social subscale of the Heatherton and Polivy (1991) State Self-Esteem scale (“I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success,” “I feel inferior to others,” and “I am worried about what others think of me”). These items were combined into a single indicator (alpha = .65) and were designated as social insecurity (rather than social self-esteem) because all three items indicate a lack of social self-esteem.

Behavioral responses were measured with five items. These items loaded on two separate factors, which together explained 71.2 percent of the variance in the individual items. The first factor consisted of items in which participants indicated to what extent they would wish to speak to someone who holds such (sexist) views, how strongly they would want to try to change the opinion of people with these views (intention to protest, alpha = .66). The second factor consisted of items assessing how strongly participants expected that they would dislike people with these (sexist) views, and would be unwilling to collaborate with people who endorsed such views (derogation of the source, alpha = .60).

RESULTS

Unless specified otherwise, all analyses follow a 2 (participant’s gender: male, female) x 2 (type of sexism: old-fashioned, modern) x 2 (gender of the source: male, female) between-participants factorial design.

Agreement With the Sexist Message

Analysis of variance on the degree of agreement with the views allegedly expressed by others revealed the predicted main effect of type of sexism, $F(1, 285) = 149.67, p < .001$, showing that participants generally agreed more with the modern sexist statements ($M = 3.93, sd = 1.55$) than with the old-fashioned sexist statements ($M = 2.06, sd = 1.33$). This finding is in line with our assumption that modern sexism seems more acceptable than old-fashioned sexism. In addition, we obtained a reliable main effect of participant’s gender, $F(1, 285) = 8.46, p < .01$, as well as an interaction between type of sexism and gender, $F(1, 285) = 5.19, p < .05$. The relevant means and post hoc contrasts (see Table 1, top panel) reveal that although the difference in agreement with modern and old-fashioned sexist views was smaller among male than female participants, the predicted difference in agreement with the two types of sexist statements remained significant for both groups. In other words, the results reveal that while male participants agreed more strongly with old-fashioned sexism than did female participants, males and females agreed with modern sexism to a similar extent. We found no significant effects involving gender of the source.

Detection of Prejudice

In analysis of variance on the extent to which the views supposedly expressed by others were perceived as reflecting prejudice, we found a significant main effect of gender of source, $F(1, 289) = 4.04, p < .05$; this was not qualified by any higher-order effects. In line with prior research, the relevant means indicate that the sexist statements generally were recognized more easily as prejudicial when voiced by a male source ($M = 4.82, sd =$
In addition we obtained a significant main effect of type of sexism, $F(1, 289) = 10.84$, $p < .001$, as well as an interaction between type of sexism and participant’s gender, $F(1, 289) = 12.83$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1 for relevant means and results of post hoc contrasts). In line with our predictions (Hypothesis 1), female participants were more ready than male participants to perceive the old-fashioned statements as sexist, but less inclined to detect prejudice in the modern sexist statements. That is, female participants regarded the old-fashioned sexist statements as more prejudicial than the modern statements, whereas male participants considered these two types of statements to be equally prejudicial.

**Affective Responses**

**Emotions.** We conducted multivariate analysis of variance on the two emotion scales to examine whether different forms of sexism elicit distinct patterns of affective responses. At the multivariate level, this analysis revealed a reliable main effect of type of sexism, $F(2, 286) = 9.52$, $p < .001$; a reliable main effect of participant’s gender, $F(2, 286) = 5.72$, $p < .005$; and a reliable interaction between type of sexism and participant’s gender, $F(2, 286) = 5.61$, $p < .005$.

At the univariate level, however, the results were different for the two emotions. Hostility-related emotions revealed reliable main effects of type of sexism, $F(1, 287) = 15.76$, $p < .001$, as well as of participant’s gender, $F(1, 287) = 7.54$, $p < .01$. The univariate interaction, however, was not significant for this variable, $F(1, 287) < 1$, ns. The relevant means show that old-fashioned sexism elicited more feelings of hostility ($M = 3.36$, $sd = 1.57$) than modern sexism ($M = 2.57$, $sd = 1.55$). Furthermore, overall female participants reported more hostility ($M = 3.23$, $sd = 1.61$) in response to the experimental manipulations than did male participants ($M = 2.70$, $sd = 1.52$). Although this latter effect was not predicted, it is consistent with our previous observation that women generally reported less agreement with the sexist statements presented to them than did men. No reliable effects involving gender of source were revealed for this variable.

For anxiety-related emotions we obtained a reliable univariate interaction only for type of sexism and participant’s gender, $F(1, 287) = 10.69$, $p < .001$. The relevant means and post hoc contrasts indicate that female participants experienced more anxiety in response to modern sexism ($M = 2.44$, $sd = 1.28$) than old-fashioned sexism ($M = 2.03$, $sd = 1.09$, $p < .05$). Male participants, however, reported more anxiety when confronted with old-fashioned sexism ($M = 2.57$, $sd = 1.55$) than modern sexism ($M = 2.02$, $sd = .94$, $p < .05$). In other words, exposure to modern sexist views elicited more anxiety in women than in men, while old-fashioned sexism resulted in more anxiety among men.

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**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables As a Function of Type of Sexism and Participant’s Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Sexism</th>
<th>Old-Fashioned</th>
<th>Modern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>2.51 (1.63)$_b$</td>
<td>1.59 (1.05)$_a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detection</td>
<td>4.67 (1.52)$_b$</td>
<td>5.26 (1.33)$_c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>2.57 (1.15)$_a$</td>
<td>2.01 (92)$_b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility</td>
<td>3.20 (1.49)$_b$</td>
<td>3.53 (1.59)$_c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Insecurity</td>
<td>2.78 (1.21)$_b$</td>
<td>3.05 (1.22)$_c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derogation of Source</td>
<td>4.58 (1.07)$_b$</td>
<td>4.83 (1.19)$_c$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. In each row, means with different subscripts differ reliably from each other at $p < .05$. 

1.53) than by a female source ($M = 4.49$, $sd = 1.54$).

In addition we obtained a significant main effect of type of sexism, $F (1, 289) = 10.84$, $p < .001$, as well as an interaction between type of sexism and participant’s gender, $F (1, 289) = 12.83$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1 for relevant means and results of post hoc contrasts). In line with our predictions (Hypothesis 1), female participants were more ready than male participants to perceive the old-fashioned statements as sexist, but less inclined to detect prejudice in the modern sexist statements. That is, female participants regarded the old-fashioned sexist statements as more prejudicial than the modern sexist statements, whereas male participants considered these two types of statements to be equally prejudicial.
than women. No other univariate effects were significant.

In sum, in line with our predictions, old-fashioned sexism resulted in more hostility than modern sexism both among women (Hypothesis 2a) and among men (Hypothesis 2c). In contrast, exposure to modern sexism elicited more anxiety than exposure to old-fashioned sexism among women (Hypothesis 2b), while men reported more anxiety due to exposure to old-fashioned sexism.

**Social insecurity.** Analysis of variance on the social insecurity measure revealed a significant main effect only for participant’s gender, $F(1, 290) = 6.36, p < .05$. When exposed to either form of sexism, female participants ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.25$) reported more feelings of insecurity than male participants ($M = 2.68, SD = 1.19$). No reliable effects involving gender of source or type of sexism were revealed.

**Behavioral Responses**

Participants’ derogation of the source was affected only by type of sexism, $F(1, 287) = 23.14, p < .001$. In line with our prediction (Hypothesis 3), participants were more inclined to derogate the source that expressed old-fashioned sexism ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.15$, significantly above the midpoint of the scale, $t(152) = 7.96, p < .001$), than the source of a modern sexist message ($M = 3.97, SD = 1.21$, not significantly different from the midpoint, $t(143) = .51, ns$). This variable was affected neither by gender of source nor by participant’s gender.

Participants’ intention to protest did not reveal the expected main effect of type of sexism (as stated in Hypothesis 3; see Table 2). Instead, the analysis of willingness to protest revealed a main effect of gender of source, $F(1, 287) = 5.86, p < .05$, which was qualified by an interaction between gender of source and participant’s gender, $F(1, 287) = 7, p < .01$. Male and female participants expressed a similar wish to protest to a male source (males, $M = 4.38, SD = 1.43$; females, $M = 4.34, SD = 1.5$), $F(1, 292) = .03, ns$. Female participants, ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.56$), however, expressed a stronger intention than male participants ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.44$) to protest to a female source, $F(1, 292) = 13, p < .001$.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study we examined the consequences of exposure to modern sexism, and compared these with the consequences of exposure to a more traditional form of sexism. In particular, we examined differences in the extent to which old-fashioned and modern sexist statements are perceived as reflecting prejudiced attitudes, as well as in the affective and behavioral responses these statements elicit. In addition, we not only investigated how these forms of sexism are perceived and experienced by women, the group targeted by sexism, but also examined the responses of men, the dominant group. The results are generally in line with our predictions, and indicate that politically correct ways of describing current gender relations (such as in modern sexism) may prove perilous because they are likely to remain unchallenged, despite their negative consequences.

Modern sexism is assumed to constitute a more socially acceptable or politically correct expression of prejudice than old-fashioned or blatant sexism (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; McConahay 1986; Swim et al. 1995). We first obtained empirical support for this assumption because we observed that people generally agreed more strongly with views expressing modern sexism than old-

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1 To check whether the gender differences should be attributed to the experimental conditions, we also examined reported emotions and social insecurity among people who had not been exposed to sexism. These control participants were informed that we were interested in examining differences and similarities between men and women, and subsequently were asked to state up to five such differences. We followed this procedure to ensure that male and female controls differed from experimental participants only with regard to their exposure to prejudice, but not with regard to salience of gender identity. In total, 39 males and 30 females indicated the extent to which they experienced each of the affective indicators. Male and female controls did not differ in the extent to which they expressed hostility, ($male = 2.10, SD = 1.19$; female = 2.10, $SD = .99$), $F(1, 67) < 1, ns$; anxiety, ($male = 2.59, SD = 1.07$; female = 2.36, $SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 67) < 1, ns$; nor social insecurity ($male = 2.97, SD = 1.26$; female = 2.97, $SD = .99$), $F(1, 67) < 1, ns$. Therefore any gender differences in affective experiences obtained in this study may be regarded as resulting from exposure to sexism.
fashioned sexism. This difference was particularly pronounced among female research participants.

More important, the results of our study corroborate the argument that detection of prejudice depends on situational cues (i.e., form of prejudice) as well as on the perceiv-er’s characteristics (i.e., perceiver’s gender). In line with past research (Baron et al. 1991; Inman and Baron 1996), our results show that sexism is recognized more easily when expressed by a male source, while detection seems to be less likely in the case of a female source. More important, and a new finding in the present study, situational cues and perceiver characteristics interact to reveal that women are more likely than men to perceive sexism when it is blatant, but less likely than men to recognize it when it is expressed in more covert forms (Hypothesis 1). In fact, both forms of sexism we examined are recognized as prejudicial by male perceivers.

In the case of female observers, however, additional processes come into play because females belong to the group that is depicted (explicitly or implicitly) in a negative way. By comparing the responses of female and male perceivers—in contrast to previous research in this area, which usually focused only on the (potential) victims of prejudice—we were able to establish that sensitivity to prejudice can be increased when one’s own group identity is the target of prejudiced attitudes, but only in the presence of clear prejudice cues. By contrast, when people face more subtle forms of prejudice (modern sexism, in this case), self-protective mechanisms may be set in motion to hinder detection of prejudice (also see Crosby 1984; Ruggiero and Taylor 1997). This finding is novel, and constitutes a significant advance in understanding why prejudice so often remains undetected in modern societies. It seems that because of the general reluctance to acknowledge that the self may suffer from disadvantage due to unfair treatment of one’s group, one may become less able to recognize prejudice that is expressed in politically correct ways.

Old-fashioned and modern sexism also differ in their affective consequences for women and for men. Indeed, we observed that each form of sexism resulted in a specific kind of emotional response (Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2c): old-fashioned sexism elicited more hostility among both women and men, while modern sexism induced more anxiety among women and less among men. That is, old-fash-ioned sexism elicited “fight”-type affective responses, whereas modern sexism elicited ‘flight’-type affect among women (Cannon [1932]1939; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). These results not only attest to the difference in the affective consequences of old and new forms of sexism; they also demonstrate that modern forms of sexism may remain undetected but are not inoffensive, particularly to women. We believe that this anxiety among women derives from the implications of modern sexism: That women possess inferior abilities, do not make an effort, and/or choose not to pursue a career. Although these impli-

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Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Protest As a Function of Type of Sexism, Participant’s Gender, and Gender of Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Sexism</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old-Fashioned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Source</td>
<td>4.52 (1.52)</td>
<td>4.51 (1.68)</td>
<td>4.24 (1.36)</td>
<td>4.17 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Source</td>
<td>4.11 (1.26)</td>
<td>4.81 (1.44)</td>
<td>3.73 (1.24)</td>
<td>4.79 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Participant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Source</td>
<td>4.52 (1.52)</td>
<td>4.51 (1.68)</td>
<td>4.24 (1.36)</td>
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<td>4.79 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. In each row, means with different subscripts differ reliably from each other at $p < .05$. 

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3 With a separate sample of 11 male and 11 female participants, drawn from the same population as used for the main study, we tested whether hostility-related emotions indeed were indeed perceived as more active (i.e., preparing people to act) than anxiety-related emotions. In fact, participants rated hostility-related emotions as more active ($M = 3.89, sd = 1.09$) than anxiety-related emotions ($M = 3.19, sd = .86, t (1, 21) = 3.19, p < .005$).
cations may appear different at first sight, they all stem from stereotypical images of women (regarding their opportunities and preferences), and they all lead to attributions internal to women to explain their disadvantaged position in society. Future research might examine whether women in fact perceive modern sexism to carry these implications.

We also found that men felt not only more hostile but also more anxious in the old-fashioned than in the modern sexism condition. Although we had predicted that men would feel hostile in the old-fashioned condition, we had not anticipated that they would also feel more anxious in this condition than when facing modern sexism. This increase in anxiety, however, is consistent with our broader argument that old-fashioned sexism also presents a threat to men (a threat to the legitimacy of their status), even though this is unlike the threat it presents to women (a threat to the value of their identity; see Branscombe, Ellemers et al. 1999). By contrast, modern sexism holds perilous implications for women but is actually flattering to men, and thus is associated less closely with anxiety (see note 1). When we compare women's and men's affective responses to modern sexism, it seems that denial of gender discrimination reassures and possibly flatters men but appears to threaten women, most likely because it legitimizes current gender inequalities.

Another finding which suggests that subtle forms of prejudice may be more (rather than less) harmful than more blatant forms is the greater derogation of the source among participants exposed to old-fashioned sexism. That is, old-fashioned sexism elicits “fight”-type responses in the sense that the response is directed at the source (i.e., derogation of the source). By contrast, because modern sexism is associated with inaction or “flight”-type responses, it contributes to the maintenance of prejudicial attitudes; in this sense it may be seen as more harmful than old-fashioned sexism. That is, conditions that facilitate the recognition of prejudice or of illegitimate treatment result in attempts to challenge discriminatory views held by others (Dion 1975; Ellemers, Wilke and Van Knippenberg 1993; Hafer and Olson 1989; Sidanius and Pratto 1993; Wright, Taylor and Moghaddam 1990). Lack of resistance to subtle forms of sexism, however, communicates acquiescence and therefore acceptance of the status quo (Gramsci 1971; Jackman 2001). With regard to the potential victims (in this case, women), more blatant forms of prejudice make it easier to focus negative responses on those who hold prejudicial views instead of worrying about possible shortcomings of the self. Thoughts about such possible shortcomings interfere with behavior that aims to challenge or redress prejudicial expectations (Steele and Aronson 1995). In this sense, our research clearly demonstrates the perils of politically correct expressions of prejudice such as modern sexism (also see Satterfield and Muehlenhard 1997; Windmann and Kruger 1998).

Our results, however, did not support our prediction of a similar pattern for protest responses regarding derogation of the source. Instead, we found that the intention to protest depended on the source of the discriminatory message. This result also takes us one step further in understanding how people respond to prejudice. That is, we found that when a female expresses negative attitudes towards women, women are more inclined to protest than men, whereas men and women are equally likely to challenge a male’s sexist views. This observation is consistent with the view that prototypes guide our perceptions of prejudice and our responses. Indeed, our finding that sexism is detected less easily when expressed by a female agrees with the idea that the prototypical sexist event involves a male perpetrator and a female victim (also see Baron et al. 1991; Locksley et al. 1980). Similarly, in the prototypical scenario for protest against sexism, women challenge men’s sexist attitudes. As a result, our male participants may have found it awkward to protest against sexist views held by women because such protest would imply a complete reversal of the prototypical situation. The violation of the prototype would be less evident, however, in the case of female participants protesting against other females’ sexist attitudes.
Finally, to complement previous research, we not only explicitly compared the effects of blatant and subtle prejudice against women, but also focused on the responses of those who are exposed to prejudicial views as external perceivers. In contrast to previous research, we did not directly subject our research participants to negative treatment, even though male and female perceivers differed from each other in the extent to which their own group was implicated in the message they received. As one important consequence, this feature tells us something about the likelihood that victims of prejudice will receive social support from others when they claim unjust treatment (Kaiser and Miller 2001; Stangor et al. 2002; Swim and Hyers 1999). Thus our findings offer scope to predict the conditions under which particular forms of prejudice will be subject to social sanctions and when they will be condoned by witnesses. Therefore we find it pertinent not only to examine the responses of those targeted more directly by prejudice (in this case, women), but also to include the perspective of others (in this case, men) who are in the position to either sanction the occurrence of prejudice (Carli and Eagly 2001; Ridgeway 2001) or offer social support to those who challenge prejudice and discrimination.

Even though we obtained only partial support for some hypotheses, the overall results of this study are generally consistent with our theoretical argument. These results suggest that modern forms of prejudice may harm the potential victims, but may remain unchallenged because of the difficulty of detecting their prejudicial nature. Even so, we acknowledge that our research focused on a very particular type of modern prejudice, namely denial of gender discrimination. Additional research must investigate further the impact of this and other new forms of prejudice on those who are exposed to such views, and particularly must explore the coping strategies that are available to victims of contemporary forms of prejudice. Future research also should clarify the conditions that facilitate recognition of subtle forms of prejudice, and that may be set in place in contexts where prejudice occurs most often.

REFERENCES


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