

## Excuse Me—What Did You Just Say?!: Women's Public and Private Responses to Sexist Remarks

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Two studies illustrate women's struggle between their desire to challenge sexism and the social pressures and costs that lead to not publicly responding. In Study 1, 45% of the women confronted a man who made a sexist remark and only 15% did so directly. Confronting was most likely to be chosen by women actively committed to fighting sexism in their daily lives. Private responses illustrate that a lack of responding was not necessarily indicative of complacency about the remarks or a lack of thoughts about confronting. The results from Studies 1 and 2 reveal that diffusion of responsibility, normative pressures to not respond, social pressures to be polite, and concern about retaliation likely suppressed responding. © 1999 Academic Press

As the focus of psychological research on prejudice has widened to include the target's perspective, we can no longer view those on the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination simply as passive victims (Lalonde & Cameron, 1994). Theoretical examinations have described targets as strategic negotiators of threatening situations (Goffman, 1963), as partners in a dynamic interaction (Deaux & Major, 1987), and as stress managers who actively cope through externally and internally focused responses (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995).

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These approaches emphasize that targets employ a variety of cognitive as well as behavioral coping strategies to withstand the injustices that they face (Crocker & Major, 1989; Feagin, 1991; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Hyers & Swim, 1998; Lalonde & Cameron, 1994; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Understanding how targets respond to prejudice is important in order to provide a fuller picture of the way that targets negotiate social interactions in an era when encounters with prejudice are still common (Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). In the present research, we wished to examine the often underestimated role of targets as active rather than passive recipients of prejudice, without neglecting to account for their more personal, private reactions.

## STUDY 1

### *Public Responses*

In this paper, we focus on how women confront encounters with sexism. Confronting styles may vary from target group to target group because the nature of prejudice, its history, and expression are idiosyncratic to different stigmatized groups (Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Young-Bruehl, 1996). It is important to study the particular aspects of women's confronting styles for a number of reasons. Encountering sexism is commonplace for women and making decisions about whether and how to respond is a part of their everyday lives (Swim et al., 1998). Personal benefits of responding include altering or reducing this form of daily hassle and the self-satisfaction of acting on one's beliefs rather than being overpowered by a prejudiced individual (Crosby, 1993). Confronting can also aid in improving the condition of women in general by altering specific perpetrator's beliefs, altering bystanders' perceptions of events, or altering social norms as to what is considered appropriate behavior (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Lalonde & Cameron, 1994). Yet, women may not respond because of social influence pressures to not respond, social pressures against identifying oneself as a feminist, fears of retaliation, or fears of being perceived as impolite or overly aggressive. These latter concerns might be especially heightened for women because confronting could be seen as inconsistent with the female gender role (Jack, 1991; Swim, Ferguson, & Hyers, 1999).

There has been very little, if any, high-impact, nonretrospective empirical work on response styles women make to encounters with prejudice. Therefore, in our first study, we placed women in a group discussion where they heard a male confederate make several sexist remarks, which allowed us to observe women's immediate responses to a specific encounter, rather than relying on long-term, retrospective recall. The sexist remarks made by our male confederate openly endorsed traditional gender roles (viewing women as sex objects and as responsible for domestic chores). The expression of prejudice directed toward women as a group, rather than directed at a specific woman, is pervasive and typical of women's everyday experiences with sexism (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Swim et al., 1998). We also included a condition where women heard parallel nonsexist

comments in order to obtain baseline information about women's public and private responses to the nonsexist component of these remarks.

### *Predicting Public Responding*

Understanding public responding includes knowledge about factors that might influence one's decision to respond. Responding to events involves labeling an event as prejudicial, being motivated to respond to the event, and then deciding to act on that motivation. There are a number of factors that can influence labeling an event as prejudiced (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997) and greater certainty that an incident is prejudicial can influence the likelihood and style of responding (e.g., Wright et al., 1990). However, labeling an event as prejudicial may not be sufficient to result in confronting. The motivation to respond is likely a function of how offensive the prejudicial incident is perceived to be (Kowalski, 1996). The decision to act on one's motivation likely involves assessing possible costs and benefits of publicly responding (Kowalski, 1996).

Endorsement of gender-related beliefs should be related to perceptions of events, motivation to respond, and decisions to respond. More specifically, identification with women as a group, such as holding gender central to the self-concept, feeling a sense of common fate with other women, and being concerned about the well-being of women in general (Branscombe, Owen, & Kobrynowicz, 1993), may increase the likelihood that a woman will label an incident as sexist (Johnston, Swim, & Stangor, 1998) and take action in response to the incident (Sauders, 1992, as cited by Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Women who have traditional attitudes about gender roles and hold modern sexist attitudes, such as believing that sexism is no longer a problem in society, may also be less likely to label an event as sexist or to publicly respond to an incident (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Mazer & Percival, 1989; Swim & Cohen, 1996). Finally, an active commitment to fighting sexism may be required before a woman feels the responsibility or courage to confront sexism (Crosby, 1993).

A factor that has been overlooked when considering whether people confront offensive behavior is the effect of social influence. Observations of others' behaviors after an offensive incident might influence one's interpretation of the extent to which an event is sexist and offensive. Also, group norms and diffusion of responsibility are likely to influence one's perceptions of the appropriateness of responding, motivation to respond, and assessment of the costs and benefits of responding. In the present study, the effect of social influence was examined by testing the impact of gender composition on women's public verbal responses to sexist remarks. Informational and normative social influence processes should be more powerful when bystanders are more similar to the target than when they are less similar (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). Thus, if bystanders do not respond (as in the present study), then women's responses would be suppressed more when the nonresponding bystanders are women rather than men. Research on helping in emergencies suggests similar outcomes (Latane

& Darley, 1970). The presence of bystanders creates diffusion of responsibility and lack of responding. People may feel that women are more responsible than men for confronting sexism directed at women, perhaps because women should be most qualified to decide whether the remarks need to be confronted or because they have more to gain by curbing sexism directed at women. Thus, women may believe that fellow bystanders share more responsibility for responding when the bystanders are women than when they are men.

In contrast, expectations about women's versus men's reactions to confrontations suggests that public confrontation may be *more* likely to occur when other women are present. A woman may anticipate social support from women and hostility from men if she publicly responds because of an expectation that other women would be more likely than men to share her perceptions. Thus, the cost of responding would be smaller and the likelihood of publicly responding would be greater when a woman is with other women than when she is the only woman in a group.

### *Private Responses*

Choosing not to respond does not mean a lack of private responses (Kowalski, 1996). The types of private responses to prejudice described by previous researchers primarily represent different ways of coping with prejudice (e.g., denial of prejudice or making intragroup rather than intergroup comparisons, Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, private responses can also be characterized by immediate thoughts and feelings about the offensiveness of the incident and whether to confront. In the present study we examine the content of women's private evaluations of the sexist remarks they encounter and the person making the remark and their thoughts about how they would like to respond to these remarks.

### *Self-Esteem*

A final purpose of the first study was to examine how encountering and confronting prejudice might affect state self-esteem. Self-blame is a common response to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993) and it can be associated with negative feelings about the self. Similarly, women may internalize the disempowering messages of sexist remarks (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Dion, 1975; Dion & Earn, 1975). However, there are ways to buffer oneself from the negative impact of prejudice (Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998). Women who hold gender-related attitudes that would predispose them to identifying the remarks as sexist may be more likely to make self-protective attributions (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997). Further, if a woman confronts a sexist person, the confronting may be self-affirming and self-esteem enhancing.

In sum, in Study 1 we examined public and private responses women make when encountering sexism directed at women. We were particularly interested in assessing the frequency and style of women's public and private responses that

communicated displeasure about the sexist remark. Although we predicted that women would be more likely to publicly respond to sexist than parallel nonsexist responses, we predicted that a substantial number of women would not publicly respond to the sexist condition in contrast to the substantial number of women who would report unfavorable private thoughts and feelings about the sexist comment and person. We also predicted that those who were more gender identified, had more feminist-related beliefs, and reported being actively committed to fighting sexism would be more likely to publicly confront sexist comments. We did not make directional predictions about the effect of gender composition due to the social influence and diffusion of responsibility explanation yielding one prediction and the social support explanation providing an opposite prediction. Further, we predicted more confrontations when our female participants were the solo member of their gender in the group than when their gender was in the majority. Finally, we predicted that public confrontations, gender identification, nonsexist beliefs, and having an activist orientation would buffer women against the possible negative effects of sexist comments on self-esteem.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 108 women recruited by phone from a group of students who completed a departmental prescreening questionnaire in their Introductory Psychology class. We excluded 9 participants who expressed suspicion during debriefing that the confederates were not naïve participants. In addition, thought and feeling listings and data about verbal confrontations were not available from 4 participants in the sexist condition due to technical difficulties with the video camera.

### *Design*

The design was a 2 (gender composition: solo vs. nonsolo woman)  $\times$  2 (type of remark: sexist vs. nonsexist) between-subjects factorial. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. In addition, the impact of several gender-related measures on the dependent measures was assessed.

### *Gender-Related Beliefs*

As part of a departmental prescreening of Introductory Psychology classes, students completed several scales relevant to the present study. These included Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp's (1973) shortened version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter's (1995) Modern Sexism Scale. The Attitudes Toward Women Scale measures participants' attitudes about gender roles and gender equality (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ). The Modern Sexism Scale measures beliefs that discrimination against women is not a problem, women complain too much about sexism, and women have gotten too much special treatment (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ), and can be considered a measure of sensitivity to sexism (Swim & Cohen, 1996). Responses to items on these scales were on 0 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree) scales. Higher scale scores indicate more unfavorable attitudes toward women's issues on both scales.

Participants also completed the activism portion of O'Neil, Egan, Owen, and Murry's (1993) Gender Role Journey Scale and Branscombe et al.'s (1993) Gender Identity Scale. The activism subscale of the Gender Role Journey Scale included items such as "I have taken some actions in my personal life to reduce sexism" and "I am responsible for changing restrictive gender roles." Higher scores indicate greater activism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ). We used four subscales from the Gender Identity Scale. Higher scores on these subscales indicate that respondents (1) hold biases in favor of their own gender group (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ), (2) have a strong emotional attachment to their own gender group (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ), (3) feel they are a typical member of their own gender group

(Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), and (4) feel they share a common fate with members of their own gender group (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ).

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited to be in a study ostensibly concerning group decision making. The experimenter escorted one participant and the three confederates to a group discussion room where they were asked to sit in preassigned seats. In the solo female participant condition, there were three male confederates. In the nonsolo female participant condition, there were two female confederates and one male confederate. The experimenter explained that the group was to select 12 individuals, from a list of 15 women and 15 men with different occupational titles, who would be best suited for survival on a deserted island. The experimenter asked group members to take turns in a clockwise order indicating their suggestion and a reason for their suggestion and asked one of the confederates to record the group's selections. This procedure allowed the participant to take part in the group discussion while the confederates said scripted comments. The script included comments about other confederates' remarks. However, the confederates were instructed to keep extraneous conversation to a minimum and always to agree with the participant's selections.

The male confederate sitting to the participant's right made either three sexist or three parallel nonsexist statements at different points during the group discussion. First, in response to another confederate's selection of an athlete/trainer, the confederate to the right of the participant said "Yeah, we definitely need to keep the (women/people in shape)." Second, during his own turn, he said "Let me see, maybe a chef? No, one of the (women/others) can cook." Third, during his final turn, he selected a female musician and said "I think we need more (women on the island to keep the men satisfied/entertainers to keep everyone happy)." The confederate made these comments to the group as a whole and did not look directly at the participant when he said them. The other two confederates were instructed not to respond to the sexist remarks or to any comments the participant might make about the remarks. After the selection of the 12 individuals was completed, one of the confederates informed the experimenter that the group had finished the task. The experimenter then led the participant and ostensibly the confederates to private rooms to complete a questionnaire.

When the participant completed the questionnaire, the experimenter led her to another room where she was informed that the group had been videotaped during the group task. In accord with Ickes, Robertson, Tooke, and Teng's (1986) naturalistic social cognition procedure, the participant was asked to view the videotape of her group task in order to help her recall the thoughts and feelings she had during the session. She was instructed to stop the tape whenever she remembered having a thought or feeling during the session and was asked to write down the thought or feeling and the time it occurred from a clock appearing on a videotape display. After she finished viewing the videotape, she was asked to rate her thoughts and feelings on several dimensions, as described below. She was then given the final debriefing and thanked for her participation in the study.

### *Questionnaire*

Participants rated their impressions of each of the confederates.<sup>1</sup> Using 7-point scales, they rated the extent to which each person was cooperative, friendly, prejudiced, flexible, involved, active, responsible, expressive, comfortable, and supportive. Of particular interest were ratings of the confederates' level of prejudice. This rating was used as a single item scale with higher numbers indicating more prejudice. Based on factor analyses, three scales were formed from the remaining attributes, with higher scores representing greater perceived cooperativeness (cooperative, flexible, friendly, supportive; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), participation (involved, active, expressive, and comforting; Cronbach's

<sup>1</sup> Participants also completed four questions designed to assess their perceptions of social support in the group. Participants reported feeling less support from the group when a sexist remark was made. This is likely a function of perceptions of the sexist confederate rather than all members of the group because type of remark did not affect other ratings of the bystanders. Group composition did not affect the social support ratings.

$\alpha = .75$ ), and responsibility (measured by one item, "responsibility"). After these ratings, participants rated the extent to which they would like to work with the person in the future, they would like the person as a friend, and they perceived that the person had attitudes similar to their own.

Participants' feelings about themselves during the task were assessed with a modified version of Heatherton and Polivy's (1991) state self-esteem scale. We modified the scale so that it referred to participants' feelings during the group task rather than during the completion of the scale itself. The questions asked how they felt about their performance (e.g., I felt confident about my abilities), how they felt socially, (e.g., I felt concerned about the impression I was making), and how they felt about their appearance (e.g., I was pleased with my appearance). Responses to these items were recoded such that higher numbers indicated higher state self-esteem on the performance (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), social (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ), and appearance (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ) subscales.

### *Coding of Thought and Feeling Listings*

Participants wrote an average of 12 thoughts and feelings. After writing their recalled thoughts and feelings, participants were asked to number them and rate each thought and feeling as to whether it was (a) a thought or a feeling, (b) related to the group task, (c) negative or positive on a scale from 1 to 7, and (d) written about themselves personally, each of the confederates, or something or someone else.<sup>2</sup> We selected and then aggregated the ratings of those thoughts and feelings that participants had identified as being directed at the confederate sitting to their right (the confederate saying either the sexist or the nonsexist remark). There were no notable predictors of the thoughts and feelings directed at others or the participants themselves.

After the study was completed, two female coders independently rated the thoughts and feelings. Coders rated whether each thought or feeling mentioned one of the three sexist or parallel nonsexist remarks or the person saying the remarks ( $\kappa = .88$ ). The thoughts and feelings in this subset were rated as to whether they included any mention of ways to confront the sexist comment or person ( $\kappa = .55$ ). Private confrontations were defined as comments participants would have liked to have made or actions they would have liked to have done during the group task that would express their disagreement or displeasure with the remark.

### *Coding of the Videotapes*

Transcribers were instructed to list all comments made by the participant immediately after each sexist remark until the next scripted comment was made. Then, two female coders independently noted any confrontations, defined as verbal expressions of displeasure or disagreement with the sexist remark. The correlation between the number of confrontational responses each coder noted during each session was 0.98.

After reconciling discrepancies as to whether the response was confrontational, the responses were coded to capture their specific style of delivery, details not accounted for in most broad conceptual classifications (e.g., Lalonde & Cameron, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright et al., 1990). Because coders could select more than one style for each response, interrater agreement was assessed separately for each style. The response styles and corresponding reliabilities were direct confrontation (e.g., saying that the person or remark was sexist or telling the perpetrator to change his behavior;  $\kappa = .77$ ), humor or sarcasm ( $\kappa = .73$ ), questioning of the confederate ( $\kappa = .78$ ), giving a task-related response that contradicted the confederates remark ( $\kappa = .86$ ), surprised exclamations ( $\kappa = .77$ ), grumbling noise ( $\kappa = .66$ ), and resigned acceptance ( $\kappa = .88$ ). Coders reconciled any discrepancies through discussion. The 10% of responses that indicated resigned acceptance (e.g., "Whatever") were excluded from analyses of confrontational responses because they did not clearly indicate disagree-

<sup>2</sup> Each participant also rated the extent to which the thought took a direct-perspective (a perception of herself, other people, the task, or the room) or a meta-perspective (a perception of other people's perception of her, other people, the task, or the room). There was some confusion for participants as to what a meta-perspective was and few participants selected this option, so we did not examine this variable.

ment. It could be argued that several of the other behaviors (such as surprised exclamations or grumbling) represent immediate emotional reactions to the event rather than confrontational reactions. However, these remarks can be considered confrontational because they were verbal indicators of disagreement or displeasure and were controllable.

## Results

### *Manipulation Check*

A 2 (gender composition)  $\times$  2 (type of remark) ANOVA was performed on the questionnaire ratings. This analysis revealed a main effect for type of remark on all but one rating. When the confederate made sexist remarks, he was perceived as more prejudiced, less responsible, and less cooperative than when he made nonsexist remarks (see Table 1). Participants also indicated a lesser preference to work with the confederate making the sexist remarks in a future group, indicated a lesser preference to have him as a friend, and perceived that his attitudes were more dissimilar from their own attitudes compared to when he made nonsexist remarks. The only rating of this confederate that was not affected by the type of remark was his level of participation in the group. There were also no main effects or interactions with gender composition.

### *Public Responses*

Of the 44 women in the sexist condition, 4 confronted all three sexist remarks, 5 confronted two of the remarks, 11 confronted one remark, and 24 made no confrontations. Thus, 45% ( $n = 20$ ) gave at least one verbal confrontational response in the sexist condition. In contrast, 7 of the 51 women in the nonsexist condition expressed disagreement or displeasure with the parallel nonsexist remarks. Because the parallel nonsexist remarks merely expressed a preference for certain occupations and were not designed to be offensive and few responded

TABLE 1  
PERCEPTIONS OF CONFEDERATE WHO MADE THE SEXIST OR NONSEXIST REMARK

Rating	Sexist remark ( <i>M</i> )	Nonsexist remark ( <i>M</i> )	<i>F</i> (1, 95)	<i>p</i>
Prejudiced	5.06 (2.06)	1.86 (1.41)	83.57	<.001
Responsible	5.12 (1.68)	6.22 (1.01)	15.52	<.001
Cooperative	5.28 (1.28)	6.12 (.84)	14.86	<.001
Participation	5.21 (1.08)	5.31 (1.31)	.21	.70
Work with in the future	3.50 (1.98)	5.04 (1.48)	18.17	<.001
Be their friend	3.37 (1.78)	4.53 (1.41)	12.10	.001
Perceive similarity	2.67 (1.78)	4.26 (1.44)	24.52	<.001

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate standard deviations. Higher means represent perceiving the confederate as more prejudiced, responsible, cooperative, participatory, having more favorable reactions to working with the person in the future, having more favorable reactions to being their friends, and perceiving more similarity between themselves and this person. There were 48 women in the sexist condition and 51 women in the nonsexist condition.

in the nonsexist condition, the confrontation-like responses in the nonsexist condition are used only for basic comparison purposes and will not be analyzed further.

The most frequent style of confrontation made in the sexist condition was questioning the confederate ( $n = 11, 25\%$ ). These questions included asking the confederate to repeat himself and asking the confederate rhetorical questions (e.g., “What did you say?!”). The second most frequent style of response was a task-related response ( $n = 9, 20\%$ ) (e.g., by selecting an occupation or providing an explanation that contradicted the suggestion made by the sexist person). Next, the following three styles of responses were equally likely to occur ( $n = 7, 16\%$ , for each): direct comments (e.g., “You can’t pick someone for that reason. Pick another person”), humor or sarcasm (e.g., making an anti-male, sexist comment), or surprised exclamations (e.g., “Oh my God. I can’t believe you said that!”). The least frequent confrontational response was grumbling ( $n = 1, 2\%$ ).

### *Predicting Public Responses<sup>3</sup>*

*Gender composition of the group.* We used log-linear regressions to test whether gender composition of the group predicted publicly confronting the sexist remarks at least once during the entire task as well as at least once to each of the three sexist remarks. We were interested in responses to each remark because each remark might be perceived differently at different points during the group task. For instance, there is a possible cumulative impact of hearing several remarks and observing others not responding to the remarks, as our confederates were instructed to behave.

While not significantly different, women were 14% more likely to confront at least once when they were the only member of their gender in the group ( $n = 12, 52\%$ ) than when there were other women present ( $n = 8, 38\%$ ;  $\chi^2(1) = .88, p = .35$ ). Examining the number of women who gave at least one style of response after each remark revealed that gender composition had a statistically significant impact for the first remark ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.24, p = .04$ ), but not for the later remarks. Participants were more likely to confront after the first remark when they were the solo woman present ( $n = 8, 35\%$ ) than if there were other women present ( $n = 2, 9\%$ ). There was no statistically significant effect of gender composition on responding to the second remark ( $n = 7, 31\%$  versus  $n = 5, 22\%$ ,

<sup>3</sup> We wanted to know whether perceptions of the sexist remarks would mediate the relationship between activism and confronting. However, we did not have a measure of perceptions of the sexist remark because we did not want to reveal the purpose of the study by asking the question. As a proxy for participants’ perceptions of the sexist remark, we used participants’ ratings of how prejudiced the sexist individual was perceived to be. The results indicate that these perceptions did not mediate the results. A possible reason this variable did not mediate the relationship is that being more likely to perceive the person as sexist, in contrast to perceiving the remark as sexist, may decrease confronting because confronting might be perceived as less effective and more risky with a more sexist person. Consistent with this explanation, log-linear regressions revealed that perceiving that the confederate was more prejudiced led to being less likely to confront after the first remark ( $r = -.23, \chi^2(1) = 4.37, p = .04$ ).

solo woman versus nonsolo woman, respectively), nor to the third remark ( $n = 6$ , 27% versus  $n = 5$ , 20%, solo woman versus nonsolo woman).

*Gender-related beliefs.* For those in the sexist remark condition, log-linear regressions were conducted to test whether any of the gender-related beliefs predicted publicly confronting the sexist remarks at least once during the study or to each remark. Separate log-linear regressions were computed for each gender-related belief. Women who reported actively confronting sexism in their lives were more likely to confront after the second ( $r = .17$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.77$ ,  $p = .05$ ) and third remarks ( $r = .25$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.75$ ,  $p = .02$ ). None of the other gender-related beliefs predicted confronting.

### *Private Responses*

Participants' ratings of the thoughts and feelings directed at the person sitting to their right were analyzed with  $2$  (group composition)  $\times$   $2$  (type of remark) ANOVAs. A higher percentage of the thoughts and feelings were about the confederate sitting to their right when he made the sexist remarks ( $M = 35.73$ ,  $SD = 21$ ) than when he made the parallel nonsexist remarks ( $M = 14.56$ ,  $SD = 14.38$ ),  $F(1, 94) = 34.84$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . With regard to the thoughts and feelings listed about the person sitting to their right, participants were more likely to list fewer thoughts, more feelings, fewer task-related thoughts and feelings, and more non-task-related thoughts and feelings in the sexist than the nonsexist remark condition (see Table 2). Further, the valence of these thoughts and feelings was more negative in the sexist ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) than the nonsexist condition ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ),  $F(1, 72) = 26.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . There were no main effects or interactions involving gender composition.

We were particularly interested in whether women's thought and feeling listings included ways to confront the sexist remarks. In the sexist condition, 43% ( $n = 19$ ) of the participants mentioned at least one confrontational response. Of the 44 women in this condition, 1 reported four confrontational comments, 1 listed three confrontational comments, 5 listed two confrontational comments, 12 listed one confrontational comment, and 25 listed none. The confrontational comments included responses they made during the study, responses they would like to have made (e.g., arguing with him, name calling, scolding, leaving, and questioning the confederate), and responses they were not likely to have seriously considered (e.g., hitting or killing him). The two most common responses listed were arguing and taking some type of violent action like hitting the confederate. In contrast, only 3 of the 51 women in the nonsexist condition reported ways to confront the parallel nonsexist comment or person saying the comment. The confrontational responses they listed were simply thoughts about not wanting to openly disagree or argue with the confederates. Listing at least one confrontation in the thought and feeling listings was not related to whether participants made similar public responses during the study ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.62$ ,  $p = .20$ ).

TABLE 2

QUALITY OF THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS DIRECTED TO THE CONFEDERATE WHO MADE EITHER THE SEXIST OR NONSEXIST REMARKS

Rating	Mean sexist remark	Mean nonsexist remark	F(1,72)	<i>p</i>
Thought	58.99 (40.03)	82.16 (34.77)	7.81	.01
Feeling	41.01 (40.03)	17.84 (34.77)	7.81	.01
Related to task	48.98 (40.79)	79.28 (35.30)	11.63	.001
Not related to task	51.02 (40.79)	20.72 (35.30)	11.63	.001

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate standard deviations. Higher means indicate a higher average proportion of thoughts and feelings that the participants rated as having each characteristic. There were 43 women in the sexist condition and 31 in the nonsexist condition. The means excluded people who did not identify any of their own thoughts and feelings as being directed toward the confederate who made the sexist or nonsexist remark.

### Self-Esteem

We predicted that hearing the sexist remark might affect how participants felt about themselves during the task in terms of their state self-esteem and this might be moderated by whether they confronted. Two (type of remark)  $\times$  2 (group composition) ANOVAs revealed that the type of remark and gender composition of the group did not affect performance, appearance, or social state self-esteem. Contrary to predictions that confronting would be self-affirming, a 2 (confronted at least once vs. never)  $\times$  2 (group composition) ANOVA for those in the sexist condition revealed no significant effects on state self-esteem.

We also predicted that gender-related beliefs would moderate the effect of hearing sexist remarks on self-esteem. Moderated regression analyses supported this prediction. First, a gender-related belief measure (kept as a continuous measure) and the type of remark made (dummy coded) were entered together in the regression equations. Second, we entered the interaction between the individual difference measure and the type of remark. We ran separate regressions for each of the gender-related beliefs and for each of the types of state self-esteem. These regressions revealed an interaction between level of activism and type of sexist remark for performance ( $b = .16$ ,  $t(86) = 2.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ), appearance ( $b = .32$ ,  $t(86) = 2.63$ ,  $p = .01$ ), and social ( $b = .28$ ,  $t(86) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .01$ ) state self-esteem. When a sexist remark was made, less activist women reported that they had lower performance, ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ), appearance, ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and social ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .01$ ) state self-esteem during the group session. When a nonsexist remark was made, level of activism was not related to performance, ( $r = .01$ ,  $p = .93$ ), appearance, ( $r = -.07$ ,  $p = .64$ ), and social ( $r = .02$ ,  $p = .91$ ) state self-esteem. Similar results predicting social state self-esteem were found for the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and the emotional attachment to one's own gender group subscale of the Gender Identity scale (interaction  $b = -.43$ ,  $t = -2.75$ ,  $p = .01$ ; interaction  $b = -.23$ ,  $t = 2.16$ ,  $p = .03$ , respectively). When

a sexist remark was made, those with more traditional gender-role attitudes and less emotional attachment to their gender group had lower social state self-esteem ( $r = -.36, p = .02, r = .38, p = .02$ , respectively), whereas when a nonsexist remark was made, these attitudes did not predict their social state self-esteem ( $r = .18, p = .22; r = .05, p = .69$ , respectively).

## Discussion

Study 1 results revealed that only 16% of the women confronted the sexist person with direct verbal comments such as indicating that his remarks were inappropriate or that he should retract them. However, when including additional confronting styles, 45% of participants openly expressed their displeasure. In comparison to the near lack of confronting in the nonsexist condition, this reveals that women did not behave as passive victims to this encounter with sexism.

An examination of the private thoughts and feelings among the remaining 55% who did not publicly confront reveals that their lack of confrontation was not indicative of acceptance of the remark. First, many women privately mentioned confronting and these thoughts were unrelated to having actually confronted. Second, perceptions of the sexist confederate indicated that most participants did not think favorably about the confederate making the sexist remarks and thought that he was prejudiced. More specifically, three-quarters of those who did not publicly respond indicated that they saw him as prejudiced in their private ratings. Similarly, 91% of the women who did not confront publicly nonetheless had private negative thoughts and feelings about the confederate (i.e., the average rating of their thoughts and feelings were below the midpoint of the favorability scale).

As hypothesized, activism predicted public confrontation. This relationship was found for publicly confronting the second and third remark. This pattern suggests that after a certain amount of time had elapsed and after observing others not publicly responding one's sense of personal responsibility became a motivator. None of the other gender-related beliefs predicted confronting, suggesting that a particularly committed stance toward fighting sexism is more predictive of confronting than either being gender identified or having certain feminist beliefs. The importance of an activist orientation in women's reactions to sexism was also revealed through the impact of the sexist remarks on women's state self-esteem. In the sexist condition, women who had an activist orientation reported higher performance, appearance, and social state self-esteem than women who did not have an activist orientation. This effect is not likely a function of activist women confronting more than nonactivist women because, contrary to predictions, confrontation was not related to self-esteem.

The effect of gender composition on public confronting indicates that social influence processes affected women's choice of whether to respond more than social support. Women were more likely to confront the first remark when they were the solo female than when their gender was in the majority and, while not statistically significant, this trend existed after the other two remarks. The lack of

effect of gender composition on private ratings and thoughts and feelings about the confederate and his sexist remarks suggest that social influence did not influence perceptions. Thus, the effect of group composition was not likely a result of informational influence. Instead, ingroup identification likely caused women to feel that other women's lack of response provided a better role model than the other men's lack of response. Further, they likely felt less personal responsibility for confronting when other women were present than when other men were present.

## STUDY 2

There were two purposes for conducting Study 2. First, we tested whether women would be overconfident about the likelihood that they would respond to sexist comments. As has been long documented, people are often unaware of the impact of situations on their behaviors (Milgram, 1974). Further, people are often overconfident of their ability to predict their own and others' behaviors due, in part, to their tendency to underestimate the impact of situational forces on behavior (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). This overconfidence has important implications for assumptions about and sensitivity to women who do not respond. Demonstrating the assumptions people might make, one woman noted in her thought–feeling listings “The other two women didn't appear to find anything wrong with these comments. The two girls, I realized, have a lot to learn if they [don't] defend themselves and their gender.” We predicted that women would be more likely to indicate that they would take the direct action of publicly confronting sexist remarks than women actually did in Study 1.

A second purpose of Study 2 was to test possible reasons for women's selection of responses in Study 1. After one is motivated to respond, the decision of whether and how to confront is likely a function of the anticipated costs and benefits of confronting (Kowalski, 1996). Thus, in Study 2, we examined whether the perceived costs associated with different styles of confronting might explain the responses participants selected. While there are many different costs associated with identifying events as sexist (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Feldman Barrett & Swim, 1998; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997), we focus on two immediate costs which are particularly associated with publicly confronting sexist remarks in a group setting. Complaining can be seen as impolite because it is a violation of the social standard that says “If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all” (Crosby, 1993). This may be particularly true for women for whom assertive responding can be perceived as inconsistent with their gender role. Thus, women who confront will be viewed as impolite. Another perceived cost may be possible retaliation, ranging from mild social rejection to overt aggression. For instance, one woman noted in her thought–feeling listing, “Should I yell at a room full of guys and give them a women's lib lecture? They would laugh at me.” Thus, we predicted that the most frequently selected styles of responses women made in Study 1 would most likely be those that were perceived to be the least costly (i.e., the most polite and the least risky).

## Method

### *Participants*

As part of a mass screening packet distributed in Introductory Psychology classes, 113 women responded to the scenario and activism measures described below.

### *Design*

The study was a 2 (group composition: solo vs. nonsolo woman)  $\times$  3 (first, second, or third sexist remark) mixed factorial with repeated measures on the second factor and random assignment to one of the two group composition conditions.<sup>4</sup>

### *Scenarios and Dependent Measures*

The scenarios described the situation that participants experienced in the sexist remark condition in Study 1. Study 2 participants were instructed to imagine that they were participating in the deserted island group task along with three men (solo condition) or along with a mixed-sex group (two women and a man, the nonsolo condition). The gender composition manipulation was accomplished by providing a diagram of the seating arrangement indicating the names of the other group members and the place where the participant was to imagine sitting. The next page of the scenario described the scripted dialogue from Study 1 and specifically noted the male confederate's remark that they needed an athlete/trainer to keep the women in shape on the island. Participants were first asked to rate how offensive (0, not very offensive; 6, very offensive) and sexist (0, not very sexist; 6, very sexist) they perceived this first remark to be. Next they were asked to indicate whether they definitely would not, probably would not, probably would, or definitely would give different styles of responses to the remark. The response styles represented the confrontational responses participants actually made during Study 1. (See Table 3 for the list of responses.) Violent responses (hitting and punching) were also included because they were frequently mentioned in the thought and feeling listings of Study 1.<sup>5</sup> After rating the likelihood that they would give each response, the second remark made by the sexist confederate was described and the same questions were asked. Then the third

<sup>4</sup> Because we anticipated that women would not be sensitive to situational cues, we anticipated that they may not be sensitive to the impact of group composition on responding. However, in contrast to their overconfidence in estimating their likelihood of responding, women accurately anticipated that they would be more likely to say they would publicly confront the sexist person in the solo status condition than the nonsolo status condition. This effect occurred for all three sexist remarks. Women in Study 2 may have assumed that they would not have needed to make as many responses because other women would be helping them. Thus, this finding could be indicative of diffusion of responsibility or expectations of social support.

<sup>5</sup> Three additional responses were included on the form (resigned acceptance, glaring, and laughing) as other options participants might choose. These responses were not included as confrontational responses in Study 1, so they are not used in the analyses presented below.

TABLE 3  
COMPARISON BETWEEN ACTUAL AND ANTICIPATED PUBLIC RESPONSES

Response	Percentage who actually gave the response (Study 1) (N = 44)	Percentage who anticipated definitely giving a response (Study 2) (N = 109)
No response		
1. Ignore the comment <sup>a</sup>	55	1
2. Wait to see what others do	55	4
Confrontational responses		
3. Question the response	25	47
4. Task-related response	20	22
5. Comment on inappropriateness	16	48
6. Sarcasm or humor	16	37
7. Surprise exclamation	16	40
8. Grumbling	2	10
9. Hit or punch	0	8
Gave at least one confrontational response	45	81

<sup>a</sup> Whether the lack of responses was a result of ignoring the comment and waiting to see what others do was not differentiated in Study 1.

remark was described and the same questions were asked. Participants perceived the sexist remarks as offensive ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ) and sexist ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ).<sup>6</sup> Following the response ratings after the third remark, participants rated, from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very), the extent to which each response directly communicated disagreement or disapproval of the remark made, represented a

<sup>6</sup> We examined the impact of gender-related beliefs on perceptions of the comments and anticipated responses. Being gender identified (emotional attachment to one's gender and perceiving a common fate with other women, holding less sexist beliefs (Modern Sexism and Attitudes Toward Women), and being an activist predicted perceiving the remarks as sexist and offensive. However, being an activist predicted women being more likely to confront. Perceptions of how sexist and offensive the remarks were perceived to be mediated the effect activism, but not group composition, on the likelihood of confronting. Finally, because the questionnaire was included in a mass screening packet for all students, 45 male participants also completed all questions in the survey. Men and women found the remarks to be equally sexist but men found them to be less offensive. Men were less likely than women to anticipate that they would definitely confront the sexist comment (50% vs 81%). This effect remained significant after covarying out perceptions of the offensiveness of the remarks. In contrast to the women, they were less likely to anticipate confronting when the other three group members were men (33%) than when the other three group members were composed of two women and one man (62%). Even though the group composition variable resulted in the condition being all men versus an equal number of women and men, this is consistent with a diffusion of responsibility explanation, with people taking on less responsibility when other people of their gender are available to confront the sexist person. It should be noted that it is not necessary to make comparisons with men in order to understand that women did not respond as much as they wanted to and that individual differences, perceived costs, and social influence processes affected women's responding in the present study.

polite or socially acceptable response, and represented a risky response in terms of how the sexist person or others would react to that response.

In order to obtain a conservative estimate of people's anticipated responses to each remark, the results were based only on the percentage of individuals who reported that they would definitely give each response (as opposed to those that probably would, probably would not, or definitely would not give each response). We calculated the percentage who would definitely give any of the confrontational responses at least once after each remark, the percentage who would definitely give any of the confrontational responses at least once across all three remarks, and the percentage who would definitely give each of the seven confrontational responses at least once across all three remarks. Lack of responding was calculated by the percentage of women who indicated that they would definitely not respond to all three remarks. Hence, the percentage of participants not responding was based upon the percentage of individuals who would ignore all three remarks or wait to see what others would do for all three remarks. These calculations were done to make the results from Study 2 comparable to the results from Study 1.

## Results and Discussion

### *Confidence in Likelihood of Publicly Confronting*

Study 2 illustrated that women were optimistic about the likelihood that they would take the direct approach of responding publicly to the sexist remarks. The total percentage of individuals predicting that they would definitely give at least one confrontational response far exceeded the number who gave at least one confrontational response during Study 1 (see Table 3). With the exception of task-related responses, the percentage of participants in Study 2 who anticipated definitely engaging in each of the confrontational behaviors at least once was greater than the percentage who actually displayed such responses in Study 1. Further, in direct opposition to the results of Study 1, very few women in Study 2 anticipated that they would not respond at all. Not responding was rated as the least direct response option (see Table 4). Thus, women anticipated being more direct than they likely would have been in a real situation.

### *The Cost of Responding*

The difference in preferred style of confronting between Study 1 and Study 2 is likely a function of avoiding possible costs associated with confronting. Not responding, which was the least frequent public response women anticipated in Study 2, but the most frequent public response actually given in Study 1, was perceived to be the least risky as well as the least direct.

We wanted to examine whether the particular style of public confrontational responses women in Study 1 actually made and the women in Study 2 anticipated making were related to the possible costs of responding. We also tested whether their confidence that they would be direct would be associated with the confronta-

TABLE 4  
 MEAN RATINGS OF HOW DIRECT, RISKY, AND POLITE EACH RESPONSE WAS PERCEIVED TO BE

Response	Direct ( <i>M</i> )	Risky ( <i>M</i> )	Polite ( <i>M</i> )
No response			
1. Ignore the comment <sup>1</sup>	.81 <sup>a</sup> (1.43)	.77 <sup>a</sup> (1.49)	4.31 <sup>ab</sup> (2.00)
2. Wait to see what others do	.73 <sup>a</sup> (1.14)	.61 <sup>a</sup> (1.10)	4.15 <sup>b</sup> (1.81)
Confrontational responses			
3. Question the response	4.27 <sup>c</sup> (1.29)	3.61 <sup>c</sup> (1.45)	4.17 <sup>b</sup> (1.38)
4. Task-related response	4.19 <sup>c</sup> (1.48)	3.41 <sup>c</sup> (1.59)	4.67 <sup>a</sup> (1.43)
5. Comment on inappropriateness	5.67 <sup>d</sup> (.85)	4.53 <sup>d</sup> (1.54)	3.74 <sup>b</sup> (1.96)
6. Sarcasm or humor	2.89 <sup>b</sup> (1.48)	3.20 <sup>c</sup> (1.45)	3.13 <sup>c</sup> (1.54)
7. Surprised exclamation	3.51 <sup>b</sup> (1.38)	3.32 <sup>c</sup> (1.42)	3.45 <sup>c</sup> (1.37)
8. Grumbling	2.12 <sup>b</sup> (1.40)	2.65 <sup>b</sup> (1.38)	2.47 <sup>d</sup> (1.43)
9. Hit or punch	4.28 <sup>c</sup> (2.34)	5.60 <sup>d</sup> (1.23)	.28 <sup>c</sup> (.84)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate standard deviations. Higher numbers indicate that the response was rated as more direct, risky, and polite. Means with different superscripts *within a column* are significantly different from each other at  $p < .01$ , with Newman–Kuels posthoc tests. *N* ranges from 109 to 113.

tion style they used or would anticipate using. We correlated the mean ratings of how risky, polite, and direct each confrontational response was perceived to be, first with the percentage of women who actually gave each confrontational response at least once in Study 1 and second with the percentage who anticipated definitely giving each confrontational response at least once in Study 2. The less risky, more polite, and the more direct a response was perceived to be the more women actually gave the response ( $r(6) = -.30, .88, .36$ , respectively) and the more women anticipated giving the response ( $r(6) = -.11, .64, .46$ , respectively). However, the only significant correlation was between how polite the response was perceived to be and the percentage of women in Study 1 who actually gave the response ( $p = .01$ ).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> We also conducted repeated measures analyses to have a more statistically powerful test of the effect of costs on public responding. The dependent variable in these analyses was the likelihood that participants either gave a particular style of response in Study 1 or anticipated giving a particular style of response in Study 2. We excluded hitting or punching from the analyses because there was no variance on this variable for Study 1 because no participant gave this responses. We used planned contrasts with weights derived from Study 2 participants' perceptions of how direct, polite, and risky the responses were. The results revealed significant linear trends for all the variables such that the more direct, polite, and risky behaviors were perceived to be more likely to be done and anticipated. The effect for riskiness was therefore in the opposite direction to that found with the correlations. Further, higher order effects qualified all analyses with the exception of the analyses for actual responding with contrasts based upon how polite the behavior was perceived to be. Thus, like the analyses using correlations, these analyses revealed that politeness was the most parsimonious predictor of the participants' choice of response style.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

These studies illustrate that women are not responding to sexist remarks in the manner that they would like to respond. Most women in our studies found the sexist remarks objectionable, perceived the person saying the remark as prejudiced, and would like to have publicly responded. However, the constraints of the situation impeded their responding. The effects of social constraints are illustrated by the response styles women chose and by the effect of social influence processes. First, women preferred the least risky choice of not responding. Second, when women did respond, they preferred more polite responses. Third, women were less likely to publicly confront when other women were present than when they were a solo member their gender in the group. The effect of group composition was likely a result of diffusion of responsibility or female bystanders providing a stronger normative standard about how women should respond than male bystanders.

Women who are most likely to respond are those with an activist orientation. While not endorsing traditional roles or modern sexist beliefs would be indicative of a feminist orientation, a more well developed feminist identity is associated with taking an active stance to fight sexism (Bargard & Hyde, 1991). Given that the other gender-related beliefs did not predict public responding in Study 1, the results indicate that it takes a person who is particularly committed to ending sexism to overcome the social influence processes constraining behavior.<sup>8</sup>

It is likely that the process leading to public responding is similar for targets of prejudice other than women (e.g., African Americans) as well as for bystanders who are not the targets (e.g., men overhearing sexist comments about women). Specifically, this process would consist of labeling an event as prejudicial, being motivated to respond to the event, and then deciding to act on the motivation. Further, an activist orientation and social influence processes are likely to affect outcomes of each of the steps in this process. Similarly, group differences may emerge due to different tendencies to label events as prejudice, motivations to respond to prejudice, and assessments of costs and benefits. For instance, compared to women, men may be less likely to label events as sexist (Russo-Devosa & Swim, 1997), feel less compelled to confront sexism, and be less afraid of appearing impolite.

Future research should explore the ramifications of confronting. People's

<sup>8</sup> The fact that gender-related beliefs predicted perceptions of the sexist remark but only activism predicted publicly responding (see footnote 5) is consistent with the argument that labeling an event as prejudicial is not sufficient for understanding public responses to prejudice. It is possible that the greater conceptual similarity between the activism measure and confronting accounts for its greater predictive power. However, the temporal pattern of findings from Study 1 suggest that the scales' ability to identify people more strongly committed to fighting sexism is also a viable explanation for its greater predictive power. That is, the pattern of findings suggests that participants' assessment of the situation as one in which others were not taking the responsibility to respond influenced the greater predictive power of activism as the study progressed.

anticipation of the costs and benefits about responding may not be correct. The discrepancy between public and private responses suggests that if a woman dissents from the social pressure not to confront, it is likely that the dissent will receive support from other women because many women would privately agree with the dissenter. The dissenter may therefore not be perceived as impolite and the response might not be as risky as assumed. Further, the benefits of confronting could be examined in future research. Confronting may serve a social role by altering other people's perceptions. Past research has shown that awareness that others do not tolerate prejudice can decrease a bystander's prejudice and tolerance of comments (Blanchard et al., 1994; Citron, Chein, & Harding, 1950). While not all the verbal confrontations in the present study are likely to have been strategically planned to influence others' perceptions, they still may have that impact. Other perhaps unintended effects of confronting include being a role model for others to express their displeasure with sexist remarks, altering social standards for what is acceptable behavior, and educating perpetrators of sexist remarks. Finally, while it may seem that confronting could make women feel efficacious and therefore heighten their self-esteem, the results from Study 1 indicated that confronting was unrelated to state self-esteem. Instead of having this personal effect, confronting may help protect the state self-esteem of women who may be uncertain as to whether the remarks were sexist by perhaps increasing the likelihood that they would label such remarks as prejudicial.

In sum, the fact that 45% of women did respond in some confrontational manner to the remarks reveals that women are not necessarily passive recipients of prejudicial encounters. This is particularly likely to be true for women personally committed to fighting sexism. However, the present study also illustrated women's struggle between their desire to challenge sexism and the social pressures that work against direct responding. Merely labeling a remark as prejudicial and wanting to respond is not likely to be sufficient to predict responding. For instance, thinking about confronting did not predict actually public confronting. Further, concerns about the costs associated with confronting support the idea that it takes courage to complain in public about sexist behaviors. The low frequency of direct comments about the remarks and the fact that 55% did not make public confrontations in contrast to the negativity of their private opinions and the desires of many to confront indicate that observers will not be privy to women's personal opinions about sexism and their views of those who make sexist remarks. This can lead to pluralistic ignorance and normative pressures not to respond, sexist people not learning that they are behaving offensively and are disliked because of this, and, in general, the perpetuation of sexist comments in the culture. We hope that recognition of pluralistic ignorance helps alleviate this ignorance and that recognition of the social barriers women face as targets of prejudice will yield more sympathetic responses to the struggles that they and others face when deciding whether to take active stances against sexism in their everyday lives.

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