



# Value-based standards guide sexism inferences for self and others<sup>☆, ☆ ☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

People often disagree about what constitutes sexism, and these disagreements can be both socially and legally consequential. It is unclear, however, why or how people come to different conclusions about whether something or someone is sexist. Previous research on judgments about sexism has focused on the perceiver's gender and attitudes, but neither of these variables identifies comparative standards that people use to determine whether any given behavior (or person) is sexist. Extending Devine and colleagues' values framework (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Plant & Devine, 1998), we argue that, when evaluating others' behavior, perceivers rely on the morally-prescriptive values that guide their own behavior toward women. In a series of 3 studies we demonstrate that (1) people's personal standards for sexism in their own and others' behavior are each related to their values regarding sexism, (2) these values predict how much behavioral evidence people need to infer sexism, and (3) people with stringent, but not lenient, value-based standards get angry and try to regulate a sexist perpetrator's behavior to reduce sexism. Furthermore, these personal values are related to all outcomes in the present work above and beyond other person characteristics previously used to predict sexism inferences. We discuss the implications of differing value-based standards for explaining and reconciling disputes over what constitutes sexist behavior.

Post: I'm not sexist but I really think I'm a better driver than every girl... #sorrynotsorry #learnhowtodrive

Response: You're not sexist but I really think you are. #sorrynotsorry #learnhowtothink

([notsexistbut.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/sexistbut))

## 1. Introduction

Addressing sexism in our contemporary society can be both challenging and confusing. Although sexism has become increasingly socially unacceptable in recent years (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), disputes rage on about what is and is not considered “sexist.” The exchange above exemplifies the type of strident debates about sexism that occur frequently in daily life. Given that behavior labeled as sexist is often subject to social (e.g., Waxman, 2015) and even legal sanctions (e.g., *Hopkins v. Price Waterhouse*, 1985; *Wal-Mart Stores v. Dukes*, 2011), determining what does and does not qualify as sexism constitutes a critically important undertaking.

The scientific literature, which is replete with examples of disagreements about the extent to which any given behavior is sexist or innocuous, adds to the confusion (Brant, Mynatt, & Doherty, 1999; Smith, 1992; Swim, Mallett, Russo-Devosa, & Stangor, 2005; Trenholm & Todd de Mancillas, 1978). Indeed, the ambiguities surrounding “sexism” are reminiscent of the ambiguity surrounding the definition of “obscenity” when Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously stated, “*I know it when I see it...*” regarding potential obscenity in Louis Malle's film *The Lovers* (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964). Rather than formalize a set of criteria to determine whether the film qualified as obscene, Justice Stewart, writing for the majority, relied on his personal perspective to conclude that the film was not obscene. The Court, however, was not unanimous and the justices who prepared the minority opinion arrived at the opposite conclusion. In considering contemporary struggles to define sexism, it appears that sexism, like obscenity, is effectively in the eye of the beholder. Though people clearly differ in their judgments about the same potentially sexist behaviors, it is unclear why people come to these disparate conclusions.

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Data and materials for this project can be found at: <https://osf.io/qgnzd/>

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### 1.1. Sources of variability in judgments of sexism

Some researchers have attempted to explain the variability in judgments of sexism in others' behavior by exploring individual differences, most notably gender and attitudes, that may predispose some people to see sexism more readily than others. Several studies showed, for example, that women are more likely than men to view the same behaviors as sexist and people lower in self-reported levels of sexism are more likely to conclude that specific behaviors are sexist (Blodorn, O'Brien, & Kordys, 2012; Inman & Baron, 1996; Smith, 1992; Swim et al., 2005). Although examining sexism inferences as a function of gender and attitudes describes *who* is more or less likely to infer sexism, these approaches do not fully account for *why* these people see more sexism in others' behavior and they do not directly identify the psychological processes involved in reaching a conclusion of sexism.

According to classic inference models, inferences are made through a comparison process, which requires identifying a standard against which to compare a person's behavior or qualities to determine if he or she possesses the characteristic of interest (Mussweiler, 2003; Trope, 1986). Thus, understanding judgments of sexism requires identifying the standards people use to draw their conclusions. Because neither gender nor attitudes prescribe specific standards for what constitutes sexism, it is necessary to look beyond these characteristics. Swim et al. (2005) speculated that perceivers might use similar criteria to judge other people's behavior as they do when they judge their own behavior (i.e., a behavior viewed as unacceptable for the self would similarly be viewed as unacceptable for others). Though highly plausible, this analysis neither identifies the standards that guide people's inferences for what is appropriate for the self or others, nor what gives rise to observed variability in these standards across people. We argue that it is necessary to address both issues to understand the source of the oft contentious disputes regarding what is and is not considered sexist behavior.

To address these issues, we turned to work by Devine and colleagues that demonstrated that people's personal standards for appropriate behavior for themselves in the prejudice domain are derived from their values concerning how to treat stigmatized others (Devine et al., 1991; Klonis, Plant, & Devine, 2005; Plant & Devine, 1998). Whereas some people have values that prohibit prejudice, others have values that are more accepting of prejudice. Plant and Devine's (Plant & Devine, 1998; Klonis et al., 2005) Internal Motivation to Respond without Prejudice Scale (IMS) captures variability in the extent to which people have internalized the values of being nonprejudiced (or nonsexist) and use these values to set standards for their own behavior.<sup>2</sup> Devine and colleagues' work draws our attention to two aspects of a standard – its location on an acceptability continuum and its importance to the self-concept. The location of a standard (more or less stringent) determines whether behaviors are deemed acceptable or unacceptable. The personal importance of the standard, as reflected in the degree to which the standard is internalized, self-defining and accessible, in turn, influences how people affectively and behaviorally respond to transgressions of the standard.

Devine and colleagues have argued that both the type of affect one experiences and whether self-regulatory efforts to realign one's behavior with one's standards occur, follow from evaluating the morality of the behavior relative to these value-based standards (Devine et al., 1991; Plant & Devine, 1998; see also Higgins, 1987). An abundance of evidence demonstrates that people who score higher in IMS have internalized, chronically accessible, egalitarian values that lead them to establish stringent, personally important, nonsexist standards. Thus, when they fail to adhere to these standards, they feel a form of agitated

distress, specifically anger directed toward the self (i.e., guilt) and engage in regulatory efforts to reduce the discrepancy between their standards and their behavior (Amodio, Devine, & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Monteith, 1993; Plant & Devine, 1998). People who score lower in IMS, on the other hand, set less stringent standards, allowing for more bias in their behavior. Moreover, their standards are not strongly internalized or highly accessible; even though they often behave with bias exceeding even their more permissive standards, these transgressions are not self-threatening and thus do not elicit guilt or efforts to realign their behavior with their standards.

To date, Devine and colleagues have focused exclusively on the affective and regulatory significance of personal standards for judgments about *one's own* behavior. We argue, however, that extending this framework to the interpersonal arena may give us leverage to test Swim et al.'s (2005) speculation that a similar evaluation process occurs when judging others' behavior as when judging one's own behavior. Because people derive the standards they set for their own behavior from their morally-prescriptive values, we reason that they derive the standards they set for other people's behavior from the same set of values. To the extent that this is true, standards for acceptable behavior in the sexism domain should be similarly stringent for the self and others; further, violations of the important, nonsexist standards imposed on others should trigger agitation-related affective reactions, as they do for the self (Higgins, 1987). Specifically, Higgins (1987) argued that when a target violates a perceiver's value-based, moral (ought) standard for others, the perceiver would likely feel anger and resentment directed toward the target. Following Devine and colleagues' work on self-regulation in the prejudice domain, we suspect that to the extent that a target violates perceivers' personally important value-based standard, they will also make efforts to regulate the target's behavior to bring it in line with the standards they set for others (e.g., Monteith, 1993; Plant & Devine, 1998). We test both affective and regulatory hypotheses in the present set of studies.

Before moving on to an overview of the present work, we wish to note that Devine and colleagues' work (Klonis et al., 2005; Plant & Devine, 1998) recognizes the possibility that the standards people impose on others could be derived from social norms, which discourage expressions of sexism and prejudice (Barreto & Ellemers, 2013; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996; Swim et al., 2005). If people derive the standards they set for others from social norms, we would expect these standards to be stringent and to display little variability. However, it is also true that people vary in their sensitivity to the pressure to respond consistently with nonsexist norms. Klonis et al.'s (2005) External Motivation to Respond without Sexism Scale (EMS) captures variability in the extent to which people are reactive to the pressure imposed by others to respond without sexism. Whereas high EMS people are sensitive to pressure imposed by others to respond without sexism, low EMS people are not. Although EMS has not been related to the location of people's personal standards in prior work (Plant & Devine, 1998), we included it in the present studies to explore its potential role in setting standards for others and predicting people's reactions to a target's sexist behaviors.

## 2. The present work

The primary goal of the present work was to explore the utility of extending Devine and colleagues' values analysis of the affective and regulatory significance of personal standards for judgments about *one's own* behavior to judgments about *others'* behavior. Testing the validity of this analysis in the interpersonal context requires first that we establish that IMS, an indicator of people's personal values regarding sexism, predicts the standards people set for sexism in others. Beyond setting standards, the values framework suggests that IMS should predict the inferential, affective, and regulatory consequences of encountering potentially sexist behaviors in others. We explore these

<sup>2</sup> Although some of the relevant evidence was demonstrated in the racial prejudice domain, we will use the terms "sexist" and "nonsexist" for simplicity and consistency throughout the present work.

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