



# The role of attachment style in women's recognition of sexism



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## ABSTRACT

The present research examined how differences in attachment style might impact women's awareness of sexism. Identity threat models of stigma emphasize the role of individual differences in responding to social identity threats, however little is known about what factors lead to avoidance versus vigilance for such threats. Furthermore, research shows that insecure attachment is related to avoidant responses to blatantly threatening cues, but vigilance when such cues are ambiguous. Thus, insecurely attached women should acknowledge less sexism toward women when faced with instances of blatant sexism, whereas their awareness should be heightened by instances of ambiguous sexism. Conversely, securely attached women should acknowledge sexism when encountering blatant rather than ambiguous instances of sexism. In a test of these hypotheses, 155 women were exposed to either a male verbally rejecting a women's opinion for blatantly sexist or ambiguously sexist reasons. The data confirm predictions. The findings suggest interventions to improve outcomes for stigmatized groups should consider impacts of attachment style, and further, that attachment style might partially explain women's divergent responses to sexism.

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## 1. Introduction

Much research has examined how individuals with stigmatizable identities respond to and cope with prejudice and discrimination. This research highlights multiple situational and individual differences contributing to how individuals respond to social identity threats. Importantly, before responding with effective coping strategies individuals must first recognize and attribute such events to prejudice and discrimination. Although identity threat models of stigma emphasize the role of individual differences in responding to social identity threats, the factors leading individuals to be vigilant versus guarding against recognition of threatening cues is largely unknown (Major & O'Brien, 2005). The current research explores the role of individual differences in women's recognition of sexism.

One prominent individual difference that predicts perception and response to interpersonal threats is attachment style. Attachment styles develop from early experiences with caregivers, and result in chronic expectations about interpersonal relationships. Thus, attachment style likely impacts how individuals with stigmatizable identities respond to social identity threats. However, very

little research has examined the role of attachment styles in responding to and perceiving prejudice. Therefore, the present research examined how attachment style guides women's perceptions of sex discrimination and prejudice (i.e., stigma consciousness) after exposure to social identity threat.

### 1.1. Attachment theory and prejudice

Attachment style emerges very early in life (typically within the first 9 months), continues to be formed through social interactions and peer relations during childhood and adolescence (Englund, Kao, Puig, & Collins, 2011), and effectively acts as a schema through which individuals perceive and experience their relationships throughout the lifetime (Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, & Holland, 2013). In general, two attachment patterns characterize attachment styles: anxiety and avoidance. Individuals scoring low on both dimensions are characterized as securely attached, generally experiencing positive interpersonal relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Insecurely attached individuals comprise those who score high on either (or both) attachment anxiety or avoidance. Anxious individuals are fearful and nervous about others' availability in times of need; they tend to feel excessively vulnerable, and are characterized as being hypersensitive and seeking of inclusion. Avoidantly attached individuals are distrustful of others' good intentions, seek to affirm their independence, and effortfully avoid seeking help.

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Although its role in being a target of discrimination remains unspecified, attachment style reliably predicts being a perpetrator of discrimination. Insecurely attached individuals are more prejudiced (Hofstra, van Oudenhoven, & Buunk, 2005) and are more likely to stereotype (Mikulincer, 1997) and discriminate against outgroup members (Boag & Carnelley, 2012) than are securely attached individuals. Correlational works demonstrate the link between insecure attachment and prejudice, and conversely, secure attachment and low levels of prejudice and discrimination (Hofstra et al., 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). Recent experimental work has established a causal relationship: primed attachment insecurity can lead to higher levels of prejudice and more discriminatory choices (Boag & Carnelley, 2012). Research indicates that attachment style is importantly related to prejudice and discrimination, but the extant literature is limited to potential perpetrators of prejudice and discrimination rather than targets of prejudice and discrimination. The present research begins to address this gap.

### 1.2. Attachment and being a target of prejudice

Insecure attachment develops from negative relational experiences and predicts vigilance to threats in day-to-day experiences (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). In interpersonal relationships, insecurely attached individuals experience more negative outcomes than do securely attached individuals: insecurely attached individuals have more negative expectations and explain their partner's behavior in more negative terms (Collins, 1996), report more negative attitudes toward conflict (Ben-Ari & Hirshberg, 2009), and exhibit prolonged grief symptomatology after bereavement (Meier, Carr, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2013). Furthermore, research has demonstrated insecurely attached people exhibit heightened vigilance to threats in the social environment compared to those who are securely attached (Ein-Dor et al., 2011). Thus, substantial evidence suggests that attachment style impacts interpersonal experiences and predicts vigilance toward threats in the social environment. Given that stigmatizing group membership carries the potential threat of discrimination, insecure attachment conceivably impacts vigilance towards and responding to prejudice.

Similarly, because attachment style impacts coping styles, by extension it likely predicts patterns of coping with prejudice. A recent study found that attachment style accounted for 40% of variance in coping styles (Peiliang, 2007). Indeed, research on attachment and coping implicates insecure attachment in maladaptive coping styles. For example, insecurely attached individuals use more dysfunctional coping strategies to cope with exam-related stress (Berry & Kingswell, 2012). Securely attached individuals are more likely to cope with stress by seeking the support of others than are insecurely attached individuals (Fraleigh, Davis & Shaver, 1998), who are more likely to avoidantly cope by distancing (Holmberg, Lomore, Takacs, & Price 2011). When coping with a major stressor such as prejudice and discrimination, the types of coping behaviors one engages in could depend heavily on attachment style. However, active coping first necessitates recognizing the presence of prejudice. Because insecurely attached individuals are more likely to engage in distancing they also may be more likely to deny the existence of prejudice and discrimination, ostensibly because they do not perceive adequate resources for coping. This is particularly important because denial of prejudice and discrimination ultimately allows these injustices to be perpetuated, whereas actively confronting may eventually eradicate such biases. To address this possibility, the current research investigated the impact of attachment style on women's perceptions of prejudice and discrimination against their group (i.e., stigma consciousness).

### 1.3. Coping with sexist events

Research on coping with sexist events illustrates that women respond and cope with sexism in multiple ways. One way that women can cope with prejudice and discrimination is through becoming vigilant for cues that signal devaluation. Enacting a "zero-miss" strategy (Feldman & Swim, 1998), and becoming vigilant for subtle or ambiguous sexist cues allows women to cope by attributing outcomes to prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, such attributions can buffer self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989), whereas not making these attributions (when appropriate) negatively impacts psychological wellbeing (Sechrist & Swim, 2008; Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004). Thus, if insecurely attached individuals engage in distancing or minimization strategies in the face of prejudice and discrimination, they may experience negative personal and interpersonal outcomes.

Although the attachment literature suggests insecurely attached women might engage in minimization or distancing when faced with sexism, whether instances of sexism are blatant or ambiguous is likely to differentiate these responses. Past research has shown that women who are high in stigma consciousness are more likely to make attributions to prejudice when instances are ambiguous, whereas all women make these attributions when prejudice is blatant regardless of stigma consciousness level (Wang, Stroebe, & Hamilton, 2012). Similarly, insecurely attached individuals are more likely to interpret ambiguous social situations in a threatening manner, than are securely attached individuals (Barrett & Holmes, 2001). Ambiguity is an aversive experience that individuals are motivated to diminish (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982); insecurely attached women may interpret an ambiguous comment as threatening and seize upon an available, plausible explanation (i.e., sexism). Thus, although most women will make attributions to discrimination in the face of blatant sexism, there is reason to believe that insecurely attached women may respond differently to sexist events if they are blatant or ambiguous. Specifically, insecurely attached women may point to sexism when a threat is ambiguous. However, when sexism is blatant, insecurely attached women may be more likely to engage in distancing, exhibiting less recognition of sexism. The converse pattern would be true of securely attached women: greater recognition of sexism when it is blatant, but less when it is ambiguous.

Given that attachment styles influence individuals' coping styles, it stands to reason that being securely or insecurely attached may impact how they cope with stigma-related threats. Furthermore, because the way one copes (or fails to cope) with prejudice and discrimination has important ramifications for overall wellbeing, understanding the role of attachment style in women's responses to sexist events may shed light on why some responses are counterproductive or maladaptive. Understanding the role of attachment style in response to social identity threat is important to interventions designed to help individuals cope with stigma-related threats.

### 1.4. The current research

The current research extends previous research linking attachment to prejudice to the target's perspective by examining the role of attachment style in women's responses to ambiguous and blatant sexist events. To examine this possibility, adult attachment style was measured, and then female participants were exposed to a threatening interpersonal conversation in which a male was blatantly rejecting of a female's opinion for sexist reasons, for ambiguous reasons (i.e., was just rejecting and rude, but gender was not mentioned), or expressed neutral comments with no rejection. Sensitivity to and recognition of sexual prejudice and discrimination then was measured. Based on predictions set forth from

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