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To cite this article: Robyn K. Mallett, Thomas E. Ford & Julie A. Woodzicka (2019): Ignoring sexism increases women's tolerance of sexual harassment, *Self and Identity*, DOI: [10.1080/15298868.2019.1678519](https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1678519)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1678519>



Published online: 16 Oct 2019.



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ARTICLE



Ignoring sexism increases women's tolerance of sexual harassment

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ABSTRACT

Women often ignore gender harassment (i.e., sexism). Two studies tested whether ignoring real or imagined sexism increases tolerance of sexual harassment and decreases support for survivors. In Study 1 ($n = 252$) undergraduate women were randomly assigned to receive a sexist or offensive remark delivered in a serious or humorous manner. Compared to women who confronted sexism, women who ignored it aligned attitudes with behavior and reported more tolerance of sexual harassment. In Study 2 ($n = 384$), women reported more dissonance when they imagined ignoring a sexist remark compared to having no chance to confront or confronting. Regardless of whether humor was present, the more dissonance, the more they endorsed sexually harassing attitudes and the less they supported survivors.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 May 2019
Accepted 3 October 2019

KEYWORDS

Sexism; confronting; sexual harassment; dissonance

After actresses Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment, several prominent performers came forward saying they also endured sexual harassment at the hands of Weinstein spanning three decades (Kantor & Twohey, 2017). Despite the fact that some women experienced repeated harassment, most did not report or confront Weinstein's abusive behavior until years later. The #MeToo movement is rife with stories of women who for years silently tolerated sexism. This pattern is consistent with social psychological research showing that, although it goes against their self-interest, women often tolerate, minimize, or ignore sexism (e.g. Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). The present research investigates how such responses to sexism affect women's attitudes toward sexual harassment. Specifically, we test whether ignoring gender harassment increases a woman's tolerance of sexual harassment more generally.

In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) legally defined two types of sexual harassment predominantly perpetrated by men against women: quid pro quo harassment and hostile environment harassment, also termed gender harassment (Hitlan, Pryor, Hesson-McInnis, & Olson, 2009). Quid pro quo involves the abuse of power to coerce sexual compliance, whereas gender harassment refers to discrimination based on gender. A 2018 survey by the nonprofit organization, Stop Street Harassment (<http://www.stopstreetharassment.org>), reveals that eighty one percent of

women reported having experienced at least one instance of sexual harassment (Chatterjee, 2018). Consistent with previous research (e.g. Bastian, Lancaster, & Reyst, 1996; Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995; Pryor, 1995), the survey also showed that women commonly experience gender harassment in the form of verbal remarks (e.g. jokes, insults, suggestive stories) that ridicule or belittle them because of their gender. A state-wide sample of over 30,000 high school girls found that roughly 65% experienced sexual harassment in the last year, the most common form being unwelcome sexual comments or jokes (Crowley, Datta, Stohlman, Cornell, & Konold, 2019). Similarly, 77% of adult women reported having experienced verbal sexual harassment (Chatterjee, 2018).

Responses to gender harassment

Women generally believe they would confront perpetrators of gender harassment. When asked to imagine being interviewed by a man who posed sexist questions (e.g. “Do you have a boyfriend?”), most women (74%) reported they would confront the interviewer’s sexism (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). When faced with actual gender harassment, however, women often respond less assertively than they would like. When women imagined participating in a group discussion with a man who made sexist comments, most (81%) anticipated confronting him (Swim & Hyers, 1999). However, when they actually experienced the group discussion, less than half (45%) confronted the sexist comments.

Many factors discourage women from confronting instances of sexism including legitimate fears of backlash and retaliation (Good, Woodzicka, Bourne, & Moss-Racusin, 2019). Thus, instead of confronting gender harassment, most women choose to ignore it. In fact, most adolescents who experience gender harassment say that they “do nothing,” “try to forget about it” or “ignore it” (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Similarly, when asked about experiences with everyday sexism, most adult women report that they ignore gender harassment (Ayles, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009) and more egregious forms of sexism (Fitzgerald et al. (1995); Kulik, Perry, and Schmidtke (1997).

Women choose to ignore sexism in an effort to preserve good standing and avoid backlash (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Toward this end, women sometimes respond to gender harassment using impression management strategies such as ingratiation. Research documents this tactic with other stigmatized groups. For instance, when heavy women expected to experience size-based discrimination some respond by agreeing with the perpetrator, smiling, nodding their head, and leaning forward in an effort to minimize the negative impact of bias on the interaction (Miller, Rothblum, Felicio, & Brand, 1995). Similarly, when racial minorities anticipated discrimination, they smile and talk more during an interaction compared to when they had neutral expectations – even though they disliked their partner (Shelton, 2003; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2004).

Consequences of confronting versus ignoring gender harassment

Confronting prejudice may have positive consequences for both the perpetrator and the target. For the perpetrator, confrontation can reduce stereotypic judgments and change prejudiced attitudes. For example, participants confronted for stereotypic responses were less likely than those not confronted to make stereotypic inferences

in the future, and they reported less prejudiced attitudes (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). Confrontations that present clear evidence of bias and its negative consequence are particularly effective. When women and men were told their evaluations of a female job applicant were biased, they reported negative self-directed affect, which triggered greater concern about regulating gender bias (Parker, Monteith, Moss-Racusin, & Van Camp, 2018). Confrontation also reduces the likelihood that people will repeat the same biased behavior. After being confronted about their use of sexist language by a woman, men demonstrated more friendliness and cooperation in a subsequent discussion, which increased their perceptions of mutual liking between the confronter and themselves (Mallett & Wagner, 2011). Importantly, perceptions of mutual liking increased men's ability to detect sexist language in a purportedly unrelated task, suggesting greater caution with using sexist language.

There are also positive intrapersonal consequences for women who confront sexism. Women who label a sexist remark as inappropriate experience empowerment (i.e. a sense of control and ability), competence, and self-esteem compared to those who do not confront (Gervais, Hillard, & Vescio, 2010). There may be something special about assertively responding to bias. Women who assertively confront sexism report less regret and anger and are less likely to ruminate than women who ignore sexism (Hyers, 2007; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Indeed, those who confront with anger report greater well-being compared to those who confront indirectly or with the intent to educate (Dickter, Kittel, & Gyurovski, 2012; Foster, 2013). Even publicly tweeting about societal sexism decreases women's negative affect and increases psychological well-being (Foster, 2015).

In contrast to confronting prejudice, ignoring it seems to have negative *interpersonal* consequences for both the perpetrator and the target. Most obviously, a perpetrator's prejudiced attitudes and behaviors are unlikely to change unless they are labeled as biased and shown to be harmful (Czopp et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2018). Indeed, a perpetrator might interpret a target's failure to confront a prejudiced response as tacit approval, thereby validating or legitimizing the response (Czopp, 2019). Czopp (2013) had participants read either a profile of an ecology major who wanted to study environmental law and expressed a commitment to activism or a neutral profile. Participants then watched a video of the student interacting with another person who made several anti-environmental comments, which the student either confronted or ignored. Participants who saw the ecology student ignore the anti-environmental comments reported more negative environmental attitudes and behavior compared to participants in the other conditions. Apparently, the ecology student's failure to confront the anti-environmental comments implicitly validated the comments, allowing them to affect the participant's own attitudes.

We propose that failing to confront gender harassment also can have detrimental *intrapersonal* consequences, or negative consequences for the self. People construct a definition of self that consists of "possible selves" (e.g. the person one aspires to be or feels morally obligated to be) that serve as standards for self-evaluation (e.g. Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). These evaluative self-standards motivate self-regulation through emotions: self-enhancement when one meets standards and self-criticism when one violates them. Accordingly, for a person who feels a moral obligation to uphold nonsexist, egalitarian standards, failure to confront gender harassment would violate one's evaluative self-standards and produce self-critical emotions. Indeed, women who were personally

committed to fighting sexism felt guilty over times they ignored it and reported ruminating over their inaction (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006).

In keeping with Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, people can defend against self-critical emotion by changing either their behavior or their evaluative self-standards. However, if one cannot "take back" their behavior, they must resort to changing their evaluative self-standard to make it less discrepant from their actions (or inaction). Relevant to the present research, women who chose to ignore a man's sexist remark downplayed the importance of confronting sexism and liked the man more compared to women who did not have the opportunity to confront him (Rasinski, Geers, & Czopp, 2013). Rasinski and colleagues argued that women reduced the dissonance (self-criticism) they experienced from failing to confront the man's sexism by minimizing the degree to which their behavior violated their evaluative standards of moral conduct. Accordingly, we hypothesized that when women ignore a sexist remark they experience cognitive dissonance and justify their behavior by endorsing sexually harassing attitudes.

The effects of humor on responses and attitudes

In addition, we tested whether the failure to confront a humorous sexist remark affects women's attitudes differently from a failure to confront a serious sexist remark. Sexist humor (and other forms of disparagement humor) represents a paradox as it communicates two conflicting messages: an explicit message of derision and an implicit message that the derision is free of malicious intention or prejudiced motives – "it is just a joke," meant to amuse and not to be taken seriously (Attardo, 1993; Zillmann, 1983). As a result, sexist humor provides a unique vehicle for expressing gender harassment as well as a unique challenge. It disguises sexism in a cloak of frivolity, allowing it to avert the opposition that non-humorous sexist remarks incur (Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford, 2000). Indeed, people judge sexist remarks communicated in a humorous manner as less offensive and confrontation-worthy than the same remarks communicated in the absence of humor (Woodzicka, Mallett, Hendricks, & Pruitt, 2015). Further, women were less likely to perceive a man as sexist when he delivered sexist content in the form of a joke compared to a serious statement (Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka, 2016); not surprisingly, as perceptions of the speaker as sexist decreased, so did confronting. Because sexist jokes, and men telling such jokes, appear to be perceived as less confrontation-worthy than their serious counterparts, we hypothesized that ignoring a humorous sexist remark would induce less dissonance and subsequent attitude alignment compared to ignoring a serious sexist remark.

The present research

Study 1 provided an initial test of our hypotheses by measuring women's tolerance of sexual harassment following their decision to ignore or confront a humorous or non-humorous sexist remark in an online chat paradigm. We predicted that women who ignored the sexist remark would express greater tolerance of sexual harassment compared to women who confronted it (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that the direct effect of behavior on tolerance would be attenuated when the sexist remark was presented as a joke versus a serious comment (Hypothesis 2). Further, we expected that ignoring and

confrontation would indirectly explain the link between the content of the remark (offensive, sexist) and sexually harassing attitudes (Hypothesis 3). Study 2 provided a more rigorous test of the hypotheses by manipulating women's imagined response to a sexist remark (ignore versus confront), directly measuring their experience of dissonance, and testing whether dissonance moderated the impact of the imagined response on attitudes (Hypothesis 4). Study 2 also tested the generalizability of the attitude change by measuring attitudes toward women who reported sexual assault and harassment in the #MeToo movement and during the confirmation of Supreme Court justice Kavanaugh.

Study 1

We randomly assigned women either to receive a sexist or merely offensive remark presented as a joke or a serious statement during an online chat. We recorded whether women ignored or confronted that remark and then measured their attitudes toward sexual harassment. We predicted that women who ignored the sexist remark (but not the nonsexist offensive remark) would express greater tolerance of sexual harassment compared to women who confronted it (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that this direct effect on tolerance would be weakened when the sexist comment was delivered as a joke versus a serious comment (Hypothesis 2). Last, we expected that the link between the content of the remark (offensive, sexist) and sexually harassing attitudes would be indirectly explained by ignoring and confrontation (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 252 undergraduate women ($M_{age} = 19.30$, $SD = 1.60$) who partially fulfilled a course requirement for completing the study. Sample size was determined by the number of participants we could run in two semesters. Participants were White ($n = 163$), Asian ($n = 51$), multi-racial ($n = 22$), Black ($n = 9$), and Indigenous ($n = 7$). We randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions in a 2(content of remark: nonsexist offensive, sexist) x 2(type of remark: joke, serious) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure

After giving consent, a female experimenter told participants we were studying online communication and they would interact with another student. In reality, the experimenter also played the role of a male student chatting with the participant. Using an instant message program, the experimenter introduced herself as Mike and followed a script during a chat about meal plans and laundry services at school. Before the chat, the experimenter told participants that the time allowed for the chat was randomized and their conversation may be cut off without notice. Near the end of the chat, the experimenter introduced the critical remark. Participants were required to provide a response to the remark, after which the experimenter ended the instant messaging interaction. Participants then reported how they responded to their chat partner and their attitudes toward sexual harassment.

Critical remark

After several minutes of chatting, Mike introduced the independent variable manipulations through one critical remark.¹ In the *joke condition* he delivered either a *sexist joke*, “A man and woman were stranded in an elevator and they knew they were going to die. The woman turns to the man and says, ‘Make me feel like a woman before I die.’ So the man takes off his clothes and says, ‘Fold them!’” or a *non sexist offensive joke*, “What’s the difference between a pit bull and a poodle? When a pit bull’s humping your leg, you let him finish.” In the *serious sexist statement condition* he delivered a non-humorous statement that expressed the same sexist sentiment, “I think it’s a women’s role to do household chores like laundry for a man.” In the *nonsexist serious offensive condition* he wrote, “The other day my friend’s pit bull started humping my leg. I didn’t stop him because pit bulls are more aggressive than other dogs, like poodles. I was scared.” The experimenter waited until the participant typed a response to the critical remark before entering the room and informing the participant the chat was over.

Because participants had to type a response for the experiment to end, we operationalized ignoring the offensive remark as ingratiating their partner and behaving as if nothing offensive had happened – effectively accepting the diminishment inherent in the comment. Two coders independently reviewed written responses to the critical remark and coded ingratiation and confronting. Coders rated ingratiation by choosing 0 (no), 1 (some), or 2 (a lot) for the statement, “She tried to make her chat partner like her. That is, she was nice, friendly; tried to make a good impression on her chat partner; showed concern about his thoughts, ideas, and opinions.” For instance, “Nope. Nope. Didn’t like that.” received a 0, “I’d rather talk about my lack of a meal plan, if you don’t mind. The struggle is so real” received a 1, and “lmao!!! haha that’s hilarious” received a 2. They also coded responses for *confrontation*. This was the average of offense and disagreement where coders could choose 0 (no), 1 (some), or 2 (a lot). Offense was measured with, “she was offended by the remark”. An example of a 1 was, “so I found your last comment slightly offensive,” and a 2 was, “Wow, man. That’s super offensive towards woman.” Disagreement was measured with, “says she disagrees with the comment.” An example of a 1 was, “um hey no,” and a 2 was, “I am going to strongly disagree with you.” Percent agreement for all codes was greater than 92%. If coders disagreed, they discussed the response until they came to agreement.

Women reported how much they ingratiated using 4 items (1 *absolutely not* to 7 *absolutely*): I tried to be friendly with my partner; I showed my partner that I liked him; I tried to highlight things that I had in common with my partner; I tried to be funny. We created a self-report measure of *ingratiation* by averaging responses to these items ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.20$). They also reported how much they *confronted* using 3 items: I insulted my partner. I questioned something that my partner said. I agreed with my partner – reverse scored. We averaged responses to create a self-report measure of confronting ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.21$).

Tolerance of sexual harassment

Women completed the 19-item sexual harassment attitude scale (Mazer & Percival, 1989; 1 *disagree strongly* to 7 *agree strongly*) that includes items such as, “A man must learn to understand that a woman’s ‘no’ to his sexual advances really means ‘no’ (reverse-scored).” We averaged responses to form a scale ($\alpha = .80$).

Results

We predicted that ingratiation following the sexist remark (but not the nonsexist offensive remark) would foster a greater tolerance of sexual harassment, and that this effect would be attenuated when the sexist remark was presented as a joke versus a serious statement. In contrast, we predicted that confrontation following the sexist remark would foster less tolerance of sexual harassment. To test our hypothesis, we used Preacher and Hayes (2004) bootstrapping macro for SPSS, computing bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for 5,000 samples with replacement. The bootstrapping analysis tested whether the indirect effect (i.e. the path from type of remark to attitudes through her response) was different from zero by providing a 95% confidence interval for the population value of the indirect effect. If zero is not in the 95% confidence interval, the indirect effect is significant at $p < .05$. We tested moderated mediation (PROCESS model 8), that is whether the indirect effect of the content of the remark (offensive, sexist) on sexually harassing attitudes was explained by the woman's response (ingratiating or confronting) and depended on the use of humor (see Figure 1).

Responses to the critical remark

The ingratiation and confrontation codes were negatively correlated ($r = -.69$, $p < .001$). Replicating past research, 65.7% of women showed evidence of ignoring the offensive remark and ingratiating instead (e.g. "hahaha").²

Tolerance of sexual harassment

Supporting hypothesis 1, the more women ignored the remark and instead ingratiated, the more they endorsed sexually harassing attitudes (see Table 1). In contrast, the more women confronted the remark, the less they endorsed sexually harassing attitudes (see Table 2). Ignoring and confrontation indirectly explained the link between the content of the remark (offensive, sexist) and sexually harassing attitudes. In all cases, the indirect effect was significant, as indicated by a confidence interval that did not include zero. All of these effects were true for both self-report and coding of women's actual responses. Hypothesis 2 was not supported as women were equally likely to show attitude adjustment following humorous and serious remarks.

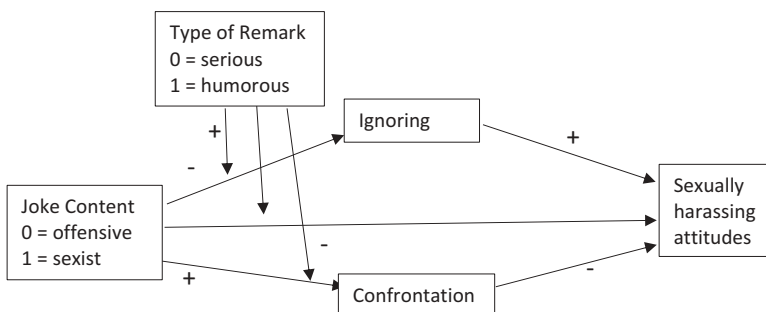


Figure 1. The indirect effect of the content of the remark (offensive, sexist) on sexually harassing attitudes was explained by the woman's response (ingratiating or confronting), but did not depend on the use of humor (Study 1).

Table 1. Conditional effects analysis for ignoring sexism (Study 1).

Paths	Self-report		Coded	
	b (SE)	95% CI	b (SE)	95% CI
Content → ignoring	−1.44 (0.20)***	−1.84/−1.05	−0.85 (0.13)***	−1.10*/−0.60
Type of Remark → ignoring	−0.46 (0.19)*	−0.85/−0.07	−0.12 (0.13)	−0.13/0.37
Content X Type of Remark → ignoring	0.92 (0.28)*	0.36/1.48	0.46 (0.18)*	0.11/0.82
Ignoring → SHAS	0.11 (0.02)***	0.06/0.16	0.09 (0.04)*	0.01/0.17
Content → SHAS	0.22 (0.09)*	0.02/0.34	0.08 (0.09)	−0.10/0.26
Type of Remark → SHAS	0.22 (0.08)**	0.05/0.38	0.15 (0.09) ⁺	−0.02/0.32
Content X Type of Remark → SHAS	−0.28 (0.11)*	−0.52/−0.04	−0.23 (0.12) ⁺	−0.46/0.02
Indirect effect for interaction				
	0.10 (0.05)		0.04 (0.02)	
	95% CI [0.01, 0.21]		95% CI [0.01, 0.11]	
Conditional Indirect Effect for humorous and serious remarks				
serious	95% CI [−0.30, −0.12]		95% CI [−0.15,- 0.01]	
humorous	95% CI [−0.20, −0.03]		95% CI [−0.10, −0.01]	

Note. These analyses tested for an indirect effect of the content of the remark on sexually harassing attitudes that operates through ignoring and depends on the use of humor. ⁺ < .10 * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. 95% CI indicates the confidence interval for the estimate.

Table 2. Conditional effects analysis for confrontation (Study 1).

Paths	Self-report		Coded	
	b (SE)	95% CI	b (SE)	95% CI
Type of Remark → confrontation	0.03 (0.19)	−0.35/0.40	−0.07 (0.09)	−0.24/0.11
Content → confrontation	1.32 (0.19)***	0.96/1.73	1.24 (0.09)***	1.07/1.43
Content X Type of Remark → confrontation	−0.80 (0.28)**	−1.38/−0.29	−0.68 (0.12)***	−0.95/−0.44
confrontation → SHAS	−0.07 (0.03)*	−0.12/−0.01	−0.15 (0.06)*	−0.27/−0.04
Type of Remark → SHAS	0.16 (0.08)*	0.01/0.33	0.15 (0.08) ⁺	−0.01/0.32
Content → SHAS	0.10 (0.09)	−0.11/0.26	0.20 (0.11) ⁺	−0.02/0.42
Content X Type of Remark → SHAS	−0.24 (0.12) ⁺	−0.47/0.02	−0.29 (0.13)*	−0.54/−0.03
Indirect effect for interaction				
	0.07 (0.03)		0.10 (0.05)	
	95% CI [0.02, 0.15]		95% CI [0.02, 0.22]	
Conditional Indirect Effect for humorous and serious remarks				
serious	95% CI [−0.19, −0.03]		95% CI [−0.37,- 0.02]	
humorous	95% CI [−0.08, −0.01]		95% CI [−0.20, −0.01]	

Note. These analyses tested for an indirect effect of the content of the remark on sexually harassing attitudes that operates through confrontation and depends on the use of humor. ⁺ < .10 * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. 95% CI indicates the confidence interval for the estimate.

Study 1 discussion

Ignoring gender harassment is associated with detrimental intrapersonal consequences. Recall that Rasinski et al. (2013) found that women who ignored a sexist remark downplayed the importance of confronting sexism more than women who did not have the opportunity to confront. We extend this research by showing that the more women ignored a sexist remark during an interpersonal exchange the more their attitudes aligned with their behavior by endorsing sexually harassing attitudes. Confronting sexism showed the opposite association. Although women may have good reason to avoid confrontation such as minimizing backlash or reserving energy for other goals, doing may have unintended consequences. Not only do perpetrators remain unaware that their behavior was inappropriate and caused offense, letting sexist remarks slide is also associated with women's own tolerance toward sexual harassment.

Both the interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of ignoring sexism perpetuate the status quo of belittling women in everyday conversation and behaviors.

Rasinski et al. (2013) argued that women changed their attitudes about the importance of confronting sexism to reduce dissonance. We find a similar pattern of results, but neither study directly measures dissonance. It would be useful to measure dissonance as the strength of self-critical emotions may moderate the extent to which women adjust their attitudes toward sexual harassment. We expect that the stronger the self-critical emotions, the greater the attitude adjustment.

Study 1 used a high impact lab study that captured actual responses to sexism. An important limitation of Study 1, however, is that it provided *correlational* data. Thus, third variables such as the participant's own sexist beliefs (Russell & Trigg, 2004) or identification as a feminist (Ayres et al., 2009) could have influenced their responses to sexual harassment. Accordingly, we used an experimental design in Study 2 to address this limitation and to establish greater confidence in internal validity.

Study 2

We conducted a more controlled test of the process through which attitude change occurred by manipulating women's imagined response to a sexist remark, directly measuring their experience of dissonance, and testing whether dissonance moderates the impact of the imagined response on attitudes. We tested the generalizability of the attitude change by measuring attitudes toward women who reported sexual assault and harassment in the #MeToo movement and during the confirmation of Supreme Court justice Kavanaugh. People may reduce dissonance by changing the importance of one of the discrepant cognitions (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). In this case, we tested whether women devalue people who report sexual harassment, bringing their attitudes in line with the fact that they ignored similar behavior. Study 1 showed that this effect was isolated to sexist, rather than merely offensive, remarks so we held the content of the remark constant and only examined sexist remarks in Study 2.

To create dissonance, we manipulated the way women imagined they responded to a sexist remark. Women should experience little dissonance if they imagined confronting a sexist remark because they challenged the inappropriate behavior. In comparison, women should experience dissonance if they imagined ignoring – or even going along with – a sexist remark. Following Rasinski et al. (2013) we included a condition where participants imagined they did not have an opportunity to confront the remark. Women who had no chance to confront sexism have an external justification for their inaction (e.g. he left before I could say something) and may therefore have little dissonance to reduce.

We expected that women who imagined ignoring sexism would report more dissonance than women who imagined confronting sexism or those who imagined they did not have a chance to confront. As in Study 1, we expected that women who imagined ignoring sexism would align their attitudes and behavior by reporting greater endorsement of sexual harassment and condemnation of survivors than women who imagined confronting sexism (Hypothesis 1). Finally, we tested whether the use of humor (Hypothesis 2) and dissonance (Hypothesis 4) moderated the strength of the association between the imagined response and tolerance of sexual harassment (see Figure 2).

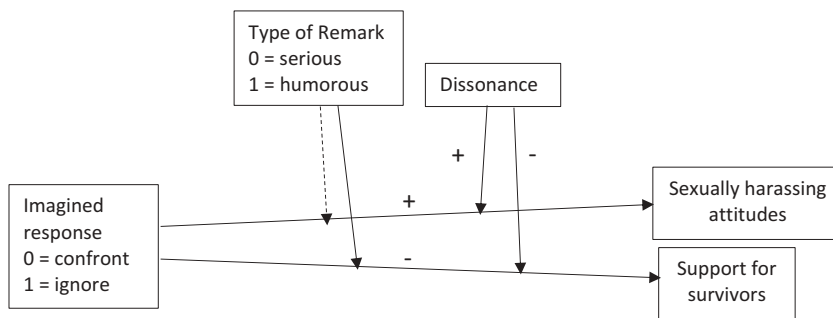


Figure 2. Women who imagined ignoring (versus confronting) sexism aligned their attitudes with behavior, endorsing sexual harassment and condemning survivors. The use of humor and dissonance moderated the strength of the association between the imagined response and tolerance of sexual harassment (Study 2).

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 384³ women from Mturk ($M_{age} = 33.14$, $SD = 10.65$). Participants were White ($n = 255$), Black ($n = 58$), Latina ($n = 26$), multi-racial ($n = 17$), Asian ($n = 17$), and Indigenous ($n = 11$). Fifty-nine percent had a college or graduate degree. Women were randomly assigned to condition using a 2(type of remark: humorous, serious) \times 3(response: ignore, confront, no opportunity to confront) between-subjects design.

Procedure and materials

Women read a scenario that asked them to imagine a colleague made a humorous or serious sexist remark. They were randomly assigned to imagine they ignored his remark (ignore condition), confronted him (confront condition), or that he left before they could confront him (no opportunity condition). Then they reported dissonance, endorsement of sexually harassing attitudes, and attitudes toward survivors of sexual harassment.

Humorous versus serious manipulation

In all conditions, the scenario began, "Imagine that you and your coworker Mark are in the breakroom talking about plans for the weekend. One of your coworker's teen-aged daughter is sitting at a table reading a book and waiting for her to get off of work. Mark says that he is going to a party Saturday night with friends and that he hopes there will be some available women at the party. Then he states ..." In the *humorous condition*, participants read, "That reminds me of a joke ... What's the difference between a bitch and a whore? A whore sleeps with everyone at the party and a bitch sleeps with everyone at the party except you." In the *serious condition*, participants read, "I'm not very optimistic ... It seems like most women are either bitches or whores. They either won't sleep with me or they sleep with everyone else too." Participants rated how funny and how offensive the comment was (1 *not at all* to 5 *extremely*).

Imagined response manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to imagine they responded in one of three ways. In the *ignore condition*, they read, “You think that what Mark said is sexist and know that you could say something, but instead you play along and act amused.” In the *confront condition*, they read, “You think that what Mark said is sexist. You shake your head and say, ‘Wow, that’s sexist and so offensive.’” In the *no opportunity condition*, they read, “You think that what Mark said was sexist but before you can say something Mark is called out of the breakroom.”

Dissonance

Participants reported *dissonance* using 14 items (1 *not at all* to 7 *very much*). We generated 8 items to assess dissonance specific to the scenario (I feel disappointed in myself for my response; I feel a little conflicted about how I responded, If I could do it over again, I would more strongly show my disapproval of the remark; I feel good about how I responded – reverse scored; I would feel better about myself if I had more strongly confronted the remark; I am satisfied with how I responded to the remark – reverse scored). We also used 8 items from the *negself* scale (If I responded that way I would feel ... angry at myself; guilty; annoyed with myself; disappointed with myself; disgusted with myself; regretful; shameful; self-critical; Czopp et al., 2006). We averaged all items into a single scale ($\alpha = .96$).

Attitudes toward sexual harassment

We averaged the 19-items from the sexual harassment attitude scale (Mazer & Percival, 1989; 1 *not at all true* to 7 *extremely true*) to form a scale ($\alpha = .92$).

Support for survivors

We created 10 items to assess support for survivors of sexual harassment from the #MeToo movement and responses to the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. We counter-balanced the order in which participants read the two scenarios. The *#MeToo scenario* read, “Angelina Jolie, Ashley Judd, and Lupita Nyong’O, along with many other women reported that producer Harvey Weinstein engaged in unwanted sexual contact with them when they met to discuss roles in his movies.” The *Kavanaugh scenario* read, “Christine Blasey Ford, Julie Swetnick, and Deborah Ramirez each came forward with accusations of sexual misconduct against U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh ahead of his confirmation hearing. They alleged that he engaged in unwanted sexual contact with them while they were attending parties in high school or college.” After each scenario participants read, “Considering this, please answer the following questions.” They answered the same 5 questions (1 *not at all true* to 7 *extremely true*) after each summary: I support people who report sexual misconduct; People who report sexual misconduct are brave; People who report sexual misconduct are seeking attention – reverse scored; People who report sexual misconduct should be taken seriously; I believe the accusers.” We averaged all 10 items to form a scale ($\alpha = .91$).

Results

Manipulation checks

An independent samples t-test showed the humorous remark was funnier than the serious remark, $t(382) = 2.10$, $p = .036$, but as equally offensive $t(382) = -0.56$, $p = .58$.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for dissonance, tolerance of sexual harassment, and support for survivors depending on one's imagined response (Study 2).

Imagined Response	Dissonance	Tolerance of Harassment	Support for Survivors
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Ignore	5.59 (1.25)	2.73 (0.94)	6.09 (0.08)
Confront	2.45 (1.22)	2.59 (0.10)	6.19 (0.09)

Dissonance

An ANOVA revealed a main effect of the imagined response on dissonance, $F(2, 384) = 177.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$. As anticipated, women reported more dissonance when they imagined ignoring the remark compared to when they confronted (see Table 3 for descriptives). Pairwise comparisons showed that both imagined responses produced different levels of dissonance, $F(2, 378) = 9.22$, $p < .001$. There was no main effect of the type of remark, $F(1, 384) = 1.43$, $p = .22$ showing that women experienced the same amount of dissonance following serious and humorous remarks. Imagined response and the type of remark did not interact, $F(2, 384) = 0.61$, $p = .55$.

Moderation analyses

Using PROCESS (model 2) we tested whether the use of humor and dissonance moderated the strength of the association between the imagined response (0 = confront, 1 = ignore) and tolerance of sexual harassment.⁴ There was a main effect of dissonance (see Table 4). As expected, the more dissonance women reported, the more they endorsed sexually harassing attitudes and the less they supported survivors. There was also a main effect of imagined response on attitudes. Supporting hypothesis 1, women who were randomly assigned to imagine ignoring the sexist remark more strongly endorsed sexually harassing attitudes and reported less support for survivors of sexual harassment than women who imagined confronting. The use of humor did not affect

Table 4. Testing whether the type of remark (0 = joke, 1 = serious) and dissonance moderate the effect of one's imagined response (0 = confront, 1 = ignore) on attitudes toward sexual harassment and survivors (Study 2).

Paths	SHAS		Support for Survivors	
	b (SE)	95% CI	b (SE)	95% CI
Dissonance → attitudes	0.32 (0.07)***	0.17/0.47	−0.24 (0.06)***	−0.37/−0.12
Response → attitudes	1.33 (0.24)***	0.86/1.80	−1.20 (0.21)***	−1.61/−0.79
Type of remark → attitudes	0.10 (0.18)	−0.25/0.45	−0.29 (0.16) ⁺	−0.59/0.02
Dissonance X Response → attitudes	−0.32 (0.05)***	−0.42/−0.22	0.27 (0.04)***	0.18/0.35
Response X Remark → attitudes	−0.03 (0.13)	−0.28/0.22	0.24 (0.11)*	0.02/0.46

Conditional Effect of response on attitudes at low/medium/high dissonance					
Remark	Dissonance	Effect (SE)	95% CI	Effect (SE)	95% CI
Humorous	Low ($M = 2.11$)	−0.68 (0.16)***	−0.37/−0.99	0.66 (0.14)***	0.93/0.39
	Medium ($M = 4.04$)	0.04 (0.12)	−0.19/0.28	−0.13 (0.10)	−0.33/0.08
	High ($M = 5.98$)	0.60 (0.16)**	0.91/0.28	−0.40 (0.14)**	−0.13/−0.67
Serious	Low ($M = 2.11$)	−0.65 (0.15)***	−0.35/−0.96	0.42 (0.14)**	0.69/0.15
	Medium ($M = 4.04$)	0.01 (0.12)	−0.23/0.25	0.11 (0.10)	−0.09/0.32
	High ($M = 5.98$)	0.63 (0.16)***	0.95/0.31	−0.64 (0.14)***	−0.36/−0.92

Note. These analyses tested whether the use of humor and dissonance moderated the effect of imagined response on attitudes. ⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 95% CI indicates the confidence interval for the estimate.

sexually harassing attitudes, but women tended to be more supportive of survivors when they imagined the serious (compared to humorous) comment.

Supporting hypothesis 4, dissonance moderated the strength of the association between the imagined response and tolerance of sexual harassment. The more dissonance women reported from ignoring the sexist remark, the more they endorsed sexually harassing attitudes and the less they supported survivors. In partial support of hypothesis 2, although humor did not moderate the impact of the imagined response on sexually harassing attitudes, it did affect support for survivors; the effect of dissonance on support for survivors was stronger for serious than humorous remarks.

Study 2 discussion

Just like women who actually experienced and ignored sexism in Study 1, women who imagined ignoring sexism in Study 2 brought their attitudes in line with their behavior by becoming more tolerant of sexual harassment. Extending Study 1, we found that simply imagining that they ignored (versus confronted) sexism caused women to report less support for survivors of sexual harassment. Study 2 had the added benefit of directly measuring dissonance which has not been done in previous research. As expected, women who imagined ignoring (versus confronting) sexism reported more dissonance and the more dissonance they reported the more they tolerated sexual harassment.

Although humor did not directly moderate the impact of the imagined responses on attitudes toward sexual harassment, it did affect support for survivors. The effect of dissonance on support for survivors was stronger for serious than humorous remarks. Ignoring sexism in any form creates dissonance in women. However, women were less supportive of survivors when they imagined ignoring sexist jokes compared to sexist statements. This is consistent with past research showing that sexist jokes are seen as less confrontation-worthy than sexist statements (Woodzicka et al., 2015) and that people who tell sexist jokes are less sexist than people who make serious sexist comments (Mallett et al., 2016).

General discussion

Women who ignore a sexist remark reduce dissonance by changing their attitudes toward sexual harassment. In comparison, women who challenge sexist remarks report less approval of sexual harassment. We varied whether women were exposed to blatant or subtle sexist remarks by manipulating whether the content was delivered in a serious (blatant) or humorous (subtle) manner. Surprisingly, we found the same effect operates regardless of how the sexist remark was delivered. Given that serious sexist comments are seen as more confrontation-worthy we expected that ignoring them would induce more dissonance than ignoring sexism cloaked in humor. Regardless, there are important consequences for the self and society when women ignore sexism; doing so increases tolerance of sexual harassment and decreases support for people who report their own harassment.

There are many reasons why targets of prejudice may choose not to confront (Mallett & Melchiori, 2019). Many times, targets ignore bias not because they condone the treatment but because they prioritize other outcomes. When Hyers (2007) asked women about their immediate goals following discrimination, 37% said they wanted to avoid conflict and

12% said they did not want to invest a lot of time and energy in the response. Feagin (1991) notes that challenging bias requires a significant amount of time and energy, making acquiescence and withdrawal logical responses to discrimination. Moreover, assertively responding in some situations may be dangerous, intimidating, or uncomfortable (Ayres et al., 2009). As is true for most research on responding to sexism, we sampled predominately White women from the United States (65% in Study 1, 66% in Study 2). Therefore, we do not know the extent to which these results generalize to women of color and women from other cultures.

Little research examines the intrapersonal consequences of choosing to ignore or confront sexist remarks. Ignoring sexism may lead a woman to believe that she is not the type of person who fights for equality. This may especially be true in a culture where many believe that a “reasonable woman” would confront sexism, even though confronting is relatively rare (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Given that our attitudes and identity are shaped by observing our own behavior (Bem, 1972), responding to sexism by ignoring or ingratiating the perpetrator impacts self-schemas regarding acceptance of sexual harassment and likely other forms of sexism. Repeatedly ignoring sexism may also lead to a more stable sense of a non-confrontational self. Not confronting sexism may convey tacit acceptance that has an impact on the self and others (Czopp, 2019). Because people look to the public reactions of others to define the behavior and determine the appropriate response (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008) ignoring sexism may affect bystanders. Some people are expected to respond to bias based on their perceived attitudes or group membership. For example, Whites were more likely to look at a Black (versus White) actor when they heard a racist remark. When we expect someone to confront and that person does not, bystanders may believe that such behavior is acceptable (Czopp, 2013) which could change the norms for a situation.

A strength of Study 1 is that we measured actual responses to a sexist remark delivered during an online chat, but we had little control over women’s responses. In Study 2, we used an analogue paradigm where we asked participants to imagine responding to sexism in one of three ways. Doing so allowed us to control the type of (imagined) response to sexism but it is possible that for some women, the imagined response may have been incompatible with their preferred response in the same situation. Nonetheless, we still observed dissonance when women imagined they ignored sexism – regardless of whether they believe they would have ignored or confronted. Future research may wish to measure the extent to which the imagined response aligns with women’s own preferences for responding. We measured actual responses to a fairly mild sexist remark in Study 1 and imagined responses in Study 2. Although our results hold for these types of sexist remarks, it is worthwhile to consider the generalizability of our results to a variety of real world experiences.

The amount of dissonance generated by ignoring bias from an ingroup versus an outgroup member may differ, as might the subsequent effects on attitudes and behavior. It can be more difficult to detect sexism from a woman than a man because such bias is less prototypical (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Similarly, benevolent sexism is more difficult to identify than hostile sexism (Swim, Mallett, Russo-Devosa, & Stangor, 2005). Thus, women may experience less dissonance after ignoring a sexist comment from a woman than from a man or after ignoring benevolent sexism. Ironically, if women did not experience sufficient dissonance in these cases then their tolerance of sexual harassment might not increase.

Finally, the current research focused on attitude change (toward sexual harassment and survivors) following women's responses to sexism, but it is essential to test whether people also change their behavior. Future research could test whether people are more likely to ignore a staged instance of gender harassment if they had previously ignored (versus confronted) a sexist comment during an online chat. Additionally, it would be interesting to inform people that their inaction causes self-justifying tendencies and perpetuates prejudice and then test whether that information changes willingness to confront bias. If people recognize that ignoring bias has unintended consequences for their attitudes, they may reconsider their decision to confront. Future research may also wish to test whether these effects generalize to ally groups (e.g. men observing sexism) as allies may also confront bias.

This is the first research that we know of to demonstrate that ignoring sexism makes women more tolerant of sexual harassment in society. We knew there were positive intrapersonal consequences for women who confront (versus ignore) sexism – they report more empowerment, competence, and self-esteem (Gervais et al., 2010). Now we know that there are also negative intrapersonal consequences that accompany ignoring sexism – women's become more tolerant of sexual harassment. Taking the path of least resistance and ignoring sexism therefore has unintended consequences for the self and society as others likely look to women to decide how to respond to sexism.

Notes

1. A pilot test showed that the jokes were funnier than the serious statements, $t(29) \geq 2.07$, $ps \leq .04$. Ford (2000) also reports pretest ratings for the sexist joke and statement. The sexist and offensive jokes were rated as equally offensive, $t(29) = -1.89$, $p = .07$. The serious sexist remark was rated as more offensive than the serious offensive remark, $t(29) = -8.91$, $p < .001$.
2. We include an analysis of how the content of the remark (offensive, sexist) and the type of remark (joke, serious) affect ingratiation and confrontation in the supplemental materials.
3. Twenty-eight additional people completed the study but failed an attention check and were excluded from analysis. The pattern of results remains unchanged when they are included.
4. We find the same pattern of results when we compare the women who imagined they confronted to the women who imagined they had no chance to confront.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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