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### **WHICH JUDGEMENT DO WOMEN EXPECT FROM A FEMALE OBSERVER WHEN THEY CLAIM TO BE A VICTIM OF SEXISM?**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*The aim of the study is to examine whether female victims of sexism expect to be negatively judged by their peers. Women were led to believe that a sexist male evaluator negatively assessed a test they had taken. Then, they had to attribute their failure to discrimination in the presence of a female observer or in a private context. In the presence of the female observer, women minimized discrimination and expect a positive judgment. In the private context, women reported more discrimination. When this attribution became public, they expected a negative judgment from the female observer.*

Although there are many reasons why women might claim and fight sexism, there are also many reasons to remain silent (Hyers, 2007). Several studies have shown that women are unwilling to report discrimination of which they are victims (e.g. Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004; Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). A number of individual differences and situational factors can potentially influence whether a woman will claim or not sexism. In the present research, we focus on the negative judgment associated with this claim (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2003; Sechrist et al., 2004; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Stangor et al., 2002). Indeed, perpetrators of discrimination negatively judge the targets who confronted them, evaluating them as being complainers (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Shelton & Stewart, 2004). But this negative judgment of discriminated targets who claim discrimination is not restricted to the perpetrators of such unfair treatment. People usually perceive the fact of blaming a negative outcome on discrimination as socially undesirable behavior, and targets are seen as complainers who just lament their fate (e.g., Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Even women negatively judge a woman claiming sexism (Garcia, Reser-Horstman, Amo, Redersdorff, & Branscombe, 2005; Marin & Guadagno, 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, it is common for

women to remain silent to sexism (e.g., Sechrist et al., 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999). However, it is important to study if women claiming sexism are really aware that they risk to be negatively judged by another woman. Thus, the main aim of the present research is to experimentally examine if female victims of sexism expect a negative judgment by a female observer when they claim discrimination.

Research has shown that female targets of a sexist act are aware of this discrimination privately, but they minimize it in front of others by attributing their negative outcome more to internal dispositions than to discrimination. This causes a discrepancy between their private and publicly expressed opinions (Lott, Asquith, & Doyon, 2001; Sechrist et al., 2004; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Stangor et al., 2002; Swim & Hyers, 1999). This discrepancy between wanting to say something and not saying something can be described as self-silencing (Swim, Eysell, Quilivan Murdoch, & Ferguson, 2010). Although self-silencing may appear to be a choice, it is done within a public context that can impose negative judgments towards discrimination claimers. They are considered as individuals who avoid personal responsibility for their negative outcomes. Claiming discrimination or attributing personal negative events to discrimination publicly is perceived as an "easy way out" (e.g., Garcia et al., 2005; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Are female victims of sexism aware of these negative judgments? Shelton and Stewart (2004) have shown that discriminated women do not claim discrimination because they expect to be negatively judged. However, their results were obtained among female victims in front of the male perpetrator of the discrimination. Female victims of sexism are likely to react in a different way in front of a female observer of their negative outcome. Indeed, some studies have shown that women can support a female victim of sexism who denounces the sexist act. They are more empathic and sympathetic than men towards a discriminated woman (Gutek, Cohen, & Tsui, 1996; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). For instance, compared to men, they recognize discrimination against a woman more easily (Elkins, Phillips, & Konopaske, 2002; Elkins, Phillips, Konopaske, & Townsend, 2001). When they imagined being a bystander of a sexist act carried out by a man, they felt anger towards the perpetrator and would have liked to confront him (Ayres, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). They may also be more able to report discrimination than the victim herself (Sechrist et al., 2004). However, if this set of findings suggests that women can support a female victim of sexism claiming discrimination, other findings have shown that they risk judging her negatively (Garcia et al., 2005). Therefore, which judgment do female victims of sexism expect by another woman when they claim discrimination?

In line with previous research showing that they are aware of this discrimination in a private context (Sechrist et al., 2004; Stangor et al., 2002), female targets of a sexist evaluation should make more attribution to discrimination privately than publicly. Thus, female victims of sexism should attribute their negative outcome to discrimination in a context perceived as private in a first time. Then, it becomes possible to examine which judgment they expect to obtain by a female observer in making public their attribution in a second time. If victims are aware that women judge a woman claiming discrimination as a person who complains (Garcia et al., 2005), the more they make private attribution to discrimination in private, the more they should expect to be negatively judged by a female observer when their attribution becomes public.

H1: Attribution to discrimination should mediate the effect of the context of explanation

(private vs. public) on the expectation of being negatively judged.

However, if female targets of discrimination begin to explain their negative outcome in a public context, the hypothesis will be different. Because female targets of sexism minimize it in public by attributing their negative outcome more to internal dispositions than to discrimination (Sechrist et al., 2004; Stangor et al., 2002), female victims of sexism in the present study should explain their negative outcome by internal dispositions in a public context. Therefore, they should expect that a female observer judge them positively, as individuals who do not refuse to be held accountable for their outcomes and take their personal responsibility (Garcia et al., 2005).

H2: Attribution to internal dispositions should mediate the effect of the context of explanation on the expectation of being positively judged.

## METHOD

Female undergraduates in psychology ( $N = 46$ ) participated in the study for course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: context of explanation: private vs. public.

### Procedure and Measures

Each participant worked in pairs with a female confederate who played the part of an undergraduate in psychology. A female experimenter conducted all the sessions. The protagonists were told that the goal of the study was to examine predictors of future success and interpersonal relationships at work. They were informed that they would each take a different test, each one supposed to predict future success (procedure derived from Sechrist and colleagues' study, 2004). A rigged drawing was systematically used to assign the confederate to one of the tests and the real participant to the other test. Once the tests were completed, they were informed that in order to examine interpersonal relationships after a performance outcome, a "target" and an "observer" role would be attributed to them by drawing lots which systematically designated the participant as the target and the confederate as the observer. Then, the experimenter explained to both protagonists that she was going to e-mail the target's answer sheet (i.e., the participant's answers) to a male evaluator at a local analysis firm in order to quickly get her score. After allegedly sending the e-mail, the experimenter confided to both protagonists that this evaluator consistently discriminated against women, and she left the room. Upon returning, she presented a printed e-mail showing the target's (the participant's) test score. The participant got a failing score of 4 out of 10 in both experimental conditions. Then, the two protagonists were given a questionnaire. Before filling in the questionnaire, the participant in the "public" condition was informed that she had to give her completed questionnaire to the observer. In the "private" condition, the participant thought that she would fill in her questionnaire privately and was informed *only* after answering it that she had to give it to the observer. The questionnaire consisted of attribution measures to explain her negative outcome. The participant had to attribute her failure to (1) internal dispositions ("quality of my answers", "my efforts";  $r = .37, p < .01$ ) and (2) discrimination ("discrimination" and "prejudice on the part of the evaluator";  $r = .76, p < .001$ ), using Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*

*much*).

Then, the participant was given another questionnaire and was explicitly told that the observer would not see her answers to this questionnaire. The participant had to rate the extent to which she expected that the observer would perceive her (1) negatively as a complainer on 5 items (e.g., complainer, defeatist,  $\alpha = .75$ ), and (2) positively as a person taking her responsibility on 4 items (e.g., assume her responsibilities, has self-control,  $\alpha = .63$ ) using Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Finally, the experimenter did a suspicion check by asking some indirect questions, after which the participant was debriefed.

## RESULTS

**Mediation analysis.** A first mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was used to examine whether attribution to discrimination mediated the effect of the context of explanation (which was coded -1 for private and +1 for public) on the expectation of being negatively judged (as more of a complainer). This analysis showed that significant relationships existed between (a) context of explanation and attribution to discrimination ( $\beta = -.45, p < .01$ ), and (b) context of explanation and the expectation of being judged as a complainer ( $\beta = -.35, p < .05$ ). After the expectation of being judged negatively as a complainer was regressed simultaneously on the context of explanation and attribution to discrimination, the path between context of explanation and expectation of being judged as a complainer was no longer significant ( $\beta = -.22, ns$ ) and the path between attribution to discrimination and expectation of being judged as a complainer was significant ( $\beta = .32, p < .05$ ) [1]. Even though not expected, we also tested whether attribution to discrimination mediated the effect of the context of explanation on the expectation of being judged positively as a person taking her responsibility, and there was no significant evidence for this mediation. Descriptive statistics of attribution to discrimination and the expectation of being negatively judged are presented in Table 1.

A second mediation analysis was used to examine whether attribution to internal dispositions mediated the effect of the context of explanation on the expectation of being positively judged (as a person taking her responsibility). This analysis showed that significant relationships existed between (a) context of explanation and attribution to internal dispositions ( $\beta = .45, p < .01$ ), and marginally significant relationships between (b) context of explanation and the expectation of being judged positively as a person taking her responsibility ( $\beta = .28, p < .10$ ). After the expectation of being judged as a person taking her responsibility was regressed simultaneously on the context of explanation and internal attribution, the path between context of explanation and expectation of being judged as a person taking her responsibility was no longer significant ( $\beta = .07, ns$ ), and the path between internal attribution and expectation of being judged as a person taking her responsibility was significant ( $\beta = .45, p < .01$ ) [2]. Even though not expected, we also tested whether attribution to internal dispositions mediated the effect of context of explanation on the expectation of being negatively judged as a complainer, and there was no evidence for this mediation. Descriptive statistics of attribution to internal dispositions and the expectation of being positively judged are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean scores for attributions and expected judgment as a function of context of explanation

		Context of explanation			
		Public ( <i>n</i> = 22)		Private ( <i>n</i> = 24)	
		<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )
Attributions	Discrimination	2.27	(1.27)	3.48	(1.42)
	Internal dispositions	5.15	(1.08)	4.05	(1.12)
Expected judgment	Complainer	2.38	(.84)	2.98	(.76)
	Taking her responsibility	4.18	(.83)	3.76	(.60)

*Note.* The ratings corresponding to attributions and expected judgments could range from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) with higher numbers reflecting higher ratings. *M* = Mean and *SD* = Standard deviations.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined whether female victims of a negative sexist evaluation expected to be negatively judged by a female observer when they reported to be a victim of discrimination. As expected, female victims of sexism recognized more discrimination in a private context of explanation, and expected a negative judgment from a female observer once they learned that their answer was in fact public. Thus, when attribution was made in private, attribution to discrimination mediated the impact of this context of explanation on the expectation of being judged negatively as a complainer. Female victims of sexism seem to feel that claiming discrimination is perceived as an excessive reaction from someone who is never satisfied with her fate. When female victims of sexism explained their negative outcome publicly, they preferred explaining their negative outcome by internal dispositions. This attribution led them to expect a positive judgment from the female observer. Thus, in this public context of explanation, attribution to their internal dispositions mediated the impact of this context on the expectation of being judged positively as a person taking her responsibility. In other words, women seem to be aware of the risk of being derogated in a public context, and they adjust their explanation for their negative outcome to avoid this rejection.

The present study goes further than previous research examining social costs related to discrimination claims (Shelton & Stewart, 2004), which showed that women were less likely to confront male perpetrators in high social cost situations. The present findings showed that women expect social costs even from women who are not the perpetrators of the sexist act. However, in order to bring about social change and to improve women's status, victims must denounce discrimination (Cameron, 2002; Crosby, 1993). The present findings showed that women believe that they risk negative judgment from a peer after claiming to be a victim of sexism, while social acceptance and the positive evaluation of ingroup members are particularly important for people (Correll & Park, 2005; Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovic, 2008). Moreover, social support from ingroup members may be beneficial for the well-being and self-perceptions of stigmatized individuals (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998). Therefore, future research should explore which factors or contexts are likely to facilitate discrimination claims within women's groups by increasing the social support from a peer.

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#### APPENDIX 1

Correlational matrix concerning the first meditational analysis

	Context of explanation	Attribution to discrimination	Negative judgment
Context of explanation	1	-.42	-.35
		p < .004	p < .018
Attribution to discrimination		1	.41
			p < .004
Negative judgment			1

#### APPENDIX 2

Correlational matrix concerning the second meditational analysis

	Context of explanation	Attribution to internal dispositions	Positive judgment
Context of explanation	1	-.45	-.28
		p < .002	p < .06
Attribution to internal dispositions		1	.48
			p < .001
Positive judgment			1

#### ENDNOTES

1. We made additional analysis to confirm the indirect effect of context of explanation (via attribution to discrimination) on the expectation of being judged as a complainer. A bootstrap analysis showed that the 95% percentile confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect did not include zero [-0.28 , -0.01]. This confirmed a significant indirect effect (Preacher & Hayes,



2008). The Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) showed that the indirect effect marginally differed from zero,  $z = -1.76$ ,  $p < .10$ .

2. Additional analysis confirmed the indirect effect of context of explanation (via attribution to internal dispositions) on the expectation of being judged as a person taking her responsibility. The bootstrap analysis showed that the 95% percentile confidence interval ranged from 0.03 to 0.32 which confirmed a significant indirect effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The Sobel test also provided evidence for mediation,  $z = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ .

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