6-30-2022

Ambivalence, Sexism, and Sexual Decision-Making Among Heterosexual College Students

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AMBIVALENCE , SEXISM, AND SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING AMONG HETEROSEXUAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Psychology
College of Science and Mathematics
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology
at
Rowan University
May 25, 2022

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Dedication

To my parents and brother: thank you for always supporting me in everything I do. Your constant encouragement, understanding, and humor motivate me each day to do what I love. None of this would be possible without the three of you.

Acknowledgments

I want to extend my gratitude to my advisors, Drs. Meredith Jones and DJ Angelone. Thank you for providing me with your mentorship, guidance, and support throughout this process. I am appreciative of all that you both do for me and for our lab and I look forward to our continued work together in the future.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Drs. Dustin Fife and Chelsie Young. Your feedback, flexibility, and assistance have been so helpful in the making of this project. And specifically to Dr. Fife, thank you for all of your help with my analyses. I could not have done this without your guidance and expertise!

Finally, to my family and friends, I am endlessly appreciative of your support and uplifting words.

Abstract

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Sexual ambivalence is defined as having both favorable and unfavorable thoughts toward sexual activity in any given sexual situation (Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998). Most sexually active people will experience feelings of ambivalence at some point in their lives and ultimately decide to engage in sexual activity (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). Based on previous research and guided by sexual script theory Simon & Gagnon, 1986), we hypothesized that gender, hostile, and benevolent sexism would moderate the association of prior experience with a partner/activity and engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalence. A total of 457 heterosexual college students answered questions about their ambivalent experiences and attitudes toward gender roles. Prior experience with a partner and sexual activity was associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in sexual activity while feeling ambivalent; however, gender was not a significant predictor in our models. Exploratory analyses indicated that hostile and benevolent sexism may predict engagement in sex while ambivalent above and beyond the effect of gender. The lack of support for most of our hypotheses may be attributed to the absence of a measurement of relationship status and assessing hostile and benevolent beliefs separately. Future studies may expand on these findings by assessing relationships on a deeper level and using an overall measurement of ambivalent sexism.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Sexual ambivalence is defined as having both favorable and unfavorable thoughts toward sexual activity in any given sexual situation (Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998). Most sexually active people will experience feelings of ambivalence at some point in their lives when presented with an opportunity to engage in sexual activity (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998). Prevalence rates of sexually ambivalent experiences range from 30 to 46 percent in college populations (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998, Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). Despite their hesitation, individuals often decide to ultimately participate in these sexual experiences (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). In fact, when college students find themselves in a situation in which they experience sexual ambivalence, only 13 percent refuse to engage in sexual activities (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

Despite the limited research on the topic of sexual ambivalence, the existing literature demonstrates that having sex while feeling ambivalent is linked to various negative outcomes. For example, among college students who decide to engage in sexual activity despite their ambivalent thoughts, 30% report experiencing emotional discomfort, including disappointment in oneself, physical discomfort, or relationship tension following the sexual act (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). College students also report experiencing less enjoyment and pleasure during sexual encounters where they were feeling ambivalent (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010).

Willingly consenting to sexual activity despite ambivalence may also have implications for individuals' vulnerability to sexual violence. For example, 19 percent of

college women who report unwanted, nonconsensual sex also report experiencing sexual ambivalence during these encounters (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). In turn, experiences of sexual violence tend to be related to a variety of negative consequences, including anxiety and depressive disorders, eating disorders, and attempted suicide (Chen et al., 2009; Maniglio, 2009), and an increased likelihood of being revictimized in the future (Maniglio, 2009). Students who consent to sexual activity while feeling ambivalent are also less likely to use condoms, increasing their risk for contracting and spreading sexually transmitted infections and diseases (Fair & Vanyur, 2011). Due to these potential risks, it is important to study predictors of engaging in sex despite ambivalent thoughts.

College students may experience ambivalent thoughts about enaging in sexual activity for a variety of reasons. For example, some young people report experiencing feelings of pleasure during sex while also feeling vulnerable to physical or psychological danger (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). Additionally, many young adults may desire a sexual activity but fear potential consequences (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). These outcomes may include pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases and infections. Conversely, some students may want the outcomes of sexual activity but not the act itself, leading them to be unsure about whether they want to engage in sexual activity. These consequences include promoting intimacy within their relationship and avoiding tension between partners (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Therefore, wanting only some aspects of sexual activity but not others can lead individuals to experience ambivalent thoughts about engaging in a sexual activity.

Despite their ambivalent thoughts, there are several related and overlapping reasons as to why college students ultimately decide to engage in sexual activity. First, some students engage in sexual activity despite ambivalence if they have previously participated in that particular sexual act. In fact, an individual's past behavior directly contributes to future engagement in the same behavior, and a key predictor for participating in sex is prior sexual behavior (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Ouellette & Wood, 1998). For example, college students with prior hookup experience were far more likely to repeat the same behavior a year later (Owen et al., 2011). Second, college students are more likely to engage in sexual activity during their first semester if they have had previous sexual experience before their first year of college (Olmstead et al., 2015). As for sexual ambivalence, between 30 and 50 percent of college students who have engaged in sex despite ambivalence report that they had previously engaged in that specific sexual activity (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998). In addition, college students are far more likely to engage in a sexual activity while ambivalent if they have engaged in that activity despite past ambivalence (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

College students may also be more likely to engage in sexual activity despite their ambivalence if they have previously engaged in sexual activity with the same partner (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). There is a positive relationship between feelings of commitment to a partner and an individual's likelihood to engage in sexual activities despite sexual ambivalence (Impett & Peplau, 2003). College students may consent to sexual activity because they believe it will promote intimacy within the relationship with their partner (Conroy et al., 2015; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). Many individuals also describe the concept of an implicit social contract within heterosexual romantic

relationships that involves maintaining sexual activities even when sexual activity is undesired by one partner (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). Romantic partners will often engage in sexual activities despite ambivalence to fulfill their partners' desire for sex. These individuals may feel pressured to engage in sex due to an awareness that in the future, the roles of wanting versus not wanting may be reversed within their relationship. They may also believe that by refusing to engage in sex, their partner might think they are trying to dissolve or diminish the relationship (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Others report consenting to sex to avoid upsetting their partners and to prevent partners from losing interest (Conroy et al., 2015).

Sexual Script Theory

An important aspect of understanding sexual ambivalence involves exploring how social context and gender expectations influence an individual's sexuality and sexual agency (Conroy et al., 2015). Sexual script theory suggests that individuals make meaning out of behaviors and emotions based on internalized scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005). In addition, individual expectations and perceptions of sexual behavior are shaped within a social context (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). That is, sexual scripts are learned and created via development and maturation within a particular social context, and these scripts often guide individuals when responding to certain social situations. Thus, sexual scripts provide a sense of direction for responding to sexual cues and situations (Wiederman, 2005). For example, feeling able to refuse or ask for sex, along with feeling obligated to give in to a partner, are all rooted in societal gender norms (Fahs et al., 2020). The problem with the internalization of sexual scripts is that they

leave no room for ambivalent thoughts about sexual activities (Kettrey, 2018; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005).

While individuals within the same cultural context may develop similar scripts, men and women follow separate guidelines for sexual behavior (Wiederman, 2005). For example, men are taught to view sex as a goal-directed activity, centered around self-pleasure (Katz & Tirone, 2010). Therefore, when the opportunity to engage in a sexual activity is present, they are expected to engage. On the other hand, women who subscribe to feminine gender roles may be more likely to engage in sexual activity despite ambivalence in order to avoid deviating from their gender norms (Katz & Tirone, 2010). In fact, traditional gender role expectations have a large impact on young women's sexual compliance (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018). For example, women may engage in sexually ambivalent experiences in the absence of partner pressure in order to meet the social expectations of women as passive, compliant beings (Conroy et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2006). That is, female gender role expectations are predictors of engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalence (Quinn-Nilas & Kennett, 2018).

Sexual scripts are most apparent within the context of heterosexual relationships. For example, female sexual scripts are framed within the context of heterosexual relationships and intimacy. Thirty percent of women in heterosexual relationships report agreeing to engage in sexual activity due to societal pressure to comply to what their partner desires (Fahs et al., 2020; Katz & Tirone, 2010). Women still feel an obligation to comply with their partner's desires, even though they are aware their partner is not pressuring them to do so (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Young women may focus

their sexual activity on the pleasure of a male partner rather than prioritizing their own pleasure if they endorse more traditional gender norms (Kettrey, 2018). Both men and women report that they believe women engage in unwanted, consensual activity in order to please their male partners (Morgan et al., 2006). Women report complexity in managing their own need to be sexually desired with their partners' needs, and describe requiring a great deal of emotional work in order to balance both needs (Fahs et al., 2020). This may be complex because challenging societal expectations within a relationship can have severe social consequences for women, so they feel obligated to conform to gendered norms (Conroy et al., 2015).

Compared to women, the research findings remain mixed regarding how men's decisions to engage in sexual activity while experiencing ambivalence are influenced by sexual scripts. Some evidence suggests that sexual scripts play a large role in men's heterosexual relationships. For example, men may be more likely to take on the traditional role as the initiator of sexual activity in a heterosexual relationship (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In fact, men are more likely than women to initiate sex when they are feeling ambivalent (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). Men may feel obligated to engage in sex despite feeling ambivalent in order to promote altruism and intimacy within their relationships (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018). In other words, they may prioritize their partner's happiness over their own ambivalence. However, other evidence suggests that it is more acceptable for men to say no to sexual activity while experiencing ambivalent thoughts if they are in a relationship (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018). Since relationships often involve elements of acceptance and trust, men feel it is more acceptable to refuse sexual activity while ambivalent. Men also believe that sexual activity is no longer the most important

part of being with a woman if they are in a relationship (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018). Therefore, saying no to sexual activity does not diminish the reason for the partnership as it would in a casual hookup.

Sexism

The endorsement of traditional gender roles and expectations has been linked to sexism. In fact, sexism may serve as a proxy for understanding individuals' acceptance of traditional gender roles (Angelone et al., 2021). Some researchers have defined sexism by identifying two distinct yet complementary constructs: Hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism is defined as a more traditional form of prejudice, with antagonistic, derogatory views toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). It derives from men's perceived power over women which is often exemplified through sexual harassment and discrimination. On the other hand, benevolent sexism consists of a set of attitudes toward women that may appear positive, but still view women in restricted, stereotypical roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). These attitudes may be conveyed in prosocial ways, such as feeling that a woman may need help, but the underlying view is that women are weak and inferior. Benevolent sexism can also be characterized by the perspective that women are responsible for satisfying men's sexual needs and bearing children, and consequently require the protection of men.

Hostile and benevolent sexism have been shown to influence dating behaviors and preferences within heterosexual relationships by guiding the standards that individuals set for their close romantic relationships and long-term partner selection (Chen et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2010). For example, men who endorse hostile sexism often view intimate relationships as a battleground for control between partners (Hammond & Overall, 2013).

They believe that women will use their sexuality to gain power within a relationship and undermine the influence of their male counterpart (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This threat of losing control within a relationship can lead to men engaging in more aggressive sexual behaviors and having negative attitudes toward their female partners, resulting in relationship dissatisfaction (Hammond & Overall, 2013). However, men who endorse hostile sexism are also more afraid of intimacy and therefore less likely to engage in behaviors that promote it.

Though there is limited research regarding the influence of hostile sexism and relationship behaviors for women, the existing literature suggests that women's promotion of hostile sexism may influence their relationships in conflicting ways. For example, women who endorse hostile sexism may experience less conflict within their relationships because they promote more soothing of communication and conflict with their male partners (Cross & Overall, 2019). Additionally, women with higher levels of hostile sexism in young women increase their attitudes toward the acceptability of dating violence and rape myths (Angelone et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2016). Conversely, women who endorse hostile sexism may be more likely to experience jealousy within their relationships (Cross & Overall, 2019) which may lead them to view their partners negatively. However, it remains unclear how hostile sexism impacts women's sexual behaviors.

In contrast to hostile sexism, benevolent sexism can promote intimacy within relationships and lead partners to display caring, warm attitudes toward one another (Hammond & Overall, 2017). However, there are mixed findings for how benevolent sexism influences men and women in relationships. Men who endorse benevolent sexism

show more desire to maintain intimacy within their relationships, and are more receptive to their female partners' desires (Overall et al., 2011). Since the promotion of benevolent sexism is related to respecting women's roles and opinions, men may be more open and willing to change based on their female partners' desires. Therefore, men who endorse benevolent sexism may also be more easily influenced by their partner. However, it is important to note that hostile and benevolent sexism are complementary. When men promote high levels of benevolent sexism, this can lead to the development of hostile sexism (Sibley & Perry, 2010). This means that though benevolent sexism may be associated with a greater likelihood of complying to a female partner, it may also have separate but related effects on the hostility men hold toward their partners.

On the other hand, higher levels of benevolent sexism among women makes them more resistant to their partners' influence within their relationship (Overall et al., 2011). This may be due to their lack of openness to their male partners' opinions and influence on the relationship. However, benevolent sexism can also cause women to behave more submissively around their male partners, making them more likely to comply with their requests. Despite the body of research related to hostile and benevolent sexism and relationship behaviors, the connection between hostile and benevolent sexism and sexual decision-making while feeling ambivalent has yet to be investigated.

Present Study

Prior experience with a specific sexual activity (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998) or with a specific partner (Conroy et al., 2015; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998) is associated with a greater likelihood that individuals will engage in sex while feeling ambivalent. For example, if someone had oral sex with a particular partner, they would be more likely to

engage in oral sex with that partner even though they had thoughts of ambivalence. This would suggest that prior experience with *both* a specific sexual activity and a specific partner would predict engagement in sexual activity while ambivalent.

Sexual scripts provide separate guidelines for men and women regarding their engagement in sexual activities, especially in relationships (Wiederman, 2005). Therefore, we predicted that prior engagement with both a specific sexual activity and a specific partner would moderate the association between gender and engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent. Since women in heterosexual relationships are more likely to comply to unwanted sexual activity in order to please their partners (Fahs et al., 2020, Katz & Tirone, 2010), we predicted that women who had prior experience with a partner and an activity would be more likely to engage in sexual activity despite ambivalent thoughts. Conversely, since evidence regarding the impact of relationships on men's sexual decision-making is mixed (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018, Simon & Gagnon, 1986, & Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010), we explored how prior experience with a partner and activity might moderate men's engagement in sex while experiencing ambivalence without specifying a direction for this effect. Finally, due to the lack of research regarding how hostile and benevolent sexism influence sexual decision-making, we examined how hostile and benevolent sexism influence the relationship between gender, prior experience with a partner and activity, and engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalent thoughts.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore how 1) prior experience with both a sexual activity and a partner, 2) gender, and 3) hostile and

benevolent sexism predicted likelihood of college students engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalence. Specifically, we predicted the following:

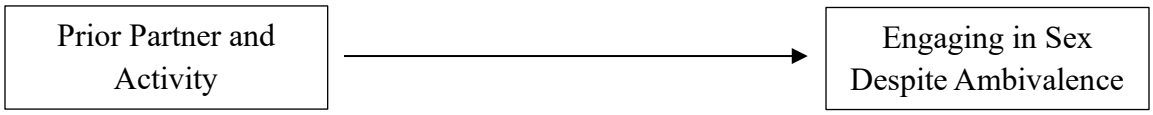
Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

Participants who have previously engaged in the same sexual activity with the same partner will be more likely to engage in sexual activity despite ambivalence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual Frameork for Hypothesis 1



Hypothesis 2

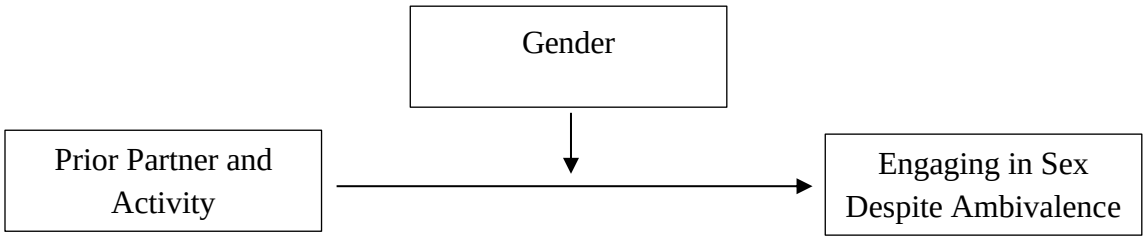
Gender will moderate the association between prior experience with a partner and activity and engaging in sexual activity while ambivalent (see Figure 2).

2a. Women who have prior experience with a partner and sexual activity will be more likely to engage in sexual activity while ambivalent as compared to those without prior experience.

2b. Due to the limited research regarding men and prior experience with a partner and sexual activity, we did not specify the direction of the effect for this predition.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework for Hypothesis 2

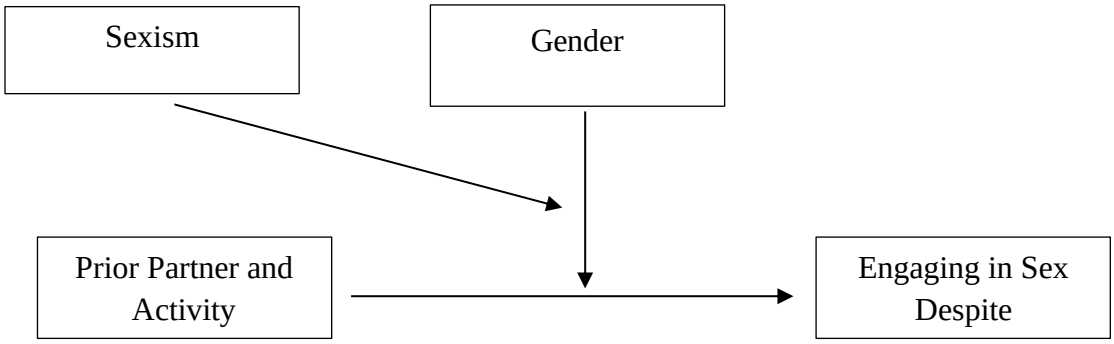


Hypothesis 3

We predicted that there would be a three-way interaction between gender, prior experience with partner and activity, and hostile sexism in predicting engaging in sexual activity while ambivalent. Given the novelty of studying sexual ambivalence and hostile sexism, we did not make any predictions about the directionality of these relationships (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework for Hypotheses 3 and 4



Note. Sexism serves as a secondary moderator, changing the association between gender, prior partner and activity, and engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalence. Sexism refers to hostile and benevolent sexism.

Hypothesis 4

We predicted that there would be a three-way interaction between gender, prior experience with partner and activity, and benevolent sexism in predicting engaging in sexual activity while ambivalent. Given the novelty of studying sexual ambivalence and benevolent sexism, we did not make any predictions about the directionality of these relationships.

Chapter 2

Method

Participants

The Rowan Institutional Review Board granted approval for this study prior to data collection. Participants were recruited using SONA, an electronic undergraduate participant pool. Students enrolled in Essentials of Psychology who were over the age of 18 were eligible to participate. Those who were eligible were directed to a one-time electronic survey adminstered via Qualtrics. The informed consent included information about the nature of the study, how the data would be used, and resources available should participants experience any emotional distress. Upon completion of the survey, participants were given credit toward their Essentials of Psychology course. A total of 932 undergraduate students completed this overall survey.

Given that sexual script theory is based on cisgender individuals, and hostile and benevolent sexism specifically reference male and female gender roles only, participants who identified as nonbinary, transgender, or other genders were excluded from our sample. In addition, since the nature of this study focused on heterosexual individuals, only participants who identified as heterosexual or straight were included in our sample. Finally, participants were only included if they reported having been in a situation with a partner who wanted to have sex, but the they were not sure at that time if they wanted to engage in sex with that partner. Taken together, this resulted in a final analytic sample of 457 participants (see Table 1 for demographics).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Demographic	Full Sample (n=457) (M_{age} = 19.2) *n*	*%*
Gender		
Female	282	61.7%
Male	175	38.3%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	305	66.7%
Black or African American	55	12.0%
Latino or Hispanic	47	10.3%
Asian or Asian American	25	5.5%
Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern American	9	2.0%
American Indian/Native American	3	0.7%
Bi or Multi-racial	9	2.0%
Do not wish to answer	4	0.9%
Class Standing		
Freshman	253	55.4%
Sophomore	130	28.4%
Junior	50	10.9%
Senior	23	5.0%
Do not wish to answer	1	0.2%

The mean age of our participants was 19.1 (SD= 1.6) years and included 253 freshmen (55%), 130 sophomores (28%), 50 juniors (11%), 23 seniors (5%), and 1 person who did not wish to answer (0.2%). Participants self-identified their race and ethnicity as white (N= 305, 67%), Black (N= 55, 12%), Latino or Hispanic (N=47, 10%), Asian or Asian American (N=25, 6%), Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern American (N=9, 2%), American Indian/Native American (N=3, 0.7%), Bi- or Multi-racial (N=9, 2%), or indicated they did not wish to answer (N=4, 1%).

Measures

Demographics

Participants answered a series of demographic questions (see Appendix A). These questions asked participants to self-identify their race and ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, and class year.

Sexism

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996) is a 22-item scale containing two subscales: Hostile and benevolent sexism (see Appendix A). Items are answered using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly). Example items on the hostile subscale include "women are too easily offended" and "women exaggerate problems they have at work." Example items on the benevolent subscale include "women, as compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility" and "women should be cherished and protected by men." A total score for each subscale is calculated by averaging all of the items. Each subscale is scored separately. High scores on the hostile subscale indicate high levels of hostile sexism, and high scores on the benevolent subscale indicate high levels of benevolent sexism, regardless of their scores on other subscales. Cronbach's α for the hostile subscale is .83, and Cronbach's α for the benevolent subscale is .73 (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Within our sample, Cronbach's α for the hostile subscale was .84, and Cronbach's α for the benevolent subscale is .68.

Sexual Ambivalence

We used an adapted version of the Questions About Ambivalent Experiences (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998) to assess participants' experiences of sexual ambivalence

(see Appendix A). This is a 15-item scale with each item scored separately. For example, when asked “have you ever been in a situation in which a man/woman indicated to you that they wanted to engage in a particular sexual activity with you” and “have you ever been in a such a situation where a man/woman indicated that they wanted to engage in a particular sexual activity, but you were not sure at that time if you wanted to engage in it or not,” participants answered either “yes,” “no,” or “I don’t know.” Participants were also given these answer options when presented with the question “had you ever engaged in this sexual activity with this person before this interaction.” When asked “did you end up engaging in the sexual activity despite being unsure,” participants answered either “yes” or “no.”

Chapter 3

Results

Analytic Strategy

These analyses are considered rough confirmatory due to the specification of hypotheses prior to analysis that have not been previously examined in research (Fife & Rodgers, 2021). Due to the binary nature of our outcome variable—engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent—we used chi-square analysis and generalized linear models with logistic regression to analyze the data and answer our research questions. All continuous variables met the assumptions of normality, homoskedasticity, linearity, and independence.

Descriptive Statistics

About half of our sample, 248 participants (54%), had not engaged in sex while feeling ambivalent, as compared to 208 (46%) participants who had engaged in sex despite feeling ambivalent. There was no significant difference between men (46%) and women (47%) who engaged in sex and men (54%) and women (53%) who did not engage in sex while ambivalent (p = .79). Sixty-six percent of participants (N=302) had not engaged in the sexual activity with that partner before, while 138 (30%) participants had engaged in the sexual activity with that person prior to their ambivalent experience. There was no significant difference between men (31%) and women (31%) who had prior experience and men (69%) and women (69%) who did not have prior experience with that partner and sexual activity (p = .99). Additionally, the average score on hostile sexism was 2.2 (SD = 0.0), and the average score on benevolent sexism was 2.5 (SD =

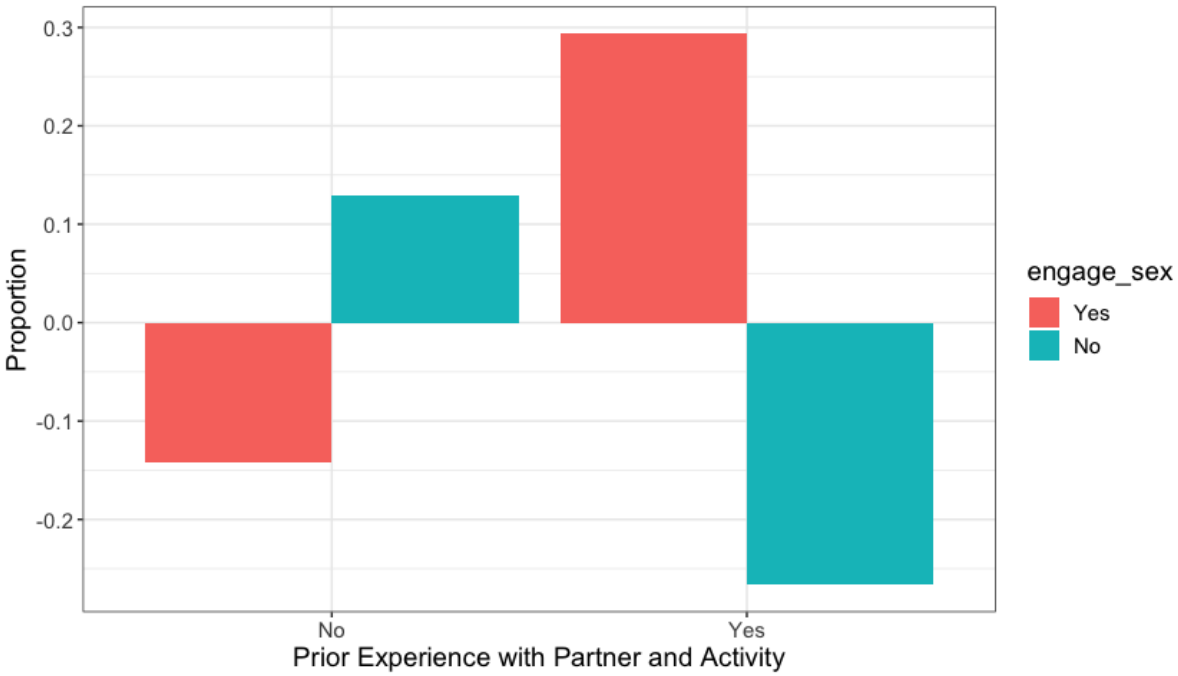
0.7). Men scored significantly higher than women on hostile sexism. There was no significant difference between men and women's scores on benevolent sexism.

Primary Analyses

We used a chi-square analysis to test the relationship between previous engagement in the same sexual activity with the same partner and engaging in sex despite ambivalence. Participants who had previously engaged in the same sexual activity with the same partner were more likely to engage in sex while feeling ambivalent as compared to those who had not engaged in the same activity with the same partner (χ^2 = 18.79, df = 1, p < .001, see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Association Plot of the Relationship Between Prior Experience with a Partner and Activity and Engaging In Sex While Ambivalent



Next, we analyzed whether gender moderated the relationship between prior experience with a partner and activity and engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent (see Figure 5). We created full and reduced generalized linear models in which the full model included an interaction of gender and prior experience with a partner and activity, and the reduced model included only prior experience with a partner and activity. All statistics favored the reduced model when compared to the full model (see Table 2). Therefore, there was no evidence of an interaction between gender and prior experience with a partner and activity. When analyzing whether there was a main effect of gender, we compared our full model with a model that included gender as a main effect. All parameters favored the model as a main effect (AIC = 701.79, BIC = 714.54, Bayes Factor = 20.92). However, when comparing the main effect model to the reduced model, all parameters favored the reduced model (*OR* = 1.45). This suggests that gender does not have a main effect in the relationship between prior experience with a partner and activity and engaging in sex while ambivalent.

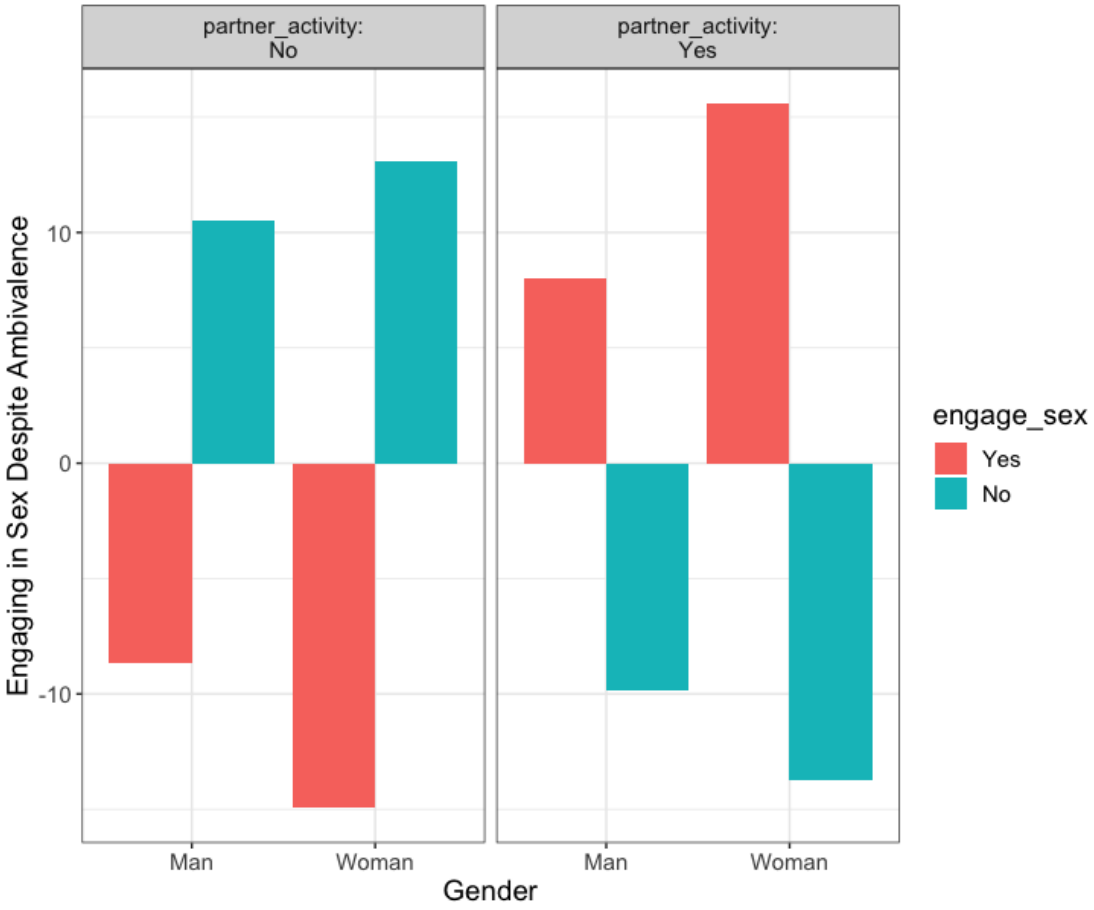
Table 2

*Model Comparison of Full (PriorExperience*Gender) and Reduced (PriorExperience) Models*

	AIC	**BIC**	**Bayes Factor**	***p***
Full Model	703.63	720.62	0.05	.92
Reduced Model	699.80	708.29	475.03	

Figure 5

Impact of Gender on the Relationship Between Prior Expeirence with a Partner and Activity and Engaging in Sexual Activity Despite Ambivalence



Note. There was no evidence of an interaction between gender and prior experience.

Next, we analyzed whether there was a three-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity, gender, and hostile sexism (see Figure 6). We created a full model that included the three-way interaction, and a reduced model that contained a two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and gender. All statistics favored the reduced model (see Table 3, *OR* = 0.39). Therefore,

there was no evidence of a three-way interaction between gender, prior experience with a partner and activity, and hostile sexism.

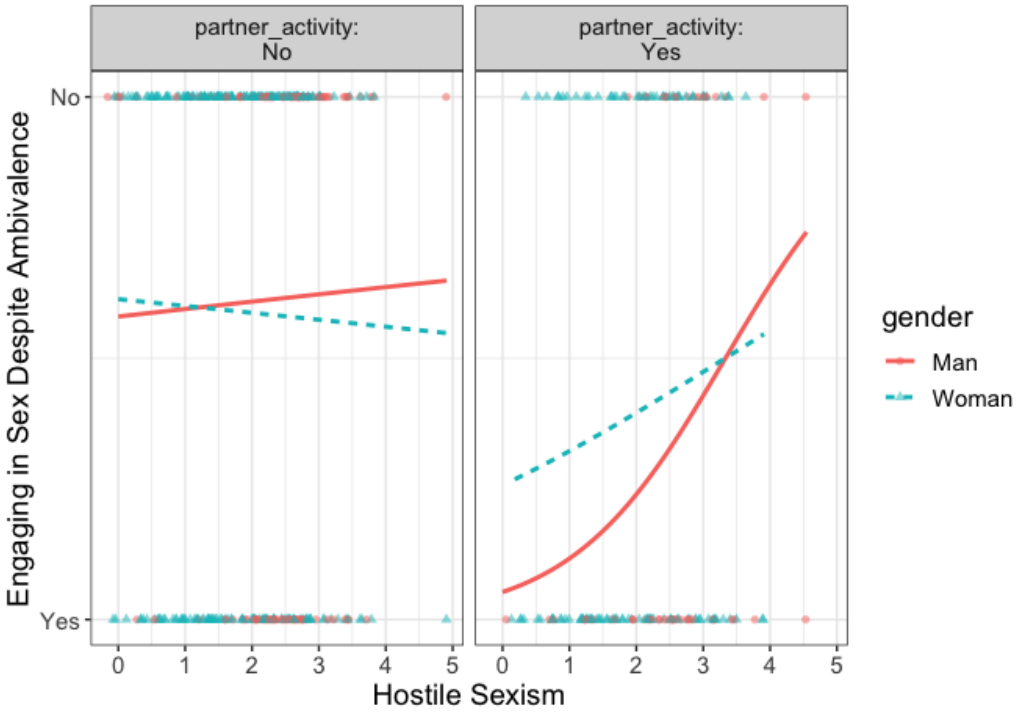
Table 3

*Model Comparison of Full (Gender*PriorExperience*Sexism) and Reduced (Gender*PriorExperience) Models*

	AIC	**BIC**	**Bayes Factor**	***p***
Hostile Sexism				
Full Model	688.24	722.08	0.00	.10
Reduced Model	688.14	705.07	4950.41	
Benevolent Sexism				
Full Model	684.85	718.70	.001	.02
Reduced Model	688.14	705.07	911.42	

Figure 6

Relationship Between Hostile Sexism, Gender, and Prior Experience with a Partner and Activity on Engaging in Sex Despite Ambivalence

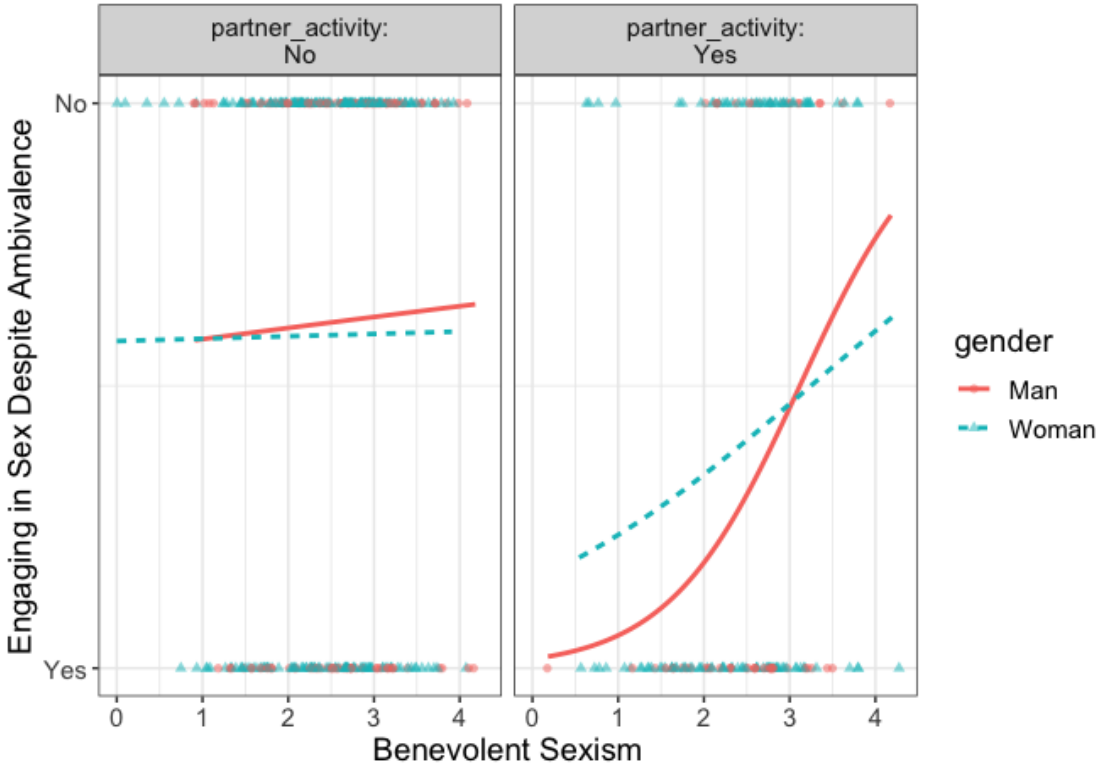


Note. There was no evidence of a three-way interaction.

Finally, we analyzed whether there was a three-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity, gender, and benevolent sexism (see Figure 7). We created a full model that included the three-way interaction, and a reduced model that contained a two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and gender. The parameters conveyed ambiguity when favoring a model (see Table 3). However, the Bayes Factor suggests there is resounding evidence to favor the reduced model (*OR* = 1.51).

Figure 7

Relationship Between Benevolent Sexism, Gender, and Prior Experience with a Partner and Activity on Engaging in Sex Despite Ambivalence



Note. There was no evidence of a three-way interaction.

Exploratory Analyses

Though there was no evidence to support a three-way interaction between hostile sexism, prior experience with a partner and activity, and gender, the visualization showed a potential two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and hostile sexism (Figure 8). Therefore, we created full and reduced generalized linear models in order to understand the relationship between prior experience with a partner and activity and hostile sexism on engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent. The full model included the two-way interaction of prior experience and hostile sexism, while the

reduced model only included prior experience and hostile sexism as main effects (Figure 9). When comparing the models, there was ambiguity about whether to favor the full model (AIC = 683.86, BIC = 700.79, Bayes Factor = .24, p = .07) or the reduced model (AIC = 685.28, BIC = 697.97, Bayes Factor = 4.10). Therefore, there it remains uncertain as to whether or not there is a two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and hostile sexism.

Figure 8

All Possible Two-Way Interactions Between Hostile Sexism, Gender, and Prior Experience on the Likelihood of Engaging in Sex While Ambivalent

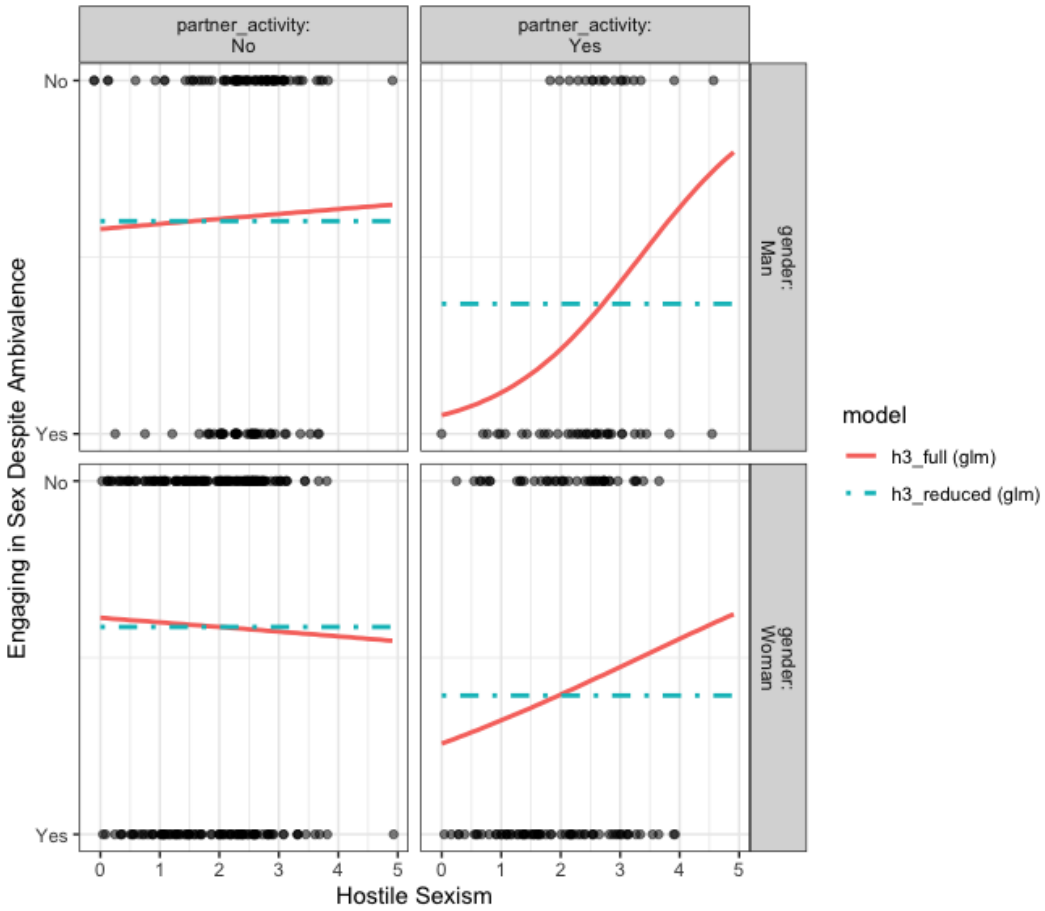
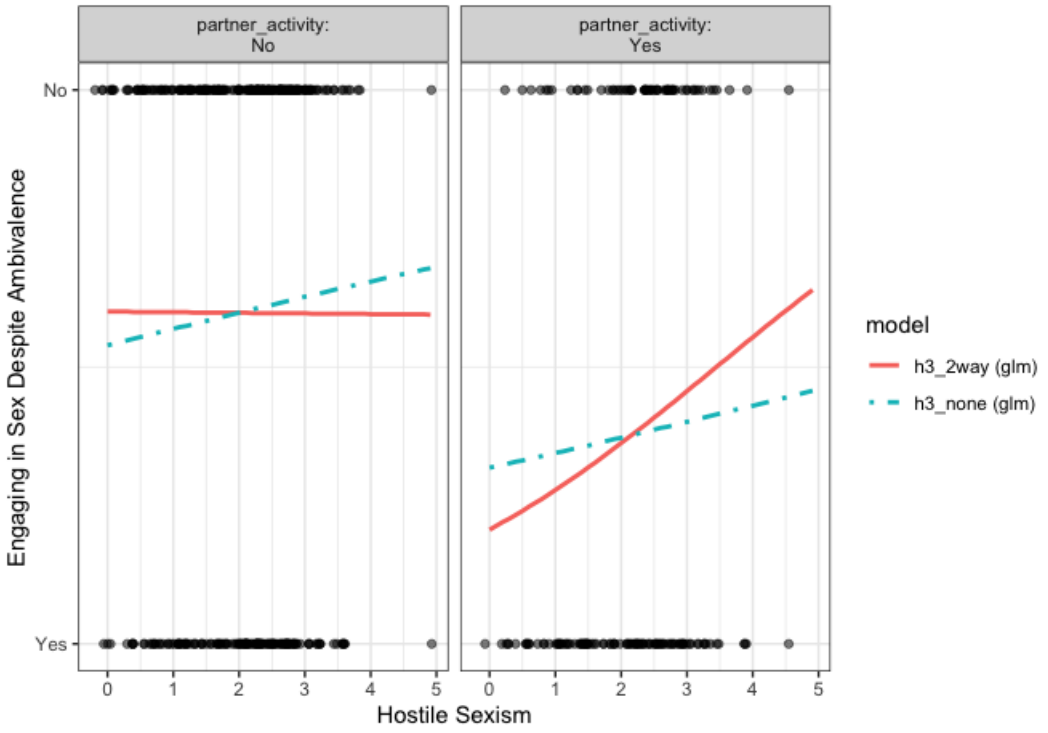


Figure 9

Two-Way Interaction Between Hostile Sexism and Prior Experience on Engaging in Sex Despite Ambivalence



Note. Evidence suggests uncertainty of whether or not there is a two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and hostile sexism in predicting engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalence.

Similarly, though there was no evidence to support a three-way interaction between benevolent sexism, prior experience with a partner and activity, and gender, the visualization showed a potential two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and benevolent sexism (Figure 10). Similar to above, we created a full and reduced generalized linear model in which the full model included the two-way interaction of prior experience and benevolent sexism, while the reduced model only

included prior experience and benevolent sexism as main effects (Figure 11). Most parameters favored the full model (AIC = 679.70, BIC = 696.62, Bayes Factor = .62, p = .02) as compared to the reduced model (AIC = 682.98, BIC = 695.67, Bayes Factor = 1.61). Though the Bayes Factor was greater for the reduced model, the value was not large enough to suggest evidence to favor the reduced model. Therefore, it appears that prior experience with a partner and sexual activity, paired with higher levels of benevolent sexism, may predict a tendency to not engage in sex while feeling ambivalent (*OR* = 1.33).

Figure 10

All Possible Two-Way Interactions Between Benevolent Sexism, Gender, and Prior Expeirence on Engaging in Sex While Ambivalent

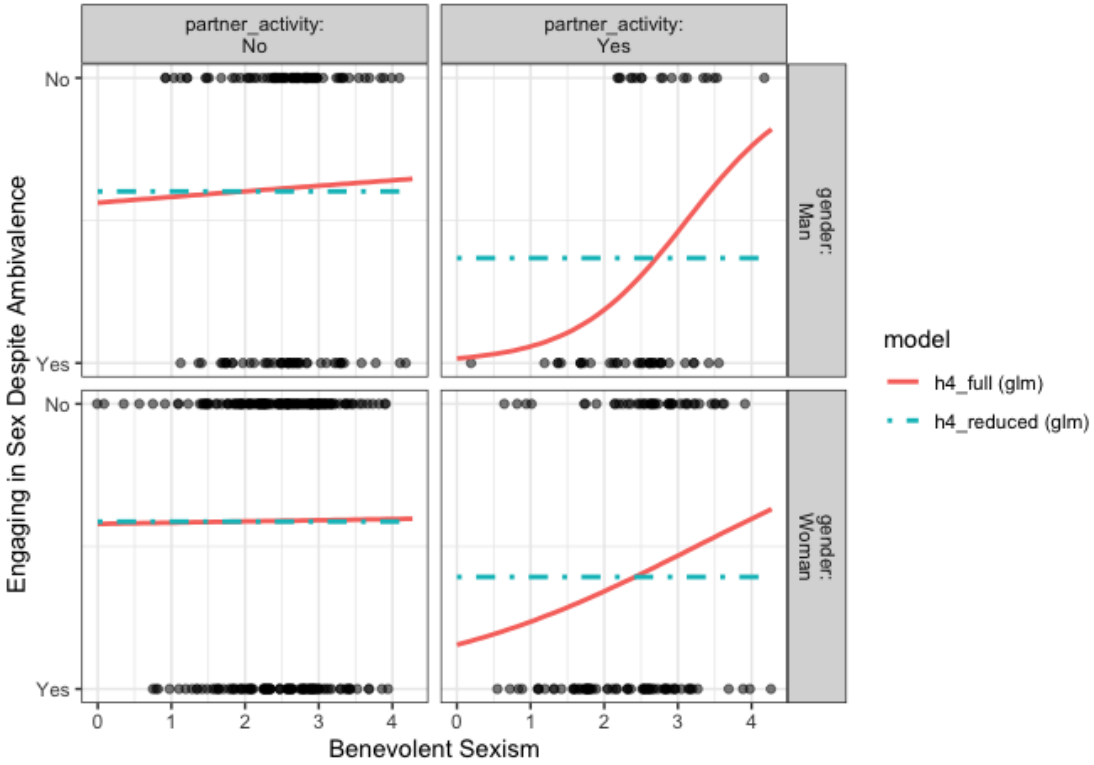
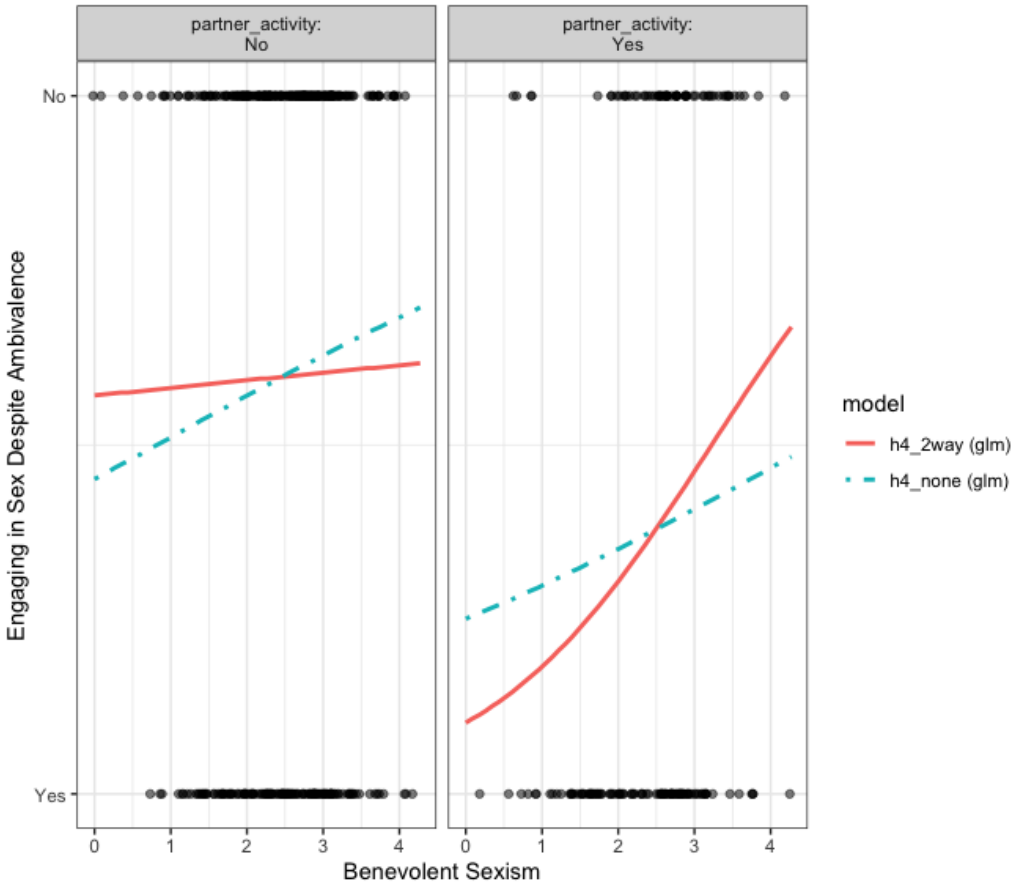


Figure 11

Two-Way Interaction Between Benevolent Sexism and Prior Expeirence on Engaging in Sex Despite Ambivalence



Note. Evidence suggests uncertainty of whether or not there is a two-way interaction between prior experience with a partner and activity and benevolent sexism in predicting engaging in sexual activity despite ambivalence.

Chapter 4

Discussion

This study sought to analyze prior experience with a partner and activity, gender, and sexism as predictors for engaging in sex despite ambivalence. Our first hypothesis, that individuals who have previously engaged in the same sexual activity with the same partner would be more likely to engage in sex while feeling ambivalent, was supported. This finding extends upon previous research demonstrating that either prior engagement with sexual partner, or with a sexual activity, increases the likelihood of engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent (Conroy et al., 2015; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Unfortunately, our second hypothesis, that gender would moderate the association between prior experience with a partner and sexual activity and engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent, was not supported. In addition, our prediction that there would be three-way interactions between prior experience with a partner and activity, gender, and sexism, were also not supported. Our exploratory analyses did however demonstrate that higher levels of benevolent sexism, combined with previous experience with the same partner and activity, decreases the likelihood of engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent, and the effect of hostile sexism may be likely to do the same.

Our prediction that gender would moderate the association between prior experience with a partner and activity and engaging in sex despite ambivalence was based in sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Since sexual behaviors are often based on societal expectations and norms, we anticipated that women in heterosexual partnerships would be more likely to engage in sex while feeling ambivalent in order to uphold their roles of being passive, compliant beings (Conroy et al, 2015; Morgan et al.,

2006). Our lack of support for this hypothesis was surprising, especially since female sexual scripts are most apparent in relationships (Fahs et al., 2020). Since our measure of prior experience with a partner did not indicate the nature of the relationship between our participants, it is possible that our participants were engaging in more casual hookups and therefore our theoretical framework did not entirely apply.

Additionally, our participants may have been more likely to recall ambivalent experiences with newer partners than experiences within relationships. Since there is often a notion of a contract between partners in a relationship, indicating that each partner will engage in sexual activities despite ambivalence in order to please the other partner, engaging in sex when ambivalent may be perceived as a normal, common event (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). Therefore, it is possible that our participants were thinking about ambivalent experiences outside of romantic relationships, explaining why sexual script theory may not have applied as predicted.

The mixed findings about men's sexual behavior in relationships may also indicate why gender did not moderate the relationship between prior experience with a partner and activity and engaging in sex despite ambivalence. For example, men in relationships describe feeling more comfortable refusing sex when feeling ambivalent, due to the elements of trust and acceptance with long-term partners (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018). However, men also discuss feeling obligated to initiate sex with female partners in order to promote intimacy within their relationships (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2018). Therefore, it is likely that our male participants also recalled mixed experiences of engaging and not engaging in sex despite ambivalence, leading to our lack of findings regarding gender playing a role in prior experience and engaging in sex despite ambivalence.

Mixed evidence may also be the reason why the addition of hostile and benevolent sexism did not help predict engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent. Since men who promote hostile sexism may engage in sex in order to maintain power within their relationships, they may also be more likely to fear intimacy and engage in fewer sexual behaviors to promote it (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Hammond & Overall, 2013). As for women, they may be more likely to smooth conflict in their relationships by engaging in sex, while also viewing their partners more negatively and engaging in sex while ambivalent less frequently (Cross & Overall, 2019). Regarding benevolent sexism, while men who promote it may be more likely to comply with female partners, they may also be more likely to promote hostile sexism which may lead to either increased or decreased engagement in sex while ambivalent (Overall et al., 2011, Sibley & Perry, 2010). Similarly, for women, the promotion of benevolent sexism may lead them to behave more submissively toward their partners, or to be more resistant to their partners' influence (Overall et al., 2011). Since our exploratory analyses demonstrated that higher levels of benevolent sexism, combined with previous experience with the same partner and activity, decreases the likelihood of engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent, this may suggest that benevolent sexism influences sexual decision-making above and beyond gender. The same goes for hostile sexism.

Since hostile and benevolent sexism are separate, but highly correlated constructs, it is possible that measuring them as distinct concepts may be playing a role in our findings (Glick & Fiske, 1996). For example, since hostile and benevolent sexism are correlated with one another, many individuals demonstrate ambivalent sexism: Promoting high levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). If men who

promote hostile sexism are more likely to view their relationships as battlegrounds, they may also endorse high levels of benevolent sexism which may lead them to desire the promotion of intimacy within their relationships (Hammond & Overall, 2013; Overall et al., 2011). By combining the two constructs, the somewhat contradictory beliefs about gender roles that many individuals feel are measured in a more reliable, valid manner (Glick & Fiske, 1996). If we had used ambivalent sexism as our measurement of sexism instead of hostile and benevolent beliefs, this may have served as a more accurate measurement of sexism and therefore displayed different outcomes.

Limitations & Future Directions

When interpreting our results, it is important to consider the limitations to this study. First, though participants self-identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual, we did not include a question to assess the partner's gender during the ambivalent experience. Though college-aged individuals demonstrate consistency between their sexual orientation and their sexual attraction, their sexual behaviors may be more fluid (Diamond, 2000). In other words, though our participants identified as heterosexual, it is possible that their ambivalent encounters occurred during non-heterosexual sexual activities. If participants' ambivalent experiences were not heterosexual encounters, sexual script theory may not be applicable to their experiences.

Additionally, though we measured prior experience with a partner and sexual activity, we did not have a way to measure the type of relationship our participants engaged in. It is possible that some participants were in long-term romantic partnerships, some were in ongoing casual hookups, and others were recalling experiences in which they had only been with that partner and engaged in that particular sexual activity once

before. If our participants were recalling experiences outside of romantic relationships, sexual script theory may not have applied to our predictions in the way we intended.

Our study adds to the limited research on sexual ambivalence to create better understanding of the factors that play into the decision to engage in sex despite ambivalence. The results of this study not only indicate that prior experience with a partner and activity may increase the likelihood of engaging in sex while feeling ambivalent, but that hostile and benevolent sexism may also play a role in the decision-making process. Future studies on sexual ambivalence can extend upon this study by assessing how different types of relationships play a role in saying yes to sex when feeling ambivalent, and by using ambivalent sexism as another measure of individuals' attitudes toward gender roles.

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Appendix

Measures

Demographic Questions

1. What is your gender?
    1. Male
    2. Female
    3. Transgender
    4. Other, please describe: _____
    5. Do not wish to answer

2. How old are you? _____
    1. Do not wish to answer

3. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
    1. White, non-Hispanic
    2. Black or African American
    3. Latino or Hispanic
    4. Asian or Asian American
    5. Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern American
    6. American Indian/Native American
    7. Bi- or Multi-racial
    8. Another race/ethnicity. Please describe_____
    9. Do not wish to answer

4. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
    1. Heterosexual/straight
    2. Gay
    3. Bisexual
    4. Unsure/Questioning
    5. Queer
    6. Another orientation. Please describe_____
    7. Do not wish to answer

5. How would you describe your current relationship status?
    1. Single and not dating
    2. Single, but casually seeing someone/hanging out with someone
    3. Hooking up with acquaintances/friends
    4. In a relationship

5. Engaged
6. Married/Civil Union
7. Divorced/Separated
8. Widowed
9. Another relationship status. Please describe_____
10. Do not wish to answer

6. How would you describe your current sexual relationships status?
    1. In an exclusive/monogamous sexual relationship (that is, we only have sex with each other)
    2. In a non-exclusive/non-monogamous sexual relationship (that is, you have a primary partner and one or both of you have sex with other partners)
    3. Engaging in mainly casual sexual encounters
    4. Not engaging in sexual activities right now
    5. Do not wish to answer

7. How often do you attend religious services?
    1. Once a week or more
    2. 2-3 times per month
    3. Once a month
    4. A few times per year
    5. Never
    6. Do not wish to answer

8. How important is religion to you personally?
    1. Very important
    2. Somewhat important
    3. Not really important
    4. Not at all important
    5. Do not wish to answer

9. Are you employed at a paid job?
    1. Yes—full time
    2. Yes—part time
    3. No—full time student
    4. No—full time homemaker
    5. No—retired
    6. No—currently unemployed
    7. No—disabled
    8. Do not wish to answer

9a. If you answered yes above, what is your job? _____

10. What is your year in school?
    1. Freshmen
    2. Sophomore
    3. Junior
    4. Senior
    5. Graduate Student
    6. Non-degree student
    7. Do not wish to answer

11. Have you ever been a member of a college fraternity?
    1. Yes, I am a current member
    2. Yes, I was a member, but now I am disassociated
    3. No, but I am planning to pledge/join a fraternity
    4. No, and I do not plan to pledge or join
    5. Do not wish to answer

12. How would you describe the area where you spent most of your childhood?
    1. Rural (small towns or cities isolated from larger areas or farming communities)
    2. Suburban (community near a bigger city, often part of a metropolitan region)
    3. Urban (big city – e.g., Cincinnati, Fresno, Austin)
    4. Megalopolis (extra-large city with an especially diverse population – e.g., New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles)
    5. Do not wish to answer

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996)

Below is a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale: 0 = disagree strongly; 1 = disagree somewhat; 2 = disagree slightly; 3 = agree slightly; 4 = agree somewhat; 5 = agree strongly.

1. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.
2. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality."
3. In a disaster, women ought not necessarily to be rescued before men.
4. Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.
5. Women are too easily offended.
6. People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex.
7. Feminists are not seeking women to have more power than men.
8. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.
9. Women should be cherished and protected by men.
10. Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.
11. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
12. Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.
13. Men are complete without women.
14. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.
15. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.
16. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
17. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
18. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.
19. Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
20. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
21. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.
22. Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

Questions about Ambivalence Experiences (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998)

1. Have you ever been in a situation in which someone indicated to you that they wanted to engage in a particular sexual activity with you?

   O Yes

   O No

   O I don't know

2. Have you ever been in such a situation where someone indicated that they wanted to engage in a particular sexual activity, but you were not sure at that time if you wanted to engage in it or not?

   O Yes

   O No

   O I don't know

3. How **often** have been in a situation where you felt unsure if you wanted to engage in sexual activity?

   O Never

   O Rarely

   O Sometimes

   O Almost all the time

   O All the time

Directions: For the following questions, please think about the most recent time that you were unsure about engaging in a sexual activity regardless of what you told them and regardless of whether you ended up engaging in the sexual activity for whatever reasons

4. What was your relationship status with the initiating partner?

5. What specific sexual activities were you unsure about?

6. Why were you unsure during this particular experience?

7. How did you communicate to your partner that you were unsure?

8. At what point during the encounter did you feel unsure? Check all that apply

Before sexual activity started ☐ During sexual activity ☐ After sexual activity ☐

(Skip logic—if they check “during” the following question appears)

9. You noted you felt unsure **during** the sexual activity. What did you do as a result of this feeling?

10. Did you end up engaging in the sexual activity despite being unsure?

O Yes

O No

O I don't know

11. If you did engage in sexual activity despite being unsure, how did you consider your participation at the time you engaged in the sexual activity?

O Wanted

O Unwanted

O Still not sure

12. Had you ever engaged in this sexual activity with this person before this interaction?

O Yes

O No

O I don't know

13. Had you ever engaged in this sexual activity with anyone else before this interaction?

O Yes

O No

O I don't know

14. How did your partner react to you being unsure?

O Positively

O Neutral

O Negatively

O I didn't say anything to them

15. How did this situation affect your romantic interest felt toward your partner?

O Very negatively
O Negatively
O Somewhat negatively
O Neutral/I don't know
O Somewhat positively
O Positively
O Very positively