

SEXUAL PREJUDICE AND SEXISM

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Chana Etengoff & G. Tyler Lefevor

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Sexual Prejudice, Sexism, and Religion

Introduction

Psychologists have reported links between religion and prejudice for decades [1], and continue to do so [2]. This article explores the association between religion, sexism, and sexual prejudice on individual and social levels. We begin by defining the constructs of religion, sexism, and sexual prejudice and then continue with a summary of recent personality and social psychological research on the subject. Following which, we introduce a theoretical model synthesizing extant research and then conclude with a discussion of the implications of religiously situated sexism and sexual prejudice.

Religion is a multidimensional construct comprised of individual and group behaviors/practices (e.g., individual/communal prayer), cognition (e.g., theology, beliefs), emotion (e.g., joy, peace/calm), and motivations (e.g., intrinsic vs. extrinsic). While belief, spirituality, and practice are related, the constructs are not (always) contingent upon each other. For example, one can attend weekly worship services (i.e., practice) and simultaneously report low levels of belief. Some measures of religiousness utilize subscales to both include and distinguish the various components, although there is a wide range of assessment tools that vary in this regard. The research summarized in this article utilized a diverse array of religious measures and we encourage readers to carefully review the referenced works for a more nuanced understanding of the summarized findings and implications.

Sexism is rooted in three primary beliefs: paternalism (the ideological explanation of male dominance), binaric gender differentiation (the belief that men and women comprise gender and are fundamentally different), and heteronormativity (the norm of heterosexual romantic relationships) [3]. Sexism is often ambivalent, a multifaceted power construct that includes both

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hostile and benevolent components [4]. Benevolent sexism encompasses a patronizing attitude, the idealization of traditional gender roles, and women's need for male protection/nurturance. Contrastingly, hostile sexism centers on antipathy and resentment towards women perceived to be challenging male power or conventional gender roles. While these attitudes can exist independently of religion [5], many religious groups and theological frameworks promote sexism. Sexist attitudes are also often associated with sexual (orientation) prejudice.

Sexual prejudice is the internalization of negative attitudes and cultural stigma toward sexual minorities, same-sex desires, behaviors, and communities. While sexual prejudice can be linked to irrational fears or beliefs, such as in the case of homophobia, sexual prejudice is more of a cultural phenomenon than a psychological one. Sexual prejudice is predicated on negative attitudes and inferior views towards sexual minority individuals, relationships, behaviors, and communities. Unlike sexism, sexual prejudice does not often manifest in benevolent forms and is more likely to be expressed in hostile ways. Similar to sexism, sexual prejudice is frequently situated within religious frameworks and communities [6].

Sexism and sexual prejudice are associated with various aspects of religion (e.g., belief, faith, and fundamentalism) across all major world religions (e.g., Christianity [7], Judaism [8], Islam [9], [10], [11], and Hinduism [12]), although the strength of this relationship varies across groups. Moreover, multinational analyses suggest countries with larger non-religious populations tend to be more gender equitable and more tolerant of homosexuality [13] [14]. This association between religion and sexism/sexual prejudice is significant for correlative self-reports and experimental designs [14]. Though sexism and sexual prejudice are significantly associated with religion on an aggregate level, this relationship is not universally or consistently expressed by individuals. For example, some highly religious individuals maintain supportive relationships

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with sexual minority family members [15]. Sexual and gender minorities have constructed integrated religious sexual minority identities, congregations, and theologies [16], [17], [18]. Similarly, there are feminist clergy, congregations, and theologies [19], [20], [21]. Given this larger context, this paper takes the position that religion is socially constructed at the nexus of individual and community development [22]. Religion is a cultural tool that individuals can choose to use to support or undermine gender/sexual equity. We must therefore identify the additional individual and social factors that contribute to the association between religion, sexism, and sexual prejudice.

I. Personality and Individual Differences

Quantitative analyses suggest that while religiousness can predict sexism/sexual prejudice, the impact of religiousness is limited as compared to that of individual differences and social attitudes. In other words, once social attitudes and individual differences are included in statistical models (i.e., hierarchical regression), the statistical impact of religiousness drops markedly. More specifically, authoritarianism (comprised of conventionalism, submission, and aggression), is the most robust predictor of sexism/sexual prejudice across North American [23], European [24], and Middle Eastern [25] cultures. Relatedly, researchers in North America and Europe suggest that the most significant predictor of sexual prejudice is conservative political beliefs that privilege power hierarchies [26], [27]. Additional significant factors include low empathic concern, high social dominance orientation, and low openness to change [28].

Although some psychologists classify the above constructs as personality factors, by their very definition, these characteristics are related to the larger social and community context.

II. Social and Congregational Dynamics

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We summarize the existing literature on the relationship between religiousness and sexism/sexual prejudice graphically in *Figure 1*. This figure illustrates that religiousness primarily relates to sexism/sexual prejudice through social conservatism, which is comprised of authoritarianism (the tendency to obey authority and punish those who do not obey) [29] and fundamentalism (the belief in a single set of inerrant teachings that contains the entirety of truth) [30], [31]. However, a direct path from individual and congregational religiousness to sexism/sexual prejudice also exists.

Our summary of the literature begins by acknowledging the link between religiousness and conservatism (path a in *Figure 1*). Conservatism—which at its core entails a preference for stability, conformity, and retaining the status quo [32]—is a key component of the religious experience of many individuals [28]. In recognizing this link, we also acknowledge that many individuals have non-conservative religious experiences.

In both meta-analytic and multi-national studies, conservatism is the strongest predictor of sexism/sexual prejudice [33], [34], [35]. What about conservatism promotes sexism/sexual prejudice? Some research suggests that the relationship between conservatism and sexism/sexual prejudice (path b in *Figure 1*) can be explained by conservatism's emphasis on stability, conformity, and social convention [30], [36]. Conservatism may affect sexism/sexual prejudice by promoting in-group favoritism in socially threatening situations [37]. Multi-national research suggests that conservatism is more strongly related to sexism/sexual prejudice in countries with less systemic threat (e.g., less rigid power hierarchies, unemployment, and incidence of violence) [2], [33], [38]. In contexts with greater systemic threat, these studies suggest that the range of expected individual differences is constrained by the existence of a greater sense of threat. Essentially, conservatism is thought to be an adaptive form of social

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cognition that helps people cope with uncertainty. In situations where there is greater threat, people in general may be more likely to engage in conservative thinking and behaviors, reducing the variation in conservatism between individuals. Conversely, when there is less systemic threat, a wider range of conservatism may be observed. Alternatively, conservatism may relate to sexism/sexual prejudice because conservatism entails prioritizing sanctity/purity above doing good to others when these values conflict. In this lens, both conservatism and prioritizing sanctity/purity values, advocate for the maintenance of strong group norms, whereas valuing doing good to others appeals less strongly to group norms. Studies from this perspective suggest that valuing sanctity/purity may thus lead to denial that outgroup individuals are rational individuals, thereby perpetuating prejudice [39], [40].

However, even when conservatism is accounted for, meta-analyses and multinational studies indicate that religiousness still predicts sexism/sexual prejudice (path c in *Figure 1*) [26], [30], [41]. This relationship emerges in isolation as well as when controlling for either “positive” (e.g., love of humanity, sense of universalism) [28] or “negative” (e.g., fundamentalism, authoritarianism) [42] aspects of religiousness. So, what is it about religiousness that promotes sexism/sexual prejudice?

One explanation is that religious spaces may sanction sexism/sexual prejudice through doctrine and/or culture. Many denominations and congregations have adopted official policies that prohibits women or same-sex couples from being clergy. Research indicates that these policies are related to congregants’ sexism/sexual prejudice, even if policies are not strictly enforced [43], [44]. Multinational research—relying on national representative datasets from the US, Europe, and over 50 countries worldwide—suggests that these doctrines/policies (e.g., “love the sinner, hate the sin”) may provide individuals with justification that permits them to

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discriminate [37] [14]. Recent research suggests that congregation-level predictors such as policies/procedures around same-sex sexuality are among the strongest predictors of sexism/sexual prejudice [45], [46], [47], [52]. Clergy's views and practices (e.g., how much clergy sanction prejudice in their preaching or how often scripture is quoted in worship services) as well as aggregates of individual religiousness variables (e.g., how often congregants within a congregation on average attend worship services; the average congregant reported orthodoxy of a congregation) may be particularly influential in congregants' sexism/sexual prejudice [48], [49], [55]. Altogether, these studies suggest that although a general relationship between religiousness and homonegativity exists, characteristics of clergy and congregations may moderate the strength and possibly the direction of this relationship.

Alternatively—or perhaps additionally—some religious spaces may promote sexual prejudice by reducing contact with sexual “outgroups”. Sexual and gender minorities are less likely to be religious and to report positive religious involvement than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, with some studies suggesting that sexual and gender minorities affiliate with religion half as often as heterosexual and cisgender individuals [50], [51]. Further, those who engage in religious spaces may be more reticent about their engagement, concealing their sexual or gender identity to avoid discrimination [52]. Contact with sexual outgroups is one of the best predictors of prejudice reduction [38], [53], presumably because contact challenges prejudicial thinking through positive interactions with an “out group” member [54]. Contact may also moderate the effects of fundamentalism on prejudice and its downstream negative mental health implications for sexual and gender minorities [55], [56]. Thus, some religious spaces may deter people from challenging pre-existing sexual prejudice because they reduce contact with sexual “outgroups”, even if they, personally, do not promulgate prejudicial doctrines or practices. We

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also note many exceptions to these trends where religious spaces promote gender equality and civil rights.

Conclusions

Meta-analyses, multinational studies, quantitative, and qualitative research strongly suggest that while religion is related to sexism/sexual prejudice, this relationship is partially mediated by sociopersonality factors such as conservatism. These findings have been reported across all major world religions and many global regions (e.g., North America, Europe and the Middle East). Detailed analyses of these factors and mechanisms is imperative given the larger negative impact of religiously situated gender inequality and sexual prejudice on individuals, relationships, and communities [57], [58]. For example, sexual and gender minorities that experience discrimination and prejudice are at greater risk of developing mental and physical health challenges across the lifespan [59]. Familial relationships often become strained amidst sexism and sexual prejudice, removing or limiting vital social support networks and potentially increasing physical and mental health vulnerabilities. On an economic level, research indicates that religiously situated gender inequities negatively impact labor markets, household resource allocation, and government spending across religions and countries [60]. Similarly, there are strong indications that sexual and gender minorities inclusion and economic development (e.g., gross domestic product) are mutually reinforcing (or limiting) [61]. Relatedly, religiously linked sexism and sexual prejudice negatively impact women's and sexual and gender minorities' access to equitable education opportunities [62], [63]. Alternatively, researchers drawing on positive psychological frameworks, such as stress-related growth and coming-out growth, continue to report the socioemotional benefits of integrated sexual and gender minorities and religious identities, religious resilience, liberation theology, and religious social support (e.g., inclusive and affirmative congregations and clergy). Moreover, the positive impact of inclusive

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and equitable religious frameworks can benefit both those that identify as sexual and gender minorities as well as those that support sexual and gender minority individuals.

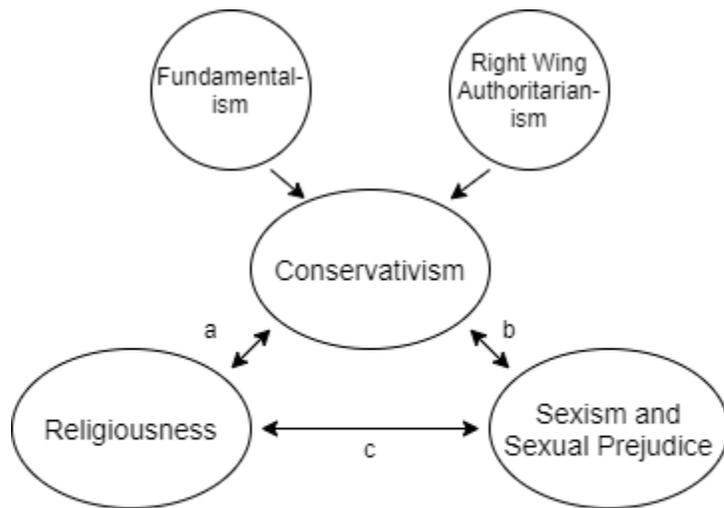


Figure 1. The Correlative Components of Sexism and Sexual Prejudice.

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