Decision-Making in Ambiguous Situations: The Impact of Neosexism and Gendered Contexts

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Abstract

This study explores how situational cues, attitudes (i.e., neosexism), and context (i.e., banking vs. daycare) influence perceptions of sexism, interaction favorability, and subsequent decision making in ambiguous interactions. Results indicate sex composition significantly affects sexism perceptions, especially in male-to-female interactions within a traditionally-male context (i.e., banking). Neosexism introduced a bias toward higher sexism ratings and showed more pronounced effects in the opposite-sex banking scenario but not the daycare scenario. This study extends our understanding of individual and situational factors that affect sexism attributions in ambiguous situations and offers implications for decision making.

Keywords: Sexism, neosexism, biases, decision making, attitudes

Word Count: 9,392 (inclusive)

In social interactions or while observing others, whether viewing online videos or engaging in personal encounters, people frequently face situations where the true intentions behind someone's words or actions are unclear. This ambiguity frequently leads to quick judgments based on incomplete information, which can result in inaccurate assumptions about intent. The tendency to fill in these informational gaps is often shaped by personal experiences, introducing potential biases and errors in judgment (Bach & Schenke, 2017; Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Such inferences, made without complete information, can have significant impact on the decisions that follow.

Over the course of three studies, Grawitch et al. (2023) found that the sex composition of an ambiguous interaction influenced respondents' attributions regarding the message sender's sexist behavior. These attributions, in turn, influenced respondents' overall assessment of the interaction's favorability. Since the scenarios were identical apart from the sex of the message sender and receiver, it remained unclear how different situations might influence attributions of sexist behavior and assessments of interaction favorability. Additionally, the impact of these attributions and assessments on actual decision making was not explored, which is a recurring issue in related research as well as decision-making research in general. By addressing this gap, the current study highlights the importance of linking attribution processes to real-world decisions. The current study builds on Grawitch et al.'s prior research by (1) expanding the number of scenarios, (2) evaluating the degree to which relevant biases (i.e., neosexism, subjective beliefs about probability of sexist attitudes) influence attributions of sexism, and (3) exploring whether sexism and interaction favorability ratings predict decision making (i.e., to recommend what the message sender proposes or not). The study is grounded in social prediction

theory (Bach & Schenke, 2017), which provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between attributions, biases, and decision making.

Social Prediction Theory

Human decision making is often shaped by the initial expectations individuals form in specific contexts (Bach & Schenke, 2017; Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). Decision makers engage in top-down hypothesis testing, adjusting their hypotheses based upon bottom-up feedback from the environment (Bach & Schenke, 2017). Initial expectations arise from cues in the environment that reflect patterns learned from past experiences. When these cues match previous patterns, they produce an intuitive response or prediction based on the available information (Haselton et al., 2009; Klein, 2015; Pennycook et al., 2015). When these cues do not match previous patterns well, they may instead lead the individual to engage in further deliberation (Pennycook et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2011). As the situation unfolds, more information may become available, signaling previously undetected discrepancies and prompting a revision of the initial judgment. In all social prediction, individuals draw upon a background set of "conceptual, rule-like knowledge" (Bach & Schenke, 2017, p. 5) that, when combined with salient situational cues, leads to the predicted judgment.

Ambiguous situations differ from non-ambiguous ones in that decision makers have fewer salient cues to guide their judgments and reduced confidence in the relevance of those cues. This lack of clarity increases reliance on top-down heuristic processing, which may rely more on personal factors, such as biases and prior experience, rather than on overt cues present in the situation (e.g. Chen, 2022; Hussain Ismail et al., 2019; Remedios et al., 2020). In these situations, further information may not be readily accessible to prompt modification of the initial hypothesis. Subsequently, the perceiver's own motivation and prior experiences may influence

their interpretation of the available cues (Pauker et al., 2010), resulting in an intuition-based prediction. Although predictions are constrained by the cues present in the environment (Simon, 1990), individuals use their background knowledge to recognize and combine those cues to make inferences (Bach & Schenke, 2017; Newell & Shank, 2017; Shah & Oppenheimer, 2007; Simon, 1990). Consequently, the initial prediction is likely to remain the default conclusion unless new information justifies reconsideration.

In the context of sexism-related attributions, research by Riemer et al. (2014), Sirin et al. (2004), Grawitch et al. (2023), and others demonstrates that slight changes in situational cues can lead to significantly different inferences. Riemer et al. (2014) found that women rated comments attributed to their boyfriends as less sexist than the same comments attributed to managers and strangers. Sirin et al. (2004) found that the sexist behavior of men was viewed more negatively than sexist behavior of women. And finally, Grawitch et al. (2023) found that in an ambiguous banking situation where sexism might be present, a banker interacting with a customer of the opposite sex was rated less favorably and perceived as more sexist. Notably, a male banker was rated as most sexist and least favorable when interacting with a female customer. In the current study, we set out to replicate Grawitch et al.'s (2023) findings:

H1a: The sender in the opposite-sex conditions will be rated as more sexist than the sender in the same-sex conditions

H1b: The sender in the male-female condition rated as more sexist than the sender in the female-male condition.

The broader context may impact how behavior is interpreted, particularly for attributions of sexism. For instance, while Grawitch et al. (2023) and Sirin et al. (2004) varied the characteristics of the message sender and/or receiver, they did not vary the broader context in

which the message was delivered. In contrast, Riemer et al. (2014) demonstrated that a message in one context (i.e., when a manager says it) may be interpreted very differently than when conveyed in a different context (i.e., by a significant other). One contextual factor to consider is the degree to which a particular context aligns with traditional male or female sex roles. Grawitch et al. noted that because their scenario involved a male banker, the observed effects may be due to the alignment with traditionally male sex roles. This is consistent with role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which posits that sex interacts with gender role expectations to influence the attributions people make about individuals in these roles. Further research is needed to explore situational characteristics beyond the sex of the message sender or receiver that might affect these attributions. Consequently, we posed the following research question:

> RQ1: Does the effect of sex composition on sexism attributions differ based on situational context?

Neosexism and the Relevance of Biases

Social prediction theory suggests that people make predictions based on various situational cues present in a given situation. According to Bach and Schenke (2017), "Humans store a vast amount of behaviour-relevant information about other people, reaching from the fact that our kid likes to pick his nose, to political and musical preferences of our friends, to more abstract traits that predict people's behaviour across situations" (p. 7). Therefore, the information people bring to a situation may affect the predictions they make about that situation and, subsequently, the attributions they make about a message sender's behavior.

The attitudes people bring to a situation can be one potential source of bias, influencing how the situation is perceived and interpreted (Bach & Schenke, 2017). In the context of

attributions about sexist intent, individual attitudes toward sexism are likely to influence sensitivity to its presence. These attitudes can influence how readily people access relevant information (Brinol, 2019; Katz, 1960). Consequently, those with stronger views about the prevalence of sexism may be more likely to infer sexist intent, especially in ambiguous situations due to the absence of sufficient cues for making confident inferences.

Grawitch et al. (2023) identified neosexism as a potential source of bias in ambiguous situations where attributions of sexism might arise. Tougas et al. (1995) defined neosexism as a "manifestation of a conflict between egalitarian values and residual negative feelings toward women" (p. 843) and claimed that "those who are prejudiced couch their negatively charged beliefs about women in the language of equality rather than the language of inferiority" (p. 847). What Grawitch et al. (2023) found was that those who were lower in neosexism were more likely to perceive a message sender's behavior as sexist when the message sender was male and the message receiver was female. Those results were consistent with other sex-based research, suggesting that holding strong attitudes can create a perceptual lens that biases attributions (Elkins & Phillips, 1999; Elkins et al., 2002).

However, the results observed by Grawitch et al. (2023) require further validation, given that the neosexism construct was used in only one of their three studies. Additionally, given the nature of the scenario they employed, it is equally important to determine whether changing the context in which the ambiguous behavior occurs would result in different effects. Therefore, we proposed:

H2: Neosexism will moderate sexism ratings, such that sexism ratings will be higher in the male-female condition when neosexism is low.

RQ2: Do the effects of neosexism differ by context?

Although neosexism scores may serve as a de facto measure of bias affecting sexism ratings, such an effect is likely to be observed only in ambiguous conditions where there is a male-female interaction with the male's behavior serving as the target of attribution. The reason for this is that neosexism is a measure strictly designed to assess a type of female-directed sexism, with the traditional perpetrator of that sexism being male. However, in the current study, we explored people's a priori beliefs about sexism across all perpetrator and target categories (e.g., male-female, female-male). Additionally, given that Grawitch et al. (2023) and most prior sexism-related research has focused predominantly on male-perpetrated sexist behavior directed toward females, a better understanding of the beliefs people possess about who (i.e., males, females) is likely to behave in a sexist manner toward whom (i.e., other males, females) could shed additional insight beyond a strict use of neosexism (or other measures of bias) as it relates to how people make attributions about others' intent. From a Bayesian perspective, if individuals differ in their a priori expectations that sexism is prevalent in a given sex pairing (e.g., the likelihood of females being sexist against other females), they should differ in the sexism ratings they provide in situations where there is the potential for the behavior to be perceived as sexist (e.g., a female interacting with another female). In fact, prior theory and research (e.g., Brower et al., 2017; Klein Tuente et al., 2019, Westra, 2019) has suggested that people's pre-existing beliefs about the likelihood of an event can influence the attributions they make in ambiguous situations. However, to date, no research has examined this possibility in terms of sexism-related situations that deviate from traditional perpetrator-target paradigms. As such, we proposed:

RQ3: In a given sex pairing condition, do respondents who report higher prior probability about the prevalence of sexism relevant to that sex pairing rate the message sender in

that condition as more sexist than those who report lower prior probability relevant to that sex pairing?

Sexism, Interaction Favorability, and Decision Making

There is reason to suspect that appraising others' behavior as sexist would influence more general inferences people make about a given situation. Prior research has shown, for example, that in various customer-oriented situations, the interpersonal behavior of sales or customer service employees influences customers' satisfaction with the experience and/or product (e.g., Bateman & Valentine, 2015; Goff et al., 1997; Poujol et al., 2013). The appraisals made about the person delivering a message appears to be a piece of evidence used to make more general inferences about the experience.

In the context of sexism perceptions, a few studies support a link between perceptions of sexism and satisfaction (e.g., Archer et al. 2011; Deuling et al., 2023, Neoh et al., 2023). Archer et al. specifically found that the perception of sexism in a service interaction was associated with reduced satisfaction with that interaction. More directly related to the current study, Grawitch et al. (2023) found that sexism ratings were negatively associated with ratings of interaction favorability. As such, we proposed:

H3: Sexism ratings will predict perceptions of favorability of the interaction (i.e., those who make stronger attributions of sexism will report less positive attributes of interaction pleasantness).

There is, however, a dearth of research in terms of how both perceived sexism and interaction favorability may predict the actual decision people make in a given situation. Most research in behavioral sciences tends to default to ratings for various measures, often in the form of 5- or 7-point scales. Although this may be useful for demonstrating differences in conditions

or correlations among factors, it also offers less insight into the way in which various ratings relate to actual decision making. Decisions themselves tend to be dichotomous (e.g., whether or not to) or polychotomous (e.g., which of three or more options), and as such, it is important to understand how the ratings respondents make about a given scenario in terms of the sexism of the message sender and the overall favorability of the interaction relate to specific decision choices. The current study relied on scenarios that lent themselves to dichotomous decisions (i.e., whether to recommend making a decision that benefits the message sender). We specifically explored the following research question:

RQ4: Do sexism or interaction favorability ratings predict the decision choice made by respondents?

Method

Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot was to design and test two alternative scenarios to those used by Grawitch et al. (2023) and was conducted in a manner consistent with sound ethical research practices. Both scenarios were structured similarly (three paragraphs, roughly equivalent numbers of sex-specific terminology such as pronouns and names) and were designed to be applicable to both sexes. Full versions of all scenarios are provided in the Appendix. Respondents were recruited from the authors' social networks using Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, with a request for viewers to share it within their own networks (N=107; 75.6% female). All respondents were required to consent before being permitted to participate. The pilot study was conducted using consisted of a 2 (sender direction: male-to-female, female-to-male) x 2 (scenario: daycare, HR) experimental design. Respondents first received the banking scenario from Grawitch et al. (2023) corresponding to their randomly assigned sender direction condition.

After reading the scenario, they rated the sexism of the sender using a 7-point scale (details discussed in the measurement section). Next, respondents were randomly assigned to either the daycare or the HR scenario and again rated the sexism of the sender. Finally, respondents provided a comparative rating to indicate which sender was more sexist, based on their given scenario.   Ratings were provided using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Definitely more sexist in Situation 1) to 5 (Definitely more sexist in Situation 2).

Paired samples t-tests revealed that the sexism ratings in the male-female condition were more similar between the banking and daycare scenarios ($t(27)=1.56$, $p=.065$) than the banking and HR scenarios ($t(27)=3.15$, $p=.002$). Additionally, the female-to-male conditions showed comparable levels of sexism ratings for both the banking and daycare ($t(25)=0.71$, $p=.243$) and the banking and HR ($t(24)=-1.28$, $p=.106$) comparisons. There were also no differences between the daycare or the HR scenario in terms of whether respondents found the behavior more or less sexist compared to the banking condition (male-to-female: $t(50)=-0.88$, $p=.192$; female-to-male: $t(45)=0.86$, $p=.197$). Based on these findings, we chose to use the daycare scenario as a complement to the banking scenario in the larger study.

Participants

For the main study, 531 respondents were initially recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) system using the Positly Study Recruiter System (https://www.positly.com). To qualify, participants had to be U.S. employees over the age of 18 who worked a minimum of 30 hours per week, ensuring they had a sufficient frame of reference to evaluate the scenarios. Data quality checks were performed using three tools. First, the survey included an embedded bot checker provided by Qualtrics, which resulted in the removal of six respondents who failed the bot check. Second, we reviewed the average deviation of scores on

the neosexism scale (which included two reverse-scored items), leading to the removal of one respondent who failed the check. Finally, an anomaly check was conducted using SPSS, and identified one suspicious item from a respondent; however, this respondent was retained based on insufficient evidence for removal. The final sample size was 524 participants (60.3% male; ages ranged from 22-71; 70.2% were college graduates; 59.2% were cohabitating with someone).

Procedure

Participants who confirmed their willingness to participate completed a Qualtrics survey including (1) demographic items, (2) self-report measures (i.e., prior probabilities, neosexism), (3) one randomly assigned scenario, and (4) a series of follow-up items about the scenario. Respondents were paid $2.00 for their participation. The study employed a 2 (scenario setting: bank, daycare) x 2 (sex of message sender: male, female) x 2 (sex of message receiver: male, female) design in which all three variables were manipulated between-subjects. Each participant was randomly assigned to only one of the 2 scenarios and to only one of the four possible sender-receiver sex combinations: (1) female sender/male receiver, (2) male sender/female receiver, (3) female sender/female receiver, (4) male sender/male receiver. The sex of the message sender and receiver was manipulated by using sex-specific names (i.e., Anna/Bob, Julie/Tim), with all other sex-based language adapted to correspond with the assigned condition (e.g., wife/husband). Participants were instructed to, "Please review the following situation and then respond to the questions that follow." After reading the scenario, participants responded to the decision-making item and provided ratings of the interaction.

Measures

Prior Probability of Sexism. Four questions were used to assess the prior probabilities respondents held regarding others' sexist attitudes toward members of the same sex (2 items) or

the opposite sex (2 items): "Among 10 random [men/women], how many would you expect to hold sexist attitudes towards [women/men]?" Responses ranged from 1 to 10.

Neosexism Scale. Respondents' neosexist attitudes were captured using the 11 items from Tougas et al.'s (1995) Neosexism Scale. An example item is, "In order not to appear sexist, many men are inclined to overcompensate for women," with items being rated from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 7 ("Strongly agree"; $\alpha=.91$).

Post-Scenario Items. Upon completion of the scenario, respondents were first provided with a dichotomous yes/no item that asked, "Knowing nothing else besides that there are other similar [daycare/bank investment] options available to [Anna/Bob/Julie/Tim], would you recommend [Anna/Bob/Julie/Tim] sign the contract with [Julie's/Bob's/Anna's/Tim's] [daycare/bank]?" (The exact wording matched the scenario delivered to respondents.)

After completing the dichotomous item, respondents rated the interaction on three attributes – pleasantness, professionalism, and sexism: "If you were (customer name), how pleased would you be with your interaction with (employee name)?" (*pleasantness*), "To what degree was (employee name)'s behavior professional?" (*professionalism*), and "Based on this interaction, to what extent do you think (employee name) is sexist?" (*sexism*). A single item was used to assess each attribute using a response scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all") to 7 ("Very much"). As noted by Grawitch et al. (2023), the pleasantness and professionalism items were aggregated together ($\alpha=.91$).

Demographic Information. Respondents reported their sex, age, highest level of educational attainment, and married/cohabitation status.

Results

Due to the number of analyses, the relative sample sizes, and recent calls by scholars (Benjamin et al., 2017), we chose to use more conservative estimates for statistical significance testing. We set an α of .005 as the threshold for statistical significance and .01 as the threshold for suggestive results, with results above an α of .01 deemed non-significant. Furthermore, we interpret our results within the context of both their effect size and confidence intervals to provide a more accurate interpretation.

To test H1 and RQ1 we conducted a 2 (sex of sender) x 2 (sex of receiver) x 2 (scenario) analysis of variance (ANOVA) using sexism ratings as the dependent variable (DV). The results (top panel of Table 1) suggested both a receiver sex main effect and a receiver sex x scenario interaction effect. The sender was rated as more sexist when the receiver was female (M = 3.78, SE = .11) rather than male (M = 3.00, SE = .11, 99.5% CI_{Dif}: .347; 1.22). This effect, though, varied by condition, so we opted to perform a 2 (sender sex) x 2 (receiver sex) ANOVA within each condition. The results suggested both a significant receiver sex effect and a suggestive sender sex x receiver sex interaction effect, but only in the bank condition (see bottom two panels of Table 1). The overall receiver effect in the bank scenario suggested that when the receiver was female, the sender was rated as more sexist (M = 3.85, SE = .15) than when the receiver was male (M = 2.63, SE = .15, 99.5% CI_{Dif}: 0.61; 1.83). However, this effect was stronger when the sender was male than when the sender was female (see Table 2). Thus, H1a was not supported, as the effect was largely a receiver effect. However, H1b was partially supported, as the effect in the male-to-female condition was significantly higher than the effect in the female-to-male condition, but only for the bank scenario. Furthermore, the answer to RQ1 was that yes, the effect differed by condition.

To test H2 and RQ2, we began by performing a median split on the neosexism variable. This resulted in two nearly equivalent groups: a low neosexism group ($n = 263$) and a moderate/high neosexism group ($n = 261$), which differed significantly on neosexism ($M_1 = 1.35$, $SD = 0.24$; $M_2 = 2.79$, $SD = 0.67$, $t(522) = -32.76$, $p < .001$). Given that the potential interaction effects with neosexism were likely to differ between scenario conditions (given earlier results), we conducted a 2 (sender sex) x 2 (receiver sex) x 2 (neosexism) ANOVA in each of the two scenario conditions (Table 3). As shown in the top panel of Table 3, for the daycare condition, only a significant main effect of neosexism was present. Those in the low neosexism group reported significantly higher sexism ratings ($M = 3.88$, $SE = .16$) than those in the moderate/high neosexism group ($M = 3.16$, $SE = .15$; 99.5% CI_{Dif}: 0.10; 1.34).

As shown in the bottom panel of Table 3, for the bank condition, the sender sex x receiver sex suggestive interaction was still present, but there was also a receiver sex x neosexism suggestive interaction. A comparison of means (Table 4) indicated that the highest sexism ratings were obtained by those low in neosexism when they rated a scenario in which the receiver was female. None of the other conditions varied significantly. When taken together, the results suggest that those low in neosexism showed a bias toward higher sexism ratings but that this effect was more pronounced when the receiver was female in the bank scenario. Hence, we found minimal support for H2. However, the answer to RQ2 was that yes, there was some evidence that the effects of neosexism differed by condition.

To test RQ3, whether the prior probability of sexist attitudes of men (women) toward women (men) would predict sexism ratings, we ran a series of regression analyses. For each analysis, we selected only one of the four sex-specific conditions (e.g., M-to-F, F-to-F). We then entered the prior probability response associated with that condition (e.g., the prior probability of

men holding sexist attitudes toward women) as the predictor, scenario as a control (given the

differing effects we observed), and sexism scores as the outcome. The only significant results

were found for the male-to-male and male-to-female conditions (see Table 5). However, the

results for the male-to-male condition suggested that scenario, rather than prior probability of

male-to-male sexist attitudes, explained the significant variance (i.e., the sender in the male-male

bank scenario was rated as less sexist than the sender in the male-male daycare scenario). The

only significant result relative to our research question concerned the male-to-female condition.

After controlling for scenario, respondent reports about the likelihood of men holding sexist

attitudes toward women was significantly predictive of sexism ratings, though the effect was

small.

Given the effects of neosexism in prior analyses, we re-ran the fourth model, this time

including neosexism as another control. The strength of the model increased (see Table 5), and

prior probability was no longer a significant predictor. Instead, only neosexism was significant.

That then led to an exploratory analysis to determine whether prior probability reports across the

various sex categories (e.g., men-to-women, women-to-women) differed significantly, and

whether any of those differences varied as a function of neosexism category (low vs.

moderate/high). To test this, we conducted a 2 (neosexism) x 4 (prior probability ratings)

repeated measures ANOVA with prior probability scores serving as the within-subjects factor.

The results indicated that prior probabilities varied significantly within-person ($F(3, 1566) =$

214.51, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .291$) and as a function of neosexism category ($F(3, 1566) = 32.22$,

$p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .058$). There was, however, no between-subjects neosexism effect on

average prior probability scores ($F(1, 522) = 0.20$, $p = .656$, partial $\eta^2 = .000$). Follow-up

analyses indicated that the four prior probability estimates were all significantly different from

each other ($M_{M-F} = 4.92$, $SE = .10$, $M_{M-M} = 2.40$, $SE = .10$, $M_{F-M} = 3.94$, $SE = .10$, $M_{F-F} = 3.22$, SE $= .10$, all ps $< .001$). Those low in neosexism reported higher M-to-F prior probability estimates ($M = 5.45$, $SE = .14$) and lower F-to-M prior probability estimates ($M=3.49$, $SE=.14$) than those higher in neosexism ($M_{M-F} = 4.38$, $SE = .14$; $M_{F-M} = 4.39$, $SE = .14$, both ps $< .001$).

To test H3, that sexism ratings would predict favorability ratings, we began by analyzing the correlation between the two ratings, which showed a significant negative relationship ($r=-.52$, $p<.05$). We then conducted a multiple regression analysis, entering neosexism, sender sex, receiver sex, and scenario as control variables, sexism ratings as the predictor, and interaction favorability as the outcome. After controlling for the covariates, sexism ratings predicted interaction favorability ratings, accounting for an additional 24.5% of the variance, supporting H4 (see Table 6).

Of further interest, though, was a potential mediation effect for neosexism, which had been a significant predictor when sexism ratings were not included, but was reduced to nonsignificance when sexism ratings were included. We conducted a follow-up exploratory analysis using Model 8 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). Model 8 allows the inclusion of X (predictor), M (mediator), and W (moderator of the X-M relationship) to predict Y (outcome). We entered neosexism as X, sexism ratings as M, a 4-level sex condition variable as moderator W (1 = M-to-M, 2 = F-to-F, 3 = M-to-F, 4 = F-to-M), interaction favorability ratings as Y, and scenario as a covariate. We chose the M-to-M condition as the comparison condition because sexism ratings were lowest in that condition. Because W was multicategorical, we used effect coding to allow for comparison (W1 compared conditions 1 and 2, W2 compared conditions 1 and 3, and W3 compared conditions 1 and 4). Results of the regressions can be found in Table 7. Tests of the moderated indirect effects revealed that neosexism had an indirect effect through

sexism ratings on interaction favorability ratings, but only for the M-to-F condition (b=.43, SE=.08, 99% CI=.22, .64, p<.001), with the index of moderated mediation = .28 (99% CI: .11, .48) and relative to the M-to-M condition.

Finally, RQ4 posed the question of whether interaction favorability or sexism ratings would predict the actual recommended decision choice made by respondents. To test RQ4, we first computed the correlations between interaction favorability and decision choice ($r = .75$, $p <$ .001) and between sexism ratings and decision choice ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). Because both demonstrated a significant correlation with the decision choice recommendation, we followed this test with a logistic regression, entering both rating scores as predictors of decision choice. Descriptive results indicated that across all the scenario and sex pairing conditions, 250 respondents (47.2%) recommended that the receiver not make the choice the message sender suggested (i.e., sign the daycare contract, make the investment), while 274 (52.3%) recommended doing so. As such, with no predictors, the overall correct percentage classified was 52.3% (0/524 would be correctly classified as no, while 274/524 would be correctly classified as yes). The use of the predictor set, however, increased the overall accuracy rating to 86.8% (87.2% correctly classified as no, and 86.5% correctly classified as yes), which was significant ($\chi^2(2)$=404.41, p<.001, Nagelkerke R^2=.718). Closer inspection of the results indicated that interaction favorability ratings were predictive of the decision choice recommendation (B = 1.89, SE = .17, Wald = 123.56, $p < .001$, OR = 6.63, CI = 4.11, 10.68) but sexism ratings were not (B = -0.08, SE = .10, Wald = 0.63, $p = .428$, OR = .93, CI = .71, 1.21). Figure 1a charts the percentage endorsement by each level of interaction favorability and shows that only at or above a favorability score of 4 did the majority of respondents endorse the decision recommended by the message sender (i.e., banker or daycare worker). We followed this analysis by re-analyzing

the data both by scenario condition and also by sex pairing condition (as separate analyses given sample size constraints). Only in the daycare scenario was sexism ratings predictive of decision choice recommendation (B = -.60, SE = .20, Wald = 8.68, $p < .003$, OR = .55, CI = .31, .97), though interaction favorability was still significant (B = 1.84, SE = .28, Wald = 42.04, $p < .001$, OR = 6.30, CI = 2.84, 13.97). Figures 1b and 1c chart percentage endorsement for interaction favorability and reverse-coded sexism (for ease of presentation) in the daycare scenario. Thus, perceived sexism may influence interaction favorability, and it is interaction favorability that largely predicts decision choice.

Discussion

This study examined how observers make attributions about actors when situational cues are ambiguous and subsequently whether and how such attributions might impact decision choices. We questioned whether Grawitch et al.'s (2023) findings would generalize to other contexts by incorporating a second scenario to compare against the one used by Grawitch et al. The new scenario was designed to represent a context that aligns more closely with a traditionally female role (i.e., childcare) than a traditionally male role (i.e., banking) to examine whether previous patterns of results would replicate or if people might interpret cues differently based on the role context. While appraisals research rarely links appraisals to actual decision behavior, we explored whether and which observer appraisals would influence their recommended course of action.

The results suggest that, while Grawitch et al.'s (2023) findings replicated in terms of sexism ratings in the male-female condition, those results were confined to scenarios where situational cues were aligned with a traditionally male role (i.e., the banking scenario). In the more traditionally female role (i.e., daycare), the sender sex-receiver sex combinations had no

effect on sexism ratings. As such, the context in which ambiguous behavior is displayed may influence the degree to which different attributions are likely to be made, at least as they concern attributions about sexist intent.

These results are consistent with ideas underlying role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), though much of that theory was developed to explain why followers would be prejudiced toward female leaders who occupy traditionally male roles. The evidence supporting such a perspective is that context matters. When behaviors correspond to stereotypes of males or females in different contexts, stereotype-consistent attributions are more likely to be elicited (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig & Eagly, 2014), potentially automatically (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Blair & Banaji, 1996). As such, when the male sender's behavior was consistent with stereotypical sexist behavior in a traditionally male role, stereotype-consistent attributions became more likely. Why the reverse trend was not observed in the daycare scenario is impossible to conclude, though it could be that male-perpetrated sexism toward females is either more readily perceived or evaluated more harshly than is female-perpetrated sexism toward men. Although both explanations are plausible, there is evidence that males who engage in gender role transgressions are evaluated more harshly than women who do so (Sirin et al., 2004; Sanborn-Overby & Powlishta, 2020). Thus, it would not be surprising if sexist behavior from males toward females is both more readily identified and evaluated more harshly than sexist behavior from females toward males. As such, there may be a bias toward recognizing and judging sexist behavior when males perpetrate it toward females that does not exist in the opposite situation.

Such a conclusion seems more likely given that the results suggested the presence of a bias stemming from people's neosexist attitudes. In the daycare condition, this effect simply manifested as increased sexism ratings for those lower in neosexism. In the banking scenario,

this resulted in a tendency for those lower in neosexism to report higher sexism ratings when the receiver of the message was female (regardless of the sex of the sender). Although the results did not suggest a general trend for prior probability to predict sexism ratings, it was predictive for the male-to-female scenarios. Those who reported a higher percentage of males holding sexist attitudes toward women were more likely to report higher sexism in the male-to-female condition. Follow-up tests, however, indicated this effect may have stemmed from neosexism attitudes, given that (a) the effects of prior probability dissipated once neosexism was entered as a predictor and (b) the model that included neosexism accounted for almost three times more variance in sexism ratings than the model that excluded it.

Sexism ratings subsequently played an instrumental role in interaction favorability. It was the strongest predictor of favorability and served as a mediating mechanism that connected neosexism to the favorability outcome in the male-female condition. Hence, the evidence suggests that how sexist one's behavior is interpreted to be, regardless of intent, influences how favorable people report an interaction with that person to be. How favorable an interaction was perceived to be subsequently influenced the likelihood respondents would advise the target of the message to accept the recommendation of the message sender.

The results generally support those originally reported by Grawitch et al. (2023). In ambiguous situations, observers make assumptions based on the cues present in the situation (Bach & Schenke, 2017). When it comes to assumptions that lead to inferences about sexist behavior, the sex of interactants appears to play a prominent role in some contexts, but that role is not context invariant based on the results reported here. It may be that contexts that better align with traditionally male sex roles promote sexism-related prototype accessibility. In such situations, sexism-related prototypes would be easier to access because situational cues are better

aligned with that prototype. When behaviors occur that could be interpreted as aligning with that prototype, following Bach and Schenke (2017), social prediction takes over, leading to an increased probability of making inferences and attributions that are also aligned with that prototype. However, when situations do not conform to such a prototype, it is likely that stronger evidence of intent (i.e., less ambiguity of intent) is necessary to draw such conclusions.

The results of the current study add to the growing body of evidence suggesting that inferences people make about others' behavior are often influenced by contextual factors perceived to be relevant sources of evidence (Gray & Ford, 2013; Riemer et al., 2014; Sirin et al., 2004; Strain et al., 2015). In the case of sexism, as evidenced in the current study, inferences about sexist intent can influence appraisals people make about the situation as a whole (in terms of its favorability), which then influences specific decision choices people make within that situation. While these effects on appraisals and decision making may seem warranted in the case of unambiguously sexist behavior, support for those inferences is much weaker when it comes to more ambiguous situations - where merely altering some characteristics of the situation can alter the appraisals and decisions that result. The logical defensibility of the inference becomes even more questionable given that various sexism-related attitudes (i.e., neosexism) can bias individuals' perceptions of sexism - more markedly so when situational characteristics align with the bias.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

While the current study provided an extension of prior research using an experimental approach to the study of sexism attributions, future research may want to address various limitations inherent in it. First, while participants were provided with specific sets of cues for each scenario that only slightly varied (i.e., in terms of sender/receiver sex), we did not

manipulate the number of cues available in the scenarios. Hence, we cannot draw conclusions about how many cues are required to increase/decrease the likelihood of a given conclusion in an ambiguous situation nor can we infer how cues were weighted. Although the differences in results for the banking versus the daycare scenario suggest that specific details of the context are important for affecting people's perception of the situation, more research is needed to explore the reasons why. It is possible that situations more aligned with sexism prototypes increase the likelihood that sex composition influences perceptions of sexism, but that does not explain why comparable effects in the other direction were not observed in the daycare scenario.

Additionally, this study did not compare ambiguous and non-ambiguous scenarios, which limits the ability to generalize findings to contexts where cues are more explicit. Future research should explore how varying levels of ambiguity affect reliance on heuristic processing, particularly in real-world decision-making settings. In more non-ambiguous situations, cues are likely to play a more definitive role in guiding judgments, reducing the influence of individual biases and prior experiences by providing clearer evidence to support a conclusion. Understanding this distinction could illuminate how and when biases exert their strongest effects.

Second, our study relied on an MTurk sample, which could mean the results may not generalize to the broader population. Previous research has concluded that MTurk samples produce valid results relative to other sources (e.g., Barger et al., 2011; Buhrmester et al., 2011), but MTurk is not without limitations (Keith et al., 2017) and still represents more of a convenience sample. Therefore, future research should utilize other sampling techniques as a way to better ascertain the generalizability of the results obtained here to the broader population.

Finally, the current studies utilized scenarios. Though these are effective for experimental manipulation, they still deviate from real, in-person situations. During real-time events,

individuals make snap judgments and draw conclusions based on the experience of the situation. The presence of emotions and context and the lack of an ability to read or re-read a particular scenario means that in-situ experiences could produce different results. For example, more intuitive processing may come into play, which could affect the generalizability of scenario-based results to real-world situations.

Conclusion

Sexist behavior is a problem with which society continues to wrestle. Our research expands on prior studies showing that when situations are ambiguous in nature, what is perceived to be sexist may be affected by the interactant sex composition as much as the content of the actual message. However, our research also demonstrates that individual attitudes about sexism prevalence, as well as other situational contextual factors beyond interactant sex composition, both play a significant role in the interpretation of behavior in ambiguous situations. Sexism ratings predicted how favorable people perceived the interaction to be, which then predicted people's decision making. These results pose consequences for actual behavioral choices, suggesting the need to conduct additional research to better understand the practical consequences.

Declaration of Interests

There are no conflicts of interest to declare for any of the authors.

Open Practices

Data, code, and materials for this study are made publicly available on the OSF data repository at the following URL: https://osf.io/tgpxu/

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Appendix

Banking Scenario (adapted from Grawitch et al., 2023)

Julie Jones [Bob Smith] walks into a local bank and is greeted by [Bob Smith/Julie Jones], the assistant manager of the bank, whom [she/he] has dealt with before. They walk into [Bob's/Julie'] office to discuss what the bank can do to help [Julie/Bob] invest some money. As [Julie/Bob] walks in, [Bob/Bob] says: "Hello [Julie/Bob]. That's a very nice suit you're wearing. You look great."

[Julie/Bob] explains that [she/he] is interested in investing $30,000. As they are talking, [Bob/Julie] notes that [Julie/Bob] has quite a bit of money that [she/he] wants to invest. [Bob/Julie] then goes on to say: "You're lucky to have so much money to invest." [Julie/Bob] then begins to present [her/his] ideas concerning how [she/he] would like to invest [her/his] money. [She/He] explains that [she's/he's] worried about the stock market and that [she/he] is considering buying tax-free bonds. [Bob/Julie] responds by saying: "No, that's a bad idea. Tax-free bonds have a very low yield. You're better off investing in a mutual stock fund."

At the end of the meeting. [Bob/Julie] gets up from behind [his/her] desk and puts [his/her] arm around [Julie's/Bob's] shoulders and says, "We will do all we can here to help you anytime you need us. Are you ready to make that investment?"

Childcare Scenario

Julie Jones [Bob Smith] walks into a local daycare and is greeted by [Bob Smith/Julie Jones], the assistant manager of the daycare, whom [she/he] has met before. They walk into [Julie/Bob]'s office to discuss details of the contract before officially signing [her/his] children up. As

[Julie/Bob] walks in, [Julie/Bob] says: "Hello [Julie/Bob]. I assume your [wife/husband] is joining us before we talk through final arrangements?"

[Julie/Bob] explains that she is the only one attending the meeting because [she/he] will be doing most of the drop-offs and pick-ups. As they talk, [Julie/Bob] notes that [Julie/Bob] has a very flexible work schedule. [Julie/Bob] then goes on to say "You're lucky to have so much flexibility in your schedule. I guess *that's* why we'll see you so often." As they talk through the daycare contract, [Julie/Bob] asks a number of questions to ensure [she/he] understands all the specifics.

At the conclusion, [Julie/Bob] reaches out and puts [her/his] hand on [Julie/Bob]'s shoulder and says, "It's nice to have parents like you who ask good questions. I'm certainly looking forward to seeing you around. Shall we go ahead and finalize the contract?"

HR Scenario (Pilot Study Only)

[Bob Smith/Julie Jones] walks into the HR department of a prospective employer and is greeted by [Julie Jones/Bob Smith], the assistant manager of human resources, whom he has spoken to before. They walk into [Julie's/Bob's] office to discuss what the company can offer [Bob/Julie] in terms of salary and benefits. As [Bob/Julie] walks in, [Julie/Bob] says: "Hello [Bob/Julie]. It's great to see you again. Congratulations on the job offer."

[Bob/Julie] explains that [he/she] is interested in discussing [his/her] compensation and benefits package options before deciding whether to accept the job. As they are talking, [Julie/Bob] notes that [Bob/Julie] has several children at home. [Julie/Bob] then goes on to say, "You're lucky to have such a large family." [Bob/Julie] then begins to present [his/her] ideas concerning how [he/she] would like to manage [his/her] childcare responsibilities. [He/She] explains that [he/she]

is worried about the long hours and that [he/she] is considering using the company's child-care facility. [Julie/Bob] responds by saying: "No, that's a bad idea. Our childcare facility will interrupt your workday for the slightest reasons. You're better off investing in another daycare, perhaps one closer to your spouse's work."

At the end of the meeting, [Julie/Bob] gets up from behind [his/her] desk, shakes [Bob's/Julie's] hand and says, "We do all we can here to help parents like you succeed. Can I look forward to you joining our team?"

Table 1. ANOVA Results for H1.

Source	df_1	df_2	F	p	Partial η^2
Overall ANOVA					
Sender Sex (SS)	1	516	3.25	.072	.006
Receiver Sex (RS)	1	516	**25.61**	**.001**	**.047**
Scenario	1	516	3.69	.055	.007
SS x RS	1	516	3.25	.072	.006
SS x Scenario	1	516	0.16	.686	.000
RS x Scenario	1	516	**7.96**	**.005**	**.015**
SS x RS x Scenario	1	516	3.88	.049	.007
Daycare Condition					
SS	1	260	0.93	.335	.004
RS	1	260	2.40	.122	.009
SS x RS	1	260	0.01	.908	.000
Bank Condition					
SS	1	256	2.55	.112	.010
RS	1	256	**32.55**	**.001**	**.113**
SS x RS	1	256	*7.45*	*.007*	*.028*

Note: bold indicates threshold of statistical significance of .005 met; italics indicates threshold of suggestive significance of 01 met.

Table 2. Exploration of Interaction Effects for H1 in the Bank Condition.

	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)
	Receiver: Male	Receiver: Female
Sender: Male	2.51_a	4.31_b
	(.21)	(.21)
Sender: Female	2.75_a	3.39_a
	(.22)	(.22)

Note: Values with different subscripts are significantly different.

Table 3. ANOVA Results for H2.

Source	df_1	df_2	F	p	Partial η^2
Daycare Condition					
Sender Sex (SS)	1	256	0.40	.529	.002
Receiver Sex (RS)	1	256	1.53	.216	.006
Neosexism	1	256	**10.82**	**.001**	**.041**
SS x RS	1	256	0.12	.728	.000
SS x Neosexism	1	256	1.25	.265	.005
RS x Neosexism	1	256	3.56	.060	.014
SS x RS x Neosexism	1	256	2.42	.121	.009
Bank Condition					
Sender Sex (SS)	1	252	2.19	.141	.009
Receiver Sex (RS)	1	252	31.24	.001	.110
Neosexism	1	252	1.82	.178	.007
SS x RS	1	252	*6.66*	*.010*	*.026*
SS x Neosexism	1	252	0.82	.365	.003
RS x Neosexism	1	252	*7.33*	*.007*	*.028*
SS x RS x Neosexism	1	252	4.19	.042	.016

Note: bold indicates threshold of statistical significance of .005 met; italics indicates threshold of suggestive significance of 01 met.

Table 4. Exploration of Neosexism Interaction Effects for H2 in the Bank Condition.

	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)
	Receiver: Male	Receiver: Female
Low Neosexism	2.49_a	4.24_b
	(.20)	(.20)
Mod/High Neosexism	2.78_a	3.38_a
	(.21)	(.21)

Note: Values with different subscripts are significantly different.

Table 5. Regression Results Using Prior Probability to Predict Sexism Ratings

Variable	B	CI	SE	β	t	p
Model 1: F-to-M						
Scenario	-.48	-1.32, .37	.29	-.14	-1.61	.109
Prior Probability	.03	-.14, .21	.06	.05	0.52	.605
Model 2: F-to-F						
Scenario	-.19	-1.15, .76	.33	-.05	-0.57	.566
Prior Probability	.08	-.14, .30	.08	.10	1.08	.282
Model 3: M-to-M						
Scenario	**-.90**	**-1.71, -.08**	**.28**	**-.26**	**-3.14**	**.002**
Prior Probability	.14	-.03, .32	.06	.19	2.30	.023
Model 4a: M-to-F						
Scenario	.72	-.19, 1.64	.32	.19	2.25	.026
Prior Probability	**.20**	**.02, .39**	**.06**	**.27**	**3.15**	**.002**
Model 4b: M-to-F						
Scenario	.69	-.15, 1.54	.29	.18	2.35	.020
Prior Probability	.13	-.05, .30	.06	.17	2.09	.038
Neosexism	**-.84**	**-1.31, -.36**	**.17**	**-.40**	**-5.04**	**.000**

Model 1: $R = .154$, $R^2 = .024$, $F(2, 127) = 1.54$, $p = .218$

Model 2: $R = .114$, $R^2 = .013$, $F(2, 124) = 0.82$, $p = .444$

Model 3: $R = .342$, $R^2 = .117$, $F(2, 130) = 8.63$, $p < .001$

Model 4a: $R = .295$, $R^2 = .087$, $F(2, 131) = 6.26$, $p = .003$

Model 4b: $R = .486$, $R^2 = .236$, $F(3, 130) = 13.41$, $p < .001$

Table 6. Regression Results Testing the Prediction of Interaction Favorability.

Variable	B	CI	SE	β	t	p
Model 1						
Scenario	**-.86**	**-1.24, -.48**	**.13**	**-.26**	**3.70**	**.000**
Sender Sex	**-.41**	**-.79, -.03**	**.13**	**-.12**	**-3.04**	**.002**
Receiver Sex	**.50**	**.12, .88**	**.13**	**.15**	**3.70**	**.000**
Neosexism	**.32**	**.11, .54**	**.08**	**.17**	**4.20**	**.000**
Model 2						
Scenario	**-1.01**	**-1.34, -.69**	**.11**	**-.31**	**-8.87**	**.000**
Sender Sex	*-.30*	*-.62, .02*	*.11*	*-.09*	*-2.65*	*.008*
Receiver Sex	.13	-.19, .46	.12	.04	1.16	.247
Neosexism	.17	-.02, .35	.07	.09	2.53	.012
Sexism Ratings	**-.46**	**-.56, -.37**	**.03**	**-.52**	**-14.43**	**.000**

Model 1: $R = .380$, $R^2 = .145$, $F(4, 519) = 21.93$, $p < .001$

Model 2: $R = .624$, $R^2 = .390$, $F(5, 518) = 66.17$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .245$, $\Delta F(1, 518) = 208.11$, $p < .001$

Note: Bold values are significant at $p < .005$, italicized values are significant at $p < .01$

Table 7. Test of Indirect Effects of Neosexism on Interaction Favorability.

Variable	B	CI	SE	t	p
Model 1					
DV: Sexism Ratings					
Neosexism	**-.31**	**-.53, -.08**	**.09**	**-3.50**	**.001**
W1	.13	-.21, .48	.13	1.00	.316
W2	**.62**	**.28, .96**	**.13**	**4.72**	**.000**
W3	**-.37**	**-.72, -.03**	**.13**	**-2.81**	**.005**
Neosexism x W1	-.01	-.38, .36	.14	-0.09	.932
Neosexism x W2	**-.60**	**-.98, -.22**	**.15**	**-4.06**	**.000**
Neosexism x W3	.22	-.18, .61	.15	1.41	.160
Scenario	-.30	-.70, .09	.15	-1.97	.049
Model 2					
DV: Interaction Ratings					
Neosexism	*.17*	*.00, .35*	*.07*	*2.64*	*.009*
Sexism Ratings	**-.47**	**-.56, -.38**	**.03**	**-14.26**	**.000**
W1	.07	-.19, .33	.10	0.68	.495
W2	-.19	-.45, .06	.10	-1.94	.053
W3	.23	-.03, .49	.10	2.28	.023
Neosexism x W1	-.13	-.41, .14	.11	-1.23	.218
Neosexism x W2	-.04	-.33, .25	.11	-0.32	.749
Neosexism x W3	.11	-.18, .41	.11	0.98	.324
Scenario	**-1.01**	**-1.31, -.72**	**.11**	**-8.86**	**.000**

Model 1: $R = .348$, $R^2 = .121$, $F(8, 515) = 8.90$, $p<.001$

Model 2: $R = .626$, $R^2 = .392$, $F(9, 514) = 36.89$, $p<.001$

Note: Bold values are significant at $p<.005$, italicized values are significant at $p<.01$; W1 = F-to-F condition relative to the M-to-M condition, W2 = M-to-F condition relative to the M-to-M condition, W3= F-to-M condition relative to the M-to-M condition

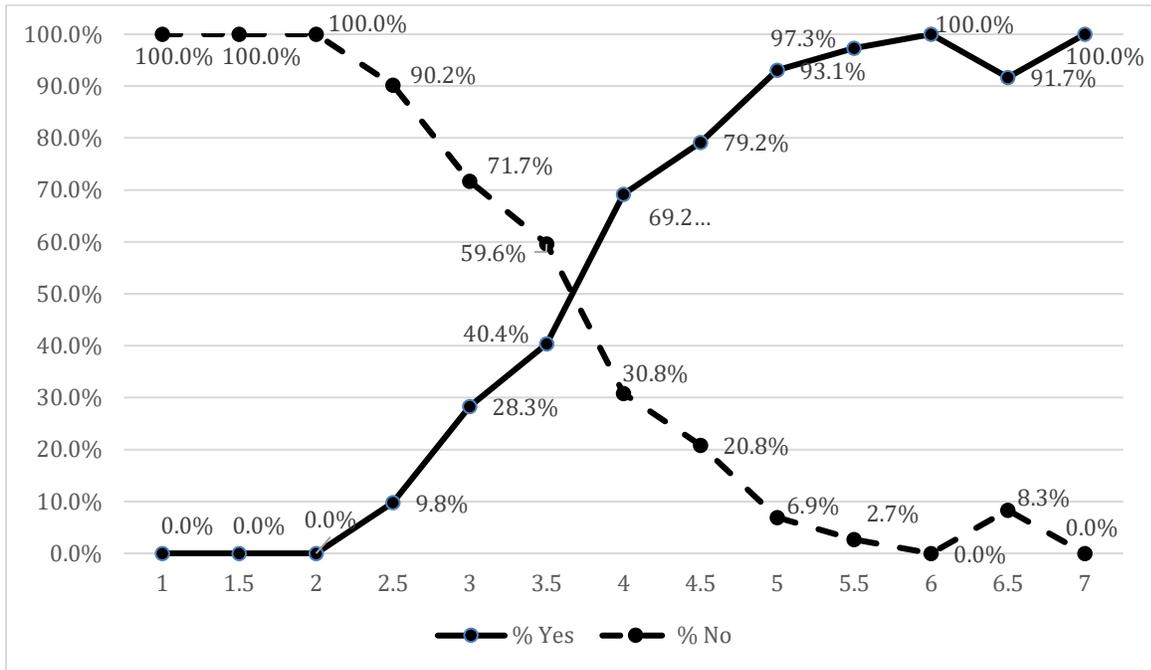Figure 1a. Overall – Interaction Favorability
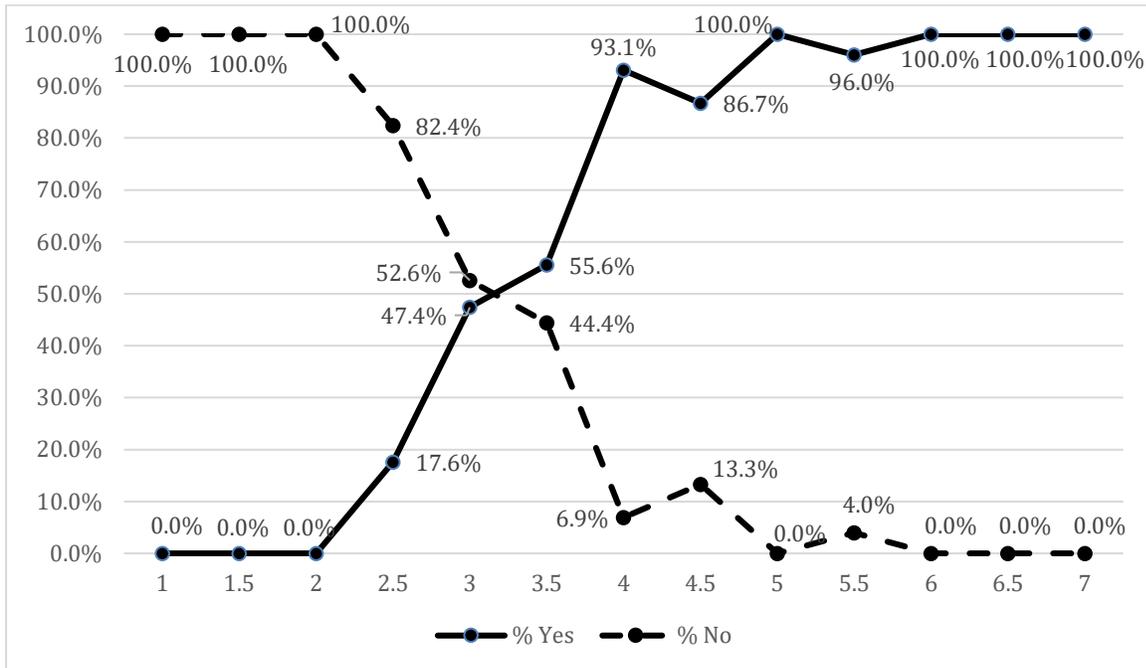
Figure 1b. Daycare Scenario – Interaction Favorability

Figure 1c. Daycare Scenario – Sexism Recoded