

## A STRESS AND COPING PERSPECTIVE ON CONFRONTING SEXISM

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In this study we tested a stress and coping model of confronting sexism. One hundred fourteen university women completed measures of optimism, cognitive appraisals about the prospects of confronting discrimination (expectations of the costs and benefits of confrontation as well as confrontation-related anxiety), and reported on the extent to which they behaved confrontationally in two recent encounters with sexism. Structural equation modeling analyses revealed that an optimistic outlook on life was associated with more benign appraisals of the consequences of confronting discrimination, which in turn was associated with greater reports of confrontational responses to prejudice. This study suggests that silence in the face of prejudice does not necessarily or generally represent contentment with the status quo and emphasizes the importance of understanding how appraisals of the costs and benefits of confronting discrimination relate to this process.

Women are exposed to prejudiced attitudes and sexist treatment across a wide variety of situations and contexts (Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). The question of how women react when they face discrimination has been addressed in a number of recent studies. Most of this research focuses on relatively nonconfrontational cognitive coping strategies aimed at regulating one's emotions after sexism has occurred (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002, for a review). In this study, we examined a considerably less studied response to sexism, confronting or directly challenging perpetrators of sexism.

We define confronting discrimination as a volitional process aimed at expressing one's dissatisfaction with discriminatory treatment to a person or group of people who are responsible for engaging in a discriminatory event. For instance, a woman has confronted discrimination if after being targeted by a sexist remark, she expresses to the person who made the remark that the comment was discriminatory and

that she finds it objectionable. As this example illustrates, confronting discrimination begins with an attribution that a specific event or outcome was due to prejudice. Although there is a large literature on whether and with what effects women make attributions to discrimination (see Major et al., 2002, for a review), in the present paper, we examine confrontational behavior that occurs *after* an event has been appraised as being due to prejudice.

The few studies to examine confrontational responses to prejudice show that even when faced with blatant discrimination, women often do not confront the perpetrators of the discrimination (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001) or tell members of higher status groups that they have been discriminated against (Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). For example, Swim and Hyers (1999) had undergraduate women engage in a group discussion in which a male confederate made a series of sexist or nonsexist comments. Although more than half (55%) of the women in the sexist comments condition did not respond to the discriminatory comments, private ratings made after the interaction revealed that 75% of these women who failed to respond rated the confederate as sexist, and 91% had negative thoughts and feelings about him. Similarly, Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) found that only a minority of women confronted a man who asked them sexually harassing questions during a laboratory-based interview. Finally, field research on sexual harassment demonstrates that fewer than half of women who experience sexual harassment respond by telling the perpetrator to discontinue his behavior (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board [USMSPB], 1995).

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## STRESS AND COPING PERSPECTIVE

In this paper, we consider why women are reluctant to confront those who discriminate against them, and we attempt to identify psychological antecedents that influence the process of confronting discrimination. Our approach to understanding this question follows from our assumption that confronting discrimination is one way of coping with a stressful situation (Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Miller & Major, 2000). Coping is a volitional process that draws upon personal resources with the end goal of regulating emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances (Compas, Conner, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Coping involves either disengagement from or engagement with a stressful event or problem (Compas et al., 2001). Disengagement coping involves efforts to cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally move away from the stressor. Engagement coping involves thinking about the stressor, having an emotional or physiological reaction to it, or behavior that involves approaching it in some way. One form of engagement coping is primary control coping, which involves efforts to influence the stressful event or situation, such as problem solving and efforts to directly regulate one's emotions or the expression of emotion (Compas et al., 2001). From a stress and coping perspective, confrontational responses to prejudice fall under the rubric of primary control coping. That is, confrontational responses are directed at changing the situation of being the target of prejudice (see Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

### *Cognitive Appraisals*

Coping is determined to a significant extent by the cognitive appraisal process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1999). Cognitive appraisals involve judgments about whether an event is potentially harmful or beneficial and whether one is capable of dealing with the harmful event or increasing the likelihood that benefits will occur. When individuals are insufficiently prepared to cope with events appraised as harmful or are unable to secure potential gains, they often avoid or disengage from the situation. Alternatively, when individuals believe they are sufficiently prepared to deal with the harmful event or to acquire gains, they are likely to cope by approaching or engaging with the situation (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993).

Cognitive appraisals may be particularly relevant in understanding when women are willing to confront perpetrators of prejudice. Women who appraise confronting discrimination as a process that carries few costs and great benefits, and who feel confident about their abilities to confront discrimination, may be more likely to confront sexism than women who appraise this act as more threatening. In this paper we address three important components of cognitive appraisals of confronting sexism: expectations that

interpersonal costs stem from confronting sexism, expectations that confrontation reduces prejudice in the future, and anxiety about one's ability to confront sexism.

*Interpersonal costs.* The most commonly documented barrier to confronting discrimination is interpersonal costs, such as being perceived as a troublemaker or experiencing retaliation (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Crosby, 1993; Feagin, 1991; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Haslett & Lipman, 1997; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003; Latting, 1993; Near & Jensen, 1983; USMSPB, 1995). For instance, women report that responding to sexist remarks by commenting on the inappropriateness of the response is a more risky behavior (in terms of perceived reactions of the perpetrator) than ignoring the remarks (Swim & Hyers, 1999). In fact, commenting on the inappropriateness of sexist comments is perceived as equally risky as physically aggressing against the perpetrator (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Likewise, women report a number of interpersonal reasons for not reporting sexual harassment experiences, such as anticipating retaliation, not being believed, and not wanting to harm the harasser (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; USMSPB, 1995).

These perceptions about others' negative reactions to claims of discrimination are founded in reality. For example, in a study of female attorneys' responses to sex discrimination in the workplace, none of the women reported that confronting a peer's sexist behavior improved the relationship (Haslett & Lipman, 1997). At best the relationship remained the same and at worst the relationship deteriorated. Additionally, 40% of women who brought sexual harassment allegations against their employers reported experiencing retaliation from the organizations (Near & Jensen, 1983; see also Bergman et al., 2002), and women frequently report being blamed for their predicament or told that their accounts of the event are not believable (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Furthermore, experimental work demonstrates that women who confront sexist remarks are perceived as hypersensitive (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Shelton & Stewart, in press). Anticipating negative reactions such as these may lead women to avoid confronting sexism.

*Reducing sexism.* Benefits of confronting sexism include potentially stopping perpetrators of prejudice in their tracks, educating them about sexism, and preventing them from discriminating in the future. Confrontation can also help women achieve their goals without being hindered by prejudice-related hassles and obstacles. Finally, confrontation can produce social changes on behalf of the larger social group. Indeed, women with a feminist orientation toward producing social change are more likely to confront prejudice relative to less feminist women (Swim & Hyers, 1999). If individuals believe that confronting sexism can enact positive changes, they may be willing to confront it even when they might incur some personal costs by so doing.

*Confrontation-related anxiety.* Women's appraisals about confronting discrimination will also depend on their confidence that they can effectively confront perpetrators of sexism (Bandura, 1982; Lazarus, 1999). Women who appraise their abilities to confront sexism as insufficient may refrain from engaging in this behavior. Indeed, women who lack confidence in their abilities to successfully negotiate prejudice-tainted situations are more likely to avoid intergroup situations relative to more confident individuals (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Pinel, 1999). Likewise, targets of prejudice who are anxious about prejudice-related rejection tend to withdraw from stressful prejudice-tainted environments (Mendoza-Denton, Purdie, Downey, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). This suggests that individuals who lack confidence in their abilities to confront discrimination will be hesitant to confront perpetrators of sexism.

### Resources

Cognitive appraisals are influenced by the possession of personal resources. Personal resources are determined by structural factors (e.g., status), situational factors (e.g., income and social support), and personality factors (e.g., optimism and perceived control). In the current study we focus on dispositional optimism as a resource that promotes more benign cognitive appraisals about coping with sexism through confrontation. We focus on optimism in this study because it is among the more powerful predictors of cognitive appraisals (Chang, 1998; Kaiser, Major, & McCoy, 2004; Major, Richards, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Zubeck, 1998), making it a strong initial candidate to test our model of confronting discrimination. Optimism is the expectation that positive outcomes will be plentiful in the future and negative outcomes rare (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Individuals with an optimistic outlook on life appraise potentially stressful events, such as confronting sexism, as less threatening and believe they are better prepared to cope with those events (Major et al., 1998). For example, in a recent study, optimistic and pessimistic women read an article about sex-

ism against women and subsequently reported cognitive appraisals about sexism. Although all women in this study were exposed to the same threatening article about sexism, relative to pessimists, optimists reported that sexism was less threatening and that they were better prepared to cope with it (Kaiser et al., 2004). That is, optimism served as a resource that promoted more benign cognitive appraisals of sexism.

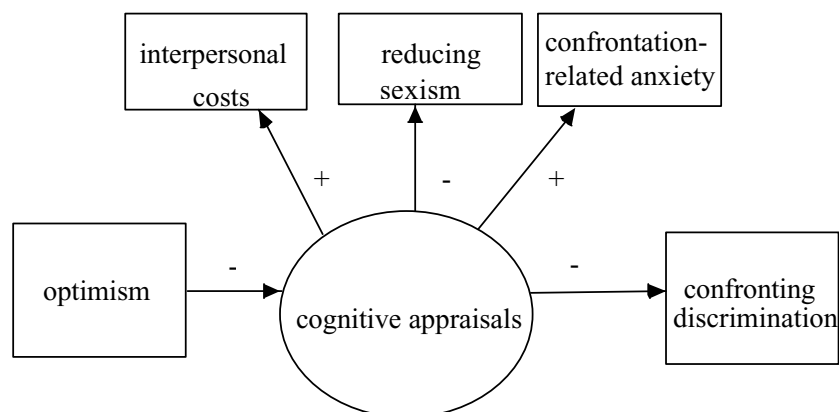
### Hypotheses

The present study tested a model of confronting discrimination (see Figure 1) as it applies to women dealing with sexism. As can be seen in the model, optimism is theorized to predict cognitive appraisals (a latent variable comprising perceived interpersonal costs, expectations about reducing prejudice, and confrontation-related anxiety) that in turn should predict women's reports of confronting those who discriminate against them. Relative to women who possess low levels of optimism, those who possess high levels of optimism should appraise confronting discrimination as less threatening, and appraisals should ultimately increase perceived confrontational responses to sexism. That is, optimists may anticipate greater potential for gain (such as reducing sexism) and less potential for loss (such as experiencing retaliation) and experience less anxiety about confronting prejudice. Appraisals such as these may promote confrontational responding when faced with prejudice.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedures

Participants were 151 women who volunteered to participate in a study on women's life experiences in exchange for research participation credit. Participants attended a public university located in a small city in a predominantly rural New England state. Participants roughly reflected the ethnic composition of this university (participants were 98.2%



**Fig. 1.** Hypothesized model of confronting discrimination.

White) and had a mean age of 19.01 years (range = 18 to 32 years).<sup>1</sup> Participants completed a series of measures in a large classroom setting with only other women and the White female experimenter present.

Participants completed measures of optimism, cognitive appraisals about confronting discrimination, and a measure of the extent to which they reported confronting discrimination in two recent encounters with sexism. Participants completed these measures in one of three different random orders with the exception that the outcome variable, the confronting discrimination measure, was always completed last. After completing these measures, the participants were thanked and debriefed.

### Measures

We adapted existing measures and developed some of our own to assess the predictor and criterion variables. The items used to assess each variable were rated on 5-point scales on which a 1 indicated that the participant *strongly disagreed* with the statement and a 5 indicated that she *strongly agreed*. Items were always scored so that a high score indicated more of the variable being assessed (that is, greater optimism, perceived interpersonal costs, anxiety, reduction in sexism, and confrontation). Items within each scale were averaged to compute the score for that variable.

**Optimism.** Optimism was measured with the revised Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). Sample items from this six-item measure include: "I'm always optimistic about my future" and "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best" (alpha = .88 in the present sample).

**Cognitive appraisals.** Cognitive appraisals were assessed with a latent variable comprising three indicators: (a) beliefs that confronting discrimination is interpersonally costly, (b) beliefs that confronting discrimination reduces sexism, and (c) anxiety about one's ability to confront sexism. The indicator assessing beliefs about reducing sexism loads negatively on the cognitive appraisal factor. This latent cognitive appraisal factor is theoretically consistent with Lazarus' (1999) conceptualization of the appraisal process. Lazarus (1999) argued that these appraisal components are interdependent and part of a common process.

The interpersonal costs of confronting discrimination were measured with nine items derived from research and theory on confronting discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Five of these items were: "When I confront someone who has discriminated against me, people tend to react by thinking I am" impolite, trying to cause trouble, just trying to make excuses for my own shortcomings, just being emotional, and just complaining. The other four items were: "Confronting discrimination results in" a scene being made, a heated confrontation or argument, the discriminator retaliating

against me, and the discriminator physically harming me (alpha = .84).

Expectations about reducing sexism by confronting discrimination were measured with nine items derived from theory on confronting discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). These items were: "Confronting people who discriminate against me usually" helps reduce some of the sexism in our society, causes them to become aware or recognize that their behavior was sexist, causes them to change some of their prejudiced attitudes, helps reduce the prejudice-based hassles that I would otherwise have to deal with, helps me achieve things that their sexism would otherwise prevent me from obtaining, makes things better for women as a whole, helps educate sexists about why their behavior is wrong, makes them behave less sexist in the future, and lets the discriminator know that sexism is unacceptable (alpha = .80).

Six items addressed the extent to which women were anxious about their abilities to confront sexism. These items included: I am quite skilled at confronting people who discriminate against me (reverse-scored), I come across competently when confronting people who discriminate against me (reverse-scored), I am capable of effectively informing people who discriminate against me that their behavior is inappropriate (reverse-scored), I worry that I won't be able to effectively communicate my dissatisfaction to people who discriminate against me, I feel very confident when I interact with people who have discriminated against me (reverse-scored), and I experience anxiety when I confront people who discriminate against me (alpha = .79).

**Confronting discrimination.** We examined participants' reports of perceived confrontational behavior in recent encounters with sexism. We chose to examine retrospective reports of confrontational behavior for several reasons. First, empirical evidence indicates that women have difficulty accurately predicting how they will respond when faced with sexism. For instance, in the Swim and Hyers (1999) study described previously, 55% of the women responded to the confederate's sexist comments by ignoring them. However, when an independent sample of women was asked to predict how they would respond if they were in the same situation as the women in the experiment, only 1% of these women reported that they would ignore the confederate's comments (see also Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Second, this technique allowed us to examine multiple instances of how women responded to sexism rather than draw inferences from how they responded to a single sexist incident. Finally, this methodology allowed us to study real-life sexist experiences, where important personal outcomes are at stake.

The perceived confrontation measure first instructed participants to describe the two most recent times in their lives in which they experienced sexism that they considered being important or significant. This request was prefaced with a general description of some potentially sexist

incidents derived from Swim et al.'s (1998, 2001) work on women's experiences with everyday sexism. These instructions served to provide participants with a consensual definition of sexist behavior. The exact wording of this request was as follows:

Please think about the two most recent instances in your life when you personally believe that someone discriminated against you because of your gender. This could include things like comments or assumptions being made about your attributes, characteristics, interests, or goals in life. It could also include certain kinds of sexual comments or behaviors. Please try to think of instances of sexism that you considered being important or significant.

For both recorded instances of personal discrimination, participants then completed the following six items assessing the extent to which they confronted the person who discriminated against them: I made my dissatisfaction directly known to the person or persons who discriminated against me, I believe that I confronted the person or persons who discriminated against me, my behavior toward the person or persons who discriminated against me was passive (reverse-scored), my reaction to the situation let the person or persons who discriminated against me know that I was offended by their behavior and thought they were sexist, the person or persons who discriminated against me probably to this day do not know that their prejudiced behavior offended me (reverse-scored), and my reaction to the situation did not let the person or persons who discriminated against me know that I was offended by their behavior and thought they were sexist (reverse-scored). These 12 items (6 items for each sexist incident) were averaged to form a single composite measure representing past confrontational behavior ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

## RESULTS

Three of the 151 participants were excluded from the data analyses because they did not follow instructions or failed to complete the questionnaires. We also excluded 6 women who reported no instances of discrimination, 21 women who reported only one instance, 6 women who reported two instances of discrimination but indicated that one of these experiences occurred many years ago when they were in grade school or middle school, and 1 woman who reported two incidents of discrimination but failed to complete the confrontation ratings for one of the instances. Following these exclusions, the original sample was reduced to 114 women.

The final sample of women who reported two recent instances of gender discrimination differed statistically from the excluded women on only the measure of perceived interpersonal costs of confronting discrimination,  $F(1, 146) = 4.13$ ,  $p = .04$ , with women included in the final sample ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) reporting that confronting discrim-

ination was more costly than women excluded from the sample ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ). Women in the final sample did not differ from those who reported one or fewer instances of discrimination on any of the other self report measures ( $F < .09$ ,  $p > .76$  for all).

### Characterization of the Sexist Incidents

The women described experiencing a wide variety of sexist events. Participants reported sexist incidents involving traditional gender role stereotypes and prejudice including comments that certain roles (e.g., jobs, academic disciplines, sports, hobbies, household tasks) were more or less appropriate for women and that women possessed differing levels of ability in these domains relative to men. Participants also reported sexist events involving demeaning and derogatory comments and behaviors. For example, they reported being referred to with demeaning labels such as bitch, chick, and babe. Other derogatory behaviors included hearing sexist jokes about women and other comments expressing hostile and negative attitudes towards women. They also reported being ignored during conversations or having their opinions carry less influence than men's opinions. Sexually objectifying incidents included being subjected to unwanted sexual comments, catcalls, gestures, and behaviors.

### Model Testing

The zero-order correlations between variables as well as the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. These correlations were consistent with our stress and coping model presented in Figure 1. Relative to pessimists, more optimistic women reported that confronting discrimination had greater interpersonal benefits, fewer interpersonal costs,

**Table 1**

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between the Variables

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1 Optimism	3.46 (0.79)					
2 Costs of Confronting Discrimination	2.57 (0.47)	-.32**				
3 Confrontation-related Anxiety	2.96 (0.74)	-.22*	.25**			
4 Reducing Sexism by Confronting Discrimination	3.08 (0.56)	.34**	-.35**	-.20*		
5 Confronting Discrimination	3.07 (0.84)	.11	-.18*	-.19*	.19*	

Note.  $N = 114$ . The possible range for all variables was from 1 to 5. Higher scores represent higher levels of each variable. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

and was less anxiety provoking. Additionally, the more participants appraised confronting prejudice as a threatening process (i.e., high in costs, low in benefits, and anxiety-arousing), the less they reported confronting discrimination. Using structural equation modeling techniques with AMOS 4.01 software (Arbuckle, 1999), we examined the hypothesized relationships between optimism, confronting appraisals (a latent variable comprising perceived interpersonal costs, reducing sexism, and anxiety), and perceived confrontation. Model fit was assessed with a joint consideration of the chi-square statistic, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Normed Fit Index (NFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). Good model fit is evidenced by a nonsignificant chi-square, a CFI and NFI of at least .95, a RMSEA of .05 or less, and models with lower AIC values are preferred over those with higher values (Kline, 1998).

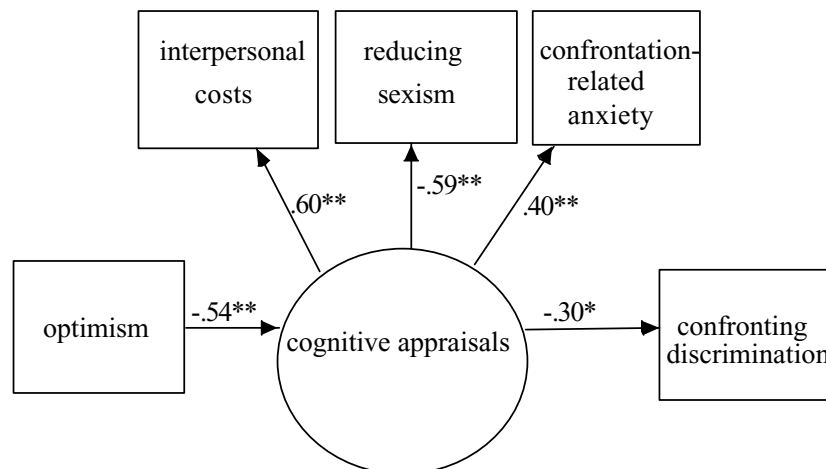
The chi-square test on the hypothesized model presented in Figure 1 was not significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .92$ . Of importance, the independence model (in which all parameters are set to zero to test whether the variables are independent of each other) did not adequately account for the data,  $\chi^2(10) = 53.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , and provided a worse fit to the data than did the hypothesized model,  $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 52.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, the remaining fit indices revealed that the hypothesized model fit the data quite well (NFI = .97, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, AIC = 21.44).

Although the fit indices measure the extent to which a model fits the observed data, it is essential to examine the direction and statistical significance of the hypothesized paths. This is crucial because models can fit data well even when pieces of the model, such as specific paths, are nonsignificant or in the direction opposite of predictions. All three indicators of the cognitive appraisal construct loaded significantly on this factor (the paths for perceived costs and anxiety were positive and the path for reducing sexism was negative). Consistent with hypotheses derived from the

model in Figure 1, the path from optimism to cognitive appraisals was negative and significant. That is, the possession of an optimistic outlook on life was associated with less threatening appraisals of confronting discrimination. Also, consistent with predictions, the path between cognitive appraisals and confronting discrimination was negative and significant, indicating that women who believed that confronting discrimination was more threatening were less likely to report confronting their two most recent discriminatory encounters. See Figure 2 for the parameter estimates.

*Alternative models.* Although the empirical model above was well supported by the data, it is important to examine alternative plausible relationships between the variables. It is possible for example that some characteristic of optimistic women influenced their memory of past confrontational behavior. For instance, relative to pessimists, optimists may have been less willing to admit (even to themselves) that they sat there passively after experiencing discrimination. If this memory distortion alternative is correct, there should be a direct positive relationship between optimism and reports of confronting the two reported sexist incidents, irrespective of women's more general appraisals of confronting discrimination.

We examined this possibility by running a model in which the path between optimism and perceived confrontation was modified so that optimism now directly (rather than indirectly) predicted confrontation. The direct path between confronting appraisals and reports of confronting discrimination remained in this model. This alternative model did not provide an adequate fit to the data and provided a worse fit relative to the hypothesized model (NFI = .58, CFI = .60, RMSEA = .18, AIC = 42.41). Furthermore, the direct path between optimism and perceived confrontation was not significant ( $p = .90$ ). Thus, the data from the alternative model do not support the conclusion that



**Fig. 2.** The estimated parameters of the hypothesized model. All estimated path weights are standardized. \*  $p < .02$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

the optimists reported distorted recollections of confrontational behavior.

We also examined the possibility that a history of confronting discrimination can lead women to be more aware of the potential negative consequences of confronting discrimination. That is, it is possible that perceived confrontation influences appraisals of the interpersonal consequences of confronting discrimination rather than vice versa. To test this alternative, we ran an equivalent model in which perceived confrontation predicted confronting appraisals. As in the hypothesized model, the path between optimism and confronting appraisals was included in this alternative model. Not surprisingly, the equivalent model fit the data well ( $\chi^2(5) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .82$ ; CFI = 1.00, NFI = .96, RMSEA = .00, AIC = 22.23). Both perceived confrontation and optimism were significantly negatively associated with confronting appraisals, such that women who reported confronting discrimination and those who were more optimistic perceived confronting discrimination as a less threatening process. Although this model received empirical support, we believe that it is less theoretically compelling than the original hypothesized model. First, the negative path between reports of confronting discrimination and confronting appraisals is inconsistent with virtually all research of confrontation that demonstrates that women incur negative costs when they confront discrimination (e.g., Bergman et al., 2002; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Haslet & Lipman, 1997; Hesson-McInnis & Fitzgerald, 1997; Near & Jensen, 1983). In fact, even very minor or isolated instances of confronting sexism can have negative interpersonal consequences (e.g., Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Although it is certainly possible that the experience of confronting discrimination leads women to realize that it is not as bad as they thought and that more good came out of it than bad, we are aware of no empirical data supporting this conclusion. Second, the perceived confrontation measure comprised only participants' two most recent sexist experiences. It is doubtful that these two incidents alone are responsible for participants' more general appraisals of the interpersonal consequences of confronting discrimination (though see Schwarz, 1999, for a discussion of recency biases in self-report measures).

Finally, we ran a second equivalent model examining whether perceived confrontation predicted appraisals of confronting discrimination, which in turn predicted optimism. This model tests the hypothesis that the more women confronted discrimination in the past, the less costly they subsequently appraised this process, which ultimately lead to a greater sense of optimism. Again, this model fit the data well,  $\chi^2(5) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .92$  (NFI = .97, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, AIC = 21.44). Although this alternative hypothesis is statistically not different from the hypothesized model, we believe it is less theoretically plausible than the original hypothesized model. First, as mentioned above, the negative relationship between reports of confronting discrimination and confronting appraisals is inconsistent with

a large number of existing studies showing that confronting sexism is associated with increased, not decreased, negative interpersonal reactions (e.g., Bergman et al., 2002; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Haslet & Lipman, 1997; Hesson-McInnis & Fitzgerald, 1997; Near & Jensen, 1983). Second, it is unlikely that two recent experiences with sexism are sufficient to shape women's dispositional, global levels of optimism, which has stability coefficient of .79 over a 28-month time span (Scheier et al., 1994), when other environmental and developmental factors have a long history of shaping this important resource (Gillham, Reivich, & Shatte, 2001). Nonetheless, correlational research cannot provide causal conclusions, so alternative hypotheses remain viable possibilities.

## DISCUSSION

The women in this study reported experiencing a wide array of sexist events including exposure to gender role stereotyping and prejudice, demeaning comments and behaviors, and sexual objectification. Although the participants all labeled these events as sexism, their responses to these behaviors varied greatly. Why is it that many of the women in this sample did not express their displeasure with others' sexist comments and behaviors? We hypothesized that the possession of an optimistic outlook on life would predict cognitive appraisals about the costs and benefits of confronting discrimination, and that these appraisals would predict women's willingness to cope with these events by confronting the perpetrator.

Consistent with predictions and our stress and coping framework, the data revealed that women with a more optimistic outlook on life appraised confronting sexism as more benign. That is, they viewed this process as one that is lower in costs and higher in benefits, and were more confident in their abilities to confront sexism. The fact that optimism predicted cognitive appraisals is consistent with research and theory demonstrating that optimism serves as a resource promoting less threatening appraisals of potentially stressful events (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Kaiser et al., 2004; Major et al., 1998). Also consistent with predictions, appraisals of the consequences of confronting discrimination did indeed predict women's reports of confronting people who discriminated against them. Women who appraised confronting discrimination as a more threatening process were less likely to report confronting recent discriminatory experiences relative to women who appraised confronting discrimination more benignly.

It is interesting that optimism was not significantly positively associated with confronting sexism (though the relationship was in this direction). Because optimism is theorized to promote proactive, problem-focused coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), the absence of this relationship is at first glance surprising. However, confronting sexism differs in some important respects from other forms of problem solving typically assessed in psychological research

(e.g., seeking medical treatment). Although problem solving is generally an adaptive way of coping with stressors, it may be less personally adaptive in some encounters with sexism. Sometimes the costs of confronting discrimination may simply be too high and it may not be in the individual's best interest to confront a perpetrator of sexism. For example, if a woman confronts a work supervisor's sexist comments, she might find herself without a job. In a tight economy where jobs are difficult to find, the financial benefits of the job might be more important than the discomfort caused by the sexist remarks. In other words, optimists may know when it is in their personal best interest to confront sexism and when it is more costly, thus resulting in no direct relationship between this resource and confronting prejudice. Indeed research shows that optimists are more effective than pessimists at knowing when it is worth their energy to pursue a problem and when it is too resource-draining and less worthy of pursuit (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996).

The findings of this study are important because they can help make sense of the striking gap between labeling an event as discrimination and confronting those responsible for such unjust treatment (e.g., Swim & Hyers, 1999). These data complement work showing that women often do not confront sexist remarks even when they report recognizing that the remarks are sexist (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Additionally, the findings converge with research showing that women are less likely to claim discrimination when they are in the presence of a male (presumably a costly situation) rather than by themselves or with another woman (Stangor et al., 2002). Although the Stangor et al. (2002) and Swim and Hyers (1999) experiments suggest that appraisals of the costliness of confronting discrimination were responsible for the tendency to avoid claiming discrimination, neither study provided a direct measure of this important construct. Thus, this study provides important novel empirical evidence that appraisals about confronting sexism are in fact related to women's reactions to sexist incidents.

### *Implications*

Understanding why women often do not confront sexism has important implications for gender relations and social change. First, when women remain quiet in the face of prejudice, others may incorrectly assume that they are satisfied with how they are being treated or the outcomes they receive. Thus, little will be done to remedy the sexist situation. Additionally, infrequent claims of sexism may lead society at large to underestimate the extent to which women still face sexism in their lives. Second, acknowledging prejudice and discrimination is an essential precursor to efforts aimed at mitigating the injustices that might otherwise continue to exist (Crosby, 1993). Once sexism is publicly acknowledged, other women have a forum for expressing their dissatisfac-

tion. When groups of disenfranchised individuals come together with a common goal, such as reducing sexism, this can result in social movements that bring about changes that actually affect how the group is treated. In short, confronting sexism can have tremendous societal benefits by exposing prejudice-based injustices and reducing barriers and hassles that result from others' sexism (Crosby, 1993; Swim et al., 1998).

Women face the unfair situation of having to decide whether or not to confront the illegitimate sexist treatment they receive. Confronting sexism can bring both costs (e.g., being disliked) and benefits (e.g., reducing the prejudice they face). Furthermore, the decision to confront sexism will be influenced by structural power differentials and societal norms. Thus the decisions women make in these situations will not be simple or come without thoughtful deliberation. By making society at large aware of the interpersonal consequences faced by targets of prejudice, it is possible to reduce these costs in the future. This in turn may provide women with greater latitude in how they respond to others' negative attitudes and behavior toward them.

### *Future Directions*

Although the data from this study support the hypothesized model of confronting sexism, it is important to examine some of the potential limitations of the present study. First, it is possible that women's perceived confrontational responses were not perceived as confrontational by the perpetrators of sexism. For example, a woman may have believed that a humorous response to a perpetrator of sexism was confrontational, but the perpetrator may not have seen this response as confrontational or an expression of displeasure. Although this is certainly possible, we believe that women's self-perceptions of their behavior are important. Individuals are not privy to others' interpretations of their behavior, thus they can never be certain how their behaviors are perceived. Additionally, there is no reason to assume that the perpetrator's interpretation of the woman's behavior is more accurate than the woman's own interpretations. Many perpetrators of sexism may minimize the confrontational nature of discrimination complaints because they are unwilling to acknowledge that they themselves engaged in a discriminatory fashion. Future research would benefit by examining the observations of multiple informants (e.g., the target, the perpetrator, a neutral observer) who observe the target's responses to prejudice.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that our sample comprised young, predominantly White, North American college students. Because of this privileged background, these women may have fewer or less severe experiences with sexism than less privileged women, such as older women, women of color, less educated women, or lesbians. Thus, the mean levels of cognitive appraisals of confronting prejudice as well as confrontational behavior might

be different for groups that face more severe forms of sexism. The fact that not all participants could report two instances of sexism suggests that these women may be relatively isolated from sexism. It will be important to examine whether the effects discovered in this research generalize to other samples of women, such as women of color, lesbians, or women at different developmental stages in life.

Third, these findings are correlational. The correlations fit the model we tested well, but the possibility remains that the direction of causation might differ from what we hypothesized. In fact, several of the alternative models also provided a good fit to the data. For example, one could pose an alternative argument that the negative relationship between appraisals of confronting sexism and confrontational behavior occurred because the sexist incidents assessed in this study were relatively minor and that confrontation was thus successful and served as a healthy stress inoculation experience for our participants. Although this argument is theoretically and empirically reasonable, it conflicts with existing research showing that college women who confront even small isolated instances of sexism perceive being treated negatively and do indeed experience negative treatment (e.g., Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Stangor, Swim, Sechrist, Decoster, Van Allen, & Ottenbreit, 2003; Swim & Hyers, 1999). It will be important for further research to explore these relationships. For example, one could manipulate the costs of confronting an instance of sexism in the laboratory (e.g., the perpetrator could have a great deal of control or little control over the target of prejudice) and then measure whether women are willing to confront the sexist act. Additionally, a prospective study in which optimism and beliefs about interpersonal consequences are measured prior to the occurrence of sexist incidents could shed light into the direction of the relationships discovered in this study. Moreover, qualitative studies exploring the real-world consequences of sexism among diverse groups of women could provide important theoretical insights into this issue.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there are other important factors that may predict confronting discrimination. This study was limited to individual difference variables that, despite being important, may be outweighed by salient situational factors or social goals. For instance, an optimistic woman who believes that confronting discrimination is generally not particularly costly may be hesitant to confront sexism in particular situations such as when the perpetrator of sexism holds a great deal of power over her outcomes. Additionally, certain situations, such as those that tax or deplete personal resources, might create greater or fewer opportunities for subsequently assessing these resources. Finally, other individual difference variables, such as perceived social support, perceived control, gender identity, feminism, and a commitment to activism might also be important factors influencing whether women confront sexism. Thus, it will be important to identify both individual differences and contexts or situations that promote and in-

hibit confrontational responses to prejudice (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002).

### Conclusions

This study addressed one strategy women use to cope with sexism: confronting the perpetrator. The data demonstrate that greater personal resources are associated with less threatening appraisals of the consequences of confronting discrimination, which in turn relate to increased reports of confronting sexism. These findings provide novel insights into the difficult behavior of standing up to perpetrators of sexism. This study suggests that silence in the face of prejudice does not necessarily or generally represent contentment with the status quo and that it will be important to consider how the costs and benefits of confronting discrimination influence this process.

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### NOTE

1. In the present study we examined the reactions of a predominantly White, educated, young sample not because we expect them to represent the experiences of all women, but rather because we wanted to examine if the proposed model linking resources and appraisals to confronting discrimination gave a plausible account of the experiences of any group of women. Women who are multiply stigmatized (for example, women of color, lesbians, elderly women, economically disadvantaged women) are likely to experience gender discrimination differently than the women examined in this study. However, these differences are more likely to involve the mean level of discrimination women report, the amount of resources they have at their disposal to help them confront that discrimination, and perceptions of the costs involved in confronting discrimination than they are to affect whether these resources, perceptions of the costs of confronting sexism, and confronting discrimination are related to each other in the manner predicted by our model.

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