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

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Supplementary materials: Pre-registration (with links to full data/code) can be found here: https://osf.io/q3m4p/overview

Abstract

This study examined how people judge whether an interaction is sexist when the situation is ambiguous. We tested how judgments were influenced by (a) sex composition of the interaction (e.g., male-female, female-female), (b) the setting of the interaction (banking, a traditionally male-typed context vs. daycare, a traditionally female-typed context), and (c) individual attitudes about sexism. Across two scenarios, people rated the behavior as more sexist when a male addressed a female in the banking context. This effect was absent in the daycare context. People who showed more sensitivity to potential sexism were more likely to rate behavior as sexist across both contexts, and this affected how favorable they found the interaction and what advice they gave in response. These findings suggest that both individual beliefs and situational context shape how people interpret potentially biased behavior.

Keywords: Sexism, Neosexism, Biases, Decision Making, Attitudes

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 often 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 typically shaped by personal experiences, introducing biases that can sometimes lead to errors in judgment (Bach & Schenke, 2017; Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Such inferences, made without complete information, can significantly influence judgments and downstream decisions, carrying the potential for serious personal and societal harm.

The current study examines how people make judgments about potentially biased behavior – specifically, sexist intent – within ambiguous interpersonal interactions. It focuses on the roles of sex composition (the combination of sexes of the message sender and receiver), gendered contextual cues (whether the interaction occurs in a traditionally male- or female-typed setting), and individual attitudes (i.e., neosexism and prior beliefs about sexism prevalence) in shaping attributions of sexism, favorability of the interaction, and subsequent decision making. Grounded in social prediction theory (Bach & Schenke, 2017), this study aims to clarify how observers use both external and internal cues to fill interpretive gaps under uncertainty.

Social Prediction Theory

Human decision making is strongly influenced by expectations formed from prior experiences and environmental cues (Bach & Schenke, 2017; Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). These expectations guide top-down hypothesis testing, in which individuals use initial assumptions to interpret a situation and then revise those assumptions in response to bottom-up feedback from the environment (Bach & Schenke, 2017). When environmental cues closely match familiar patterns, they trigger fast, intuitive responses or predictions (Haselton et al., 2009; Klein, 2015; Pennycook et al., 2015). In contrast, when cues are unfamiliar or ambiguous, they often prompt slower, more deliberate reasoning (Pennycook et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2011). As new information emerges, individuals may detect inconsistencies with their initial expectations, prompting them to adjust their judgments accordingly. Throughout this process of social prediction, people rely on a foundation of conceptual, rule-based knowledge that interacts with situational cues to shape how judgments are formed (Bach & Schenke, 2017).

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 domain of sexism-related attributions, observers often rely on learned social prototypes when interpreting ambiguous situations – such as that men are more likely than women to engage in sexist behavior or that opposite sex interactions entail a higher risk of harm. These prototypes may be activated by two main types of cues: actor-relevant cues (reflecting features of the actor) and relational cues (reflecting compositional features across individuals). For instance, a male speaker in the workplace may more readily activate a "perpetrator" role simply due to the base-rate expectation that men are more often sexist. Supporting this, Goh et al. (2022) found that people hold narrow prototypes of sexual harassment – typically involving male perpetrators and female victims – which leads to under-recognition of non-prototypical cases, such as female-on-male or same-sex scenarios. Similarly, research on moral typecasting has shown that observers more readily assign men the role of moral agent (i.e., capable of causing harm) and women the role of moral patient (Gray & Wegner, 2009), which further shapes interpretations of intent in ambiguous situations.

Ambiguous interactions are particularly vulnerable to prototype-driven biases, with people tending to rely on top-down processing to resolve uncertainty, as social prediction theory emphasizes (Bach & Schenke, 2017). As such, observers may more readily attribute sexism to male senders, particularly in male-to-female interactions – the most prototypical form of sexism. However, this bias may also extend more broadly to opposite-sex interactions, which are socially and psychologically more "charged" than same-sex ones, especially in hierarchical or unfamiliar contexts (Harush et al., 2023; Koenig et al., 2007; Ridgeway, 1997). Empirically, though, there is strong support for the idea that a male sender-female receiver composition elicits the highest attributions of sexism and least favorable impressions (Grawitch et al., 2023; Sirin, 2004). Sirin et al. (2004) found that identical behaviors were rated as more sexist when performed by men than women. In ambiguous workplace interactions, Grawitch et al. (2023) similarly found that opposite-sex pairings, especially male-to-female, led to higher sexism ratings and lower favorability.

While some studies suggest that opposite-sex senders are not always rated as more sexist than same-sex senders (i.e., when the receiver is male), the dominant pattern remains that sex composition influences interpretation, especially when it matches prototypical expectations. Together, these findings suggest that both actor-level cues (e.g., sex of sender) and dyadic cues (e.g., sex pairing) systematically shape how observers attribute sexism in ambiguous situations. Therefore, we propose the following:

H1a: The sex composition of interactants will predict sexism attributions, such that opposite-sex interactions will be rated as more sexist than same-sex interactions.

H1b: Among opposite-sex compositions, the sender in the male-female condition will be rated as more sexist than the sender in the female-male condition.

Environmental cues may also impact how behavior is interpreted, particularly for attributions of sexism. For instance, while Grawitch et al. (2023) and Sirin et al. (2004) varied the sex composition of the message sender/receiver, they did not manipulate the environmental characteristics in which the message was delivered. In contrast, Riemer et al. (2014) showed that relational context (e.g., romantic partner vs. boss) can substantially shift perceived intent.

One contextual factor to consider is the degree to which a particular context aligns with

traditional male or female gender roles. For example, banking is stereotypically male-typed, while daycare is often viewed as female-typed. Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) posits that individuals evaluate others more negatively when their behavior is incongruent with stereotyped expectations tied to sex roles. Gendered settings may shape interpretation in two ways: by altering baseline expectations for what constitutes inappropriate behavior or by amplifying congruence-based effects such that stereotype-consistent behavior is perceived as less problematic. Both possibilities are consistent with social prediction theory, which holds that people rely on stored experience and prototype matching when evaluating ambiguous situations.

While prior theory suggests that gendered settings may shape how observers interpret ambiguous behavior, we lacked a clear basis to predict the specific direction of this effect – particularly in a female-typed setting like daycare. As such, and in line with our preregistration, we treated the potential interaction between sex composition and context as exploratory:

RQ1: Does the effect of sex composition on sexism attributions differ based on the gendered setting of the exchange?

Neosexism and the Relevance of Biases

Social prediction theory suggests that people bring stored knowledge and attitudes to social situations, which can shape their interpretations of ambiguous behavior. As Bach and Schenke (2017) noted, “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, people’s prior experiences and attitudes can influence how they interpret a situation and the inferences they draw about the message sender’s intent.

In cases where cues are ambiguous, these internal inputs can function as biases, shaping perception in ways that reflect preexisting beliefs more than objective information (Bach & Schenke, 2017). That is, personal attitudes may act as a filter through which behavior is interpreted. One important source of interpretive bias in ambiguous situations is an individual's attitudes toward sexism. Attitudes can guide attention and influence the accessibility of related information, especially when cues are limited or unclear (Brinol et al., 2019; Katz, 1960). Individuals who believe sexism is widespread may be more likely to activate and retrieve sexism-related concepts, introducing a bias toward identifying behavior as sexist – even when the situation is open to multiple interpretations. In this way, attitudes toward sexism can shape both what individuals notice and how they interpret others’ intent.

One such attitude is neosexism, defined by Tougas et al. (1995) as a “manifestation of a conflict between egalitarian values and residual negative feelings toward women” (p. 843). They further argued 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). Grawitch et al. (2023) found that individuals who were low 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, because neosexism was only assessed in one of three studies in that paper, further validation is needed. Therefore, we proposed:

H2: Neosexism will moderate the effect of sex composition on sexism attributions, such that the sender in the male-female condition will be rated as more sexist than senders in other sex composition conditions when neosexism is low.

Additionally, the influence of neosexist attitudes may depend on the context in which the interaction occurs. In traditionally male-typed settings like banking, behaviors by male senders may be perceived as more entrenched or inappropriate – compared to the same behaviors in traditionally female-typed contexts like daycare. According to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), such gendered settings can shape how observers interpret behavior, potentially amplifying or reducing the impact of individual biases like neosexism. Thus, we asked:

RQ2: Do the effects of neosexism on sexism ratings differ by gendered setting?

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 also explored people's a priori beliefs about sexism across all sex composition categories (e.g., male-female, female-male). For instance, how likely do people believe it is that a woman would behave in a sexist way toward another woman, or that men are targets of sexism from women? These beliefs act as explicit prior probabilities, which may influence judgment under ambiguity.

From a Bayesian perspective, individuals with higher a priori beliefs about the prevalence of sexism in a given sex composition dyad (e.g., the likelihood of females being sexist against another female) may be more likely to interpret ambiguous behavior within that type of interaction as sexist. In fact, prior theory and research have suggested that people's pre-existing beliefs about the likelihood of an event can influence the attributions they make in ambiguous situations (e.g., Brower et al., 2017; Klein Tuente et al., 2019, Westra, 2019). 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 composition condition, do respondents who report higher prior probability about the prevalence of sexism relevant to that sex composition rate the message sender in that condition as more sexist than those who report lower prior probability relevant to that sex composition?

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 appear to be 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. Based on this, 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, relatively little research on how perceptions of sexism and interaction favorability relate to the actual decision people make in a given situation. Much of the behavioral science literature emphasizes ratings as a form of dependent variable, often in the form of 5- or 7-point scales. Although such ratings are useful for demonstrating differences in conditions or correlations among factors, they provide limited insight into how such judgments influence discrete choices. Yet, real-world decisions are often binary (e.g., choosing whether or not to) or multinomial (e.g., choosing among options), and understanding how the ratings translate into discrete choices remains an important gap.

In this study, we used scenarios that allowed for binary decision making – specifically, whether to recommend a choice that would benefit the message sender. This allowed us to explore whether participants' evaluations of the message sender (in terms of sexism) and the interaction (in terms of favorability) predicted their actual decision choice:

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

The Current Study

The present study was designed to examine how individuals interpret ambiguous interpersonal behavior – particularly in terms of perceived sexist intent – and how these interpretations are shaped by both contextual and individual difference factors. We investigated whether the sex composition of the interaction (sender and receiver) influenced perceptions of sexism (H1a, H1b), and whether this effect was moderated by the gendered nature of the environmental setting (RQ1) as well as individual differences in neosexism (H2) and prior beliefs about sexism (RQ3). We also explored whether the effects of neosexism varied by context (RQ2).

Beyond attribution, we tested whether perceptions of sexism subsequently predicted appraisals of the interaction's overall favorability (H3), and whether both perceptions and appraisals influenced downstream decision-making behavior (RQ4). Together, these tests allowed us to assess how ambiguous cues, personal beliefs, and contextual factors interact to shape both subjective evaluations and behavioral choices.

Method

Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study was to evaluate two newly developed scenarios (daycare and HR) to identify one that could serve as a suitable complement to the banking scenario used by Grawitch et al. (2023). Our primary goal was to select a second scenario that would introduce a

different gender-typed context (i.e., more stereotypically female-typed) while maintaining comparability with the original scenario in terms of structure and baseline perceptions of sexism when rated side by side. This was important because the main study examined how gendered context interacts with sex composition to influence perceptions of sexist behavior in ambiguous interactions. To test this, we pretested the new scenarios to ensure they did not inherently elicit stronger or weaker sexism attributions when evaluated against the original, which could confound the interpretation of contextual effects.

Both new scenarios were structured similarly (three paragraphs, roughly equivalent numbers of sex-specific terminology such as pronouns and names) and designed to be applicable to both sexes. Full versions of all scenarios are provided in the Appendix. Participants (N = 107; 75.6% female) were recruited through the authors' social media networks – Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter – and required to provide informed consent prior to participating. The pilot used a 2 (sender direction: male-to-female, female-to-male) × 2 (scenario: daycare, HR) design. Participants first read the banking scenario corresponding to their randomly assigned sender direction, then rated the sexism of the sender using a 7-point scale. Next, they were randomly assigned to read either the daycare or the HR scenario and again rated the sender's sexism. Finally, they completed a comparative judgment about which scenario (1 or 2) featured more sexist behavior.

Paired-samples t-tests revealed that perceived sexism in the male-to-female condition was more similar between the banking and daycare scenarios ($t(27)=1.56$, $p=.065$) than between the banking and HR scenarios ($t(27)=3.15$, $p=.002$). The female-to-male condition also showed more comparable ratings between banking and daycare ($t(25)=0.71$, $p=.243$) than between banking and HR ($t(24)=-1.28$, $p=.106$). Comparative judgments likewise showed no significant differences between banking and either daycare or HR in terms of perceived sexism (all ps > .19). Based on these findings, we selected the daycare scenario for inclusion in the main study as a complementary female-typed context that was matched in structure and perceived sexism level to the original banking scenario.

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 (gendered setting: bank, daycare) x 4 (sender/receiver sex composition: male/female, female/male, female/female, male/male) design in which both variables were manipulated between subjects. Each participant was randomly assigned to only one of the two scenarios and to only one of the four possible sender-receiver sex composition 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 a decision choice item and provided ratings of the interaction.

Measures

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"; α=.91).

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.

Post-Scenario Decision Choice. Upon completion of the scenario, respondents were 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.)

Post-Scenario Interaction Favorability Ratings. Respondents rated favorability of the interaction on two attributes: pleasantness and professionalism. The specific wording of the items was as follows: "If you were (customer name), how pleased would you be with your interaction with (employee name)?" (*pleasantness*) and "To what degree was (employee name)'s behavior professional?" (*professionalism*). Ratings were provided on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all") to 7 ("Very much"). The pleasantness and professionalism items were aggregated together to create an overall favorability score (α=.91).

Post-Scenario Sexism Ratings. Respondents were asked the following question: "Based on this interaction, to what extent do you think (employee name) is sexist?" Ratings were provided on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 ("Not at all") to 7 ("Very much").

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

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables by Condition.

	Sexism		Interaction Favorability		Decision	
	Bank M (SD)	Daycare M (SD)	Bank M (SD)	Daycare M (SD)	Bank % Yes	Daycare % Yes
Sex Comp.						
M-F	4.31 (1.78)	3.81 (1.97)	2.75 (1.59)	3.82 (1.75)	23.9%	59.7%
M-M	2.51 (1.56)	3.48 (1.75)	3.36 (1.30)	4.39 (1.37)	28.4%	77.3%
F-M	2.75 (1.61)	3.24 (1.72)	3.78 (1.68)	4.70 (1.61)	42.2%	72.7%
F-F	3.39 (1.94)	3.61 (1.83)	3.56 (1.55)	4.08 (1.61)	41.9%	72.3%
Neosexism						
Low	3.39 (1.93)	3.94 (1.80)	3.08 (1.55)	3.94 (1.69)	27.0%	63.5%
Mod/High	3.07 (1.76)	3.17 (1.77)	3.65 (1.55)	4.25 (1.50)	41.5%	78.8%
Overall	3.24 (1.86)	3.54 (1.82)	3.35 (1.57)	4.25 (1.62)	33.8%	70.5%

Note: F-M is female sender/male receiver, F-F is female sender/female receiver, M-M is male sender/male receiver, and M-F is male sender/female receiver

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 α of .005 as the threshold for statistical significance and .01 as the threshold for suggestive results, with results above 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.

Descriptive statistics for the sexism, interaction favorability, and decision choice variables split by the various conditions can be found in Table 1. To test H1 and explore RQ1 we conducted a 2 (gendered setting) x 4 (sex composition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) using sexism ratings as the dependent variable (DV). The results (top panel of Table 2) suggested a significant sex composition main effect, $F(3,516)=10.86$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.059$.

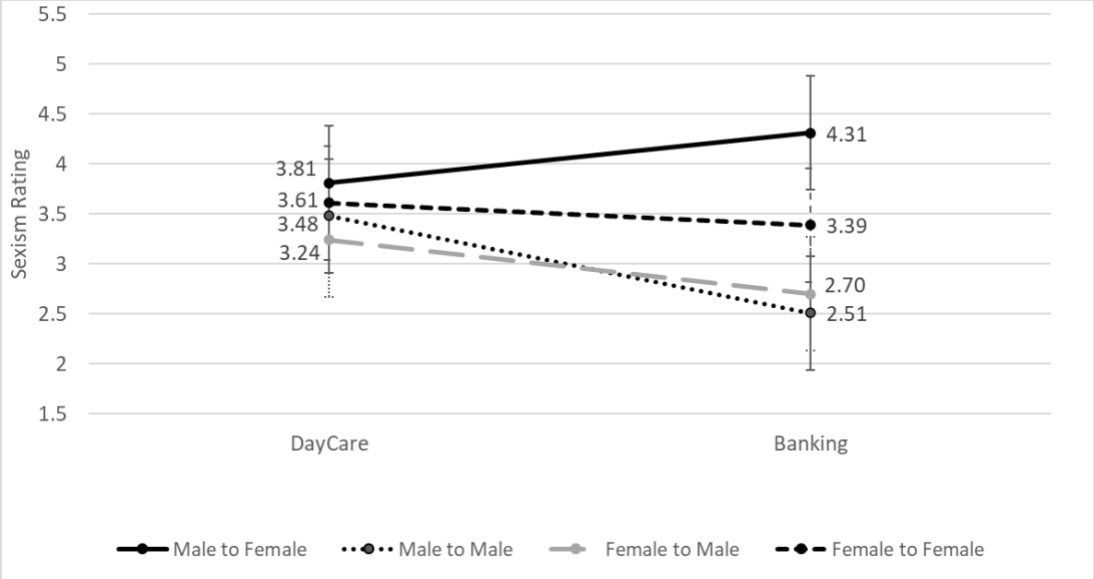
Table 2. ANOVA Results for H1.

Source	df_1	df_2	*F*	*p*	Partial η^2
Overall ANOVA					
Sex Composition (SC)	3	516	**10.86**	**.000**	**.059**
Scenario	1	516	3.69	.055	.007
SC x Scenario	3	516	*4.08*	*.007*	*.023*
Daycare Condition					
SC	3	260	1.12	.340	.013
Bank Condition					
SC	3	256	**14.54**	**.000**	**.146**

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

This effect, though, showed a suggestive difference between the two gendered setting conditions, $F(3,516)=4.08$, $p<.007$, partial $\eta^2 = .023$. As a result, we opted to perform a one-way ANOVA within each condition, using the 4-level sex composition variable as the IV. The results suggested a significant and strong sex composition effect only in the bank condition (see bottom two panels of Table 2). The overall female victimization effect appeared to be present and much more pronounced in the bank scenario (see Figure 1), with average sexism ratings over 1.5 points higher in the male sender/female receiver condition than in the reverse condition. Thus, H1a was not supported, as the effect was largely a receiver sex effect. However, H1b was partially supported, as the effect in the male sender/female receiver condition was significantly higher than the effect in the female sender/male receiver condition, but only for the bank scenario. Furthermore, the answer to RQ1 was that yes, the effect differed by gendered context condition.

Figure 1. Sex Composition x Gendered Condition Interaction Effect for Sexism Ratings H1b).



To test H2 and explore 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 4 (sex composition) 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 sex composition effect was

still present, but there was also a sex composition x neosexism suggestive interaction. A comparison of means (Table 4) indicated that sexism scores between those low and high in neosexism were comparable in all conditions except for the male sender/female receiver

Table 3. ANOVA Results for H2.

Source	df_1	df_2	*F*	*p*	Partial η^2
Daycare Condition					
Sex Composition (SC)	3	256	0.68	.565	.008
Neosexism	1	256	**10.82**	**.001**	**.041**
SC x Neosexism	3	256	2.43	.065	.028
Bank Condition					
SC	3	252	**13.65**	**.000**	**.140**
Neosexism	1	252	1.82	.178	.007
SC x Neosexism	*3*	*252*	*4.21*	*.006*	*.048*

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

Table 4. Neosexism Interaction Effects for Sexism Ratings (H2) in the Bank Condition.

	Mean (SE)	**Mean (SE)**
Sex Composition	Low Neosexism	High Neosexism
Male Sender/Female Receiver	**4.76**	**3.17**
	(.20)	**(.23)**
Male Sender/Male Receiver	2.88	3.10
	(.22)	(.21)
Female Sender/Male Receiver	3.07	2.94
	(.23)	(.21)
Female Sender/Female Receiver	3.70	3.31
	(.22)	(.22)

Note: Bold indicates significant differences between low and high neosexism conditions.

condition, with those scoring low in neosexism providing sexism ratings that were 1.47 points higher on average than those high in neosexism (99.5% CI: .30, 2.65). When taken together, the results suggest that those low in neosexism showed a bias toward higher sexism ratings in general but that this effect was more pronounced in the male sender/female receiver condition in the banking context. 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 explore 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 composition conditions (e.g., M-F, F-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 sender/male receiver and male sender/female receiver conditions (see Table 5). However, the results for the male/male condition suggested that scenario, rather than prior

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

Variable	B	CI	SE	β	t	p
Model 1: F-M						
Scenario	-.48	-1.32, .37	.29	-.14	-1.61	.109
Prior Probability	.03	-.14, .21	.06	.05	0.52	.605
Model 2: F-F						
Scenario	-.19	-1.15, .76	.33	-.05	-0.57	.566
Prior Probability	.08	-.14, .30	.08	.10	1.08	.282
Model 3: M-M						
Scenario	**-.90**	**-1.71, -.08**	**.28**	**-.26**	**-3.14**	**.002**
Prior Probability	.14	-.03, .32	.06	.19	2.30	.023
Model 4a: M-F						
Scenario	.72	-.19, 1.64	.32	.19	2.25	.026
Prior Probability	**.20**	**.02, .39**	**.06**	**.27**	**3.15**	**.002**
Model 4b: M-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
Note: F-M is female sender/male receiver, F-F is female sender/female receiver, M-M is male sender/male receiver, and M-F is male sender/female receiver

probability of male-to-male sexist attitudes, explained the significant variance (i.e., the sender in the male sender/male receiver bank scenario was rated as less sexist than the sender in the male sender/male receiver daycare scenario). The only significant result relative to our research question concerned the male sender/female receiver condition. After controlling for scenario, respondent reports about the likelihood of men holding sexist attitudes toward women were 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 composition 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 ($M_{M\text{-}F} = 4.92$, $SE = .10$, $M_{M\text{-}M} = 2.40$, $SE = .10$, $M_{F\text{-}M} = 3.94$, $SE = .10$, $M_{F\text{-}F} = 3.22$, $SE = .10$, all ps < .001). Those low in neosexism reported higher M-F prior probability estimates ($M = 5.45$, $SE = .14$) and lower F-M prior probability estimates (M=3.49, SE=.14) than those higher in neosexism ($M_{M\text{-}F} = 4.38$, $SE = .14$; $M_{F\text{-}M} = 4.39$, $SE = .14$, both ps < .001).

To test H3, that sexism ratings would predict favorability ratings, we began by analyzing the correlation between the two ratings, which was significant and negative (r=-.52, p<.05). We then conducted a multiple regression analysis, entering neosexism, three dummy coded sex composition variables (with the reference group being the M-M condition), 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).

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

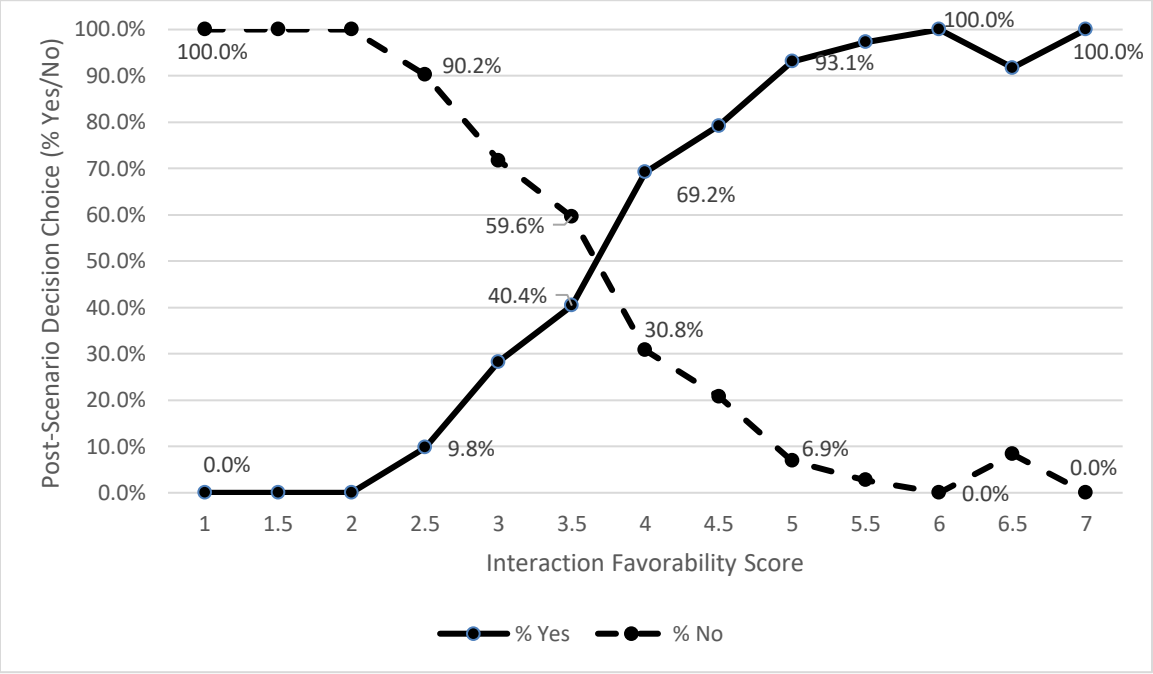
Variable	B	CI	SE	β	t	p
Model 1						
Scenario	**-.86**	**-1.24, -.48**	**.13**	**-.26**	**-6.41**	**.000**
F-M Condition	.32	-.22, .85	.19	.08	1.67	.095
F-F Condition	-.08	-.62, .45	.19	-.02	-0.45	.653
M-F Condition	**-.59**	**-1.12, -.06**	**.19**	**-.15**	**-3.12**	**.002**
Neosexism	**.32**	**.11, .54**	**.08**	**.17**	**4.21**	**.000**
Model 2						
Scenario	**-1.01**	**-1.34, -.69**	**.11**	**-.31**	**-8.87**	**.000**
F-M Condition	.35	-.11, .80	.16	.09	2.15	.032
F-F Condition	.17	-.29, .63	.16	.04	1.03	.304
M-F Condition	-.09	-.18, -.02	.16	-.02	-0.56	.577
Neosexism	.17	-.02, .35	.07	.09	2.53	.012
Sexism Ratings	**-.47**	**-.56, -.37**	**.03**	**-.52**	**-14.40**	**.000**

Model 1: $R = .380$, $R^2 = .145$, $F(5, 518) = 17.62$, p<.001
Model 2: $R = .624$, $R^2 = .390$, $F(6, 517) = 55.08$, p<.001, ΔR^2=.245, $\Delta F(1, 517)$=207.26, p<.001
Note: Bold values are significant at p<.005, italicized values are significant at p<.01

Finally, RQ4 posed the question of whether interaction favorability or sexism ratings would predict the actual recommended decision choice made by respondents. To explore 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 composition 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 2 charts the percentage endorsement by each level of interaction favorability and shows that only at or above a favorability score of 4 did most respondents endorse the decision recommended by the message sender (i.e., banker or daycare worker). Thus, there appears to be a threshold of interaction favorability that influenced decision choice: when favorability exceeded the threshold, decision choices benefitted the message sender.

Figure 2. Percentage Endorsement by Interaction Favorability



Discussion

This study investigated how sex composition, gendered setting, and individual attitudes affect perceptions of sexism and downstream decision making in ambiguous interpersonal situations. Drawing on and extending prior research – including work by Grawitch et al. (2023), Riemer et al. (2014), and Sirin et al. (2004) – we tested whether established findings hold across new contexts, and how such perceptions translate into appraisals and decisions. Specifically, we tested whether effects observed in prior studies – such as increased perceptions of sexism in male sender/female receiver interactions – would hold across different role contexts (i.e., banking vs. daycare), and whether those perceptions would influence judgments of favorability and downstream decision making.

The results suggest that, while the sex composition effects observed by Grawitch et al. (2023)

replicated in the male sender/female receiver condition, these findings were confined to the context of a traditionally male-typed role (i.e., the banking scenario). In the more traditionally female-typed role (i.e., daycare), the combination of sender and receiver sex had no effect on sexism ratings. This suggests that the influence of sex composition on attributions of sexism may be context-dependent, potentially amplified in settings that align more closely with gendered expectations. Such settings may increase the accessibility of social prototypes (Goh et al., 2022), thereby heightening the likelihood of sexism-related attributions in ambiguous interactions within those settings. These findings add to a broader literature showing that contextual cues – such as social role (Riemer et al., 2014) and actor sex (Sirin et al., 2004) – can shape how people interpret ambiguous behavior, even when message content remains constant.

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 (as argued by Goh et al., 2022).

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 sender/female receiver 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.

These findings, while consistent with prior work, raise a broader conceptual question: Does the neosexism scale truly reflect a stable attitudinal orientation toward women, or does it more accurately capture individual differences in the threshold for labeling behavior as sexist? For example, some items in the scale may reflect philosophical disagreements about overcorrection

or societal fairness, rather than the latent prejudice Tougas et al. (1995) claim it does. In this way, neosexism scores may reflect broader worldview differences – particularly beliefs about how pervasive sexism is – which, in turn, influence how readily ambiguous behavior is interpreted as biased (an explanation thar seems likely given recent research from Winegard et al., 2025). That is, individuals who believe sexism is widespread may be more attuned to its possible presence and thus more likely to perceive it in uncertain situations. Future work should consider both the interpretive role of such beliefs and the possibility that neosexism scores are shaped by broader ideological orientations (e.g., political beliefs) that guide how people construe social intent.

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 sender/female receiver 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 the 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 the utilized scenarios. 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 contextual details shape people's perception of the situation, more research is needed to clarify 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. These discrepancies may reflect scenario-specific features, as the banking and daycare scenarios may have entailed distinct cues unrelated to gender typicality that contributed to sexism attributions. Relatedly, both scenarios identified the message sender as an assistant manager, a role that may carry authority-based or leadership connotations. While this occupational framing was held constant across conditions to isolate contextual effects, it may itself influence perceptions of behavior and intent. Future studies should consider independently varying the sender's role and the broader setting to disentangle the effects of gender-neutral cues such as status from those of gendered settings.

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 to better ascertain the generalizability of the results obtained here to the broader population.

Finally, the current studies utilized hypothetical scenarios. Though effective for experimental manipulation, these scenarios still deviate from real, in-person situations. During real-time events, individuals make snap judgments and draw conclusions based on their experience of the situation, often with real-world consequences for the decision maker. The presence of emotions, rich contextual cues, 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 contributes to a broader body of work suggesting that in ambiguous situations, perceptions of sexist intent are shaped not only by message content, but also by factors like the sex composition of the

interaction (Grawitch et al., 2023), the social role of the communicator (Riemer et al., 2014), and the sex of the actor (Sirin et al., 2004). However, our research also demonstrates that individual attitudes about sexism prevalence, as well as other situational contextual factors beyond interactant sex composition, may play a significant role in the interpretation of behavior in ambiguous situations. In the present study, sexism ratings predicted how favorable people perceived the interaction to be, which then predicted people's decision making. These results point to practical consequences for actual behavioral choices, suggesting the need to conduct additional research to better understand the practical consequences.

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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?"