Sexual Prejudice, Sexism, and Religion

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Multi-national and meta-analytic studies suggest that the pathways between religiousness and sexism/sexual prejudice are partially mediated by sociopersonality factors such as conservatism. In this article, we describe the contributing factors to this relationship, such as authoritarianism and fundamentalism. These factors interact at the dynamic nexus of individual and social development. As such, religiously situated sexism and sexual prejudice are not viewed as inevitable outcomes to religious practice and faith. Individual differences (e.g. conservatism), congregational (e.g. doctrine/policies, limited contact), and cultural factors (e.g. power hierarchies) mutually contribute to this landscape, and individuals ultimately make choices regarding their behavior and views. Further research exploring the mechanisms of religiously situated gender inequality and sexual prejudice is essential given the associated negative outcomes for individuals, relationships, and communities. Our growing grasp of the agentic pathways leading to religiously situated prejudice and discrimination is enriching our understanding of how individual differences and social contexts contribute to sexism and sexual prejudice.

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

Sexism is rooted in three primary beliefs: paternalism (the ideological explanation of male dominance), binaric gender differentiation (the belief that men and women comprise gender and are fundamentally different), and heteronormativity (the norm of heterosexual romantic relationships) [3]. Sexism is often ambivalent, a multifaceted power construct that includes both hostile and benevolent components [4]. Benevolent sexism encompasses a patronizing attitude, the Idealization of traditional gender roles, and women’s need for male protection/nurturance. Contrastingly, hostile sexism centers on antipathy and resentment towards women perceived to be challenging male power or conventional gender roles. While these attitudes can exist independently of religion [5], many religious groups and theological frameworks promote sexism. Sexist attitudes are also often associated with sexual (orientation) prejudice.

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

Sexism and sexual prejudice are associated with various aspects of religion (e.g. belief, faith, and fundamentalism) across all major world religions (e.g. Christianity [7].

Introduction
Psychologists have reported links between religion and prejudice for decades [1], and continue to do so [2**]. This article explores the association between religion, sexism, and sexual prejudice on individual and social levels. We begin by defining the constructs of religion, sexism, and sexual prejudice and then continue with a summary of recent personality and social psychological research on the subject. Following which, we introduce a theoretical model synthesizing extant research and then conclude with a discussion of the implications of religiously situated sexism and sexual prejudice.
Judiasm [8], Islam [9,10,11], and Hinduism [12], although the strength of this relationship varies across groups. Moreover, multinational analyses suggest countries with larger non-religious populations tend to be more gender equitable and more tolerant of homosexuality [13,14**]. This association between religion and sexism/sexual prejudice is significant for correlative self-reports and experimental designs [14**]. Though sexism and sexual prejudice are significantly associated with religion on an aggregate level, this relationship is not universally or consistently expressed by individuals. For example, some highly religious individuals maintain supportive relationships with sexual minority family members [15]. Sexual and gender minorities have constructed integrated religious sexual minority identities, congregations, and theologies [16**,17,18]. Similarly, there are feminist clergy, congregations, and theologies [19–21]. Given this larger context, this paper takes the position that religion is socially constructed at the nexus of individual and community development [22]. Religion is a cultural tool that individuals can choose to use to support or undermine gender/sexual equity. We must therefore identify the additional individual and social factors that contribute to the association between religion, sexism, and sexual prejudice.

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

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

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

In both meta-analytic and multi-national studies, conservativism is the strongest predictor of sexism/sexual prejudice [33–35]. What about conservativism promotes sexism/sexual prejudice? Some research suggests that the relationship between conservativism and sexism/sexual prejudice (path b in Figure 1) can be explained by conservativism’s emphasis on stability, conformity, and social convention [30,36*]. Conservativism may affect sexism/sexual prejudice by promoting in-group favoritism in socially threatening situations [37]. Multi-national research suggests that conservativism is more strongly related to sexism/sexual prejudice in countries with less systemic threat (e.g. less rigid power hierarchies, unemployment, and incidence of violence) [2**,33,38]. In contexts with greater systemic threat, these studies suggest that the range of expected individual differences is constrained by the existence of a greater sense of threat. Essentially, conservativism is thought to be an adaptive form of social cognition that helps people cope with uncertainty. In situations where there is greater threat,
people in general may be more likely to engage in conservative thinking and behaviors, reducing the variation in conservativism between individuals. Conversely, when there is less systemic threat, a wider range of conservativism may be observed. Alternatively, conservativism may relate to sexism/sexual prejudice because conservativism entails prioritizing sanctity/purity above doing good to others when these values conflict. In this lens, both conservativism and prioritizing sanctity/purity values, advocate for the maintenance of strong group norms, whereas valuing doing good to others appeals less strongly to group norms. Studies from this perspective suggest that valuing sanctity/purity may thus lead to denial that outgroup individuals are rational individuals, thereby perpetuating prejudice [39*,40].

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

One explanation is that religious spaces may sanction sexism/sexual prejudice through doctrine and/or culture. Many denominations and congregations have adopted official policies that prohibits women or same-sex couples from being clergy. Research indicates that these policies are related to congregants’ sexism/sexual prejudice, even if policies are not strictly enforced [43**,44]. Multinational research — relying on national representative datasets from the US, Europe, and over 50 countries worldwide — suggests that these doctrines/policies (e.g. ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’) may provide individuals with justification that permits them to discriminate [37,14**]. Recent research suggests that congregation-level predictors such as policies/procedures around same-sex sexuality are among the strongest predictors of sexism/sexual prejudice [45–47,52]. Clergy’s views and practices (e.g. how much clergy sanction prejudice in their preaching or how often scripture is quoted in worship services) as well as aggregates of individual religiousness variables (e.g. how often congregants within a congregation on average attend worship services; the average congregant reported orthodoxy of a congregation) may be particularly influential in congregants’ sexism/sexual prejudice [48,49,55]. Altogether, these studies suggest that although a general relationship between religiousness and homonegativity exists, characteristics of clergy and congregations may moderate the strength and possibly the direction of this relationship.

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

Conclusions

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

**Conflict of interest statement**

Nothing declared.

**References and recommended reading**

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

* of special interest
** of outstanding interest


This global study tests the hypothesis that high threat contexts constrain the relationship between individual differences in religiousness, and anti-gay prejudice and sexism. Results indicate strong associations between religion and prejudice in regions low in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and collectivism.


This article quantitatively explores the demographic and social factors contributing to sexual prejudice among a sample of 186 Muslim Americans (largely from Saudi Arabia).


This article quantitatively studies the impact of intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, and religious fundamentalism on Indonesian people’s (n=602) attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women.


This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of religion and morality across cultures, with an emphasis upon religion and homophobia/sexual prejudice.


This paper presents a retrospective secondary data analysis of 750 gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals to quantitatively assess sexual orientation and religion/spirituality integration using hierarchical cluster analysis.


This study used a mixed-methods design to explore the religious and mental health experiences of 15 transgender Muslims, finding that 8 of the 15 participants used religion and spirituality as important coping tools (e. g. Allah, Quran, liberation theology).


This quantitative study indicates that low empathic concern is the primary driver of hostile sexism and that social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, religiosity, and low openness and agreeableness differenti- entially predict ambivalent sexism, along with male gender and low education level.


This article presents analyses on samples from Turkey, the Netherlands, and Belgium (combined N = 964), indicating that the impact of individual differences in religiosity on traditional gender role beliefs and sexism is
limited as compared to that of individual differences in social-ideological attitudes (i.e., social dominance orientation and authoritarianism).


31. Janssen D, Scheepers P: How religiosity shapes rejection of homosexuality across the globe. J Homosex 2019, 66:1974-2001 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1523606. This article uses multi-level modelling of data from 55 countries to highlight that religiousness may impact sexism/ssexual prejudice through group-level processes and that these relationship may be explained by authoritarianism and traditional values.


Through five incident studies, this article finds that the difference in which participants valued sanctity over care predicted sexual prejudice, suggesting that this effect is due to de-rationalizing sexual minorities.


Using results from several cross-nationals datasets to back their claims, the authors propose a justification-suppression model to explain the relationship between religiousness and prejudice.


By taking a multi-level approach, this work demonstrates the role that congregations may have in influencing congregants’ sexual prejudice.


49. Lefever GT, Milburn HE, Sheffield PE, Tamez Guerrero, NA: (resubmit): Religiousness and homonegativity in congregations: The role of individual, congregational, and clergy characteristics. Psychol Religion Spiritual.


55. Cunningham GB, Melton EN: The moderating effects of contact with lesbian and gay friends on the relationships among religious fundamentalism, sexism, and sexual prejudice. J Sex


