



Distancing or drawing together: Sexism and organisational tolerance of sexism impact women's social relationships at work

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Abstract

This article examines the role of organisational climate in women's social responses to sexism at work. We argue that after experiences of sexism, women “draw together” with other women when they perceive that the organisational climate is intolerant of sexism. We assess the role of organisational climate at three levels: peer-, manager-, and policy-level. We conducted a correlational study ($N_{\text{study1}} = 405$) and two experimental studies ($N_{\text{study2}} = 377$, $N_{\text{study3}} = 391$), in which we examined women's experiences of sexism at work (measured in Study 1; manipulated in Studies 2 and 3). We also measured perceived tolerance of sexism at the peer-, manager- and policy-level in all studies. The main DVs were women's workplace friendships with other women in Studies 1 and 2, and closeness to female co-workers in Study 3. Results showed that perceived tolerance of sexism from *peers* was especially important in shaping women's social relationships following experiences of sexism; tolerance from managers or at the policy level had less consistent effects. Specifically, experiences with sexism were positively associated with female participants' reported friendship (Studies 1 and 2) and closeness (Study 3) with their female colleagues, but only when peers were perceived not to tolerate sexism. When peers were perceived to tolerate sexism, female participants did not respond to sexism by drawing together.

KEYWORDS

managers, organisational tolerance, peers, policies, sexism, social relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research shows that women often face sexism in the workplace (Davison & Burke, 2000; Starnarski & Son Hing, 2015; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Sexism can be defined as unequal evaluations and treatment of men and women based on their sex (Swim &

Hyers, 2009) and includes a range of daily hassles and negative life events (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995). Sexism affects women negatively in different ways, such as by leading to unfair payment (Petersen & Morgan, 1995) and lack of leadership opportunities (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Moreover, disadvantage in the workplace causes stress and generally negatively affects women's

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psychological wellbeing (Barreto & Ellemers, 2013; Borrell et al., 2010; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). For instance, women's reports of personal experiences with discrimination are positively correlated with self-reported depression (Kobryniewicz & Branscombe, 1997) and inversely correlated with personal self-esteem (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobryniewicz, & Owen, 2002). However, not much is known about the impact of discrimination on interpersonal relationships within the group that is targeted by discrimination. Prior research in this area does provide some indications, but these are largely inconsistent. This article aims to advance understanding of how sexism affects women's interpersonal relationships with other women by taking into account the role of tolerance of sexism in the organisational environment.

1.1 | The importance of social relationships at work

The quality of one's social relationships is an important aspect of individual wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2000). In the workplace, workers with high quality work relationships with their peers and managers report more positive emotions (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016) and greater job satisfaction (Ragins & Dutton, 2007; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). In addition, social relationships at work also affect organisations. High quality workplace relationships with peers and managers are positively associated with productivity (Ragins & Dutton, 2007; Einarsen et al., 2011) and organisational commitment (Hanpachern, Morgan, & Griego, 1998).

Research on the role of social relationships in health and wellbeing indicates that social relationships constitute an important resource to cope with negative or stressful experiences (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Frisch, Hausser, Van Dick, & Mojzisch, 2014; Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012). In other words, those who have positive social relationships with others are better able to cope with a variety of negative life events (and some argue this is especially the case for women compared to men; Taylor et al., 2000). Social relationships with other members of the same in-group have particularly important benefits for health and wellbeing (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998; Sanchez & Garcia, 2009). Studies focusing specifically on workplace friendships, or informal relationships with peers at the same level in the hierarchy (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Myers & Johnson, 2004), have also highlighted the importance of peer relationships, especially among members of minority or disadvantaged groups (Hays, 1989; Jones, 1991). In sum, social relationships with other women are an important resource for women's wellbeing. Here, we examine whether experiences of sexism might interfere with these relationships, hindering or facilitating women's access to this important resource.

1.2 | The impact of sexism on women's social relationships with other women

There is a developing line of research on how devaluation affects social relationships, but findings in this area are inconsistent and

sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, research has shown that being targeted by prejudice and discrimination can negatively affect close interpersonal relationships, including those with friends and family (Doyle & Molix, 2014a, 2014b, 2015b). However, that work does not specifically address the effects of devaluation on relationships with other members of the devalued group (i.e., in-group members). In the context of gender, some research has shown that women can respond to gender discrimination by distancing themselves from other women (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016; Ely, 1994; Faniko, Ellemers, & Derks, 2016), especially if being a woman is not an important part of their identity to begin with (Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & de Groot, 2011). At the same time, however, it has often been suggested that members of devalued groups tend to "draw together" when threatened (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). For example, the extent to which individuals perceive themselves and their group to be targets of discrimination is positively associated with in-group identification (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001).

One source of confusion in this area is that what can broadly qualify as self-group distancing is very diverse and varies in critical ways. For example, researchers studying self-group distancing have examined how experiences of sexism impact how women relate to women as a whole (e.g., how similar they see themselves to the typical woman, Derks, van Laar, et al., 2011; to what extent they identify with other women, Branscombe et al., 1999), as well as how experiences of sexism impact the extent to which women use stereotypically feminine versus masculine traits to describe themselves (Derks, Ellemers, van Laar, & de Groot, 2011; Faniko et al., 2016; Faniko, Ellemers, Derks, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2017), and by looking at how experiences of sexism impact women's evaluations of their subordinates (Derks, Ellemers, et al., 2011; Derks, van Laar, et al., 2011; Faniko et al., 2016, 2017). Our aim in this article is to contribute to this literature by focusing specifically on women's *interpersonal relationships* with in-group members, that is, female co-workers. In addition, while the majority of the self-group distancing work was particularly focused on uncovering the conditions under which women distance themselves from each other, we are additionally interested in when they might draw together in response to sexism (see also Derks, van Laar, et al., 2011). Indeed, self-group distancing is problematic both because it can be interpreted as discrimination from in-group members and because it inhibits the social support (seeking and provision), which is most directly evidenced by directly examining when women draw together.

Prior research on interpersonal relationships (and in-group relationships) therefore suggests that women might respond to sexism at work by distancing themselves from other women, but there is also evidence that the opposite can happen, whereby experiences of sexism instead lead women to draw together. In this article, we hope to clarify these somewhat contradictory findings by considering the role played by organisational climate in shaping women's relationships with other women at work. We argue that when women experience sexism at work, the organisational climate in which that sexism occurs can hinder or facilitate

women's access to this important coping response. Specifically, when women experience sexism at work, the perception that the organisational climate is *intolerant* of sexism will lead women to report more positive social relationships with other women in the workplace. However, the perception that organisational climate is *tolerant* of sexism may hinder drawing towards other women as a response to sexism.

1.3 | The role of organisational climate

Research has shown that organisational climates that tolerate sexism tend to be associated with more sexism and sexual harassment compared to organisational climates that do not tolerate sexism (Parker, Griffin, Sprigg, & Wall, 2002; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). However, an organisational climate that does not tolerate sexism does not automatically eliminate sexism altogether (Kaiser et al., 2013). We argue that *perceived* organisational tolerance of sexism is also likely to shape health and wellbeing outcomes when sexism does occur in an organisation. When sexism occurs in an organisation where there is a climate of tolerance of sexism, this might affect how pervasive sexism is expected to be. Sexism that is perceived to be pervasive has been shown to have more damaging effects on wellbeing (an important correlate and precursor of social affiliative behaviour) than sexism that is perceived to be rare (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Stroebe, Dovidio, Barreto, Ellemers, & John, 2011). In addition, when organisations tolerate sexism, victims are more likely to expect that complaining or seeking social support is likely to be very costly—and it is already known that the anticipated social costs of complaining decrease actual complaints (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). In accordance with this reasoning, we argue that the organisational climate within which sexism occurs will impact women's social relationships following experiences of sexism. We specifically expect that when women experience sexism at work, the perception that the organisational climate does not tolerate sexism will have a beneficial effect on their relationships with female colleagues. However, we expect that this beneficial effect will fade away when the organisational climate is perceived to tolerate sexism.

Organisational climates include practices, procedures, and norms about behaviour that an organisation expects from its employees (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003; Schein, 2010; Zohar & Hofmann, 2012). The particular focus of this article is on organisational tolerance of sexism, which therefore refers to the absences of practices, procedures, and norms about the inappropriateness of sexism in the workplace. Importantly, organisational climates can also be expressed at the interpersonal level (Paustian-Underdahl, King, Rogelberg, Kulich, & Gentry, 2017), for instance by managers and by peers (Madlock & Booth-Butterfield, 2011), and having a high-level organisational policy that clarifies intolerance of discrimination does not mean that this necessarily translates into similar levels of intolerance of discrimination at lower levels in the organisation (Brady, Kaiser, Major, & Kirby, 2015; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, &

Dovidio, 2002). In this article, then, organisational climate is operationalised at three levels, namely the extent to which (a) peers, (b) managers, and (3) organisational policies do or do not reject sexism and support those targeted by sexist treatment.

Organisational policies around equality and diversity clarify that discrimination is unacceptable and facilitate disciplinary action when it occurs—and therefore may reduce expectations of discriminatory or unfair treatment (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Ruggs, Martinez, Hebl, & Law, 2015). Previous studies support the idea that managers also strongly influence the extent to which the workplace is perceived to tolerate discrimination (Bulutlar & Oz, 2009; Salin, 2003; Samnani, 2012). One reason for this is that managers are expected to have the power to determine how much intolerance of discrimination is emphasised at the local level, as well as how discriminatory events are handled (Edelman, 2005; Martinez, Ruggs, Sabat, Hebl, & Binggeli, 2013), and to provide support to victims of discrimination (Beehr, King, & King, 1990; Ely, 1994; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). However, the most proximal determinant of organisational climate is one's peers. As is the case for managers, it has been shown that peer networks play an important role in establishing social norms within the work context (James & Sells, 1981; James, James, & Ashe, 1990), and this is also likely to be true with regard to norms around sexism. However, it is not known how this might affect social relationships among women after they have experienced sexism, which is the focus of the current work. One previous study (Doyle & Molix, 2015a) with sexual minorities in the United States showed that discrimination was associated with greater friendship strain, but that this effect was reversed for those who lived in states with laws and policies that supported sexual minorities against discrimination. However, this study examined interpersonal relationships broadly (rather than social relationships with members of the in-group) and it was not conducted within an organisational setting as is the current research.

1.4 | The present research

In this research, we examined how experiences of sexism at work affect women's social relationships with other women. We assessed the role played by tolerance of sexism in the workplace, including perceptions of tolerance of sexism at the peer-, manager-, and policy-level. We expected to find that women respond to sexism by drawing together when they perceive the organisational climate as *less* tolerant of sexism. However, we expect that drawing together behaviour is not triggered when they perceive the organisational climate as *more* tolerant of sexism. Additionally, we aim to provide insight into which source (or sources) of tolerance of sexism (i.e., peer, manager, policy) have a more substantial impact on women's social relationships with other women following experiences of sexism at work. Studies in this article conform to APA ethical guidelines and have been approved by the ethical review committee at the University of Exeter. Data associated with these studies can be viewed at https://osf.io/af95p/?view_only=a9dd26d879834a30bd49652cd4195db0.

2 | STUDY 1: CORRELATIONAL STUDY

In Study 1, we surveyed women working in the United Kingdom (UK), asking about their experiences of sexism in the workplace during the previous 6 months as well as perceived tolerance of sexism among their peers, their managers, and policies within their organisations. In addition, we assessed social relationships between participants and their female co-workers using a measures of co-worker friendship.

In line with previous literature examining interpersonal relationships as a function of exposure to discrimination (e.g., Doyle & Molix, 2014a) we hypothesised that, overall, experiences of sexism would have detrimental effects on social relationships among women (H1). However, we hypothesised an interaction between experiences of sexism and perceived tolerance of sexism within the organisation (H2), such that experiences of sexism would be positively associated with social relationships with female colleagues, but only when the organisational climate was perceived to be less tolerant of sexism. We hypothesised that this effect would disappear when the organisational climate was perceived to be more tolerant of sexism.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Design and participants

This was a cross-sectional study among working women resident in the UK. All participants were sampled from Prolific Academic and were compensated £2 for their time and effort, which is on par with payments for tasks of comparable length (approximately 15 min). Using the effect size obtained in a pilot study¹ ($f^2 = 0.02$; power = 0.80, $\alpha = .05$), power analyses conducted in G*Power version 3.1 (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996) indicated a sample size of 395 was necessary to detect a comparable effect. A total of 406 participants were recruited online. However, one participant was excluded from the study as they reported they worked alone with no peers or managers in their daily work environment. The age of the final 405 participants ranged from 18 to 66 years with a mean of 37.54 years ($SD = 10.37$ years).

Of the 405 participants, 264 (65.2%) worked full time and 141 (34.8%) worked part time at the time of data collection. More than half of the participants (64%) indicated having a female manager. In terms of percentage of women in the branch or immediate work group, 232 participants (57.3%) indicated that more than 60% of their colleagues were female and 145 (35.8%)

stated that they worked with between 20% and 60% female co-workers.

2.1.2 | Procedure and measures

Participants were invited to take part in an online study about workplace experiences. The measures were presented in the order described here.

Perceived experiences with sexism at work

Participants completed an 11-item sexism scale developed in prior work, focusing on personal experiences with sexism (Van Breen, Barreto, Darden, & Dimitriou, manuscript in preparation). Example items are: "During the last 6 months, have you been in a situation where anyone at work did not take what you said seriously because you are a woman?" and "During the last 6 months, have you been in a situation where anyone at work assumed you had inferior ability (e.g., in maths or science) because you are a woman?" Participants indicated how frequently in the past 6 months they had such an experience, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (most of the time). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present research, $\alpha = .92$.

Perceived organisational tolerance of sexism

Two items were taken from Bingham and Scherer (1993) focused on how participants perceived sexist incidents were dealt with within the organisation: "Unequal treatment of men and women is clearly discouraged in my workplace (including stereotypical comments or jokes)" and "People at my work ignore the unequal treatment of women when it happens". Two other items were developed for the purpose of this study: "There are formal procedures to address the unequal treatment of women at my workplace", and "When women are treated unequally in my workplace this is corrected". These items were repeated three times, referring to perceived peer-, manager-, and policy-level tolerance separately. For example, to measure peer tolerance, the item "Unequal treatment of men and women is clearly discouraged in my workplace" was adjusted to "My co-workers clearly discourage the unequal treatment of men and women in my workplace", while for manager tolerance it was adjusted to "My manager clearly discourages the unequal treatment of men and women in my workplace", and for policy tolerance it was adjusted to "Policies at my work clearly aim to discourage the unequal treatment of men and women in my workplace". Participants rated their level of agreement with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Relevant items were reverse scored. Responses to these 12 items were subjected to a principal components analysis with direct oblimin rotation, which confirmed that the items clustered into three factors reflecting peer- ($\alpha = .97$), manager- ($\alpha = .90$), and policy-level tolerance ($\alpha = .86$).

¹The pilot study consists of secondary analyses of a data set collected in 2015–2016 by undergraduate students working under the supervision of Dr Safi Darden and in collaboration with Prof Manuela Barreto. The data was collected to compare the effects of non-sexualised sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace. Importantly for our purposes, the data included reported personal exposure to sexism and self-reported organisational tolerance of sexism at work. While this did not allow us to examine social relationships, it allowed us to take initial steps towards understanding the role of organisational tolerance of sexism.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 1

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	37.54	10.37						
2. Percentage of women	3.59	1.19	.06					
3. Sexism	1.52	0.66	-.16**	-.29**				
4. Peer tolerance	2.49	0.81	-.06	-.21**	.45**			
5. Manager tolerance	2.29	0.96	-.02	-.12**	.44**	.63**		
6. Policy tolerance	2.29	0.93	-.02	-.07	.21**	.42**	.52**	
7. Friendship	3.84	0.76	-.08	.13**	-.20**	-.46**	-.45**	-.35**

Note: M and SD are used to represent means and standard deviation, respectively. The answer categories for percentage of women are: 1 = 0%–20%, 2 = 21%–40%, 3 = 41%–60%, 4 = 61%–80%, 5 = 81%–100%.

** $p < .01$.

Workplace friendships

The central dependent variable in this study was a measure of women's friendship with other women at work. To measure this, we adjusted the workplace friendship scale developed by Nielsen, Jex, and Adams (2000) by adding "female" before co-workers for each sentence. Six items measured *friendship opportunity* (e.g., "I have the opportunity to develop close friendships with my female co-workers at my workplace", $\alpha = .90$) and six items measured *friendship prevalence* (e.g., "I have formed strong friendships with my female co-workers at work", $\alpha = .90$). Participants responded to these items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These two scales were highly correlated, $r(405) = .62$, $N = 405$, $p \leq .001$, and were thus combined for further analyses ($\alpha = .92$).

It is important to emphasise that the measure of sexism experiences focused on personal experiences with sexism in the workplace, whereas the measure of tolerance of sexism focused on perceptions of how peers, managers, or the organisation as a whole responded to sexism, irrespective of who the target is. Also, while the peer tolerance measure focused broadly on "co-workers" and "people", the measure of workplace friendships clearly and specifically referred to "female co-workers".

Demographics

We included two items adapted from Glomb et al. (1997) to assess the gender composition of the immediate work environment. The items were: "What is your manager's gender?" and "Please estimate the percentage of women in your branch or immediate work group" (ranging from 1 "0%–20%" to 5 "81%–100%"). Finally, participants indicated their age, highest educational attainment, occupation, how long they had been at their current job, the size of the organisation, the size of their immediate work group, how many people they supervised, place of birth, and their employment status.

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Analytic strategy

We utilised hierarchical linear regression, and entered managers' gender (dummy coded as 0 = male, 1 = female), age, and reported percentage of women in the branch or immediate work group (mean-centred) as covariates. Age was entered as a covariate due to prior research with non-college samples demonstrating a negative association between age and experiences with sexism (e.g., Lott, Asquith, & Doyon, 2001). We then entered perceived sexism, and peer-, manager-, and policy-level tolerance of sexism (all mean centred). Finally, we added the interactions between sexism and each tolerance of sexism variable (i.e., three separate interaction terms). Means, standard deviations, and correlations for these variables are provided in Table 1.

2.2.2 | Workplace friendship with women

Overall, the main effect of sexism on workplace friendship with women was not statistically significant, $b = 0.05$, $t(397) = 0.85$, $p = .40$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.16], indicating that exposure to sexism was not associated with social distancing from other women.

The main effect of peer tolerance of sexism was statistically significant, $b = -0.28$, $t(397) = -5.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.38, -0.17], indicating that women who perceived their peers as less tolerant of sexism also reported greater workplace friendship with women. As predicted, this main effect of peer tolerance of sexism was qualified by a significant interaction with personal experiences with sexism, $b = -0.21$, $t(397) = -3.03$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.07]. Breaking down this interaction² showed that among women who perceived

²The alternative breakdown showed that among women who had frequent experiences with sexism, the perception that peers were less tolerant of sexism was associated with more friendships with women, $b = -0.35$, $t(397) = -5.94$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.46, -0.23].

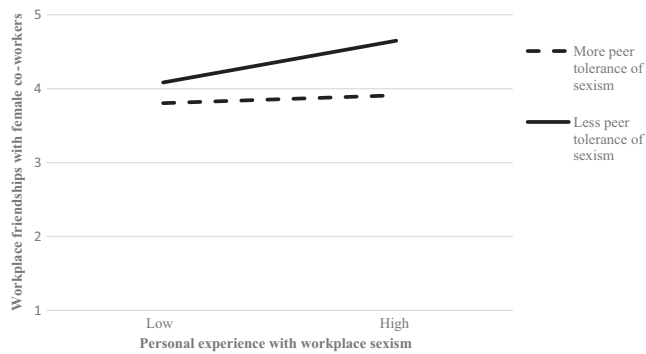


FIGURE 1 How peer tolerance of sexism (M) moderates the relationship between personal experiences with sexism (X) and workplace friendships with female co-workers (Y) in Study 1

less peer tolerance of sexism (-1 SD), more frequent experiences with sexism were associated with stronger workplace friendships, $b = 0.24$, $t(397) = 2.54$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.42]. This was not the case for women who perceived more peer tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.10$, $t(397) = 1.25$, $p = .21$, 95% CI [-0.25, 0.06]. These results are plotted in Figure 1.

Regarding manager-level tolerance of sexism, results showed a main effect of manager tolerance on workplace friendships, such that women who perceived their managers to be less tolerant of sexism reported stronger workplace friendships with other women, $b = -0.17$, $t(397) = -3.59$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.26, -0.08]. As predicted—and as we found for peer tolerance—workplace friendships with women were also affected by an interaction between sexism and manager tolerance of sexism, $b = 0.12$, $t(397) = 2.00$, $p = .046$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.24]. However, decomposition of this interaction³ showed that more experiences of sexism were associated with stronger workplace friendships only for women who perceived their managers to be more tolerant of sexism ($+1$ SD), $b = 0.19$, $t(397) = 2.41$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.34]. This effect was not present for women who perceived their managers to be less tolerant of sexism (-1 SD), $b = -0.05$, $t(397) = -0.48$, $p = .63$, 95% CI [-0.24, 0.15]. In sum, although there was an interaction between experiences of sexism and manager tolerance similar to that found for peer tolerance, the simple slopes revealed patterns that were quite different from those obtained for peers, as evidence for drawing together after sexism was only apparent when managers were perceived to be *tolerant* rather than *intolerant* of sexism.

Perceived tolerance of sexism at the policy-level also had a significant main effect on workplace friendship with other women, showing that women who reported that policies in their workplace were less tolerant of sexism also reported stronger workplace friendships with other women, $b = -0.10$, $t(397) = -2.45$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.02]. However, results showed no statistically

significant interaction between sexism and policy-level tolerance of sexism on workplace friendships, $b = 0.03$, $t(397) = 0.40$, $p = .67$, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.15].

2.3 | Discussion

Summarising the results of Study 1, we did not observe evidence in support of H1, or social distancing following exposure to sexism at work. However, we did observe some evidence in support of H2. That is, sexism was associated with stronger social relationships among women, but only in climates where peers were perceived to be relatively *less* tolerant of sexism; this drawing towards other women was disrupted in climates where peers were perceived to be relatively *more* tolerant of sexism. In contrast, sexism was associated with stronger social relationships among women in climates where *managers* were perceived to be relatively *more* tolerant of sexism. Policy-level tolerance only had a main effect on women's interpersonal relationships in the workplace but did not appear to modify the effect of sexism.

3 | STUDY 2

Having found initial evidence supporting the idea that sexism and organisational climate together might affect women's interpersonal relationships at work, in Study 2 we sought to replicate and expand on this work by investigating our hypotheses in a quasi-experimental design. Specifically, we measured women's perceptions of tolerance of sexism at their workplace (peer-, manager-, and policy-level), and then introduced a manipulation of experiences of sexism by asking women to think back to a recent experience of sexism in their own lives. The outcome variable of central focus was once again friendships with female co-workers. For exploratory purposes, we also included a new outcome variable: *closeness* to female co-workers. Specifically, we aimed to explore whether the central effects observed for friendship among women also appear on other indicators of social relationships (i.e., closeness between women).

Our hypotheses remained largely the same as in Study 1. First, as before, we hypothesised that experiences of sexism would have a detrimental effect on women's friendships with other women in the workplace. Even though we did not find evidence for distancing in Study 1, we believed it would be beneficial to re-examine this idea in an experimental design. Second, we hypothesised that peer tolerance of sexism would interact with experiences of sexism to affect women's friendships with their female co-workers. Specifically, we expected that being reminded of experiences of sexism would increase reported friendship with female co-workers, but only for those who perceived that peers do not tolerate sexism. Support for this hypothesis would replicate the effect found in Study 1. Third, we hypothesised that managers' tolerance of sexism would mirror the effect described for peers above.

³The alternative breakdown showed that women who perceived their managers to be less tolerant of sexism reported stronger workplace friendship with other women. This effect was stronger for women whose actual experiences of sexism were low $b = -0.30$, $t(397) = -4.00$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.44, -0.15], relative to when experiences of sexism were high, $b = -0.14$, $t(397) = -2.61$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [-0.24, -0.03].

While this was not what we observed in Study 1, we sought to test this hypothesis further with an experimental manipulation of sexism before reconsidering hypotheses regarding the pattern of effects for manager tolerance. Given that policy-level tolerance did not modify the effect of sexism in Study 1, we raised no hypotheses here, and instead included it as an exploratory variable. This study was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/82mgq>.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Design and participants

This quasi-experimental study was a two cell (sexism vs. no sexism) between-participants design, with continuous scales measuring perceptions of peer, manager, and policy tolerance of sexism in the workplace.

All participants were sampled through Prolific Academic. Using the effect size ($f^2 = 0.019$) detected in Study 1 for the interaction between sexism and peer tolerance, power analysis in G*Power version 3.1 (Erdfelder et al., 1996) indicated that a sample size of 416 was necessary to achieve power of 0.80. Since participants who do not report having at least one experience of sexism in session 1 will not be invited to session 2, to be able to reach this number we recruited 700 participants for the first session. Of these 700, 462 participants reported that they had experienced at least one instance of workplace sexism and gave consent for the researchers to contact them a week later, again through Prolific Academic. Of these 462 participants who were invited to the second session, 392 participated; however, 15 were excluded from the study later as they did not provide the information required to manipulate sexism, or indicated that they had never experienced sexism at work (even though they indicated that they had previously experienced sexism during session 1). Therefore, the final sample comprised 377 participants. All 377 participants in this study were women in employment and residence in the UK. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 64 years old with a mean of 33.31 years ($SD = 10.10$ years).

Of the 377 participants, 251 (66.6%) were in full time employment, while 126 (33.4%) were working part time when the data was collected. More than half of the participants (50.4%) indicated having a female manager; 153 participants (40.6%) indicated that more than 60% of their colleagues were female and 165 (43.8%) stated that between 20% and 60% of their co-workers were female.

3.1.2 | Procedure and measures

The study received ethical approval from the Psychology Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter. The study included two sessions a week apart. Participants provided informed consent in

each session and were compensated £0.50 for session 1 (approximately 5 min in duration) and £1.00 for session 2 (approximately 10 min in duration), in line with Prolific Academic guidelines.

In session 1, participants provided the same demographic information as in Study 1 and responded to the same 12 questions to assess tolerance of sexism. As before, we conducted a principal components analysis with direct oblimin rotation to examine whether these 12 items clustered into the three hypothesised levels (peer-, manager-, and policy-level tolerance). The analysis revealed that the three scales loaded in separate factors, but one of the four items measuring peer and manager tolerance did not load with the respective items. This item was "My co-workers/my manager clearly discourage(s) the unequal treatment of men and women in my workplace (including stereotypical comments and jokes)" and it was excluded. Excluding this item improved the reliability of the peer tolerance scale (four items: $\alpha = .73$; three items: $\alpha = .83$.) and did not change the reliability of the manager tolerance scale (four items: $\alpha = .86$; three items: $\alpha = .86$). The four items used to measure tolerance at the policy level loaded together and formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .87$).

Participants also reported whether or not they had ever personally experienced sexism in their current workplace in the same way as in Study 1, and this was used to filter participation in the second session. Only participants who reported that they had experienced at least one instance of workplace sexism were asked to participate in the second session. This was done because the manipulation (in the second session) asked participants to recall a time when they had experienced sexism at work. Participants who were eligible for the second session were asked to give consent to be contacted a week later. Those who were not eligible (or indicated that they did not want to be contacted) were directed to the end of the study and debriefed.

To disguise the goals of the study, we also included a few filler items. Four items measured the perceived discrimination of sexual minorities (Doyle & Molix, 2016) and nine items measured workplace age discrimination (Marchiondo, Gonzales, & Ran, 2016). These scales were not included in any analyses.

In the second session, participants were randomly allocated to one of two experimental conditions (sexism, no sexism) and responded to the dependent measures. In the sexism condition, participants were asked to recall and describe an experience when they felt they had been treated unfairly at work because they were women. To ensure that participants recalled this situation in sufficient depth, several prompts were used: "Describe, for example, where it happened, how many people were involved, what the person/people said or did and what is this person's relationship to you". In the no sexism condition, participants were asked to recall and briefly describe their usual daily route from home to work. The prompt for the no sexism condition was "Describe, for example, how long the route is, what means of transportation you use, and what challenges it involves".

Participants then completed the same workplace friendship measure as in Study 1, with minor adjustments. First, participants were

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	33.31	10.10						
2. Percentage of women	3.10	1.33	.01					
3. Peer tolerance	2.43	0.93	.04	-.25**				
4. Manager tolerance	2.31	0.97	-.03	-.20**	.67**			
5. Policy tolerance	2.26	0.95	-.01	-.13**	.42**			
6. Friendship	3.65	0.80	-.16**	.08	-.18**	-.17**	-.16**	
7. Social closeness	3.08	1.03	-.09	-.01	-.07	-.07	-.01	.59**

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 2

Note: *M* and *SD* are used to represent means and standard deviation, respectively. The answer categories for percentage of women are: 1 = 0%–20%, 2 = 21%–40%, 3 = 41%–60%, 4 = 61%–80%, 5 = 81%–100%.

** $p < .01$.

asked how they felt about their co-workers *at the moment*, rather than in general. Second, two items were excluded because they could not be easily adjusted to create a state (vs. trait) measure. As a result, in this study four items measured friendship opportunity ($\alpha = .87$) and six items measured friendship prevalence ($\alpha = .88$). As in Study 1, these two scales were highly correlated, $r(391) = .70$, $N = 377$, $p < .001$, and were thus combined for further analyses ($\alpha = .91$).

New to Study 2, to measure closeness to female co-workers, participants were presented with a “name generator”, in which they were asked to list up to five people to whom they felt close at work. For each individual, participants provided initials, gender, and indicated how close they felt to them on a 5 points scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). We summed those who were female.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Analytic strategy

To test our hypotheses, we conducted moderation analyses in hierarchical linear regressions, entering managers' gender (dummy coded as 0 = male, 1 = female), age, and reported percentage of women in the branch or immediate work group (mean-centred) as covariates. We then entered sexism (dummy coded as no sexism = 0, sexism = 1) and peer-, manager-, and policy-level tolerance of sexism (mean centred). Finally, we added each of the three interactions between sexism and each of the tolerance variables. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for these variables are provided in Table 2.

3.2.2 | Workplace friendship with women

As in Study 1, but contradicting Hypothesis 1, the main effect of sexism once again did not attain statistical significance, $b = 0.00$, $t(367) = 0.04$, $p = .96$, 95% CI $[-0.16, 0.17]$.

The main effect of peer tolerance of sexism also did not attain statistical significance, $b = -0.07$, $t(367) = -1.08$, $p = .28$, 95% CI $[-0.19, 0.05]$. There was not a statistically significant interaction between sexism and peer tolerance of sexism either, $b = -0.21$, $t(367) = -1.76$, $p = .08$, 95% CI $[-0.45, 0.03]$. However, even though this interaction did not attain statistical significance, we continued to decompose it⁴ in order to assess evidence for our further hypothesis, which focused on a simple effect contained within this interaction. In line with our hypothesis and the results of Study 1, for women who perceived less peer tolerance of sexism, recalling sexism at work was significantly associated with stronger workplace friendships relative to the control condition, $b = 0.22$, $t(367) = 2.59$, $p = .01$, 95% CI $[0.07, 0.48]$. This effect was not present for women who perceived greater peer tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.18$, $t(367) = 1.32$, $p = .19$, 95% CI $[-0.46, 0.09]$. These effects are represented in Figure 2.

Regarding manager tolerance of sexism, in Study 2 we did not find either a statistically significant main effect of manager tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.08$, $t(367) = -1.36$, $p = .17$, 95% CI $[-0.19, 0.04]$, or a significant interaction between sexism and manager tolerance, $b = 0.02$, $t(367) = 0.15$, $p = .88$, 95% CI $[-0.21, 0.25]$. As such, there was no evidence for our hypothesis that after being reminded of sexism, manager tolerance of sexism would improve friendships among female colleagues. Furthermore, these findings did not replicate the unexpected pattern of results for manager tolerance of sexism found in Study 1.

While policy-level tolerance of sexism was included for completeness, neither the main effect of policy-level tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.07$, $t(367) = -1.50$, $p = .13$, 95% CI $[-0.17, 0.02]$, nor the interaction between sexism and policy level tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.05$, $t(367) = -0.56$, $p = .58$, 95% CI $[-0.24, 0.14]$, attained statistical significance.

⁴The alternative breakdown showed that after having been reminded of sexism, low perceived tolerance of sexism on the part of peers predicted greater friendship with female co-workers, $b = -0.17$, $t(376) = -1.83$, $p = .07$.

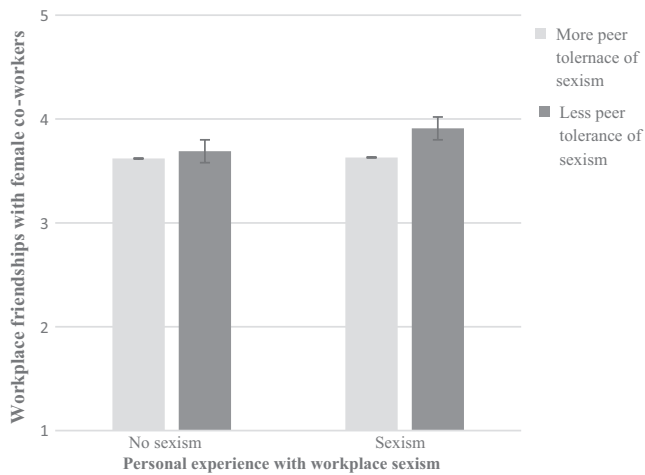


FIGURE 2 How peer tolerance of sexism (M) moderates the relationship between personal experiences with sexism (X) and workplace friendships with female co-workers (Y) in Study 2

3.2.3 | Exploratory analyses: Closeness to female co-workers

We next examined whether similar effects to those observed for workplace friendship with women were also evident on the new measure, *closeness* to female co-workers. Participants' closeness to male co-workers was added as covariate in these analyses because this allowed us to control for what could be a generalized tendency to withdraw socially and to focus in this article more specifically and uniquely on relationships with women. No statistically significant main effect emerged for sexism, $b = 0.11$, $t(359) = 1.01$, $p = .31$, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.31].

For peer tolerance of sexism, there was no evidence of a statistically significant main effect, $b = -0.01$, $t(359) = -0.09$, $p = .93$, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.15], or interaction with sexism, $b = -0.01$, $t(359) = -0.09$, $p = .93$, 95% CI [-0.32, 0.29]. Similarly, manager tolerance of sexism did not show a statistically significant main effect, $b = -0.11$, $t(359) = -1.47$, $p = .14$, 95% CI [-0.26, 0.04], nor did it interact with sexism, $b = -0.10$, $t(359) = -0.65$, $p = .52$, 95% CI [-0.39, 0.19].

Finally, while there was no evidence of a statistically significant main effect of policy tolerance, $b = -0.10$, $t(359) = -0.65$, $p = .52$, 95% CI [-0.39, 0.19], the interaction between sexism and policy tolerance was statistically significant, $b = -0.30$, $t(359) = -2.38$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [-0.54, -0.05]. Decomposing this interaction⁵ showed that women who perceived less tolerance of sexism at the policy level reported greater closeness with their female co-workers when they were reminded of sexism (sexism condition) compared to those who were not reminded of sexism (control condition), $b = 0.30$, $t(359) = 2.46$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.70].

⁵The alternative decomposition showed that for women who were not reminded of sexism (control condition), lower perceptions of policy-level tolerance of sexism increased closeness between women, $b = -0.17$, $t(359) = -2.10$, $p = .03$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.01].

These effects were not apparent for women who perceived greater tolerance of sexism at the policy level, $b = -0.17$, $t(359) = -1.11$, $p = .27$, 95% CI [-0.49, 0.14]. However, at this stage these effects should be considered preliminary as they were not directly hypothesised.

3.3 | Discussion

As in Study 1, in Study 2 we failed to find evidence for social distancing following sexism, contradicting Hypothesis 1. Study 2 did replicate evidence from Study 1 for Hypothesis 2, namely that women who are reminded of sexism report stronger friendships with their female colleagues when they perceive their peers to be intolerant of sexism. However, unlike Study 1, and unlike our hypothesis, there were no significant effects for manager tolerance of sexism. In addition, policy-level tolerance of sexism showed no significant effects in Study 1, whereas in Study 2 an interesting pattern emerged suggesting that experiences with sexism were significantly associated with *greater* closeness to female colleagues when participants perceived *less* policy-level tolerance of sexism (mirroring moderating effects of peer tolerance on workplace friendship with women).

In sum, results from Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that peer tolerance of sexism affects the relationship between sexism and women's affiliation with other women. However, results for manager- and policy-level tolerance are less clear. This led us to conduct another study to replicate and further examine these results. Given mixed findings for closeness in Study 2, we also aimed to prioritise this dependent variable in Study 3 by focusing on it as our key outcome measure.

4 | STUDY 3

This study aimed to replicate Study 2, with a new sample. It was virtually identical to Study 2 with one exception: In this study, we focused on closeness to female co-workers, and accordingly chose to measure it before measuring workplace friendship (that is, directly after the manipulation of sexism) in order to account for potential order effects. Therefore, we first asked participants to list their friends and then rate closeness with them before moving on to rate their general friendship with their female colleagues.

The hypotheses of this study were identical to those of Study 2, although we now focus on closeness to female co-workers as well as friendship with female co-workers as the key outcomes. First, as before, we hypothesised that experiences of sexism would have a detrimental effect on women's closeness (H1a) and friendship (H1b) with other women in the workplace. Second, we hypothesised that peer tolerance of sexism would interact with experiences of sexism to affect women's closeness (H2b) and friendship (H2b) with their female co-workers. Specifically, we expected that being reminded of experiences of sexism would strengthen closeness and friendship

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	34.69	10.48						
2. Percentage of women	3.46	1.22	.06					
3. Peer tolerance	2.50	0.83	-.07	-.13**				
4. Manager tolerance	2.28	0.90	-.04	-.11	.64**			
5. Policy tolerance	2.26	0.94	-.15**	-.03	.45**	.48**		
6. Friendship	3.68	0.79	-.12**	.04	-.23**	-.14**	-.16**	
7. Social closeness	3.29	0.95	-.05	-.03	-.19**	-.10	-.07	.56**

TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 3

Note: *M* and *SD* are used to represent means and standard deviation, respectively. The answer categories for percentage of women are: 1 = 0%–20%, 2 = 21%–40%, 3 = 41%–60%, 4 = 61%–80%, 5 = 81%–100%.

** $p < .01$.

with female co-workers, but only for those who perceived that peers were less tolerant of sexism in the workplace. However, we expected that this effect would disappear for those who perceived that peers were more tolerant of sexism. Given that manager- and policy-level tolerance produced inconsistent results in Studies 1 and 2, we included them here without making firm hypotheses regarding their effects.

4.1 | Method

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for these variables are provided in Table 3.

4.1.1 | Design, participants, procedure, and measures

The design and procedure of this study were identical to those of Study 2 with the exception of the order of outcome measures. Using the effect size ($f^2 = 0.019$) detected in Study 1, power analysis in G*Power version 3.1 (Erdfelder et al., 1996) indicated that a sample size of 416 was necessary to achieve power of 0.80. To be able to reach this number at the end of the second session, we again recruited 700 participants for the first session of the study. Of these 700, 465 participants reported that they had experienced at least one instance of workplace sexism and gave consent for the researchers to contact them a week later, again through Prolific Academic. Of these 465 participants who were invited to the second session, 405 participated; however, 14 were excluded from the study as they did not complete the questions involved in the manipulation of sexism or indicated that they had never experienced sexism at work (even though they had indicated previously experiencing sexism at work during session 1). The final sample comprised 391 participants.

All 391 participants in this study were women in employment and residence in the UK, with ages ranging from 18 to 66 years old ($M = 34.69$ years; $SD = 10.48$ years). Of the 391 participants, 266 (68%) worked full time while 125 (32%) worked part time when the data were collected. More than half of our participants (57.5%) indicated having a female manager; 203 participants (51.9%) indicated that more than 60% of their colleagues were female and 158 (40.4%) stated that between 20% and 60% of their co-workers were female.

Participants completed the same measures (in the same sessions) as in Study 2 (peer tolerance $\alpha = .74$, manager tolerance $\alpha = .84$, policy tolerance $\alpha = .87$). As in Study 2, in the second session of Study 3, participants were randomly allocated to the sexism or no sexism conditions. Then, participants completed the same measures of closeness to female co-workers and workplace friendships ($\alpha = .91$; correlation between friendship opportunity and prevalence: $r = .73$, $N = 391$, $p < .001$), but in the reverse order.

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Closeness to female co-workers

Using the same analytic strategy as in Study 2, we first examined whether the effects observed for workplace friendships in Study 1 and 2 were also evident on our measure of closeness to female co-workers in Study 3. We added women's closeness to male co-workers as a covariate in the model as we did in Study 2. Results showed a statistically significant main effect of sexism, $b = -0.28$, $t(370) = -2.42$, $p = .02$, 95% CI $[-0.50, -0.05]$, indicating that recalling sexism led women to report *weaker* closeness with other women at work, in line with Hypothesis 1.

The statistically significant main effect of peer tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.25$, $t(370) = -2.75$, $p = .006$, 95% CI $[-0.43, -0.07]$, showed that women who perceived their peers to be less tolerant of sexism reported *greater* closeness to female co-workers.

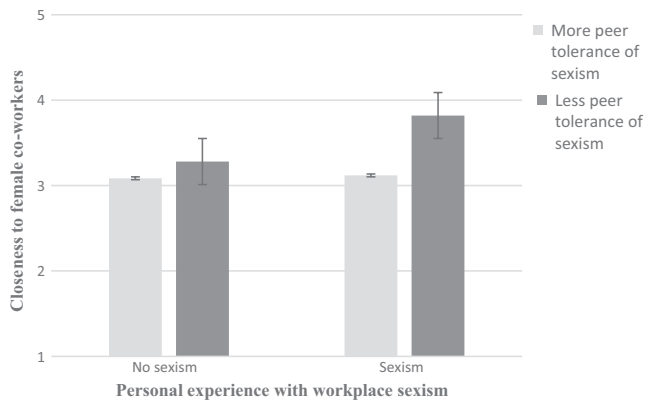


FIGURE 3 How peer tolerance of sexism (M) moderates the relationship between personal experiences with sexism (X) and closeness to female co-workers (Y) in Study 3

However, these significant main effects were not qualified by a statistically significant interaction between sexism and peer tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.31$, $t(370) = -1.69$, $p = .09$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.67]. As in Study 2, even though this interaction did not attain statistical significance, we continued to decompose it⁶ in order to assess evidence for our further hypothesis, which focused on a simple effect contained within this interaction. In line with our hypothesis, for women who perceived less peer tolerance of sexism, experiences with sexism were significantly associated with stronger closeness to female co-workers, $b = 0.28$, $t(370) = 2.80$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [-0.92, -0.15]. This association was not apparent for women who perceived greater tolerance of sexism at the peer level, $b = 0.02$, $t(370) = 0.11$, $p = .91$, 95% CI [-0.39, 0.35]. These results are plotted in Figure 3.

No statistically significant main effect emerged for manager tolerance of sexism, $b = 0.09$, $t(370) = 1.07$, $p = .29$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.27]; the interaction between sexism and manager tolerance of sexism was also not significant, $b = -0.14$, $t(370) = -0.77$, $p = .44$, 95% CI [-0.48, 0.21]. For policy-level tolerance, neither the main effect, $b = -0.03$, $t(370) = -0.33$, $p = .74$, 95% CI [-0.17, 0.12], nor the interaction with sexism, $b = -0.19$, $t(370) = -1.27$, $p = .21$, 95% CI [-0.48, 0.10], attained statistical significance.

4.2.2 | Workplace friendships with women

As in Study 2, the main effect of sexism on workplace friendships with women was not statistically significant, $b = 0.08$, $t(370) = 0.96$, $p = .34$, 95% CI [-0.23, 0.08].

However, once again there was a significant main effect of peer tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.21$, $t(370) = -3.23$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-0.33, -0.08]. This finding indicated that women who perceived

their peers as less tolerant of sexism also reported greater workplace friendships with women. However, the interaction between sexism and peer tolerance of sexism was not statistically significant for this measure, $b = -0.13$, $t(370) = -1.01$, $p = .31$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.38].

Neither the main effect of manager tolerance of sexism, $b = 0.04$, $t(370) = 0.64$, $p = .52$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.16], nor the interaction with sexism, $b = -0.09$, $t(370) = -0.71$, $p = .48$, 95% CI [-0.32, 0.15], attained statistical significance. There was no significant main effect of policy-level tolerance of sexism, $b = -0.08$, $t(370) = -1.71$, $p = .09$, 95% CI [-0.18, 0.01], nor was there a significant interaction between sexism and policy-level tolerance, $b = -0.17$, $t(370) = -1.76$, $p = .08$, 95% CI [-0.37, 0.02]. However, the trend⁷ suggested that for women who perceived less policy-level tolerance of sexism, recalling sexism was significantly associated with stronger workplace friendships compared to the control condition, $b = 0.23$, $t(370) = 1.97$, $p = .049$, 95% CI [-0.49, -0.00]. These effects were not apparent for women who perceived greater tolerance of sexism at the policy level, $b = -0.09$, $t(370) = -0.70$, $p = .48$, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.33].

4.3 | Discussion

Here, we found suggestive evidence for Hypothesis 1 on the measure of closeness; experiences of sexism led women to report reduced closeness with their female colleagues in this study. Moreover, we again found evidence in support of our second hypothesis, that organisational tolerance of sexism moderates the effect of sexism on women's relationships with other women. Specifically, we found that women reported greater closeness to their female co-workers after recalling sexism, but only for those who perceived their peers to be relatively low in tolerance of sexism.

Although this pattern was revealed in different measures in Studies 1 and 2 relative to Study 3, these measures are conceptually similar, and the patterns are the same across studies. The order in which these variables were presented might explain why the effect appeared on different measures in Studies 2 and 3. In Study 2, participants first completed the measure of workplace friendship, then closeness to female co-workers; but this order was reversed in Study 3.

With regard to the other two levels of organisational tolerance, the results of Study 1 were not replicated in Studies 2 and 3. Specifically, in Study 1 experiences of sexism were associated with greater friendship with female colleagues, but only among those who reported *greater* tolerance of sexism from their managers. However, this effect was not replicated in Studies 2 and 3. With regard to perceived policy tolerance, in Study 1, policy-level tolerance did not

⁶The alternative breakdown showed that among women who were reminded of sexism (sexism condition), the perception that peers were less tolerant of sexism was associated with greater closeness with female co-workers, $b = -0.44$, $t(370) = -3.00$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.73, -0.15].

⁷The alternative breakdown showed that among women who were *not* reminded of sexism (control condition), higher perceptions of policy-level tolerance were associated with greater friendship with female colleagues, $b = -0.13$, $t(370) = -2.02$, $p = .045$, 95% CI [-0.26, 0.00].

interact with perceived sexism to influence women's friendship with their female co-workers; however, in Studies 2 and 3, some interesting patterns emerged, suggesting that in cases of *less* policy-level tolerance of sexism, recalling sexism may significantly *increase* closeness to female colleagues (Study 2) and *strengthen* workplace friendship with female co-workers (Study 3). This pattern—although not directly covered in our hypotheses—suggests that under some circumstances, policy-level tolerance may have effects that mirror peer-level tolerance, whereby experiences of sexism lead women to affiliate with their female colleagues when perceptions of tolerance are low.

5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across three studies, we demonstrated that women's social relationships with their female colleagues might be affected by personal experiences with sexism and the organisational climate in which that sexism occurs. When experiences of sexism occur within an organisational climate that is perceived to be intolerant of sexism, women might strengthen social bonds with their female co-workers as a way of coping with sexism. That is, after experiences with sexism, the perception that peers (and potentially organisational policy) do not tolerate sexism can draw women to each other. However, the perception that one's peers tolerate sexism hinders this effect, thereby making it harder for women to engage in such a positive coping response. This shows that peer tolerance of sexism is key in shaping the social consequences of experiences of sexism. In these studies, affiliative tendencies took the form of stronger workplace friendships with other women as well as greater reported closeness to female co-workers.

Although evidence for distancing was not consistently found, there was some evidence that experiences with sexism led women to report less closeness with other women in Study 3. This finding is consistent with some past work (Derks, Ellemers, et al., 2011; Derks, van Laar, et al., 2011; Doyle & Molix, 2014b; Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearn, 2007). Previous work has shown distancing effects, but this was in the context of male-dominated work environments (Derks, Ellemers, et al., 2011; Ely, 1994). The current work was not specifically focused on male-dominated contexts, but still we find some evidence that women may distance themselves from others following experiences of sexism.

While the majority of prior work in this area demonstrates patterns of self-group distancing, our results mainly highlight when women draw together (or fail to do so). Here it is important to stress that this "other side of the coin" is not unrelated to self-group distancing and can in fact help shed light on when this emerges, as well as when it does not. This has in fact already been acknowledged in prior work, as when Derks and her colleagues (Derks, Ellemers, et al., 2011) examined support for collective action and showed that senior women who were highly identified with their gender responded to sexism by reporting more support for collective action in favour of women. Again, we contribute to this analysis by focusing

on when women draw to each other and when they do not, which does not provide direct evidence of self-group distancing, but does contribute to broader understandings of when women are able to support each other in response to sexism.

Taken together, then, this work sheds light on the question of when women draw together with other women (Branscombe et al., 1999; Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Jetten et al., 2001). Specifically, this work shows that an organisational climate that is less tolerant of sexism can encourage women to draw together after experiences of sexism. A key theoretical contribution of this work is that while exposure to sexism and perceived tolerance of sexism might often go hand in hand, there is clear value in distinguishing between these concepts. For example, a particular workplace might have a few sexist individuals, but also several colleagues who do not tolerate this behaviour. Our argument is that the harm caused by those few individuals is worse when colleagues tolerate such behaviour than when they do not. This insight may have important practical implications for organisations' efforts to improve diversity climates. The fact that these findings emerged across a correlational study and two quasi-experimental studies attests to the consistency of these effects.

Another issue worth considering is *why* women would pursue closeness with other women. Previous literature has shown that social support can help people deal with negative experiences in general (Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996) and sexism in particular (Cihangir, Barreto, & Ellemers, 2014; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). However, past research also shows that other in-group members are not necessarily supportive, especially when it comes to supporting discrimination claims (Kahn, Barreto, Kaiser, & Rego, 2015; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006). Taking this literature together with the findings from the current work, we suggest that experiences of sexism lead women to pursue closeness with women who are intolerant of sexism *as a way of accessing social support from others whom they expect to be supportive*—a well-considered coping response. That is, this study extends previous literature on the benefits of social support by demonstrating that women actively pursue closeness/draw together with those who might provide social support, but may not be able to do so when this type of support is not expected or available (in the case of greater tolerance of sexism).

With regard to tolerance, it was *peer* tolerance of sexism, in particular, that most consistently emerged as a moderator of responses to sexism (although policy tolerance also demonstrated suggestive evidence in the same direction). However, we did not find a similar interaction between sexism and *manager* tolerance of sexism. In Study 1, the main effect of manager tolerance of sexism suggested an overall positive association with friendship with female co-workers. This was qualified by an interaction with sexism, in which experiences of sexism were related to stronger friendship with female co-workers, but only among those who perceived their managers to be *more* tolerant of sexism. Although this finding was not as hypothesised, we consider it interesting to discuss and potentially worthy of further investigation.

Previous research has examined how experiences of sexism affect managers' attitudes towards their subordinates (Derks, van

Laar, et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2016), and subordinates' attitudes towards their managers (Sterk, Meeussen, & Van Laar, 2018). For instance, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2017) found that women feel less supported by their female supervisors than by their male supervisors. Here, we show that managers' attitudes might similarly impact relationships *among their subordinates*. Specifically, when managers are not tolerant of sexism, this might encourage friendships among their female subordinates. However, this main effect is qualified by the fact that actually experiencing sexism seemed to be tied to affiliative responses among female subordinates only when managers were *more* tolerant of sexism. This might be because unlike peer tolerance, manager tolerance does not convey much information about how much support women will receive from other women after they experience sexism. Therefore, when they perceive their managers to be more tolerant of sexism, women may be even more inclined to seek informal social support from other women in the workplace (rather than, for example, lodging an official complaint or addressing the matter with their managers, which is a strategy that might be more appropriate when managers are intolerant of sexism). However, it is worth noting that these effects were only present in Study 1 and not in the experimental studies (Studies 2 and 3), and as such should be interpreted with caution until they are replicated.

Interestingly, policy-level tolerance had little impact on women's friendship with other female co-workers in the correlational study; however, some interesting patterns emerged with regard to closeness between women, suggesting that in cases of *less* policy-level tolerance of sexism, sexism was significantly associated with *greater* closeness to female colleagues (Study 2). There was also a marginally significant interaction showing that sexism is associated with *greater* workplace friendship with female co-workers in cases of *less* policy level tolerance of sexism (Study 3). These effects mirror the central findings of this study with regard to peer tolerance, although patterns were not as strong. One reason why they were less strong might be that policy-level tolerance of sexism is relatively abstract (or distal) for women. In other words, policy-level tolerance might be quite removed from women's daily experiences because interactions and experiences with peers are more tangible and concrete for women. In a similar vein, previous research suggests that having an organisational policy that clarifies intolerance of discrimination does not mean that this necessarily translates into less tolerance of discrimination at lower levels in the organisation (Brady et al., 2015; Hebl et al., 2002), suggesting some degree of dissociation between these levels.

5.1 | Limitations and future directions

One limitation of this work is that our participants were primarily employed in female-dominated work environments (although this was not deliberately due to our sampling strategies). It would be interesting to see if the results regarding experiences of sexism and tolerance of sexism differ for women in male-dominated work environments. One reason why it is important to work with women in a male-dominated

setting is that men often show that they are unaware of, and disconnected from, sexist treatment of women (Tougas & Beaton, 2002). Therefore, in a male-dominated environment, women might feel *greater* peer tolerance of sexism, as well as have fewer female co-workers with whom to affiliate. That is to say, the findings of the current studies can only emerge when other women are around. It might be interesting to examine, in addition, what is the minimum proportion of women in a work environment necessary to encourage women to draw to each other in response to sexist treatment.

In addition, as the studies in this article did not manipulate, but measured, perceptions of tolerance and interpersonal relationships, it is not possible to know precisely whom participants were thinking about when responding to these measures and whether or not these were the same people. That said, the measure of tolerance we used specifically refers to "my co-workers" and "people" (which does not exclude men), while the measures of social relationships explicitly mention "my female co-workers" or investigate social closeness to "female co-workers". However, we acknowledge that this does not completely disambiguate the results and therefore future research might try to exert more control over these interpretations.

Additionally, we tried to separate three levels of tolerance of sexism (peer-, manager-, and policy-level tolerance), but these three levels are not necessarily entirely distinct from one another. Specifically, manager tolerance and policy-level tolerance of sexism may, in real-life contexts, not be independent. One reason for this is that managers' actions may play a role in shaping organisational policies. For example, Edelman (2005) points to the fact that many organisational managers create their own organisational policies against discrimination. In addition, Martinez and colleagues (Martinez et al., 2013) argue that organisational-level policies are not always clear for employees; for this reason, sometimes managers need to filter these policies through their own beliefs and actions.

The role of manager tolerance of sexism should also be investigated further in future work. The suggestive evidence observed here needs to be replicated, but research examining motivational underpinnings of both seeking support from other women and potentially filing formal complaints following sexism could help to clarify discrepant findings in the current studies. Overall, these results underscore the importance of continuing to try to distinguish the various levels of organisational climate that might convey tolerance of sexism.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the present research was to understand when women draw together (vs. distance from each other) as a response to sexism. Specifically, we tested whether three levels of organisational tolerance of sexism (peer, manager, and policy) have an impact on women's tendency to draw together at work in response to sexism. The combination of cross-sectional and quasi-experimental studies showed that the effect of peer tolerance of sexism was the most consistent among

the three levels of organisational climate, demonstrating that when women perceived that their peers were *less* tolerant of sexism, experiences of sexism led to increased affiliation with other women, but this did not occur when women perceived their peers to be *more* tolerant of sexism. This insight may have important practical implications for organisations' efforts to improve organisational climate.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

We confirm that studies reported in this manuscript conform to APA ethical guidelines and have been approved by the ethical review committee at the University of Exeter.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

Data described in this manuscript can be viewed at <https://osf.io/af95p/>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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