



Remain Calm:

How Emotional Responses Influence Perception of Women Confronting Sexism

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Introduction

- Women often experience sexism in the workplace,¹ but confronting sexism can be an effective way to reduce gender bias.²
- Unfortunately, however, individuals who confront prejudice often face negative social repercussions, which can lead to a reluctance to intervene.³
- To help address this issue, we investigate how the emotional tone of confronters can mitigate negative perceptions and promote effective confrontation.

Method

$N = 682$ employed adults recruited from Prolific ($M_{Age} = 38.57$, 51.9% female, 80.1% white).

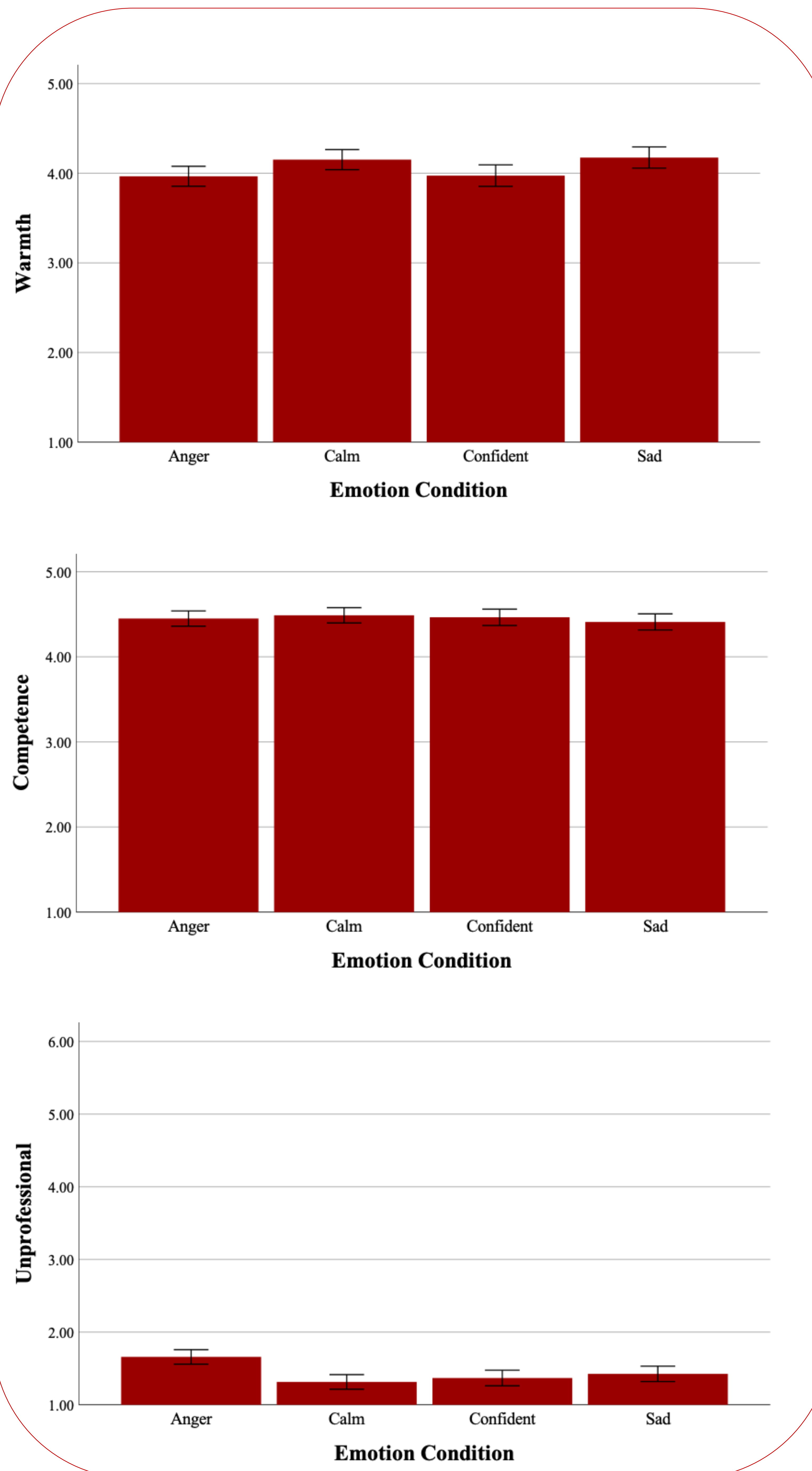
Adults read a workplace scenarios involving two characters, Emily and John, where Emily confronts John's blatantly sexist remarks using one of four emotional tones: angry, calm, confident, or sad.

Afterwards, participants rated their perceptions of Emily. In particular, they rated her:

- Warmth
- Competence
- Professionalism

Results

- Emily was perceived as highly warm in all scenarios, but especially when she expressed low arousal emotions, such as calmness or sadness ($p < .001$).
- Emily was perceived as competent in all scenarios, regardless of her emotional tone ($p = .28$).
- Overall, Emily was perceived as professional, but adults perceived her as slightly unprofessional when she expressed anger (compared to the other emotions, $p < .001$).
- Interestingly, female adults perceived Emily more positively (i.e., as warmer, more competent, more professional) than male adults ($ps \leq .035$).



Discussion

- Generally, adults perceived Emily quite positively.
- However, when Emily expressed high arousal emotions (in particular, anger), she was perceived as relatively less warm and more unprofessional.
- The study's findings demonstrate that emotional expression during confrontation can significantly influence adults' perception of the confronter.
- It is normal to experience emotions during a sexism confrontation, and feeling anger is a reasonable response, but it is important to be aware of its potential side effects, such as being perceived as unprofessional.
- Therefore, when faced with blatant sexism, it may be most effective for confronters to regulate their emotions (assuming that one of their goals is to preserve a "positive impression").

Limitations & Future Directions

- Future studies should examine the influence of diverse confronter identities on the effectiveness of confrontation in challenging sexism. Our study was limited by the lack of diversity in the use of a stereotypically white-sounding name, "Emily."
- Moreover, it is unclear whether our findings can be generalized to other forms of prejudice beyond sexism, as our study did not examine all types of prejudice.

References

¹ Begeny, Ryan, Moss-Racusin, & Ravetz (2020). In some professions, women have become well represented, yet gender bias persists—Perpetuated by those who think it is not happening. *Science Advances*, 6(26). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aba7814>

² Mallett & Wagner (2011). The unexpectedly positive consequences of confronting sexism. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(1), 215-220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.10.001>

³ Shelton & Stewart (2004). Confronting perpetrators of prejudice: The inhibitory effects of social costs. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 28(3), 215-223. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2004.00138.x>