SEXISM AND FAMILY AGGRESSION DURING COVID-19

Sexist Attitudes Predict Family-Based Aggression during a COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

The current research examined whether men's hostile sexism was a risk factor for family-based aggression during a nationwide COVID-19 lockdown in which families were confined to the home for 5 weeks. Parents who had reported on their sexist attitudes and aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic completed assessments of aggressive behavior toward their partners and children *during* the lockdown ($N = 362$ parents of which 310 were drawn from the same family). Accounting for pre-lockdown levels of aggression, men who more strongly endorsed hostile sexism reported greater aggressive behavior toward their intimate partners and their children during the lockdown. The contextual factors that help explain these longitudinal associations differed across targets of family-based aggression. Men's hostile sexism predicted greater aggression toward intimate partners when men experienced low power during couples' interactions, whereas men's hostile sexism predicted greater aggressive parenting when men reported lower partner-child relationship quality. Novel effects also emerged for benevolent sexism. Men's higher benevolent sexism predicted lower aggressive parenting, and women's higher benevolent sexism predicted greater aggressive behavior toward partners, irrespective of power and relationship quality. The current study provides the first longitudinal demonstration that men's hostile sexism predicts residual changes in aggression toward both intimate partners and children. Such aggressive behavior will intensify the health, well-being, and developmental costs of the pandemic, highlighting the importance of targeting power-related gender role beliefs when screening for aggression risk and delivering therapeutic and education interventions as families face the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19 lockdown, hostile sexism, intimate partner aggression, aggressive parenting, power

Sexist Attitudes Predict Family-Based Aggression during a COVID-19 Lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed considerable strain on families. The substantial stress accompanying the pandemic and mandatory lockdowns, including loss of work and income, balancing work and childcare in the home, and social isolation, increase the risk of relationship problems and parenting difficulties (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020; Prime et al., 2020). A grave concern is that these conditions amplify the risk of aggression at a time when confined families have reduced access to help (Peterman et al., 2020). Evidence from prior disasters, and emerging evidence within the current COVID-19 crisis, suggest these concerns are justified (Usher et al., 2020; Van Gelder et al., 2020). Identifying risk factors of family-based aggression is thus important to understand and mitigate the costs of the pandemic.

In the current research, we leveraged an ongoing family study to test whether sexist attitudes assessed prior to the pandemic predicted residual changes in aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children during a nationwide lockdown. Hostile sexism involves a set of beliefs stipulating that men should possess social power along with views that women are competing to take men's power (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Men higher in hostile sexism are concerned with protecting power in intimate relationships, prompting aggressive behavior toward female partners (Cross et al., 2017, 2019). Recent research also indicates that men higher in hostile sexism expect to hold authority in the home, prompting more controlling parenting (Aikawa & Stewart, 2020). Thus, we expected that men's hostile sexism would be a risk factor for aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children during lockdown.

Hostile Sexism and Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners

Men's hostile sexism is a robust risk factor for aggression within heterosexual couple relationships. Men higher in hostile sexism hold more accepting attitudes toward domestic violence (Chen et al., 2009; Yamawaki et al., 2009), report greater aggression toward partners (Cross et al., 2019; Forbes et al., 2004), and exhibit more aggressive behavior during couples'

conflict interactions (Cross et al., 2017, 2019; Overall et al., 2011). These links are robust controlling for a range of other risk factors (relationship quality, interpersonal dominance, propensity for violence; Cross et al., 2019; Hammond & Overall, 2013; Overall et al., 2011).

Power is central to why hostile sexism promotes aggression. Men higher in hostile sexism view relationships as a competition for control and are concerned about losing power (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Yet, men are highly dependent on intimate partners, which constrains power. Accordingly, men higher in hostile sexism are more likely to view female partners' behavior as intentionally antagonistic and feel they lack power in their relationship, which heightens aggression (Cross et al., 2019; Hammond & Overall, 2013, 2020). Men's hostile sexism is also particularly predictive of aggression in contexts that amplify dependence and challenge power (Cross et al., 2017; Hammond & Overall, 2020; Overall et al., 2011).

The threat of dependence and loss of power should be especially challenging during COVID-19 lockdowns in which couples are confined to the home, forced to balance work and childcare, and have to rely on each other isolated from other means to alleviate the uncertainty and economic loss created by the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). The amplified dependence and loss of power arising from these difficulties are likely to result in a greater risk of aggressive behavior toward intimate partners by men higher in hostile sexism. In particular, the more that men higher in hostile sexism experience threats to power in their relationship, the more likely they are to behave aggressively toward intimate partners.

Hostile Sexism and Aggressive Parenting

The stress, confinement and pressured family roles within lockdowns are likely to create similar risks for harsh parenting. Aggression toward intimate partners and children often co-occur (Chan et al., 2019). Such co-occurrence may partly arise because aggressive couple conflict can spillover to increase harsh parenting (e.g., Sears et al., 2016), but also may be due to shared risk factors. In particular, beliefs that men should possess and protect

power may result in men's hostile sexism predicting more aggressive behavior toward both intimate partners and their children. Providing supporting evidence, men's more traditional gender role attitudes that stipulate men should hold the power in the home predict greater risk of parent-child aggression across the transition to parenthood (Gowda & Rodriguez, 2019).

Similarly, hostile sexism is founded on beliefs that men should hold social roles of power, including specifying that men should possess the authority in the family (i.e., be the head of the family, direct the decision making, deliver discipline; Chen et al., 2009; Gaunt, 2013). These beliefs about upholding power within the family also involve expectations that children, irrespective of their gender, will respect and obey their father's authority and rules (Aikawa & Stewart, 2020). Similarly, parents are more aggressive toward their children when they feel they need to regain or exert their power (Bugental & Happaney, 2000). Expecting that men should have power and authority in the family, therefore, is likely to result in men's hostile sexism promoting more authoritarian and punitive parenting. Indeed, recent research found that men's hostile sexism predicted more controlling parenting independent of men's general desire for dominance (Aikawa & Stewart, 2020). In the current research, we extend this preliminary evidence by testing whether men's hostile sexism predicts more harsh or aggressive parenting when families were in a COVID-19 lockdown confined to the home.

Benevolent Sexism and Family Aggression

Hostile sexism is positively associated with a second form of sexist attitudes that also predicts how men respond within close relationships (Hammond & Overall, 2017). Rather than characterizing the relationship between men and women as a contest for power, benevolent sexism romanticizes a paternalistic version of heterosexual relationships: men are fulfilled by cherishing and protecting women who men are dependent on for the fulfilment of relational needs (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Accordingly, men higher in benevolent sexism do not feel their power is threatened in relationships, and do not exhibit greater aggression toward

intimate partners (Cross et al., 2017, 2019; Hammond & Overall, 2013; Overall et al., 2011).

How men's benevolent sexism might relate to aggressive parenting is less clear. Like hostile sexism, benevolent sexism prescribes traditional gender roles, including men holding the role of provider, being less involved in parenting, and expecting children to respect their authority (Chen et al., 2009; Aikawa & Stewart, 2020). However, unlike hostile sexism, benevolent sexism depicts men living up to the role of cherishing provider and protector rather than obtaining authority and power in the family via domination (Chen et al., 2009). Thus, we expected hostile rather than benevolent sexism to predict aggressive parenting.

Current Research

The COVID-19 pandemic poses considerable challenges to families that may amplify the risk of family-based aggression and thus intensify the costs of the pandemic on parents' and children's health and well-being (Prime et al., 2020). The current investigation provides the first test of whether sexist attitudes longitudinally predict aggression toward intimate partners *and* children as a global pandemic emerges. We leveraged an ongoing family study in which parents had reported on their sexist attitudes and aggressive behavior toward (1) intimate partners and (2) children *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents then reported on their aggression toward partners and children *during* a nationwide lockdown in New Zealand (NZ), which involved mandatory and enforced confinement in the home for 5 weeks. The longitudinal design allowed us to test whether men's pre-lockdown hostile sexism predicted residual changes in aggressive behavior toward (1) intimate partners and (2) children.

During the lockdown we also gathered assessments of additional risk factors of family-based aggression, including participants' (a) feelings of power when interacting with their partner and child, (b) evaluations of couple and parent-child relationship quality, and (c) life stress. Based on prior theory and research that identifies threats to power as central to why and when men's hostile sexism will promote aggression in close relationships, we tested

whether the effects of men's hostile sexism was explained or moderated by feeling low power within interactions with partners or children during the lockdown. We also ran analyses examining whether any predictive effects of hostile sexism and low power were explained by relationship quality or life stress. All analyses modelled benevolent sexism to test the unique effects of hostile sexism and explore whether any effects emerged for benevolent sexism.

Method

Participants

Participants included 362 parents of which 310 were drawn from the same family. Sample size was determined by the pool of families participating in an ongoing study examining family processes and child development (see OSM for more details about the initial study). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 237 opposite-sex couples ($N = 474$) who were parents of a 4-5 year old child and lived in the same household in predominantly urban areas in the Auckland region of NZ attended a laboratory session with their child, including completing assessments of sexism and aggressive behavior within the family.

Parents who continued to live together in NZ ($N = 468$) were invited to complete an online questionnaire during the COVID-19 Level 4 Lockdown in NZ (March 26 to April 28, 2020) in which all families were legally required to stay within their immediate household with no physical contact outside the home allowed (see OSM for more detail). All schools and businesses were closed, except for essential services (e.g., health services, grocery stores). Occasionally one person could leave the house to gather essential resources (e.g., medicine, groceries) under strict distancing protocols. The questionnaire was sent two weeks into the lockdown and open for completion until the end of the Level 4 lockdown (between April 8 and 27, 2020). Each parent received \$NZ25 for completing the assessment.

Of the 464 parents who completed pre-lockdown measures of sexist attitudes, 78% ($N = 362$; 199 mothers, 163 fathers) completed the lockdown assessment, of which 310 were

drawn from the same family ($N = 155$ dyads). Parents who completed vs. did not complete the lockdown assessment did not differ in pre-lockdown sexist attitudes or aggression ($t_s < 1.35$, $p_s > .17$). Three parents did not complete the parent-child measures. Our analyses use all available data predicting aggressive behavior toward intimate partners ($N = 362$) and children ($N = 359$). Sensitivity analyses suggests this sample size provides adequate power (.809) to detect small actor ($r = .21$) effects for men or women (Ackerman et al., 2016).

Parents were on average 37.03 years old ($SD = 4.84$), involved in long-term marital relationships ($M = 11.88$ years, $SD = 4.53$; 87 % married, 13% cohabiting but not married) with two children ($SD = .87$) on average. Participants identified as Māori (5.8%), Pacific Nations (5.5%), Indian (5%), Asian (10.2%), non-NZ European (12.4%), NZ European/Pākehā (56.4%) and Other (4.1%). Families covered a range of income brackets prior to the pandemic [per annum NZD; 27% < 40,000, 31% 41-60,000, 17% 61-80,000, 17% 81-100,000, 26% > 100,000]. Around a third lost work ($N = 112$; 31%) and/or income ($N = 122$; 34%) due to COVID-19, which is evident in change in income groups during the lockdown [38% < 40,000, 12% 41-60,000, 15% 61-80,000, 16% 81-100,000, 20% > 100,000]. Economic loss (no loss vs. lost work/income) did not predict family aggression, and as when controlling for life stress (see OSM), controlling for economic loss did not alter the results.

Procedure

The study was approved by the [blinded for review] ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained. Prior to the lockdown, all families had completed an initial assessment, and 78 had completed a second assessment, of the ongoing study. At both pre-lockdown assessments, parents completed measures of sexist attitudes and aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children. For the current analyses, we used the most recent assessment of sexist attitudes and aggressive behavior, which was on average 208 days ($SD = 126$; range 24-627 days) before the lockdown assessment. Controlling for days since the initial

assessment did not alter the results. Participants completed the same measures of aggressive behavior, along with measures of power, relationship quality and stress, during the lockdown.

Measures

See [OSF](#) for full scales. Items were averaged to construct scale scores.

Sexist Attitudes Assessed Prior to COVID-19 Lockdown

Participants completed the 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which assesses hostile sexism (e.g., “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men”; $-3 = \textit{Strongly Disagree}$; $3 = \textit{Strongly Agree}$; $\alpha = .89$) and benevolent sexism (e.g., “A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man”; $\alpha = .76$).

Aggressive Behavior Assessed Prior to and During COVID-19 Lockdown

Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners. Couples completed the 8-item verbal aggression subscale from Kerig’s (1996) conflict and problem-solving scales. Prior to the pandemic, participants reported how often they were verbally aggressive toward their partner when they had conflict or disagreements (e.g., “I raise my voice, yell, shout”; “I name-call, curse, insult my partner”; $1 = \textit{Never}$ to $7 = \textit{Very Often}$; $\alpha = .85$). During lockdown, parents reported on how often they were verbally aggressive when they had conflict *during the lockdown* (e.g., “I raised my voice, yelled, shouted”; $\alpha = .87$). A separate physical aggression scale (e.g., “I struck, kicked, or bit my partner”) was not analyzed because too few people rated more than 1 item above 1 (never) during lockdown (6%; skew = 7.154; kurtosis = 61.141) compared to 90% for reports of verbal aggression (skew = .873; kurtosis = .350).

Aggressive Parenting. Consistent with prior research using authoritarian or harsh parenting as an indicator of parent-child aggression risk (Gowda & Rodriguez, 2019), we used four items from the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (Robinson et al., 2001) to assess aggressive parenting. Prior to the lockdown, parents reported how often they generally exhibited hostility towards their child (e.g., “I yell or shout when my child

misbehaves”; “I use physical punishment as a way of disciplining my child”; 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*; $\alpha = .72$). During the lockdown, parents reported how often they exhibited hostility *during the lockdown* (e.g., “I have yelled or shouted when my child misbehaved”; $\alpha = .70$).

Power, Relationship Quality and Stress Assessed During Lockdown

Power During Couple Interactions. Participants rated four items with regard to how they felt when interacting with their partner during the lockdown, including feeling powerful and assured (“powerful/influential”, “confident/self-assured”) and powerless and ineffective (reverse-scored: “powerless/like I lacked control”, “useless/ineffective”; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Higher scores represent feeling higher power ($\alpha = .83$).

Power during Parent-Child Interactions. Parents rated the same four items with regard to how they felt when interacting with their child during the lockdown (e.g., “powerful/influential”, “powerless/like I lacked control” [reverse-scored]; $\alpha = .84$).

Couple Relationship Quality. Participants rated five items from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) according to how satisfied they felt about their relationship with their partner during lockdown (e.g., “I feel satisfied with our relationship”, “Our relationship is close to ideal”; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .70$).

Parent-Child Relationship Quality. Parents rated 6 similar items to assess parent-child relationship quality (Le & Impett, 2016; Smith & Krohn, 1995) rating how they thought and felt about their child during lockdown (e.g., “I have felt satisfied with my relationship with my child”, “My relationship with my child has been close to ideal”; $\alpha = .92$).

Stress. Participants rated 12 items assessing how stressful different areas of life had been during lockdown (e.g., living conditions, financial status, work; parenting, relationships, health; 1 = *not at all stressful*, 7 = *extremely stressful*; $\alpha = .83$; see Neff & Broady, 2011).

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (see OSM for correlations). Men reported

stronger hostile ($t = 2.52, p = .012$) and benevolent ($t = 4.62, p < .001$) sexism. No other measures differed across men and women. Levels of aggressive behavior prior to vs. during lockdown are not directly comparable because pre-lockdown assessments reflected aggressive behavior in general whereas lockdown assessments were specific to aggressive behavior exhibited during the lockdown period. Nonetheless, controlling for pre-lockdown levels of aggression in the analyses provides evidence that any effects of pre-existing sexist attitudes (assessed prior to the pandemic) on aggressive behavior while families were in lockdown reflect relative residual changes from general pre-lockdown aggressive behavior.

Primary Analyses: Sexist Attitudes and Family Aggression

Using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 26, we ran dyadic models treating individuals' scores from the same dyad as repeated measures from the same family and accounting for nonindependence by modeling a *heterogeneous compound symmetry* error structure (Kenny et al., 2006). Each analysis includes all parents who completed the relevant assessments, including 310 who comprised 155 dyads and 52 parents whose partners did not complete the lockdown assessment. The multilevel models treat the 52 partners who did not provide lockdown data as missing so that only available data for each dyad informs the estimates. Given the levels, meaning and established effects of sexist attitudes differ across men and women, we conducted two-intercept models to simultaneously estimate parameters for men and women while accounting for dependencies across dyad members (Kenny et al., 2006; also Cross et al., 2017, 2019; Hammond & Overall, 2013, 2020; see OSM for annotated syntax). Given they represent aggression toward different targets, we also tested the links between sexism and (1) aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and (2) aggressive parenting in separate models. Supporting our analytic approach, a pooled multilevel model testing differences across gender (-1 women, 1 men) and forms of aggression (-1 intimate partner, 1 parenting) revealed that the effect of hostile sexism differed across men vs. women

($t = 2.27, p = .024$) although similarly predicted aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children ($t = 1.26, p = .207$). The effect of benevolent sexism also differed across men vs. women ($t = -2.63, p = .009$) and differed in predicting aggressive behavior toward intimate partners vs. children ($t = -2.42, p = .016$). See [OSF](#) for data and syntax for all analyses.

Hostile Sexism and Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners. Verbal aggression toward intimate partners during lockdown was modelled as a function of (1) pre-lockdown assessments of verbal aggression so that any significant effects represent prediction of relative residual change from general pre-lockdown aggression, as well as pre-lockdown assessments of (2) hostile sexism and (3) benevolent sexism. All predictors were grand-mean centered. Table 2 presents the effects for men and women. Accounting for pre-lockdown levels of aggression, men's higher hostile sexism significantly predicted greater aggression toward partners, whereas the effect of women's hostile sexism was near zero. By contrast, women's (but not men's) benevolent sexism predicted greater aggression toward partners.

Hostile Sexism and Aggressive Parenting. Analogous models tested whether hostile sexism predicted greater aggressive parenting during lockdown (accounting for pre-lockdown levels). As shown in the bottom of Table 2, men's greater hostile sexism was also a strong predictor of aggressive parenting, whereas women's hostile sexism was not. This effect of men's hostile sexism was not reduced when controlling for aggressive behavior toward intimate partners prior to and during lockdown ($B = .09, 95\% \text{ CI } [.04, .14], t = 3.38, p = .001, r = .27$) revealing that the link between men's hostile sexism and aggressive parenting was not simply spillover from couple-level aggression. Additional analyses also revealed that this effect did not differ across child gender (186 girls, 176 boys), indicating that men's hostile sexism produces aggressive efforts to sustain the authority role in the family regardless of the gender of their child (see OSM for full results). Finally, men's benevolent sexism predicted less aggressive parenting (Table 2) which also did not differ across child gender (see OSM).

Analyses Examining the Role of Power

As in prior research (Cross et al., 2019), dyadic models revealed that men's higher hostile sexism was associated with men feeling lower power in couples' interactions during lockdown ($B = -.22$, 95% CI $[-.38, -.06]$, $t = -2.67$, $p = .008$), although the same was not true for power within parent-child interactions ($B = .04$, 95% CI $[-.13, .21]$, $t = .45$, $p = .655$; see OSM, Table SM3 for full results). However, if the potential power and dependence threats within the lockdown amplified the risk of family-based aggression, then men higher in hostile sexism should show greater aggression to the extent that they experience these threats (see Cross et al., 2017). Accordingly, to examine the role of power in the links between hostile sexism and aggression we ran models including the main and interaction effects of (1) power during couples' interactions on aggressive behavior toward intimate partners, and (2) power during partner-child interactions on aggressive parenting, during the lockdown (see Table 3).

Consistent with the role of low power in prompting family-based aggression (e.g., Bugental & Happaney, 2000; Cross et al., 2019; Overall et al., 2016), power was negatively associated with aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children. Moreover, the interaction between hostile sexism and power predicting aggressive behavior toward intimate partners was significant (see top section of Table 3). As shown in Panel A of Figure 1, men's greater hostile sexism predicted greater aggression toward partners when men experienced lower power during couples' relationship interactions (dashed line: $b = .15$, CI $[.03, .27]$, $t = 2.55$, $p = .012$), but not when power was relatively high (solid line: $b = -.04$, CI $[-.18, .10]$, $t = -.57$, $p = .570$). By contrast, men's hostile sexism remained a strong predictor of aggressive parenting (see bold main effect bottom of Table 3) irrespective of level of felt power during parent-child interactions (no significant interaction effect). The effects of benevolent sexism on family-based aggression also remained and were not modified by feelings of power.

Analyses Examining the Role of Relationship Quality

We ran concomitant analyses modelling the main and interaction effects of couple and parent-child relationship quality to (a) assess whether the role of power on aggression toward intimate partners was independent of couple relationship quality (e.g., Cross et al., 2019), and (b) explore whether relationship quality also represented an important factor identifying when hostile sexism was a risk factor for family-based aggression during COVID-19 lockdowns (see Table 4). As expected, lower couple and parent-child relationship quality were strongly associated with greater aggression. The effect of men's hostile sexism on aggressive behavior toward intimate partners (top section of Table 4) was reduced in this model ($p = .077$) and was not moderated by couples' relationship quality (non-significant interaction). However, additional analyses including the main and interaction effects of both (a) power and (b) couples' relationship quality did not reduce the significant interaction shown in Figure 1, Panel A (see OSM, Table SM4 for full results). Thus, couples' relationship quality did not account for hostile sexism predicting aggression toward partners when men lacked power.

When modeling aggressive parenting, the effect of men's hostile sexism remained and the interaction between hostile sexism and parent-child relationship quality was significant (see bottom section of Table 4). As shown in Panel B, Figure 1, men's greater hostile sexism predicted greater aggressive parenting when men reported low parent-child relationship quality (dashed line: $b = .15$, CI [.07, .23], $t = 4.34$, $p < .001$), but not when parent-child relationship quality was high (solid line: $b = .04$, CI [-.02, .10], $t = 1.31$, $p = .191$). These effects remained significant controlling for power within parent-child interactions as well as couples' relationship quality (see OSM, Tables SM5-6). Finally, the effects of benevolent sexism on family-based aggression remained and were not modified by relationship quality.

Analyses Examining the Role of Life Stress

We ran the same analyses with life stress to contrast with the relationship stressors we examined (see OSM for full results). Greater life stress was associated with greater family-

based aggression, but did not further modify the effects of sexist attitudes on aggression toward partners or children. Analyses controlling for life stress also did not alter the main and interaction effects of men's hostile sexism or benevolent sexism shown in Tables 2-4.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns confining families to the home represent acute, stressful challenges that may amplify the risk of aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and children. Investigations of prior disasters, and rapid evidence showing increased rates of domestic violence as the pandemic emerged, reveal that identifying risk factors for family-based aggression is vital (Peterman et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020; Van Gelder et al., 2020). Yet, no research to date (that we are aware of) has examined aggressive behavior within families prior to *and* during a national or global crisis, or assessed the risk that sexist attitudes have for aggressive behavior when families are quarantined in the home. The current results suggest that fathers who more strongly endorse hostile sexism may be more likely to exhibit greater aggression toward their family during COVID-19 lockdowns especially when they lack power in interactions with their partner or have poor quality bonds with their child.

Hostile Sexism and Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners and Children

Prior research has established that men's hostile sexism reliably predicts aggression toward intimate partners in heterosexual relationships. The current study provides the first longitudinal demonstration that men's hostile sexism predicts residual changes in aggression toward partners, and the first test of whether pre-existing sexist attitudes predict aggression as couples face a global disaster and mandatory lockdown. Supporting the underlying reasons hostile sexism risks aggression (Hammond et al., 2020; Overall et al., 2011), and the role of power and dependence established in prior research (Cross et al., 2017, 2019), men's hostile sexism predicted greater aggressive behavior toward partners when men experienced lower power during couples' relationship interactions. Thus, contexts that clash with the power

concerns central to hostile sexism, such as lacking power when confined with partners during a mandatory lockdown, amplify the risk of aggression by men higher in hostile sexism.

Advancing prior research and theory, the current findings also show that men's hostile sexism represents a risk factor for aggressive behavior across familial relationships. Prior work has almost exclusively focused on hostile sexism as a predictor of aggression toward female partners. Yet, these antagonistic attitudes are founded on the protection of traditional gender-role hierarchies in which men hold the power and authority in the family, and thus men's hostile sexism also should promote more aggressive attitudes and behavior toward their children. The current results extend initial evidence that hostile sexism and traditional gender role beliefs shape attitudes toward parenting and parent-child aggression (Aikawa & Stewart, 2020; Gowda & Rodriguez, 2019) by revealing that hostile sexism predicted residual changes in harsh and aggressive parenting as families lived through a COVID-19 lockdown.

Further, by uniquely testing the links between hostile sexism and aggression toward both partners and children, we illustrated that the predictive effect of men's hostile sexism on aggressive parenting was not due to spillover from more aggressive couple conflict. Men's hostile sexism also predicted aggressive parenting regardless of children's gender, which provides good evidence that the hostile sexism—aggressive parenting link relates to concerns about maintaining men's role as authority in the home (rather than general negativity toward female partners and female children). Yet, unlike aggression toward intimate partners, felt power during parent-child interactions did not play an explanatory role in the links between men's hostile sexism and aggressive parenting. Instead, men's hostile sexism predicted greater aggressive parenting when men reported lower parent-child relationship quality.

The novel, unexpected role of parent-child relationship quality in determining when men's hostile sexism predicted aggressive parenting may provide insights into the different factors involved in amplifying versus protecting against different forms of family aggression.

Adults are not as dependent on their children as their intimate partners and so expectations that fathers hold authority over children may not be as closely tied to concerns about losing power. Rather, rigid role-based expectations may generally promote authoritarian parenting and may create interpersonal distance between fathers and children. Building higher quality father-child relationships, however, may strengthen other parenting motives or qualities (e.g., perspective taking) that soften harsh parenting by fathers higher in hostile sexism. Although these ideas are speculative, the current results indicate that men's hostile sexism is a risk factor for aggressive parenting and provide important, new directions for future research to assess how the quality of father-child bonds may amplify versus buffer these risks.

Benevolent Sexism and Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners and Children

The effects of benevolent sexism also differed across partners and children. As in prior studies, men's benevolent sexism was not associated with aggression toward partners. By contrast, men's greater benevolent sexism robustly predicted lower aggressive parenting. Benevolent sexism promotes gender role hierarchies via cooperation and familial intimacy, rather than dominance. The current results provide the first evidence that benevolent sexism attenuates fathers' antagonistic behavior toward children. Such beneficial effects may be most evident in contexts that call for men to live up to the role of protective provider, such as when families confront the external threat of a pandemic. It is also possible, however, that the cooperative behavior arising from men's benevolent sexism is replaced by more aggressive responses when women or children violate expected roles (see Abrams et al., 2003).

Finally, as in prior research, women's hostile sexism was unrelated to aggressive behavior. By contrast, women's benevolent sexism predicted greater aggressive behavior toward partners irrespective of levels of power, relationship quality or life stress. Most prior studies have shown null effects between women's benevolent sexism and aggression (e.g., Cross et al., 2019; Hammond & Overall, 2013), although other studies indicate that women

can exhibit more destructive responses when male partners do not live up to the cherishing provider that benevolent sexism promises (e.g., Overall, et al., 2011). The family challenges arising from the COVID-19 lockdown may have intensified these expectations of male partners. Thus, the effects of women's benevolent sexism on aggression toward partners may also be magnified in threatening contexts that make men's role of protective provider salient.

Caveats and Context

Leveraging an existing family study provided strong evidence that pre-existing sexist attitudes predicted residual changes in family-based aggression during a mandated COVID-19 lockdown. Yet, this considerable strength restricts sample size, which may have reduced statistical power for interaction and longitudinal effects. The correlational nature of the data also limits causal conclusions and leaves open the possibility of third variables. Greater life stress strongly predicted family aggression, but the effects of men's hostile sexism, power and relationship quality were independent of this established risk factor. We did not gather other attitudinal measures that may contribute to family-based aggression (e.g., social and interpersonal dominance), but prior work has shown that the effects of hostile sexism are independent of general dominance (e.g., Aikawa & Stewart, 2020; Cross et al., 2019).

Lockdown assessments necessarily involved self-report measures of aggressive behavior, and we did not gather partner reports of aggression prior to or during the lockdown. Aggressive behavior arising from hostile sexism has been corroborated by partner reports and observer ratings in prior research (Cross et al., 2019; Overall et al., 2011), but individuals' self-reports may underestimate the level of aggression occurring. Indeed, levels of aggression were relatively low, partly because reports focused on the specific weeks of the lockdown compared to typical measures assessing aggression in general or over the past year (see Table 1), but also because participants may have under-reported aggressive behavior. Very low levels of physical aggression also meant we only focused on verbal aggression toward

partners. Nonetheless, the types and level of aggressive behavior we assessed predict detrimental long-term health and well-being outcomes for both adults and children (Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Pinquart, 2017) and likely represent a risk for more serious family violence (e.g., Chan et al., 2019; Murphy & O’Leary, 1989).

The aims of the existing study also restricted the sample and context of the current investigation. We sampled parents with a school aged child (5-7 years old at the time of the lockdown) living in the same household with their partner who were willing to participate in an extensive family-based longitudinal study. Despite the advantage of capturing a similar parenting context, the characteristics of the sample likely restrict average levels of aggression and sexist attitudes. Although levels of these primary variables are comparable to prior studies examining sexism and aggressive attitudes and behavior, families entering lockdown with high-quality relationships and economic reserves are likely to be at lower risk of poor outcomes, including aggressive behavior toward partners and children (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Yet, even for the fairly well-functioning families in our sample, men’s greater hostile sexism predicted residual increases in aggressive behavior. The risk of family-based aggression, and the damaging effects of hostile sexism, may be far greater for families facing more substantial challenges and conflictual family relationships.

The risk for aggression during lockdowns is also likely to be greater for families residing in less egalitarian contexts. The levels of sexist attitudes in NZ and in this sample are comparable to those across many countries (Glick et al., 2002), and the links between hostile sexism and partner aggression appear consistent across nations irrespective of any mean differences in sexism (Glick et al., 2002; Sakalli, 2001). However, the associations between hostile sexism and aggression may be more pronounced, and have more severe consequences, in less egalitarian societies where hostile sexism is more prevalent and there exists stronger support for enacting aggression to protect men’s power (Archer, 2006). Similarly, although

the lockdown in NZ placed all families in enforced confinement and thus a context that could exacerbate family-based aggression, the swift and strong response to the pandemic was accompanied by increased levels of trust in the government, police and science (Sibley et al., 2020). Support of the lockdown may have counteracted some of the stress NZ families faced during the initial stages of the pandemic. The risk of aggressive behavior is likely greater as families in NZ and across the world encounter ongoing challenges, especially in countries where a less uniform response places more responsibility on families to manage the risk of ongoing transmission and produces prolonged uncertainty, family stress and isolation.

Conclusions and Implications

Despite inevitable caveats, by showing that sexist attitudes longitudinally predicted aggressive behavior toward partners and children in relatively secure and egalitarian families, the current study illustrates the relevance of sexist attitudes in shaping aggression within the family. We expect future research will reveal that the links between men's hostile sexism and family-based aggression are stronger in more challenging and conflictual environments, which is supported by the results from moderation analyses: the harmful effects of men's hostile sexism primarily occurred within low power or poor quality relationship contexts. The differentiated pattern across aggressive behavior toward partners vs. children, along with the beneficial effects of men's benevolent sexism, provide new directions for understanding why and when gender-role attitudes create family dynamics that have harmful consequences for parents and their children. The aggressive behavior arising from men's hostile sexism will intensify the health, well-being and developmental costs of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current longitudinal results suggest that targeting power-related gender role beliefs when screening for aggression risk and delivering therapeutic or education interventions may help mitigate family aggression as families face the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic.

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Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation (SD) and Range of Scores for Primary Measures

Measures	Men		Women		
	<i>Range of Possible Scores</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Range of Actual Scores</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Range of Actual Scores</i>
<i>Pre-Lockdown Measures</i>					
Hostile Sexism	-3.00-3.00	-0.80 (1.15)	-3.00-2.73	-1.11 (1.13)	-3.00-1.91
Benevolent Sexism	-3.00-3.00	-0.02 (1.09)	-2.73-2.73	-0.56 (1.12)	-3.00-2.18
Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partner	1.00-7.00	3.11 (1.04)	1.00-7.00	3.25 (1.01)	1.00-6.63
Aggressive Parenting	1.00-5.00	1.69 (0.47)	1.00-4.00	1.78 (0.55)	1.00-5.00
<i>Lockdown Measures</i>					
Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partner	1.00-7.00	2.16 (0.92)	1.00-5.67	2.31 (0.99)	1.00-5.33
Aggressive Parenting	1.00-5.00	1.63 (0.49)	1.00-3.75	1.69 (0.54)	1.00-4.50
Power During Couple Interactions	1.00-7.00	5.24 (1.13)	1.25-7.00	5.16 (1.26)	1.75-7.00
Power During Parent-Child Interactions	1.00-7.00	5.31 (1.19)	2.00-7.00	5.23 (1.18)	1.50-7.00
Couple Relationship Quality	1.00-7.00	5.34 (1.36)	1.00-7.00	5.38 (1.40)	1.00-7.00
Parent-Child Relationship Quality	1.00-7.00	5.73 (1.15)	2.33-7.00	5.85 (1.02)	2.17-7.00
Life Stress	1.00-7.00	2.59 (1.00)	1.00-5.56	2.72 (0.91)	1.00-5.08

Note. Levels of aggression prior to versus during lockdown are not directly comparable because pre-lockdown levels of aggression captured general experiences whereas lockdown levels were specific to aggression exhibited during the lockdown period. See OSM for correlations across variables.

Table 2. The Effects of Sexist Attitudes Assessed Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic on (1) Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners and (2) Aggressive Parenting during the COVID-19 Lockdown Controlling for Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Behavior

Predictors	Men						Women					
	<i>B</i>	CI <i>Low</i>	CI <i>High</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>B</i>	CI <i>Low</i>	CI <i>High</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
<i>Predicting Aggressive Behavior Toward Intimate Partners</i>												
Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Behavior	.54	.43	.65	10.02	<.001	.62	.50	.39	.62	8.62	<.001	.53
Hostile Sexism	.12	.01	.22	2.22	.028	.17	.02	-.10	.13	.30	.765	.02
Benevolent Sexism	-.06	-.17	.04	-1.17	.242	.09	.12	.01	.24	2.15	.033	.15
<i>Predicting Aggressive Parenting</i>												
Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Parenting	.61	.49	.73	9.90	<.001	.62	.65	.54	.76	12.17	<.001	.65
Hostile Sexism	.10	.05	.16	3.83	<.001	.30	.03	-.03	.08	.92	.361	.07
Benevolent Sexism	-.07	-.13	-.01	-2.45	.015	.20	-.03	-.08	.02	-1.11	.269	.08

Note. Significant effects of sexist attitudes are shown in bold. Pre-lockdown assessments of (1) aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and (2) aggressive parenting were included as a predictor so that any significant effects represent prediction of residual change from general levels of aggression prior to the lockdown. Effect sizes *r* were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2 / t^2 + df)}$. In these multilevel models, the Satterthwaite approximation is applied to provide specific degrees of freedom for each effect, which were used to calculate the effect sizes.

Table 3. The Effects of Sexist Attitudes and (1) Power during Couples' Interactions on Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners and (2) Power during Parent-Child Interactions on Aggressive Parenting During the COVID-19 Lockdown

Predictors	<i>Men</i>						<i>Women</i>					
	<i>B</i>	CI <i>Low</i>	CI <i>High</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>B</i>	CI <i>Low</i>	CI <i>High</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
<i>Predicting Aggressive Behavior Toward Intimate Partners</i>												
Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Behavior	.44	.34	.55	8.55	<.001	.57	.48	.37	.59	8.62	<.001	.53
Hostile Sexism	.06	-.04	.15	1.16	.249	.09	.01	-.09	.12	.26	.794	.02
Benevolent Sexism	-.00	-.10	.10	-.07	.945	.01	.13	.02	.24	2.35	.020	.17
Power during Couples' Interactions	-.29	-.38	-.18	-5.83	<.001	.42	-.25	-.33	-.16	-5.41	<.001	.37
Hostile Sexism X Power	-.09	-.16	-.01	-2.19	.030	.17	.02	-.06	.10	.43	.666	.03
Benevolent Sexism X Power	.06	-.02	.15	1.43	.154	.11	.01	-.08	.09	.14	.889	.01
<i>Predicting Aggressive Parenting</i>												
Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Behavior	.58	.47	.69	10.44	<.001	.65	.61	.50	.71	11.78	<.001	.65
Hostile Sexism	.11	.07	.16	4.69	<.001	.36	.01	-.05	.06	.30	.764	.02
Benevolent Sexism	-.06	-.11	-.01	-2.43	.016	.20	.01	-.05	.06	.20	.841	.01
Power during Parent-Child Interactions	-.15	-.19	-.10	-6.43	<.001	.47	-.13	-.18	-.08	-5.45	<.001	.37
Hostile Sexism X Power	-.03	-.06	.01	-1.45	.150	.12	.03	-.01	.08	1.53	.128	.11
Benevolent Sexism X Power	.03	-.02	.07	1.21	.227	.10	-.02	-.06	.02	-.85	.398	.06

Note. Significant effects involving sexist attitudes are shown in bold. Pre-lockdown assessments of (1) aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and (2) aggressive parenting were included as a predictor so that any significant effects represent prediction of residual change from general levels of aggression prior to the lockdown. Effect sizes *r* were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2 / t^2 + df)}$. In these multilevel models, the Satterthwaite approximation is applied to provide specific degrees of freedom for each effect, which were used to calculate the effect sizes.

Table 4. The Effects of Sexist Attitudes and (1) Couple Relationship Quality (RQ) on Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners and (2) Parent-Child Relationship Quality (RQ) on Aggressive Parenting During the COVID-19 Lockdown

Predictors	Men						Women					
	<i>B</i>	CI <i>Low</i>	CI <i>High</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>B</i>	CI <i>Low</i>	CI <i>High</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
<i>Predicting Aggressive Behavior Toward Intimate Partners</i>												
Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Behavior	.39	.27	.50	6.42	<.001	.46	.47	.36	.59	8.12	<.001	.51
Hostile Sexism	.09	-.01	.19	1.78	.077	.14	.03	-.08	.14	.60	.550	.04
Benevolent Sexism	-.01	-.11	.10	-.13	.895	.01	.12	.01	.23	2.13	.035	.15
Couple Relationship Quality (RQ)	-.23	-.32	-.14	-4.94	<.001	.37	-.19	-.27	-.11	-4.57	<.001	.31
Hostile Sexism x Couple RQ	.00	-.07	.07	.01	.989	.00	-.00	-.08	.07	-.07	.945	.00
Benevolent Sexism x Couple RQ	-.02	-.10	.06	-.54	.591	.04	-.03	-.11	.06	-.66	.508	.05
<i>Predicting Aggressive Parenting</i>												
Pre-Lockdown Aggressive Behavior	.52	.42	.63	9.82	<.001	.63	.60	.50	.70	11.71	<.001	.64
Hostile Sexism	.10	.05	.14	4.17	<.001	.32	.02	-.04	.07	.64	.524	.05
Benevolent Sexism	-.05	-.09	-.01	-2.10	.038	.17	-.02	-.07	.03	-.74	.458	.05
Parent-Child Relationship Quality (RQ)	-.16	-.21	-.12	-7.19	<.001	.51	-.14	-.19	-.09	-5.38	<.001	.36
Hostile Sexism x Parent-Child RQ	-.05	-.09	-.01	-2.40	.018	.19	-.03	-.09	.02	-1.16	.249	.08
Benevolent Sexism x Parent-Child RQ	.01	-.03	.05	.69	.490	.06	.04	-.01	.08	1.42	.158	.10

Note. Significant effects involving sexist attitudes are shown in bold. Pre-lockdown assessments of (1) aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and (2) aggressive parenting were included as a predictor so that any significant effects represent prediction of residual change from general levels of aggression prior to the lockdown. Effect sizes *r* were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2 / t^2 + df)}$. In these multilevel models, the Satterthwaite approximation is applied to provide specific degrees of freedom for each effect, which were used to calculate the effect sizes.

A: Men's Aggressive Behavior toward Intimate Partners

B: Men's Aggressive Parenting

Figure 1. Men's Hostile Sexism Predicts Aggressive Behavior Toward Intimate Partners when Experiencing Low Power in Couples' Interactions (Panel A) and Aggressive Parenting when Experiencing Low Parent-Child Relationship Quality (Panel B).

Note. The x-axis is shown to the mid-point for each measure and captures more than 1SD above the mean as levels of sexist attitudes are plotted. Men's aggression scores ranged from 1.00-5.67 (out of 7) for aggressive behavior toward intimate partners and 1.00-3.75 (out of 5) for aggressive parenting.