

SEXUAL HARASSMENT SENSITIVITY AND GENDER: CLARIFYING THE DIFFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

The traditional view of sexual harassment sensitivity is that in certain circumstances, social-sexual behaviors are viewed as sexual harassment by women, but not so by men. The findings of the research reported here suggest a dichotomy that may revise this point of view. On an intellectual level, social-sexual behaviors are seen as sexual harassment by both men and women in certain circumstances. However, on an emotional level, the appropriate organizational punishment for social-sexual behaviors viewed as sexual harassment are drawn along gender lines to the extent that women may deal more severely with sexual harassment offenders than do men.

Sexual harassment and its recognition have been the subject of ongoing discussion in recent years, and much of the discussion has centered on differences in interpretation of exactly what constitutes sexual harassment. In this research, we use 1980, the date when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) *Guidelines on Sexual Harassment* were enacted [1] as a key date in considering the issues. In the years since, many men were first confronted with the idea of sexual harassment from a victim's perspective and with the concept of a hostile environment. It is possible that prior to this period, men and women may, in fact, have had very different experiences regarding sexual harassment and have held differing perceptions about some of the issues. A critical question, however, is what has happened in the period since 1980.

In this research, we are concerned with drawing a distinction between how men and women understand issues of sexual harassment on an intellectual level and their underlying emotional responses to it. We contend there may be very little difference in the way men and women *understand* sexual harassment. But the operative word is *understand*. *Understanding* sexual harassment on an intellectual level may be one thing, while feelings, visceral reactions, and the way we respond to and act upon situations of sexual harassment may be another thing entirely. Generally speaking, some individuals may understand sexual harassment on a cognitive level, yet experience no emotions about it, while others may understand sexual harassment intellectually and also respond to it viscerally.

TREATMENT OF THE ISSUES IN RECENT YEARS

Since 1980, sexual harassment issues have been highly publicized. There has been abundant opportunity for the way men and women think about sexual harassment to have been altered by a continuing high level of discussion of the issues in the media, through the widespread use of educational and training activities in the workplace and in educational institutions, and by feminist activities and the highly publicized sexual harassment cases since 1980. Consequently, it is possible that one of the net effects of sexual harassment as a major workplace issue in the 1980s and 1990s has been the education of employees to a broader understanding of sexual harassment—that sexual harassment is more than overt sexual aggression.

RELATED RESEARCH

When we survey the academic research dealing with perceptions of sexual harassment by men and women, we find two rather distinct perspectives dominating the discussion. One of these we label the *traditional* and the other the *contemporary* perspective.

Traditional View

The traditional view from research is that gender has a significant impact on sex-role behaviors (e.g., [2, 3]) and social-sexual behaviors (e.g., [4-9]). Likewise, this perspective suggests that men and women have systematically different orientations toward sexually related behaviors at work (e.g., [10]) and different reactions to sexual harassment (e.g., [11-12]). Many believe these differences are grounded in sex roles learned at an early age (e.g., [13]).

Generally speaking, research in this area has found men have a more positive image of sexual work behaviors than women (e.g., [5]) and men are more tolerant of sexual harassment than women (e.g., [14]). Men tend to rate hypothetical

scenarios [15-16] and specific social behaviors [12] as less harassing than women. Men, more so than women, are likely to believe sexual harassment in the workplace is exaggerated [17].

In general, the traditional perspective has held that men view the workplace as one of the playing fields for sexual games while women are less accepting of sexual overtures at work [18] and, in general, that women react to sexual harassment scenarios more negatively than men.

Contemporary View

More recently, Terpstra and Baker [19] have suggested gender differences in sexual harassment perception may be overstated. Several studies have indicated men and women are similar in their perceptions and judgments about sexual harassment (e.g., [20-24]), while some report mixed findings. For example, Kenig and Ryan [25] found significant sex differences in the definition of what constituted sexual harassment among nontenured faculty (women were more comprehensive in terms of what they perceived as sexual harassment), but in the other four groups (tenured faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff employees), there were no significant differences. In general, however, the tenor of this research is that there may be fewer differences between men and women in understandings of sexual harassment than was believed earlier. Of course, both views may be correct in that more recent studies may simply be detecting an increased sensitivity to sexual harassment, which could have been the result of attention to the issues during the 1980s and 1990s, as we have noted.

Other Research Considerations: Exploring the Full Range of Harassment Scenarios

Previous research has been limited to traditional scenarios of sexual harassment—male aggressor and female victim. While this combination may represent the traditional view of sexual harassment, it limits our understanding in that what we know about sexual harassment is not derived from the full range of gender combinations in sexual harassment situations. Recognizing this limitation in their study, Lee and Heppner pointed out:

Although it seemed prudent to limit the scope of the instrument to male to female harassment . . . it is vital that in the future [to] include female to male as well as same sex harassment so that sensitivity to the whole range of harassing behaviors can be explored [22, p. 516].

Using the full range of gender combinations opens a wide range of research opportunities. Men are often expected and encouraged to initiate sexual relations (e.g., [26]), and it is socially acceptable for men to be sexually aggressive and for women to be accepting of such behaviors (e.g., [27-28]). Perception of sexual

behavior is viewed more seriously when the harasser is female (e.g., [16]) and when female respondents rate a hypothetical sexual harassment scenario (e.g., [17]). In contrast to these findings, hypothetical scenarios involving a woman as an initiator of social-sexual behavior are seen as relatively nonharassing [16]. It is apparent from these studies that judgments of individuals involved in a sexual harassment incident may be influenced by a number of factors such as gender of the perceiver, gender of the harasser, and gender of the harassee.

As a result, additional possibilities for detecting gender differences in reactions to sexual harassment scenarios occur when the full range of gender-role possibilities is examined. For example, in hypothetical scenarios where a woman initiates sexual overtones to a man in the workplace, we might reasonably expect respondents to react along lines of sex-role expectations.

Another opportunity presented by having the full range of gender combinations is to study the so-called chivalry bias. The chivalry bias is based on an extensive research related to gender differences in the administration of sentencing in criminal proceedings (e.g., [29-34]). Chivalry bias theory holds women are less likely to be arrested and more likely to receive more lenient sentences than men alleged to have committed the same crime. The underlying assumption of the theory is that men are socialized to protect women in a male-dominated society. As a result, men will take a protective, sympathetic response to women in their transgressions. This suggests males will be more tolerant of sexual-harassment situations wherein a female is the aggressor and a male is the victim.

Other Research Considerations: Understanding Intellectually vs. Emotional Response

What is not clear from the research are the differences between men and women in their emotional reactions to sexual harassment. As the recent research discussed above suggests, at least on a rational/cognitive basis, both men and women may be in agreement on what constitutes sexual harassment. But are emotional reactions to sexual harassment different for males and females? Assuming, for example, that the power of the individual making a suggestive statement is held equal, is it possible a man would find it flattering if coming from a woman, while a woman would find it offensive coming from a man? Note, for example, expert testimony in one federal case based on surveys from the early 1980s [35], which indicated that about 75 percent of the women polled would be offended by a sexual advance in the workplace. However, of the men polled, 75 percent would be *flattered* by a sexual overture from a woman at work. What about equivalent situations involving same-sex harassment?

Are women less threatened now about sexual harassment because they realize there are effective ways to address the problem that did not exist before the *Guidelines on Sexual Harassment* were published in 1908? Are men less tolerance of sexual harassment because they now understand, more so than in the early

1980s, the extent of sexual harassment in the workplace and its debilitating effects on many people?

Previous research provides us with relatively little direct evidence about emotional sensitivity to—rather than intellectual understanding of—sexual harassment. More specifically, previous research has been designed to examine only subjects' cognitive reactions to elements of real or hypothetical sexual-harassment scenarios. Intuitively, we would expect a difference in the emotional reactions of men and women. However, the research has not dealt with this more emotionally based sensitivity to sexual harassment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As discussed above, research findings related to gender differences in sexual harassment sensitivity are inconsistent. Findings dating from the emergence of sexual harassment as a social issue indicate women are more sensitive to sexual harassment in the workplace than men. However, recent findings suggest gender differences in sexual harassment sensitivity may be diminishing. Moreover, previous research has not specifically examined the full range of gender combinations in sexual harassment situations, and it has not dealt with what we term *emotional*, as opposed to strictly cognitive/intellectually based reactions. This study deals with these issues and was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Are there gender differences with respect to rational reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment?

Research Question 2: Are there gender differences with respect to emotional reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment when a full range of harassment situations (i.e., male-male, male-female, female-female, female-male)?

METHOD

The purpose of this research was to determine whether there were gender differences with respect to rational and emotional reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment over a full range of sexual harassment situations. Three separate research settings were used to examine the reactions. The first two studies focused on the rational reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment. The third study examined emotional reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment.

First Study

Our subjects in this study were 150 full-time employees. There were fifty-four males and ninety-six females. The respondents were from diverse occupational backgrounds—clerical, technical, managerial, professional, etc. with an average

of 10.9 years of experience. Their average age was 33.4 years. We used the Harassment Sensitivity Inventory (HSI), an instrument developed by Lee and Heppner [22] that measures sensitivity to two forms of harassment—sexual and nonsexual. The HSI consists of eighteen vignettes (9 sexual and 9 nonsexual) describing varying degrees of harassment. On a 5-point scale, subjects rate each vignette in terms of:

Interference: does the harassment interfere with work performance?

Intimidation: is an intimidating work environment created?

Hostility: is a hostile work environment created?

Offensiveness: is an offensive work environment created?

Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to examine the effects of gender on perceptions of sexual and nonsexual harassment. The MANOVA was significant at the .05 level. Table 1 reports the findings of the univariate tests. Of the sexual harassment situations, male and female respondents differed in their perception of whether an offensive work environment is created (OFFENSIVENESS). Of the nonsexual harassment situations, they differed in their perception of INTIMIDATION, HOSTILITY, and OFFENSIVENESS.

Thus, our results are similar to those of Lee and Heppner [22]. Males and females do, in fact, differ in sensitivity to harassment. However, the difference appears in reaction to harassment of a nonsexual nature where women were more likely than men to perceive a given incident as harassing. The results of the first study suggest there is practically no gender difference with respect to rational reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment.

Table 1. Summary of Univariate Tests of Sexual and Nonsexual Harassment by Gender

	<i>F</i>	Sig of <i>F</i>	Male	Female
Sexual Harassment				
Interference	.36	.545		
Intimidation	2.55	.112		
Hostile	2.04	.155		
Offensive	7.88	.006*	2.27	2.45
Nonsexual Harassment				
Interference	.91	.340		
Intimidation	5.66	.019*	1.88	2.04
Hostile	10.42	.002*	1.82	2.03
Offensive	10.56	.001*	1.91	2.14

*Significant at .05

How can these findings and the findings of Lee and Heppner [22] indicating significant gender differences in perceptions of other forms of work-related harassment be explained? One possible explanation is that the media attention given sexual harassment issues has indeed been educational. Specifically, the attention given to sexual harassment over the past several years has enabled employees to see sexual harassment from a victim's perspective. However, perspectives on other forms of work-related harassment are apparently still affected by gender differences.

Second Study

In the second study, responses were collected from 318 full-time professionals in the health-care field. They were employed in medical professional and technical areas. There were 107 males and 211 females with an average of thirty-five years. Their average education was 15.41 years, ranging from eleven to twenty years. Of the 318 respondents, 186 were married and 244 were white.

To examine perceptions of sexual harassment, we developed a questionnaire based on York's study [24] of sexual harassment in the workplace. York identified eight categories for classifying sexual-harassment behaviors. We used the responses to the eight scenarios as dependent variables. One category involved the *status* of the sexual harassment aggressor, the supervisor. The other categories were *history* (how long the victim and the aggressor had worked together), *place* (where the harassment occurred), *form* (the nature of the harassment), *reaction* (how the victim reacted to the harassment), *coercion* (whether the aggressor put pressure on the victim to comply), *job consequences* (whether the victim suffered any job-related consequences by refusing to comply), and *prior evidence* (whether the aggressor had a history of sexual harassment). Subjects indicated degree of sensitivity to each scenario on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 being not important and 7 being very important.

As mentioned, Lee and Heppner suggested it is vital in the future to include female-to-male as well as same-sex harassment so that sensitivity to the whole range of harassing behaviors can be explored [22]. To examine the full range of aggressor-victim combinations, four versions of the scenarios were developed: 1) male aggressor, female victim, 2) female aggressor, male victim, 3) male aggressor, male victim, 4) female aggressor, female victim. In all other respects, the scenarios were identical. It should be noted that this approach identifies sexual preference of the aggressor only; the preference of the victim is not specified.

The MANOVA was used to examine the effects of gender on perceptions of sexual harassment while controlling for the full range of aggressor-victim conditions. The MANOVA is significant at the .05 level, indicating there is no interaction effect and only a significant gender effect, not an effect related to the aggressor-victim combinations. Table 2 reports the findings of the univariate test of gender differences. The results indicate that of the eight categories, there is a

Table 2. Summary of Univariate Tests of Sexual Harassment by Gender

	<i>F</i>	Sig of <i>F</i>	Male	Female
Status	1.90	.168		
History	3.00	.085		
Place	7.17	.008*	4.19	4.82
Form	2.77	.097		
Reaction	.14	.713		
Coercion	2.17	.142		
Job Consequences	1.52	.218		
Prior Evidence	1.89	.170		

*Significant at .05

significant gender effect in evaluating the importance of place in sexual harassment situations, with females significantly putting more emphasis on place. When examining the effect of the full range of aggressor-victim gender combinations, there were no statistically significant differences in the way men and women responded to sexual harassment.

Third Study

The third study goes beyond rational perceptions and taps into emotional reactions to hypothetical situations of sexual harassment. It seemed reasonable that the best way to get respondents to manifest their emotions in a hypothetical scenario would be to give them an opportunity to retaliate against a sexual-harassment offender. The retaliation took the form of the decision to take a disciplinary action. Logically, if the traditional view is correct that women are more offended by sexual harassment than men, then in a disciplinary situation, we should expect them to assess relatively heavy penalties on the guilty parties.

Note, incidentally, that we are not implying we expected the female subjects in this study to make an irrational emotional reaction. Instead, we are simply saying that if—within some bounds like interpreting a rule calling for punishment for a given offense—one subject provides harsher penalties than another, the difference in penalties exacted represents one measure to show which subject feels more strongly about the situation. Moreover, we hope it is clear that this research is not attempting to, and, in fact, *cannot* deal with the question of which of the penalties, a harsher or more lenient one, is “correct.” Obviously, there is no way to judge. Rather, we are using size of penalty differences *only* to suggest strength of feeling.

A case study requiring the respondents to decide on the appropriate disciplinary action in a sexual harassment scenario was developed. As in the second study, there were four versions of the case to examine the full range of aggressor-victim

combinations: 1) male aggressor, female victim, 2) female aggressor, male victim, 3) male aggressor, male victim, 4) female aggressor, female victim. In the case, an employee files a complaint against a supervisor for sexual harassment. The respondents assumed the role of a personnel director who investigates the accusation and must decide on the appropriate disciplinary action.

In the case study, the two employees began a sexual affair that lasted for four years. They kept the affair quiet because the company fraternization policy prohibited dating among supervisors and subordinates. At last, the subordinate ended the relationship but the supervisor continued to pursue the subordinate to the extent of sexual harassment.

The respondents were given a choice of five disciplinary actions to take against the supervisor for violating the rules against fraternization or sexual harassment or both fraternization and sexual harassment. The actions ranged in severity from speaking to the supervisor in private to discharging the supervisor outright. In addition, the respondents were given a choice of five disciplinary actions to take against the subordinate for violating rules related to fraternization. The alternatives for the subordinate were the same, ranging from speaking to the subordinate in private to discharging the subordinate outright. The disciplinary actions taken against the supervisor and the subordinate served as the dependent variable.

The respondents were 890 full-time employees. There were 449 men and 441 women from a variety of occupational backgrounds—clerical, technical, managerial, professional, etc. Their average age was 39.2 years, with an average of sixteen years of education. Of the 890 respondents, 501 were managers, 642 were married, and 764 were white.

The MANOVA was used to examine the effects of gender on judgments about disciplinary action taken relative to the case and we again controlled for the full range of aggressor-victim conditions. The MANOVA results indicate there is no interaction effect and only a significant gender effect. There was no aggressor-victim combinations effect. Table 3 reports the findings of the univariate tests of gender differences.

Clearly, in the third study, gender influences the action taken against sexual-harassment offenders. While recent research and the two studies above imply men and women rationally agree on what constitutes sexual harassment, the third study suggests men and women differ in the way they assess penalties for sexual harassment. Note in Table 3 that in the disciplinary action against the supervisor for sexual harassment, women were significantly more severe in their disciplinary action taken (mean of 2.91) than were men (mean of 2.70). In addition, women also gave more severe disciplinary action (mean of 3.57) against the supervisor for fraternization and sexual harassment than men did (mean of 3.29).

In the way the case was written, violations of the rules related to fraternization and sexual harassment were equally offensive. However, in the disciplinary action taken against the supervisor for fraternization, there were no gender effects.

Table 3. Summary of Univariate Tests of Sexual Harassment by Gender

	<i>F</i>	Sig of <i>F</i>	Male	Female
Disciplinary Action Against Supervisor for Fraternization	.65	.419		
Disciplinary Action Against Supervisor for Sexual Harassment	5.12	.024*	2.70	2.91
Disciplinary Action Against Supervisor for Fraternization and Sexual Harassment	7.80	.005*	3.29	3.57
Disciplinary Action Against Subordinate for Fraternization	1.19	.275		

*Significant at .05

Apparently, women did not react differently than men to a supervisor breaking a company rule that forbade sleeping with a consenting subordinate. Both men and women felt the breach of rules related to fraternization was less egregious than the breach of rules related to sexual harassment.

With respect to disciplinary action against the subordinate for violating rules related to fraternization, there were no gender effects (combined mean of 2.18).

Since the point of the third study was to determine whether women reacted more strongly to sexual harassment than men, in the sense of penalizing offenders, the findings suggest that they do. Finally, there was no evidence of a chivalry bias in this study. Men made no distinctions in the way they treated women and men, either as aggressors or as victims.

CONCLUSION

Gutek et al. accounted for gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment within the context of social-sexual behaviors [12]. Specifically, in certain circumstances, social-sexual behaviors are viewed as sexual harassment by women, but not so by men. The findings of this research suggest a dichotomy and a revised point of view. Specifically, what seems to be occurring is that, on an intellectual level, certain social-sexual behaviors are viewed similarly by men and women as sexual harassment. However, on an emotional level, remedies for social-sexual behaviors that are viewed as sexual harassment are drawn along gender lines to the extent that women deal more severely with sexual harassment

offenders than do men. One interesting side note involves the effect in the scenario of the prior relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate. Reilly, Carpenter, Dull, and Bartlett suggested that when using hypothetical vignettes, any prior relationship between a target and a potential harasser, such as previous dating, or any suggestive behavior on the part of the target will significantly reduce ratings of harassment [36]. Note that both male and female subjects in this study *were* willing to exact penalties for harassment even in a situation where there had been a prior consenting relationship. Women, however, exacted heavier penalties.

What has happened to cause women and men to perceive sexual harassment on the same rational terms? Perhaps the answer lies in the attention given to sexual harassment as a social issue during the 1980s and 1990s. It is entirely possible that both men and women have been educated to the point where they recognize and define sexual harassment in similar ways. But then why do men and women differ in their more emotionally based reactions toward sexual harassment offenders, if, indeed, that is what our third study is detecting? There are several possibilities. One of them, of course, is that respondents' willingness to accord harsher penalties toward offenders is *not* a measure of their underlying emotional reaction to sexual harassment. If so, future studies will need to propose alternative explanations and to test for them.

Assuming, however, that we are detecting real, underlying differences between men and women in emotional reactions, we believe our findings can best be understood in terms of established patterns of sex roles and expected sexual behaviors as they diverge along gender lines. Specifically, males may be socialized to welcome sexually oriented behaviors directed toward them (i.e., seeing them as flattering or "part of the game") and, if this is the case, they may be less able to feel empathy for a victim at an emotional level.

Several questions remain. How different are the emotional reactions to sexual harassment in the workplace? Are men flattered by sexual harassment and women annoyed by it? Are women less threatened by sexual harassment because they realize effective ways to address the problem now exist that were not available prior to the 1980 publication of the *Guidelines on Sexual Harassment*? Are men less tolerant of sexual harassment because they are now, more so than in the early 1980s and prior to the *Guidelines*, aware of sexual harassment in the workplace and its debilitating effects on many people? Obviously, more research is needed to determine the extent to which emotional reactions to sexual harassment separate along gender lines.

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