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Dimensions of perceived sexual harassment: effects of gender, and status/liking of protagonist

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Abstract

We explored individual differences in males' and females' perceptions of potentially sexually harassing male behaviours in two studies, using a questionnaire design. In the first study, based on perceptions of an undergraduate population, principal components analysis supported the hypothesis of two independent dimensions: *unwanted sexual attention* (e.g. touching and kissing) and *gender harassment* (e.g. crude and sexist remarks). Results for the liked/disliked boss factor, indicated that male and female respondents rated both forms of sexual harassment as more serious by a disliked boss than by a liked boss; but males rated gender harassment as less serious than females. In the second study, based on employees working in a university setting, males once again took a more charitable view of gender harassment, but not unwanted sexual attention; and, compared with females, males believed sexual harassment to be less common in the workplace. Male/female respondents also rated seriousness in relation to three levels of status (boss, colleague, subordinate): across both dimensions, the order of rated seriousness for status of protagonist (colleague < subordinate < boss) suggested that the appropriateness of the behaviour in terms of the situation was important. Results from both studies indicate that subjective factors play an influential role in the designation of male behaviour as 'sexually harassing'. Findings are discussed in terms of proximal-level attribution theory and ultimate-level evolutionary theory. Implications of these data and theories for workplace interventions are outlined. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Sexual harassment; Hostile environment; Unwanted sexual attention; Status; Attribution; Evolution; Gender perceptions; Workplace interventions

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1. Introduction

In this paper we report two studies concerned with male and female respondents' perceptions of sexually harassing male behaviours. The first study was conducted in a student population, and the second study extended this investigation to a workplace setting. The findings contribute to the debate concerning gender biases in perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable male behaviours at work. We discuss these data in terms of proximal-level attributional theory and ultimate-level evolutionary theory.

In recent years sexual harassment has emerged from the 'backroom to the courtroom and from fun to fines' (Coles, 1986). Although not clearly recognised as an important work issue before the mid-1970s (Brewer & Berk, 1982), there is now an increasing awareness of the widespread nature of sexual harassment, and an appreciation of its effects on both victims and organisations (Fitzgerald & Schullman, 1993; Schneider, Swan & Fitzgerald, 1997; Tinsley & Stockdale, 1993). For example, Jensen and Gutek (1982) reported that 20% of victims experienced depression, 80% disgust, and 68% anger. Financial damages awarded against companies have also been large (Terpstra & Cook, 1985); and there are hidden costs associated with decreased work efficiency, absenteeism, and turnover (Gutek & Koss, 1993; Lach & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1993; Terpstra & Baker, 1989). Hidden costs to the organisation may in fact be far higher than generally recognised because sexual harassment is under-reported (Brooks & Perot, 1991). Exposure to both direct and indirect sexual harassment may have important implications in terms of job stress and impaired occupational performance (Glomb, Richman, Hulin & Drasgow, 1997).

Whilst accepting the reality of sexual harassment in the workplace, and its associated personal and commercial costs, the theoretical and empirical bases of the concept of sexual harassment remains ambiguous (Pryor, 1985; see Lengnick-Hall, 1995, for a review of the methodological problems in this literature). In particular, the conceptualisation of harassment, and the range of behaviours included under this heading, along with the factors that influence perceptions of harassment, remain in need of further clarification.

The concept of sexual harassment is used in a number of different ways. For example (1) to define any sexually-oriented behaviour initiated by males and directed towards females; (2) to describe the process by which male superiors exercise gender-based power over female subordinates; and (3) as a quasi-legal category to classify accusations that de facto gender-specific behaviours constitute sexual harassment, irrespective of whether such behaviour is de jure sexual harassment (see Cleveland & Kerst, 1993, for a review of this literature). However, the view that male-initiated sexually-oriented behaviour in the workplace automatically constitutes 'harassment' is of dubious theoretical utility; in order to avoid circularity of argument, *perceptions* of sexual harassment cannot be used as the sole *definition* of harassment. As we are concerned with male behaviour directed towards females, and in order to avoid confusion, neutral terms are used throughout this paper to designate the male initiator (the 'protagonist') and the targeted female (the 'target').

Most countries adopt a broadly similar framework for defining sexual harassment, in terms of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature which become, either implicitly or explicitly, a condition of continued employment or future progression. The identification of behaviour as sexually harassing is seen from the perspective of the 'reasonable person'; that is, it is assumed that most people of both

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