



Gender-biased behavior at work: Exploring the relationship between sexual harassment and sex discrimination

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines survey-based reports of sexual harassment and sex discrimination in order to identify the stylized facts about the nature of the relationship between them. In particular, we are interested in assessing whether these concepts measure similar forms of gender-biased behavior and whether they have the same effect on workers' job satisfaction and intentions to leave their jobs. Our results provide little support for the notion that survey-based measures of sexual harassment and sex discrimination capture the same underlying behavior. Respondents do appear to differentiate between incidents of sexual harassment and incidents of sex discrimination in the workplace. There are gender differences in the consequences, however. Both sex discrimination and sexual harassment are associated with a higher degree of job dissatisfaction. However, women's intended job changes appear to be more sensitive to experiencing sex discrimination, while men's are more sensitive to experiencing sexual harassment. Although exploratory, when taken together these results give us hope that in the future sufficiently detailed surveys could provide a useful foundation for quantifying the link between sexual harassment and sex discrimination. They also suggest that the best prospect for developing—and then testing—a conceptual framework of gender bias lies in adopting a multi-disciplinary approach incorporating the insights of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economics.

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1. Introduction

Workplaces are rarely gender-neutral. Though gender differences in the terms and conditions of one's employment are almost never codified in firms' personnel policies or in employment law, women nonetheless frequently find that they are paid less, are promoted less often, and receive less training than their male colleagues (Blau, 1998; Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 1998). Reports of sexual harassment are also common with many working women experiencing sexual harassment at some point in their careers (for example, Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997; Welsh, 1999). The

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complex—and often ill-defined—nature of workplace sex discrimination and sexual harassment poses significant challenges for researchers wishing to assess the extent of gender bias in employment relationships.

Strong disciplinary roots have shaped the ways in which previous researchers have approached the issue of gender bias. The idiosyncrasies in conceptual frameworks, definitions, and research methodologies inherent in various academic disciplines have produced a dizzying array of results that, while individually enlightening, can be difficult to piece together to produce a comprehensive view of employment-related gender bias more generally. Economists, for example, typically define sex discrimination to be that portion of the gender gap in aggregate employment outcomes that is not attributable to productivity differentials and have largely been concerned with understanding how these disparities can best be measured (see *Altonji & Blank, 1999*). Until recently, however, economists have been almost silent on the issue of sexual harassment. A universally accepted definition of sexual harassment has not yet emerged for example (see *Foulis & McCabe, 1997*), though psychologists have made a great deal of progress in quantifying women's experiences of sexual harassment (see *Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Schneider et al., 1997*). Still, with the exception of a few evolutionary psychologists, psychologists have not been engaged in analyzing the psychological origins of sex discrimination as economists understand it.³

These somewhat artificial disciplinary boundaries have not been helpful in enriching our understanding of the causes and consequences of employment-related gender bias. More progress is almost certain to be made by developing a conceptual framework that does not focus exclusively on either sexual harassment or sex discrimination in isolation, but rather which explicitly views these as alternative forms of gender bias and considers the links between them. For economists, the successful strategy is likely to involve incorporating the insights from disciplines such as psychology and sociology into economic models of labor market behavior. There are a number of ways in which we might proceed. Sociologists, for example, often have an understanding of sexual harassment that is rooted in the power structure in society more generally (*Skaine, 1996*). They argue, for example, it is the social power structure that frequently puts male employers in positions of authority over female employees which underlies sexual harassment. Of course this is the same social power structure that is implicit in many "taste-based" theories of sex discrimination in economics (see for example, *Becker, 1957*). Similarly, legal scholars have spent the past two decades developing and then refining the argument that sexual harassment is sex discrimination (see *MacKinnon, 1979; Siegel, 2004; Skaine, 1996*). In particular, *MacKinnon (1979)* argues:

"Sexual harassment is discrimination 'based on sex' within the social meaning of sex, as the concept is socially incarnated in sex roles. Pervasive and 'accepted' as they are, these rigid roles have no place in the allocation of social and economic resources" (p. 178).

Ideally, any conceptual model of employment-related gender bias would be multi-disciplinary, well grounded in the stylized facts, and take account of the complexities of workers' experiences in the workplace. Sexual harassment and sex discrimination are surely related, but they are a long way from being the same thing despite the arguments of legal scholars.⁴ Yet we have very little empirical evidence on the nature of the relationship between them. There is evidence that the negative consequences of unwanted sexual behavior at work can be greater for women who believe themselves to be sexually harassed (*Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2006*), though psychologists often conclude that labeling unwanted sexual experiences as sexual harassment is unrelated to many subsequent employment outcomes (*Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999; Munson, Miner, & Hulin, 2001*). Moreover, previous research concludes that workers' perceptions of harassment and discrimination are closely related to their labor market behavior. Women experiencing sex discrimination and older workers experiencing age discrimination are more likely to separate from their employers for example (*Johnson & Neumark, 1997; Neumark & McLennan, 1995*), while women's labor supply behavior appears to be particularly sensitive to sexual harassment (*Goldsmith, Sedo, Darity, & Hamilton, 2004*).

Our objective is to add to this very limited empirical literature on the relationship between two forms of gender-biased behavior—sexual harassment and sex discrimination—by using data drawn from the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS). While far from perfect, these are the only data of which we are aware that separately identify incidents of sexual harassment from incidents of sex discrimination. Consequently, they allow us to begin to understand the extent to which these forms of gender bias might be related and to consider their respective consequences in terms of employment outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction and intentions to change jobs). Specifically, we address the following questions. Do survey-based measures of sexual harassment and sex discrimination capture separate forms of gender bias or are they simply reflections of the same underlying behavior? Do they have similar consequences for workers' job satisfaction and intentions to remain in their current employment?

Our results provide little support for the notion that survey-based measures of sexual harassment and sex discrimination capture the same underlying behavior. Respondents do appear to differentiate between incidents of sexual harassment and incidents of sex discrimination in the workplace. There are gender differences in the consequences, however. Both sex discrimination and sexual harassment are associated with a higher degree of job dissatisfaction. However, women's intended

³ *Kanazawa (2005)* provides a review of the evolutionary psychology literature on sex discrimination.

⁴ Drawing links between sexual harassment and sex discrimination is made more difficult by the fact that each is a complex phenomenon. *Basu (2003)*, for example, argues "it would be unfortunate if the only way to establish sexual harassment was to categorize it as a form of discrimination" (p. 151) because in doing so we ignore the reality that first, sexual harassment often occurs within gender and second, men are increasingly the victims of sexual harassment.

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