

Original Article

# Sociosexuality as predictor of sexual harassment and coercion in female and male high school students<sup>☆,☆☆,★</sup>

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## Abstract

Sexual harassment and coercion have mainly been considered from a sex difference perspective. While traditional social science theories have explained harassment as male dominance of females, the evolutionary perspective has suggested that sex differences in the desire for sex are a better explanation. This study attempts to address individual differences associated with harassment from an evolutionary perspective. Considering previous research that has found links between sociosexual orientation inventory (SOI) and harassment, we consider whether this association can be replicated in a large, representative sample of high school students ( $N=1199$ ) from a highly egalitarian culture. Expanding the previous studies which mainly focused on male perpetrators and female victims, we also examine females and males as both perpetrators and as victims. We believe that unrestricted sociosexuality motivates people to test whether others are interested in short-term sexual relations in ways that sometimes might be defined as harassment. Furthermore, unrestricted individuals signal their sociosexual orientation, and while they do not desire all individuals that react to these signals with sexual advances, they attract much more sexual advances than individuals with restricted sociosexual orientations, especially from other unrestricted members of the opposite sex. This more or less unconscious signaling thus makes them exploitable, i.e., harassable. We find that SOI is a predictor for sexual harassment and coercion among high school students. The paper concludes that, as expected, unrestricted sociosexuality predicts being both a perpetrator and a victim of both same-sex and opposite-sex harassment.

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## 1. Introduction

Sexual harassment at work represents a considerable problem in the management of organizations (UN, 2006). Early studies portrayed the traditional view of male perpetrators and adverse consequences for female victims (Fitzgerald, 1993). The feminist perspective has focused on men's need for power as the root cause of conflict between the sexes, seeing sexual harassment as a tool of patriarchy (Browne, 2006; Studd, 1996). Sexual harassment is linked to the need to dominate women accompanied by hostile

attitudes (including condoning forced sex) and men's use of their organizational power to oppress their female subordinates (Smith & Konik, 2011; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). Evolutionary psychology (EP) presents an alternative perspective claiming that sex is the driving force in sexual harassment—not males' need for power over women (Buss, 1996; Vandermassen, 2011). We support Vandermassen's (2011) perspective that feminism and EP may mutually inform each other, but one needs to treat both approaches as testable scientific theories (Buss & Schmitt, 2011). As such, the contemporary discussion in the journal *Sex Roles* (Smith & Konik, 2011) may reflect a watershed in the debate between these two perspectives, resulting in less polemic and more empirical testing (although see Liesen, 2011).

Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexually oriented behavior such as offensive sexual attention or hostile behaviors that focus on gender (Fitzgerald, Collinsworth, & Harned, 2001; Studd, 1996). It is worth noting that “unwanted” and “offensive” are from the perspective of the

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person experiencing the harassment. Similar acts from more attractive persons might not be considered harassment, but rather be perceived as flirtatious (Browne, 2006). Sexual harassment covers various acts ranging from sexual comments (obscene language and jokes) and spreading rumors, through inappropriate sexual advances to showing pictures of nudity and sex. Sexual coercion is the use of *physical* force to obtain sex.

Most research on sexual harassment, conducted within the hierarchical organizational context, has studied adult male perpetrators and female targets. However, sexual harassment is common among high school girls and also among boys (American Association of University Women, 2001; Bendixen & Kennair, 2008; Witkowska, 2005). Studies report 12-month prevalence rates in the 40%–50% range for sexist jokes, degrading and obscene sexual comments, and homophobic insults. Nearly one in four high school students reported the spreading of sexual rumors, being shown pictures of nudity, and being asked for sexual favors. Apart from homophobic insults, more girls than boys reported harassment. *Coercion* is much less common but is still reported by a significant proportion of students (Bendixen & Kennair, 2008).

Several findings support the sexual motives hypothesis advanced by EP (Studd, 1996). The evidence is particularly strong that victims of sexual harassment are not random women. They are disproportionately young, single, and employed as low-level office workers, waitresses, or cooks in the service sector (Browne, 2006; Studd, 1996). From a male perspective, gaining sexual access to a young and single woman would, potentially, bring greater reproductive benefits than sexual access to an older married woman.

Reliable patterns of sexual harassment and coercion may be predicted by EP (Buss & Kenrick, 1998). Over evolutionary time, the use of coercive means to gain sexual access to unconsenting women increased the reproductive fitness for males but not for females. Differences in evolved sexual strategies (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972) and evolved mental mechanisms between the sexes explain why women perceive more situations as sexual harassment or why more men are perpetrators of sexual harassment (Studd & Gattiker, 1991), why more males overperceive sexual intent from the opposite sex (Haselton, 2003), or why the same behavior by different men is perceived differently by women (Sheets & Braver, 1999).

Evolved sex differences have been far more subject to investigation than individual differences, while there are greater behavioral differences within the same sex than between the sexes (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Currently, there is growing interest in evolved individual differences and explanations of within-sex differences (Buss & Hawley, 2010).

This paper addresses whether there are evolved within-sex differences that predict sexual harassment and coercion of others and predictors of being harassed or coerced. Early findings (Bendixen & Kennair, 2008) suggest that there is a

large overlap between those who harass others and those who are targets of harassment. The etiology of this is not understood, and it remains open to question whether harassing others increases the risk of being harassed (or vice versa) or whether harassing others and being a target of harassment share common individually differing antecedents. Who is harassed, and how are they identified as exploitable by harassers?

Buss and Duntley (2008) suggest that there are different types of exploitation—and there will be different markers that suggest whether or not one is prone to being exploited in a specific area. Such areas of vulnerability are, therefore, person and context specific. Evolved mental mechanisms will be specifically orientated toward perceiving such signs of exploitability. For example, Sakaguchi and Hasegawa (2006) found that Japanese males used awkward gait as a cue to vulnerability for inappropriate touching. Moreover, the male subjects' judgments were able to predict real-life sexual harassment, as reported by the female walkers. Exploitability is thus a specific quality of an individual that conveys to potential exploiters the following information (Buss & Duntley, 2008).

Sakaguchi and Hasegawa (2007) found that unexpected sexual attention was predicted by the targets' unrestricted sociosexuality as measured by Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) sociosexual orientation inventory (SOI; a stable individual behavioral and attitudinal characteristic that predicts sexual behavior across many different situations). Inappropriate touching of body parts was, however, not predicted by SOI. Hence, high-SOI persons are more subject to harassment, but not necessarily to coercion in this study.

Individual differences in SOI are discernible to observers: SOI may be estimated through visual cues such as facial features and body language (Boothroyd, Jones, Burt, DeBruine, & Perrett, 2008; Gangestad, Simpson, DiGerónimo, & Biek, 1992; Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2007), and high-SOI females are rated to be more attractive than low-SOI females. In the light of Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), the major sex difference in SOI (Schmitt, 2005) is due to males being more open to short-term relations (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Kennair, Schmitt, Fjeldavli, & Harlem, 2009), while females consider sexual relations more from a long-term perspective (Campbell, 2008; Haselton & Buss, 2001; Surbey & Conohan, 2000).

Individuals with high SOI scores thus seem to signal their greater interest in short-term sexual affairs. These signals are perceived by others (Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2007). Compared to individuals with a restricted sociosexuality, they will, therefore, attract more sexual attention—not least from other unrestricted individuals of the opposite sex.

If we compared two females—one with an unrestricted sociosexuality and one with lower SOI scores—in a social setting, we might find the following: unrestricted sociosexuality elicits much more sexual solicitations. If the numbers of solicitations were similar, the female with the

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