



# A threatening exchange: Gender and life history strategy predict perceptions and reasoning about sexual harassment



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## ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is a serious societal issue, with extensive economic and psychological consequences, yet it is also an ill-defined construct fundamentally defined in terms of subjective perception. The current work was designed to examine the ways in which individual differences between people are systematically related to different perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios, as well as reasoning about those harassment situations. Participants ( $N = 460$ ) read several possible harassment scenarios and rated how uncomfortable they would find them. They then also evaluated a quid pro quo sexual harassment situation in terms of their interpretation of it as a threat or a social exchange and completed a deductive reasoning task about the same situation. Females and individuals with slow life history strategies were more uncomfortable with potential harassment situations and were more likely to interpret the quid pro quo scenario as a threat. Further, interpreting the scenario as a threat was associated with poorer performance on the deductive logic task, compared to those who interpreted the scenario as a social exchange.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Threatening exchange: perception of sexual harassment predicts performance on Wason Selection Task

Although human ability to reason in formal logic contexts tends to be poor, our ability to reason about certain social situations appears to be much better. A considerable body of literature now documents our abilities to reason well about with whom we should mate (Miller & Todd, 1998), who might pose a threat to our well-being and survival (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2011), and whom we should trust in social interactions (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Ekman, O'Sullivan, & Frank, 1999). The current work examines decision making at the intersection of formal deductive logic and social reasoning. Specifically, our goal is to examine the ways in which people reason about sexual harassment situations, make decisions in such contexts, and how those responses compare to both normative formal logic standards and practical standards. Additionally, this work looks at individual differences in gender and in Life History Strategy (LHS) as factors influencing reasoning and decision making in this context.

### 1.2. Why sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is broadly recognized as a phenomenon that has serious and pervasive implications for society, not only as a social issue but also as an economic, legal, and psychological well being issue (MacKinnon, 1979). Yet sexual harassment as a construct is quite “gray”; it is characterized by legal, political, and academic debate. The ambiguity of this definition has been critiqued in academic discourse, often citing findings which suggest that the “standpoint of a reasonable person” does not capture individual differences in the way that sexual harassment is perceived (Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001). For example, females are more likely to perceive a broader range of behaviors as harassment (Rotundo et al., 2001).

Little work, however, has systematically delineated how the subjectivity of this sexual harassment definition creates implications for how people reason and make decisions about sexual harassment. For this reason, we turn our attention in this research to this underexplored issue, and we employ a clear, objective substrate for our research design: human reasoning as studied in relation to formal logic.

### 1.3. Human reasoning about social contexts

Humans are limited in their reasoning ability, based on the time and energetic constraints within which we must operate as decision

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makers (Gigerenzer & Selten, 2002). These limitations are sometimes used to account for why people are notoriously bad at formal deductive reasoning (e.g., Evans, 2002; Funder, 1987). However, Cosmides (1989) discovered that when a formal deductive reasoning task, called the Wason Selection Task, is framed in terms of a social exchange, participants perform dramatically better. According to Cosmides (1989) this differential performance in reasoning based on the context of the problem supports an evolutionary perspective on human reasoning – that the mind has been shaped through natural selection and has therefore developed specific solutions to specific problems related to survival and reproduction. Social exchange is one such domain that has been critically important for our ancestors' survival and reproduction; individuals can solve significant adaptive problems (such as deciding with whom to cooperate) so that all parties can enjoy mutual benefits. Conversely, people can use information available to them and recognize if someone has cheated them in a social exchange, allowing for ending that relationship or even retaliatory responses (Cosmides, 1989; Cosmides & Tooby, 1989). It is of utmost importance to be able to conclude whether other people in one's social group are going to be truthful and honest in social exchanges or whether they are going to cheat. Cosmides (1989) defines "cheating" in this context as "a violation of the rule established" (p. 197).

The Wason Selection Task (WST; Wason, 1968), which was used in the above research and is a staple of the human reasoning field, is a reasoning problem wherein a subject is required to see if a conditional rule of the form "If  $P$  then  $Q$ " has been violated in four instances that are relevant to that rule (where  $P$  and  $Q$  can be any information). These four instances (represented by cards) give the antecedent and the consequent being true or false ( $P$ , Not  $P$ ,  $Q$ , Not  $Q$ ). The participant is tasked with choosing which cards need to be turned over in order to test the truth of the statement (e.g., turning over the  $P$  card would reveal either  $Q$  or Not  $Q$ ). Formal logic dictates that, given a statement of "If  $P$ , then  $Q$ ," the correct choice to examine the truth of that statement is the cards " $P$ " and "Not  $Q$ ". In less abstract terms, say the statement is "If a person is drinking alcohol, then that person is 21 or older" in this case,  $P$  is "a person drinking alcohol", and Not  $Q$  is "a person who is not 21 or older". The other cards (a person who is 21 or older [ $Q$ ] and a person who is not drinking alcohol [Not  $P$ ]) do not provide information which can logically falsify the conditional rule.

For Cosmides (1989) and some subsequent researchers (e.g., Liberman & Klar, 1996), better performance on the WST emerged because the content mapped onto evolved mechanisms which include reasoning processes. In the context of a social exchange, individuals' abilities to perform well on the WST was due to an ability to detect "cheaters": violations of social contracts. When viewed as a social contract, the conditional statement can be phrased as: "If you take the benefit ( $P$ ), then you pay the cost ( $Q$ )," and participants are tasked with enforcing this social contract.

The cost/benefit structure of the social contracts (Cosmides, 1989) create a potential for individual differences in reasoning performance that are based in people having different evaluations of what constitutes "costs" and "benefits." One such difference between people in the valuation of actions is the difference between males and females with regard to sexual activity. On average, males perceive more benefits to sexual activity, whereas females on average perceive higher costs to sexual activity. Given this very fundamental difference in perceptions of costs and benefits, Brase and Miller (2001) examined if there might be corresponding sex differences in the perception and reasoning about quid pro quo sexual harassment.

Quid pro quo ("something for something"; QPQ) harassment is a form of sexual harassment in which there is a solicitation of sexual compliance through promises of reward or threats of punishment (Fitzgerald & Hesson-McInnis, 1989). The structure of QPQ

harassment is amenable to being expressed as a conditional statement. Brase and Miller (2001) examined whether a quid pro quo harassment statement was perceived as a social exchange and if that interpretation influenced participants' reasoning performance on the WST. Brase and Miller presented participants with a statement such as "If you spend the night with me, I will give you a promotion" and asked participants whether this statement was a *threat* or a *social exchange*. Participants were then given the same statement within a Wason Selection Task and asked to pick the cards that need to be evaluated to determine if the statement has been violated. Participants who perceived the situation to be a *threat* performed worse on the reasoning task than those participants who perceived the situation to be a *social exchange*. Furthermore, Brase and Miller (2001) found that males, who in most conditions were more likely to perceive the statement to be a social exchange, outperformed females on the WST. These findings suggest that the extent to which individuals' perceive an event as a social contract, even an illegal sexual harassment event, shapes their reasoning about how to evaluate that event.

#### 1.4. Extending prior research

The current work is designed to clarify and build on the findings of Brase and Miller (2001), further exploring differential perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios and how these differential perceptions might predict patterns of reasoning. In particular, this prior research found that sex differences in how people evaluated sexual harassment situations were inconsistent. One possible reason for this inconsistency is that there are within-sex individual differences also playing a role, such as Life History Strategy (LHS). Life History Strategy originated in evolutionary biology as a way to describe the selection of traits in an organism that represent the trade-off between quantity and quality of offspring (MacArthur & Wilson, 1967), initially in comparisons across species. A "fast" life history strategy (wherein quantity of offspring is prioritized) involves producing more offspring and lower investment in individual offspring, whereas a "slow" life history strategy (wherein quality of offspring is prioritized) involves producing fewer offspring and greater investment in individual offspring. Humans as a species have a very slow LHS, but research has progressed to look at individual variations in LHS within the population.

Several research investigations of individual variations in LHS among humans have revealed some striking associations between LHS and changes in fertility rates (Hill & Kaplan, 1999), age of menstruation onset (Ellis, 2004), and well as parental and romantic patterns of attachment (Figueredo et al., 2005). In humans, these individual differences in LHS can be operationalized as the allocation of resources to either reproductive efforts (relatively fast LHS) or somatic efforts (relatively slow LHS). Because organisms have limited resources to spend (e.g., energy, time, money), deciding how to invest them involves trade-offs (Dillon, Adair, Wang, & Johnson, 2013). In general, females employ slower life history strategies than males, but trade-offs exist both across the lifespan and as individual differences (within each sex) across the continuum from fast to slow LHS.

It is proposed that people with a slow LHS will be *less* likely to view the statement "if you spend the night with me, I will promote you" as a social exchange (and more likely to view it as a threat). A person employing a slow LHS should perceive a much higher cost/benefit ratio regarding this type of opportunistic sexual activity, which makes it a particularly unviable as a social exchange. In contrast, a person with a relatively fast LHS will be more likely to view their sexuality as a commodity that could be exchanged for other benefits (i.e., it has a lower cost/benefit ratio which makes it amenable to transactions) and would be *more* likely to view the statement as a social exchange.

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