

1997

Sexual harassment perception as influenced by a harasser's physical attractiveness and job level

Mark E. Savery
California State University, Sacramento

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Savery, Mark E. (1997) "Sexual harassment perception as influenced by a harasser's physical attractiveness and job level," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol5/iss1/6>

This articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals, Magazines, and Newsletters at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Psychological Studies by an authorized editor of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Sexual Harassment Perception as Influenced by a Harasser's Physical Attractiveness and Job Level

Mark E. Savery

California State University, Sacramento

Seventy-two women participated in a study that compared factors that influenced the perception of sexual harassment. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 66 years ($M = 24.03$, $SD = 8.12$). The variables studied were the physical attractiveness of the harasser (low or high), the job level of the harasser relative to the target (equal or superior), and the level of sexual harassment in the stories read by the participants (low or moderate). The Sexual Harassment Perception Scale (SHPS) was used to measure the perception of sexual harassment. Analysis of variance indicated that physically attractive males were perceived as less harassing than physically unattractive males, $F(1, 68) = 5.44$, $p < .05$. Stories that featured more ambiguous harassing behaviors were found to be less harassing than stories that had more harassing behaviors, $F(1, 68) = 21.26$, $p < .01$. The job level of the harasser relative to the target did not affect the perception of sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is a pattern of behavior that has only lately received a notable amount of attention in both business and academic settings. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has defined sexual harassment as any unwanted verbal or physical sexual behavior that interferes with a person's ability to work in a given environment (EEOC, 1980). Clearly sexual harassment has become a major issue in the modern work world. Many companies have become aware of the negative impact that sexual harassment has on the work atmosphere, and have implemented measures to discourage harassment (Samoluk & Pretty, 1994).

What is not clear is how the guidelines for sexual harassment should be implemented, given the fact that the EEOC's definition has been contingent upon the idea that the given behavior is unwanted. "Sexual" behaviors that may have been tolerated and encouraged from one person might be reviled when initiated from another individual. As evidenced from one study (Littler-Bishop, Seidler-Feller, & Opaluch, 1982), flight attendants found identical behavior from baggage handlers and pilots to be more offensive when the behavior was initiated by a baggage handler, rather than a pilot. Upon closer examination, sexual harassment has been found to be a highly subjective term in which many behaviors may, or may not, fall into the defined category. Different attitudes and perspectives affect the perception of sexual harassment.

Studies have consistently shown that some behaviors, such as sexual coercion and rape, are almost universally considered to be sexual harassment (Lees-Haley, P. R., Lees-Haley, C. E., Price, and Williams, 1994). Conversely, it is logical to propose that there are a large number of behaviors that would be considered innocuous by most people, and would not be considered sexual harassment. How these behaviors are perceived is influenced by a wide array of factors.

Gender has been found to be a major predictor of the perception of sexual harassment, with women being more likely to perceive a situation as sexually harassing than men (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991). In contrast, men were more likely to find a woman's behavior flirtatious, even when the woman was actually just being friendly (Saal, Johnson, & Weber, 1989).

Other factors have also affected the perception of sexual harassment. In a study conducted by Moore, Wuensch, Hedges, and Castellow (1994), participants found a physically attractive male defendant in a fictional trial to be innocent of sexual harassment charges, based upon his attractiveness. The female plaintiff's physical attractiveness was also found to affect the perception of sexual harassment. When she was attractive, jurors were more likely to believe her claims of harassment. In an earlier study, physical attractiveness of the harasser was found to have an even stronger effect over the perception of harassment than it did in the

Mark E. Savery

previously mentioned study (Castellow, Wuensch, & Moore, 1990).

Power over the target of harassment has been shown to be a key element in the perception of sexual harassment. Until recently, men have enjoyed jobs with higher status and power than women. This could have created conditions in which women might feel more vulnerable and less able to defend themselves in situations where they may be victimized by sexual harassment (Williams, Brown, & Lees-Haley, 1995). Even when women have been in positions of power, they have still been viewed as victims of sexual harassment, especially in cases where the harassing behavior is unclear. In a study by Grauerholz (1989), participants perceived a female college professor as being the victim of sexual harassment by a male student, even though she was obviously in a more powerful role than the male student.

The purpose of this study was to explore the external cues that affect the perception of sexual harassment when behavior is ambiguous, and not clearly harassing. Physical attractiveness, job status of the harasser relative to the target, and intensity of the harassment have all been previously identified as factors that affect the perception of sexual harassment. This experimental study examined which of these factors was the most potent and if an interaction between any of these factors might heighten the perception of sexual harassment even further.

It is proposed that a physically attractive male who is equal in job status to the female target will be perceived as being less sexually harassing than a physically unattractive male who is a job superior to the female target. Both physical attractiveness (Castellow et al., 1990) and job level (Williams et al., 1995) are shown to affect the perception of harassment. When the behavior is ambiguous, it is proposed that the more physically attractive the male harasser is, the less likely the female target will perceive his behavior as harassing. In contrast, the more physically unattractive the male harasser is, the more harassing the female target will find his behavior to be. When the harasser is in a position of authority over the target, his behavior will be seen as more harassing, but less harassing when he is a job equal to the target. Finally, when the behavior is overtly harassing, both physical attractiveness and job level of the harasser relative to the target will

have less of an effect on the perception of harassment than when the behavior is more ambiguous.

Method

Design

The study used a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design. The between-subjects variables were the physical attractiveness of the harasser and the intensity of the harassment. The within-subjects variable was the job level of the harasser relative to the target. The physical attractiveness of the harasser was split into two levels, low and high. Job level of the harasser relative to the target was divided so that the harasser would either be a job equal or a job superior to the female target. The level of harassment intensity in the study was divided into two levels: moderate and low. The purpose behind this division was that it distinguished between ambiguous behavior and more overt behavior, and it also allowed the opportunity to establish that the variable of harassment can be successfully manipulated.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a volunteer sample. Seventy-two female undergraduate college students from California State University, Sacramento received $\frac{1}{2}$ hour class credit for taking part in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 66 years ($M = 24.03$, $SD = 8.12$). Fifty participants described their ethnicity as white, six as African-American, six as Hispanic, five as Asian, and one as Native-American. Four participants declined to state their ethnicity. Participants were informed that their answers would be kept confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also fully debriefed as to the purpose of the study.

Materials

Harassment Stories.

Six short stories were developed based on work by Chavin, Gallois, Yoshihisa, McCamish, Terry, and Timmins (1992). Three of the stories were taken directly from published work, while the remaining three were written in the same format as the published stories. All of the stories took place in an office or business setting and involved some form of sexual harassment. As determined by participants in a pilot study, three of the stories were defined as having low sexual harassment content. The other three were defined by participants as having high sexual harassment content, based upon the intensity

SEXUAL HARASSMENT PERCEPTION

and overtness of the behavior. The pilot study showed a significant difference in the perception of harassment between the low and high groups, $t(15) = 1.78, p < .01$. All six of the stories varied on the job level of the harasser relative to the target. The harasser was either a co-worker or a boss.

Photograph/Biography.

Six color photographs with a biography of a fictional sexual harasser were used. The photograph/biographies measured $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ inches. Three photographs were of an attractive male, while the other three were of a physically unattractive male. A pilot test was used to confirm that three of the models were attractive and the others unattractive. The biographies attached to the photographs were identical and did not reveal any information that would indicate past sexual behavior or the marital status of the character. All of the photographs were taken from public journals and fell within the realm of public domain. The actors in the photographs were posed in similar position, lighting, and scale.

Sexual Harassment Perception Scale.

A Sexual Harassment Perception Scale (SHPS) was developed based upon the five components of sexual harassment as defined by Fitzgerald and Hesson-McInnis (1989). These five components were gender harassment, seductive behavior, sexual bribery, threat of punishment, and sexual imposition. Gender harassment described behaviors such as telling sexist jokes or displaying sexually explicit material in a work setting. Seductive behavior and sexual imposition involved repeated attempts at either verbalizing sexual behavior, or attempting to engage in any unwanted sexual contact. Sexual bribery implied sex in return for a reward, while threat of punishment involved reprisal for failure to participate in sexual activity. The SHPS had 20 items and uses a 7-point Likert-type scale. Items were ranked on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with a neutral response of 4 (no opinion). The SHPS asked participants to record their opinions about behaviors read in the harassment stories. Four items on the scale categorized gender harassment: "I find this behavior to be demeaning to women," four items categorized seductive behavior: "I find this behavior to have too many sexual overtones for the work place," four items categorize sexual bribery: "I find this behavior to be a form of sexual bribery," four

items categorized sexual imposition: "I find this behavior to be coercive and threatening," and four items categorized threat of punishment: "I find this behavior to be threatening and possibly assault."

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a volunteer sample of undergraduate female college students. Upon entering the research room, participants were seated around a table and informed of their right to confidentiality and their right to withdraw. The photograph/biography was introduced to the participants. It was placed in the center of the table so that each participant was easily able to see it. The photo/bio was either of an attractive male or an unattractive male. Each participant was exposed to only one photo/bio. Next, copies of the stories and the scales were distributed to the participants. Participants were instructed to assume that the male character in the photo/bio was the male character in the story. Each participant received two stories that were both either less sexually harassing or more sexually harassing. The story also indicated whether the harassing male was a boss or co-worker (within-subjects variable) to the target. One story had the job level equal between harasser and target, and the other had the harasser in a position of authority over the target. The order in which these were presented to the participants was counter-balanced in order to prevent any carry-over effects.

Participants filled out two harassment scales, one for each story presented to them. Upon completing both of the scales, participants returned them to the experimenter, who then debriefed them as to the nature of the study.

Results

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design was used to analyze results. Between-subjects variables in the experiment were the physical attractiveness of the harasser and the intensity of the harassment in the stories. The within-subjects variable in the study was the job level of the harasser relative to the target. The dependent variable was the participants' perception of sexual harassment, as defined by the SHPS.

Analysis of variance was conducted and main effects for physical attraction and intensity of harassment were found. Physically attractive males were perceived as less harassing ($M = 66.99, SD = 24.17$) than physically unattractive males ($M = 77.30, SD = 19.72$),

Mark E. Savery

$F(1, 68) = 5.44, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$. Stories that had a low level of sexual harassment, as defined by the pilot study, were perceived as less sexually harassing ($M = 62.03, SD = 23.61$) than those with a high level of sexual harassment ($M = 82.32, SD = 20.28$), $F(1, 68) = 21.26, p < .01, \eta^2 = .31$. The job level of the harasser relative to the target did not have a significant effect on the perception of harassment, $F(1, 68) = 0.45, p > .05$.

Simple-effects testing revealed that physical attractiveness did not affect the perception of harassment when the harasser was a co-worker in the low harassment level, $F(1, 68) = 1.94, p > .05$. However, when the co-worker was in the high harassment category, harassment perception was

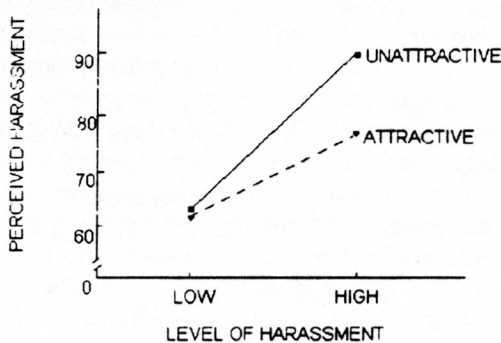


Figure 1. Perception of sexual harassment with a co-worker as the harasser.

lower when the harasser was attractive, $F(1, 68) = 16.76, p < .01$. Figure 1 displays the perception of sexual harassment when the harasser was a co-worker of the target.

Physically attractive bosses were considered to be less harassing, in both the low and high levels of sexual harassment, $F(1, 68) = 5.55, p < .05$. Bosses in the high harassing stories were perceived to be more harassing than bosses in the low harassing stories, $F(1, 68) = 12.36, p < .01$. Figure 2 displays the perception of sexual harassment when the harasser was a job superior (boss) to the target.

Discussion

In support of the hypothesis, physical attractiveness of the harasser and level of harassment in the stories significantly affected the perception of sexual harassment. Physically attractive males were

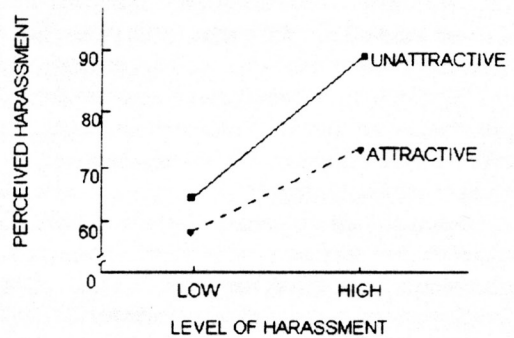


Figure 2. Perception of sexual harassment with a boss as the harasser.

perceived as less sexually harassing than physically unattractive males. In addition, when the sexually harassing behaviors described in the stories were more severe, participants responded by perceiving those behaviors as more harassing, a manipulation check designed to ensure that respondents were consistently perceiving the events in the story. The existence of hierarchical levels of sexual harassment has been supported in research by Tata (1993), demonstrating that some behaviors are consistently seen as more harassing than others.

The job level of the harasser relative to the target did not affect the perception of sexual harassment. Whether the harasser was a boss or co-worker, participants considered them to be equally harassing. This is in contrast to the predictions of this study, which hypothesized that male figures in authority over female workers would be perceived as more sexually harassing. It is possible that the higher status of the boss category counteracted heightened perceptions of harassment, as evidenced by Littler-Bishop, Seidler-Feller, and Opahluch (1982). The boss' status and influence might actually have made him more attractive to the participants. Another possibility is that the participants might not have fully incorporated the power level of the boss, since he was presented to them in a short story, and thus did not have any direct power over them personally.

According to the guidelines of the EEOC, a behavior must be unwanted for it to be established as sexual harassment. Ambiguous behaviors, such as asking a fellow worker out for a date, or complimenting a co-worker's physical attractiveness, may or may not be considered sexual

SEXUAL HARASSMENT PERCEPTION

harassment. Outside factors, such as the physical attractiveness of the initiator, may affect the perception of these borderline behaviors.

As sexual harassment awareness continues to evolve, more emphasis needs to be placed on the interactive behaviors between men and women. Specifically, while it has already been shown that men and women perceive similar situations differently (Saal, Johnson, & Weber, 1989), future research needs to concentrate on what behaviors men would consider to be harassing, as much research has already been conducted on women's perception of harassment. This information would be relevant not only because it would better display the perception gap between men and women, but it would also provide a meaningful starting point for determining what behaviors are sexually harassing against men. As parity between the sexes in the workplace continues to progress, more and more men are filing sexual harassment suits against their female bosses. It would be interesting to see if men base their harassment claims on specific events (as women tend to do) or if they view sexual harassment as being more a function of an office culture that either marginalizes or sexualizes male employees. Only when it is understood how both men and women view sexual harassment can adequate definitions for sexual harassment be established.

References

- Castellow, W. A., Wuensch, K. L., Moore, C. H. (1990). Effects of physical attractiveness of the plaintiff and defendant in sexual harassment judgments. Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 5(6), 547-562.
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1980). Guidelines on discrimination because of sex (Sect. 1604.11). Federal Register, 45, 74676-74677.
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Ormerod, A. J. (1991). Perceptions of sexual harassment: The influence of gender and academic context. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 15(2), 281-294.
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Hesson-McInnis, M. (1989). The dimensions of sexual harassment: A structural analysis. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 35(3), 309-326.
- Gallois, C., Kashima, Y., Terry, D., McCamish, M., et al. (1992). Safe and unsafe sexual intentions and behavior: The effects of norms and attitudes. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 22(19), 1521-1545.
- Grauerholz, E. (1989). Sexual harassment of women professors by students: Exploring the dynamics of power, authority, and gender in a university setting. Sex Roles, 21(11-12), 789-801.
- Lees-Haley, P. R., Lees-Haley, C. E., Price, J. R., Williams, C. W. (1994). A sexual harassment-emotional distress rating scale. American Journal of Forensic Psychology, 12(3), 39-54.
- Littler-Bishop, S., Seidler-Feller, D., Opaluch, R. E. (1982). Sexual harassment in the workplace as a function of initiator's status: The case of airline personnel. Journal of Social Issues, 38, 137-148.
- Moore, C. H., Wuensch, K. L., Hedges, R. M., Castellow, W. A. (1994). The effects of physical attractiveness and social desirability on judgment regarding a sexual harassment case. Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 9(4), 715-730.
- Saal, F. E., Johnson, C. B., Weber, N. (1989). Friendly or sexy? It may depend on whom you ask. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 13(3), 263-276.
- Samoluk, S. B., Pretty, G. M. (1994). The impact of sexual harassment simulations of women's thoughts and feelings. Sex Roles, 30(9-10), 679-699.
- Tata, J. (1993). The structure and phenomenon of sexual harassment: Impact of category of sexually harassing behavior, gender, and hierarchical level. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 23(3), 199-211.
- Williams, C. W., Brown, R. S., Lees-Haley, P. R., & Price, R. J. (1995). An attributional (causal dimensional) analysis of perceptions of sexual harassment. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 25, 1169-1183.

Appendix

Harassment Stories

1. Elizabeth Fisher is an assistant manager for a major hotel chain. She has been working there for 3 years. She is waiting in the main lobby for Jonathan Brandis, another manager *the district manager*, to discuss the week's job duties. The hotel is sponsoring a national convention, therefore temporary job assignments are required in order to accommodate the extra guests. He finds her in the lobby area and says

Mark E. Savery

- "Why don't we go where we can speak more privately."
2. Jefferson High School is known throughout the area as having an extremely high rate of outstanding academic achievement. Jeannie Evans is a history teacher at the school. She teaches advanced placement history and history honors. She enjoys teaching, and the students really seem to get a lot out of her class. A school counselor *the superintendent of the school district*, Jonathan Brandis, has decided to hold monthly meetings with the teachers at the various schools in order to exchange information and to keep up with the operations of each school. This week, when the meeting with the counselor *superintendent* and other teachers in her division ended, Jeannie stayed after in order to discuss specific matters concerning her classroom. During the conversation, Mr. Brandis commented, "Your sweater is very flattering."
 3. Karen Block is a statistician working in a large public relations firm. As she walked into her office one morning, she noticed a large vase of flowers sitting on her desk. After examining the card attached to the flowers, she realized that they were from Jonathan Brandis, a co-worker *the executive vice-president in charge of promotions*.
 4. Mary Douglass is a secretary for a larger financial corporation. She works in a large office with about 30 other secretaries. They perform various tasks for the administrative staff. She usually receives her assignments from the head of the secretarial pool, but sometimes she receives them from various heads of administration. Lately, she has been receiving a majority of her work from Jonathan Brandis, who is the head of the secretarial pool *the vice-president of finance*. She is sitting at her desk, finishing a typing job when Mr. Brandis walks over to her and sits down in the chair next to her desk. As he is explaining what he would like to be done, he touches her hair with the back of his hand.
 5. Gavins and Associates is a very small, very old, law firm. Jennifer Ramon is a relatively new law associate, who has been with the firm for seven years. Recently, as she was in the executive lounge, she overheard one of the *senior* associates, Jonathan Brandis, joke to another: "Jennifer should get that new case. She has the hottest briefs in town."
 6. Steamers is a large chain of coffee houses with headquarters located in the Pacific Northwest. Erin Jacobs works as a buyer for the company. One day, after accidentally spilling a new test blend of espresso on her blouse, she was approached by Jonathan Brandis, a fellow buyer *the company CEO*. Without saying a word, he slowly removed a handkerchief from his jacket lapel, and proceeded to blot the front of her blouse with it.

Mark E. Savery, Department of Psychology, California State University, Sacramento.

Special thanks to Lisa M. Bohon, Department of Psychology, and Larry Meyers, Department of Psychology.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mark E. Savery, 1625 Bell St. #24, Sacramento, CA 95825. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to MESavery@aol.com.