

# Perceptions of Peer Verbal Sexual Harassment: Gender of Perpetrator and Victim Effects

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## ABSTRACT

The current study investigated gender differences in the perceptions of same and opposite gender verbal sexual harassment. Independent variables were relationship (male perpetrator-female victim, male perpetrator-male victim, female perpetrator-male victim, female perpetrator-female victim) and gender of participant. Dependent variables were a Social Likeability and Sexual Appropriateness Scale and a Sexual Harassment Scale. Participants were 40 female and 40 male undergraduate students. Results indicated that both male and female participants rated a male perpetrator's behavior equally harassing when he propositioned a female. Overall, male participants rated all perpetrator behaviors as less inappropriate than did females. Additionally, perpetrator behavior in same gender relationships was rated as less inappropriate than in opposite gender relationships by both male and female participants. Finally, males failed to rate female perpetrator behavior as inappropriate when she was propositioning another female.

## INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that over 50% of all women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace and 20-30% of all college women have been sexually harassed (Gervasio & Ruckdeschel, 1992). Sexual harassment has been defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as:

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly as a term or condition of an individual's employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such employment decisions affecting such individual, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1985).

Based on this definition, two types of sexual harassment are identified: "quid pro quo," the solicitation of sexual acts in return for advances in employment (Baird, Bell, Bensko, Viney, & Woody, 1995), and "hostile environment," the environment that exists as a result of unwelcome sexual advance, or sexist and degrading statements and behaviors (Perry, 1993). In the past, quid pro quo sexual harassment cases were more likely to be successfully prosecuted in the court system than hostile environment sexual harassment cases. Most people find it easier to interpret the definition of quid pro quo sexual harassment, because it coincides with socie-

tal norms, which stress that advancement in employment should be based on merit alone. Hostile environment harassment appears to be less clear to people because there are often discrepancies about what constitutes a hostile environment. For instance, some people find jokes with a sexual content to be sexually harassing, while others see sexual jokes to be part of normal interaction in the work or school setting (Baird, et al., 1995). Therefore, a compelling research area is to empirically understand individual's perceptions of what constitutes hostile environment sexual harassment.

It is also important to explore perceptions of hostile environment because current legal standards (as set by the United States Supreme Court) determine whether or not an incident is sexual harassment by using the "reasonable" person standards. In other words, would the reasonable person find this incident to be sexually harassing. Recently in lower court cases, the "reasonable woman" standard has been used in determining if indeed the incident could legally be classified as sexual harassment. The reasonable woman standard takes into account the gender of the victim because research has established the existence of large gender differences in perceptions of hostile environment sexual harassment situations (Baird, et al., 1995). Therefore, studies of perception of sexual harassment may serve to further establish reasonable woman standards.

Past research indicates that women are more likely to label various behaviors as sexual harassment than men are. For instance, women are more likely than men to consider sexual teasing, jokes, looks, and gestures, as well as remarks from co-workers, to be sexual harassment (Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986; Powell, 1986). Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1992) found that males felt more strongly than females that "people should not be so quick to take offense when a person expresses sexual interest in them." In their study, men were also more likely than women to believe that sexual harassment is overblown in today's society and that it takes place in business settings more often than in school settings.

Although research tends to focus on harassment where the perpetrator is male and the victim is female, some studies have reported that males are frequent victims of sexual harassment. Mazer and Percival (1989), found that 89% of women and 85.1% of men reported at least one incident of sexual harassment. In addition, males reported an average of 5.6 incidents of sexual harassment in college, and females reported an average of 6.2 incidents of sexual harassment in college. These statistics merit the need for further investigation regarding male victimization in sexual harassment. Another more recent area of focus by researchers is same-gender sexual harassment. Whitley (1998) reported that both heterosexual men and women rated their anticipated response to a sexual advance by someone of the same gender as being highly negative.

Finally, most of the past research on hostile environment sexual harassment in university settings has focused on faculty-student sexual harassment. However, while 27% of participants reported receiving seductive remarks about their appearance, body, or sexual activities from professors, 44% of participants reported experiencing these types of remarks from another student (Daun, Hellenbran, Limberg, Oyster, & Wolfgram, 1993). High incidence of peer sexual harassment suggests that universities need to be more concerned with student-student sexual harassment.

The current study investigates differences in perceptions of student-student verbal sexual harassment based on gender. We will examine three central hypotheses: 1. Male participants will view a male's harassment of a female less negatively than will female participants 2. Male participants will view a female's sexual harassment of a male less negatively than will

female participants and 3. Both male and female participants will view same-gender sexual harassment as highly negative.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 80 (40 male, 40 female) undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a medium sized midwestern university. The distribution of participant's ages was positively skewed with ages ranging from 18-42 (median=19.00, mean=19.74,  $s=3.03$ ). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (97.5%) with the remaining participants equally distributed between Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander (1.3% each). The majority of the participants were underclassmen (freshman=30%, sophomore=52.5%, junior=15.0%, and senior=2.5%).

### Materials and Procedure

Participants were told the study was investigating perceptions of interpersonal communication. Specifically, participants were told they would be watching a videotaped interaction two times. Before the first viewing, participants were instructed simply to familiarize themselves with the video. Before the second viewing, participants were instructed to watch for behaviors indicating that the actors were paying attention to each other. The video depicted two college students having a conversation while waiting in line for a cash machine. The video taped scenarios varied only in terms of the relationship (male perpetrator-female victim, male perpetrator-male victim, female perpetrator-male victim, female perpetrator-female victim).

After viewing the videotape, participants completed a questionnaire comprised of items based on previous research. Items measuring sexual appropriateness were embedded within items measuring other aspects of interpersonal interaction. The final two items of the questionnaire asked participants to rate the degree to which the situation and the perpetrator's behavior were sexually harassing. These two items were presented on a separate page to prevent students from recognizing the true nature of the study. Each item was answered on a line scale where participants marked a line with a slash indicating their degree of agreement. A Principle Axis Factor Analysis was used to extract a single factor from all administered items except the sexual harassment items. Items which loaded at .50 and above were retained. These items measured the degree to which the perpetrator's behavior was inconsiderate, insulting, promiscuous, disrespectful, unintelligent, flirtatious, inappropriate, unlikable, tasteless, and based on sexual attraction. This factor was therefore labeled Social Likeability and Sexual Appropriateness Scale (SLSA). Coefficient alpha of this scale was .88. The two items measuring sexual harassment were combined to form a sexual harassment scale; coefficient alpha was .76.

## RESULTS

Data were analyzed using General Linear Model ANOVAs with the SLSA and the sexual harassment scale as dependent variables. The ANOVA entering the SLSA scale as the dependent variable indicated an interaction between gender of participant and relationship (see Table 1). Tukey's post hoc analysis indicated that the same gender relationships (male perpetrator-male victim and female perpetrator-female victim) were rated as least inappropriate by the opposite gender participants. Alternatively opposite gender relationships were rated

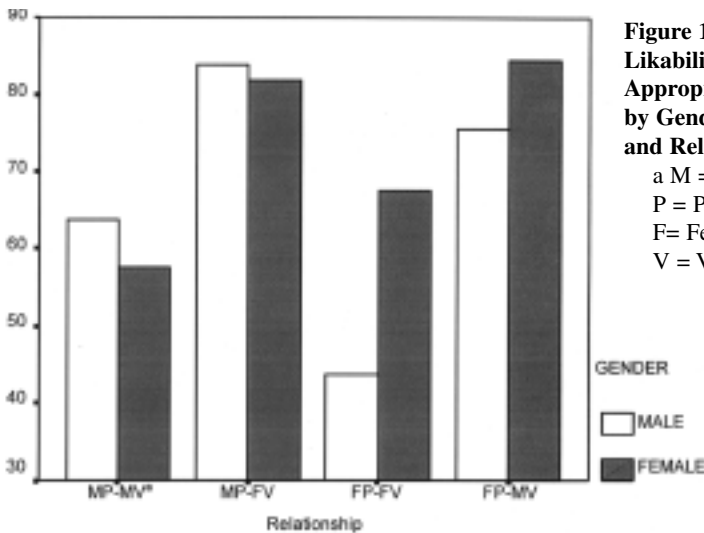
as most inappropriate when the perpetrator was the same gender as the participant (see Figure 1). Interestingly males' ratings of the female perpetrator-female victim relationship were below the midpoint of the SLSA scale. In other words, males did not find the female perpetrator's behavior to be inappropriate when she was propositioning another female. All other groups' ratings were above the midpoint of the SLSA scale. In other words, both males and females rated the perpetrator's behavior as inappropriate in all other relationships. The ANOVA entering the sexual harassment scale as the dependent variable also indicated a main effect of relationship. Males rated all perpetrators' behaviors as less inappropriate than did females. In addition, both males and females rated the perpetrator's behavior in the same gender relationships as less inappropriate than in the opposite gender relationships, however this should be interpreted with caution due to the gender of participant by relationship interaction effect.

**Table 1. Mean Ratings on Social Likeability and Sexual Appropriateness Scale**

Relationship	Participant Gender <sup>1</sup>	
	Male Mean(s)	Female mean(s)
Male Perpetrator-Male Victim	63.76 <sub>b,c</sub> (11.59)	57.70 <sub>a,b</sub> (17.31)
Male Perpetrator-Female Victim	83.92 <sub>d</sub> (11.08)	81.94 <sub>c,d</sub> (11.46)
Female Perpetrator-Female Victim	43.69 <sub>a</sub> (11.62)	67.62 <sub>b,c,d</sub> (15.99)
Female Perpetrator-Male Victim	75.56 <sub>b,c,d</sub> (14.48)	84.45 <sub>d</sub> (8.70)

<sup>1</sup>All scores based on a 10 item line scale anchored at 0 cm = strongly disagree and 11.2 cm = strongly agree

<sup>2</sup>Means with the same subscript are not different



**Figure 1. Mean Social Likability and Sexual Appropriateness Ratings by Gender of Participant and Relationship**

a M = Male  
P = Perpetrator  
F = Female  
V = Victim

The second ANOVA entering the sexual harassment scale as the dependent variable indicated a main effect of relationship in that a male propositioning a female was rated significantly more harassing than the perpetrator's behavior in either of the same gender relationships, regardless of participant gender. Ratings of a female propositioning a male were not different from the other three groups (see Table 2)

**Table 2. Mean Ratings on Sexual Harassment Scale**

<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Mean Sexual Harassment Rating mean(s)</b>
Male Perpetrator-Male Victim	11.43 <sub>a</sub> (6.80)
Male Perpetrator-Female Victim	17.46 <sub>b</sub> (4.29)
Female Perpetrator-Female Victim	10.26 <sub>a</sub> (7.33)
Female Perpetrator-Male Victim	13.31 <sub>a,b</sub> (4.82)

<sup>1</sup> All scores based on a two item line scale anchored at 0 cm = strongly disagree and 11.2 cm = strongly agree

<sup>2</sup> Means with the same subscript are not different

## DISCUSSION

Contrary to previous research, men and women did not differ in their overall ratings of the degree to which the perpetrator's behavior was sexually harassing. This would suggest that a "reasonable women" standard of sexual harassment would not necessarily differ from a "reasonable person" standard. Also, contrary to the first hypothesis, men and women did not differ in their ratings of a male propositioning a female.

Much of the past research has focused on sexual harassment in the workplace (e.g. Gutek & Dunwoody, 1987; Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986; & Powell, 1986). It is possible that student perceptions of interactions change dependent upon setting. Research regarding sexual harassment in a university setting has typically focused on faculty harassment of a student (e.g. Daun, et al., 1993). Again, students may feel quite differently about a situation in which a peer is harassing another peer. Finally, much of the research used a within-subjects design where participants would read several vignettes. Participants would then rate the degree to which the behavior depicted in the vignette was insulting, inappropriate, and sexually harassing (e.g. Katz, Hannon, & Whitten, 1996; and Popovich, Gehlauf, Jolton, Everton, Godinho, Mastrangelo, & Somers, 1996). The demand characteristics of such methodology may account for rating differences between genders. Finally, all of the previous research to date has used written scenarios to describe the sexually harassing activity. The current research used a more externally valid method of having participants view a video-taped interaction. The script used in the video had been previously rated by participants in a pilot study as moderately sexually harassing. Therefore the variability in responses was greater than in some of the previous research where the purpose of the research was more obvious to participants.

Consistent with the second hypothesis, men's ratings of the degree to which the female perpetrator's behavior was sexually harassing or inappropriate when she was propositioning another female were lower than women's ratings of the same situation. In fact, men did not find that situation to be sexually harassing or socially inappropriate as evidenced by a mean below the midpoint of the scale.

Finally, consistent with the third hypothesis, men and women found same gender scenarios, respective to their own gender, to be more harassing. Therefore, participant responses to the interactions presented in the current research match participant anticipated responses in previous research. Whitley (1988) found that heterosexual men and women anticipated feeling highly negative if sexually harassed by a person of the same gender. The reasons for more negative responses remain unclear. It is likely that homophobia, or uncomfortable feelings regarding gay/lesbian/bisexual behavior, may in part influence a person's reactions to same gender sexual harassment. Future research should include measures of homophobia as covariates to determine if participants continue to rate same gender sexual harassment as more socially and sexually inappropriate over and above what can be accounted for by homophobia itself.

The results of this study may aid educators in understanding students' perceptions of behaviors. With this information, university personnel will be able to implement programs that address questionable behaviors. Universities need to further educate students regarding sexual harassment legal standards and ramifications of sexual harassment.

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