When is Workplace Sexual Harassment Experienced as Discrimination? Comparisons Across Gender and Sexual Orientation

**Abstract**

This paper reports the results of an experiment investigating whether gay men and lesbians experience workplace sexual harassment as employment discrimination. In several jurisdictions, workplace sexual harassment has been conceptualized legally as sex discrimination while in management literature sexual harassment has been largely conceptualized as stressor, leading to negative affect and fear. Approximately equal numbers of lesbians, heterosexual women, gay men, and heterosexual men were recruited through MTurk (n = 193). Each participant read one of four scenarios describing a benign interaction (control), sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, or gender harassment. Participants then completed a series of measures, including whether they perceived the interaction in the scenario to be discrimination. There was a significant main effect of participant gender such that female participants were more likely to perceive sexual harassment as discrimination than male participants. There was also a main effect of sexual orientation such that gay/lesbian participants were more likely to perceive sexual harassment as discrimination than heterosexual participants. As predicted, these two main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction of gender and sexual orientation such that there were no differences between the extent to which gay men and lesbians perceived sexual harassment as discrimination but heterosexual women were more likely than heterosexual men to view harassment as discrimination.

*Keywords:*sexual harassment; discrimination; sexual orientation; experiment

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In several countries, including the United States, workplace sexual harassment has been deemed by the courts or government to be a form of sex discrimination (*Janzen v. Platy Enterprises Ltd.*, 1989; *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986; *Sex Discrimination Act*, 1975). This conceptualization has not been adopted by management literature. Rather, sexual harassment has largely been conceived as a stressor within the stressor-strain model (e.g. Barling et al., 1996). Recently researchers have proposed that this may be too narrow a conceptualization of the phenomenon and that sexual harassment is in fact perceived by female targets as employment discrimination (Clarke, Ford, & Sulsky, 2016). The purpose of this vignette study was to replicate and extend prior research by examining whether lesbians and gay men, also members of a historically disadvantaged group, experience workplace sexual harassment as discrimination.

Employment discrimination is essentially unequal treatment in any condition of employment based on a prohibited ground. In the United States, the prohibited grounds of employment discrimination set out in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 are race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. In 1964, the United States Supreme Court, in *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, deemed workplace sexual harassment to be sex discrimination and therefore prohibited by law.

This conception of sexual harassment as unequal treatment and therefore discrimination has not been adopted in the management literature until very recently. One study recently found that unwanted sexual attention from a supervisor had a greater negative effect on job satisfaction than unwanted sexual attention by a coworker, for female targets bot not male targets and the effect of sexual harassment on job satisfaction was mediated by justice perceptions (Clarke et al., 2016). Clarke et al. (2016) posited that women are aware of their continuing unequal status and power in the workplace and therefore experience sexual harassment as a denial of their value as an employee and as unequal treatment. That is, female targets of sexual harassment but not male targets, experience workplace sexual harassment as employment discrimination.

I extend this prior work by explicitly measuring perceived discrimination rather than inferring it through justice perceptions, and by examining the three forms of sexual harassment: unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, and gender harassment. Most significant, this study contributes to the sexual harassment literature by examining whether gay men and lesbians also experience workplace sexual harassment as discrimination. If heterosexual men experience sexual harassment in a manner than is different from the experience of gay men, lesbians, and heterosexual women, they are likely unable to take the perspective of many sexual harassment targets or complainants. This has significant implications for the effectiveness of sexual harassment training and reporting policies and procedures.

I begin with a brief discussion of workplace sexual harassment, explaining its conceptualization both in law and in management literature. Next I apply power and dependency theory (Emerson, 1962) and social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), to develop predictions regarding who will perceive sexual harassment to be discrimination. Then I delineate the method and results before concluding with a discussion of the findings and their implications for research and practice.

**Workplace Sexual Harassment**

Despite increasing legal sanction of workplace sexual harassment over time, it remains pervasive. One study of employed Americans found that 52% of women and 43% of men experienced sexual harassment during the previous twelve months (Rospenda, Richman, & Shannon, 2009). Because there is a plethora of factors that contribute to workplace sexual harassment at the individual, organizational, and societal levels, it persists despite sexual harassment policies, reporting mechanisms, and training.

A substantial body of knowledge evidences the negative effects of experiencing sexual harassment. One meta-analysis demonstrated sexual harassment to have detrimental effects on physical and mental health, including post traumatic stress disorder, as well as a negative impact on job attitudes, such as job satisfaction, and job-related behaviors like work withdrawal (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

**The Legal Conceptualization of Workplace Sexual Harassment**

The legal definition of workplace sexual harassment in the United States is unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2017a). In the United States, as well as in several other countries, the legal prohibition of workplace sexual harassment derives from employment discrimination laws. In the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom sexual harassment is deemed, whether by government or the courts, to be a form of sex discrimination (*Janzen v. Platy Enterprises Ltd.*, 1989; *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986; *Sex Discrimination Act*, 1975). For example, in *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* (1986), the United States Supreme Court deemed sexual harassment to be sex discrimination as prohibited by Title VII of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*. Title VII, section 703(a)(1) states that it is illegal discrimination to:

(1) to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, *conditions*, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin [emphasis added].

Sex discrimination then is essentially unequal treatment in the workplace on the basis of one’s sex and legal protection from sexual harassment, a condition of employment, was provided by the courts’ definition of it as sex discrimination. As sexual harassment was initially viewed as something perpetrated against women by men, it was unequal treatment on the basis of one’s sex.

Pursuant to the legal definition of workplace sexual harassment, two types are generally recognized: *quid pro quo* and hostile environment (*Burlington Industries, Inc.* *v.* *Ellerth*, 1998; Dorfman, Cobb, & Cox, 2000). *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment occurs when sexual activity is coerced, through bribery or threats, in exchange for some workplace benefit such as a promotion or raise. Hostile environment sexual harassment comprises sexually offensive conduct that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment or detrimentally affects an individual’s ability to perform his or her job.

**Conceptualization of Sexual Harassment in Management Literature**

In management literature, sexual harassment has been defined as “behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual’s sex” (Berdahl, 2007, p. 644). Three types of sexual harassment are recognized: sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment. Sexual coercion includes demands for sexual favors that imply job-related consequences (Richman et al., 1999). Unwanted sexual attention encompasses such behaviors as unwanted touching, sexual advances, and repeated requests for dates (Richman et al., 1999). Gender harassment includes behaviors representative of sexist or sexual hostility. Sexist hostility includes sexist remarks and mistreatment because of one’s sex (Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999). Sexual hostility involves hostile acts of a sexual nature such as offensive sexual jokes, remarks or gestures (Fitzgerald et al., 1999). Gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention comprise hostile environment sexual harassment and sexual coercion constitutes *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995).

The relationship between sexual harassment and the negative outcomes experienced by targets has largely been explained with the stressor-strain model (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). Some research has identified negative affect as a mediator in this framework, such that harassment, a stressor, leads to negative affect, which in turn leads to strain outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction (Barling et al., 1996). Most other research, however, has suggested a direct stressor-strain relationship where sexual harassment directly leads to strain outcomes (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Glomb, Munson, Hulin, Bergman, & Drasgow, 1999; Kath, Swody, Magley, Bunk, & Gallus, 2009). As discussed below, researchers have recently posited an additional mechanism through which sexual harassment leads to negative consequences for targets.

**The Psychological Experience of Sexual Harassment as Discrimination**

A recent study investigated whether sexual harassment had greater negative effects on overall job satisfaction when the harasser was a supervisor versus when the harasser was a coworker (Clarke et al., 2016). It was previously unclear in extant research what impact harasser status had on target outcomes. Clarke et al. (2016) found that targets subjected to unwanted sexual attention from their supervisor experienced greater decreases in overall job satisfaction than those targeted by a coworker. However this held true only for female targets and the effect of supervisor harassment on job satisfaction as mediated by perceptions of interpersonal justice. The authors posited that this was because female targets not only experience sexual harassment as threatening and/or embarrassing but also as discrimination.

Due to the historical subjugation of women in the workplace and the negative effects of gender stereotypes, workplace sexual harassment is a reminder of their continuing inequality. For instance, women continue to experience unequal treatment with respect to pay and promotions (Deitch & Hegewisch, 2013). Further, women hold less power and authority in organizations than men (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). When a woman is sexually harassed in the workplace it sends her the message that she is not viewed as equal to her male counterparts. Sexual harassment is differential treatment based on her gender. That is, women experience workplace sexual harassment as sex discrimination (Clarke et al., 2016).

Power and dependence arises through social relations (Emerson, 1962). That is power is socially constructed (Farmer & Aguinis, 2005). According to Emerson (1962), an individual has power over another when they are able to control or influence the other’s behavior. Dependence arises when another facilitates one’s goal attainment.

In North America, men “hold greater power and authority” than women (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004, p. 83) and are perceived as possessing French and Raven’s (1959) power bases to a greater degree than women (Clarke et al., 2016). This can be explained with social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Social dominance theory explains the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies as well as the repression of subordinate groups by dominant groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Dominant groups possess a disproportionate amount of power and resources. In the United States, for instance, men possess more valued resources, including money, education, and status (Lips, 2005). Men also have greater access than women to social networks, which are a source of power in organizations (Lips, 2005).

Pursuant to social dominance theory, ideologies are developed to justify social hierarchy and maintain the status quo (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The extent to which one endorses these ideologies is described as one’s social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 2000). Individual’s high in social dominance orientation will seek to justify and maintain their position in the hierarchy. They endorse stereotypes and ideologies that legitimize inequality such as sexism and racism, and oppose policies aimed at reducing inequality such as affirmative action and gay and lesbian rights (Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997). Those low in social dominance orientation will reject such ideologies as they seek to attenuate social hierarchies. Research has demonstrated that men possess higher social dominance orientation than women (Pratto et al., 2000).

As a historically disadvantaged group, women have and continue to face unequal access to the workplace and unequal treatment with respect to pay and promotions decisions (Deitch & Hegewisch, 2013). Women are also most commonly harassed by men (Berdahl & Raver, 2011). Therefore:

*Hypothesis 1: Target gender will predict perceived discrimination such that female targets will be more likely to perceive sexual harassment as discrimination than male targets.*

Although there has not been a United States Supreme Court decision declaring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation to be illegal, the EEOC deems it to be a form of sex discrimination (EEOC, 2017b). Sexual orientation is also a prohibited ground of employment discrimination in some states pursuant to legislation or common law (EEOC, 2017b). Both the Canadian Human Rights Act and the United Kingdom’s Equality Act 2006 explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Such legal protection has been necessary because the prejudice and discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians in the workplace (see, e.g., Levahot & Lambert, 2007; Tilcsik, 2011). Therefore as members of another historically disadvantaged group, also possessing less power and access to resources than heterosexual men, gay men and lesbians should also perceive sexual harassment to be discrimination. Hence,

*Hypothesis 2: Target sexual orientation will predict perceived discrimination ratings such that gay and lesbians targets will be more likely to perceive sexual harassment as discrimination than heterosexual targets.*

*Hypothesis 3: Target sexual orientation will interact with target gender to predict perceived discrimination such that gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual female targets but not heterosexual male targets will perceive sexual harassment as discrimination.*

**Sexual Harassment Type**

Clarke et al.’s (2016) study examined only the effects of behaviors representative of unwanted sexual attention. I extend this work by examining whether sexual coercion and gender harassment are also perceived as discrimination. Gender harassment, which includes derogatory comments about the target’s gender or mistreatment on the basis of one’s gender, is by definition most akin to sex discrimination and should be the most likely to be perceived as discrimination. I therefore predict as follows:

*Hypothesis 4: Sexual harassment type will predict perceived discrimination such that gender harassment will be more likely to be perceived as discrimination than sexual coercion or unwanted sexual attention.*

It may also be that these predicted relationships vary by type of sexual harassment. For instance, there is evidence than men and women are more likely to view sexual coercion in a similar manner, i.e. as harassment, than more ambiguous forms of sexual harassment, like unwanted sexual attention or gender harassment (Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001). It may be that gender differences and/or sexual orientation differences in perceptions of sexual harassment as employment discrimination may vary based on the type of sexual harassment. Hence,

*Research Question 1: Will perceptions of sexual harassment as discrimination depend on the type of sexual harassment?*

**Other Psychological Outcomes of Workplace Sexual Harassment**

Research has demonstrated that targets of sexual harassment experience fear and negative affect following victimization (e.g. Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001). Studies have also suggested that women are more likely than men to perceive socio-sexual experiences as harassment (e.g. Rotundo et al., 2001). It is important then to determine that there are true gender and sexual orientation differences in the experience of workplace sexual harassment as discrimination, rather than differences in how the socio-sexual behaviors themselves are perceived. I therefore include a second exploratory research question to determine whether the relationships hypothesized to predict perceived discrimination also predict fear and embarrassment following an incident of harassment.

*Research Question 2: Will there be any main effects of, or interactions among, sexual harassment type, target gender, and/or target sexual orientation in the prediction of fear or embarrassment ratings?*

**Method**

I carried out an experiment that followed a 2 (target gender = male or female) x 2 (target sexual orientation = heterosexual or gay/lesbian) x 4 (sexual harassment = control, sexual coercion (SC), unwanted sexual attention (USA), gender harassment (GH) design. The scenarios described an interaction between the target (i.e. participant) and their manager at work. The four scenarios are reproduced in Appendix A. I recruited approximately equal numbers of male and female, and heterosexual and gay/lesbian participants. Participants were instructed to imagine that the situation in the scenario was occurring to them, thereby making the participant the target of sexual harassment (in the three harassment conditions). I employed a between-subject experimental design because it allowed me to test causation while also avoiding demand and carryover effects.

**Participants**

I recruited heterosexual, gay, and lesbian employed adults in the United States through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing internet marketplace. MTurk provides a forum where ‘Requesters’ post tasks that they need completed and ‘Workers’ voluntarily complete those tasks, called ‘Human Intelligence Tasks’ or ‘HITS’, for payment by the Requesters. MTurk is now a fairly common source of study participants (see, e.g. Lucas & Nordgren, 2015). Scholars have lauded MTurk as a valuable source of experimental study participants (e.g. Lander & Behrend, 2015) and reliable data (Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011). Finally, MTurk provides a mechanism through which Requesters can reject a Worker’s work if they failed to complete the work as instructed. To bolster data quality, I recruited only Workers that had at least a 95% approval rating (i.e. meaning that less than 5% of the work they had previously completed on MTurk had been rejected by other Requesters.)

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four sexual harassment conditions, with approximately equal numbers of male and female, and heterosexual and gay/lesbian participants assigned to each condition. The total number of participants was 193 (female = 95, male = 98; heterosexual = 94, gay/lesbian = 100). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 years to 66 years with a mean of 30 years. Participants reported their race as followed: White = 70.1%, Black or African American = 10.8%, Hispanic or Latino = 10.8%, Asian = 5.7%, and Other = 2.6%.

**Procedure**

MTurk workers who met my requirements (resident in the United States and at least a 95% approval ratings), were able to view the HITS I posted on MTurk to recruit study participants. To recruit approximately equal numbers of male and female and heterosexual and gay/lesbian participants, I posted separate HITS for each of these four groups as well as for each of the sexual harassment conditions, resulting in a total of 16 HITS in order to randomly assign each of the four groups of participants to each of the four sexual harassment conditions.

MTurk Workers interested in completing the study followed the link to the online study materials on Qualtrics. After reading the informed consent page, participants indicated their consent to complete the study and then read one of four scenarios describing an interaction between themselves and their manager (see Appendix A). Participants then completed a questionnaire containing the measures listed below, along with some attention questions to ensure data quality. After completing the questionnaire, they were directed to a debriefing webpage.

**Measures**

**Perceived discrimination.** Participants reported the extent to which they agreed that they were discriminated against in the scenario on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; to 5 = strongly agree).

**Fear.** The extent to which participants would feel afraid following the incident in the scenario was measured with four items reported on a 7-point scale from 1= strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The four items were: “After what happened in the scenario, I would feel fear.”; What happened in the scenario would make me feel afraid.”; “I would fear that what I experienced in the scenario would happen again.”; “I would be afraid that what happened in the scenario would happen again.” Cronbach’s alpha = .92.

**Embarrassment.** I measured the extent to which participants would feel embarrassed following the incident in the scenario with four items reported on a 7-point scale from 1= strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The four items were: What happened in the scenario would make me feel embarrassed.”; “I would feel humiliated by what happened in the scenario.” “After this experience I would feel embarrassed.”; “I would be find what happened in the scenario embarrassing.” Cronbach’s alpha = .97.

**Manipulation checks.** I included several different manipulation check questions in order to determine whether each of the three sexual harassment conditions but not the control condition were perceived as sexual harassment and also whether each of the three types of sexual harassment were perceived as that type. The wording of the items as well as the results of the manipulation check analyses are provided below in the Manipulation Checks section.

**Harasser gender and sexual orientation.** Participants reported whether they perceived their manager in the scenario to be male (coded 1) or female (coded 2), and whether they perceived their manager to be heterosexual (coded 1), gay/lesbian (coded 2), or other (coded 3).

**Demographics.** Participants reported their gender (male or female), sexual orientation (heterosexual or gay/lesbian), age, and race (Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, White, or Other).

**Results**

**Manipulation Checks**

The first manipulation check item asked participants to respond ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to whether they were sexually harassed in the scenario. I performed three chi-squared tests with unequal expected frequencies comparing the frequency of ‘yes’ responses in the control condition to that in each of the three sexual harassment conditions. The results demonstrate that the frequency of ‘yes’ responses in the control condition differed significantly from that in the sexual coercion (*X*2 = 300.000, *p* < .001), unwanted sexual attention (*X*2 = 341.333, *p* < .001), and gender harassment (*X*2 = 33.333, *p* < .001) conditions. That is participants were significantly more likely to respond that they had been sexually harassed in the three sexual harassment conditions than in the control condition.

In addition to the dichotomous response item, I included an item that asked participants to report on a scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) the extent to which they agreed that they were sexually harassed in the scenario. I performed two analyses with the data from this item. First I carried out a planned contrast comparing the mean rating in the control condition to that of the three sexual harassment conditions combined. The results indicated that the difference is significant *t*(192) = -8.164, *p* < .001. Examination of the means (control condition = 1.47 (.98); three sexual harassment conditions combined = 3.37, (1.53)), indicates that participants were significantly more likely to agree that they had been sexually harassed in the three sexual harassment conditions than in the control condition.

Next, I performed a one-way ANOVA comparing mean sexual harassment ratings across the four sexual harassment conditions. The difference was significant, *F*(3,190) = 46.539, *p* < .001. Examination of the means indicates that participants were significantly more likely to agree that they were sexual harassed in all of the sexual harassment conditions (sexual coercion = 3.83 (1.31); unwanted sexual attention = 4.02 (1.19); gender harassment = 2.32 (1.46)) than in the control condition (control = 1.47 (.98)). Simple t-tests with the appropriate Bonferroni corrections confirmed that the mean sexual harassment rating in the control condition was significantly different from that in each of the three sexual harassment conditions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The former manipulation check tests captured the participants’ subjective perceptions of sexual harassment. I also gaged whether the behaviors exhibited in the scenarios were consistent with objective definitions of sexual harassment and its types by providing the participants with each definition and requiring participants to respond ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as to whether the defined construct was present in the scenario. I provided participants with the definitions of sexual harassment, sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment that appear in the hypothesis development section on page 7. I performed chi-square analyses with unequal expected frequencies to verify successful manipulation of each type by comparing the frequencies of ‘yes’ responses. First I compared the control conditions to the three sexual harassment conditions to verify that sexual harassment was manipulated in those three conditions. The chi-squared test was significant (*X*2 = 468.75, *p* < .001). Subsequent chi-squared tests compared, in turn, each of the three sexual harassment conditions with the remaining conditions to determine whether the manipulation of each type had discriminant validity. The results demonstrated that each of the behaviors in each sexual harassment condition were viewed as different from the behaviors in each other condition and were viewed as consistent with definition of that harassment type (sexual coercion: *X*2 = 104.496, *p* < .001; unwanted sexual attention: *X*2 = 75.84, *p* < .001; gender harassment: *X*2 = 88.354, *p* < .001).

**Hypothesis Tests**

Means on the dependent variables by condition are reported in Table 1. Correlations, overall means, and standard deviations for study variables appear in Table 2. Descriptive variances appear in Table 3.

< Insert Table 1 around here >

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The first hypothesis predicted that target gender (H1) and target sexual orientation (H2) would predict perceived discrimination ratings. Hypothesis 3 predicted an interaction of target sexual orientation with target gender on perceived discrimination. The fourth hypothesis stated that sexual harassment type would have a main effect on perceived discrimination ratings and research question 1 explores whether any of the main effects or the interaction would vary based on the type of sexual harassment. I tested the hypotheses and first research question with a 4 (harassment type: control, SC, USA or GH) x 2 (target gender: male or female) x 2 (target sexual orientation: heterosexual or gay/lesbian) ANOVA.

In support of hypothesis 1, target gender has a significant main effect on perceived discrimination, *F*(1,177) = 8.089, *p* = .005, partial eta2 = .044), with female targets (mean = 3.38, SD = 1.65) reporting higher perceived discrimination than male targets (mean = 2.94, SD = 1.56).

My second prediction was that target sexual orientation would predict perceived discrimination such that gay and lesbian participants would be more likely to perceive sexual harassment as discrimination than heterosexual participants. Hypothesis 2 was supported, *F*(1,177) = 8.053, *p* = .005, partial eta2 = .044). The means indicate that gay and lesbian participants (mean = 3.39, SD = 1.63) reported higher perceived discrimination ratings than heterosexual participants (mean = 2.93, SD = 1.58). This main effect is qualified by the significant interaction between participant gender and participant sexual orientation in the prediction of discrimination ratings, *F*(1,177) = 6.399, *p* = .012, partial eta2 = .035. This interaction is displayed in Figure 1. I probed this interaction by performing two simple t-tests with Bonferroni corrected alphas of *p* < .025, comparing discrimination ratings across gender for each of the sexual orientation conditions. Supporting hypothesis 3, the t-test for the gay/lesbian condition is non-significant (*p* > .025) but the t-test for the heterosexual condition is significant, *t*(92) = -2.470, *p* = .015, eta2 = .062). Examination of the means, heterosexual male = 2.54 (1.46); heterosexual female = 3.33 (1.62), reveals that heterosexual females reported higher perceived discrimination than heterosexual males.

< Insert Figure 1 around here >

Sexual harassment type is also a significant predictor of perceived discrimination, *F*(3, 177) = 77.553, *p* < .001, partial eta2 = .568. Examination of the means reveals that gender harassment received the highest mean rating (mean = 4.72, SD = .57) followed by sexual coercion (mean = 3.38, SD = 1.31), then unwanted sexual attention (mean = 3.04, SD = 1.53), and finally the control condition (mean = 1.49, SD = .89), supporting hypothesis 4.

The first research question explored whether the effect of participant gender, participant sexual orientation, or the interaction of participant gender with sexual orientation would vary based on the type of harassment. Neither the three-way interaction nor the two-way interaction of sexual harassment type with target sexual orientation is significant (*p* > .05). However, there is a significant two-way interaction of sexual harassment type with target gender *F*(3,177) = 3.264, *p* = .023, partial eta2 = .052). The interaction is displayed in Figure 2.

< Insert Figure 2 around here >

I probed this interaction by performing two simple one-way ANOVAs comparing discrimination ratings across sexual harassment conditions first for males and then females with a Bonferroni correction of .025. For male targets the result is significant, *F*(3,90) = 29.955, *p* < .001, partial eta2 = .500). Males were more likely to perceive gender harassment as discrimination (mean = 4.54, SD = .66), followed by sexual coercion (mean = 3.00, SD = 1.35), then unwanted sexual attention (mean = 2.64, SD = 1.41), and then the control condition (mean = 1.64, SD = 1.11). For female targets the result is also significant, *F*(3,87) = 52.115, *p* < .001, partial eta2 = .642). Females were also more likely to perceive gender harassment as discrimination (mean = 4.88, SD = .44), followed by sexual coercion (mean = 3.78, SD = 1.17), then unwanted sexual attention (mean = 3.48, SD = 1.56), and then the control condition (mean = 1.33, SD = .57). Examination of the means suggests that males and females were equally likely to perceive gender harassment as discrimination and not perceive the control condition as discrimination. However, females were more likely than males to perceive sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention as discrimination as well.

To explore the second research question I performed the same 4 (harassment type: control, SC, USA or GH) x 2 (target gender: male or female) x 2 (target sexual orientation: heterosexual or gay/lesbian) ANOVA, with embarrassment and fear, in turn, as the dependent variable.

There was a significant main effect of sexual harassment (*F*(3,177) = 34.762, *p* < .001, partial eta2 = .371) on fear. Examination of the means revealed that the highest levels of fear were reported in the unwanted sexual attention condition (M = 5.02, SD = 1.19), followed by the sexual coercion condition (M = 4.98, SD = 1.36), followed by the gender harassment (M = 4.62, SD = 1.41) condition and finally the control condition (M = 2.64, SD = 1.48). There was also a significant main effect of target gender on fear (*F*(1,177) = 5.220, *p* = .024, partial eta2 = .029) such that females (M = 4.52, SD = 1.70) reported higher levels of fear than males (M = 4.08, SD = 1.64). Neither the main effect of target sexual orientation nor any of the interactions were significant predictors of fear.

The ANOVA with embarrassment as the dependent variable revealed only a significant main effect of sexual harassment type (*F*(3,177) = 30.952, *p* < .001, partial eta2 = .344). Examination of the means revealed that the highest levels of embarrassment were reported in the gender harassment condition (M = 5.18, SD = 1.70), followed by the unwanted sexual attention condition (M = 5.17, SD = 1.41), followed by the sexual coercion condition (M = 4.97, SD = 1.49), and finally the control condition (M = 2.68, SD = 1.46). There was no significant main effects of target gender, target sexual orientation, or any interactions in the prediction of embarrassment ratings.

**Additional Analyses**

In the scenarios (see Appendix A), the harasser is referred to as ‘your manager’ and neither the harasser’s gender nor the harasser’s sexual orientation is revealed. This was intended to make the scenarios more realistic for the participants so that they could impute the harasser’s gender and sexual orientation based on their own experiences or conceptualizations of sexual harassment. As noted in the measures section, participants reported what they perceived the gender and sexual orientation of their harasser to be. I performed an ANOVA to determine whether harasser gender, harasser sexual orientation, or their interaction, influenced perceived discrimination, fear, or embarrassment. I did not include the control condition in these analyses because I was only concerned with the manager who was the harasser not the benign manager. I therefore ran three 3 (harassment type: SC, USA or GH) x 2 (harasser gender: male or female) x 2 (harasser sexual orientation: heterosexual or gay/lesbian) ANOVAs with perceived discrimination, fear, and embarrassment as the dependent variables. There were no significant main or interaction effects.

I then performed three 3 (harassment type: SC, USA or GH) x 2 (harasser gender: male or female) x 2 (target gender: male or female) ANOVAs with perceived discrimination, fear, and embarrassment as the dependent variables. There was a significant main effect of harasser gender on fear (*F*(1,133) = 7.699, *p* = .006, partial eta2 = .005) such that targets reported greater fear when they perceived the harasser to be male (mean = 4.41, SD = 1.66) rather than female (mean = 3.73, SD = 1.64). There was also a main effect of harasser gender on embarrassment ((*F*(1,133) = 4.489, *p* = .036, partial eta2 = .033). Targets reported higher embarrassment ratings when the harasser was perceived to be male (mean = 4.62, SD = 1.81) rather than female (mean = 3.78, SD = 1.87). No other main or interaction effects were significant.

Finally I performed some exploratory descriptive analyses of the perceived gender and sexual orientation of the harasser. 82% of male participants perceived the harasser to be male and 18% perceived the harasser to be female. 87% of female participants perceived the harasser to be male and 13% perceived the harasser to be female. With respect to harasser sexual orientation, 86% of heterosexual participants perceived their harasser to be heterosexual, 18% homosexual, and 1% other. 75% of homosexual participants perceived their harasser to be heterosexual, 20% homosexual and 5% other. Male participants were more likely than female participants to perceive their harasser as being homosexual. For males, 69% perceived the harasser to be heterosexual, 27% homosexual, and 4% other. For females, 92% perceived harasser to be heterosexual, 6% homosexual, and 2% other.

**Discussion**

A large body of knowledge evidences the effects of sexual harassments on targets. This literature has largely employed the stressor – strain framework in which workplace sexual harassment is a stressor leading to strain on well-being, job attitudes, and job-related behaviors (Barling et al., 1996). Barling et al. (2001) examine justice perceptions as an outcome of sexual harassment however the cross-sectional nature of the study made it impossible to distinguish the effects of the harassment itself from the effects of organizational responses to the harassment. Clarke et al.’s (2016) experimental study found that interpersonal justice perceptions mediated the effects of experiencing unwanted sexual attention from a supervisor on the target’s overall job satisfaction. This effect, however, was found only for female targets, leading the authors to posit that female targets experience sexual harassment as employment discrimination. This psychological experience of harassment is congruent with the legal conceptualization of sexual harassment as sex discrimination in the United States as well as several other countries (e.g. *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986).

This study extended prior work and contributes to the workplace sexual harassment literature in several ways. First, I explicitly measured perceived discrimination rather than inferring it from justice perceptions and found that, as proposed by Clarke et al. (2016), female targets were more likely to perceive sexual harassment as discrimination. I then demonstrated that target sexual orientation influences the extent to which harassment is perceived as discrimination. Most significant is the finding that gay men, lesbians, and heterosexual participants reported higher perceived discrimination than heterosexual men. Further, I examined all three types of sexual harassment and found that gender harassment is the most likely form to be perceived as discrimination. Although the three-way interaction of sexual harassment type, target gender, and target sexual orientation was not significant, examination of the means (see Table 1) reveals that heterosexual male targets perceived only gender harassment as discrimination. Gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual female targets perceived all three forms: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion, to be discrimination. Given the historical and continuing prejudice faced by gay men and lesbians (Levahot & Lambert, 2007; Tilcsik, 2011), it is intuitive that they would experience harassment in a manner similar to that of heterosexual women: as unequal treatment, and therefore discrimination.

A fourth contribution of this study is the inclusion of other psychological outcomes of sexual harassment, fear and embarrassment, and the demonstration that the interaction of target gender with target sexual orientation does not predict these dependent variables in the same manner is it predicts discrimination ratings. It can therefore be said that it is not simply a matter of heterosexual women, gay men, and lesbians experiencing sexual harassment as ‘worse’ than heterosexual men. Female targets reported higher levels of fear but not embarrassment and there were no significant differences across sexual orientation. This suggests that, as posited by Clarke et al. (2016), heterosexual men experience workplace sexual harassment in a manner that is qualitatively different from the manner in which it is experienced by heterosexual women, gay men, and lesbians.

This is a significant finding given that the majority of participants, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, perceived their harasser to be male and heterosexual. Thus, the very group that is the most likely to sexually harass is also the group that does not experience the phenomenon in the same manner as the majority of their targets. This suggests an inability not only of heterosexual male harassers to take the perspective of their targets, but also of heterosexual male managers to take the perspective of targets who report incidents of harassment to them. Taking the perspective of another person leads to greater empathetic concern and compassion for, as well as a greater willingness to help, that person (Batson, 1991; Batson et al., 1997). Hence this study’s findings have implications for sexual harassment training and reporting mechanisms.

Research suggests that sexual harassment training is largely ineffective in changing attitudes toward sexual harassment (Kearney, Rochlen, & King, 2004). This difficulty changing attitudes may result from the fact that heterosexual men, those who are most likely to be harassers, are unable to understand the subjective experience of targets. Future research should investigate whether integrating perspective-taking training (see, e.g., Meyer & Lieberman, 2016) with sexual harassment training increases its effectiveness. In a similar manner, the findings suggests that heterosexual males to whom incidents of harassment are reported may be unable to respond to the complainant in a manner that is perceived by the complainant to be supportive and empathetic. Targets who believe that their experiences will not be taken seriously are unlikely to report them, as evidenced by continuing low reporting rates (McDonald, Charlesworth, & Cerise, 2011).

This study investigated the perceptions of gay men and lesbian targets of sexual harassment. Future studies should extend this research by examining how other members of the LGBTQ+ community experience workplace sexual harassment. A natural progression would also be to investigate whether targets that are members of other historically disadvantaged groups such people with disabilities and racial or ethnic minorities experience sexual harassment as discrimination. Finally, empirical studies are needed that require participants to recall a past experience of workplace sexual harassment and report whether they perceived those incidents to be discrimination.

One limitation of this is study is the use of a single-item measure for perceived discrimination. However other published work has employed a similar single-item measure of discrimination (Wood, Braeken, & Niven, 2013). Further, some researchers argue that the concern over single-item measures is overstated (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007) and that single-item scales perform sufficiently well when the underlying construct is homogenous (Loo, 2002).

The most significant limitation of this study is that vignettes are unlikely to elicit the hot cognitive responses that would be evoked in real life situations. However, given that a true experiment is ethically impossible, the design was likely the most effective option for testing causal relationships. This, along with the fact that between-subject designs are conservative tests (Charness, Gneezy, & Kuhness, 2012), bolsters confidence in the study’s results. Rather than the relationships not generalizing to real life situations, the effect sizes would likely be greater.

**Conclusion**

Despite the voluminous body of knowledge that has accumulated on sexual harassment as well as the imposition of legal prohibitions of same, it remains a pervasive and destructive phenomenon in the workplace. The results of this study suggest that further research is needed to better understand this construct and that the stressor-strain model may be an insufficient framework to explain the psychological experience of workplace sexual harassment.

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Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations by Condition*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Target** | | | |
| **Outcome** | **Sexual Harassment** | **Lesbian** | **Heterosexual**  **Female** | **Gay Male** | **Heterosexual**  **Male** |
| Perceived Discrimination | Control  SC  USA | 1.25 (.62)  3.42 (1.31)  3.91 (1.51) | 1.42 (.52)  4.18 (.87)  3.08 (1.56) | 1.67 (.89)  3.75 (1.29)  3.33 (1.37) | 1.62 (1.33)  2.25 (.97)  2.00 (1.16) |
| GH | 4.92 (.29) | 4.85 (.56) | 4.83 (.58) | 4.31 (.63) |
| Fear | Control  SC  USA  GH | 1.94 (.95)  5.65 (.74)  5.30 (1.24)  5.25 (1.30) | 3.17 (1.38)  4.98 (1.30)  5.48 (.61)  4.54 (1.72) | 2.54 (1.48)  4.69 (1.32)  5.27 (.92)  4.58 (1.44) | 2.88 (1.84)  4.63 (1.77)  4.12 (1.39)  4.15 (1.04) |
| Embarrassment | Control  SC  USA  GH | 2.10 (1.16)  5.96 (.66)  4.95 (1.91)  5.88 (.98) | 3.02 (1.39)  4.50 (1.68)  5.27 (1.26)  5.02 (2.22) | 2.64 (1.58)  4.92 (1.18)  5.65 (1.01)  5.23 (1.63) | 2.92 (1.65)  4.46 (1.80)  4.83 (1.40)  4.63 (1.63) |

Note:SC = Sexual coercion

USA = Unwanted sexual attention

GH = Gender harassment

Table 2

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | M | SE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 1. Perceived discrimination | 2.89 | 1.63 | 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Fear | 3.69 | 1.50 | .49\*\* | 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Embarrassment | 3.16 | 1.62 | .53\*\* | .84\*\* | 1 |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Target gender | 2.85 | 1.91 | .14 | .13 | .06 | 1 |  |  |  |
| 5. Target sexual orientation | 3.07 | 1.79 | .14\* | .07 | .09 | .01 | 1 |  |  |
| 6. Target age | 4.31 | 1.68 | -.04 | .06 | -.00 | .01 | -.28\*\* | 1 |  |
| 7. Harasser gender | - | - | -.04 | -.15\* | -.17\* | -.08 | .04 | -.11 | 1 |

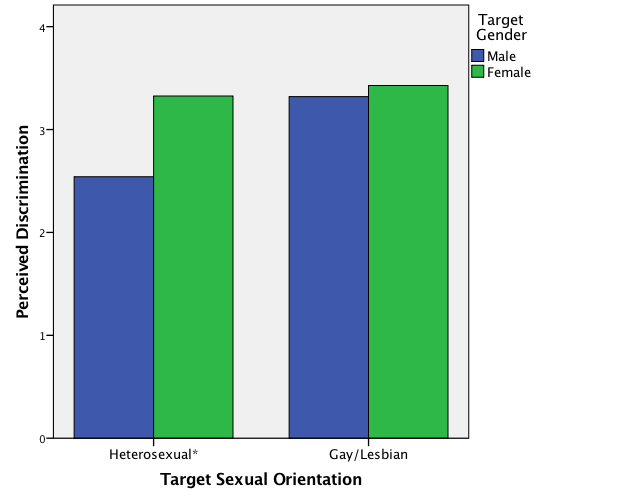
\*Correlation is significant at *p* < .05 (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at *p* < .01 (2-tailed).

Table 3

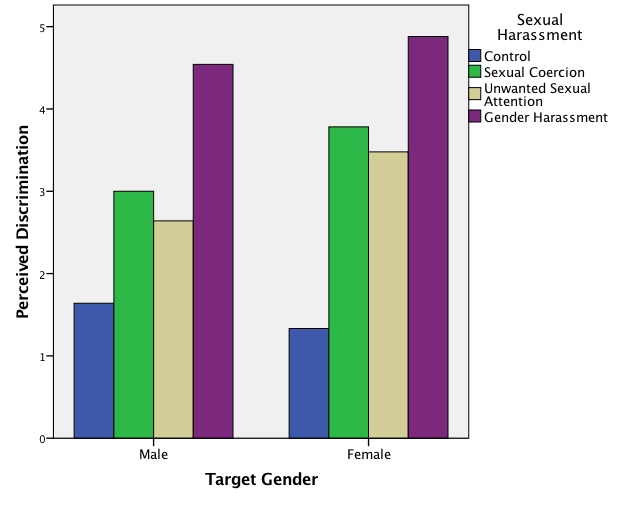
*Descriptive variances*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Target** | | | |
| **Variable** | **Sexual harassment** | **Lesbian** | **Heterosexual female** | **Gay male** | **Heterosexual male** |
| Perceived discrimination | Control | .39 | .27 | .79 | 1.76 |
| SC | 1.72 | .76 | 1.66 | .93 |
| USA | 2.44 | 2.45 | 1.88 | 1.33 |
| GH | .08 | .31 | .33 | .40 |
| Fear | Control | .91 | 1.90 | 2.20 | 3.37 |
| SC | .55 | 1.69 | 1.82 | 3.14 |
| USA | 1.54 | .37 | .85 | 1.93 |
| GH | 1.68 | 2.96 | 2.08 | 1.08 |
| Embarrassment | Control | 1.35 | 1.93 | 2.50 | 2.73 |
| SC | .44 | 2.82 | 1.40 | 3.25 |
| USA | 3.65 | 1.60 | 1.02 | 1.95 |
| GH | .96 | 4.92 | 2.66 | 2.67 |



\*Significant difference at *p* = .015

*Figure 1.* The 2-way interaction of target gender and target sexual orientation on perceived discrimination ratings



*Figure 2.* The 2-way interaction of target gender and sexual harassment type on perceived discrimination ratings

**Appendix A**

**Baseline** (identical across conditions)**:**

Imagine that you are employed with International Widget Manufacturers Inc., a company that manufactures widgets. Five years ago you were hired as a Sales Representative. The manager to whom you directly report is the Regional Sales Manager. The job is enjoyable and meaningful to you. To date you have received good performance appraisals and feedback from your manager, colleagues, and customers but lately you have felt bored with your job. Recently a position opened up in the Finance Department/Human Resource Department. You decide to apply for the position so that you can try something new.

**Control:**

One day, you are eating in the lunchroom at work when your manager enters the room. You say hello and your manager smiles and says “I hear that you applied for the finance/HR position.” You reply “Yes I have.” Your manager then asks you some general questions about where you worked before you came to International Widgets and wishes you luck getting the job.

**Sexual Coercion:**

One day, you are eating in the lunchroom at work when your manager enters the room. You say hello and your manager smiles and says “I hear that you applied for the finance/HR position.” You reply “Yes I have.” Your manager then says, “You know I can help you with that. Why don’t you come over to my place tonight to talk about it? If we have a good time, I can guarantee you get that job”.

**Unwanted Sexual Attention:**

One day, you are eating in the lunchroom at work when your manager enters the room. You say hello and your manager smiles and looks you up and down, sizing you up. Your manager crosses the room and stands so close to you that your bodies touch. You try to start a conversion but before long your manager turns the focus of the conversation from general “small talk” to asking you personal questions regarding your sex life.

**Gender Harassment:**

One day, you are eating in the lunchroom at work when your manager enters the room. You say hello and your manager smiles and says “I hear that you applied for the finance/HR position.” You reply “Yes I have.” Your manager then says, “You know that’s really a man’s/woman’s job. Women are no good with money. / Men are no good at listening to people's problems.  I don’t think you are the right person for that job.”

1. Results available upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)