

The First Decade of Sexual Harassment Research: Attributions in the Eighties

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Abstract

The current review applies attribution theory in interpreting sexual harassment research in the 1980s. Attributions are integral in defining the phenomenon and in perceiving an incident to be harassment. Individuals make judgments of the initiator's intentions, of consequences to the recipient, and of whether the initiator's actions were unwelcomed by the recipient. The most consistent predictors of judgments regarding sexual harassment vignettes are attributors' gender and the degree to which the initiator's behavior is overtly sexual and coercive. Women generally consider more behaviors to constitute harassment than do men, are more likely to blame the offender, and are less likely to blame the victim. Additional influences include situational and behavioral cues regarding the involved parties, status and attractiveness of the parties, and personality of those making the attributions. Because rape and sexual harassment are related forms of sexual coercion, findings from rape attribution studies are also discussed.

Until recently, the pervasive problem of sexual harassment has largely been neglected by researchers. A search of the PsycLIT database (American Psychological Association, 1998), which archives information from hundreds of professional journals in psychology, finds 753 articles mentioning the term *sexual harassment* in either the article titles or abstracts: 0 in the 1970's; 149 in the 1980's, and 604 from 1990 through early 1998.

Once researchers finally focused on the issue, much of the initial research was essentially descriptive, in that it was aimed at identifying frequency of occurrence, who harasses, who are the victims, the circumstances under which it occurs, and the outcomes and consequences (usually defined in terms of direct effects on the victims' working situations). Difficulties arose in gathering these types of data because there was – and still is – little consistency in what is generally considered to be sexual harassment. In fact, regardless of whether they are aware of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC, 1980) "official" definition, individuals are often more likely to evaluate circumstances in terms of their own idiosyncratic definitions and perceptions (Kenig & Ryan, 1986; Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Terpstra & Baker, 1987; Thomann & Wiener, 1987; Weber-Burdin & Rossi, 1982; York, 1989). Because individual differences in perspectives on the topic can complicate efforts simply to measure the phenomenon, some researchers began to explore the patterns of relevant perceptions and judgments by examining which behaviors or circumstances are considered to be sexual harassment and by whom. Although the empirical work provided some useful information, most of the research suffered from inadequate methodology and lack of a theoretical foundation. Terpstra and Baker (1986a) suggested a framework for the study of sexual harassment linking causal influences, sexual harassment behavior, perceived sexual harassment, individual responses, outcomes, and organizational consequences; however, their framework was

descriptive and atheoretical. Jensen and Gutek (1982) and Pryor (1985; also Pryor & Day, 1988) suggest that the essential theory could be found in attribution.

Sexual harassment is intricately linked to attributional judgments. Attribution theory (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Kelley & Michela, 1980) provides a conceptual framework for how people differentially interpret social behaviors, evaluate causality, and assign responsibility and blame. Attribution theorists assume that people are constantly trying to make sense out of their own and others' behaviors, plus make causal attributions to answer questions regarding why behaviors occur. Attributions are easily influenced by various biases, usually self-serving. For example, individuals are more likely to make internal attributions and correspondent inferences about persons other than themselves, whereas they are more likely to make external attributions regarding their own behaviors and the behaviors of those who are most similar to themselves.

Attributions and the idiosyncratic definitions upon which they depend influence sexual harassment through a variety of mechanisms. First, a sexually harassing event itself may be affected by the perpetrator's perceptions of the recipient's intentions and desires (Pryor, 1987), as well as through misattributed or displaced hostility and aggression (Latorre, 1973). Pryor (1987), for example, found that individuals' likelihood of sexually harassing correlated with their rape myth acceptance (which involves attributions that the victim causes or desires sexual coercion) and low perspective-taking ability. Second, the recipient's recognition of the perpetrator's intentions, of the event as harassment, and its seriousness (Powell, 1983) can affect her¹ ability to defend herself or take appropriate actions afterward. Third, attributional judgments may influence the estimates of sexual harassment incidence. Estimates of the frequency of sexual harassment vary greatly, ranging from as relatively little of 25% (Maihoff & Forrest, 1983) to 42% (Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981) to as much as 90% (Collins & Blodgett, 1981) among female recipients and from 15% (MSPB, 1981) to 20% (Gould & McDougall, 1981) among male recipients. Chapman (1981) points out that the MSPB figures likely underestimate the phenomenon given the application of what Chapman considered to be a narrow definition. Valentine-French and Radtke (1989) suggest one reason that sexual harassment is underreported to those in authority (e.g., Cammaert, 1985; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982) is because of the recipient's feelings of fear and self-blame (Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Rivers, 1978). Fourth, managerial or administrative response appears to be influenced by judgments regarding the involved parties and the seriousness of its effects (Margolis, 1984; Terpstra & Baker, 1987). Plaintiffs in many of the early sexual harassment cases were indeed blamed by management and fired from their jobs (Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, Ormerod, & Weitman, 1988; e.g. *Tomkins v. PSE & G Co.*, 1977; *Williams v. Saxbe*, 1981). Terpstra and Baker (1987) found that in cases of greater perceived seriousness of harassment, it is more likely that the victims who file complaints will receive favorable outcomes (monetary awards, restoring previous position back after a demotion, a promotion that had previously been denied, or entry into an organizational training program). Fifth, attributions of responsibility and perceptions of the seriousness of harassment influence legal judgments (Faley, 1982; Margolis, 1984; Somers, 1982; Terpstra & Baker, 1986a), public opinion (Sigler & Johnson, 1986), and even establishment of the governing laws (Wilson & Haber, 1981) or administrative policies (Kenig & Ryan, 1986; Somers, 1982).

Because attributions of the involved parties' intentions and responses are integral in almost any

evaluation of a case of possible sexual harassment, it can be said that the evaluation is itself an attributional process. It is therefore argued for the purposes of the current review that although few investigators of sexual harassment evaluations have actually considered attribution theory, all of the research has required participants to make attributions.

The Empirical Findings

Most of the earlier studies on interpretations of behaviors as sexual harassment involved making comparisons of large numbers of specific behaviors or situations, then directing participants to indicate whether each would be sexually harassing. The between-subjects studies presented each participant with one scenario from an incomplete factorial, Latin square design. Each participant would read a vignette in which one level of each of the independent variables was presented (e.g., Pollack, 1988; Reilly, Carpenter, Dull, & Bartlett, 1982; Weber-Burdin & Rossi, 1982; and York, 1989). The incomplete factorial design cannot detect interactions and in fact assumes no interactions -- probably an unjustified assumption, because of the complexities of social behavior.

Within-subjects research avoided this problem by presenting each participant with a list of every behavior or situation and having the participant evaluate each (e.g., Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Powell, 1983; Schneider, 1982; Terpstra & Baker, 1987). This unfortunately increased the likelihood of carryover effects. Each scenario was being evaluated in relation to those that the participant had already read earlier in the list.

Carryover effects definitely change the way individuals make judgements. Davis, Tindal, Nagao, Hinsz, and Robertson (1984) showed that varying order in which participants make judgments of different criminal charges can result in varying culpability attributions; Templar, Toom, and Willis (1991) found the effect to apply specifically to attributions of blame and responsibility regarding sexual aggression. A schema of sexual coercion will likely be activated by some items in the lists, in which case respondents would become more likely to consider any behavior to be either sexual or coercive (see Berkowitz, 1986; Herr, 1986; Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1983).

Research into judgments regarding unwanted staring provides an example of the problem with the within-subjects research. Only 7% of the working women in Powell's (1983) study considered staring to be harassing even though Terpstra and Baker (1987) found 44% of working women to consider it harassing. Schneider (1982) found even higher figures: 64% of heterosexual and 93% of lesbian women studied considered staring to be harassment. Differential activation of a sexual coercion schema may account for the extreme discrepancy between the studies. Alternately, Powell may have presented staring early in the list and participants read it before schema activation had occurred.

Acknowledging these problems that appear in much, though not all, of the empirical research, one can nonetheless examine patterns of results within and between the studies that may indicate some specific determinants of sexual harassment attributions. For example, sexual harassment is more likely to be inferred when the initiator's behavior is more overtly sexual (Thomann & Wiener, 1987) or coercive (Pollack, 1988; Reilly et al., 1982; Weber-Burdin & Rossi, 1982; York, 1989), and less likely when the recipient flirts or indicates any attraction to the initiator

(Jones, Remland, & Brunner, 1987). Some extreme behaviors (e.g., a professor or employer demands sexual favors under the explicit threat that noncompliance will adversely affect the victim's grades or working situation) are considered by most people to constitute sexual harassment (Reilly et al., 1982; Weber-Burdin & Rossi, 1982), yet there are many more specific behaviors or general situations that are interpreted as sexually harassing by some individuals but not by others.

Attributor Characteristics

Women are more likely than men to consider ambiguous cases to be sexual harassment (Benson & Thomson, 1982; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Lester, Banta, Barton, Elian, Mackiewicz, & Winkelried, 1986a, 1986b; MSPB, 1981; Schneider, 1982; Tangri et al., 1982). Konrad and Gutek (1986), for example, found women to be more likely than men to consider a number of listed behaviors to be sexual harassment. Schneider (1982) reported more extreme differences between lesbian and heterosexual women, in that lesbians were more likely to consider every listed behavior to be harassing. Possible influences by personality variables have generally not been examined, although Terpstra and Baker (1986b) found that sex role stereotyping and religiosity contributed to a complex set of interactions with other traits in determining perceived seriousness of sexual harassment. Terpstra and Baker concluded that men appeared to be more apt to be influenced by important values, attitudes, and personality in forming beliefs about sexual harassment and thus to exhibit greater variance in their judgments.

Characteristics and Behaviors of the Involved Parties

Even though co-workers are the most likely harassers (MSPB, 1981), sexual behavior is perceived as more serious and is more likely to be considered harassment when performed by a superior than by a co-worker or subordinate (Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, 1983; Livingston, 1980, cited in Jones, Remland, & Brunner, 1987; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981), presumably because of the greater implicit or explicit threat to the recipient's employment situation. Lester et al. (1986a) found that in an academic setting an instructor was seen as more harassing than a student. Gutek, Morasch, and Cohen (1983), on the other hand, found that while the higher status initiator's behavior was considered less appropriate, it was also considered less harassing or more favorable than the behavior of a co-worker or subordinate. Findings by Pryor and Day (1988) may indicate that the reason Gutek et al. obtained such results was because the scenario's harasser specifically stated (Gutek et al., 1983, p. 35) that the recipient's ". . . body looks terrific." Pryor and Day (1988) found that status interacted with attractiveness of the target in affecting perceptions of harassment. If the recipient was described as "sexy," a professor's behavior was generally not considered harassing but a student's was; whereas a professor's actions were considered harassing but a student's were not when the recipient was described in a "non-sexy" manner. It is also possible that the word "sexy" could imply that the target is using attractiveness intentionally as allure.

Regardless of their status, attractiveness of each of the involved parties influences perceptions of whether or not an event was sexual harassment and attributions toward the offender and victim. Testing hypotheses derived directly from previous rape attribution research, Castellow, Wuensch, and Moore (1990) found that the combination of attractive plaintiff-unattractive

defendant yielded the highest percentage of guilty judgments in a hypothetical sexual harassment case, while the combination of unattractive plaintiff-attractive defendant yielded the lowest percentage. The defendant was rated more positively on all measures if attractive than if unattractive. Males considered the defendant to be more sincere if he was attractive. These findings are consistent with research findings that more attractive defendants in rape cases are likely to receive more lenient sentences (Jacobson, 1981; Jacobson & Popovich, 1983), reduced perceptions of guilt (Deitz & Byrnes, 1981), and lower perceptions of likelihood of engaging in future antisocial behavior (Gerdes, Dammann, & Heilig, 1988), and that less responsibility is attributed to highly attractive plaintiffs (Ferguson, Duthie, & Graf, 1987).

Discussion

Methodological shortcomings in sexual harassment research might be resolved with use of between subjects research with complete factorial design, as in Pryor and Day's (1988) work. Exploratory research (aimed at developing a taxonomy of which behaviors are considered to be sexual harassment and at investigating who does or does not consider them as such) is useful but somewhat aimless. Investigators could go the way of Castellow et al. (1990) and hypothesize that variables found to influence rape judgments will similarly affect evaluations of sexual harassment. It would, however, be more enlightening theoretically to examine variables that might exert different influences on rape and sexual harassment judgments, such as status of offender. Higher status of the perpetrator generally yields greater perception of sexual harassment, attributions of blame toward the harassers, and attributions the event was aversive to the victim; whereas it has been suggested (Thornhill & Thornhill, in press) that rape will not be as aversive to the victim when the offender is of higher status.

Because attributions are involved in simply defining the phenomenon, much less perpetuating it, attribution theory provides the most apparent framework from which to investigate sexual harassment. Mediators of attributions can be examined, such as the possibility that some sex differences in judgments of sexual coercion scenarios result from respondents' focusing on information that would be most salient from the perspective of the involved person of the same gender as the attributor (Langley, Yost, O'Neal, Taylor, Frankel, & Craig, in press; MacRae & Shepherd, 1989). Although attributions of intentions and feelings are by definition part of evaluating the degree to which an event is harassing, the relationships have been inadequately studied.

As public and professional awareness of sexual harassment improves, one can expect sexual harassment research to become more expansive in its coverage of the complexities of the issue. The sheer volume of sexual harassment research quadrupled from the 1980-1989 period to the 1990-1998 period, and indicated by the number of articles referenced in PsycLIT (American Psychological Association, 1998) which even mention the term in their titles or abstracts (149 in the 1980's; 604 in the 1990's), the degree of emphasis on attribution and related concepts has remained constant, it appears. Attribution and related concepts (judgment, perception, interpretation) were mentioned in the titles or abstracts in 36 articles in the 1980's and 145 in the 1990's: 24% in the eighties and 24% again in the nineties. Even though the amount of research attention to sexual harassment has at least quadrupled, researchers' approaches may have

remained the same.

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Footnote

¹Although sexual harassers are not exclusively male (Gutek, 1982; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982), sexual harassment involves a male harasser and a female victim far more frequently than any other gender combination (Terpstra & Cook, 1985). Due to the extreme imbalance in gender distribution of harassers and harassees, the language of this review will refer to offenders as male and victims as female rather than say, "he or she," unless noted otherwise.

Biography

Travis Langley, Associate Professor of Psychology, received his B.A. in Psychology from Hendrix College, and his M.S. and Ph.D. in Psychology from Tulane University. Before coming to Henderson in 1994, he taught at Tulane University and Troy State University. He has made more than fifty presentations at professional conferences. His research on human aggression has appeared in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *Aggressive Behavior*, and other professional journals.

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