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Dimensions of perceived sexual harassment: effects of gender, and status/liking of protagonist

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Abstract

We explored individual differences in males' and females' perceptions of potentially sexually harassing male behaviours in two studies, using a questionnaire design. In the first study, based on perceptions of an undergraduate population, principal components analysis supported the hypothesis of two independent dimensions: *unwanted sexual attention* (e.g. touching and kissing) and *gender harassment* (e.g. crude and sexist remarks). Results for the liked/disliked boss factor, indicated that male and female respondents rated both forms of sexual harassment as more serious by a disliked boss than by a liked boss; but males rated gender harassment as less serious than females. In the second study, based on employees working in a university setting, males once again took a more charitable view of gender harassment, but not unwanted sexual attention; and, compared with females, males believed sexual harassment to be less common in the workplace. Male/female respondents also rated seriousness in relation to three levels of status (boss, colleague, subordinate): across both dimensions, the order of rated seriousness for status of protagonist (colleague < subordinate < boss) suggested that the appropriateness of the behaviour in terms of the situation was important. Results from both studies indicate that subjective factors play an influential role in the designation of male behaviour as 'sexually harassing'. Findings are discussed in terms of proximal-level attribution theory and ultimate-level evolutionary theory. Implications of these data and theories for workplace interventions are outlined. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Sexual harassment; Hostile environment; Unwanted sexual attention; Status; Attribution; Evolution; Gender perceptions; Workplace interventions

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1. Introduction

In this paper we report two studies concerned with male and female respondents' perceptions of sexually harassing male behaviours. The first study was conducted in a student population, and the second study extended this investigation to a workplace setting. The findings contribute to the debate concerning gender biases in perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable male behaviours at work. We discuss these data in terms of proximal-level attributional theory and ultimate-level evolutionary theory.

In recent years sexual harassment has emerged from the 'backroom to the courtroom and from fun to fines' (Coles, 1986). Although not clearly recognised as an important work issue before the mid-1970s (Brewer & Berk, 1982), there is now an increasing awareness of the widespread nature of sexual harassment, and an appreciation of its effects on both victims and organisations (Fitzgerald & Schullman, 1993; Schneider, Swan & Fitzgerald, 1997; Tinsley & Stockdale, 1993). For example, Jensen and Gutek (1982) reported that 20% of victims experienced depression, 80% disgust, and 68% anger. Financial damages awarded against companies have also been large (Terpstra & Cook, 1985); and there are hidden costs associated with decreased work efficiency, absenteeism, and turnover (Gutek & Koss, 1993; Lach & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1993; Terpstra & Baker, 1989). Hidden costs to the organisation may in fact be far higher than generally recognised because sexual harassment is under-reported (Brooks & Perot, 1991). Exposure to both direct and indirect sexual harassment may have important implications in terms of job stress and impaired occupational performance (Glomb, Richman, Hulin & Drasgow, 1997).

Whilst accepting the reality of sexual harassment in the workplace, and its associated personal and commercial costs, the theoretical and empirical bases of the concept of sexual harassment remains ambiguous (Pryor, 1985; see Lengnick-Hall, 1995, for a review of the methodological problems in this literature). In particular, the conceptualisation of harassment, and the range of behaviours included under this heading, along with the factors that influence perceptions of harassment, remain in need of further clarification.

The concept of sexual harassment is used in a number of different ways. For example (1) to define any sexually-oriented behaviour initiated by males and directed towards females; (2) to describe the process by which male superiors exercise gender-based power over female subordinates; and (3) as a quasi-legal category to classify accusations that de facto gender-specific behaviours constitute sexual harassment, irrespective of whether such behaviour is de jure sexual harassment (see Cleveland & Kerst, 1993, for a review of this literature). However, the view that male-initiated sexually-oriented behaviour in the workplace automatically constitutes 'harassment' is of dubious theoretical utility; in order to avoid circularity of argument, *perceptions* of sexual harassment cannot be used as the sole *definition* of harassment. As we are concerned with male behaviour directed towards females, and in order to avoid confusion, neutral terms are used throughout this paper to designate the male initiator (the 'protagonist') and the targeted female (the 'target').

Most countries adopt a broadly similar framework for defining sexual harassment, in terms of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature which become, either implicitly or explicitly, a condition of continued employment or future progression. The identification of behaviour as sexually harassing is seen from the perspective of the 'reasonable person'; that is, it is assumed that most people of both

genders view certain forms of behaviour as constituting sexual harassment. Such sexually harassing behaviours unreasonably interfere with an individual's work performance, creating an intimidating hostile or offensive work environment. Although useful as a general framework of sexual harassment, such definitions do not define what is *perceived* to be an act of sexual harassment; and nor is it obvious that the 'reasonable man' and the 'reasonable woman' would necessarily agree on these definitions (Browne, 1997).

Various theoretical positions have been advanced over the years to explain the dynamic nature of sexual harassment. The development and termination of male–female relations may be seen as a complex process of social exchange (Rolloff, 1981); and whilst this is true in the workplace, as well as in the wider society, work environments are unique in that they entail power relations between subordinates and superordinates, and reward structures that determine pay, promotion, job satisfaction, etc. Sexual harassment has accordingly been seen as a form of behavioural social control, exercised by men to subjugate women at work (see Pryor, 1985, and Gutek & Morasch, 1982, for a review of this literature).

Sexual harassment is not a unitary concept and can be divided into: (1) *unwanted sexual attention*, where the protagonist requests sexual activity; and (2) *gender harassment* (broadly referred to as *sexism*), where the protagonist creates an unpleasant and intimidating work environment (Bennett-Alexander & Pincus, 1985; Fitzgerald, Gelfand & Drasgow, 1995). In practice, unwanted sexual attention, wanted sexual attention, and gender harassment are difficult to differentiate; although, in many, instances, there is a clear-cut definition of certain behaviours (at the extreme, sexual harassment represents coercion, assault and rape).

One perspective that takes account of the social nature of interpersonal relations in the workplace is the attributional bias model. This model may be useful in explaining the substantial subjective element of rated seriousness of sexually-oriented acts. Of particular value in this regard may be the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), where others' behaviour is seen as being more person-caused, while one's own behaviour is seen as being more situation-caused. Situation effects in female–male relations may thus be perceived by the male protagonist as a 'come-on', where the female target is seen an agent of her behaviour (e.g. wearing sexually attractive clothes, demanded by the job role). Perceptions of sexual harassment may also differ according to a subjective perception of the appropriateness of the situation. Previous research indicates that sexual harassment is regarded as more serious when the protagonist is in a position of authority over the target, is married and older, and if the target is homosexual; and sexually-oriented behaviours are rated less serious if there is a pre-existing sexual relationship between the protagonist and target, or if the target has engaged in suggestive behaviour (Pryor, 1985).

The perception of 'suggestive behaviour' may also be influenced by attributional errors. In line with the fundamental attributional error hypothesis, there is evidence that males are more likely than females to attribute blame to the target and to recommend lighter punishment; and both males and females attribute more blame to targets who do not complain than to those that do complain (Kanekar & Dhir, 1993). An attributional perspective may also help to elucidate labelling of behaviour and resulting coping strategies. 'Harassing' behaviour from bosses who are liked may be perceived as less serious than the same behaviour from bosses who are disliked, whose behaviour may be immediately labelled as threatening. That is, negative behaviour from liked bosses may be attributed to external factors (i.e. 'that's not like him'), as opposed to a disliked boss where the attribution may be more to internal factors (i.e. 'isn't that just like him'). The

coping strategies used to deal with such behaviour may similarly be influenced by liking for boss. For example, with a liked boss, she may engage in appeasement; with a disliked boss, more external strategies may be employed (e.g. lodging a complaint, or telling workmates about boss's behaviour).

Whilst subjective assessments may be explained by alternative models (e.g. social exchange theory, which provides a calculus of the costs and benefits of an interaction, Jones & Remland, 1992), the attributional error model may be seen to have more theoretical appeal because it has the power to provide insights into the cognitive biases underlying perceptions of sexual harassment. Whereas the social exchange theory may help to explain behaviour that is classified as sexual harassment, when the cost to the target outweighs the benefit, and thus may be useful in determining the objective seriousness of male harassing behaviours, the attributional error approach may be more useful in explaining *why* there are subjective differences in the *perceived* seriousness of the same act when the situation changes.

According to the attribution bias model, sexually-oriented behaviour between males and females in non-work relationships is more acceptable than in work relationships. Therefore, unwanted sexual attention by bosses who are disliked may be perceived as being inappropriate, and thus perceived to be more serious because the cause of this behaviour is attributed to the internal and stable personality characteristics of the protagonist (i.e. the fundamental attribution error as seen from the target's perspective). Similar behaviour by liked bosses may be perceived as being more acceptable within a male–female friendship outside of work and thus be perceived to be less serious; the cause of this behaviour may thus be attributed to appropriate personality characteristics of the protagonist.

This attributional model is an example of proximal-level explanations. We may also ask *why* such biases exist at all; answers to this question come from consideration of ultimate-level explanations. Where sexual relations exist between males and females, the obvious place to look for such ultimate-level answers are in Darwinian evolutionary theory, which makes specific predictions concerning males' and females' attitudes and behaviours concerning sexual matters (for a review of Darwinian theory for psychological and legal processes, see Browne, 1997).

Attributional errors may also be expected to help clarify the two main common forms of sexual harassment in terms of their perceived seriousness. *Unwanted sexual attention* could be expected to be rated as serious by both males and females because the concept is clear to members of both genders. In contrast, *gender harassment* appears open to differential interpretation between the genders (Lengnick-Hall, 1995) because males may explain away this behaviour as harmless activity whereas females will be more likely to attribute the negative behaviour to internal characteristics of the male protagonist. (We are not assigning these attributional processes only to male protagonists: female-initiated sexual harassment could also be explained by these processes.)

It is also possible that differences in the perception of the seriousness of sexually harassing behaviours result from differences in the target's relationship to the protagonist. In assessing the seriousness of relatively common acts of male sexual harassment, three perspectives are possible: (1) males can assess the seriousness of the act only with reference to a female third party; whereas (2) females can assess seriousness with reference either (a) to a female third party, in the same way as males, or (b) to their first-hand reactions to being on the receiving end of sexual harassment.

In order to address the above issues, two questionnaire-based studies were undertaken in which male and female respondents rated the seriousness of various common types of sexually-oriented male behaviours towards females.

2. Study 1

We had three main aims in Study 1.

First, to confirm that male-initiated, common sexually oriented behaviours are composed of *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* dimensions (Bennett-Alexander & Pincus, 1985; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Lengnick-Hall, 1995). As noted by Lengnick-Hall (1995), ‘A major problem with existing models is that they have confounded the two conceptual definitions of sexual harassment’ (p. 854).

Secondly, we examined gender differences in the perception of sexual harassment. Males were presented with scenarios in which the target was a female third party; women were presented with scenarios in which the target was the woman herself and not a third party. We hypothesized that the type of target (males: third party female; females: self) would produce gender differences in the perceived seriousness of *gender harassment*. In the case of *unwanted sexual attention*, involving acts of an explicit nature, we did not predict a gender difference: males are just as likely as females to perceive sexually explicit acts as being of a serious nature (whether this perception inhibits their actual behaviour is a separate issue).

Thirdly, we hypothesized that females would perceive sexually-oriented behaviours as being less serious for liked bosses than for disliked bosses because they would be more tolerant of the behaviour of a liked boss, at least on the first occasion (of course, repeated acts of harassment would quickly transform liked bosses into disliked ones). This hypothesized effect could result from the attribution of others’ behaviour to internal features (i.e. disliked bosses are more responsible for their behaviour).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Respondents

We tested 50 males and 50 females (20–55 years), who were recruited from an undergraduate university population of students (they were approached individually and asked whether they would be willing to take part in a study looking at perceptions of male behaviours in the workplace); all respondents had experience of work across a wide variety of employment situations.

2.1.2. Design

Two independent factors were constructed: (1) two levels of Boss (Liked and Disliked) and (2) Gender of Respondent (male and female). These factors were combined in a two-way mixed model factorial design. The dependent measures were dimensions of sexual harassment: *unwanted sexual advances* and *gender harassment*.

2.1.3. Questionnaire

Two versions of a questionnaire were constructed to measure male and female attitudes towards a range of sexually-oriented behaviours in the workplace. Both versions of the questionnaire had the same 20 items and the same two interpersonal relations (i.e. Liked and Disliked Boss).

The 20 items were modelled to provide scenarios depicting *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* whilst excluding the atypical but very serious examples of *coercion* (e.g. physical

assault). The 20 items involved a Liked/Disliked boss who: (1) often stares; (2) puts his arm around; (3) makes suggestive remarks; (4) pinches bottom; (5) requests a date; (6) squeezes shoulder; (7) wolf-whistles; (8) jokes; (9) makes sexual remarks; (10) uses coarse language; (11) offers job enhancement for sexual favours; (12) makes [females] feel insecure about losing job if advance is refused; (13) hangs a page-3 [i.e. naked women] calendar on the wall; (14) tries to kiss; (15) hangs a suggestive comment about target on wall; (16) makes rude gestures; (17) makes patronising comments; (18) makes sexist comments; (19) leers; and (20) touches unnecessarily.

2.1.3.1. Female version. Items were presented from a first-person perspective. For example, (a) 'A boss I get along with often stares at me'; (b) 'A boss I don't get along with often stares at me'.

2.1.3.2. Male version. Items were presented from a third-person perspective. For example, (a) A woman told you a boss she got along with often stared at her; (b) A boss she didn't get along with often stared at her.

Each item was rated in terms of its 'seriousness' on a 5 point rating scale, with 5 being most serious and 1 being least serious. The instructions read: 'Please read the following scenarios and answer by rating, on a scale from 1 to 5, the seriousness of the actions in each of the statements. Circle number 1 for what you feel is the least serious and number 5 for the most serious. As you can see, this questionnaire is anonymous so please answer honestly.' Respondents completed the questionnaires anonymously and in small group sessions. Their age, gender and job title were recorded on the questionnaire.

2.2. Results and discussion

A mean score for each questionnaire item was computed by combining ratings of seriousness for liked/disliked bosses; and these means, for the 20 items, were entered into a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation to simple structure (Table 1). Two factors were extracted and rotated, on the grounds of (a) the scree plot of eigenvalues > 1 (Factor 1: 7.21; Factor 2: 2.35; Factor 3: 1.58; Factors 4: 1.15; Factor 5: 1.16), and (b) the hypothesis of two major factors of sexual harassment.

The first component (accounting for 36.1% of variance) seemed to reflect direct, unwanted sexual behaviours, which were named *unwanted sexual attention*. This dimension included various forms of touching, verbal gestures, and staring.

The second component (accounting for 11.8% of variance) seemed to reflect indirect sexually-oriented behaviour, which, in addition to including various forms of behaviour such as joking and requesting a date, also included items of a more hostile nature, such as using coarse language, being made to feel insecure about job, hanging pictures of semi-naked women on the wall, making suggestive/patronising comments and rude gestures, and being subject to leering. The item composition of this second factor is highly indicative of *gender harassment* creating a hostile environment for women at work.

Thus, our first aim of isolating two independent dimensions of common sexually oriented behaviour, corresponding to *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* seemed to be

supported. Scales measuring these dimensions were computed from the mean of the items loading onto the two factors (i.e. *unwanted sexual attention* items: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 20; *gender harassment* items: 5, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19).

In order to test the effects of (a) liking/disliking of Boss and (b) Gender of Respondent on ratings of the seriousness of the two principal components, two separate two-way mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) models were computed (means, standard deviations and scale alphas for each condition are shown in Table 2).

2.2.1. *Unwanted sexual attention*

A significant effect of Liked/Disliked Boss, $F(1,98)=129.49$, $MSe=0.11$, $P<0.001$, revealed that unwanted sexual attention by a disliked boss (Mean = 4.23, SD = 0.63) was rated as being more serious than the same behaviour by a liked boss (Mean = 3.70, SD = 0.74).

Gender of Respondent, $F(1,98)=1.54$, $MSe=0.83$, $P>0.05$, and Liked/Disliked Boss \times Gender of Respondent, $F(1,98)=0.05$, $MSe=0.11$, $P>0.05$, were non-significant.

These results indicate that, irrespective of gender of respondent, a more charitable view is taken of sexually-oriented behaviour by bosses who are liked as compared to those who are disliked; and both males and females rated the behaviours as being equally serious.

Table 1
Varimax rotated principal components analysis of 20 sexually-oriented bosses' behaviours (loading > 0.40 are shown)

Scenario	Unwanted sexual attention	Gender harassment	h^2
Q1. Stared at	0.67		0.453
Q2. Put arm around	0.86		0.748
Q3. Suggestive remarks	0.75		0.613
Q4. Pinched bottom	0.71		0.529
Q5. Requested a date		0.55	0.460
Q6. Squeezed shoulder	0.70		0.498
Q7. Wolf-whistled	0.66		0.542
Q8. Joked with her		0.40	0.260
Q9. Made sexual remarks	0.74		0.555
Q10. Coarse language		0.66	0.501
Q11. Offered job enhancement for sexual favours	0.50		0.315
Q12. Made insecure about losing job		0.45	0.209
Q13. Page-3 calendar on wall		0.61	0.373
Q14. Tried to kiss	0.59		0.467
Q15. Suggestive comment		0.54	0.317
Q16. Rude gestures		0.70	0.520
Q17. Patronising comments		0.72	0.578
Q18. Sexist comments		0.82	0.680
Q19. Leered at		0.61	0.625
Q20. Touched unnecessarily	0.52		0.326
Percent variance	36.1	11.8	

2.2.2. Gender harassment

A significant effect of Liked/Disliked Boss, $F(1,98)=116.37$, $MSe=0.41$, $P<0.001$, revealed that gender harassment by a disliked boss (Mean = 4.05, SD = 0.60) was rated as being more serious than the same behaviour by a liked boss (Mean = 3.74, SD = 0.62).

A significant Gender effect, $F(1,98)=29.97$, $MSe=0.54$, $P<0.001$, revealed that females (Mean = 4.18, SD = 0.44) rated gender harassment as more serious than males (Mean = 3.61, SD = 0.62). The Boss \times Gender of Respondent interaction was non-significant, $F(1,98)=0.10$, $MSe = 0.04$, $P>0.05$.

2.3. Gender effects across dimensions

For a liked Boss, male respondents rated *unwanted sexual attention* (Mean = 3.61, SD = 0.74) as more serious than *gender harassment* (3.46, 0.63), $t(49)=1.84$, $P=0.07$; but female respondents rated gender harassment (4.02, 0.46) as more serious than unwanted sexual attention (3.79, 0.73).

For a disliked Boss, male respondents again rated *unwanted sexual attention* (4.15, 0.67) as being more serious than *gender harassment* (3.76, 0.61), $t(49)=4.63$, $P<0.001$, but females rated both types of harassment as being equally serious (4.30, 0.59; 4.34, 0.42), $t(49)=0.47$, ns.

In summary, the first study confirmed the existence of two dimensions of common sexual harassment, which seem to correspond well to previous conceptualisations in terms of *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment*. Unwanted sexual attention is more objective in the sense that there are no gender differences in its perception; however there are gender differences in the

Table 2

Means (M), standard deviations (SD) and scale alphas for *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* in Study 1

	Mean	SD	N	alpha
<i>Factor 1: Unwanted sexual attention</i>				
Liked boss				
Males	3.62	0.74	50	0.89
Females	3.79	0.73	50	0.85
Total	3.70	0.74		
Disliked boss				
Males	4.15	0.67	50	0.89
Females	4.30	0.59	50	0.80
Total	4.23	0.63		
<i>Factor 2: Gender harassment</i>				
Liked boss				
Males	3.46	0.63	50	0.84
Females	4.02	0.46	50	0.70
Total	3.74	0.62		
Disliked boss				
Males	3.76	0.61	50	0.82
Females	4.34	0.42	50	0.68
Total	4.05	0.60		

perception of gender harassment. This finding is complicated by whether or not the boss is liked: actions by a liked boss are rated as less serious than for a disliked boss across both dimensions.

However the results of this study raise several questions that require further investigation.

First, to what extent does the difference between male and female respondents' perspectives (i.e. male third-person, female first-person) effect the difference in ratings by men and women? It is possible that sexually harassing behaviours directed towards one's self are perceived as being more serious than those directed towards others. Conceivably, this difference in perspective could account for the gender effects found in this study.

Secondly, to what extent does status of protagonist (boss, colleague, subordinate) influence perceptions of sexual harassment. A related question concerns the effects of liking and disliking boss/colleague.

Thirdly, as the present study was conducted in a student population, the generalizability of these results to work settings is raised.

The second study explored these three questions.

3. Study 2

In the second study, we extended the basic design of Study 1 to include status of protagonist as an additional variable. Also, we used respondents from a working population, and we had female respondents answer the same form of questionnaire to males (i.e. from a third-person perspective).

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Respondents

We tested 50 males and 50 females (21–56 years), who were recruited from administrative and teaching staff of a University of London college (permission was obtained from the college to approach individuals and administrative sections, and recruits were asked whether they would be willing to take part in a study looking at perceptions of male behaviours in the workplace). Job details were not obtained in order to ensure respondents knew that the data were anonymous.

3.1.2. Questionnaire

The same questionnaire as used in Study 1 was employed. Three versions were constructed: (a) A woman told you that her boss ... ; (b) A woman told you that a colleague ... ; and (c) A woman told you that a subordinate ... The instructions read: 'Please read the following scenarios and answer by rating on the scale below the extent to which you agree that behaviour described is sexually harassing. The scaling is to aid in statistical analysis of the data. As you can see the questionnaire is anonymous so please answer honestly'.

Males and females completed the same version of the questionnaires (which were presented in counterbalanced order to eliminate possible order effects). Scales of *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* were computed from the results of Study 1 (Table 1). Unlike Study 1, which used a 1–5 response scale, the present questionnaire used a –2 to +2 scale, with 0 defining 'undecided' (–2 = strongly disagree; –1 = disagree; 1 = agree, 2 = strongly agree). (We modified the response scale to provide respondents with an obvious neutral category).

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were also asked two further questions. (a) ‘Do you feel that you have ever been sexually harassed at work?’ (b) ‘Please indicate the degree to which you think sexual harassment takes place at work’; (0 = very rarely; 1 = rarely; 2 = occasionally; 3 = regularly; 4 = often; 5 = always). Respondents completed the questionnaires individually and anonymously.

3.2. Results and discussion

To test the effects of Gender of Respondents and Status of protagonist (Boss, Colleague, Subordinate), two separate two-way mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) models were computed (means, standard deviations and alphas for each condition are shown in Table 3).

3.2.1. Unwanted sexual attention

Gender of Respondent, $F(1,98) = 1.86$, $MSe = 0.69$, $P > 0.05$, Gender of Respondent \times Status, $F(2,96) = 0.09$, $MSe = 0.09$, $P > 0.05$, were both nonsignificant; but Status, $F(2,96) = 15.75$, $MSe = 0.09$, $P < 0.01$, was significant. Of significance were the contrasts for Boss vs Colleague, $t(99) = 4.86$, $P < 0.01$, Boss and Subordinate, $t(99) = 1.91$, $P = 0.06$, and Colleague and Subordinate, $t(99) = 3.77$, $P < 0.01$ (Table 3).

As in Study 1, these results indicate that males do not take a more charitable view of *unwanted sexual attention*.

3.2.2. Gender harassment

As in Study 1, Gender of Respondent, $F(1,98) = 5.62$, $MSe = 0.67$, $P < 0.05$, was significant, showing that females took a more serious view than males (Table 3). Status was once again significant, $F(2,96) = 16.19$, $MSe = 0.08$, $P < 0.001$, reflecting significance differences for Boss vs Colleague, $t(99) = 5.16$, $P < 0.001$, Boss vs Subordinate, $t(99) = 1.76$, $P = 0.07$, and Colleague vs Subordinate, $t(99) = 3.78$, $P < 0.001$ (Table 3).

Gender of Respondent \times Status, $F(2,96) = 0.75$, $MSe = 0.08$, $P > 0.05$, was once again nonsignificant.

The two above ANOVAs were rerun with experience of having being sexually harassed entered as a covariate, but this did not affect the significance of the results reported above.

3.2.3. Gender effects across dimensions

Male respondents rated *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* as being significantly different, $t(49) = 8.64$, $P = 0.001$, as did female respondents, $t(49) = 4.78$, $P = 0.001$ (Table 3).

The results of Study 2 confirm the findings of Study 1, using a working population and requiring female respondents to take a third person perspective. The difference between male and female respondents’ ratings of the seriousness of gender harassment, although statistically significant, was small; for both genders, mean scores fluctuated around 0 (‘undecided’).

3.2.4. Perceptions and experience of sexual harassment

There was a trend for males (Mean = 2.16, SD = 1.09) to believe that sexual harassment was less common in the workplace (females 2.46, 0.73) $t(98) = 1.62$, $P = 0.06$ (1-tailed). However both males and females thought that sexual harassment occurred only ‘occasionally’.

Table 3

Means (M), standard deviations (SD) and scale alphas for *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* dimensions in Study 2

	Males (Mean SD)	Females (Mean SD)	N	alpha
Factor 1: Unwanted sexual attention				
Boss	1.15 (0.50)	1.30 (0.53)	50	0.83
Colleague	0.93 (0.51)	1.05 (0.57)	50	0.83
Subordinate	1.10 (0.54)	1.22 (0.59)	50	0.84
Total	1.06 (0.52)	1.19 (0.56)		
Factor 1: Gender harassment				
Boss	0.82 (0.48)	0.99 (0.54)	50	0.74
Colleague	0.54 (0.51)	0.82 (0.57)	50	0.79
Subordinate	0.72 (0.48)	0.95 (0.48)	50	0.77
Total	0.69 (0.49)	0.92 (0.53)		

Also, there was a gender difference in reports of having experienced sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 17.61$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.01$): eight of 50 males reported having been harassed some time in the past, while 21 of 50 females reported the same.

An Harassed \times Gender ANOVA on perceptions of the prevalence of sexual harassment at work revealed a main effect of having being harassed, $F(1,96) = 6.01$, $P < 0.05$ (have been harassed: Mean = 2.73, SD = 0.80; not being harassed: 2.14, 0.95), and no effect of Gender or Gender \times Harassed ($F_s < 1$).

A Spearman correlation revealed significant positive relations between having experienced sexual harassment and (a) rated seriousness of unwanted sexual attention ($r = 0.20$, $P < 0.05$) and (b) hostile environment ($r = 0.24$, $P < 0.05$). Whether this relationship indicates that experiences of sexual harassment makes one less tolerant of unwanted behaviour, or reports of having suffered sexual harassment reflect a general intolerance of such behaviour is not known.

4. General discussion

The principal components analysis of items in Study 1 revealed two dimensions that correspond to *unwanted sexual attention* (involving various forms of physical contact and requesting sexual favours), and *gender harassment* (involving rude and sexist remarks). Across both studies, scale alphas were acceptable, and a consistent pattern of effects emerged. Importantly, for *unwanted sexual attention*, males and females did not differ in their ratings of seriousness; but for *gender harassment* males took a more tolerant view than females.

As regards *unwanted sexual attention*, in Study 1, both male and female ratings of seriousness were higher for a disliked boss than a liked boss. Physical contact by a boss who is liked may be perceived by respondents as indicating warm, close relations, suggesting that perceptions of sexual behaviours (e.g. touching and kissing) depend to some extent on whether the protagonist is liked. In Study 2, status of protagonist was important, with behaviour from a colleague being rated as less serious than from either a subordinate or boss. This finding may reflect an attribution of

the appropriateness of the situation: in general, subordinate and bosses are expected to be more formal than colleagues and, therefore, are seen to be more culpable for their behaviour.

As regards *gender harassment*, in Study 1, disliked bosses' behaviour was rated as being more serious than liked bosses. The effect of liked/disliked boss thus affected both dimensions of sexual harassment. In the two studies, males took a more lenient view of gender harassment than females. In Study 2, status of protagonist was important, with bosses being rated as most serious, followed by subordinates, and then colleagues.

In Study 1, for a liked boss females rated *gender harassment* as being more serious than *unwanted sexual harassment*, whereas males rated both dimensions equally seriously. Once again, it would appear that females' perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment is dependent on whether the protagonist is liked. Touching, kissing, etc can be interpreted as signs of affection much more than crude, rude and sexist comments that are less ambiguous in their intent.

In Study 2, males reported that they believed sexual harassment was less common than females in the workplace. This finding is consistent with males' greater tolerance of gender harassment, reported above. However, both males and females tended to concur that sexual harassment occurred only occasionally. More females (42%) than males reported having been the victim of sexual harassment at work, although some males (16%) also reported having experienced harassment. Compared to those with no personal experience of having been sexually harassed, those with this experience believed that the prevalence of sexual harassment was high. Dimensions of *unwanted sexual attention* and *gender harassment* were also rated as being more serious by those with personal experience of sexual harassment. However, the correlational nature of these data prevents interpretation of the causal direction of these effects.

The effects of gender of respondent, liking/disliking of boss, and status of protagonist, lend themselves to interpretation using the fundamental attributional error perspective (Ross, 1977). For *gender harassment* behaviours, males may underestimate the influence of the situation on female targets' behaviour and therefore believe that females are more personally responsible for male protagonists' behaviour (i.e. females are really 'asking for it' and 'enjoy it really'). The effects of this attributional bias would be enhanced by additional male characteristics, principally having less experience of the negative effects of being a victim of sexual harassment. In addition, males may derive pleasure from engaging in sexually-oriented behaviour that is perceived by females in the workplace as being inappropriate and harassing. The fact that females rate more highly unwanted sexual attention from disliked bosses is consistent with this interpretation (see Introduction).

The finding that the situation in which sexual harassment occurs affects the perceived seriousness of the behaviour has practical significance. Our research suggests that a disliked boss is more likely to be accused of sexual harassment than a liked boss even though he may have 'committed' the same act. This finding, though of important practical significance, has been neglected in previous research, much of which has tended to avoid the thorny issue of the subjective nature of sexual harassment.

The subjective nature of sexual harassment in terms of whether the act is welcome or not leads to several possibilities: (a) disliked bosses may need to take extra care to avoid the possibility of their behaviour being construed as sexually harassing; (b) disliked bosses may be able to use their unpopularity as a defence at industrial tribunals; and (c) sexually harassing liked bosses may be avoiding prosecution because targets may not be recognising their behaviour as representing

serious harassment. It is clear that we have a long way to go before all parties agree on a definition of what constitutes sexual harassment.

Sexual compliance is immediately recognisable as sexual harassment whereas normal or everyday harassment is likely to appear as acceptable to all but the victim (Kremer & Marks, 1992). The results of this study further suggest that men and women agree on the gravity of acts of serious sexual harassment but disagree on the gravity of 'everyday' acts. Men perceive everyday acts of sexual harassment as less serious than women. Such results indicate that men will tend to underestimate the seriousness of their behaviour.

The results challenge one view of sexual harassment (Burt, 1980; Diamond, 1980), that it represents a single dimension of 'sexual victimisation associated with the sex-role socialisation process' (Terpstra & Baker, 1987), with rape at one end of the pole, everyday sexual harassment at the other pole, and serious sexual harassment intermediate. The principal components analysis, as well as the different effects of gender on the two derived dimensions, seem to show that there are at least two factors underlying perceptions of sexually harassing behaviours, and that gender effects are pronounced on only one factor, viz., *gender harassment*.

Sexual relationships in the workplace may also be understood from the Darwinian perspective of the different reproductive strategies of men and women. We may ask *why* these attributional biases exist. In a thorough review and critique of the psychological and legal aspects of sexual harassment, Browne (1997) articulated the case for assuming that what we witness in the workplace is a reflection of the different sexual psychologies of males and females, shaped by natural selection. That is, what we perceive as sexual harassment is an extension of an evolved tendency for males to use a continuum of tactics from romantic pursuit to coercive force in order to copulate. Given these psychological asymmetries, Browne argues that an evolutionary analysis highlights the emptiness of the concept of the 'reasonable person' perspective on sexual matters at work. If males and females have different sexual psychologies, then the 'reasonable person' cannot be derived simply by blending these two different psychologies together.

In the workplace today, an evolutionary novel environment, men and women work alongside each other and compete for position in the same status hierarchies. This has two important consequences. First, women, as men before them, are subject to power games, which are often expressed in sexual terms (terms to which women are sensitive; men are typically subject to different tactics, for example, physical or sexual prowess); and second, there is increased opportunity for sexual activity for its own sake. In relation to this second point, Browne notes that the oft-repeated assertion that sexual harassment is about power, not about sex, is inconsistent with the evolutionary perspective that points to the opposite conclusion: men use power instrumentally to obtain sex.

In consequence of this asymmetry in sexual psychologies, men have a greater propensity to interpret female friendliness as a sign of sexual interest (which, of course, sometimes it is). In terms of reproductive strategies, if a small percentage of such occasions led to sexual intercourse then men would have evolved lower thresholds for inferring sexual intent in friendly women. Put differently, a man who waits to make sexual advances only when he is certain of females' true sexual intent would, on average, be less reproductively successful than the man who adopts the motto of 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. Until recently in the workplace, this motto served men well (in purely evolutionary fitness terms); but in today's working environment, it is becoming increasingly unacceptable.

The converse of men's bias towards sexual opportunities is women's bias toward seeing sexual threat, at least in those circumstances where (psychological) escape opportunities are limited and where the protagonist is disliked. Natural selection would have favoured females' cautiousness over the choice of partner and the timing of reproduction: females who lost control of their genetic resources would have incurred substantial loss of fitness. Browne argues that it is entirely predictable that as more women enter the workplace sexual conflict will be played out resulting in accusations of sexual harassment, some of which will be beyond contention, from the perspectives of both the 'reasonable man' and 'reasonable woman', but some of which will be deemed harassment only from the 'reasonable woman' perspective.

It should be remembered that evolutionary explanations are not immune from theoretical or empirical challenge; and nor do they provide a 'natural' justification for sexually harassing behaviour. But an appreciation of the ultimate evolutionary basis of male–female relations should sensitize us to the true psychological complexity of what we currently term 'sexual harassment'. In policy terms, an understanding of these deep biological influences should help the sexes better to negotiate appropriate behaviour in the workplace.

The conceptualisation and measurement of sexual harassment, and the exploration of its psychological processes, demands sustained research effort. The results of these two studies can make only a small contribution to this literature; but they show that *perceptions*, and associated attributional processes, determine, to some extent, which male behaviours are classified as harassing. These data point to a significant gender difference, reflecting several factors (e.g. asymmetry of interests, different experiences) that could form the focus of workplace interventions designed: (a) to increase males' awareness of the consequences of their actions, and (b) to increase females' awareness of the complex nature of their perceptions of male behaviours that they deem to constitute sexual harassment.

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