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The Combined Influences of Race, Sexuality, and Gender on

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Psychology

Examination Date: 4/12/2021

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Abstract

The current research examines the perceptions of sexual harassment based on the influence of the victim's gender, and the race of both the victim and the perpetrator, and perceiver's feminist beliefs. By using vignettes (a brief description of an event), we manipulated a) the gender of the victim (man or woman), b) the race of the victim (POC or white), and c) the race of the perpetrator (POC or white). Our hypotheses were as follows: a) vignettes depicting same-sex harassment will be less in line with the definition of sexual harassment; b) vignettes portraying the victim as a woman of color will be deemed as less problematic than white victims displayed in the vignettes, and c) in vignettes portraying the perpetrator as a black man, the participant will more likely consider the situation as sexual harassment. After responding to the vignettes, the participants completed scales measuring feminist identification, rape myth acceptance, and homophobic beliefs. Unfortunately, the present study did not support any evidence for the combined influence of perpetrator race, and victim gender and race, on perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios. Nevertheless, the present findings suggest feminist identification may play a role in how people perceive sexual harassment scenarios.

The Combined Influences of Race, Sexuality, and Gender on

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is formally defined as unwanted sexual comments or physical

advances in any social situation that can occur at any age and regardless of one's sexuality

(Gargi & Stockdale, 2016; Johnson, Stockdale, & Saal, 1991; Stockdale Gandolfo, Schneider,

& Cao, 2004). However, despite this formal definition of sexual harassment, people do not

always view sexual harassment through this lens. That is, instances of sexual harassment are

often judged on their meeting of the formal definition based on the situation, characteristics of

the victim and/or perpetrator, and characteristics of the perceiver (e.g., political views, Gargi

& Stockdale, 2016; Johnson, Stockdale, & Saal, 1991; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001;

Stockdale, Gandolfo, Schneider, & Cao, 2004).

Research supports the idea that characteristics of the victim of sexual harassment such as

race, gender, and sexual orientation impacts how instances of sexual harassment are perceived.

For instance, Black women experience more explicit and dangerous forms of sexual harassment,

such as unwanted sexual attention and/or sexual coercion, than do white women (Woods,

Buchanan, & Settles, 2009). Additionally, sexual harassment typically occurs less often with

men as victims, instead of women (Stockdale et. al., 2004). As such, victims of the same sex as

the perpetrator (e.g., male-male sexual harassment) are often taken less seriously than victims of

the cross sex as the perpetrator (e.g., male-female sexual harassment; Stockdale et. al., 2004). As

such, victim characteristics such as these, and stereotypical beliefs about sexual harassment, may

lead observers to have varying definitions and perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios.

Beyond characteristics of the victim, views on sexual harassment also depends on

characteristics of the perceiver. Some important observers' characteristics are age, race, gender,

and political identity (Castillo, Muscarella, & Szuchman, 2011). For instance, previous studies

have repeatedly shown that women frequently have a broader range of what they consider to be

harassing, as opposed to men (Fitzgerald & Alayne, 1991; Rotundo et. al., 2001). For example,

women generally agree that seemingly more subtle behaviors, such as sex-stereotyped jokes or

repeated requests for dates after being denied multiple times, are transparent signs of sexual

harassment, although men usually disagree that these acts are intrusive. (Rotundo et. al., 2001).

A study conducted by Johnson et.al., (1991) showed participants twelve different vignettes,

which manipulated the sex of the perpetrator (male or female), the level of harassment (1 = *low

level of harassment* to 3 = *high level of harassment*), and how the victim responded to the

harassment (1 = *nonresponsive* to 7 = *extremely responsive*). When the vignettes portrayed a

friendly interaction between a man and a woman, it was found that men were more likely to

misperceive the interaction as more sexual than it was (Johnson et. al., 1991).

An observer's attitudes about rape, rape victims, and rapists known as rape myth

acceptance, can impact how sexual harassment is perceived. Studies show that sexist ideals

are significantly correlated to rape myth acceptance, regardless of the participant's gender

(Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012). Specifically, those who endorse more sexist beliefs are

also more likely to blame rape victims (especially when they are women) because they failed

to preserve the socially correct appearance and/ demeanor. Research also shows that men are

more accepting of male rape myths (i.e., men can't be raped or sexually assaulted) than

women (Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012). Accordingly, those who hold more gay/ lesbian

bias are more likely to view male rape victims, who identify as gay, as responsible for being

in a situation in which sexual harassment took place. Therefore, negative attitudes about rape

victims and the myths surrounding the causes of sexual assult can lead to misguided perceptions of sexual harassment (Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012).

Studies also reveal that one's beliefs about feminism affects the way that sexual harassment is viewed by the perceiver. As a construct, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (a strive for equality of men and women in all aspects of life; Gargi & Stockdale, 2016). Men with high levels of masculinity (intense emphasis of stereotypical male behavior, such as a prominence on physical strength, aggression, and sexuality), and women with high levels of femininity (characteristics typically associated with women, such as gentleness, sensitivity, and modesty), typically have less positive attitudes toward feminism (Toller, Suter, Trautman, 2004). Since hypermasculine and more feminine women are more likely to value stereotypical gender roles, they are more likely to have higher rates in rape myth acceptance (Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012). Indeed, holding feminist attitudes appears to be related to perceptions of how sexual harassment should be treated in a legal context. For instance, research shows that those who associate with feminist beliefs are more reluctant than those who do not hold feminist beliefs to prosecute someone for sexual harassment when evidence for the case is weak (e.g., no physical proof or witnesses; Gargi & Stockdale, 2016). Even so, feminists supported prosecution more strongly than others when the evidence for the case is made more apparent (e.g., having physical proof or witnesses; Gargi & Stockdale, 2016). Additionally, individuals who hold hypermasculine or sexist beliefs have more rigid opinions about what they consider sexual harassment regarding situations with either women or men victims, with men being the usual perpetrator (Stockdale et. al., 2004).

In a separate study by Wayne, Riordan, Thomas, (2001), mock jurors accused same-sex harassers more willingly than harassers in a heterosexual case. This evidence supports the

idea that people may be more willing to tolerate, accept, and excuse heterosexual harassment (e.g. men who sexually harass women) than same-sex harassment (e.g., men who sexually harass other men; Wayne, Riordan, & Thomas, 2001). For instance, Castillo, Muscarella, and Szuchman (2011), found that heterosexual men reject homosexuality more readily than heterosexual women. Participants with more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians in general, were more likely to perceive situations with same-sex harassment as problematic. This can also be attributed to the notion that people who have more negative stereotypes toward gay men and lesbians are more inclined to see them interacting in various socially inappropriate behaviors, like sexual harassment (Castillo, Muscarella, & Szuchman, 2011). It has also been shown that same-sex harassment) is thought to be less of an issue than heterosexual harassment in a rejection-based scenario (i.e., the harasser's advances are actively rejected), but the opposite is true with an approach-based harassment (victim's passivity in response to the perpetrator's advances); (Stockdale et. al., 2004). This can be explained by the notion that some may regard approach-based same-sex harassment as "particularly threatening for men", yet heterosexual harassment is typically amusing for men (Stockdale et. al., 2004). This evidence supports the idea that people may be more willing to tolerate, accept, and excuse heterosexual harassment (e.g. men who sexually harass women) than same-sex harassment (e.g., men who sexually harass other men; Wayne, Riordan, & Thomas, 2001).

Derogatory racial comments and gestures are more common with interracial (between different race) sexual harassment, compared to intraracial (within the same race) sexual harassment (Woods, Buchanan, & Settles, 2009). Studies that used vignettes depicting unsolicited sexual behaviors against Black women were seen as more upsetting and had more

of a definite label of sexual harassment when the perpetrator was a white man, rather than a

black man. Likewise, participants who identified as women perceived interracial harassment

more negatively than intraracial harassment. Because white men have more social power and

status than black men or women, interracial sexual harassment is regarded to be more

negative than intraracial sexual harassment (Woods, Buchanan, & Settles, 2009).

The existing research addresses variables of gender, race, perceived sexual orientation,

rape myth acceptance, and feminism in relation to perceptions of sexual harassment. Women

are more likely to perceive subtle behaviors of harassment as clear signs of sexual harassment,

whereas men are more likely to think that a friendly interaction with a woman is more sexual

than what was intended (Rotundo et. al., 2001). It is also known that same-sex harassment is

condemned more harshly than heterosexual harassment, and that it is more likely for

participants to be more upset when a black woman is sexually harassed, compared to a white

woman (Woods, Buchanan, & Settles, 2009). However, these characteristics of the sexual

harassment context were all considered in separate studies and were not combined to discern

which variable has the strongest influence on how people perceive sexual harassment. Also, to

our knowledge, research to date has not combined these variables with observer

characteristics in order to understand how they might impact one's definition of sexual

harassment.

Therefore, the current research builds upon existing research by examining the

influences of gender, race, and perceived sexual orientation of the victim/perpetrator in a

sexual harassment situation. We also explore perceiver characteristics of feminist

identification, ideals on homophobia, and rape myth acceptance beliefs. The present study

addresses whether the perpetrator's race, and the victim's gender and race influences the

participant's view of whether a situation constitutes sexual harassment. Our hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Vignettes depicting same-sex harassment will be more in line with the definition of sexual harassment, based on the evidence that people perceive same-sex harassment to be more problematic than heterosexual harassment.

Hypothesis 2: Vignettes portraying the victim as a woman of color will be deemed as more problematic than white victims displayed in vignettes, based on the evidence that people perceive unsolicited sexual behaviors against black women as more upsetting.

Hypothesis 3: Vignettes portraying the perpetrator as a black man will more likely be considered as a sexual harassment, based on the evidence that people view white men as having more social power and status than black men.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of University of Tennessee at Chattanooga students recruited through SONA, the psychology participant pool. Participants recruited through SONA received partial course credit for participating in this study ($n = 101$). Additionally, participants were recruited through snowball sampling methods (e.g., social media platforms such as Facebook; email advertisements, $n = 12$) these participants were volunteers and did not receive compensation for their participation. Participants had to be 18 years or older to participate in this study. Participants were majority female (86.8%) and women (85.1%), identified as White (67.8%), and heterosexual (76%). The average age was 20.95 years of age (Range = 17-46).

Materials

Vignettes

This study followed a 2 by 2 by 2 between-subjects design to create unique conditions on the factors manipulated in this study. A series of vignettes (a brief description of a scenario) described various situations of sexual harassment. The factors that were varied in the vignettes were a) the race of the perpetrator (white, $n = 56$; Person of Color (POC), $n = 62$, b) the gender of the victim (man, $n = 57$; woman, $n = 61$) and c), the race of the victim (white, $n = 60$; POC, $n = 58$). This resulted in eight unique conditions. Specifically, the vignettes in the survey consisted of four same-sex (male-male) sexual harassment scenarios and four cross-sex (male-female) sexual harassment scenarios. An example of one of the vignettes is as follows (see Appendix A for the descriptions of the rest of the vignettes used in this study):

Treyvon and Hannah are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Treyvon knows that Hannah has a boyfriend, he moves closer to her, touches her hips, and pulls her body towards his body.

After participants read the vignettes, they indicated whether they thought the situation is considered sexual harassment (1 = *Yes*, 2 = *No*; 80.2% 'Yes'), and if so, how serious the participant considers the situation to be (1= not at all serious to 7 = extremely serious; M = 4.30, SD = 1.33). We also measured the participants' likelihood of reporting a sexual harassment situation (1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *extremely likely; M = 3.71, SD =* 1.74) and whether the participant thought the victim would be likely to deny the perpetrators advances (1 = *not at all likely to* 7 = *extremely likely; M = 5.69, SD =* 1.30).

Feminism

We measured whether participants self-identified as a feminist through a single item ("Do you identify as a feminist?"), where 1 = Yes and 2 = No. Most participants identified as feminist (58.7%), with $n = 35$ indicating 'No' (28.9% and $n = 7$ preferring not to disclose (5.8%).

Rape Myth Acceptance

The prediction of false rape-related beliefs was assessed with the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et. al., 1999). Twenty-two statements, such as "if someone is wearing revealing clothing, then they are asking for sex", were rated on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale, with higher score indicating greater endorsement of rape myths ($M = 1.56$, $SD = .65$, a = .94).

Homophobic Beliefs

The Modern Homophobia Scale (Raja, Stokes, 1998) measured participants' attitudes and comfortability toward homosexual ideals. Forty-six statements, such as "I am comfortable with the thought of two men being romantically involved", were rated on a scale of 1 (*disagree*) to 3 (*agree*) Likert-type scale. Higher scores indicated greater endorsement of homophobia toward men (hereafter referred to as Gay Bias; $M = 2.77$, $SD = .34$, a = .93) and women (hereafter referred to as Lesbian Bias; ($M = 2.65$, $SD = .25$, a = .84).

Procedure

Before taking the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their consent to participate. After consenting to participate, participants were randomly assigned to read one of eight vignettes. Next, participants answered questions regarding whether the situation is viewed as sexual harassment, the seriousness of the

situation, their likelihood of reporting the incident, and the likelihood that the victim would

deny the perpetrator's advances. After responding to the vignette related questions, the

participants completed scales measuring feminist identification, rape myth acceptance, and

gay and lesbian bias, respectively. Participants were also asked to provide their demographic

information, such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and age. After completing

these scales, participants were thanked for their participation and received partial course

credit (if applicable) for participating.

Results

We conducted a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects ANOVA to assess whether the manipulated

characteristics of the victim and perpetrator impacted the vignette-related outcomes. The

three-way interaction predicting level of seriousness that the participant thought of the

situation was non-significant, $F(1, 110) = .02$, $p= .89$. Additionally, no two-way interactions

of main effects were statistically significant, all $ps > .05$. The likelihood that the participant

would report the situation was also non-significant, $F(1, 110) = .42$, $p = .52$. Additionally,

no two-way interactions of main effects were statistically significant, all $ps > .05$. Finally,

the three-way interaction predicting likelihood that the participant thought the victim would

deny the perpetrator's advances was non-significant, $F(1, 110) = 2.69$, $p = .10$.

We also conducted a series of independent-samples t-tests to explore whether

vignette-related outcomes differed as a function of feminist identification. The seriousness

of the vignette did not differ between feminists ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.21$) and non-feminists ($M

= 4.29$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(103) = .16$, $p = .87$. Additionally, the likelihood that a participant

would report the situation did not differ between feminists (M= 3.65, SD = 1.67) and non-

feminists (M = 3.76, SD = 1.88), t(103) = -.32, p = .75. However, the likelihood that the

participants believed the victim would deny the perpetrator's advances did significantly

differ based on feminist identification, $t(103) = 2.86$, $p = .01$. People thought victim would

be more likely to deny the perpetrator's advances if they were a self-described feminist ($M =$

5.90, $SD = 1.16$) than if they were not ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.59$).

We also conducted independent samples t-tests to assess whether differences in rape

myth acceptance, gay bias, and lesbian bias existed as a function of feminist identification.

Self-described feminists were significantly lower in rape myth acceptance ($M = 1.36$, $SD =$

.40) than non-feminists ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .64$), $t(103) = -4.80$, $p < .001$. Self-described

feminists endorsed significantly greater gay bias ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .16$) than did non-

feminists ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .41$), $t(103) = 6.72$, $p < .001$. Similarly, self-described feminists

endorsed significantly greater lesbian bias ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .13$) than did non-feminists ($M =$

2.50, $SD = .30$), $t(103) = 6.08$, $p < .001$.

We also conducted bivariate correlations between all continuous variables (see Table

1). Of importance, rape myth acceptance was significantly negatively correlated with both

gay and lesbian bias. People who were lower in rape myth acceptance were significantly

higher in both gay and lesbian bias.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations between all Continuous Variables

Variable	Serious	Deny	Likely Report	RMA	Gay Bias	Lesbian Bias
1. Serious	—					
	—					
2. Deny	0.015	—				
	0.874	—				
3. Likely Report	0.557	0.111	—			
	< .001	0.233	—			
4. RMA	0.079	-0.097	0.122	—		
	0.398	0.298	0.189	—		
5. Gay Bias	-0.101	0.144	-0.138	-0.544	—	
	0.280	0.123	0.140	< .001	—	

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations between all Continuous Variables

Variable	Serious	Deny	Likely Report	RMA	Gay Bias	Lesbian Bias
6. Lesbian Bias	-0.120	0.074	-0.159	-0.565	0.879	—
	0.201	0.430	0.090	< .001	< .001	—

Note: For each cell, top row indicates Pearsons' *r*, and bottom row depicts p-value.

Discussion

The current study bridges a gap in the literature examining the perceptions of sexual harassment based on factors of race and gender of the perpetrator/victim and perceiver characteristics of feminist identification. Unfortunately, the present study did not support any evidence for the combined influence of perpetrator race, and victim gender and race, on perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios. Nevertheless, the present findings suggest feminist identification may play a role in how people perceive sexual harassment scenarios. Indeed, participants who identified as feminists had a) lower rape myth acceptance beliefs, b) were more likely to say that the victim would deny the perpetrator's advances, and c) were higher in gay and lesbian bias, respectively, compared to those who did not identify as feminists.

An explanation for why self-described feminists have lower rape myth acceptance could be that they do not conform to the notion that rape is the fault of the victim; at the core of feminism is the rejection of oppressive systems which uphold sexism and perpetuate gender-based violence. Our finding are consistent with previous research, which has found that those who value more traditional and stereotypical gender roles, such as men being natural leaders and women being more natural nurturers, are more likely to score lower in rape myth acceptance (Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012). Generally, feminists do not identify with these stereotypical

gender roles, and value the idea of equality between men and women (Gargi & Stockdale, 2016). They strongly believe that victims, whether they are men or women, have the right to say "no" in the face of a perpetrator's sexual advances. Feminists are steadfast in holding the perpetrator accountable, instead of blaming the victim for the cause of sexual harassment (Gargi & Stockdale, 2016).

Feminists were also more likely to say that the victim would deny the perpetrator's advances. One reason why this could be is that feminists might view denying a perpetrator's sexually harassing advances as empowering. Consent over one's own body and how comfortable they are in engaging in sexual activities is a key part of feminist values. A self-described feminist is more likely to be vocal about the victim saying no to the perpetrator since "saying no" is an active progression in the feminist movement. Whereas someone who does not identify as a feminist is more likely to view "saying no" as insignificant to the progression of the situation.

Finally, the justification as to why self-described feminists were higher in gay and/ lesbian bias could be because these participants only stand with the feminist movement and are not active advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and ideologies. Many feminists are white, heterosexual women that only identify with their own struggle as a woman and are oblivious to other minority groups' issues. Those who identify as feminists may believe that they are feminists but have a superficial understanding of feminism. They are likely to support other women that are similar to them (i.e., other white heterosexual women, while still holding homophobic beliefs. In other words, the participants in this study may not associate with others outside of their social circle, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, which could result in a failure to understand their values.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had a small sample size (N= 113) and a relatively homogeneous sample (e.g., majority young, heterosexual women) The sample was also in the majority from The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and therefore our sample is from one region of the United States. We view our sample size and representativeness as a limitation because we do not have the views and responses from a sample of participants from diverse ethnicities, races, ages, sexual orientations or gender identifications. Therefore, future studies would benefit from a larger sample size with more diverse ethnic and racial identities, and broader age range in order to expand our current knowledge about perceptions of sexual harassment. Doing so in future studies can would afford conclusions drawn from more diverse views and points, and would therefore be more generalizable than the present investigation.

Moreover, in the present study we attempted to manipulate perpetrator race, victim race, and victim gender. Nevertheless, our manipulations did not appear to be successful given non-significant findings. Studies that take place in the future could modify the vignettes to more strongly manipulate the aforementioned factors. One modification possibility would be to produce visual scenarios (e.g., a video of a sexual harassment interaction) for the participants to view before answering questions related to their perception of the situation. These scenarios could also be adjusted to display or describe overt sexually harassing behaviors, such as the perpetrator touching the victim more inappropriately (e.g. grabbing specific body parts, groping) rather than simply touching the victim's hip. Despite these limitations, overall, the current study sheds light on the role of feminist identification on perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios and supports the idea

that future research should consider the role of self-described feminists in understanding and

preventing sexual harassment.

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Appendix A.

Variables	Vignettes
Victim: white female Perpetrator: white male	Michael and Olivia are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Michael knows that Olivia has a boyfriend, he moves closer to her, touches her hips, and pulls her body towards his body.
Victim: black male Perpetrator: white male	Robert and Demarcus are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Robert knows that Demarcus has a boyfriend, Robert moves closer to Demarcus, touches his hips, and pulls Demarcus' body towards his body.
Victim: black female Perpetrator: white male	Daniel and Chantelle are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Daniel knows that Chantelle has a boyfriend, he moves closer to her, touches her hips, and pulls her body towards his body.
Victim: white female Perpetrator: black male	Treyvon and Hannah are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Treyvon knows that Hannah has a boyfriend, he moves closer to her, touches her hips, and pulls her body towards his body.
Victim: white male Perpetrator: black male	Rashawn and Mason are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Rashawn knows that Mason has a boyfriend, Rashawn moves closer to Mason, touches his hips, and pulls Mason's body towards his body.

Victim: black female Perpetrator: black male	Jamal and Imani are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Jamal knows that Imani has a boyfriend, he moves closer to her, touches her hips, and pulls her body towards his body.
Victim: white male Perpetrator: white male	Todd and James are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Todd knows that James has a boyfriend, Todd moves closer to James, touches his hips, and pulls James' body towards his body.
Victim: black male Perpetrator: black male	Darius and Malik are at a party together and having a good time socializing with each other. Although Darius knows that Malik has a boyfriend, Darius moves closer to Malik, touches his hips, and pulls Malik's body closer to his body.