

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# *Social perception of sexual harassment in informal relations*

Dariusz Drążkowski <sup>A,C,D,E,F</sup>, Monika Ganclerz<sup>A,B,D,E,F</sup>

Faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland

## BACKGROUND

Perception of sexual harassment in informal relations is a largely uninvestigated topic. This study aimed to bridge this gap by examining the effect of the type of relationship between the perpetrator and the victim on the perception of harassment. Furthermore, we considered potential factors moderating the tested relationships: acceptance of gender stereotypes and sex.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

In total, 369 participants were assigned to one of three conditions including a female victim and a male perpetrator who was either her neighbor, coworker, or supervisor.

## RESULTS

The participants assessed the harasser to be responsible. The supervisor's behavior was considered more punishable

than that of the colleague or neighbor. The male participants reported that the perpetrator was less deserving of punishment than female participants.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that social norms regarding sexual harassment in formal and informal relationships are similar, excluding harassment by supervisors, which was rated as most punishable.

## KEY WORDS

sexual harassment; attributions of responsibility and punishment; informal relationships; gender differences; defensive attribution theory

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR – Dariusz Drążkowski, Ph.D., Faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science, Adam Mickiewicz University, 89AB Szamarzewskiego Str., 60-568 Poznan, Poland, e-mail: [dardra@amu.edu.pl](mailto:dardra@amu.edu.pl)

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## BACKGROUND

Sexual harassment leads to many negative consequences for victims (EU FRA, 2015), and over half of working women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). The #MeToo campaign on social media, which publicizes the sexual harassment of women, has highlighted the gravity of the problem. This campaign, however, witnessed many negative comments, blaming victims, and indicating that they deliberately provoked their supervisors to behave sexually to receive benefits (Lucarini et al., 2020). The #MeToo campaign also showed that the media do not discuss sexual harassment outside of the workplace, that is, in informal relationships. Additionally, existing research has rarely focused on this topic. Therefore, to fill this research gap, this study examined the perceptions of female victims and male perpetrators in formal (supervisor and coworker) and informal relationships. Moreover, we examined whether the sex of the harassment evaluators and their acceptance of gender stereotypes affect their perceptions of the harassment situation.

### THE PERPETRATOR-VICTIM RELATIONSHIP AND ASSESSMENT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

It is common for an observer to assign responsibility for sexual harassment to the victim or perpetrator (Smirles, 2004). The issue of attribution (the process of linking an event to its causes) of responsibility for sexual harassment has so far been examined only in formal relationships (Pina et al., 2009). However, sexual harassment also occurs when the initiator and the victim do not have a professional relationship, as 41% of women who had never worked had also experienced sexual harassment (EU FRA, 2015). How responsibility and punishment for sexual harassment are attributed in informal relationships has not been studied to date. Thus, in this study, we aimed to examine the effect of the type of relationship between the perpetrator and the victim on the attribution of responsibility and punishment for sexual harassment.

In general, in formal settings, individuals are more likely to attribute responsibility for harassment to the perpetrator-supervisor and expect him to be punished more than the perpetrator-coworker (e.g., Wayne, 2000). Supervisors are judged more harshly for sexual harassment, given that they use their power to exert authority and harass the victim, and the victim, in turn, has limited options to withdraw from the relationship (Pina et al., 2009). The situation of harassment is different in relationships in which the perpetrator and the victim have equal status, such as with a coworker or in an informal relationship. In such a set-up, the victim can withdraw from the relationship, and therefore harassment in those relationships should be eval-

uated similarly, regardless of whether the relationship is formal or not. Thus, we hypothesized that:

H1: More responsibility and punishment will be attributed to the supervisor than to a non-supervisor (coworker or neighbor).

Marin and Guadagno (1999) found that women who alleged sexual harassment at workplaces were viewed as less trustworthy and ethical, suggesting that the harassed women's character can be perceived negatively. A victim's behavior toward a supervisor may be perceived as provocative to gain professional benefits later (Moor, 2010), affecting the victim's perception as that of having lesser morals. Thus, we hypothesized the following:

H2: The victim harassed by a supervisor would be rated as having lesser moral values than a victim harassed by a non-supervisor.

### SEX DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Generally, the attribution of responsibility and punishment for sexual harassment is affected by the observer's sex. Men attributed less responsibility to the victim than did women (Shechory Bitton & Shaul, 2013), particularly for ambiguous behaviors such as sex-stereotyped jokes (Rotundo et al., 2001). Research conducted in the context of the #MeToo campaign confirmed previous findings by demonstrating that men are also less likely to recommend a more severe punishment for the perpetrator of harassment than women (Nodeland & Craig, 2021). Sex differences in assessing harassment have been explained using the defensive attribution theory (Shaver, 1970), which states that individuals are motivated to bias causality and responsibility assignments for negative behavior of other people to avoid being blamed for similar behavior in future situations. Research has confirmed this theory and shown that men, because of their similarity to male perpetrators, due to an ingrained fear for future harassment allegations, attribute less responsibility to the perpetrator for their behavior (e.g., Key & Ridge, 2011).

We hypothesized that:

H3: Men (vs. women) are less likely to attribute responsibility and punishment to the perpetrator of the harassment.

The results of the meta-analysis suggest that sex differences in the assessment of sexual harassment exist mostly for behaviors that occur between coworkers than for those perpetrated by authorities (Rotundo et al., 2001). Evaluating a supervisor's act of perpetration of harassment is often more unambiguous and unquestionable, regardless of the evaluator's sex. Thus, we hypothesized that:

H4: Sex differences in attributing responsibility and punishment will be greater for assessing non-supervisors than supervisors.

## SEX BELIEFS AND ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sex differences in perceiving sexual harassment can also be explained by sex-role identity. Bem (1974) argued that sex-role identity influences the manifestation of sex-role-related traits and behaviors more greatly than sex. According to Bem, femininity and masculinity were regarded as independent components of sex-role identity. Previous research has shown that masculinity and femininity can affect the attribution of sexual harassment (McCabe & Hardman, 2005), as can other constructs associated with beliefs about sex. For example, O'Connor et al. (2021) found that stronger beliefs about the prevalence of sexism in society are related to harsher negative evaluations of male harassers. We aimed to extend these findings by examining a previously unexamined sex beliefs construct: acceptance of gender stereotypes (Ashmore et al., 1995). This construct addresses the extent to which individuals endorse stereotypes about both women and men. Traditionalists who accept gender stereotypes believe in psychological sex differences more than egalitarians, who believe that fewer psychological differences exist between women and men. Acceptance of gender stereotypes seems to be relevant to sexual harassment, as it has been shown that traditionalists (vs. egalitarians) have a higher rate of perpetrating intimate partner violence (Nabors & Jasinski, 2009). Thus, we hypothesized that:

H5: Traditionalists (vs. egalitarians) are less likely to attribute responsibility and punishment to the perpetrator of the harassment.

Traditionalists believing in the presence of significant inherent psychological differences between men and women may also believe that supervisors are different from subordinates. Therefore, they may view harassment by a male supervisor more leniently than egalitarians and compare it to harassment by non-supervisors. Thus, we hypothesized that:

H6: Acceptance of gender stereotype differences in attributing responsibility and punishment will be greater for assessing harassment by supervisors than by non-supervisors.

## CURRENT STUDY

This study aimed to examine the effects of the type of relationship between a male perpetrator of harassment and a female victim on the perpetrator's attribution of responsibility and punishment and the victim's perceived morality. Moreover, we considered potential factors, such as acceptance of gender stereotypes and sex, moderating the tested relationships. We decided to control for sex role identity expressed as femininity and masculinity while testing

the hypotheses. Since verbal forms of sexual harassment are most common (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018) and sex differences in their evaluations are most pronounced (Shechory Bitton & Shaul, 2013), we described a situation in which a man directed obscene jokes and unwanted sexual propositions to a woman through vignettes.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

### PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

The study had a 3 (supervisors vs. coworker vs. neighbor) × 2 (participants' sex: male vs. female) × 2 (acceptance of gender stereotypes: traditionalists vs. egalitarians) between-subjects experimental design. In total, 369 people (278 females) aged between 18 and 57 years ( $M = 24.90$ ,  $SD = 5.80$ ) participated in the study through an invitation published on social media. Participants provided informed consent and rated their masculinity/femininity traits and acceptance of gender stereotypes. After that, they read one of the three versions of a scenario describing a verbal sexual harassment situation in a given setup. The presented scenarios differed in the relationship between the man and the woman (neighbor vs. supervisor vs. coworker). In each scenario, the man (named Paul) made inappropriate jokes with strong sexual overtones to the woman (named Marta). Although the woman said she did not like this type of joke, he continued to communicate with her in the same manner. The vignette stated that the woman then limited and avoided contact with the man. After reading the vignette, participants rated responsibility and punishment attributes and rated the victim's morality. Finally, they answered demographic questions.

### MEASURES

*Bem Sex Role Inventory* (Bem, 1974; Lipińska-Grobelny & Gorczycka, 2011). The inventory measures masculinity-femininity and gender roles. The scale consists of 20 adjectives, ten describing masculinity (e.g., "assertive";  $\alpha = .84$ ) and ten describing femininity (e.g., "caring";  $\alpha = .91$ ). Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale the degree to which each characteristic describes them.

*Acceptance of traditional stereotypes.* We used the subscale "acceptance of traditional stereotypes" from the Gender Attitude Inventory (Ashmore et al., 1995). The subscale contains ten items, such as "Males are generally more selfish than females" ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The median split calculation allows people to be classified into egalitarians (low score) and traditionalists (high score).

*Attribution of responsibility.* Victim and perpetrator responsibility for sexual harassment was assessed via three items ( $\alpha = .83$ ) adapted from previously used measures (e.g., Marin & Guadagno, 1999). In the first and second items, participants rated on a 7-point scale separately to what extent Paul or Marta was responsible for the sexual harassment. The third item was: "Who do you think is responsible for this situation?". Participants responded by selecting from 0 (*definitely Marta is responsible*) to 10 (*definitely Paul is responsible*).

*Attribution of punishment.* Attribution of punishment was assessed via three items adapted from previously used measures (e.g., Marin & Guadagno, 1999; Nodeland & Craig, 2021): "Can the described situation be called sexual harassment?"; "Should Marta inform other people about this situation?"; "Should Paul be punished?". For all items, a 7-point scale was used ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Morality traits.* We used the morality subscale ( $\alpha = .89$ ) from the Agency and Communion Scale (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). For each trait (e.g., "fair"), participants rated whether it fit Marta using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 7 (*definitely yes*).

## RESULTS

We examined the ANOVA models separately for attribution of responsibility and punishment as dependent variables. We introduced the type of relationship (neighbor vs. coworker vs. supervisor), participants' sex (male vs. female), participants' acceptance of gender stereotypes (traditionalist vs. egalitarians) as between-subjects factors, and masculinity/femininity as covariates. For victim's perceived morality, we introduced the type of relationship as a between-subjects factor.

The attribution of responsibility for harassment was not affected by type of relationship,  $F(2, 358) = 0.80$ ,  $p = .449$ , participants' sex,  $F(1, 358) = 0.70$ ,  $p = .792$ , acceptance of gender stereotypes,  $F(1, 358) = 0.003$ ,  $p = .959$ , and masculinity,  $F(1, 358) = 2.89$ ,  $p = .090$ . There was a non-significant interaction of the study conditions with sex,  $F(2, 358) = 0.31$ ,  $p = .733$ . As participants' femininity increased, the perpetrator's attributed responsibility for the harassment increased,  $F(1, 358) = 4.67$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . The interaction between type of relationship and participants' acceptance of gender stereotypes was significant,  $F(2, 358) = 3.94$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Traditionalists, contrary to egalitarians, attribute marginally lower responsibility to the supervisor-perpetrator ( $p = .073$ ) and higher to the neighbor-perpetrator ( $p = .033$ ). No such differences arise in evaluation of the coworker-perpetrator ( $p = .178$ ). Egalitarians perceived more responsibility from the supervisor than from the neighbor ( $p = .065$ ). Traditionalists similarly rated harassment across the three conditions ( $ps > .05$ ).

The attribution of punishment was not affected by acceptance of gender stereotypes,  $F(1, 358) = 0.37$ ,  $p = .545$ , masculinity,  $F(1, 358) = 3.15$ ,  $p = .077$ , or femininity,  $F(1, 358) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .102$ . Participants attribute higher punishment for the perpetrator-supervisor than for the perpetrator-neighbor ( $p < .001$ ) and higher for the perpetrator-coworker ( $p = .017$ ),  $F(2, 358) = 10.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . Participants did not differ in advocacy of punishment for the perpetrator-neighbor and for the perpetrator-coworker ( $p = .140$ ). Males advocated less punishment to the perpetrator than females,  $F(1, 358) = 8.00$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . There were non-significant interactions of the study conditions with sex,  $F(2, 358) = 1.79$ ,  $p = .168$ , and with acceptance for gender stereotypes,  $F(2, 358) = 0.53$ ,  $p = .592$ , for advocacy of punishment.

The perceived victim morality was not affected by type of relationship,  $F(2, 366) = 0.90$ ,  $p = .407$ . Participants assessed that the victim was equally moral when harassed by her supervisor ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ), coworker ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), and neighbor ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ).

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined how sexual harassment is perceived in informal relationships as compared to formal relationships where the perpetrator is in a higher or similar position of authority (supervisor, coworker). The neighbor-perpetrator was assigned the same responsibility for the harassment as the perpetrator in a formal relationship. We found that individuals perceived sexual harassment by a neighbor or coworker as deserving similar punishment, and harassment by a supervisor as deserving of a more severe punishment. Males, contrarily, advocated less severe punishment for perpetrators than females, and traditionalists attributed lower responsibility to a supervisor and higher responsibility to a neighbor than egalitarians. To our knowledge, the present study is the first to highlight the similarity in people's perceptions of sexual harassment in informal and formal relationships, contributing to existing scientific literature.

According to H1, we found that harassment by a supervisor was considered more punishable than that by a colleague or neighbor. This result is in line with previous findings (Pina et al., 2009; Wayne, 2000). Supervisors who engage in harassment must expect that their behavior may be judged more harshly because they have an advantage over the victim, limiting the victim's ability to resist the situation (Wayne, 2000). However, contrary to H1, the attribution of responsibility was similar across all conditions. Since the victim explicitly opposed the harassment in the vignette we designed, the situation may have been unambiguous regarding various judgments of respon-

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics*

|                  | Supervisor     |          |               |          | Coworker       |          |               |          | Neighbor       |          |               |          |
|------------------|----------------|----------|---------------|----------|----------------|----------|---------------|----------|----------------|----------|---------------|----------|
|                  | Responsibility |          | Punishment    |          | Responsibility |          | Punishment    |          | Responsibility |          | Punishment    |          |
|                  | <i>M (SD)</i>  | <i>n</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M (SD)</i>  | <i>n</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M (SD)</i>  | <i>n</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>n</i> |
| Total            | 6.31 (1.15)    | 117      | 4.69 (1.50)   | 117      | 6.38 (0.81)    | 129      | 4.27 (1.47)   | 129      | 6.20 (0.94)    | 123      | 3.97 (1.49)   | 123      |
| Male             | 6.14 (1.40)    | 37       | 4.57 (1.71)   | 37       | 6.39 (0.84)    | 39       | 3.88 (1.27)   | 39       | 6.21 (1.02)    | 26       | 3.23 (1.53)   | 26       |
| Female           | 6.38 (1.02)    | 80       | 4.75 (1.41)   | 80       | 6.38 (0.80)    | 90       | 4.44 (1.52)   | 90       | 6.20 (0.92)    | 97       | 4.17 (1.42)   | 97       |
| Egalitarian      | 6.47 (0.98)    | 64       | 4.64 (1.52)   | 64       | 6.40 (0.74)    | 61       | 4.16 (1.53)   | 61       | 5.94 (1.08)    | 53       | 3.91 (1.52)   | 53       |
| Traditionalist   | 6.11 (1.31)    | 53       | 4.76 (1.50)   | 53       | 6.36 (0.87)    | 68       | 4.36 (1.42)   | 68       | 6.40 (0.77)    | 70       | 4.20 (1.47)   | 70       |
| Low femininity   | 6.23 (1.33)    | 65       | 4.45 (1.60)   | 65       | 6.38 (0.80)    | 61       | 4.42 (1.42)   | 61       | 6.21 (0.94)    | 56       | 3.77 (1.49)   | 56       |
| High femininity  | 6.40 (0.89)    | 52       | 5.00 (1.32)   | 52       | 6.39 (0.82)    | 68       | 4.13 (1.51)   | 68       | 6.19 (0.95)    | 67       | 4.13 (1.47)   | 67       |
| Low masculinity  | 6.22 (1.41)    | 59       | 4.46 (1.55)   | 59       | 6.31 (0.92)    | 69       | 4.25 (1.38)   | 69       | 6.13 (1.02)    | 64       | 3.72 (1.41)   | 64       |
| High masculinity | 6.40 (0.82)    | 58       | 4.93 (1.43)   | 58       | 6.46 (0.66)    | 60       | 4.29 (1.57)   | 60       | 6.28 (0.84)    | 69       | 4.24 (1.53)   | 69       |

Note. We defined low and high femininity and masculinity by dividing the results in half.

sibility for the action. This is supported by the ratings presented in Table 1, suggesting that participants attributed high responsibility to the perpetrator. We found that a perpetrator in an informal relationship with the victim, such as a neighbor, is held responsible for harassment similarly as a perpetrator in a formal relationship (coworker). His behavior is perceived as deserving of punishment similar to the coworker. Understanding the mechanism of perceived harassment in informal relationships is a pivotal issue, which is especially important for designing educational measures. Since some potential perpetrators may believe that they can have “more leeway to harass” in informal relationships, preventive measures may partly involve making them aware that they cannot count on permissiveness. The perpetrator would be judged similarly everywhere. It would be easier for harassed women to label the situation and report it to the police after being enlightened via educational interventions describing perceptions of harassment in informal relationships. The fact that sexual harassment in informal relationships is considered similar to that in formal relationships may be due to the transmission of formalized norms of correct behavior at work to social norms outside of work. Additionally, highly publicized sexual harassment cases in the media, as during the #MeToo campaign (Nodeland & Craig, 2021), may have contributed to the results.

Contrary to H2, women’s morality was assessed independently of whether a supervisor or a non-supervisor harassed them. We had assumed that women harassed by a supervisor might be perceived to have lesser moral values to gain professional benefits. Previous studies have shown that women who report harassment are perceived as less trustworthy and ethical (Marin & Guadagno, 1999). Thus, it seems that not the type of relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, but the victim’s behavior, may determine the assessment of the victim’s moral characteristics. Failure to confirm this hypothesis may be related to the situation described in the vignette – the woman openly objected to the harassment. This suggests that if a female victim openly opposed the perpetrator-supervisor, she would be perceived in the same way as victims of harassment by non-supervisors. However, research shows that it is difficult for women to oppose harassment from supervisors (Pina et al., 2009). This might be the reason why so many harassment victims feel guilt and shame (Fidan & Yeşil, 2020). Consistent with H3 and previous research (Nodeland & Craig, 2021; Shechory Bitton & Shaul, 2013), the findings showed that males perceive a male perpetrator’s harassment as less deserving of punishment than females. This supports the defensive attribution theory (Shaver, 1970), which predicts that men who perceive their similarity to a male perpetrator will tend to judge him less harshly to protect themselves from future harassment accusations (Key & Ridge,

2011). The overly explicit description of harassment in the vignettes contributed to the fact that sex differences did not occur for responsibility attribution, contradicting previous studies (Rotundo et al., 2001). For the same reason, we may not have observed a significant effect of sex on the relationship between study conditions and evaluation of harassment, opposing H4. Sex differences appear primarily when assessing ambiguous harassment situations (Rotundo et al., 2001). However, recent findings have shown that sex differences are lesser for mild forms of harassment than severe ones (Rothgerber et al., 2021). Therefore, gender differences in the assessment of sexual harassment appear to be a complex phenomenon leading to mixed findings. Taken together, our findings suggest that men are particularly defensive about believing that male perpetrators deserve punishment, which may have implications for the *jus* Contrary to H5, we found that accepting gender stereotypes did not moderate the perception of sexual harassment. It suggests that, although people who accept traditional gender stereotypes are more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence (Nabors & Jasinski, 2009), they do not use defensive attribution when assessing sexual harassment. However, acceptance of gender stereotypes can influence perceptions of harassment. In line with H6, we found that traditionalists, who believe in greater differences between genders, attribute lower responsibility for harassment to a supervisor than egalitarians. Furthermore, we found that traditionalists attribute higher responsibility to neighbor-perpetrators than egalitarians. While the relationship between perpetrators and victims did not influence traditionalists, egalitarians attributed less responsibility to the neighbor than the supervisor. Egalitarians believe that bridging the gender gap may have influenced more equal perceptions of harassment in the informal situation where this equality was more strongly emphasized. Thus, the findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that those who reject gender stereotypes may attribute greater responsibility to a female victim in an informal relationship with a male perpetrator.

The present study has a few limitations and implications for future research. First, we used an explicit description of the harassment situation. Future research should use more ambiguous scenarios in which the victim does not resist the attacker. Second, the victim in our study was female, and the perpetrator was male, limiting the generalizability of our results to other sex configurations. Future research on informal relationships should consider situations where the perpetrator is female, and the victim is male, or possibilities related to other sexual orientations or genders. Future researchers should also focus on sexual harassment in informal relationships to consider whether the perpetrator was a stranger to the victim or a close acquaintance.

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