Students’ Perceptions of Sexual Harassment:  
Is It Harassment Only If the Offender Is a Man and the Victim Is a Woman?

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The present study investigated 3 potential sources of variability in university students’ perceptions of sexual harassment in hypothetical professor-student scenarios: raters’ gender, gender of the professor and student, and rater’s own sexual harassment. Participants were most likely to identify the interactions as harassment when they involved a male offender and a female victim. They were less likely to label the behaviors as harassment when they occurred between members of the same gender or between a female professor and a male student. Women were more open to viewing the scenarios as harassment and men were unlikely to view the interactions between a female professor and a male student as harassment. Personal history of sexual harassment did not influence participants’ perceptions.

Sexual harassment in the workplace and in educational institutions has been the subject of considerable research in the past 10 to 15 years, yet a number of central questions regarding our understanding of how individuals make judgments about sexual harassment remain unresolved. Although we know that sexual harassment is a common occurrence, prevalence rates among studies have varied considerably. For example, in a review of 18 studies, the number of women who experienced sexual harassment ranged from 28% to 75% (with a median of 44%; Gruber, 1990).

Within educational settings, it has been estimated that 1 out of every 2 women has experienced some form of sexually harassing behavior from male faculty during their years in college or university (Brooks & Perot, 1991). Similarly, studies of public school students have found very high rates of harassment occurring within school settings (Kopels & Dupper, 1999; Stratton & Backes, 1997). For example, a national representative sample of secondary school students showed that 83% of girls and 60% of boys had received unwanted sexual attention in school (Lee, Croninger, Linn, & Chen, 1996). Although the majority of these experiences involved interactions among peers, about 12% of the students had been harassed by a teacher, and about one third had been harassed by other adult school staff (Lee et al., 1996).

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Although the apparent risk of sexual harassment may vary somewhat from setting to setting, the manner in which sexual harassment is defined and measured is also likely to influence the responses of participants in these surveys. In an attempt to operationally define the concept of sexual harassment, many researchers have turned to legal definitions that incorporate two primary components: objective quid pro quo behaviors and subjective hostile-environment behaviors. Quid pro quo harassment involves requests for sexual activity in exchange for workplace benefits and includes such behaviors as coercion and actual assault (Lengnick-Hall, 1995). A hostile environment pertains to more equivocal behaviors, which may be perceived as threatening and harassing by some individuals but not by others (e.g., explicitly sexual jokes). As indicated by Silbergeld (1991), the courts tend to use the “reasonable person” criterion in determining whether or not a certain set of behaviors constitutes sexual harassment. Hence, the issue of how one perceives sexual harassment is highly relevant both with regard to the impact of such behavior on the victim, as well as to the judgments made by juries in sexual harassment cases and in the actions (e.g., support vs. dismissing attitudes) of bystanders.

Because of the subjectivity involved in making assessments of sexual harassment involving reports of a hostile environment, many of the studies done in this area have selected these ambiguous situations as their focus. Overall, there is greater agreement among raters when the target behaviors involve overt sexual harassment, such as demands for sexual compliance under threat to an individual’s job security. In situations of greater ambiguity, the respondent’s past experience of sexual harassment, gender, age, and marital status each have been found to contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment (Blakely, Blakely, & Moorman, 1995; Charney & Russell, 1994; Gowan & Zimmerman, 1996; Gutek, 1995; Katz, Hannon, & Whitten, 1996). Other factors that influence perceptions of sexual harassment include the physical setting of the harassment, physical versus verbal harassing behavior, job status of the harasser, nature of the relationship between harasser and victim (Dougherty, Turban, Olson, Dwyer, & Lapezie, 1996), and gender ratios on the job (Konrad & Gutek, 1986).

One of the most often substantiated findings from studies in this area is that men and women do not view sexual harassment in the same way. In fact, women are much more likely than men to recognize sexual harassment, particularly when the situations described are mild or ambiguous in nature (Gowan & Zimmerman, 1996; Gutek, 1995; Konrad & Gutek, 1986). Similarly, men tend to anticipate that they would feel flattered by sexual overtures at work and hence may be less likely to view such behavior as offensive (Konrad & Gutek, 1986).

Viewing sexual overtures by women as flattery may reflect men’s so-called sexual entitlement (i.e., their gender-role-related view of themselves as sexual agents rather than as sexual objects) and the fact that they are less likely than women to feel threatened by the potential for physical harm or escalation of the behavior into sexual assault (Cairns, 1993a).
Perhaps because women are more often the victims of sexual harassment and other forms of sexual victimization (O’Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998) and because they may experience more severe harassment (e.g., in secondary schools; Lee et al., 1996), the reality of their personal experiences may sensitize women to the potential threat and seriousness of inappropriate sexual attention at work or at school. Although sexual harassment history has not always been included in studies in this area, firsthand experience of sexual harassment has been found to influence later perceptions of sexual harassment. According to Blakely et al. (1995), having a personal history of sexual harassment may even outweigh gender as a determinant of sexual harassment perceptions.

One aspect of sexual harassment that has been studied rarely is the role that the gender of the offender and victim play in influencing judgments of sexual harassment. Most studies have focused almost exclusively on behaviors occurring between a male harasser and a female victim, as this generally is agreed to be the most common form of sexual harassment. However, same-gender sexual harassment has been found to occur more often than was previously thought. For example, relatively high rates of male-to-male harassment have been reported in military settings (Bastian, Lancaster, & Reyst, 1996) and in public schools (Stratton & Backes, 1997), and an increasing number of same-gender sexual harassment cases are now coming before the courts (e.g., Foote & Goodman-Delahunty, 1999). Researchers also have begun to respond to this issue by including in their studies unconventional forms of sexual harassment, such as harassment of men by women as well as same-gender harassment (e.g., Frame, 1996).

The actual frequency with which these unconventional forms of sexual harassment occur is largely unknown, as they are even less likely to be reported than harassment of women by men (which is also vastly underreported). The United States Merit Systems Protection Board (1995) survey of federal workers indicated that about 1% of women and 21% of men had been harassed by persons of the same gender and that 65% of male targets reported being harassed by a woman. Studies of sexual harassment among men and women in the United States armed forces show similar trends, where 51% of men and 2% of women have reported same-gender harassment, and 32% of men have reported being harassed by a woman (Bastian et al., 1996). In general, it appears that men are more likely than women to experience same-gender sexual harassment (Foote & Goodman-Delahunty, 1999; Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998). In addition, the nature of same-gender harassment appears to differ for men and women: In male-to-male situations, it involves primarily hostile-environment behaviors, whereas female-to-female harassment is more likely to involve quid pro quo behaviors (Magley, Waldo, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

Studies of the perceived effects of same-gender sexual harassment also have varied in terms of their findings. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1993) indicated that both men and women tend to perceive same-gender sexual
advances as highly negative and associated these experiences with feelings of violation and harm. However, Smith, Pine, and Hawley (1988) noted that male subjects rated male victims of male perpetrators as less injured than female victims of male perpetrators. Similarly, Waldo et al. (1998) found that actual male victims of sexual harassment (whether perpetrated by a man or a woman) reported relatively few negative reactions to their experiences relative to those reported by women (see also Lee et al., 1996). Given the differences in the real-life experiences of men and women in terms of same-gender harassment, as well as the gender differences that exist with regard to judgments of what constitutes sexual harassment, further exploration of these issues is required.

The present study explores perceptions of same-gender sexual harassment in comparison to cross-gender sexual harassment and investigates differences related to participant gender as well as to the gender of the actors in a hypothetical interaction between a professor and a student. Students' past experience of sexual harassment is also investigated. It was expected that perceptions of sexual harassment would be influenced by: (a) participant gender (with women being more likely to acknowledge sexual harassment); (b) actor gender (with male-to-female harassment being more readily acknowledged); and (c) personal history of sexual harassment (previous sexual harassment experiences are expected to be related to greater sensitivity to detecting sexual harassment).

Method

Participants

Participants were 241 undergraduate psychology students (106 men, 135 women) from a midsize western Canadian university. Most students (87%) were in their first or second year of study, and 95% were under the age of 25 years ($M = 19.54$, $SD = 2.71$; range = 17 to 41 years). For ethnicity, 80% of the participants were Caucasian, 15% were of Asian origin, and the remaining 5% included a variety of other racial groups (e.g., First Nations/Native Canadian, African Canadian, and "other" nonspecified origins); 95% were Canadian citizens, and 87% had English as their first language. Most participants identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual (96%), and most were single and never married (98%). Most participants (86%) were raised primarily in homes with both biological parents, and 61% came from middle-class families (i.e., annual family income at age 18 was Can$60,000 to $75,000 or approximately US$39,000 to $48,000).^2

^2Demographic variables (e.g., age, race, family income) were explored using ANOVA and Pearson correlations in relation to sexual harassment (SH) perception and participant gender. None of the demographics were related to the former, although male students had been involved in their university studies for somewhat longer than had women ($M = 1.72$ years, $SD = 1.02$; and $M = 1.38$ years, $SD = 0.71$, for men and women respectively), $F(1, 237) = 9.30, p = .003$. 


Procedure

Students volunteered for this research study (while choosing among a number of available studies) as one of two options (the other being the completion of weekly quizzes) for earning bonus points toward their course grade in Introductory Psychology. At signup, the study was described as an investigation of "attitudes toward sexual harassment." All participants provided informed consent before completing the study, were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and were assured that they would not lose their bonus points if they felt that they could not complete the study. No one chose to leave the study early.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment conditions that varied the gender of a hypothetical professor and student (i.e., two cross-gender combinations and two same-gender combinations). Each condition was comprised of approximately equal numbers of males and females (cell sizes ranged from 26 to 36 participants). Questionnaires were counterbalanced for two sections of questions: Section A included demographics, the definition of sexual harassment (SH), and personal SH history; while Section B included the 20 SH questions. Approximately half of the sample completed the questionnaire in Order A/B and the other half completed the questions in Order B/A (approximately equal proportions of each gender completed each version).

Upon completion of the study, each participant received a brief written explanation of the purpose of the study. This included the name and contact telephone number for the researchers, as well as the telephone number for the campus counseling center. Each testing session lasted approximately 20 to 30 min, and the average testing session involved about 27 participants.

Measures

Personal demographics and harassment history. The following participant demographics were assessed: age, gender, year of studies, sexual orientation, marital status, first language, race, parents' educational background, and family income.

Following the demographics, a definition of sexual harassment was presented. This definition, which is part of the university's harassment policy and is based on the definition in the guidelines of the Canadian Association of

3Statistical analysis (ANOVA and $\chi^2$) confirmed that participant age, gender, family income, and other demographic variables were statistically equivalent across the four groups.

4The order of the questionnaires was found to be related to SH perception. Because participants (especially men) who completed their questionnaires in Order A/B (definition first, Perception of Sexual Harrassment Questionnaire [PSHQ; Katz et al., 1996] second) had lower scores on the PSHQ (i.e., were less likely to acknowledge SH), questionnaire order was used as an independent variable in the main analyses.
University Teachers (as cited in Cammaert, 1985), is readily available to students and the public in printed form as well as on the university website. Accordingly, sexual harassment is defined as follows (University of Victoria, 2002):

unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when: (a) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of employment or of educational progress; or (b) submission to or rejection of such conduct is used as the basis for employment or academic decisions affecting that employee or student; or (c) such conduct has the effect or purpose of unreasonably interfering with an employee’s work performance or a student’s academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working or educational environment.

Following this definition, participants were asked about their own experiences of sexual harassment (i.e., “According to the above definition, do you feel that you have ever experienced sexual harassment?”). The following information was gathered for those students who indicated having experienced sexual harassment: gender of the harasser, age difference and relationship to the harasser, effect of the experience, actions taken, and so forth. If more than one such event had been experienced, the student was instructed to answer for the event “you consider to be the most significant experience or the experience that had the greatest effect on you.” Participants also were asked about their knowledge of any sexual harassment that had occurred to individuals whom they knew personally (e.g., friend, acquaintance, partner, family member).

Perception of Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (PHSQ; Katz et al., 1996). Participants’ perceptions of sexual harassment were assessed by Katz et al.’s PSHQ. The original measure contains 60 items involving 20 different interactions between a man and woman that occur within three different situational contexts in college and workplace settings. The items had been based on behaviors that occurred in an actual sexual harassment case. Sample items are “John touches Kathy’s hair and tells her it smells good” and “Kathy says to John, ‘If you don’t have sex with me, I’ll make it difficult for you.’” The participant provides a numerical rating of each statement that indicates the extent to which he or she views the behavior as sexual harassment. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (definitely is not sexual harassment) to 4 (not sure) to 7 (definitely is sexual harassment). Perceived sexual harassment is calculated as the average rating across the 20 items for each situation. Katz et al. reported that the PSHQ has very good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

Both of these definitions are nearly identical to that of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (as cited in Stratton & Backcs, 1997).
The current study used the 20 questions with just one of the scenarios described by Katz et al. (1996). The scenario selected was that which involved a power differential between the characters and that had the most relevance to a population of college students (i.e., an interaction on a college campus between an unmarried professor and one of his or her unmarried students). Four versions of the questionnaire were constructed that had identical item content yet varied the gender of the professor and student. This resulted in four conditions that included two cross-gender pairs and two same-gender pairs: (a) male professor/female student (M/F; \( \alpha = .89 \)); (b) female professor/male student (F/M; \( \alpha = .91 \)); (c) male professor/male student (M/M; \( \alpha = .86 \)); and (d) female professor/female student (F/F; \( \alpha = .94 \)).

A principal components analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the 20 items of the PSHQ (Katz et al., 1996) in order to determine the underlying factor structure of the measure. An examination of the scree plot and the factor loadings suggested a two-factor solution that explained 46% of the total variance. The two factors are as follows: (a) sexualized touching, looks, and verbal comments (13 items; e.g., “John tells Kathy she should wear her jeans tighter” and “Kathy brushes her body up against John”; \( \alpha = .90 \)); and (b) nonsexualized touching, dirty jokes, and attention (6 items; e.g., “John pats Kathy on the back and tells her she is doing a good job” and “Kathy tells Susan a dirty joke”; \( \alpha = .79 \)). One item (Item 5: “John says to Kathy, ‘If you don’t have sex with me, I’ll make it difficult for you’”) did not load on either factor; hence, it was examined separately.

Results

Previous Sexual Harassment Experiences

There were 31 women (23%) and 3 men (3%) who indicated that they had previously experienced sexual harassment (all of the women had been harassed by men, whereas 1 man had been harassed by a woman and 2 men had been harassed by men; overall, 97% of the harassers were male). The average participant age at the time of this harassment was 16.58 years (\( SD = 2.59 \)). Most frequently, the harasser had been a high school teacher or coach (26.5%, \( n = 9 \)), an employer (23.5%, \( n = 8 \)), or another university student (17.6%, \( n = 6 \)). Only 2 of the harassed participants (6%) indicated that the harasser had been their university professor or instructor.

Of the 26 participants who had told someone about the harassment, 58% (\( n = 15 \)) had reported it to a friend, 23% (\( n = 6 \)) reported it to a family member, and 12% (\( n = 3 \)) had spoken about it to a person in a position of authority (e.g., professor, harassment officer). Although 15% (\( n = 5 \)) of the 34 harassed participants had made a formal complaint about the harassment, none had reported it to the police.
Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Perceptions of Sexual Harassment by Rater Gender, Sexual Harassment Condition, and Questionnaire Order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual harassment condition</th>
<th>Male/male</th>
<th>Female/male</th>
<th>Male/female</th>
<th>Female/female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater gender Order A/B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.61 0.72</td>
<td>4.16 0.76</td>
<td>3.03 1.10</td>
<td>3.28 1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.44 0.42</td>
<td>4.74 0.81</td>
<td>4.81 0.64</td>
<td>4.35 0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order B/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.90 0.73</td>
<td>4.66 0.73</td>
<td>3.93 0.93</td>
<td>4.09 1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.57 0.64</td>
<td>5.09 0.55</td>
<td>4.43 0.75</td>
<td>4.50 0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Order A/B = definition/PSHQ; Order B/A = PSHQ/definition.

On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not very upsetting) to 5 (very upsetting), the average effect of the harassment at the time of its occurrence was reported as moderately upsetting ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.21$; 79% scored 3 or higher). Similarly, with regard to the extent to which the SH affected the person's ability to study or work, 75% scored 3 or above on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal; $M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.29$). Although women rated their experience of SH as being more upsetting in comparison to men's ratings, (women, $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.14$; men, $M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.53$), there was not a significant difference, $F(1, 32) = 3.44$, $p = .07$. Because of the small number of men reporting an experience of SH, this finding should be interpreted with caution.

An examination of the relationship between past history of SH and perceptions of SH indicates that having experienced SH did not influence participants' perceptions of SH in the scenarios, $F(2, 228) = 0.64$, $p = .53$. Similarly, having known someone who had been sexually harassed did not influence perceptions of SH, $F(2, 219) = 1.58$, $p = .21$. For this reason, SH was not used as an independent variable in the multivariate analyses, but instead was entered as a covariate.

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the average SH rating for participant gender, SH condition, and questionnaire order. A $2 \times 4 \times 2$ (Participant
Table 2

**ANCOVA: Gender by Sexual Harassment Condition by Questionnaire Order With Past Experience of Sexual Harassment as a Covariate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sum of squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rater gender</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>65.41</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH condition</td>
<td>17.67</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>11.56</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire order</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>15.60</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH experience</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × SH condition</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × Order</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>10.60</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order × SH condition</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × Order × SH condition</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. SH Condition = M/F, F/M, M/M, F/M; Order A/B = demographics/PSHQ; Order B/A = PSHQ/demographics.*

Gender × SH Condition × Questionnaire Order) ANCOVA was conducted using history of SH as a covariate and perception of SH as the dependent variable (Table 2).

There was a significant three-way interaction among participant gender, SH condition, and questionnaire order, $F(3, 191) = 3.44, p = .02$, indicating that for men, receiving a definition of SH prior to rating the scenarios resulted in lower ratings of SH (i.e., scores moved closer to a neutral rating of unsure for the M/F scenario; remained at unsure for both same-gender scenarios; and resulted in a shift from viewing the F/M scenario as unsure to a position much closer to definitely not SH; Figure 1). The pattern of the interaction for women was opposite that of men’s with regard to their ratings of the F/M condition. That is, while

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6This order effect is most likely a result of the definition of SH coming either before or after the participants responded to the PSHQ (Katz et al., 1996). Because the questionnaires were counterbalanced in two blocks (one block contained the definition of SH, demographic questions, and personal history of SH questions), it is possible that one of these other elements was responsible for the order effect. However, because SH history was not related to views of SH, it is unlikely that this variable was the source of the order effect. It is, however, possible that being asked about personal experiences of SH could create a defensive response set for some participants, who might then be more guarded against the detection of SH on the PSHQ (and perhaps also deny their own experiences of SH). This notion fits better for the pattern of responses seen among male participants than among female participants. Further investigation of these other elements in conjunction with the effect of different definitions of SH are needed in order to clarify this apparent effect.
women's scores moved somewhat closer to unsure for the three other conditions, for the F/M scenario, women who had read an objective definition of SH first were more likely to view the interactions between the female professor and male student as sexual harassment (while men viewed these same interactions as less likely to be SH; Figure 2).
Regarding the two-way interactions, Participant Gender × Questionnaire Order was significant, $F(1, 191) = 10.60, p = .001$. This indicates that across all four treatment conditions, men’s perceptions of SH were more likely to be influenced by the order of the questionnaires. That is, men’s ratings decreased (moved from a neutral position toward being less likely to acknowledge SH) when presented with the definition of SH prior to rating the scenarios. Women’s SH ratings were relatively consistent, regardless of which section of the questionnaire they completed first, when all SH conditions were considered together. There also was a significant interaction between gender and SH condition, $F(1, 191) = 3.84, p = .01$, indicating that men were less likely than women to view the unconventional SH gender combinations (i.e., F/M interactions and both same-gender interactions) as SH (Figure 3).

There was a significant main effect for participant gender, demonstrating that overall, women were more likely than men to rate the professor–student interactions as SH, $F(1, 191) = 65.41, p < .001$. Similarly, there was a main effect for SH condition (i.e., gender combinations of the professor and student) on perceptions of SH, $F(3, 191) = 11.56, p < .001$. Post hoc LSD analyses reveal that overall (as well as for male participants when examined separately), the M/F condition was more likely to be viewed as SH than were any of the other gender combination conditions. However, a separate examination of the women’s responses reveals that both of the cross-gender conditions (i.e., M/F and F/M) were given significantly higher SH ratings than were either of the same-gender conditions (i.e., M/M and F/F).
As expected, there was a significant main effect for questionnaire order. That is, across all participants and all conditions, completing the section of the questionnaire that included demographics, the SH definition, and the personal history of SH question prior to completing the SH perception questions resulted in overall lower SH ratings, $F(1, 191) = 15.60, p < .001$.

In order to further examine participants’ views of SH on the different components of the PSHQ (Katz et al., 1996), an additional MANCOVA was conducted using the two factors plus Item 5 as dependent variables. The results were essentially identical to those of the main analyses for Factor 1 (personal touching and sexualized comments), but diverged for Factor 2 (nonsexualized touch and comments) and Item 5 (Table 3). Of the two main factors, Factor 1 items were most likely to be seen as SH ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.07$). Although both women and men tended to view Factor 2 items as not being SH ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.03$), women’s scores on both of the factors (Factor 1, $M = 5.19$, $SD = 0.75$; Factor 2, $M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.91$) were higher than men’s scores (Factor 1, $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.18$; Factor 2, $M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.06$). As in the main analysis, on Factor 1 men viewed the F/M interactions as not being SH. Men and women essentially agreed with each other that Item 5 (“John says to Kathy, ‘If you don’t have sex with me, I’ll make it difficult for you’”) was indicative of SH ($M = 6.95$, $SD = 0.25$; $M = 7.00$, $SD = 0.00$, for men and women respectively). Similarly, for Item 5, there were no differences in perceptions of SH related to SH condition or order (nor were there any significant interactions).
Discussion

Not only are men and women differentially subjected to experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and in educational settings, but as observers and raters of such behavior, they also tend to perceive sexual harassment differently. As expected, the overall gender effect demonstrated in this study shows that women are more likely than men to perceive sexual harassment in hypothetical interactions between a professor and a student. The presence of this type of gender effect has been supported widely by other research, particularly when respondents are presented with ambiguous situations to judge (Burian, Yanico, & Martinez, 1998; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Frame, 1996; Gowan & Zimmerman, 1996; Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Ruis, 1996). When judging more severe incidents of sexual harassment (with highly specific and unambiguous items), women and men tend to be in greater agreement (Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990; Gutek, 1995; Terpstra & Baker, 1987). In the present study, this was evident as women and men showed the greatest disagreement on the most ambiguous items, and they were in greatest agreement on the single item that was the least ambiguous statement of sexual harassment. Therefore, while men and women are generally in agreement regarding blatant quid pro quo behaviors, it is in the more subtle situations of sexual inappropriateness where their different perspectives are most apparent. That is, when there is greater room for personal judgments to be made, men are much less willing to identify sexualized behavior by a professor toward a student as being sexual harassment.

However, not all studies have shown men to be more accepting of sexualized or harassing behavior in the workplace or college. For example, Dougherty et al. (1996) explained the lack of a significant gender difference in perceptions of sexual harassment in their study as a reflection of a change toward more progressive attitudes among male college students over the past decade. This does not appear to be the case in the present sample, as men’s responses were more conservative than were those of women across all conditions, and not just in the less conventional sexual harassment scenarios (where you might expect attitudes to change less quickly). Overall, men saw less harassment in the scenarios, and when faced with the least typical situations (i.e., same-gender harassment), men were unsure if these behaviors reflected sexual harassment. Similarly, when presented with the harassment of a man by a woman, men tended not to view this as harassment unless the behavior was blatantly harassing. This may reflect a general lack of awareness of the full range of sexual harassment situations that actually can occur in educational and workplace settings, as well as showing that men and women likely hold different views as to what behaviors constitute harassment when the offender is female or when the behaviors occur between members of the same gender.

As demonstrated by previous researchers, women in the present study were more likely than men to report that they had personally experienced sexual
harassment (23% vs. 3%, for men and women, respectively). Contrary to expectations, however, having had such an experience did not influence students’ perceptions of sexual harassment, even though other researchers have found such an effect (e.g., Blakely et al., 1995; Dougherty et al., 1996; Gowan & Zimmerman, 1996; Ruis, 1996).

There are a number of factors present in the current study that may have resulted in the lack of a relationship between a history of sexual harassment and perceptions of the scenarios. For example, the relatively low rate of harassment reported in the present study (particularly by men) may be relevant as sexual harassment history may have been underrepresented or underreported in this sample. Other college studies have found higher rates of sexual harassment among college students (e.g., Reilly, Lott, & Gallogly, 1986), particularly when harassment is defined broadly to include sexual assault and coercion that may occur within dating relationships (e.g., Cairns, 1993b). Studies that have found that sexual harassment history influences perceptions of harassment usually have examined individuals in the workplace and in military settings where the prevalence of sexual harassment is generally much higher than in college samples (e.g., Bastian et al., 1996; Magley et al., 1999). Youthful populations (e.g., university students) have had a relatively limited work history and so may not have experienced the full range of harassment situations that older subjects may have encountered already. Therefore, when the focus of a study emphasizes quid pro quo harassment, reported rates of harassment in these groups may be particularly low, especially for men.

Similarly, the manner in which a history of sexual harassment was measured in the current study might have influenced respondents’ acknowledgment of sexual harassment experiences. For instance, participants responded to a single global question on sexual harassment experiences (rather than a series of behavior-based questions), and the question followed immediately after the presentation of a standard definition of sexual harassment. While having access to an operational definition of sexual harassment might remove some of the subjectivity involved in assigning meaning to one’s past experiences, the definition used appears to have resulted in a restriction of some students’ range of understanding of sexual harassment. Although this definition does include the creation of a hostile environment as an element of sexual harassment, it might appear to emphasize more obvious quid pro quo behaviors, such as those that would have a negative influence on the participant’s job or educational standing. In fact, very few situations of harassment by peers were reported (most notable was the lack of any reports of harassment by peers prior to entering university). Thus, harassment situations that perhaps were more ambiguous in nature (e.g., hostile-environment behaviors and harassment among peers) yet equally disturbing might have been underreported.

As noted by Cammaert (1985), following up a more general question about sexual harassment with specific items inquiring into the types of behaviors
experienced results in higher reports of sexual harassment victimization. Unfortunately, the exact nature of participants’ sexual harassment experiences was not assessed in the present study. Also, the use of the term sexual harassment in the definition might have caused men in particular to deny such experiences (seeing oneself as a victim of sexual harassment might be particularly contrary to these young men’s gender-role expectations).

Regardless of these factors, the gender of the hypothetical offender and victim is an important factor in determining students’ perceptions of sexual harassment. In particular, men and women readily view situations involving a male professor and a female student as sexual harassment. This is consistent with the common perception (as well as the reality) that women are the primary victims and men are the primary perpetrators of sexual harassment (e.g., Cochran, Frazier, & Olson, 1997). Yet this is contrary to Frame’s (1996) finding that some individuals (clergy in that case) focus more on the behavior described and on the role of the harasser than on the gender of harasser and victim when assessing the presence of sexual harassment. Clergy, however, are quite a different group from young university students and would not necessarily be expected to share similar perceptions of sexual harassment.

Even though identical behaviors were presented in the alternate scenarios, students were less likely to acknowledge the presence of sexual harassment when the gender combinations differed from the stereotypical sexual harassment scenario with a male perpetrator and a female victim. This is particularly apparent among the male respondents, as this was the only gender combination that they saw as involving sexual harassment. This also might explain the extremely low rate of reporting of sexual harassment among the men in this study, as they may not have considered themselves, as men, likely targets or victims of sexual harassment. Women, on the other hand, acknowledged sexual harassment in all of the gender combinations, yet gave significantly higher sexual harassment ratings to both of the cross-gender combinations in comparison to the same-gender combinations. This suggests that women are particularly sensitive to the possibility of sexual harassment between the genders and that both men and women have some difficulty acknowledging the potential for sexual harassment to occur among members of the same gender.

Although past research has found that men anticipate having highly negative reactions to same-gender harassment (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993), in the present study men appeared stymied by the same-gender interactions as they indicated being unsure whether or not these represented sexual harassment. Women, on the other hand, viewed the same-gender interactions and the female-to-male interactions as sexual harassment, but to a lesser degree than the male-to-female interactions. Therefore, even though women do seem to possess an overall more flexible perspective on sexual harassment, they are still somewhat reluctant to acknowledge sexual harassment in these alternative
pairings in comparison to their greater certainty in judging situations involving a male offender and a female victim. Although it is a positive finding that these students, who may yet encounter sexual harassment in their future working lives, are sensitive to the potential for sexual harassment of women by men, it is unfortunate that there remains a reluctance to acknowledge that sexually inappropriate behaviors by an individual in a position of power over a more vulnerable person is harassment, regardless of the gender of the persons involved.

The most striking gender difference occurred with regard to the way men and women viewed the sexual harassment of a man by a woman. Consistent with their overall willingness to acknowledge sexual harassment in the scenarios, women perceived the interactions between the female professor and the male student as sexual harassment, while men did not. This finding is consistent with that of Katz et al. (1996), who also found men less likely than women to view the same interactions by a woman toward a man as sexual harassment. In the present study, the only exception to this pattern was for the most overt item (“If you don’t have sex with me, I’ll make it difficult for you”), which was recognized by both genders as being sexually harassing, regardless of the gender of the professor and the student. Public awareness campaigns and educational programs have likely succeeded in their task of highlighting the inappropriateness of this blatant form of abuse of power; however, they may have been less successful at helping students to identify sexual harassment in its less overt forms.

The diverging opinions of men and women with regard to the nature of sexual harassment are particularly evident when the respondent is first oriented to the nature of sexual harassment through the presentation of an operational definition of sexual harassment prior to rating the scenarios. When oriented toward a specific definition of sexual harassment, women were more likely to view the female-to-male interactions as sexually harassing, whereas men appeared to react to the definition in the opposite way. The fact that women are more certain that the female-to-male situations are sexually harassing, once they have been presented with a definition of sexual harassment, suggests that women may be more open and flexible in their attitudes toward sexual harassment than men and that they may be more willing than men to apply an objective definition of sexual harassment to a variety of gender combinations. For men, the definition may have encouraged them to reassess the ambiguous behaviors in light of their tendency to view the behaviors as normative gender-role prescribed behaviors. That is, the interactions between men may be viewed as nonsexual “buddy” behaviors, and those occurring from a woman toward a man may be seen as harmless flirtations.

That women possess a broader definition of sexual harassment is a finding that has been well documented in previous studies (Dougherty et al., 1996; Gutek, 1995; Katz et al., 1996; Shea, 1993). Past research suggests that these gender differences in attitude may be a result of gender socialization and differing
attributional processes among men and women. For example, because men are more likely to report being flattered by being the recipient of sexual overtures in the workplace (Konrad & Gutek, 1986), they may interpret such behavior on the part of women as flirtation rather than harassment. In addition, women appear to be more concerned than men that the behavior may escalate into even more serious affronts to their personal safety (Cairns, 1993a). Others have suggested that this gender difference is a result of the fact that women are more likely than men to personally experience sexual harassment (Blakely et al., 1995). Although women in the present study were more likely than men to report experiencing sexual harassment, because there was no association between perceptions of sexual harassment and having been a target of sexual harassment, it is not likely that the differing rates of victimization would adequately explain the present findings.

A limitation of the present study is that the use of a questionnaire with identical items for all gender combinations might not have captured the full range of sexual harassment experiences of greatest relevance to both men and women. For instance, some of the interactions may have seemed implausible to some observers in the context of certain gender combinations, and other items may have had entirely different implications, depending on the gender of the participants (e.g., “Bill pats John on the back and tells him he’s doing a good job”). In addition, as pointed out by Waldo et al. (1998), what men may experience as sexual harassment may be different from what women experience as sexual harassment (yet most surveys, including the present one, involve questions based only on women’s experiences of sexual harassment).

Some male participants in the present study indicated that they found the male-to-male scenarios to be humorous, which may have been reflected in the lower sexual harassment ratings given for this condition. This may have indicated a certain defensiveness on the part of the young male participants in this study, as well as the different meaning that they may attach to such behaviors (relative to how women may react to certain behaviors in the items). Furthermore, many of the interactions depicted were highly ambiguous (e.g., “Bill asked Susan if she wanted to take a ride in his new sports car”) and hence resulted in very few definite “Yes” or “No” sexual harassment ratings. It is also apparent that men seem to view many of these behaviors between men as normal male buddy behaviors, rather than imbuing them with sexual meaning.

Another limitation of the present study is the use of university students as participants, although much research of this type is based on similar populations. Generalizing from this population to others (especially to populations of older employed persons) would not be appropriate, as it has been shown that undergraduate students are less likely than faculty, graduate students, or the working population to label ambiguous sexual behaviors as sexual harassment (Frazier, Cochran, & Olson, 1995). These results can, however, be compared to the large body of literature in this area that has been conducted with students.
It also has been questioned just how accurately these types of questionnaires on sexual harassment reflect the actual circumstances of sexual harassment. For instance, Gutek (1995) noted that sexual harassment is best characterized as a process, pattern, or series of episodes, rather than as a single incident. Thus, when scenarios present a picture of repeated behaviors, rather than single incidents, they may reflect more closely the reality of sexual harassment and hence may be more useful in eliciting definite sexual harassment ratings. The current study, therefore, has similar limitations to other studies of this type with regard to ecological validity. The fact that rates of experienced sexual harassment were relatively low in this sample (especially for men) indicates that the definition used has certain limitations, as it may have focused students mainly on harassment experiences that involve a potential abuse of power. Certainly, future research should employ a process that asks a series of questions about actual behaviors experienced (specifically including behaviors by peers during adolescence and young adulthood) and that elicits more detailed information regarding the severity of the harassment experienced.

In summary, despite the limitations inherent in research on university students’ attitudes toward sexual harassment as elicited by surveys of hypothetical scenarios, the present study demonstrated that men and women continue to hold divergent views of sexual harassment despite the increased attention and awareness that this issue has received in recent years. In addition, awareness of the possibility for sexual harassment to occur within same-gender relationships as well as the potential for women to harass men in academic settings appears to be lagging behind students’ understanding of the harassment of women by men. That male students are particularly unwilling to acknowledge the potential for sexual harassment to occur within these other types of relationships suggests a need for further education and awareness training of university students in order to increase awareness and sensitivity as well as to prevent and halt sexual harassment in these settings. However, the effect of such awareness training should be examined carefully in light of this study’s finding that the provision of a concrete definition of sexual harassment can affect men’s and women’s view of some forms of harassment quite differently.

References


