

# The Effects of Training on Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Allegations

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This study of 176 college juniors examined the effects of respondent gender and sexual harassment training on the perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace. Variation in these perceptions, due to severity of the sexually oriented behavior, was also examined. Regardless of the subject's gender, individuals who 6 weeks earlier had seen a training film about sexual harassment rated severe sexually oriented work behaviors as more harassing than did individuals who had not seen the film. Additionally, males who had not seen the film rated ambiguous sexually oriented behaviors as less harassing than did males and females who had seen the film, and as less harassing than females who had not seen the film. Implications for the importance of training in addressing sexual harassment are discussed.

During the past several years, sexual harassment has received considerable attention due to a number of events. The Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas controversy, the Tailhook scandal, and allegations of sexual harassment directed against former Oregon Senator Robert Packwood and President Clinton undoubtedly have increased the salience of sexual harassment for many individuals and organizations. The consequences of sexual harassment, both individually and organizationally, are profound. Among the physical and emotional symptoms reported by victims of harassment are nausea, headaches, tiredness, lack of motivation, difficulty in concentrating, and lowered sense of self-esteem (Crull, 1982). Organizations may suffer in both financial and non-financial ways. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1981) study of sexual harassment in the federal government estimated that over a 2-year period, the costs in lost productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and insurance claims were

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in excess of \$180 million. In addition, based on the results of a recent survey, it was estimated that sexual harassment costs Fortune 500 companies an average of \$6.7 million annually (Sandroff, 1988). As noted by Popovich (1988), nonfinancial costs to the organization may include lowered morale within or image problems outside the organization.

According to the 1980 EEOC guidelines and the U.S. Supreme Court, sexually oriented verbal or physical conduct is considered harassment when (a) submission to the advances is required for pay, promotion, or other employment opportunity; or (b) the conduct has the purpose or effect of interfering with the individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (Commerce Clearing House, 1991).

However, what is problematic about this definition of sexual harassment is that it is vague enough to allow for different people to hold different perceptions of what sexual harassment is for them personally. Such differences of opinion may then result in differing interpretations of what is considered acceptable interpersonal behavior (Gruber, 1992). In fact, human resource professionals report that their biggest problem with the issue of sexual harassment is that the majority of employees are uncertain as to what constitutes sexual harassment (Laabs, 1995). What may be seen by one person as innocent courting behavior, which happens to occur in the workplace, may be seen by another person as offensive and intimidating behavior which hinders his or her ability to effectively perform the job. For example, a number of studies have noted that females tend to rate sexually oriented behavior as sexual harassment to a greater degree than do their male counterparts (e.g., Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, 1983; Gutek, Nakamura, Gahart, Handschumacher, & Russell, 1980; Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Popovich, Gehlauf, Jolton, Somers, & Godinho, 1992; Popovich, Licata, Nokovich, Martelli, & Zoloty, 1986; Powell, 1983, 1986; Terpstra & Baker, 1986).

Although it appears that females may be more likely than males to perceive sexually oriented behavior as harassing, particularly when the behavioral examples are ambiguous (Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990), gender alone may not be the reason for these differences between females and males. Instead, gender differences may mask the underlying influence of sensitivity to sexual harassment as the best predictor of perceptual differences. In their study about sexual harassment, Konrad and Gutek (1986) concluded that gender differences in what is considered sexual harassment are, in part, due to women's more frequent negative experiences with sex at work. Similarly, Blakely, Blakely, and Moorman (1995) used whether a person had ever been a target of sexual harassment to represent sensitivity toward sexual harassment and found that having been a target more strongly influenced perceptions of sexual harassment than did the respondent's gender. They speculated that previously reported gender

differences in these perceptions may be spurious. Their results indicate that when past experience with sexual harassment was controlled, there were no differences in how men and women define sexual harassment.

Given these results, one strategy for reducing gender differences in perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment would be to reduce the sensitivity differences between men and women. Direct experience with sexual harassment, such as being a target of sexual harassment (Blakely et al., 1995) or having negative experiences with sex at work (Konrad & Gutek, 1986), may affect what one perceives as constituting sexual harassment. However, when training employees about sexual harassment, it would be inappropriate, unethical, and possibly illegal either to make employees targets of sexual harassment or to subject them intentionally to negative experiences with sex at work.

Yet, as noted by Licata and Popovich (1987), policies and procedures alone are not sufficient to change attitudes and behaviors about sexual harassment; training is also necessary. Thus, many organizations (e.g., Du Pont, Corning) offer sexual harassment training programs that use videotapes to illustrate various forms of sexual harassment (Meyer, 1992). Having trainees view videos facilitates learning based on vicarious learning principles (Bandura, 1977), which assume that witnessing others experiencing sexual harassment may influence attitudes about sexual harassment or sexually harassing behavior. While a number of other training techniques, such as role playing or experiential exercises, may provide for this vicarious learning and subsequently increase sensitivity, videos are particularly effective training tools because of their ability to show subtle actions that cannot be captured by words alone (Meyer, 1992).

Although sexual harassment training is widespread, there have been few studies of the effectiveness of any kind of sexual harassment training (for an exception, see Blaxall, Parsonson, & Robertson, 1993). In the Blaxall et al. study, the effectiveness of a program designed to provide training to volunteer contact persons was examined. The role of the contact persons was to listen to complaints about sexual harassment and to provide the individual complainant with options. The contact persons were not to judge whether or not harassment had occurred. As noted by Blaxall et al., better client service may be provided by extending future training to include affirming skills (e.g., "You've definitely been sexually harassed") as part of the contact person training. Such skills would obviously require a judgment on the contact person's part about whether or not sexual harassment had occurred. Clearly, agreement among the contact persons about what constitutes sexual harassment would be required for the effective incorporation of this component into the training package. Given the lack of consensus among individuals as to what constitutes sexual harassment (e.g., Gutek et al., 1980, 1983; Konrad & Gutek, 1986;

Popovich et al., 1986, 1992; Powell, 1983, 1986; Terpstra & Baker, 1986), considerable attention would need to be devoted to this component of the training package.

In the present study, we examine the effectiveness of sexual harassment training on perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment. Specifically, we examine whether vicarious learning, through viewing a training video on sexual harassment, would influence perceptions of sexual harassment. Though other steps in behavioral modeling exist (e.g., briefly introducing the skill, practicing the skill via role playing; Burke & Day, 1986), we did not follow all of the steps because our interest was on increasing sensitivity and not on skill acquisition per se. As noted by Ivancevich (1995), the key component of behavioral modeling is the learning which takes place through observation.

Based on the preceding, it was first hypothesized that individuals, regardless of gender, who were exposed to the topic of sexual harassment during training would perceive sexually oriented work behavior as more sexually harassing than would individuals who had not received training about sexual harassment.

Alternatively, it may be that individuals who have been the target of sexual harassment may be sufficiently sensitized to this issue so that training designed to increase sensitivity about sexual harassment may have little effect on these persons. Since females are far more likely than males to have been the target of sexually harassing behavior, training and gender may have an interactive effect on perceptions of sexually oriented work behaviors. The nature of the interaction would be that the effect of training would be more pronounced for males than for females. In summary, we hypothesized that training would affect perceptions of what constituted sexual harassment and that this effect would be more pronounced for males than for females.

## Method

### *Participants*

Students enrolled in two sections (A and B) of a junior-level introductory management course voluntarily participated in the study. There were no penalties for individuals not participating. The average age of the sample was 20.7 years ( $SD = 1.67$ ). Approximately 34% of the individuals in the sample were employed during the semester in which the study was conducted. The average number of years of work experience (full and/or part-time) was 3.97 ( $SD = 2.20$ ). Section A of the class consisted of 120 individuals (46 females and 74 males), whose average age was 20.5 years. Section B consisted of 56 individuals (23 females and 33 males), whose average age was 21.1 years.

### *Procedure*

Section A viewed a commercially produced training film about sexual harassment in the workplace (Anderson & Boyd, 1988) and then participated in a classroom discussion about the film. The film consisted of vignettes depicting various actions within the workplace which meet the legal definition of sexual harassment. The film also depicted work-group discussions with a trainer about what behaviors might constitute sexual harassment and methods for dealing with sexual harassment. The discussion with students consisted primarily of answering questions about the film and discussing the consequences for employers if sexual harassment allegations are substantiated. Six weeks later, a questionnaire measuring perceptions of sexual harassment was administered to Section A. On the same day on which Section A completed the questionnaire, responses to the sexual harassment questionnaire were also collected from Section B, which had neither viewed the training film nor been exposed to the topic of sexual harassment in this particular class.

### *Measures*

The measure of perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment consisted of 13 items which covered a range of sexually oriented work behaviors representing severe, ambiguous, and innocuous dimensions of sexually oriented work behavior (Blakely et al., 1995). An example of one of the three items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .62$ ) included in the severe dimension was "touching or patting a female subordinate on a private part of the body (e.g., breast, buttocks)." One of the four items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ) included in the ambiguous dimension was "making sexually suggestive remarks or gestures around a female subordinate." One of the six items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ) included in the innocuous dimension was "asking a female subordinate for a date." These three dimensions of sexually oriented work behavior served as the dependent variables in the analysis.

Respondents were asked to what degree they felt that each of the 13 items constitutes sexual harassment. Their responses were measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Previous experience with sexual harassment was measured with a question which asked the respondents (either *yes* or *no*) if they had ever been the target of sexual harassment. Respondents were also asked to provide demographic information (e.g., age, gender).

It should be noted that although sexual harassment may be directed toward those of the same gender or directed from females toward male targets, the 13 items depicted male behaviors directed toward female targets because

the preponderance of sexual harassment is of this form (Backhouse & Cohen, 1978; Baldrige & McLean, 1980; Benson & Thomson, 1982; Bureau of National Affairs, 1981; Gutek et al., 1980; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). It should also be noted that since the power of the perpetrator of the behavior is related to perceptions of the behavior constituting sexual harassment (e.g., Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Pryor, 1985; Pryor & Day, 1988), and particularly for less blatant behaviors (Bursik, 1992), in order to control for power in the present study, all items depicted a supervisor's action directed toward a subordinate.

### *Research Design*

The design used in this study was a nonequivalent treatment with control group design in which we randomly selected the group which received the treatment. One of the two alternative designs which was considered but was judged not feasible was an experimental design with subjects randomly assigned to either a treatment or a control group. This design would have required either (a) individual showings of the film, but the discussions following the film would not have been controllable from session to session, or (b) group showings of the film, but the potential for cross-contamination within a classroom between those who had seen the film and those who had not militating against this particular design.

The other alternative design we considered was the design we used, but with a pretest in addition to the posttest. Our concern with this design was that the baseline measure, coupled with the public attention focused on this issue, would so heighten awareness about the topic that it would be difficult to assess the effects of the training film.

The major difficulty associated with the design chosen is that the groups may differ in a number of unknown ways. Consequently, we included several additional measures so that we could attempt to examine the equivalency of the two groups. The group which saw the film was 39% female, while the group that did not see the film was 40% female. Subjects were also asked (a) their age; (b) their years of work experience; (c) to what extent they were familiar with the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy, measured on a 1 to 5 scale; (d) to what extent they believed Anita Hill, measured on a 1 to 5 scale; and (e) to what extent they believed Clarence Thomas, measured on a 1 to 5 scale. We computed *t* tests for each of these variables, and there were no differences between those who saw the film and those who did not see the film. The means of these variables for those who saw the film compared with those who did not see the film were: age,  $M = 20.5$  versus 21.1; experiences,  $M = 3.8$  versus 4.4; familiarity with the Hill-Thomas controversy,  $M = 3.8$  versus 4.0; belief in

Hill,  $M = 2.6$  versus  $2.5$ ; and belief in Thomas,  $M = 3.4$  versus  $3.3$ . While this does not establish the equivalency of the two groups, the lack of significant differences between the two groups on these variables does bolster our confidence in the results.

### Results

The first hypothesis, which pertained to a main effect for training on perceptions of sexually oriented work behavior, was examined initially with a MANOVA. The MANOVA was not significant (Wilks's  $\Lambda = .96$ ),  $F(3, 168) = 2.33$ ,  $p < .08$ . Although the MANOVA did not reach the customary level of significance, we believed that further examination with univariate ANOVAs was warranted. Our logic was that the training film only addressed behaviors representative of the severe and ambiguous dimensions, and did not address any behaviors included in the innocuous dimension. Consequently, including that dimension as one of the dependent variables in the MANOVA was, perhaps, too conservative a test. The results of the univariate ANOVAs are reported in Table 1.

There was a main effect of training on to what extent severe sexually oriented work behavior constituted sexual harassment,  $F(1, 173) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .05$ . Individuals who had seen the film rated this dimension as significantly more harassing than did individuals who had not seen the film ( $M = 4.72$  vs.  $4.56$ ). The effect of training on perceptions of ambiguous sexually oriented work behavior was not significant,  $F(1, 173) = 0.60$ , *ns*. Also, there was no effect of training on the innocuous dimension,  $F(1, 173) = 2.97$ , *ns*.

The second hypothesis of an interactive effect of gender and training on perceptions of sexual harassment also was initially examined by a MANOVA. The MANOVA resulted in a significant Wilks's lambda (Wilks's  $\Lambda = .95$ ),  $F(3, 168) = 3.01$ ,  $p < .05$ . The univariate ANOVAs are reported in Table 1. There were no interactive effects of training and respondent gender on either the severe dimension,  $F(1, 173) = 0.03$ , *ns*; or the innocuous dimension,  $F(1, 173) = 1.34$ , *ns*. However, there was an interactive effect of training and gender on the ambiguous dimension,  $F(1, 173) = 6.34$ ,  $p < .05$ . This interaction is depicted graphically in Figure 1. Men who had not seen the training film about sexual harassment, when compared with other males who had seen the film and both groups of females, rated the ambiguous sexually oriented work behaviors as significantly less harassing.

Although no hypotheses were developed regarding gender differences in perceptions of sexually oriented work behaviors, consistent with previous research there was an overall effect of respondent gender on the three dependent variables (Wilks's  $\Lambda = .91$ ),  $F(3, 168) = 5.33$ ,  $p < .01$ . Females viewed ambiguous

Table 1

*ANOVA Tables for Perceptions of Severe, Ambiguous, and Innocuous Sexually Oriented Work Behaviors*

Source	SS	df	F
Dependent variable: Severe			
Respondent gender	1.04	1	6.28*
Film	0.91	1	5.46*
Respondent Gender × Film	0.01	1	0.03
Error	28.29	173	
Dependent variable: Ambiguous			
Respondent gender	6.28	1	9.25**
Film	0.41	1	0.60
Respondent Gender × Film	4.30	1	6.34*
Error	115.34	173	
Dependent variable: Innocuous			
Respondent gender	8.67	1	12.05***
Film	2.13	1	2.97
Respondent Gender × Film	0.97	1	1.34
Error	122.32	173	

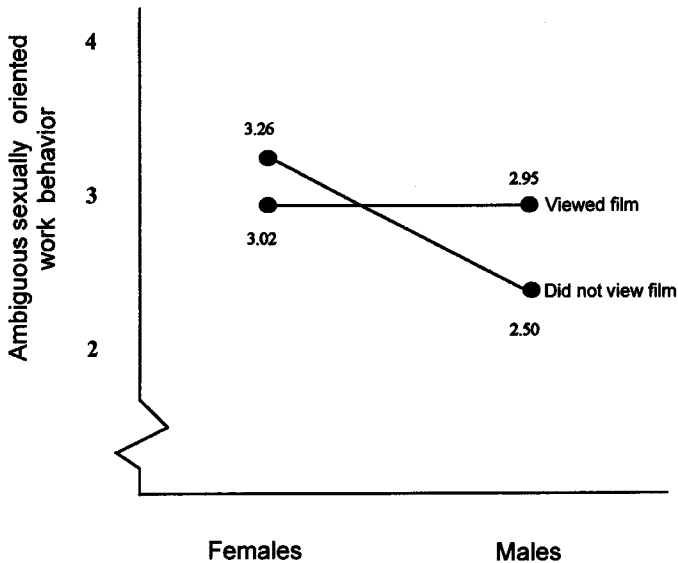
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

sexually oriented work behavior as more sexually harassing than did males ( $M = 3.14$  vs.  $2.73$ ). Females also rated both the severe dimension ( $M = 4.73$  vs.  $4.55$ ) and the innocuous dimension ( $M = 2.62$  vs.  $2.13$ ) as significantly more harassing than did the males.

### Discussion

The results of this study provide partial support for the hypothesis that training would influence perceptions of sexual harassment. Individuals who saw the training video rated the severe dimension as significantly more





*Figure 1.* The effects of respondent gender and film exposure on perceptions of ambiguous sexually oriented work behavior.

harassing than did those who did not see the video. Perhaps the lack of an effect on the innocuous dimension was because almost no one viewed those behaviors as harassing, regardless of condition. The lack of an effect on the ambiguous dimension is more understandable when one considers that there was an interactive effect of training and respondent gender on the ambiguous dimension.

The results of previous research suggest that individual perceptions about what behaviors constitute sexual harassment and subsequent sexually oriented work behavior are related (Reilly, Lott, Caldwell, & DeLuca, 1992). If subsequent sexually oriented work behavior is indeed influenced by these perceptions then the results of this study are somewhat encouraging. While females rated all three dimensions as more sexually harassing than did males, the gender differences on the ambiguous dimension did vary according to whether or not the respondent had seen the sexual harassment film. Males who had seen the film were similar to females in their perceptions about the ambiguous sexually oriented work behavior. Also, females and males who saw the film were more likely to rate the severe sexually oriented work behaviors as more harassing than were students who had not seen the film.

Even with the considerable attention directed to the topic of sexual harassment, the results of this study clearly demonstrate that there is yet substantial variance in perceptions of sexual harassment among students. Fitzgerald and

Ormerod (1991) reached similar conclusions based on the results of their study about what behaviors constitute sexual harassment in an academic setting. There is also sufficient anecdotal and empirical evidence to suggest that all workers are not equally sensitive to this issue. However, the results of this study indicate that perceptions of sexual harassment can be influenced by training. Therefore, consistent with the recommendations made by Licata and Popovich (1987), we believe that instead of simply listing penalties for sexual harassment, schools and employers need to conduct training about sexual harassment so that students and employees, respectively, learn about and become sensitive to sexually harassing behaviors. In addition, there may be other benefits gained from sexual harassment training. Based on the results of their study of 920 college students, Reilly et al. (1992) concluded that training directed toward reducing sexual harassment would likely have a spillover effect of reducing other hostile attitudes and behaviors directed toward women.

The results of the present study also indicate areas of interest for further research. Researchers may want to examine the relationship between individuals' definitions of what they consider sexual harassment and their own sexually oriented work behavior. As numerous studies have indicated, the relationship between attitudes and behavior is quite slippery, thus making it difficult to argue conclusively that increasing one's sensitivity to sexual harassment will affect one's sexually oriented work behavior. However, there is some evidence which indicates that individuals who perceive a behavior as sexually harassing are less likely to engage in such behavior (Koss & Leonard, 1984).

Furthermore, the question of which technique or combination of training techniques produces the most learning or sensitivity about sexual harassment also needs to be addressed. For example, Segal (1990) has developed a training exercise that asks participants to rate the degree to which they believe several examples contribute to a hostile work environment. This is followed by discussions of the ratings within mixed-gender groups, resulting in greater sensitivity to gender differences in workplace sexual behavior. It is possible that Segal's technique, videos, or some combination may be most effective.

Although the results of this study are suggestive, the preceding implications must be treated with caution due to the study's limitations. The extent to which one can generalize from college students to working men and women is, of course, subject to debate. A second, more serious limitation of the present study pertains to the study's design. As noted by Cook and Campbell (1979), it is very difficult to make causal inferences based on the design we used in this study. Although a number of variables (e.g., gender, age, work experience) were examined and no differences were found between the two groups, thus increasing the interpretability of our design (Cook & Campbell, 1979), it is conceivable that the two groups may have differed in a number of ways that

may have threatened the internal validity of the study. It is quite possible that the groups differed in some way prior to their inclusion in the study, or perhaps something occurred to one group and not the other during the course of the study. Although we tried to account for any differences between the two groups, the particular design we used does limit our confidence in the validity of the results. A replication of this study, with either random assignment of individuals to treatments, a test-retest design, or a Solomon four-group design, may be warranted.

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