

Facing powerful men versus sexy women activates different motives for sexual harassment

Charlotte Diehl, Selina Helmke, Pia Kobusch, Michael Papendick, Jonas Rees, Nina Vanselow, & Gerd Bohner;
University of Bielefeld

Contact:
Charlotte.Diehl@uni-bielefeld.de



Fig. 1: Poster depicting „powerful men“

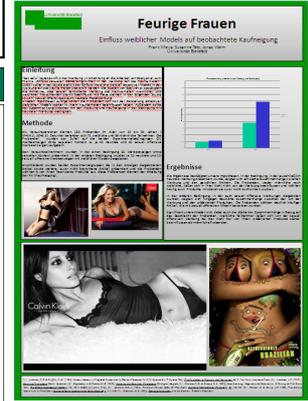


Fig. 2: Poster depicting „sexy women“

ABSTRACT

Socio-cultural and evolutionary approaches suggest two different motives for sexual harassment: hostile degradation in order to maintain male dominance versus initiation of sexual contact. To study personal and situational determinants of those motives, we assessed indices of men's acceptance of myths about sexual harassment (AMSH) and short-term mating orientation (STM) in order to predict different types of sexually harassing behavior. As part of a computer chat task, male participants could select between sexist (= harassing) and non-sexist jokes as well as between harassing and non-harassing personal remarks to be sent to a (computer-simulated) female target. Additionally, before entering the laboratory participants were exposed to a poster that was designed to activate either a power motive (depicting "powerful men") or a sexual motive (depicting "sexy women" wearing lingerie). We hypothesized a double dissociation of AMSH and STM in the prediction of different types of sexually harassing behavior, with (1) AMSH predicting the number of sexist jokes but not the number of harassing personal remarks sent, and (2) STM predicting the number of harassing personal remarks but not the number of sexist jokes sent. (3) The activation of a power motive was hypothesized to strengthen the path between AMSH and harassing remarks. Our results generally supported these predictions.

INTRODUCTION

Currently two broad fields of research address the instrumental function of sexually harassing behaviors: (1) the socio-cultural approach and (2) the evolutionary approach.

- (1) Socio-cultural theorists propose that sexual harassment serves to maintain political and economical male dominance by suppressing women on an interpersonal and on a societal level (e.g., Samuels, 2004). Thus, the motive would be hostility toward women. An attitude that reflects this degrading intention is the Acceptance of Myths about Sexual Harassment.
- (2) Evolutionary psychologists explain harassing behavior as either adaptation or evolutionary by-product that derives from sex differences in socio-sexual behavior. They perceive it as a kind of misunderstanding between women and men that arises from typically male short-term mating orientation (cf. e.g. Studd & Gattiker, 1991). Thus, sexual harassment would be mainly motivated by sexuality.

HYPOTHESES

We hypothesized that these two different dispositions of men should lead to different types of sexual harassment:

- (1) Acceptance of Myths about Sexual Harassment should lead to behaviors that are disparaging and obviously degrading and hostile, e.g. sending sexist jokes. Short-term mating orientation should predict ambiguous behaviors that could theoretically be part of a flirt, e.g. "saucy" personal remarks.
- (2) Activation of a power motive should increase the effect of AMSH on sexist jokes and dampen the effect of STM. Activation of a sexual motive should increase the effect of STM on harassing remarks and dampen the effect of AMSH.



Fig. 3: Double dissociation of the two dispositions in the prediction of two forms of sexually harassing behaviors and differential effects of activation of a power motive vs. activation of a sexual motive

METHOD

Participants: N = 75 male students of the University of Bielefeld; age: M = 24.5; SD = 4.62 years

Procedure:

Before entering the laboratory participants passed a poster that was designed to activate either a power motive or a sexual motive. For a visual impression see figure 1 and 2.

To assess sexually harassing behavior we used a further development of the computer harassment paradigm refined by Siebler et al. (2008): Participants interacted with an allegedly real, but in fact computer-simulated female chat partner. In each of 20 trials they chose one of a triple of jokes and remarks. There were 16 critical triples consisting of one critical joke and one critical remark as well as one neutral joke or remark, and 4 completely neutral filler trials.

Material:

To measure the dispositions to accept myths about sexual harassment and to follow a short-term mating strategy, respectively, we used German versions of the Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance (ISHMA) Scale (Lonsway et al., 2008) and the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI) (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

As behavioral outcome measures we summed up the number of sexist jokes and the number of harassing remarks sent to the female chat partner, respectively.

Design:

2 (poster: power vs. sexual) x 2 (material: jokes vs. remarks) x 2 (AMSH: high in AMSH vs. low in AMSH) x 2 (STM: high in STM vs. low in STM) factorial design

RESULTS

Behavioral measure of sexual harassment:

85.3 % of the participants sent at least one or more of the critical materials to their female chat partner (M = 4.47; SD = 3.66; potential range from 0 to 16; observed range from 0 to 13).

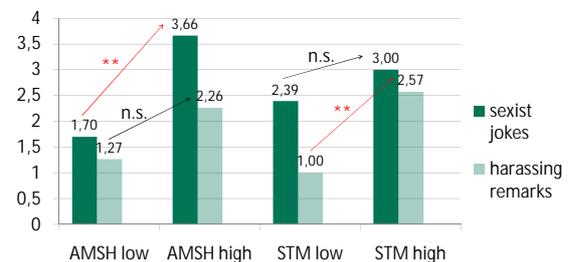


Fig. 4: Mean numbers of sexist jokes and harassing remarks sent by level of AMSH and STM
Note: N = 75; ** p < .01; n.s. = non significant, p > .05

Double dissociation of AMSH and STM as predictors of 2 different forms of sexual harassment: First, men with strong motives (high scores in AMSH or in STM) sent more harassing material in general (F = 10.42; p < .01 for AMSH; F = 4.44; p < .05 for STM). Importantly, a high AMSH score specifically resulted in a significant increase of sexist jokes sent (t = 3.25; p < .01), whereas a high STM score specifically resulted in a significant increase of harassing remarks sent (t = 3.23; p < .01). The findings thus provided qualified support for hypothesis 1.

Differential effects of activation of a power motive vs. activation of a sexual motive: Since the predicted interaction effect of poster x motive x material did not emerge (all Fs ≤ 2.87) we conducted two multiple regression analyses with the number of all harassing material sent as the criterion variable, for participants who were exposed to the poster activating a power motive and to the poster activating a sexual motive, respectively. Results are shown in Table 1. As predicted, in the "powerful men" condition the AMSH score was a better predictor of sending harassing material than the STM score, whereas the opposite was true for the "sexy women" condition. Thus, data largely supported hypothesis 2.

Tab. 1: Hierarchical regression of number of all harassing material sent on STM and AMSH (step 1) and their interaction (step 2)

Condition	Step	Predictor	Beta
Poster „powerful men“	1	STM	-.07
		AMSH	.55**
		STM x AMSH	-.05
Poster „sexy women“	1	STM	.47**
		AMSH	.25
		STM x AMSH	-.13

Note: N = 75; * p < .01

DISCUSSION

Our data support the hypothesis that there exist different motives of sexual harassment: hostility toward women and sexuality. These motives can be reliably measured by the AMSH and STM scales. Secondly, the computer chat paradigm is a reliable, subtle, and ethically unproblematic way to measure sexual harassment; especially, it is sensitive to different forms of sexually harassing behavior.

Furthermore, we found evidence for a double dissociation of the two motives in the prediction of hostile and disparaging behavior vs. harassing behavior that may be intended to initiate sexual contact. As expected, acceptance of myths about sexual harassment and short-term mating orientation each predicted participants' preferred type of harassment.

Finally, corresponding to our hypothesis, a subtle activation of a power motive vs. a sexual motive moderated the effect of the particularly underlying motive on sexual harassment. Interestingly, after these activations participants did not distinguish between different types of behavior anymore.

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