



Original Article

Advances in the understanding of same-sex and opposite-sex sexual harassment



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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment has traditionally been studied as men's harassment of women. This has led to a lack of knowledge about same sex harassment, and women harassing peers. This has also downplayed the inherent sexual nature of sexual harassment acts. While keeping in mind that sexual harassment is undesirable and causes distress, one needs to consider that many acts that are perceived as unwanted may not primarily be motivated by a wish to derogate but rather by an interest in soliciting short-term sex. In the current study we examined both perpetrators as well as victims of harassment, and specified both sex of perpetrator and target (a total of eight sex constellations). We reproduced the previously found association between unrestricted sociosexuality and sexual harassment in a representative sample of 1326 high school students (57% women). In all regression models sociosexuality outcompeted traditional measures such as porn exposure, rape stereotypes and hostile sexism. Based on the original work we divided the harassment acts into two groups of tactics: sexual solicitation and competitor derogation. Men were particularly subject to derogatory tactics from other men, while women were particularly subject to solicitation from opposite sex peers. Sexual harassment may be understood better from a human sexual strategies perspective, including competitor derogation and mate solicitation. As such, sociosexual orientation predicts both same sex derogation and opposite sex solicitation. The current results highlight the importance of considering the sex of both perpetrator and target. This advanced understanding of the inherently sexual nature of sexual harassment needs to inform future prevention studies. Unrestricted sociosexuality predicts sexual harassment in all constellations better than traditional social science models.

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1. Introduction

Sexual harassment has traditionally been studied and understood within the social sciences as a phenomenon with men as perpetrators and women as victims (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012). Mainstream social science theories – strongly alluding to feminist perspectives – have explained harassment as driven by male power, paternalism and the motive to dominate women (Begany & Milburn, 2002; Conroy, 2013; Fiske & Glick, 1995). In contrast, scholars working within the evolutionary perspective have suggested an alternative explanation, one located in sex differences in the desire for sex (Buss, 1996; Kennair & Bendixen, 2012; Vandermassen, 2011).

Previously, we examined these two explanations by studying both same-sex and opposite-sex sexual harassment in a community sample of high school students (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012). Consistent with explanations related to differences in the desire for short-term sex, we found that a non-restrictive sociosexual orientation toward

uncommitted sex (i.e., one-night stands) predicted being harassed as well as harassing others, and did so better than measures reflecting attitudes condoning forced sex or classical sexism.

When studying unwanted sexual attention between opposite-sex emerging adults, one should not ignore the possibility that the advancing party might be sexually interested. This possibility was underscored by the empirical association between harassment behavior and unrestricted sociosexuality (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012). This conclusion is further supported by the association between sociosexuality and being the target of harassment, given that signals of sexual unrestrictedness can be detected by others (Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2006), and that perpetrators will target victims with greater harassability traits (Buss & Duntley, 2008; Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2007). Unrestricted sociosexuality is characterized by an openness to uncommitted sexual relationships reflecting promiscuity and a preference for one-night stands, high acceptance for uncommitted sex, and frequent sexual arousal and activation of sexual fantasies when meeting people of the opposite-sex (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). In short, those more interested in short-term sex engage in more harassment of those who are similarly more interested in short-term sex than their peers.

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Sexual attention is, obviously, not always desired, and such attention will be unwelcome or aversive. While harassment is defined in the literature as subjectively experienced aversive sexual attention from the position of the victim, the perpetrator might not have intended the behavior to be aversive to the victim. Differences between perceived and intended behavior might therefore shed light on harasser's motives.

We suggested that opposite-sex harassment from the perspective of the perpetrator are primarily intended as signals of sexual interest, and so we suggested calling these acts sexual solicitation. Further, we considered same-sex harassment to be a form of competitor derogation (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012), intended to reduce the perceived mate value of same-sex competitors (Bendixen & Kennair, 2015; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). This view is supported by recent developmental research on sexual harassment proposing different motives for same-sex and opposite-sex behaviors (McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Pepler et al., 2006; Schnoll, Connolly, Josephson, Pepler, & Simkins-Strong, 2015). From this developmental perspective, sexual harassment in middle school years is considered a sexualized form of bullying. Drawing on evolutionary perspectives, Schnoll et al. (2015) suggested that through derogating same-sex peers, the perpetrators' status as a desirable partner for mates could be strengthened. In contrast, opposite-sex harassment could reflect a desire to communicate sexual attraction or romantic interest. However, due to adolescents' immature communication skills in opposite-sex interactions, they unintentionally sexually harass their peers in attempts to "draw attention to themselves as potential romantic partners" (Schnoll et al., 2015, p. 187). We concur. Sexual competitiveness and dominance are important motives for same-sex harassment. For opposite-sex harassment we do not think the motivation is to attract romantic partners in general, but specifically to solicit short-term sexual encounters (one-night stands) as our prior findings on sociosexuality suggest (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012).

A recent study of Swedish adolescents also showed that having had intercourse as well as one-night stands increased the risk of being subject to sexual harassment (Skoog & Özdemir, 2015). Adolescents' immature communication skills might not in fact be an important factor in opposite-sex sexual harassment. The prevalence of sexual harassment is not lower in samples of high school students compared to students in secondary school despite the latter being more sexually experienced and mature. However, age is obviously a relevant modifier of motives. For the early adolescents, the sexual aspect unsurprisingly seems less relevant (Schnoll et al., 2015) compared to a sexually mature cohort.

There is a lack, though, of explicit and acceptable social scripts for sexual contact and solicitation. Even among older adolescents and adults, norms surrounding acceptable contact and solicitation are ambiguous. Flirtation and seduction includes stealth, covertness, misdirection or misrepresentation (Bendixen & Kennair, 2015; Schmitt & Buss, 1996), misperception or disregard of sexual signals (Bendixen, 2014; Haselton, 2003; Perilloux & Kurzban, 2014), and probably imperfect insight into one's own motives (Wilson, 2002). As a result, miscommunication and unwanted attention are likely.

Heterosexual same-sex harassment also occurs. Sexual strategies theory (Buss, 1998; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kennair, Schmitt, Fjeldavli, & Harlem, 2009) suggests that same-sex derogation is a form of social competition for the best possible sexual partners (Bendixen & Kennair, 2015; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006; Schmitt, 2002; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). From an observer's point of view, the efficacy of different derogation tactics varies contingent upon sex and mating context (Bendixen & Kennair, 2015; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). While derogation is less efficient and used less often than self-promotion (Fisher, Cox, & Gordon, 2009; Schmitt, 2002), judgments of derogatory comments for example on physical appearance suggest stronger efficiency when used in short-term relative to long-term mating context (Bendixen & Kennair, 2015; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). These findings mirror the stronger preference for good looks in short-term over long-term mating contexts (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005; Okami & Shackelford, 2001). Hence,

this derogatory behavior will be motivated by interest in short-term mating rather than a long-term, commitment and love oriented approach to sex (Bendixen & Kennair, 2015; Schmitt, 2002).

1.1. This study

By studying same-sex and opposite-sex harassment separately one discovers that although men generally report sexual harassment to the same degree as women, they typically report harassment by other men more than by women (Bendixen & Kennair, 2014; Conroy, 2013; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll et al., 2015). This is a pattern also found in studies of aggressive behavior (Archer, 2004) reflecting stronger competitiveness and the use of aggressive means among men, and in a study of sexual harassment victimization in middle school (Schnoll et al., 2015).

Further, by studying women as perpetrators one discovers that not only do they sexually harass men, albeit to a lesser degree than men harass women, they also harass other women (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012). Traditional social science and feminist perspectives have not focused on competition among women (Fisher, 2014). Considering all constellations of perpetrators and victims of harassment provides the possibility to consider whether there are sex specific patterns of sexual harassment and differences in motivations and perceptions.

Using a highly comparable sample of high school students to the original study, we expanded on the original study using more refined measures of sexual harassment that for all acts better distinguish same-sex from opposite-sex harassment by peers (victimization) and harassment of peers (perpetration). Additionally, we apply the full three components of sociosexuality (SOI-R, Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), and more comprehensive and updated measures of Porn Exposure, Rape Stereotypes (McMahon & Farmer, 2011), and Hostile Sexism toward women and men (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1999) to predict same-sex or opposite-sex harassment victimization and perpetration.

The following hypothesis and predictions are tested:

Hypothesis 1. Sociosexuality will be the best predictor of being sexually harassed by and harassing peers of same-sex and opposite-sex, and the effect of sociosexuality on sexual harassment will not be accounted for by other factors such as porn exposure, rape stereotypes and hostile sexism (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012).

Based on previous work (Kennair & Bendixen, 2012; Schnoll et al., 2015) we wanted to examine if diverse harassment acts may reflect partly different tactics; *derogation and sexual solicitation*. Grouping sexual harassment acts accordingly could shed light on the underlying motivational processes. In order to do this we examined the diverse acts of sexual harassment (ranging from verbal derogatory comments, comments on looks, displays of sexual objects/pictures, spreading sexual rumors, receiving electronically sexual pictures or sexual requests) with regard to same-sex versus opposite-sex prevalence rates. By grouping acts theoretically, according to content, into *sexual solicitation* tactics and *competitor derogation* tactics we predicted:

Prediction 1. Participants would show higher prevalence for same-sex competitor derogation tactics and higher prevalence for opposite-sex solicitation tactics.

Prediction 2. Reporting victimization will be more prevalent than reporting perpetration of derogation or solicitation. Because derogation is intended to be harassing while solicitation is not, greater victim-perpetrator differences are expected to be found for the latter, particularly for *opposite-sex* encounters.

Prediction 3. Because sociosexuality measures individual differences in the propensity to pursue short-term (casual) sex, we expect this propensity to be more strongly associated with forms of sexual harassment that primarily reflect *opposite-sex sexual solicitation* tactics on the one

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