

Schematic Responses to Sexual Harassment Complainants: The Influence of Gender and Physical Attractiveness

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Abstract This study was designed to examine the characteristics of a sexual harassment schema and its consequences using expectancy-violation theory as a framework for investigating an ostensible organizational grievance. Reactions to sexual harassment complainants were expected to be less favorable when the complainant was male than when the complainant was female. Results for the complainants of sexual harassment confirmed that men were believed less, liked less, and punished more than women. Furthermore, the tendency to believe and like female complainants more than male complainants was stronger when complainants were physically attractive. This study contributes to a growing body of research on gender schemas in the context of sexual harassment.

Keywords Sexual-harassment · Expectancy-violation theory · Physical attractiveness

Previous research on the topic of sexual harassment has focused overwhelmingly on its perception and labeling. Through such research, psychologists have learned a great deal about the types of behavior that may or may not constitute sexual harassment, how men and women differentially perceive various behaviors as sexual harassment, and the contextual factors that influence such perceptions. Despite these great strides toward understanding perceptions of sexual harassment, there is still a need to understand conditions under which ambiguous cues may be

perceived to be sexually harassing. Therefore, in the current research, we drew from an expectancy-violation framework in identifying and testing a schema for sexual harassment.

Schemas, which are mental structures that individuals use to organize their knowledge around a theme, act as filters that strain out information that is inconsistent with a prevailing theme (Bartlett, 1932; Fiske, 1993). We propose that sexual harassment schemas are constructed according to gender role expectations. We further suggest that, consonant with expectancy-violation theory, deviations from individuals' schema are often evaluated negatively. This theoretical framework is particularly important given that schemas are most influential in ambiguous contexts, including situations commonly referred to as "he said, she said." In other words, we propose that individuals rely on their schemas of sexual harassment when making judgments about sexual harassment victims and perpetrators. The continued prevalence of sexual harassment, and the inherent ambiguity of "he said, she said" situations, makes it critical to consider the cognitive structures that may influence evaluations of the individuals involved.

Expectancy-Violation Theory

Schemas generate expectations about what is likely to happen and thereby help individuals to understand events and notice if something unusual or unexpected occurs (Fiske, 1993). Schema-driven expectancies influence the meaning or interpretations of others' behaviors or events. For example, the same responses to a test may be viewed as a mediocre performance when the test taker comes from a high socioeconomic background, but as a strong performance when the test taker comes from a low socioeconomic background (Darley & Gross, 1983). Because of schemas,

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men and women are expected to differ in countless ways (e.g., apparel, vocational choices, recreational interest, social behaviors in interactions; Bem, 1981). Expectancy-violation occurs when an event deviates drastically from what is expected (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). It is critical to note that such violations of expectations may lead to negative evaluations. For example, past research has shown that women are typically expected to use more non-aggressive strategies in communication than are men, and, consistent with expectancy-violation theory, deviations from such strategies result in negative evaluations of the violating target (Burgoon, Dillard, & Doran, 1983). Thus, we propose that individuals have schemas about sexual harassment interactions.

Gender of the Victim and Harasser

The prototypical sexual harassment victim is a woman, and the typical perpetrator is a man—a pattern shown in a preponderance of cases reported in the media and of laboratory scenarios used in empirical research. Indeed, Hand and Sanchez (2000) found that women were more likely than men to perceive, experience, and suffer negative outcomes from sexual harassment. Furthermore, individuals tend to judge the consequences of sexual harassment directed by men toward women as more serious and harmful than the same acts directed by women toward men (Wayne, Riordan, & Thomas, 2001). Similarly, research has also demonstrated that male harassers are perceived more negatively than female harassers (Baird, Bensko, Bell, Viney, & Woody, 1995). Consistent with these findings, we propose that there is a generally shared schema for sexual harassment in which men are perpetrators and women are victims.

Yet, men may also be the targets of sexual harassment. In fact, in 2004, men filed about 15% (1,970) of the complaints reported to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2003). Male sexual harassment complainants, however, violate the typical sexual harassment schema and gender stereotype-based expectations. Burgess and Borgida (1997) noted that victims of sexual coercion are seen as powerless and vulnerable—adjectives that are contrary to the masculine gender stereotype. People who violate such stereotype-based expectations are likely to be negatively evaluated (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Marin & Guadango, 1999). Hence, male complainants are likely to be rated less favorably than female complainants.

Research on how the gender of the victim influences sexual harassment perceptions has tended to focus on ratings of the harassment. That is, the typical research paradigm assesses the perceived severity of harassment as a function of the gender of the victim. We expand on past

research by exploring three other important domains of sexual harassment. First, we consider the *believability* of the complainant, a domain that may affect the outcome of a harassment complaint. Because many incidents of sexual harassment do not occur in the presence of others, sexual harassment involves the ambiguity of “he said, she said” situations, which make the credibility of the complaint crucial for decisions and outcomes (Marin & Guadango, 1999). Furthermore, Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand and Magley (1997) found that the credibility of the victim’s claim was an important factor in sexual harassment cases.

Second, we investigated the *likeability* of the victim and perpetrator, which is another domain that may influence the outcomes and decisions of sexual harassment. Research has demonstrated that likeability has a strong correlation with interpersonal influence; that is, individuals rated as more likeable are more influential than those rated as less likeable (Cialdini, 2001). Because likeability affects interactions, the likeability of those involved in sexual harassment may also impact important outcomes.

Third, we examined the *punishment* prescribed by the participants, such as termination or separating the parties involved, which can be applied to both harassers and complainants. An important outcome of a sexual harassment complaint is the punishment or penalty assigned to the harasser and complainant (Cummings & Armenta, 2002). Thus, the present study extends previous research, which has been limited to perceptions and labeling of sexual harassment behavior, by considering believability, likeability, and punishment prescriptions as a function of a sexual harassment schema.

Consistent with expectancy-violation theory, we hypothesized that participants would respond less favorably to male complainants than to female complainants. There is a considerable amount of research that demonstrates that individuals are rated favorably when they conform to expected gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender roles are socially shared expectations about the attributes of women and men, such that women are warm, sensitive, and nurturing, and men are aggressive, dominant, and forceful (Eagly, 1987). Violations of gendered expectations may lead to negative evaluations. In a meta-analysis, Eagly, Karu and Makhijani (1995) found that men were more effective than women in roles that were defined in more masculine terms, and women were more effective than men in roles that were defined in less masculine terms. But, these findings also suggest that being “out of role” in gender-defined terms may produce negative evaluations. Thus, because women, and not men, are expected to be victims of sexual harassment, we expected that male complainants would be believed and liked less than female complainants and that these men would be assigned more punishment than would women.

Hypothesis 1a Male complainants would be believed less than would female complainants.

Hypothesis 1b Male complainants would be liked less than would female complainants.

Hypothesis 1c Male complainants would be punished more than would female complainants.

Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness is a powerful antecedent to compliance, attraction, and liking (Cialdini, 2001). Research demonstrates that physical attractiveness leads to halo effects, which occur when one positive characteristic of an individual dominates the way that individual is viewed by others (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). As a result, for example, attractive individuals also are perceived to be talented, kind, honest, and intelligent (Eagly et al., 1991).

Previous research has shown that physical attractiveness influences judgments of mock jurors in sexual harassment cases (Popovich et al., 1996). For example, Golden, Johnson and Lopez (2001) found that physically attractive victims (all of whom were women) were more likely to be labeled as harassed than were unattractive victims.

Thus, a sexual harassment schema might include not only gender expectations, but also expectations based on the attractiveness of harassment victims. Therefore, we expected that physical attractiveness might increase the likelihood of schema activation. Because the schema of a sexual harassment includes a female victim and a male perpetrator, the attractiveness of the victim might be influential for female victims, but not for male victims. That is, reactions to female sexual harassment complainants might be more favorable when the complainant is physically attractive than when she is physically unattractive. In this way, attractiveness could enhance the salience of sexual harassment schemas.

In other words, an attractive female victim might be most congruent with the schema of sexual harassment, and therefore such a scenario might lead to the most favorable evaluations on our criteria for the complainant of sexual harassment. To extend this rationale, any violation of this schema would be likely to lead to less favorable evaluations of the victim.

Hypothesis 2a Attractive female complainants would be believed more than would unattractive female complainants, attractive male complainants, and unattractive male complainants.

Hypothesis 2b Attractive female complainants would be liked more than would unattractive female complainants, attractive male complainants, and unattractive male complainants.

Hypothesis 2c Attractive female complainants would be punished less than would unattractive female complainants, attractive male complainants, and unattractive male complainants.

It was expected that attractiveness would not only have an effect on the complainants, but it will also have an effect on the harassers. A harasser's physical attractiveness might be part of an individual's schema of sexual harassment, because a harasser is expected to be unattractive. Behaviors of attractive perpetrators tend to be perceived more positively than those of unattractive perpetrators. For example, a study by Popovich et al. (1996) showed that physically attractive perpetrators were viewed more positively than unattractive perpetrators in that scenarios were rated as more innocuous when perpetrators were physically attractive than when they were unattractive. Similarly, LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) examined the effects of attractiveness on the perceptions of sexual harassment under ambiguous conditions and found that the ambiguous behavior was rated as less harassing when the perpetrator was attractive. Golden et al. (2001) also found that the behaviors of physically attractive perpetrators were seen as less harassing than the same behaviors of unattractive perpetrators. As such, an attractive perpetrator might be believed and liked more and given less punishment than an unattractive perpetrator.

Hypothesis 3a Physically attractive alleged harassers would be believed more than would physically unattractive alleged harassers.

Hypothesis 3b Physically attractive alleged harassers would be liked more than would physically unattractive alleged harassers.

Hypothesis 3c Physically attractive alleged harassers would be punished less than would physically unattractive alleged harassers.

The Current Study

The current study was designed to investigate reactions to disputed sexual harassment complaints. We were primarily interested in investigating how responses to disputed sexual harassment complaints are influenced by

schema consistent and inconsistent gender and physical attractiveness. We used an organizational grievance paradigm—similar to that used by Popovich et al. (1996, Study 2)—in which a grievance is filed by one employee against another, and the research participant must decide how to respond. In addition, we used a situation that, if believed, was clearly harassment in order to disentangle reactions to the “complainant” (i.e., the victim) and the “alleged harasser” (i.e., perpetrator; terms we use because they indicate that guilt is in question rather than assumed) in a disputed complaint, rather than perceptions of whether the behavior described in the complaint would constitute sexual harassment.

Method

Participants

A total of 121 undergraduate students (79 women, 32 men, and 10 who withheld gender data; mean age=19.72 years, SD=1.43 years) participated in this study as partial fulfillment of a participation requirement for lower-level psychology courses. Sixty-one of the participants (50.4%) classified themselves as European American, 15 (12.4%) as Hispanic American, 12 (9.9%) as Asian American, 10 (8.3%) as African American, and 13 (10.7%) as “other.” Ten participants declined to state their ethnicity.

Design and procedure

This study employed a 2 (complainant physical attractiveness: high, low) × 2 (alleged harasser physical attractiveness: high, low) × 2 (gender situation: male alleged harasser with female complainant; female alleged harasser with male complainant) between-subjects design. The dependent variables were likeability of, believability of, and recommended punishment for both the complainant and the alleged harasser.

Participants were instructed that they were going to participate in a study that involved interactions at the workplace. Upon arrival, participants were handed a packet of materials that included the consent form, a fictional case file that described a situation that involved sexual harassment, and a questionnaire that contained the dependent variables measures. Participants were debriefed at the completion of their participation.

Materials

Packets of materials were assembled, which included the following: an informed consent statement, a confidentiality agreement from a fictional company, a situation summary, a

case file, employee files of both the person who filed the complaint of sexual harassment and the alleged harasser, and a brief questionnaire.

Confidentiality agreement Participants signed a confidentiality agreement, which was intended to add realism to the experimental task and to introduce participants to the company that would constitute the setting for the sexual harassment complaint. The agreement, typed on the letterhead of the fictional company, cautioned participants that the materials they were about to view were of a sensitive nature, strictly confidential, and made available for research purposes only. The agreement further warned that any breach of the confidentiality of the materials would result in civil action against the participant, the researchers, and the university.

Situation summary This summary described a sexual harassment complaint by one employee against another sex or cross-sex employee. The summary described the particulars of the complaint: that the alleged harasser had inappropriately touched the complainant and asked him/her for a date; that the complainant had refused the date, and expressed discomfort with the situation; and that the alleged harasser stated that dating him/her would be necessary for the advancement of the complainant’s career. The summary further described the alleged harasser’s denial of the complainant’s account of events. Finally, the summary asked the participants to familiarize themselves with the documentation of the complaint and the employee files of both parties, putting themselves in the position of an employer charged with the responsibility of resolving the complaint.

Case file The case file included an “employee grievance form,” ostensibly completed in handwriting by the complainant (feminine handwriting for the female complainant, and masculine handwriting for the male complainant), and an “incident report,” completed by a fictional employee who had investigated the complaint. The employee grievance form described the complainant’s account of events in detail. The incident report included an account of the alleged harasser’s denial, as well as an account by the alleged harasser suggestion that the complainant might have a motive to lie about the situation—that the two had had some disagreements and that the complainant had threatened to “make life difficult” for the alleged harasser. The intent of these materials was to create a “he said–she said” scenario, in which there was no solid evidence for the “true” chain of events.

Employee files The two employee files each included a “new hire data sheet,” a mock employment application

form, and “employee evaluation/change of status” forms. Each file began with the new hire data sheet. The new hire data sheet included contact information for the employee, the employee’s start date, notes from a background investigation (innocuous for both employees), and the employee’s I.D. photo at the top right corner. The I.D. photo constituted the physical attractiveness manipulation, which will be described in more detail subsequently. The employment application forms included information typical of such forms and were included merely to add realism to the employee file. The “employee evaluation/change of status” forms included notes on performance (primarily sales quotas) and recommendations for change of status. The complainant’s employee file contained two evaluation forms that described an employment period of approximately 1.5 years, during which the complainant’s performance was good, but inconsistent. The alleged harasser’s employee file contained six evaluation forms that described an employment period of about 5.5 years of very good performance. These differences in employee performance were intended to achieve two objectives: (1) to make conceivable suggestions that the two employees may have had disagreements about the complainant’s performance, and (2) to justify the alleged harasser’s attainment of a supervisory position in a relatively short time.

Stimulus photographs Twenty photographs were selected from a bank of 204 photographs that had standardized physical attractiveness ratings from a previous, unrelated study (rated by four men and four women; inter-rater reliability coefficient $\alpha=.86$). The photographs were of university seniors taken from a recent yearbook. Five photographs were used to represent the four conditions in the study. We used the top five rated men’s and top five rated women’s photographs to represent the attractive male and female complainants and alleged harassers. Similarly, we used the bottom five rated men’s and bottom five rated women’s photographs to represent the unattractive male and female complainants and alleged harassers.

Measures We constructed a 7-point Likert-type scale (Table 1) to assess the believability and likeability of both the complainant and the alleged harasser. Reliability analyses were performed on the believability and likeability scales. Items were removed from scales if such removal resulted in an appreciable increase in reliability coefficients. The resulting scales and alpha coefficients are complainant believability ($\alpha=.82$), complainant likeability ($\alpha=.82$), alleged harasser believability ($\alpha=.78$), and alleged harasser likeability ($\alpha=.80$).

We used an open-ended item to ask participants to recommend a reasonable solution to the situation as a measure of punishment. The recommended actions were

Table 1 Likeability and believability scales.

Items and reliability coefficients
Complainant Believability ($\alpha=.82$)
“How likely is it that (the complainant) is telling the truth?”
“How reasonable do you find (the complainant)’s complaint?”
“How much of (the complainant)’s story do you believe?”
“How likely would a jury believe that (the complainant) is telling the truth?”
“How reasonable to you feel a jury would find (the complainant)’s complaint?”
“To what extent can you sympathize with (the complainant)?”
“To what extent would a reasonable person sympathize with (the complainant)?”
Complainant Likeability ($\alpha=.82$)
“How well would you like (the complainant) personally?”
“How well do you think the average person would like (the complainant)?”
“How well do you think a jury would like (the complainant)?”
Alleged Harasser Believability ($\alpha=.78$)
“How likely is it that (the alleged harasser) is telling the truth?”
“How reasonable do you find (the alleged harasser)’s denial?”
“How much of (the alleged harasser)’s story do you believe?”
“How likely would a jury believe that (the alleged harasser) is telling the truth?”
“To what extent can you sympathize with (the alleged harasser)?”
“To what extent would a reasonable person sympathize with (the alleged harasser)?”
Alleged Harasser Likeability ($\alpha=.80$)
“How well would you like (the alleged harasser) personally?”
“How well do you think the average person would like (the alleged harasser)?”
“How well do you think a jury would like (the alleged harasser)?”

rated by six independent raters (three men, three women) on an 8-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 0 = “no action” to 7 = “termination.” The inter-rater reliabilities for the ratings of the complainant and the alleged harasser were $\alpha=.87$ and $.88$, respectively.

Results

Because our dependent measures were designed to tap unique constructs, separate three-way (gender situation \times complainant physical attractiveness \times alleged harasser physical attractiveness) ANCOVAs were performed on each of the dependent variables: likeability and believability of both the complainant and the alleged harasser and the punishments recommended by participants. To control for differences in the way in which men and women may perceive sexual harassment and to enhance our generalizability, participant gender was treated as a covariate in all analyses. However, the effect of participant gender did not approach significance for any of the dependent variables.

Complainant likeability, believability, and punishment

Hypotheses 1a through 1c stated that participants would respond less favorably to male complainants than to female complainants in each of three criteria (i.e., likeability, believability, and punishment) such that higher numbers reflect greater amounts of each of these constructs. As expected, female complainants were believed more than were male complainants ($M_s=5.05$ and 4.63 , respectively), $F(1, 101)=8.20$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.05$. Although the main effects did not reach significance for complainant gender on liking ($M_{\text{women}}=4.40$ and $M_{\text{men}}=4.16$), $F(1, 101)=2.40$, $p=.12$, $\eta^2=.02$, or the severity of recommended punishments ($M_{\text{women}}=1.29$ and $M_{\text{men}}=1.47$, respectively), $F(1, 101)=2.24$, $p=.14$, $\eta^2=.02$, the means were in the expected direction. Thus, hypotheses 1 received at least partial support.

Hypotheses 2a through 2c stated that an attractive female victim might be most congruent with the schema of sexual harassment, and therefore such a scenario would lead to the most favorable evaluations of the victim. In other words, we expected that the main effect of complainant gender on evaluations of complainants would be qualified by a significant interaction with complainant attractiveness. As expected, the complainant attractiveness \times gender situation interaction on reactions to complainants was significant for complainant likeability, $F(1, 101)=4.63$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.04$, and marginally significant for complainant believability, $F(1, 101)=2.96$, $p=.08$, $\eta^2=.03$, but not significant for severity of punishment, $F(1, 101)=2.24$, $p=.14$, $\eta^2=.01$. Figure 1 depicts these results and shows that the tendency to believe female complainants more than male complainants was exacerbated by physical attractiveness, which supports Hypothesis 2a. Similarly, Fig. 2 shows that the tendency to like female complainants more than male complainants was clearly driven by the tendency to like physically attractive

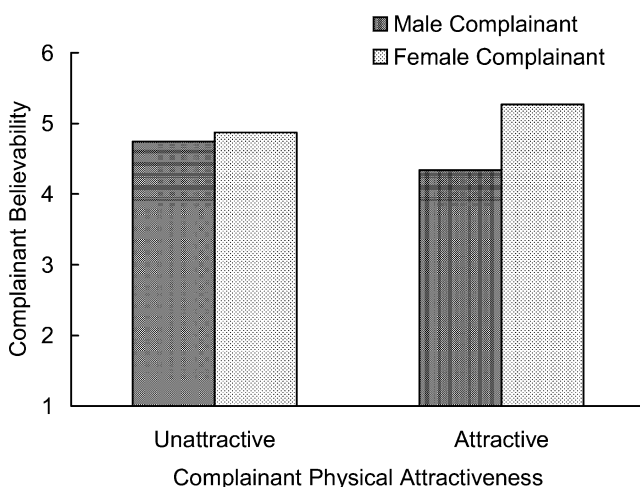


Fig. 1 Complainant believability as a function of complainant gender and physical attractiveness.

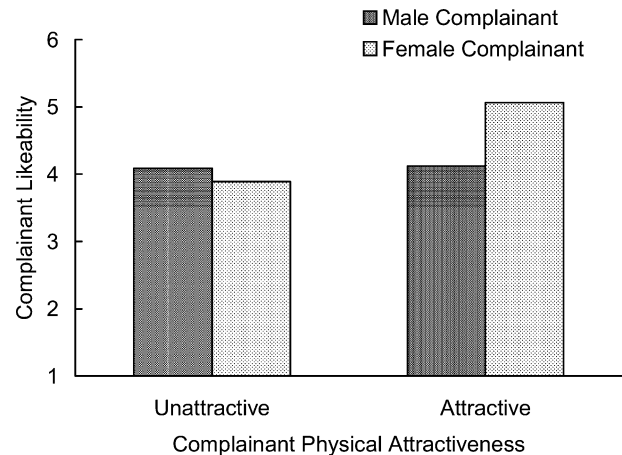


Fig. 2 Complainant likeability as a function of complainant gender and physical attractiveness.

female complainants more than all other complainants, which supports Hypothesis 2b. This pattern of findings was qualified by an additional significant three-way interaction between complainant attractiveness, harasser attractiveness, and gender situation on complainant likeability, $F(1, 101)=5.77$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.05$. Complainants were most liked when they were depicted as attractive women who were harassed by attractive men ($M=5.14$), and they were liked least when they were unattractive men harassed by unattractive women ($M=3.86$).

Harasser likeability, believability, and punishment

Hypotheses 3a through 3c stated that physically attractive alleged harassers would be evaluated more favorably than unattractive alleged harassers. However, the main effects for harasser believability, $F(1, 90)=.75$, $p=.39$, $\eta^2=.01$, and severity of punishment, $F(1, 90)=.60$, $p=.44$, $\eta^2=.02$, were not significant, although physically attractive alleged harassers ($M=4.18$) were liked more than physically unattractive alleged harassers ($M=3.5$), $F(1, 90)=17.51$, $p<0.01$, $\eta^2=.15$. Thus, only Hypothesis 3b was supported. However, harasser gender was related to harasser believability, $F(1, 102)=3.04$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.04$, likeability, $F(1, 102)=4.233$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.05$, and the severity of punishment for the harassers, $F(1, 102)=7.35$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.04$. That is, alleged male harassers tended to be believed and liked less than were female harassers, and they also tended to be punished more severely than were alleged female harassers.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine college students' schema of sexual harassment. Based on expectancy violation theory, we expected and found that schema

congruent targets were believed, liked, and punished less than targets that were incongruent with schemas. For example, the results suggest that female complainants tend to be believed and liked more, and punished less, than male complainants. Further, the results show that male sexual harassers are believed less, liked less, and punished more than are female sexual harassers. These findings are consistent with past research, which has demonstrated that individuals are rated favorably when they conform to expected gender roles and that violations to gendered expectations may lead to negative evaluations (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, because men are expected to be strong and dominant (Eagly, 1987), we hypothesized and found that male harassers were evaluated more negatively in terms of likeability, believability, and punishment than were female harassers.

Furthermore, our results demonstrate that physical attractiveness is an important factor in the schema of complainants of sexual harassment, but less critical in evaluations of the perpetrators. We found that attractive female complainants were rated most positively, suggesting that the tendency to like and believe female complainants more than male complainants appears to hinge on the fact that they are attractive. Complainants were most liked when they were depicted as attractive women, allegedly harassed by attractive men, and they were liked least when they were depicted as unattractive men harassed by unattractive women. Overall, these results confirm our hypothesis and suggest that sexual harassment situations are understood through the lens of schemas, which govern our expectations in all sorts of situations, including sexual harassment.

Although our findings support the use of schemas for victim gender and victim physical attractiveness, our findings did not support schemas for perpetrator physical attractiveness. Specifically, perpetrator attractiveness did not influence believability or punishment. These findings are not consistent with the conclusions of Golden et al. (2001) and Popovich et al. (1996), who found that physically attractive perpetrators were viewed more positively than unattractive perpetrators. However, our results do support the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), which reveals that the attractiveness effect is stronger in social domains (e.g., likeability) than in other domains (e.g., believability; Eagly et al., 1991). Eagly et al. (1991) found that physical attractiveness was related to several attributions that might lead to likeability, but it was not related to “integrity” or “concern for others.” We found that physical attractiveness influenced perceptions of likeability, but not believability, which might be related to integrity, and the recommended punishment.

As with most laboratory studies, our study is not without limitations. First, the use of students may be a limitation,

particularly because undergraduate students may not have experience in making decisions about sexual harassment grievances. However, we believe that the participants were provided with ample information to make logical decisions, and our theorizing and hypotheses were substantiated by the results. One direction for future research might be to discover whether those with grievance-related experiences also respond similarly.

Second, in the current study we focused only on the most severe form of sexual harassment—sexual coercion. Future researchers might address reactions to men and women who reported other types of sexual harassment. Although we believe that a similar pattern of results would emerge, additional data are needed to verify this.

Third, we did not examine same-sex harassment. There is some research that suggests that perpetrators of same-sex harassment cases are evaluated more negatively than are those of cross-sex cases (DeSouza & Solberg, 2004; Wayne et al., 2001). For example, DeSouza and Solberg (2004) demonstrated that perpetrators who target a gay victim are perceived as more sexually harassing than those who target straight victims. In addition, the researchers found that women are more likely than men to perceive man-to-man cases as constituting sexual harassment. Future researchers might examine how same-sex harassment violates the schema of sexual harassment and how physical attractiveness interacts with such cases.

Despite these limitations, the current research has both strengths and important implications. The results demonstrate the consequences of violating schemas that govern sexual harassment. That is, victims who are male and victims who are unattractive face particular challenges to their credibility and related outcomes.

We also went beyond previous research on labeling of harassment to explore the believability, likeability, and punishment of harassment interactants. It is important to examine the reactions toward the victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment, because as we found, the believability, likeability, and punishment of harassment interactants show different patterns for men and women despite standardization of the stimuli. Furthermore, we used an organizational grievance paradigm, in which a grievance is filed by one employee against another and the research participant must decide how to respond. The paradigm allowed us to examine which schemas were most influential in situations commonly referred to as “he said, she said,” which are the most common type of sexual harassment cases.

In a practical sense, the current findings point to the difficulty of determining consequences for harassment claims in an organizational context. Decisions appear to be heavily influenced by the schema of sexual harassment. We hope the current study promotes more research on

sexual harassment schemas in an attempt to continue understanding the issues that legitimate victims of harassment face. Only in clearly understanding such sexual harassment schemas can we then begin to address how to overcome the biases intrinsic in some of them.

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