



Sexual Harassment: In the Eye of the Beholder?

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Abstract

This study examined different perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors in a workplace setting, based on the characteristics of the person observing harassment. Participants rated the extent to which they detected sexual harassment across a series of vignettes of varying levels of sexual harassment ambiguity. Participants' (observers of the sexual harassment) gender, race, sexual orientation, and whether the individual had received sexual harassment training were examined. Interactions among these observer characteristics were also examined, in order to examine differences in perceptions of sexual harassment related to observers' membership in intersectional groups. The results of the study indicated differences among perceptions in sexual harassment associated with the observers' gender, sexual orientation, race, and sexual harassment training. A number of significant interactions were observed. Implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: sexual harassment, perceptions, gender, sexual orientation, intersectionality

Sexual Harassment: In the Eye of the Beholder?

Unfortunately, sexual harassment occurs in all settings of life, at every level, everywhere in the world (Ross et al., 2019). The prevalence and ubiquity of sexual harassment is particularly troublesome because there are many negative outcomes associated with such harassment. First, the actual experience of sexual harassment is often incredibly unpleasant for the victim (Schultz, 2003). Beyond the lived experience, there are a number of other negative outcomes experienced by the victims, in all areas of life, including general, physical, and mental health, as well as life satisfaction (Sojo et al., 2016). Specific outcomes include anxiety, stress, depression, sleep disorders, weight gain/loss, nausea, lowered self-esteem, sexual dysfunction (Schneider et al., 1997), and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Avina & O-Donohue, 2002).

Given these negative effects on the lives of the victims, it is not surprising that sexual harassment also has implications for the work-lives and careers of the victims of such harassment in the workplace. Victims of sexual harassment at work experience negative changes in various job attitudes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, supervisor satisfaction, co-worker satisfaction, and work satisfaction (Sojo et al., 2016). Experiencing sexual harassment at work also contributes to role ambiguity, role conflict, and stress (Morrow et al., 1994). Because of these negative work-life effects, victims are also more likely to leave jobs where they experience sexual harassment, even when leaving the job is not economically feasible (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Sexual harassment in the workplace is negative both for the individuals experiencing the harassment and the organization overall. Employees' reductions in commitment and satisfaction can have a negative effect on overall organizational morale. Additionally, increased turnover due to such harassment is costly to organizations. Finally, organizations spend over \$100 million annually on legal payments and damages to victims of sexual harassment due to the tens of thousands of harassment charges filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity

Commission each year (EEOC; EEOC, 2020). Because of the widespread negative effects of sexual harassment, it is important to understand more about this phenomenon.

The present study seeks to identify factors that influence the perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors. Specifically, this study examines how the characteristics of the person observing the harassment are related to their perceptions of the incident. It is important to examine of *observers* of sexual harassment perceive those behaviors for a number of reasons. First, an understanding that some people are not as sensitive to the detection of sexual harassment as others can help to inform targeted training interventions to help those people less sensitive to sexual harassment to see that they may, in fact, be engaging in behaviors that could be perceived as sexual harassment unintentionally, or witnessing such behaviors and failing to intervene. Relatedly some people may not realize that they have been victims of sexual harassment, and training programs that can help them to identify their interactions as sexual harassment may give them the knowledge and the courage to report their harassers and put an end to these behaviors. Additionally, sexual harassment interventions can use the information about how different people perceive sexual harassment in order to inform training participants generally that different people are more or less likely to detect (and perhaps then experience) sexual harassment. Such information can help people to be generally more sensitive to these issues. Finally, observers of sexual harassment are more likely to be in a position to address, and potentially prevent, sexual harassment, in way that the victims often cannot. Therefore, a better understanding of how different people perceive different sexual harassment behaviors and the observer characteristics that are associated with more or less sensitivity to detecting sexual harassment, can help in providing targeted information to participants in sexual harassment training intervention programs that may help them to better recognize sexual harassment when they encounter it.

The present study goes beyond previous research that studied observer characteristics in sexual harassment. First, most previous research examining differences in perceptions of

sexual harassment has focused on gender differences. The present study adds an examination of racial/ethnic and sexual orientation differences in perceptions. Additionally, previous studies have mostly looked at one observer characteristic variable at a time (such as solely examining gender effects of perceptions of sexual harassment). The present study, however, takes a unique approach that examines the interactions of observers' personal characteristics with regard to perceptions of the harassment. This approach has implications for whether membership in intersectional groups might be associated with differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. The dynamics of intersectional group membership and perceptions of sexual harassment is an important area of inquiry that has been neglected, and illuminating these dynamics can help inform targeted sexual harassment interventions.

Gender of the Observer

There are many factors that influence an observer's perceptions of sexual harassment in a given situation. Perhaps the most commonly studied factor is the gender of the observer. Some studies have found no differences in perceptions of sexual harassment based on observer gender. For example, in a study of government employees, Baker et al. (1990) found that men and women are very similar in their perceptions of vignettes describing potential sexual harassment.

Other studies suggest moderators for the relationship between observer gender and perceptions of harassment. For instance, Blakely et al. (1995) examined gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios that varied based on the ambiguity of the harassment behavior. They found that men and women did not differ in perceiving the existence of sexual harassment in severe cases, but in ambiguous scenarios, women were more likely to perceive the existence of sexual harassment. This was particularly true for women who had been targets of such harassment in their lives. When the effects of being a target of sexual harassment were taken into account, the relationship between observer gender and perceptions of sexual harassment disappeared. The results of this study suggest that men and women view

sexual harassment similarly overall, and gender differences may be due to the fact that women are more likely to have been targets of such harassment in the past. Similarly, Williams et al. (1995) also found that women are more likely than men to rate scenarios of lesser severity as being sexual harassment.

Other studies have found differences in the way men and women perceive sexual harassment. Gordon et al. (2005) found that men and women differ in their perceptions of sexual harassment in a number of different scenarios based on perpetrator gender and victim gender. Bitton and Shaul (2013) also found that women are more likely to perceive sexual harassment than men, and that women's definition of sexual harassment includes a broader variety of behaviors. Indeed, in a meta-analysis examining gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment, Rotundo et al. (2001) found that women generally perceive a broader range of behaviors to be sexual harassment. They found that observer gender differences in perceptions of such harassment are more pronounced for more subtle harassment behaviors, such as hostile work environment and derogatory attitudes.

Moreover, in a qualitative study about perceptions of sexual harassment, Dougherty (2006) found that differences in the way that men and women perceive power influence their perceptions of the harassment. Men view power in a more formal, structured, hierarchical way, which results in their viewing managers and supervisors as the most likely perpetrators of sexual harassment. Women view power as a process that is fluid and dynamic, in which two parties negotiate with each other, and power can be gained or lost as a result of a person's actions. Because of these views on power, women perceive all members of an organization as potential harassers.

A more recent study examined gender differences on perceptions of the responsibility of employers to be proactive in addressing and eliminating sexual harassment in organizations (Crosgrave et al., 2018). This study found that both men and women support interventions in organizations to prevent such harassment, but women favor the interventions more strongly.

Additionally, around 10% of the males in the study indicated that they did not feel that organizations are obligated to proactively prevent sexual harassment at all. The research examining gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment is mixed, but taking together the overall findings of the research examining differences in perceptions of sexual harassment between men and women, the following hypothesis was examined in the present study:

H1: Women are more likely to perceive sexual harassment than men.

Observer Sexual Harassment Training

Another variable that would be expected to alter the way an observer perceives sexual harassment is whether they have received sexual harassment training or not. Research examining the effects of training on perceptions of sexual harassment suggests that training does influence people's perceptions of such harassment. For example, Bingham and Scherer (2001) found that people who participated in a sexual harassment training program had more knowledge about such harassment and felt more strongly that sexual behavior at work is inappropriate than people who did not participate in the training program. Additionally, in examining a scenario-based sexual harassment training program, Desplaces and Ogilvie (2020) found that participants experienced shifts in perceptions of sexual harassment as a result of the training. Based on previous research examining the effects of training on perceptions of sexual harassment, the following hypothesis was examined:

H2: People who have received sexual harassment training are more likely to perceive sexual harassment than people who have not received training.

Observer's Race/Ethnicity

Another variable that might influence the way an observer perceives sexual harassment is the observers' race/ethnicity. There is not a lot of research on perceptions of sexual harassment of people in different racial and ethnic groups. Indeed, most research on sexual harassment has involved European Americans (Schwartz & Hunt, 2011), or has not specifically examined race/ethnicity as a factor in perceptions of harassment. Cassino and Besen-Cassino

(2019), however, note that sexual harassment is becoming increasingly racialized. While harassment of white women has decreased drastically, the harassment of African-American women has markedly increased. Thus, studying differences in perceptions of sexual harassment based on race/ethnicity is an important area of inquiry.

While not specifically examining race/ethnicity, there has been research examining differences in perceptions of harassment based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. This research has found that the dimensions of power distance, collectivism, and masculinity are the most likely to result in differences in perceptions of sexual harassment (Mishra & Davison, 2020). Cultural values and religious views associated with race/ethnicity can influence whether someone views a situation as sexual harassment or not (Schwartz & Hunt, 2011).

There is limited research examining perceptions of sexual harassment based explicitly on race/ethnicity. What research has been done in this area has investigated Latin Americans' perceptions of such harassment. Some research suggests that Latin Americans are less likely to perceive sexual harassment and more likely to tolerate harassment than European Americans (Sigal et al., 2005). In another study of the effects of ethnicity on perceptions of sexual harassment, Schwartz and Hunt (2011) examined how judgments of the harassment vary by the type of sample (undergraduate or community), observer ethnicity (European American or Latin American), and victim ethnicity (European American or Latin American). They found that Latin American community members are most likely to render judgments in favor of the victim of the harassment, suggesting that this group is more sensitive to sexual harassment. Given the lack of research and the mixed results from the existing research on the race of the observer of the harassment, the following research question was explored in this study:

RQ1: Do White people perceive sexual harassment differently than People of Color?

Observer's Sexual Orientation

A final characteristic of the observer that might influence their perceptions of sexual harassment is the observer's sexual orientation. There is a shortage of research, not only on the effects of experiencing sexual harassment for LGBTQ+ individuals, but also on their perceptions of observed harassment. It is possible, however, to use what is known about how LGBTQ+ people experience sexual harassment, to provide a context for making inferences about how they might perceive observed harassment.

First, sexual minorities experience a great deal of sexual harassment in the workplace. Indeed, depending on the specific context and sample, 50% to 77% of LGBTQ+ respondents report experiencing sexual or gender harassment (Brassel et al., 2019). Additionally, while any victim of sexual harassment experiences negative outcomes, LGBTQ+ victims experience increased fear and anxiety about future discrimination, and they may change their career fields in order to avoid future discrimination (Brassel et al., 2019). Given the increased prevalence and negative consequences of sexual harassment for LGBTQ+ individuals, it is possible that they will be more sensitive to observed harassment than non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Thus, the following hypothesis was examined in this study:

H3: LGBTQ+ people are more likely to perceive sexual harassment than heterosexual people.

Interactions Among Observer Characteristics: Implications for Intersectionality

There is little to no research examining the interactions of these observer characteristics on perceptions of sexual harassment. Indeed, several researchers have highlighted the need to study multiple minority group memberships in research on sexual harassment (Arlee et al., 2019; Brassel et al., 2020; Richardson & Taylor, 2009; Van De Griend & Hilfinger Messias, 2014). Research on intersectionality, double jeopardy, and minority stress theory, however, suggests that people who are members of multiple marginalized minority groups experience more harassment in general, and more sexual harassment specifically. This research can be

used to infer how members of intersecting minority groups might perceive observed sexual harassment. In a study of a large, demographically diverse organization, Berdahl and Moore (2006) found that minority women experience more harassment at work, due to their membership in two marginalized groups (gender and racial/ethnic minority). Additionally, research on migrant Chinese sexual and gender minority participants determined that these individuals face a number of challenges related to racism, sexism, and cis-heteronormativity (Chiang et al., 2019). Research on intersectionality and work attitudes found that membership in intersecting minority groups is associated with differences in work attitudes (Salter et al., 2021), as compared with members of other demographic groups. This research suggests that perceptions of sexual harassment may also be different, depending on an observer's membership in multiple minority groups. Therefore, the following research question was explored in this study:

RQ2: Are there interactions among the demographic characteristics that influence a person's perception of sexual harassment?

Methods

Participants

Three hundred thirty-nine participants from Amazon's MTurk participated. The full sample of 339 participants provided usable data that were used in the analyses for this study. These participants correctly responded to two attention checks distributed throughout the surveys. Participants were compensated \$1.00 for their participation. On average, participants completed the study in 24 minutes. There were no duplicate worker IDs or duplicate IP addresses in the worker data.

There were 220 males, 117 females, and 2 participants chose not to report their gender. There were 218 White participants, 120 Participants of Color, and 1 participant did not report race. There were 169 Heterosexual participants, 169 LGBTQ+ participants, and one participant who did not report sexual orientation. There were 198 participants who reported having taken a

sexual harassment training program, 135 participants who had not taken a sexual harassment training program, and 6 who did not answer whether they had participated in a sexual harassment training program. Information on age was not collected for this study, but Mturk workers' age distribution is close to the age distribution of US working adults, if slightly younger (Difallah et al., 2018). Most Mturk workers (67%) are in their 20s or 30s (Moss & Litman, 2020).

Measures

Demographics. The demographic questionnaire collected information about the participants' gender, race, sexual orientation, and whether they have received training in sexual harassment. For gender, participants were asked "What is your gender?", and the response options included Male, Female, or Other. As indicated above, all but two participants selected either Male or Female for gender. Participants were also asked "What is your sexual orientation?", and the response options included Heterosexual, Homosexual, or Other. For analyses, the sexual orientation variable was dichotomized into Heterosexual or LGBTQ+, such that any participant that did answered Homosexual or Other was collapsed into the LGBTQ+ group. Participants were asked "What is your race/ethnicity?", and the response options included American Indian, Asian, African American, Hispanic or Latino, Pacific Islander, Caucasian, or Other. The race/ethnicity variable was also dichotomized for analyses, such that participants who responded Caucasian were coded as White, and all other participants were coded as People of Color. The dichotomization of the sexual orientation variable and the race/ethnicity variable was necessary in order to achieve adequate sample sizes for group comparisons. Finally, participants were asked "Have you received any sexual harassment training?", and the response options were Yes or No. As indicated above, all but six participants selected either Yes or No for the sexual harassment training question.

Materials

Scenarios. This study used a series of scenarios developed by the authors depicting differing levels of ambiguous behaviors that could be interpreted as sexual harassment. This

type of measure is consistent with previous studies that have examined differences in perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors (e.g., Blakely et al., 1995; Gordon et al., 2005; Osman, 2007; Schwartz & Hunt, 2011). Indeed, in a meta-analysis examining differences in perceptions of sexual harassment between men and women, Rotundo et al. (2001) found that two-thirds of the studies used scenarios in this way.

In this study, participants read through a series of 11 scenarios with differing levels of harassment ambiguity. Each scenario began with the following question: “After reading the scenario, do you agree or disagree that sexual harassment in the workplace occurred?”, and participants rated their extent of agreement on an 11-point scale, with a rating of 0 representing “Highly Disagree” and a rating of 10 representing “Highly Agree”. Participants’ average ratings of perceptions of the existence of sexual harassment across all 11 scenarios served as the dependent variable. The scenarios cover a variety of different forms of sexual harassment (verbal, physical, unwanted sexual comments, requesting sexual favors, misgendering, making jokes about gender or sexual orientation, sexual orientation discrimination, displaying inappropriate sexual images, and staring at someone sexually or whistling). They intentionally cover behaviors of varying degrees of ambiguity with regard to sexual harassment, in order to determine differences in detection of sexual harassment across a variety of different situations. This methodology is consistent with the conclusions of Gordon et al. (2005) that it is important to study more ambiguous, relatively minor forms of sexual harassment, in addition to the more egregious forms. An example scenario (exhibiting an example of a joke about sexual orientation) is:

Larry is starting his new job at Dazzle Day Industries. As he is moving in to his office, he meets a group of his coworkers. Larry’s coworkers all go mingle with him and get to know him. Larry gets on the topic of his marital status and tells his coworkers that he is happily married to a man. Among a group of coworkers is

an individual named Franklin. After hearing this information, Franklin says “Hey Larry, do you or your husband wear the pants in the relationship?”

Procedure

Participants were presented with a description of the study via the Mturk task screen. Participants who were interested in participating clicked on the link to complete the surveys online. First participants completed an informed consent form. Participants who agreed to complete the study proceeded to read through and rate the 11 scenarios of varying levels of sexual harassment. Next participants completed the demographics questionnaire. After completing the two measures, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

Results

The dependent variable for this study was the average rating of sexual harassment across all scenarios. Race was dichotomized to form two groups: White and People of Color. Sexual Orientation was also dichotomized into Heterosexual and LGBTQ+. An ANOVA was performed with Gender (Male vs. Female), Sexual Harassment Training (Yes vs. No), Race (White vs. People of Color), and Sexual Orientation (Heterosexual vs. LGBTQ+) as the independent variables (See Table 1).

Main Effects

With regard to hypothesis 1, there was no significant main effect of gender on perceptions of sexual harassment; thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported. Additionally, with regard to research question 1, there was no significant main effect of race/ethnicity on perceptions of sexual harassment. There was, however, support for Hypotheses 2 and 3. There was a significant main effect for Sexual Harassment Training, $F(1, 316) = 21.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. People who have had sexual harassment training ($M = 7.28$, $SD = .15$) were significantly more likely perceive sexual harassment taking place than people who have not had sexual harassment training ($M = 6.16$, $SD = .20$). The main effect for Sexual Orientation was also

significant, $F(1, 316) = 20.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Heterosexual people ($M = 6.15$, $SD = .17$) were significantly less likely to perceive sexual harassment taking place than LGBTQ+ people ($M = 7.29$, $SD = .18$; see Table 1 for ANOVA results).

Table 1

ANOVA Results of Gender, Training, Race, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Harassment

Training on Sexual Harassment Perceptions

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Race	1	.11	.746	<.01
Gender	1	.37	.541	<.01
Orientation	1	21.35**	<.001	.06
Training	1	20.42**	<.001	.06
Race x Gender	1	10.47**	.001	.03
Race x Orientation	1	4.72*	.031	.02
Race x Training	1	3.17	.076	.01
Gender x Orientation	1	.98	.321	<.01
Gender x Training	1	6.61**	.011	.02
Orientation x Training	1	.03	.863	<.01
Race x Gender x Orientation	1	.49	.483	<.01
Race x Gender x Training	1	5.60*	.019	.02
Race x Orientation x Training	1	7.65**	.006	.02
Gender x Orientation x Training	1	5.38	.021	.02
Race x Gender x Orientation x Training	1	.05	.824	<.01

*Note: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$*

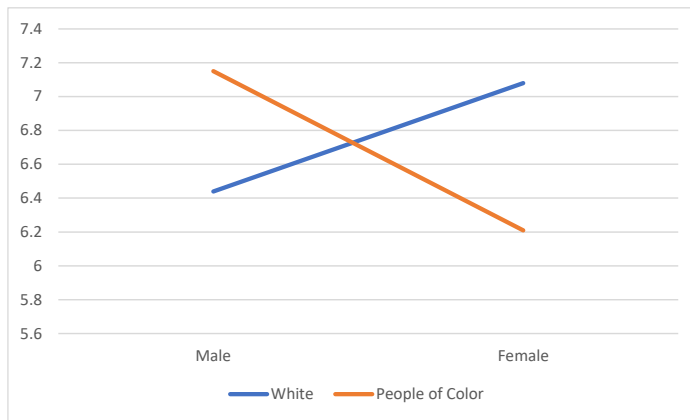
Training = Sexual Harassment Training; Orientation = Sexual Orientation

Two-way Interactions

There were two significant two-way interactions that informed research question 2. There was a significant interaction for Race x Gender, $F(1, 316) = 10.47$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$ (see Figure 1). For White participants, Females were more likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 7.08$, $SD = .17$) than Males ($M = 6.44$, $SD = .21$). For Participants of Color, Males were more likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 7.15$, $SD = .20$) than Females ($M = 6.21$, $SD = .36$).

Figure 1

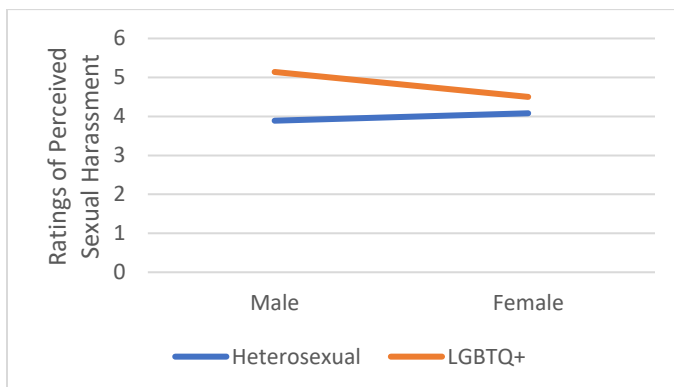
Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Based on Race and Gender of the Observer



There was also a significant interaction between Race and Sexual Orientation, $F(1, 316) = 4.72$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Figure 2). LGBTQ+ Participants of Color were the most likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 7.52$, $SD = .28$), while Heterosexual Participants of Color were the least likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 5.84$, $SD = .30$). White participants were in the middle, with LGBTQ+ White participants' being more likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 7.06$, $SD = .23$) than Heterosexual White participants ($M = 6.46$, $SD = .15$).

Figure 2

Ratings of perceived sexual harassment based on gender and sexual orientation.

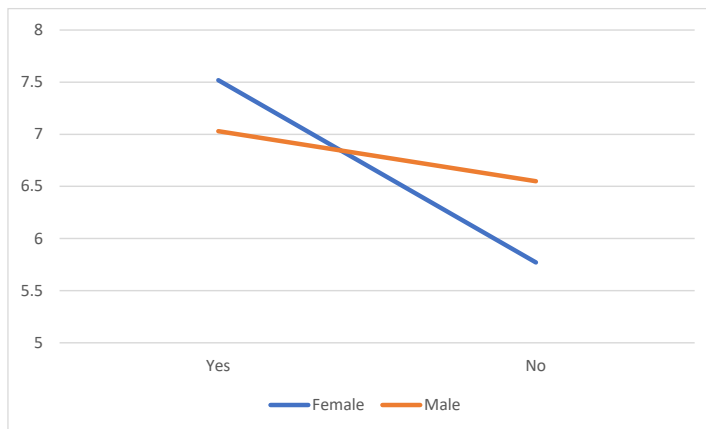


The two-way interaction between Gender and Sexual Harassment Training was also significant, $F(1, 316) = 6.61$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Figure 3). Females who had participated in Sexual Harassment Training were the most likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 7.52$, SD

= .24), while Females who had not participated in Sexual Harassment Training were the least likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 5.77$, $SD = .32$). This pattern was also true for Males, but it was much more pronounced in the Female participants. Males who had participated in Sexual Harassment Training were more likely to perceive sexual harassment ($M = 7.03$, $SD = .16$) than Males who had not participated in Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 6.55$, $SD = .24$).

Figure 3

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Based on Gender and Sexual Harassment Training Status of the Observer



Three-way interactions

There were three, three-way interactions with implications for Hypothesis 2, with regard to mediators of the relationship between sexual harassment training and perceptions of sexual harassment. The interaction among Race, Gender, and Sexual Harassment Training was significant, $F(1, 316) = 5.60$, $p < .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Table 2 for group means). This significant interaction appears to be driven by the large differences in perceptions of sexual harassment between Females of Color who have had Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 7.59$, $SD = .44$) and Females of Color who have not had Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 4.82$, $SD = .57$). All of the groups were more likely to perceive sexual harassment if they had received Sexual Harassment Training than if they had not, but the Females of Color group experienced the largest differences. For Males of Color, White Females, and White Males, average perceptions of

sexual harassment for those who had not had Sexual Harassment Training were 6.61 (SD = .32). For members of those groups who have had Sexual Harassment Training, their average perceptions of sexual harassment were 7.17 (SD = .22).

Table 2

Group Means for the Interaction Among Race, Gender, and Sexual Harassment Training

		White	People of Color
Training: Yes	Female	7.44	7.59
	Male	6.75	7.32
Training: No	Female	6.72	4.82
	Male	6.12	6.99

There was also a significant three-way interaction among Race, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Harassment Training, $F(1, 316) = 7.65$, $p < .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Table 3 for group means). This significant interaction appears to be driven by the large differences in perceptions of sexual harassment between Heterosexual Participants of Color who have had Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 6.98$, $SD = .45$) and Heterosexual Participants of Color who have not had Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .39$). Additionally, White Heterosexual participants perceived almost the same levels of sexual harassment, regardless of whether they have had Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 6.48$, $SD = .23$) or not ($M = 6.44$, $SD = .20$). The other two groups perceived greater levels of sexual harassment if they had had Sexual Harassment Training, but not to the degree of Heterosexual Participants of Color. White LGBTQ+ participants who have had Sexual Harassment Training averaged 7.72 ($SD = .19$), and those who have not averaged 6.40 ($SD = .41$). Heterosexual Participants of Color who have had Sexual Harassment Training averaged 7.93 ($SD = .23$), and those who have not averaged 7.10 ($SD = .52$).

Finally, there was a significant three-way interaction among Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Harassment Training, $F(1, 316) = 5.38$, $p < .021$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Table 4 for group means). Female Heterosexual participants who had not had Sexual Harassment Training had

Table 3

Group Means for the Interaction Among Race, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Harassment Training

		White	People of Color
Training: Yes	Heterosexual	6.48	6.98
	LGBTQ+	7.72	7.93
Training: No	Heterosexual	6.44	4.71
	LGBTQ+	6.40	7.1

the lowest perceptions of sexual harassment ($M = 5.02$, $SD = .39$), but Female Heterosexual participants who had participated in Sexual Harassment Training had much higher perceptions of sexual harassment ($M = 7.38$, $SD = .42$). Male Heterosexual participants who had not had Sexual Harassment Training had very similar perceptions of sexual harassment whether they had participated in Sexual Harassment Training ($M = 6.08$, $SD = .27$) or not ($M = 6.13$, $SD = .21$). LGBTQ+ Males and Females demonstrated higher sexual harassment perceptions if they had participated in Sexual Harassment Training, and they also demonstrated higher overall perceptions of sexual harassment, whether they had had Sexual Harassment Training (Males: $M = 7.99$, $SD = .17$; Females: $M = 7.66$, $SD = .24$) or not (Males: $M = 6.98$, $SD = .44$; Females: $M = 6.52$, $SD = .50$).

Table 4

Group Means for the Interaction Among Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Harassment Training

		Heterosexual	LGBTQ+
Training: Yes	Female	7.38	7.66
	Male	6.08	7.99
Training: No	Female	5.02	6.52
	Male	6.13	6.98

Discussion

The present study examined differences in perceptions of sexual harassment based on the characteristics of the person observing the harassment. An understanding of how different people view sexual harassment behaviors can help inform training interventions aimed at reducing such harassment. This study contributed to the current literature on perceptions of sexual harassment by examining observer characteristics that have not been studied in previous research: race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. Perhaps the most unique contribution of this study is its examination of interaction effects among the observer characteristics. By examining the interactions among demographic characteristics, this study was able to reveal differences in perceptions of sexual harassment for members of different intersecting minority groups. Additionally, the analyses examining differences in perceptions of harassment by members of different demographic groups who had received sexual harassment training and those who had not, have implications for potential differential effectiveness of such training for different groups.

Observer Gender

The present study revealed a number of interesting and valuable findings. First, this study hypothesized that there would be a difference in perceptions of sexual harassment based on gender, but that hypothesis was not supported. While meta-analyses have demonstrated this effect (e.g., Rotundo et al., 2001), several moderators of this effect have been identified, such as job experience (Baker et al., 1990) and the type/severity of the harassment behavior (Rotundo et al., 2001). The finding in the present study that Race interacted with Gender in perceptions of sexual harassment is a likely explanation for why there was no main effect for Gender. It appears that Race (White, compared to People of Color) may moderate this effect.

Sexual Harassment Training

Despite the absence of a significant main effect for gender, there were two other notable significant main effects. First, people who have had sexual harassment training were more likely

to perceive sexual harassment than people who have not had training. Thus, training appears to be related to a person's sensitivity to the issue of sexual harassment and therefore their likelihood of perceiving it. This is consistent with research on sexual harassment training, which shows that after training, 1) participants are more knowledgeable about sexual harassment than nonparticipants, and 2) participants feel more strongly that sexual behavior at work is inappropriate (Bingham & Scherer, 2001; Desplaces & Ogilvie, 2020).

The present finding is particularly interesting, however, because the quality and timing of the sexual harassment training that participants reported in this study is unknown. In other words, it is unknown whether the trainings were high-quality or low-quality, and it is unknown whether the training was 10 years ago or 6 months ago. However, the fact that participants who reported having participated in a training program were more sensitive to the existence of sexual harassment is optimistic. It suggests that any sexual harassment training may have a lasting influence on how participants perceive future instances of observed harassment.

Observer Sexual Orientation

The main effect for sexual orientation was also significant; LGBTQ+ people were more likely to perceive sexual harassment than Heterosexual people. This question has not been specifically examined in previous research, so it is valuable to demonstrate, empirically, that there are differences in perceptions of sexual harassment related to an observers' sexual orientation. This finding is consistent with what previous research has shown regarding the prevalence of sexual harassment among LGBTQ+ workers. For example, a study by the Trades Union Congress (2019) found that 68% of LGBTQ+ have been harassed at work. Because LGBTQ+ people are highly likely to experience sexual harassment at work, it is not surprising that they are vigilant for signs of harassment, and more likely to perceive it than people who are not worried about such harassment because they are unlikely to experience it. Indeed, Blakely, et al. (1995) found that participants who have been a target of sexual harassment are more likely to perceive such harassment in ambiguous situations.

While LGBTQ+ workers may be especially vigilant for sexual harassment, it is perhaps the other side of the coin that provides the most pertinent area for action: Heterosexual workers may be especially *insensitive* to detecting sexual harassment. Therefore, sexual harassment training interventions can use data such as this to highlight ways in which Heterosexual workers can broaden their sensitivity to such behaviors, in order to be able to detect, address, and prevent these behaviors in the workplace.

Observer Membership in Multiple Minority Groups

The present study found several notable interaction effects with implications for intersectionality. First, there was a significant interaction effect for Race and Sexual Orientation, such that LGBTQ+ Participants of Color were the most likely to perceive sexual harassment, and Heterosexual Participants of Color were the least likely to perceive sexual harassment. The finding that LGBTQ+ Participants of Color were the most likely to perceive sexual harassment is consistent with Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), which suggests that individuals who are members of multiple minority groups experience increased stressors due to multiple marginalization (Chiang et al., 2019). Indeed, racial and sexual minority members experience increased harassment and violence, which can result in increased stress and depression (Arlee et al., 2019). It is possible that because LGBTQ+ People of Color experience increased bias in their own lives (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Cubrich, 2020), they are more sensitive to such negative behaviors in others, and they are thus sympathetic to victims of sexual harassment due to similar experiences of marginalization (Holland et al., 2016).

Additionally, there was a significant interaction between Race and Gender, such that for White participants, Females were more likely than males to perceive sexual harassment, whereas for Participants of Color, Females were less likely than males to perceive sexual harassment. This effect, paired with the significant three-way interaction that showed that Females of Color who had participated in Sexual Harassment Training were more likely to perceive sexual harassment than Females of Color who had not participated in training,

suggests that such training may be an especially effective tool to help Women of Color to recognize and thus protect themselves from sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment Training and Observer Characteristics

There were, in fact, several interactions with implications for differential effectiveness of sexual harassment training. First, there was a two-way interaction between Gender and Sexual Harassment Training which indicated that women who had participated in such training were much more likely to perceive sexual harassment than women who had not participated in training. There was also a three-way interaction among Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Harassment Training, which demonstrated a similar pattern: Heterosexual Females who had participated in training were more likely to perceive sexual harassment than Heterosexual Females who had not participated in training. These findings, taken together, suggest that sexual harassment training may be much more valuable and informative for women than for men, and that sexual orientation also plays a role in these dynamics, likely because LGBTQ+ individuals are likely to experience more bias in their lives, so they are more sensitive to it, even without training.

Additionally, there were two three-way interactions involving Race and Sexual Harassment Training: Race x Gender x Sexual Harassment Training, and Race x Sexual Orientation x Sexual Harassment Training. Both of these interactions indicated that People of Color who had participated in training were much more likely to perceive sexual harassment than People of Color who had not participated in training. For the Race x Gender x Sexual Harassment Training interaction, it was Females of Color who exhibited the biggest difference between Training and No Training; for the Race x Sexual Orientation x Sexual Harassment Training interaction, it was LGBTQ+ Participants of Color who demonstrated the biggest difference between Training and No Training.

The findings that People of Color who have not had sexual harassment training perceived less sexual harassment is consistent with findings from Sigal, et al. (2005), who found

that Latin Americans are less likely to perceive sexual harassment than European Americans. The result that People of Color who have had training were most likely to perceive sexual harassment has important implications for the usefulness of training. This finding may indicate that training has a stronger effect on the attitudes of minority participants, as compared to White participants. This supports the conclusions of Mishra and Davison (2020), who suggest that people of different cultures are likely to respond differently to sexual harassment training.

Limitations

The present study has important implications for theory, research, and practice regarding sexual harassment. Before turning to these implications, however, a few limitations should be noted. First, this study used scenarios to determine how participants perceived sexual harassment. Scenarios are examples of low-fidelity simulations, which have been used in many studies on sexual harassment (e.g., Blakely et al., 1995; Gordon et al., 2005; Osman, 2007; Rotundo et al., 2001; Schwartz & Hunt, 2011), but it is still possible that the findings of the present study would be different if the participants witnessed actual harassment in their workplaces, among people that they know. Combining the results of scenario-based studies, along with studies of people who have actually experienced sexual harassment, would help to provide a clearer picture of how people perceive such harassment.

Additionally, the scenarios used in the study necessarily described specific examples of behavior. It is likely that most instances of sexual harassment in the workplace will not precisely match the scenarios used in the study. Those small variations might alter the way people perceive the event. Additionally, participants gave only a single rating for each scenario (the extent to which they perceived sexual harassment). Thus, the conclusions from this study are based on a finite number of behavioral examples, with a single ratings, aggregated across the 11 scenarios. More research on sexual harassment, using other scenarios, perhaps with ratings of other perceptions about the scenarios, will determine the extent to which the conclusions of this study generalize to other harassment events.

Furthermore, this study was limited in the demographic groupings that were examined; the groups were dichotomous (e.g., White/People of Color, Heterosexual/LGBTQ+). The present sample was limited by the numbers of people in the racial, sexual orientation, and gender subgroups. Indeed, the specific different groups that individuals are members of are integral to their personal identities, experiences, and perceptions. This study takes only a very surface-level look at these issues, but the differences identified in this study suggest that there are likely to be important differences in the perceptions of sexual harassment for people in intersectional groups, and future studies should further examine differences in perceptions among these subgroups.

Finally, the analysis of the interactions among observer characteristics and perceptions of sexual harassment were largely exploratory. As described in the introduction, while there are theoretical reasons to believe that there may be differences in perceptions of sexual harassment for observers with different characteristics, there is little to no direct research examining this issue. Therefore, as one of the first studies to examine these observer characteristics and the interactions among them, this study should serve as a catalyst to identifying potential areas of future research, such that these observer characteristics may be studied in a more confirmatory manner, to see if the findings from this study generalize to other samples, research settings, and real-world settings. Indeed, the present study found a number of statistically significant interactions that suggest there may be meaningful differences in the way different groups and subgroups of people perceive sexual harassment. We believe that the patterns of these statistically significant interactions do suggest real, meaningful differences that very well may have important implications for theory and practice and should be explored in future research. In particular, this study suggests that more inquiry into the role of intersectionality and perceptions of sexual harassment is needed.

Implications for Theory and Research and Future Directions

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study have implications for theory and research about the perceptions of sexual harassment. This study examined differences in perceptions of sexual harassment based on observer characteristics that have not been previously examined: different racial/ethnic and sexual orientations groups. Additionally, this study answered the call of researchers who have recommended research on sexual harassment and intersectional minority group membership by examining interactions among membership in different demographic groups. The results of this study indicated that LGBTQ+ people were more likely to perceive sexual harassment; furthermore, LGBTQ+ People of Color were the most likely to perceive sexual harassment. These findings have implications for theories and research about the perceptions of such harassment. They suggest that people who are marginalized are more likely to notice when other people are experiencing similar distress, and that people in double-minority groups are especially sensitive to harassing behaviors in others.

Most research on differences in perceptions of sexual harassment focuses on gender differences of the observers; this research has found that women tend to be more sensitive to such harassment than men (e.g., Rotundo et al., 2001). However, there has not been previous research that has examined the differences in perceptions of sexual harassment based on the observer's sexual orientation and membership in other marginalized groups. LGBTQ+ people experience a high degree of sexual harassment, and People of Color also experience a higher degree of bias than White people, while White Heterosexual men are the least likely to be harassed (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019; Cubrich, 2020). The findings of the present study could be explained by Konrad & Gutek's (1986) suggestion that negative sexual experiences at work may drive differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. Therefore, because minority group members experience more negative sexual experiences at work, they are more sensitive to perceiving sexual harassment. Future research should further explore the dynamics of the

intersections of sexual orientation and race, and perceptions of sexual harassment, to determine the factors at play in these differences in perceptions. Additionally, the findings of the present study, regarding differences in perceptions of sexual harassment associated with race, taken together with other findings that suggest religious and cultural differences in perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g., Mishra & Davidson, 2020; Schwartz & Hunt, 2011; Sigal, et al., 2005), suggest another important dimension in the future study of perceptions of sexual harassment.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study also have implications for interventions and policies designed to prevent sexual harassment. This study found that people who had participated in training were more likely to perceive sexual harassment, and that women, Women of Color in particular, reported the biggest increase in perceptions of such harassment when they had completed training, compared to those who had not. This finding has important implications for the development and implementation of sexual harassment interventions—these interventions may be more helpful for some people than others. Additionally, this finding suggests that it may be wise for interventions to include targeted information toward their audiences, in order to have the greatest benefit (Icekson et al., 2020; Mishra & Davison, 2020). In particular, organizational leaders may benefit from learning more about these perceptual issues, because they, themselves, may need to increase their sensitivity to detecting sexual harassment, so that they can address and prevent such behaviors in their work groups.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a serious matter that can affect not only an individual, but the organization that the individual is associated with. The present study examined how perceptions of sexual harassment are affected by the characteristics of observers of the harassment. A better understanding of these perceptions can help organizational leaders and employees to

create more effective, targeted sexual harassment training programs, in order to ensure a better work environment, where people can feel safe and be productive.

Declarations

Availability of data and material: You may access information about the data and materials here:

https://osf.io/x8yp5/?view_only=41eb55618c96456ea88baa89a53114ab

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