Gender, Power, and Mate Value: The Evolutionary Psychology of Sexual Harassment.

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Abstract

Evolutionary psychological principles were applied to the issue of sexual harassment to investigate whether the gender, power, and mate value of harassers were related to perceptions of sexual harassment. One hundred and sixty heterosexual men and women were given descriptions of a target individual whose mate value and power was manipulated, and three behavioural vignettes involving imagined interactions with the target individual. Participants rated their perceived level of sexual harassment (the dependent variable) stemming from the imagined interactions. Participants also provided ratings of their self perceived level of attractiveness, attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace, and experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace. As predicted, females perceived higher levels of sexual harassment than males, and participants perceived higher levels of sexual harassment from low mate-value target individuals than high mate-value target individuals. Against predictions, no result was found for power. Additionally, self perceived level of attractiveness was found to moderate the relationship between gender and perceived sexual harassment, and attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace was found to moderate the relationship between mate value and perceived sexual harassment. Implications and explanations are discussed with reference to workplace issues, and evolutionary psychology.

Introduction

Overview of Sexual Harassment

One of the consequences of the increasing integration of men and women in the workplace has been the increased opportunity for conflict based upon gender differences (Browne, 2006). Despite the inclusion of gender as a banned grounds of discrimination in the Human Rights Act 2003, and the best efforts of legislators and employers, gender-based conflict has become a major issue for organisations, and a topic of interest in research (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002). It appears that the differences between the sexes assert themselves in organisational settings, with the outcome that men and women are not just simply interchangeable employees (Browne, 2006).

One of the most prevalent forms of this conflict has been labelled sexual harassment (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002). Although a myriad of definitions exist, there is no universal agreement on an objective definition of sexual harassment (Golden, Johnson & Lopez, 2001). In line with the legal definition in New Zealand, the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as unwanted sexual attention that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance, or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment (Golden et al., 2001).

The EEOC differentiates between two distinct forms of sexual harassment that arise from this definition, 'quid pro quo', and 'hostile environment' (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002). Quid pro quo harassment is where sexual favours are solicited in exchange for positive job related outcomes such as continued employment, or

promotion, while hostile environment harassment involves unwelcome sexually toned behaviours that are perceived as contributing to an offensive, or hostile working environment (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002). While cases of quid pro quo harassment are clear, hostile environment harassment remains ambiguous due to different ideas about what reasonably constitutes a hostile or offensive environment (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002). Thus, confusion arises as people may perceive ambiguous behaviours differently; for example, research indicates that women perceive a wider range of behaviours as sexually harassing than do men (Wayne, Riordan & Thomas, 2001). This has lead to a wide variety of behaviours that have been labelled as sexual harassment from suggestive jokes, remarks, or well intended comments at one extreme, through to rape at the other (Browne, 2006). Unsurprisingly, estimates of the prevalence of sexual harassment vary significantly depending on the scope of behaviours used to define sexual harassment (Sheets & Braver, 1999). Some surveys have reported that as many as 53% of women have experienced sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985), although a meta-analysis by Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau and Stibal (2003) put the figure at 24%.

However sexual harassment is defined, it is an important issue for employees and organisations alike. Research has linked a number of negative outcomes to victims of sexual harassment including anxiety, frustration, low self esteem, job insecurity, feelings of intimidation, humiliation, anger, decreased morale, low satisfaction with job supervisors and co-workers, problem drinking, post traumatic stress disorder, nervousness and reduced life satisfaction (Berdahl & Cortina, 2008; Cogin & Fish, 2007; Elkins & Velez-Castrillion, 2008; Soloman & Williams, 1997). Furthermore, somatic outcomes have been linked to sexual harassment including

nausea and gastrointestinal disturbances, headaches, exhaustion, insomnia, jaw tightening, teeth grinding, weight loss or gain, numbness and tingling in extremities, pains in the chest and shortness of breath (Cogin & Fish, 2007). These outcomes can combine to drastically affect the careers and lives of sexual harassment victims as they may be encouraged, or forced to leave their jobs (Cogin & Fish, 2007). Sexual harassment is also likely to have negative outcomes for the harasser in terms of sanctions imposed against them, and reduced job performance and consequent career success; someone who dedicates their time and effort to harassment is not likely to work as hard or as effectively as someone who is not (Cogin & Fish, 2007).

At the organisational level sexual harassment has been linked to low motivation, low job satisfaction, low productivity, work withdrawal, burnout, high absenteeism, high intention to turnover, and turnover for the victims (Berdahl & Cortina, 2008; Elkins & Velez-Castrillion, 2008). These factors are expensive for organisations as they are forced to deal with associated costs such as training, human resources expertise, and an inefficient workforce. Sexual harassment can also result in high legal costs if it is not dealt with effectively and gets to the the judicial system; in some cases successful sexual harassment claims have been in excess of millions of dollars (Larson, 2009; Soloman & Williams, 1997).

Overall, it is clear that sexual harassment leads to a number of damaging and costly consequences in the workplace. In order to effectively deal with sexual harassment in this setting, it is therefore necessary to understand the factors that contribute to sexual harassment, and to develop a model of the phenomenon.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Harassment

Two major opposing theoretical viewpoints that have been used to study sexual harassment are the socio-cultural theory and the evolutionary psychological approach. I discuss each viewpoint next.

Previous researchers have looked at sexual harassment using a number of frameworks including organisational, feminist, role theory, and attributional models of sexual harassment; however, these models all share the same basic assumptions and can be labelled socio-cultural models of sexual harassment (Sheets & Braver, 1999). A socio-cultural view of sexual harassment maintains that society grants men more power than women, and that men sometimes use this power to coerce and sexually exploit women (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003). Based on this view, the primary motivation to sexually harass is to exercise power over another individual (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003). Much of the research on sexual harassment has been performed from this viewpoint (e.g. Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Berdahl, 2009; Berdahl, 2007).

In contrast, an evolutionary psychological approach maintains that the motivation to sexually harass arises from adaptations that involve biological factors. Evolutionary psychology is a relatively new and rapidly expanding field in psychology that attempts to explain psychological traits as functional adaptations to the environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) that solved survival and reproductive challenges (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Studd & Gattiker, 1991). Touted as the new science of the mind (Buss, 1999), this school of thought reflects the application of Darwinian theory, which traditionally focused on physiology and morphology, to the human mind and brain (Buss, 1999).

To achieve this, evolutionary psychology considers how information is processed through the mind, and then seeks to reconstruct problems that human ancestors faced in the EEA, and the problem-solving strategies and behaviours used to overcome particular obstacles (Spohn, 2005). For example, evolutionary psychologists would argue that modern humans' innate fear of snakes is a psychological adaptation driven by the danger posed to human life by snakes in the EEA (Buss, 1999). Snakes have poisonous and potentially life threatening bites; therefore, fear of snakes, and the resulting avoidance behaviours that are manifested today, were (and still are) functionally adaptive as they minimised the contact with, and danger to life posed by snakes.

Using this logic, evolutionary psychology has made some important contributions to understanding workplace behaviour; for example, research has examined the links between evolutionary psychology and work environment (Herman-Miller, 2004), leadership theory (Spohn, 2005), men's and women's relative workplace status (Browne, 1998), relationship development in organisations (Teboul & Cole, 2005), workplace motivations, the links between status and well being (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002), group social structures (Pierce & White, 1999), absenteeism, risk behaviour, unions, career development (Nicholson, 1997), and gossip (Nicholson, 2001).

Evolutionary psychology also provides a useful framework for studying sexual harassment (Browne, 2006: Studd & Gattiker, 1991). According to an evolutionary psychological viewpoint, one of the primary motivations to sexually harass is to fulfil urges that result from the biological urge to mate (Sheets & Braver, 1999). Mating

represents the ultimate solution to the problem of reproduction, and, therefore, when people get the chance to interact with members of the opposite sex, as often happens in the contemporary workplace, they will tend to initiate sexually courting behaviours.

Evolutionary psychology does not ignore the role of power in the workplace. However, unlike the socio-cultural approach, the display and application of power as a function of sex is not viewed simply as a product of cultural forces, but also in terms of adaptations linked to sexual selection. As I will detail later, for example, evolutionary psychology predicts that women should be more attracted to status or power in a potential mate, than is the case for men, as a function of adaptations from the ancestral environment. Indeed, there is good evidence for this claim across cultures (Fletcher, 2002). Moreover, as will be discussed later, the links between status, power, and perceptions of sexual harassment are complex and not readily summarised in terms of simple associations.

Consequently, in a workplace situation, power and mate value are confounded; that is, overtures from a male president of a company to his female secretary may be more likely to be perceived as harassment (all being equal), than overtures from another male secretary (all being equal). However, the high status male may be perceived as more attractive by the female secretary (all being equal). The current study avoids this confound by manipulating perceived mate value and power of the instigator of the target individual (instigator of sexual harassment) independently.

Sexual Harassment and the Workplace

Most contemporary workplaces present settings in which men and women work side by side towards a common goal. Relationship development processes are key to organisational functioning; it is through exchange interdependencies and coordinated joint member efforts that organisations are able to operate effectively enough to sustain themselves (Teboul & Cole, 2005). Therefore, it is critical for men and women to develop successful working relationships for organisations to run effectively. As well as increasing the opportunity for conflict, this critical relationship development process presents increased opportunities for workplace based friendships, and social-sexual interaction. Social-sexual interaction refers to messages that convey social interest of a sexual or romantic nature (Soloman & Williams, 1997).

Accordingly, social-sexual interaction is a pre-requisite to any romantic or sexual relationship, and when this behaviour occurs in the workplace, it is the perception of this behaviour as either welcome or as harassing that determines whether sexual harassment occurs. Workplace romance has been linked to positive outcomes such as increased productivity, increased employee congeniality, and greater work satisfaction (Soloman & Williams, 1997). However, it should be noted that office romances, particularly when they finish, have been associated with negative organisational outcomes (Williams, Giuffre & Dellinger, 1999). Similarly, workplace friendships have been linked to improved workplace performance, reduced stress, favourable social support, creation of positive workplace atmosphere, and better management of organisational change (Teboul & Cole, 2005). The challenge

for organisations is to find a way to effectively curb sexual harassment while reaping the positive benefits of amicable social exchange.

The human rights commission (2003) recommends implementing a clear and comprehensive company policy statement regarding sexual harassment, and actively providing training for employees on policy implications, and sexual harassment prevention as the best way to minimise incidents of sexual harassment. This approach to sexual harassment mitigation is echoed throughout the literature (e.g. Berdahl & Cortina, 2008; Elkins & Velez-Castrillion, 2008), and has been supported in research. Gruber (1998) found that employees reported the lowest rates of sexual harassment when they worked for organisations that proactively developed, disseminated, and enforced a sexual harassment policy, and that there was significantly more harassment reported by those in organisations who used only an informational approach (without pushing the policy), and more harassment again in organisations with no sexual harassment policy.

It is clear that the development and propagation of organisational policy is a crucial step towards preventing sexual harassment; however, in their efforts to stop sexual harassment, these policies often ban workplace romance inhibiting many potentially positive outcomes (Williams et al., 1999). As sexual harassment is associated with many negative organisational and personal outcomes, and workplace romance and friendships are associated with generally positive organisational and personal outcomes, there is a need to identify the factors that influence perceptions of inter-sexual social interaction as either harassing or welcome. Once these factors have been identified, they can inform sound organisational policy which maximises the

positive, and minimises the negative outcomes associated with inter-sexual social interaction in the workplace.

The Current Study

As sexual harassment is a pervasive phenomenon that entails a wide variety of negative consequences for both individuals and organisations, empirical research has often focused on the factors that lead to perceptions of sexual harassment. This research has identified organisational factors that contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment such as organisational culture (Cantisano, Morales, & Depolo, 2008; Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope & Hobson, 2008; Handy, 2006; Mueller & De Coster, 2001; Timmerman & Bajema, 2000), workplace gender composition (Chamberlain, et al., 2008), managerial attitudes towards sexual harassment (McCabe & Hardman, 2005; Timmerman & Bajema, 2000), and structural aspects of organisations (Mueller & De Coster, 2001).

Victim characteristics that contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment have also been identified, such as victim response pattern (Hunter & McClelland, 1991), gender (Golden et. al., 2001), age (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002), attractiveness (Golden et. al., 2001; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999) and attitudes towards sexual harassment (McCabe & Hardman, 2005). Finally, harasser characteristics that contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment have been identified such as explicitness of message (Soloman & Williams, 1997), attractiveness (Golden et al., 2001), status (Golden et. al., 2001; Littler-Bishop; 1982, Sheets & Braver, 1999), gender (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Colarelli & Haaland, 2002; Golden et. al., 2001; McCabe & Hardman, 2005;

Russell & Trigg, 2004; Soloman & Williams, 1997; Wayne, Riordan & Thomas, 2001), and power (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Colarelli & Haaland, 2002).

Much of this research has been performed from a socio-cultural theoretical viewpoint, as previously noted, with some (e.g. Berdahl & Cortina, 2008; Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003) dismissing the evolutionary perspective. However, as Browne (2006) points out, many predictions made by the socio-cultural point of view can also be accounted for by the evolutionary perspective. For example, in their study examining the effects of power on perceptions of sexual harassment, Bourgeois and Perkins (2003) used the socio-cultural framework to predict that people would perceive more harassment from those in positions of power over them relative to those in less powerful positions. Results indicated that this prediction was correct, and this was interpreted as refuting the evolutionary psychological model of sexual harassment.

However, as outlined below, evolutionary psychology predicts the same outcome; in this case the authors' (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003) conclusions stem from a misunderstanding of evolutionary psychological principles. Furthermore, the evolutionary perspective has the potential to make some important and novel contributions to the understanding of how perceptions of sexual harassment are formed. As cases of quid pro quo harassment are a little clearer, I will focus on harassment incidents involving a hostile environment. Accordingly, the current research uses an evolutionary psychological perspective to examine how gender, power, and mate value (self-perceived and perceived in the potential harasser) contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment in the context of ambiguous behaviour.

Parental investment, and mate selection theory are discussed next, along with a review of the relevant literature regarding the affects of gender, power, and mate value on perceptions of sexual harassment.

Parental Investment Theory

One theory from evolutionary psychology that is particularly relevant to sexual harassment is parental investment theory. Many of the obstacles that humans faced during evolution were the same for males and females; however successful mating posed different challenges for men and women as demonstrated by Trivers' (1972) parental investment theory. Parental investment refers to the amount of effort and resource that a parent invests in an offspring to promote the offspring's chances of survival. Due to the physiological demands of gestation, birth, and lactation, human females have a higher parental investment in offspring than human males.
Thus, it is in the reproductive interest of females to be more selective when choosing a mate then men in either long-term or short-term contexts. Indeed, there is good evidence from studies looking at initial mate-selection contexts, such as speed-dating studies, for example, that women are generally much more selective than men (Todd, Penke, Fasolo & Lenton, 2007).

As men expend less energy in reproduction, they are less selective in regard to potential mates, and more likely to seek out multiple partners (Trivers, 1972). Based on the short-term nature of men's parental investment (the act of copulation), the most important thing for men to look for is an attractive partner. Attractiveness signals good genes and fertility, so an attractive partner will likely produce a healthy baby who has a stronger chance of survival.

Stemming from the differences between men and women in reproductive strategy, men tend to see the world in a more sexualised way than women do, and have a tendency to overestimate sexual interest from women with whom they interact (Haselton & Nettle, 2006). This bias is so pervasive that it has been estimated by some that 75% of males who sexually harass do not realise that they are doing it (Bargh & Raymond, 1995). Thus, evolutionary psychology predicts that women will be more sensitive to, and more offended by, sexual pressure than men.

Research has generally supported this prediction. For example, Wayne et al. (2001) found that female jurors were more likely than male jurors to find an accused harasser guilty, and were more likely to see behaviour as serious, inappropriate and offensive. In a study looking at the effects of power on perceptions of sexual harassment, Bourgeois and Perkins (2003) found that female participants said they would be generally more upset by sexual harassment than males in two out of three proposed situations. Soloman and Williams (1997) found that females said they would be more upset by highly explicit sexual material than males, but not by low-level explicit material. Gutek (1985) asked male and female participants how they would feel if a fellow worker of the opposite sex asked them to have sex. Of the male respondents, 67.2% reported that they would be flattered while only 15% said that they would be insulted. This reversed for females, with 16.8% reporting they would be flattered while 62.8% said they would be insulted. In a similar study, Clark and Hatfield (1982) found that 75% of college aged men accepted a direct proposal from a member of the opposite sex whom they did not know to go to bed, while 0% of women accepted this offer.

Many other studies have found similar results for gender (e.g. Golden et. al., 2001, LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Russell & Trigg, 2004). However, McCabe and Hardman (2005) found no significant differences between men and women from both blue and white collar organisations in terms of which incidents they perceived as sexual harassment. Furthermore, there remains disagreement in the literature concerning the extent that gender influences perceptions of sexual harassment (Elkins & Velez-Castrillion, 2008).

Research into factors that cause perceptions of sexual harassment has also focused on the effects of power as held by one individual over another; for example the power that a manager holds over an employee. As noted previously, parental investment theory suggests that women, but not men, should be sensitive to power as the possibility of sexual coercion is increased in power relationships, and any loss of control over mating decisions is potentially very costly for women (Browne, 2006). For example, a woman may feel that she has no options but to comply with the sexual advances made to her by her manager because he has the power to adversely affect her future career if she refuses.

In many studies examining the relationship between power and sexual harassment perceptions, however, power has been confounded with status. As Sheets and Braver (1999) pointed out, power and status are conceptually different. While status refers to a person's position or standing relative to others, power refers to the situation where one person is dependent on another for valued resources. For example, in research examining the effects of status on perceptions of sexual

harassment, Bourgeois and Perkins (2003) had participants imagine they were a middle manager in a software company, or teaching assistant at a college. Participants were required to rate incidences of social-sexual behaviour emanating from either their workplace or college superiors (vice president, professor), or those working under them (lower level programmers, undergraduate students). Results showed that those of higher status were perceived as more harassing, however, while higher standing on an organisational hierarchy gave the imagined individuals more status, it also introduced a power relationship, meaning that status and power were being manipulated simultaneously.

In order to test the effects of power independently from status, Sheets and Braver (1999) performed a study where power and status were manipulated separately. While their attempt to decrease status while power remained high was ineffective, internal analysis of results supported their model where increased power lead to increased perceptions of harassment. In similar research where power and status were examined separately, Colarelli and Haaland (2002) found that initiator power had a strong affect on female perceptions of harassment. As previous results have suffered from methodological errors, more investigation into the effects of power on perceptions of sexual harassment is necessary.

Mate Selection Theory

Although males and females pursue different strategies to maximise reproductive fitness, they use the same basic criteria when selecting a mate. Research indicates that people look for three major things in a mate; a warm personality, attractiveness, and high levels of (or the potential to achieve) status and resources

(Fletcher, 2002). According to mate selection theory, each of these three attributes is a different indicator of reproductive fitness falling under the categories of either good genes, or good investment (Fletcher, 2002). Attractiveness in a partner is an indication of good genes which should lead to fertility and the good health of an infant, while a warm personality in a partner indicates a good investment through the ability to provide the emotional and practical support necessary to support an infant. Status and resources (or the potential to attain them) in a partner is an indication of good investment as this signifies the ability to protect and provide for a family (Fletcher, 2002).

People aim to find a mate of the highest possible mate value based on these three categories; however, they differ in the weighting they give to each of the three categories based on their own self perceived mate value, and their gender (Fletcher, 2002). In accordance with parental investment theory, women tend to give more weight to the investment traits (warmth personality and status/resources), whereas men give more importance to good genes (attractiveness) as these differential weightings give any resulting offspring the best possible chance of survival (Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen & Overall, 2004). Evolutionary psychology predicts that people will perceive more harassment from initiators who are low in mate value; namely individuals who are unattractive, of low status, and have a cold or harsh personality, relative to those who have high mate value.

Research has generally supported these predictions. In a study looking at the effects of attractiveness on perceptions of sexual harassment under ambiguous conditions, Golden et al. (2001) found that the behaviour of attractive males was

perceived as less harassing than the same behaviour performed by unattractive males. In similar research LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) found that unattractive members of the opposite sex were seen as more harassing than attractive individuals. Castellow, Wuensch, and Moore (1990) found that the attractiveness of plaintiffs and defendants in a mock sexual harassment court situation significantly affected guilty judgments in favour of attractive individuals, and that attractive individuals were perceived to be more flirtatious than unattractive individuals.

In research looking at the effects of status on perceptions of sexual harassment, Littler-Bishop (1982) found that flight attendants perceived the behaviour of lower status plane cleaners as more harassing than the behaviour of higher status pilots. Sheets and Braver (1999) found that increases in workplace status equated to increases in perceived social dominance, which in turn decreased the likelihood of the perception of sexual harassment. Golden et al. (2001) found that women saw socially dominant males as less harassing than less socially dominant males.

Conversely, it should be noted that in a study looking at the independent affects of power and status, Colarelli and Haaland (2002) found no significant main effect for status on perceptions of sexual harassment, but they did find an interaction such that as status increased, and power decreased, sexual harassment perceptions decreased. Some research (e.g. Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Langhout, Bergman, Cortina, Fitzgerald, Drasgow & Williams, 2005) has even found that higher status individuals cause higher levels of perceived sexual harassment; however, these results need to be interpreted carefully as this research has confounded status with power. No research to date has examined the affects of warmth/trustworthiness on perceptions of

sexual harassment. In addition, although the affects of attractiveness and power have been examined independently, no research has attempted to integrate them to examine the perceptions of sexual harassment.

Potentially Moderating Influences

LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) asserted that attractiveness moderates perceptions of sexual harassment, however, they did not describe how or why this effect was expected to happen. Given the different sexual natures of men and women as outlined by parental investment theory, and mate selection theory, the idea that attractiveness may moderate perceptions of sexual harassment is a reasonable one which warrants investigation. Thus, the current research included self perceptions of attractiveness as a potential moderator of perceptions of sexual harassment.

Soloman and Williams (1997) found that individuals who were more accepting of social sexual behaviour rated ambiguous scenarios as less sexually harassing. This finding was explained by different standards that different people have for sexual harassment; individuals who are generally accepting of social-sexual communication in the workplace are less likely to judge such messages as harassing. Furthermore, they found that exposure to socialising at work had a curvilinear association with perceptions of harassment such that low to moderate exposure corresponded with perceptions of greater harassment, and that moderate to high exposure was correlated with lower ratings of harassment. Based on this finding, Soloman and Williams (1997) concluded that exposure to socialising at work makes observers more sensitive judges of social-sexual communication, and those

individuals who have experience with social-sexual interactions at work come to find those interactions as normative and non-harassing.

While research has shown attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace, and experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace affect perceptions of sexual harassment, it is unclear as to how these variables might interact with the independent variables mate value, gender, and power in the current research. For example, it could be speculated that increased experience with social-sexual interaction in the workplace might lead to decreased perceived level of perceived sexual harassment for men, but increased level of perceived harassment for women due to the aforementioned different sexual natures of men and women. Thus, attitude towards social-sexual behaviour in the workplace, and experience with social-sexual behaviour in the workplace were included as potential moderators of perceptions of sexual harassment.

Summary of the Current Research

For the current research, 160 heterosexual men and women took part in an experiment where they were required to imagine themselves interacting in three potentially sexually harassing situations. Each participant was given one of four descriptions of an imagined target individual of the opposite sex to themselves who varied according to the two independent variables: mate value, and power. Each potentially harassing situation consisted of a behavioural vignette describing three separate potentially sexually harassing behaviours emanating from the target individual in a fictional workplace. Participants completed scales measuring perceived level of sexual harassment based on the vignettes, imagining themselves as the target

of the overtures. In addition, participants completed scales measuring self-perceived level of attractiveness, attitudes towards social-sexual communication, and their experience with social-sexual communication. The between-participants design allowed the examination of the independent and additive effects of the major independent variables on level of perceived sexual harassment.

Hypotheses

This study tested three main hypotheses:

1. Female participants would perceive higher levels of sexual harassment than male participants.
2. There would be an interaction between power and gender where females would perceive higher levels of sexual harassment when initiators had power over them compared to males.
3. Both male and female participants would perceive higher levels of sexual harassment from initiators with low mate value relative to initiators with high mate value.

Additionally, self perceived level of attractiveness, attitude towards social-sexual interaction in the workplace, and experience with social-sexual interaction in the workplace were included as potential moderators of perceived sexual harassment. In each case, the moderating analysis was treated as an exploratory exercise, and as such, no predictions were made as to how any moderating effects might occur.

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty heterosexual undergraduate students at the University of Canterbury were participants for the experiment. Eighty participants were males and 80 were females. 39 participants, including 21 males and 18 females, were recruited from first year psychology classes and received credit points towards fulfilment of a class requirement for their participation. 121 participants, including 59 males and 62 females, were recruited using bulk emails, flyers, and signage. These participants and received a $5 grocery voucher for their participation.

Materials

Participants received an information/anonymous consent form, a questionnaire containing personal questions, the stimulus material, a manipulation check, and various measures related to sexual harassment, and a debriefing form. The stimulus material consisted of a description of an individual that participants were required to imagine they interacted with (target individual), and 3 vignettes outlining these imagined interactions. The measures included previous experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace, attitude toward social-sexual communication in the workplace, self perceived level of attractiveness, and perceived sexual harassment.

Personal questions. Participants were required to indicate their gender, and sexual orientation.

Description of target individual. Each participant received one of eight variations of the description of the target individual that differed in terms of mate value, power, and gender. For females the target individual was referred to as John, and for males the target individual was referred to as Mary. The different descriptions of the target individual were designed for this study based on research into mate selection criteria by Fletcher (2002), and are as follows:

1. High mate value/ high power

   John/Mary is attractive, intelligent, and ambitious. He/she works with you at Organisation X, and manages the team in which you work in your graduate role. You report directly to John/Mary, and consequently, you frequently see him/her during the course of your usual day.

2. High mate value/low power

   John/Mary is attractive, intelligent, and ambitious. He/she works at a different company to you, and manages a team of graduates there. Although he/she has nothing to do with supervising you or your work, the company that John/Mary works for is in the same building as Organisation X, and he/she sometimes visits your office. Consequently, you often see him/he during the course of your usual day.

3. Low mate value/high power

John/Mary is unattractive, unintelligent, and lacks ambition. He/she works with you at Organisation X, and manages the team in which you work in your graduate role. You report directly to John/Mary, and consequently you frequently see him/her during the course of your usual day.

4. Low mate value/low power

John/Mary is unattractive, unintelligent, and lacks ambition. He/she works at a different company to you, and manages a team of graduates there. Although he/she has nothing to do with supervising you or your work, the company that John/Mary works for is in the same building as Organisation X, and he/she sometimes visits your office. Consequently, you often see him/he during the course of your usual day.

Behavioural vignettes. Each participant received three vignettes consisting of three ambiguous sexual harassment behaviours. A pilot study was run using a different sample (*N* = 20*)* to determine what constituted ambiguous sexual harassment behaviours. A wide range of behaviours between two colleagues of different sexes were rated on a 7-point scale anchored by 1 = not sexual harassment, and 7 = definitely sexual harassment. A further pilot study was then run using a different sample (*N* = 10) to determine which tripartite combinations of these behaviours remained ambiguous. The same 7 point rating scale was used. The three vignettes that were given to participants are as follows:

1. *You walk into the communal cafeteria of your building where John/Mary is seated having lunch. You notice that she/he is watching you intently. She/he calls you over and looks you up and down before asking you "How is your day going sweety?"*

2. *You are walking through the foyer of your building to the lifts when you are stopped by John/Mary. He/she looks you up and down, and then puts his/her arm around you and says "how are you darling?"*

3. *You are working at your desk when John/Mary walks past and does a double take of you (looks at you and then looks at you again). He/she then walks up to your desk while looking you in the eyes, and tells you that you looked stressed. He/she then starts to rub your shoulders.*

Previous experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace. Participants indicated the frequency of social-sexual communications between co-workers in their previous work experience using a 7 point Likert scale anchored by 1 = never occurred and 7 = always occurred. The items rated were based on those from Soloman & Williams (1997) and included (a) people go out together for fun (b) people talk about their personal lives (c) people joke with each other (d) people socialise with co-workers (e) people talk about their families or dating partners (f) people date each other (g) people have romantic relationships with co-workers. The seven items were summed and averaged to provide an overall indication of previous

experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace with a higher score indicating more experience. This measure indicated good internal reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.77).

Attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace. Participants indicated their attitudes towards social-sexual communication between co-workers using a 7 point Likert scale anchored by 1 = unacceptable, and 7 = acceptable. The items rated were based on those from Soloman & Williams (1997) and were the same as those for the previous experience of social-sexual communication in the workplace scale. The seven items were summed and averaged to provide an overall indication of attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace with a higher score indicating a more accepting attitude. This measure indicated good internal reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.81).

Self perceived level of attractiveness. Participants indicated their self perceived level of attractiveness using the self perceived vitality/attractiveness subscale of the Ideal Standards Scale developed by Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas (1999). Ratings were made on a 7 point Likert scale anchored by 1 = very inaccurate and 7 = very accurate. The items rated were (a) sexy (b) nice body (c) attractive appearance (d) good lover (e) outgoing, and (f) adventurous. The six items were summed and averaged to provide an overall indication of self perceived level of attractiveness with a higher score indicating a higher level of self perceived attractiveness. This measure indicated good internal reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.82).

Perceived sexual harassment. Participants rated how sexually harassing the target individual was in each of the three vignettes using six 7 point Likert scales. The Likert scales were based on research from Colarelli and Haaland (2002), and Golden et al. (2001) and were (a) the degree to which John/Mary's behaviour was offensive, anchored by 1 = inoffensive, and 7 = offensive, (b) the degree to which John/Mary's behaviour was appropriate, anchored by 1 = inappropriate, and 7 = appropriate, (c) the degree to which John/Mary's behaviour was upsetting, anchored by 1 = not upsetting, and 7 = upsetting (d) the degree to which John/Mary's behaviour was friendly anchored by 1 = unfriendly, and 7 = friendly, (e) the degree to which John/Mary's behaviour would make you feel comfortable, anchored by 1 = uncomfortable, and 7 = comfortable, and (f) the degree to which John/Mary's behaviour was welcome, anchored by 1 = unwelcome, and 7 = welcome. Items (b), (d), (e), and (f) were reverse scored. The 18 items (three for each vignette) were summed and averaged to provide an overall indication of perceived sexual harassment with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived sexual harassment. Each of the three perceived sexual harassment scales for each vignette demonstrated good internal reliability (Cronbach's alphas = 0.89, 0.88, 0.89).

Manipulation check. A manipulation check was performed using two 7 point Likert scales. The first scale required participants to indicate how much power they perceived that Mary/John had over them, and was anchored by 1 = no power, and 7 = a lot of power. The second scale required participants to indicate how appealing Mary/John was as a romantic partner, and was anchored by 1 = not at all appealing, and 7 = very appealing.

Other materials. The information/anonymous consent form (see appendix A) provided participants with basic information regarding the study including the fact that some questions were of a sexual nature. In order to reduce demand effects, participants were not informed of the true rationale of the research. Instead they were told that they were participating in a study assessing social perception in the workplace. The information/consent form also informed participants that by completing the questionnaire it was understood they had consented to participate in the project with the understanding that anonymity would be preserved. The debriefing form (see appendix B) told participants the true nature of the research, outlined the manipulations, measures, and implications of the research, and gave contact details for the researcher.

Design

The experiment used a 2 (mate value) x 2 (power relationship) x 2 (gender) between participants factorial design. The two categories for mate value were high mate value, and low mate value. The two categories for power relationship were high power relationship, and low power relationship.

Procedure

The experiment was completed in small groups of up to five participants. Participants were seated at individual desks configured for maximum privacy, and given an information sheet/anonymous consent form. Once participants verbally agreed to participate in the research they were administered a randomly assigned questionnaire, and instructed to take as much time as was necessary to complete it. Upon completion of the study, participants placed their questionnaires into envelopes

and posted them into a padlocked drop box. Participants then entered an adjoining room and were given a debriefing form and a NZ $5 grocery voucher.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The means and standard deviations of all major variables, including overall perceived sexual harassment, are given in table 1. As can be seen, all mean scores fell into the mid-ranges of the 7-pt. scales, and the variability was adequate for each scale.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Major Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*
Overall Perceived Sexual Harassment	4.45	1.28
Self Perceived Level of Attractiveness		
Males	4.84	0.96
Females	4.53	1.06
Experience with Social-Sexual Communication in the Workplace		
Males	4.83	0.80
Females	4.99	0.92
Attitude Towards Social-Sexual Communication in the Workplace		
Males	5.71	0.74
Females	5.44	0.93

Note: Means and standard deviations are expressed in terms of scores on a 7- point scale. The sample size for overall perceived sexual harassment was N =160. The sample size for all other reported statistics was N = 80.

Manipulation Check

As predicted, participants in the high power condition (M =4.55) perceived the target individual as having significantly more power than participants in the low power condition (M = 2.05), $t(158) = 11.22$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = 0.44$. Similarly, participants in the high mate value condition (M =4.80) perceived the target individual as significantly more romantically appealing than participants in the low mate value

condition (M = 1.55), $t(158) = 14.57$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = 0.57$. These results indicate that the power and mate value manipulations were effective.

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

A 2 (gender) x 2 (mate value) x 2(power) factorial ANOVA was conducted on perceived sexual harassment. Table 2 gives the means and standard deviations for each of the eight experimental conditions.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Harassment Ratings in Each Experimental Condition

Perceived Sexual Harassment Ratings

	Male Participants			
	High Mate Value		Low Mate Value	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
High Power	3.53	0.98	4.31	1.16
Low Power	3.06	0.81	4.30	1.22

	Female Participants			
	High Mate Value		Low Mate Value	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
High Power	5.06	1.31	5.33	1.29
Low Power	4.74	0.87	5.26	0.50

Note: Means and standard deviations are expressed in terms of scores on a 7- point scale. The sample size for each group was N = 20.

This analysis produced a significant main effect for gender $F(1, 160) = 60.46$, $p < 0.0$, partial $eta^2 = 0.28$, and a significant main effect for mate value $F(1, 160) = 17.79$, $p < 0.01$, partial $eta^2 = 0.10$. As predicted, females perceived higher levels of sexual harassment than males (female M = 5.10; male M = 3.80), and low mate value

target individuals were seen as more harassing than high mate value target individuals (low mate value $M = 4.80$; high mate value $M = 4.10$). Against predictions, there was no significant main effect for power (low power $M = 4.34$; high power $M = 4.56$), and there were no significant interactions.

Moderation Analyses

Regression analyses were carried out to investigate the possible moderating influences of self perceived level of attractiveness, experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace, and attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace. Self perceived level of attractiveness, and attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace were found to exert significant moderating effects.

Self perceived level of attractiveness was found to significantly moderate the relationship between gender and perceived sexual harassment. A standard hierarchical multiple regression strategy was used to perform this analysis. In the first step, perceived sexual harassment was the dependent variable, and gender, power, mate value and self perceived level of attractiveness were the independent variables. In the next step, three interaction terms were also included as independent variables in the regression; a gender/self perceived level of attractiveness interaction term, a mate value/ self perceived level of attractiveness interaction term, and a power/self perceived level of attractiveness interaction term. The interaction term for gender/self perceived level of attractiveness explained a significant amount of variance over and above gender, mate value, power, and self perceived level of attractiveness $t(1,159) =$

2.39, p <.05, semi-partial r^2 = 0.02. The gender/self perceived level of attractiveness interaction was the only interaction term that was significant.

To confirm the robustness of this significant interaction, a further regression analysis was conducted to investigate the significant gender/self perceived level of attractiveness interaction term independently of mate value and power. In the first step perceived sexual harassment was the dependent variable, and gender and self perceived level of attractiveness were the independent variables. In the next step a gender/self perceived level of attractiveness interaction term, was included in the regression analysis as an independent variable. The self perceived level of attractiveness variable was centred prior to this analysis to avoid computational difficulties. The interaction term for gender/self perceived level of attractiveness still explained a significant amount of variance over and above gender and self perceived level of attractiveness $t(1,159) = 2.70$, p <.01, semi-partial r^2 = 0.03.

The nature of this moderation effect is shown in figure 1 setting self perceived level of attractiveness at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below its mean. For males, those with higher levels of self perceived attractiveness perceived less sexual harassment than those with lower levels of self perceived attractiveness, whereas for females those with higher levels of self perceived attractiveness perceived higher levels of sexual harassment than those with lower levels of self perceived attractiveness. While the result for males was significant (r = -.27, B = -.33), the result for females was not significant (r = .12, B = .12).

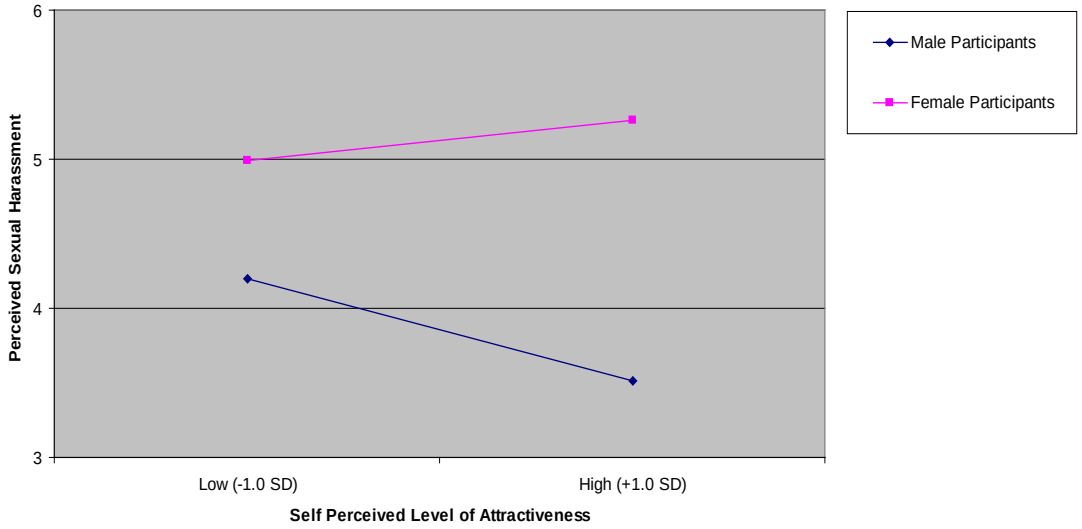

Figure 1. The link between gender and perceived sexual harassment as moderated by self perceived level of attractiveness. Scores are expressed on a 7 point scale.

A further moderating effect was found with attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace moderating the link between mate value and perceived sexual harassment. The same hierarchical multiple regression procedure outlined previously was used for this analysis. In a regression where perceived sexual harassment was the dependent variable, and gender, power, mate value, attitude towards social-sexual communication, and three interaction terms (gender, power, and mate value with attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace) were the independent variables, the mate value/attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace interaction term explained a significant amount of variance over and above the other independent variables $t(1,159) = 1.98$, $p = < .05$, semi-partial $r^2 = 0.01$.

In a further regression examining only mate value and towards social-sexual communication in the workplace, the mate value/attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace interaction term still explained a significant amount

of variance over and above mate value and ASC $t(1,159) = 2.26$, $p = < .05$, semi-partial $r^2 = 0.02$.

The nature of this moderating effect can be seen in figure 2 setting ASC at one standard deviation above, and one standard deviation below its mean. For participants in the high mate value condition, higher levels of acceptance of social-sexual communication in the workplace led to lower levels of perceived sexual harassment, whereas for participants in the low mate value condition, attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace was unrelated to perceived sexual harassment. While perceived level of sexual harassment was significantly different in the high mate value condition ($r = -.31$, B = -.51), the difference was not significant in the low mate value condition ($r = .00$, B = .00).

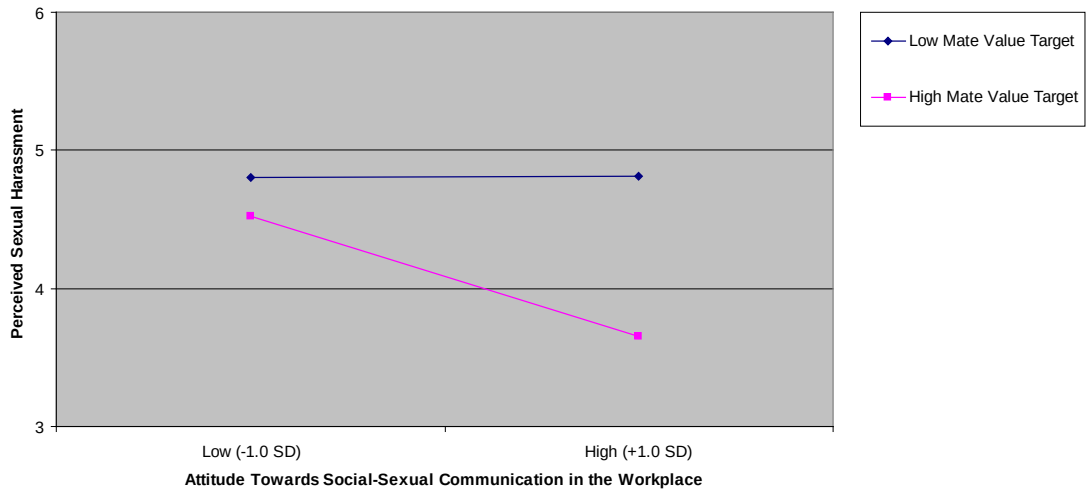

Figure 2. The link between mate value and perceived sexual harassment as moderated by attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace. Scores are expressed on a 7 point scale. A high score on attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace indicates a high level of acceptance.

Discussion

The current research used an evolutionary psychological model of sexual harassment to test three major hypotheses regarding the factors that contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment. First, it was predicted that female participants would perceive higher levels of sexual harassment than male participants. Second, it was predicted that both male and female participants would perceive higher levels of sexual harassment from initiators with low mate value relative to initiators with high mate value. Finally, it was predicted that there would be an interaction between power and gender such that females would perceive higher levels of sexual harassment when initiators had power over them, whereas males would not. Results supported the hypotheses regarding gender and mate value, but not the hypothesis regarding power.

Furthermore, self perceived attractiveness, experience with social-sexual communication in the workplace, and attitude towards social-sexual communication in the workplace were included as potential moderators of the relationships between gender, mate value, power, and perceived sexual harassment. Significant moderating effects were found for self perceived level of attractiveness on the relationship between gender and perceived sexual harassment, and attitude toward social-sexual communication in the workplace on the relationship between mate value and perceived sexual harassment. Results are discussed below with regard to the research literature, implications for evolutionary psychology, and implications for workplace issues. Additionally, limitations of the current research are considered, and recommendations for future research advanced.

Gender

As expected, female participants perceived significantly higher levels of sexual harassment than male participants. This result supports the majority of previous research on gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g. Wayne et al., 2001; Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Soloman & Williams, 1997), and supports the predictions made by parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972). However, as was mentioned previously, there remains some disagreement in the literature regarding the extent of differences between males and females in perceptions of sexual harassment with some previous research (e.g. McCabe & Hardman, 2005) finding little or no difference between genders in labelling incidents as sexual harassment. The current finding supports the notion that significant gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment do exist.

Mate Value

As was predicted, participants perceived significantly higher levels of sexual harassment from initiators of low mate value relative to initiators of high mate value. This finding is consistent with predictions from mate selection theory (Fletcher, 2002). Although the effects of mate value have not been examined before, making this a novel finding, this result is consistent with previous research on the effects of attractiveness on levels of sexual harassment (e.g. Golden et al., 2001; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999), and raises an interesting point about status.

Some previous research (e.g. Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003) has found that higher status leads to higher levels of perceived sexual harassment; however as was pointed out by Sheets and Braver (1999), this research confounded status with power. The current research manipulated power and status independently, and suggests that

higher levels of status contributes to lower levels of perceived sexual harassment. Power was manipulated by changing the role of the target individual from direct manager to manager at a different company, while status was manipulated by changing the description of the target individual from ‘ambitious’ to ‘lacks ambition’ (consistent with mate selection theory, ambition signals the drive for, and potential to achieve status). This result is consistent with research that has sought to examine status independently of power such as Sheets and Braver (1999) and Littler-Bishop (1982).

Power

Against the prediction stemming from parental investment theory, no interaction between power and gender was found, nor was there a main effect for power. This result is inconsistent with previous research examining the effects of power on perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g. Colarelli & Haaland, 2002; Sheets & Braver, 1999), and is surprising. It is interesting to note that the pattern of results observed in this research regarding power and status (as a component of mate value) is opposite to results found by Colarelli and Haaland (2002). In their study, which was of a similar design and also utilised an evolutionary psychological perspective, Colarelli and Haaland (2002) found a significant main effect for power on female perceptions of sexual harassment, but no main effect for status. There are a number of possible reasons that the current research showed no effects for power.

First, while the manipulation check showed that participants perceived the high power target individual as having significantly more power than the low power

target individual, the power manipulation in this research may not have been strong enough to manifest itself through differential levels of perceived sexual harassment.

Second, getting participants to imagine themselves in fictional vignettes (as was the experimental design in this research) may not have provided a vivid enough scenario for power to have an effect. While it is easy to imagine an individual of high or low mate value, and the associated implications for perceptions of sexual harassment based on a given description of that individual, it may be more difficult to imagine a workplace power relationship under the same circumstances.

Third, although this research attempted to manipulate power and status (as a component of mate value) independently, participants may have continued to associate power automatically with status, thereby cancelling out the effects of power on sexual harassment as has been the case in previous research. Sheets and Braver (1999) tested the independent and additive effects of power and status on perceptions of sexual harassment, and found that while power increased levels of perceived harassment, and status decreased levels of perceived harassment, when the two concepts were combined, there was no significant effect on the level of harassment perceived as the two effects cancelled each other out. Moreover, Sheets and Braver (1999) also struggled to effectively manipulate power and status independently.

Fourth, the participants in this research were all students who were unlikely to have had very much workplace experience. In comparison, only 35% of the sample used by Colarelli and Haaland (2002) were students. The lack of workplace

experience may have made it difficult for participants to accurately imagine the nature and implications of workplace power relationships.

Self Perceptions of Attractiveness

For males, those with higher levels of self perceived attractiveness perceived less sexual harassment than those with lower levels of self perceived attractiveness, whereas for females, those with higher levels of self perceived attractiveness perceived higher levels of sexual harassment than those with lower levels of self perceived attractiveness. This pattern of results is consistent with research by LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) who found that males rated incidents of observed sexual harassment as more harassing when the victim was unattractive than when the victim was attractive, but that females rated incidents of observed sexual harassment as more harassing when the victim was attractive than when the victim was unattractive. LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) focused on observer perceptions, thus the current result extends their finding into the realm of victim perceptions. Furthermore, LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) were unable to offer any explanation, instead commenting on the 'intriguing' nature of the effect, and asserting that more research was required to understand the underlying mechanisms.

I can only speculate concerning the explanation of this finding. Females are more often actively pursued and subjected to sexual coercion by males; thus, high mate value females will be subject to large amounts of sexual attention and behaviour from males. Due to the risks and dangers involved in sexual coercion for females, it might be expected that high mate value females would find these repeated sexually coercive behaviours particularly offensive and threatening. On the other hand, low

mate value females who do not receive such attention may be more likely to enjoy the more unexpected interest from males and find it flattering rather than harassing.

High mate value males are successful at acquiring female mates. Therefore, any sexually themed behaviour directed at high mate value males would also be relatively unsurprising. However, such approaches from women are inherently less dangerous than from men to women, and may be received more receptively. In the case of low mate value males, such advances may be so surprising that they may invoke suspicion of an ulterior motive such as being led on then humiliated as a form of joke. Such interpretations are, of course, speculative, and the findings need replicating.

Attitude towards Social-Sexual Communication in the Workplace

Attitudes towards social-sexual communication in the workplace was found to moderate the relationship between mate value and perceived sexual harassment. For participants in the high mate value condition, higher levels of acceptance of social-sexual communication in the workplace lead to lower levels of perceived sexual harassment, while in the low mate value condition, higher levels of acceptance of social-sexual communication in the workplace were unrelated to level of perceived sexual harassment. The result for the high mate value condition is consistent with previous research by Soloman and Williams (1997) who found that higher levels of acceptance of social-sexual behaviour led to lower levels of perceived sexual harassment.

The peripheral processing of communicated information offers an explanation for this finding (see Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005). In the context of a low mate value target individual, people will use cognitive heuristics and automatically infer sexual harassment regardless of their attitudes towards social-sexual communication. As the low mate value individual making the overture has little to offer, their behaviour is not worth deep consideration, and a cognitive shortcut is employed when making judgements of the behaviour in question. When the target individual has high mate value, however, there is more at stake in terms of a potential mate. Due to this, people may take the time to consider the behaviour of the target individual in a more controlled and in-depth fashion, and filter their perceptions through their prior beliefs about social-sexual communication. Those who are more accepting of social-sexual communication will tend to perceive less sexual harassment, whereas those who are less accepting of social-sexual communication will tend to perceive more sexual harassment.

Theoretical and Workplace Implications

Taken together, these results provide support for an evolutionary psychological perspective of sexual harassment, and enhance current understanding of how harasser and victim characteristics contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment. While consistent with evolutionary theory, the findings regarding gender would also be predicted by the socio-cultural perspective, thus, this evidence in favour of the evolutionary perspective is not conclusive. However, the finding that mate value is a significant factor in the formation of sexual harassment perceptions is difficult to explain from a socio-cultural perspective. If sexual harassment was primarily about power rather than sexual desire, the characteristics of the harasser

relating to sexual desirability (mate value and status) would have little impact on sexual harassment perceptions. Furthermore, although the null effect of power on perceptions of sexual harassment is not consistent with evolutionary psychology, neither is it consistent with socio-cultural predictions.

In addition to providing evidence of the applicability of evolutionary psychology to the issue of sexual harassment, this research suggests that evolutionary psychological principles can be successfully and fruitfully applied to workplace issues. Using evolutionary psychological theory, many aspects of the industrial/organisational psychological literature could be elaborated upon and better understood to the benefit of organisations and individuals alike.

The implications of the findings of the current research extend beyond the theoretical realm to more practical concerns. The notion that sexual harassment can be produced by environments hostile to women is a popular one. However, it is also an ambiguous claim, perhaps partly because of gender differences in perceptions of what constitutes sexually harassing behaviour. Thus, when assessing cases of hostile environment harassment it would be useful to interpret the behaviours in question through the different perspectives of men and women. This approach to the appraisal of sexual harassment claims has been suggested in the past by Browne (2006) who argued that using a ‘reasonable person’ standard to judge sexual harassment, as American courts do, is unfair and meaningless given the different sexual natures of men and women. It should be noted here I do not intend the ‘reasonable man’ and ‘reasonable woman’ view of sexually toned behaviours to act as an excuse for men to

engage in vulgar acts claiming they are a slave to their evolutionary heritage; sexual harassment is, after all, an offence which is only partly in the eye of the beholder.

Moreover, the findings from this research regarding both gender and mate value could be effectively put to use in organisational policy, flowing down to training and the assessment of sexual harassment incidences. As Browne (2006) pointed out "Sexual harassment training might more productively focus on educating men and women about sex differences in perspectives to avoid miscommunication rather than simply heightening female employees' inclinations to be offended" (p. 156). This logic can be easily extended to the findings from this research regarding mate value. However, when creating and implementing this policy, training, and assessment, it would be critical to employ trained professional personnel who could accurately interpret and communicate the material without causing offense. It is not hard to imagine how insensitive or biased information regarding how gender and mate value differences contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment could lead to perceptions of discrimination, an outcome potentially as costly for individuals and organisations as sexual harassment.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research has several limitations. As was previously alluded to, the sample of participants used in this research was comprised entirely of students who would likely have had little workplace experience. This calls into question whether these results generalise to workplace settings; however, as many students return to study after spending time in the workforce, and many students have part time jobs while they study, the effects of this limitation may not be strong as it appears at face value.

Future research of this variety could circumvent this issue by using participants drawn from the workforce, or students with significant workforce experience.

Additionally, the experimental design used to study sexual harassment in this study may not be predictive of real perceptions of sexual harassment. As mentioned previously, getting people to read scenarios in which they imagine themselves interacting in an ambiguous situation may not provide a vivid or realistic enough experience to accurately measure perceptions of sexual harassment. Future research could use a more immersive experimental technique such as showing participants recordings of sexual harassment scenarios, or role playing to provide a more realistic experience.

Furthermore, experimental ratings of sexual harassment may not predict actual perceptions of sexual harassment in a working environment. The extent to which laboratory results using hypothetical scenarios generalise to the real world is questionable (Sheets & Braver, 1999). To overcome this problem, future research could qualitatively examine past instances of workplace sexual harassment. It should also be acknowledged that to some extent this type of research is artificial in that participants are required to make complex judgments about behaviour using limited information. This point was explicitly made to the researcher by several participants during debriefing.

As the present study was the first to examine mate value of the instigating as a factor effecting sexual harassment, there is the potential for a variety of future research building on the current findings. Future research could investigate the effects

of a warm and trustworthy personality on perceptions of sexual harassment, and also incorporate warmth and trustworthiness into further research on the effects of overall mate value. Additionally, future research could manipulate the levels of different components of mate value (warmth/trustworthiness, status/resources, attractiveness/vitality) independently, and examine the effects on perceptions of sexual harassment between genders. Research of this kind would provide insight into how mate value affects men and women differentially, as well as providing further evidence of the applicability of the evolutionary perspective of sexual harassment.

In light of the null effect for power in this research, it would be useful for future research to investigate the role of power on sexual harassment perceptions further. Future research could use a similar design to the current study, but strengthen the power manipulation, for example, by using a vice president instead of a manager as the target individual. Moreover, future research could examine the effects of different levels of power on sexual harassment perceptions while holding status at a constant.

Conclusion

With continued gender integration in the workforce, the issue of sexual harassment will remain problematic for both organisations and individual employees. Only with sound organisational policy driven by a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon will the effects of sexual harassment be minimised and controlled, allowing the positive benefits of affable inter-gender social exchange to come to the fore. Despite the limitations alluded to above, this research contributes to the understanding of sexual harassment showing that gender and mate value of potentially

harassing individuals contribute to perceptions of sexual harassment, and that self perceived attractiveness and attitude towards social-sexual interaction in the workplace influence these perceptions according to the context in which the behaviours occur. Finally, this research suggests that evolutionary psychology provides a useful framework for investigating sexual harassment.

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Appendix A – Anonymous Consent/Information Form

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Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND

QUESTIONNAIRE

Social Perception in the Workplace: Factors that Influence Perceptions of Workplace Behaviour

Please read the following note before completing the questionnaire.

NOTE: You are invited to participate in the research project 'Social Perception in the Workplace: Factors that Influence Perceptions of Workplace Behaviour' by completing the following questionnaire. The aim of the project is to investigate factors that lead to differing perceptions of behaviour in a workplace setting.

The project is being carried out as a course requirement for the MSc in Applied Psychology by Michael O'Connell under the supervision of Garth Fletcher. Contact details are below. Michael and/or Garth will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

Please be aware that some questions that you will be asked are of a sexual nature. If you are not comfortable answering these questions then it is suggested that you withdraw your participation from the research now.

Except for your gender, the questionnaire is anonymous and you will not be identified as a participant. You may withdraw your participation, including withdrawal of any information you have provided, any time up until your questionnaire has been added to the others collected. Because it is anonymous, it cannot be retrieved after that.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

By completing the questionnaire it will be understood that you have consented to participate in the project, and that you consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved.

Michael O'Connell mcc84@student.canterbury.ac.nz

Garth Fletcher garth.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz

Appendix B – Debriefing Form

Debriefing for study: 'Social Perception in the Workplace: Factors that Influence Perceptions of Workplace Behaviour'

Rationale

As the title that you have been given suggests, this research is looking at factors that influence perceptions of workplace behaviour, however the information that you have been given about this study thus far is incomplete. The real (working) title of the research is:

The effects of mate value, gender, and power on perceptions of sexual harassment in the workplace.

This study is really looking at how different levels of mate value, power, and gender might influence perceptions of sexual harassment. If you have any concerns or negative feelings regarding the sexual harassment aspect of this study, please make these known to the researcher now during the debriefing session. Alternatively, if you would like to raise any concerns that you may have privately please contact the researcher using the contact details provided below.

Explanation and Predictions

The idea of this study is that different levels of mate value, power, and gender will lead to people perceiving more or less sexual harassment in ambiguous situations. For the purposes of this study, sexual harassment has been defined as 'unwanted sexual attention that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment'.

Mate value refers to how a person adds up in the eyes of potentially interested others as a romantic partner. Research shows that people make mate value judgements based on three things (1) how attractive another person is (2) how warm and caring another person is, and (3) how much wealth and influence another person has. Because people try to maximise the mate value of their romantic partners, it is predicted that people who have low mate value will be perceived as more sexually harassing than people who have high mate value.

In this context power refers to the influence and control that one person may have over another person. For example, your boss has a degree of power over you. Because people with power over others can use that power to get what they want, and by doing so limit the options of those over whom they have power, it is predicted that people in positions of power over others will be perceived as more sexually harassing than those who don't have power over others.

Men and women have different minimal investment in reproduction. For men, the minimum investment is the act of copulation, while for women this investment is nine months growing and sustaining an unborn child. Because of this, women are generally pickier in who they choose to mate with than men, and men are generally more sexually orientated than women. Stemming from this, it is predicted that female participants will perceive more sexual harassment than male participants.

Manipulations and Measures

Both mate value and power were manipulated in this study by giving participants different descriptions of people with whom they imagined they interacted with. The high mate value condition described John/Mary as attractive and ambitious, while the low mate value condition described John/Mary as unattractive and un-ambitious. Similarly, in the high power condition John/Mary was the participant's boss, while in the low power condition John/Mary worked at a different company. The effects of gender were examined by using both male and female participants. When the results are analysed comparisons will be made between the sexes.

Sexual harassment was measured using six scales that measure feelings that are related to sexual harassment.

As well as measuring sexual harassment some personal data was collected relating to attitudes and experiences with socio-sexual behaviour in the workplace, as well as self perceived level of attractiveness. This data will be used to run moderator analyses. Moderator analyses will assess whether the level of sexual harassment perceived in the different conditions of the experiment is dependent on the level other variables, such as previous experience with socio-sexual behaviour in the workplace, and self perceived levels of attractiveness.

Implications of the Research

As stated above, it is hoped that this research will provide insight into factors that influence perceptions of sexual harassment in a workplace setting. This knowledge will contribute to what we know about sexual harassment and what causes perceptions of sexual harassment. In a more applied sense, this information could be used to guide sexual harassment policy and training, and minimise instances of sexual harassment in workplaces. If we know what causes sexual harassment, then we can take steps to prevent it.

Contact Details

This research is being conducted by Michael O'Connell mcc84@student.canterbury.ac.nz under the supervision of Garth Fletcher garth.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz

Please contact either Michael or Garth if you have any further questions or concerns relating to this research.