Behavioral Responses to Sexual Harassment: Intentions versus Reality

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Sexual harassment is a serious societal problem across multiple societal spheres, including sport, affecting 1 in 2 women (Fitzgerald & Omerod, 1993; Pedersen et al., 2009) and negatively affecting their work and health outcomes (Chan et al., 2006; Willness et al., 2007). When harassment does occur, the onus is often on the person who is harassed to report the offense. This is a daunting proposition because doing so usually evokes fear rather than anger and negatively affects the victims’ work, psychological, and health outcomes (Bergman et al., 2002; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). As a result, sexual harassment offenses often go unreported (Knapp et al., 1997). This dynamic has led researchers and policy makers to increasingly call on bystanders to react to and report sexual harassment they observe (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005). This approach has several advantages, and although the number of studies is scarce, there is some evidence that sexual harassment observers intend to respond to the incident (Benavides Espinoza, 2009; Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999).

The question is, however, will bystanders actually take action? While study participants report that they intend to do so (Benavides Espinoza, 2009; Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999), there is some evidence that people’s intentions do not always match their actual behaviors. For instance, Dunn and Ashton-James (2008) found that people’s anticipated reactions to tragic events (e.g., natural disasters and human violence) was significantly greater than how they responded when actually confronting those occurrences. Similar findings have been observed for people’s reactions to racist comments (Kawakami et al., 2009) and their reactions to harassing comments in an interview (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). These dynamics are explained, at least in part, by people’s implicit and explicit attitudes to stressful events. When people are provided hypothetical situations, such as how they might respond to observing sexual harassment, they are likely to adopt a deliberative approach (Dunn & Ashton-James, 2008), and therefore, their explicit, gender-egalitarian attitudes are likely to shape their affective and behavioral responses. On the other hand, when faced with a situation in which they actually observe sexual harassment, people’s immediate affective and behavioral responses are likely to reveal their implicit sexist attitudes (see Kawakami et al., 2009, for similar findings with respect to race). Thus, the differences in how people anticipate they will react in a situation and how they actually do are likely a function of explicit and implicit attitudes toward women.

The purpose of this study was to examine the possibility that people would overestimate their affective and behavioral responses to observing sexual harassment. Consistent with previous research in this area (Dunn & Ashton-James, 2008; Kawakami et al., 2009), participants were divided into two groups: forecasters (i.e., persons who read scenarios and estimated how they would respond in that situation) and experiencers (i.e., persons who actually observed events unfold and then responded accordingly). Within each of those groups, participants observed (or read about) one of two scenarios: the first, which included two men disparaging a woman colleague for refusing dating requests, and the second, which was a control condition where the comments were not made. After the participants observed (or read about) the harassment, we measured their emotional distress and social rejection of the harassers (see also Kawakami et al., 2009). We predicted that forecasters who read about the sexual harassment would report more distress than were forecasters who did not, while experiencers’ distress was not expected to be influenced by the presence (or lack thereof) of the sexual harassment comment (hypothesis 1). We further predicted that participant gender would moderate these relationships such that women’s negative reactions would be stronger than would men’s (hypothesis 2). Finally, we hypothesized that emotional distress would influence social rejection of the harasser among people who heard (or read about) the sexually harassing comment, but not among people who did not hear the comment (hypothesis 3).

Students (N = 206) at a large, public institution voluntarily participated in the study. The study hypotheses were tested through a 2 (role: experiencer, forecaster) x 2 (comment: sexual harassment, no comment) x 2 (participant gender) design. In groups approximating 25, persons in the experience condition entered the laboratory where they were introduced to three confederates (two men and one woman; all White) and instructed that they would be participating in a decision making task. Shortly thereafter, the woman left the room to retrieve additional materials.
needed for the study. It was at this time that the comment manipulation took place. In the sexual harassment condition, the two men began a dialogue concerning the woman when she left the room. Specifically, Male # 1 said, "She is such a bitch! I cannot stand her." Male #2 then asked, "Why is that?", to which Male #1 responded, "She thinks she is so hot. I asked her out, but she said no." Male #2 then concluded the exchange by commenting "I hear ya, man." A manipulation check confirmed that all participants were aware of the comment. After this time, the female confederate reentered the room with the questionnaires, which were distributed to the participants. In the no comment condition, the female confederate left the room to pick up the needed materials, but the two male confederates waited silently for her return. In both conditions, experiencers then completed the questionnaire, which requested them to provide their demographics, respond to items measuring their emotional distress, and to indicate with which of the confederates they would want to work for the remainder of the task. Upon completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to verbally express their selection for with whom they had chosen to work. At that point, the experimental manipulation was complete, and the participants were debriefed. In the other part of the study, students in the forecasting condition were given one of two scenarios to read and were then asked complete the questionnaire. The vignettes described the "sexual harassment" condition and "no comment" conditions previously outlined. After completing the task, participants were debriefed and excused.

Results of an analysis of variance supported the first hypothesis. Experiencers’ emotional distress did not vary if they heard the sexually harassing comment relative to if they did not (M = 2.72, SD = 1.14, and M = 3.09, SD = .95, respectively). This was not the case among forecasters, however, as participants who read about the sexually harassing comment reported more negative affect (M = 4.09, SD = 1.53) than did their counterparts who did not read of such a comment (M = 3.33, SD = 1.20), d = .56. The second hypothesis was also supported, as gender’s primary influence was on the emotional distress of forecasters and experiencers who heard (read about) the sexually harassing comment. The magnitude of the differences was larger for women (M = 4.40, SD = 1.88, and M = 2.82, SD = .83, d = 1.16) than it was for men (M = 3.97, SD = 1.37, and M = 2.81, SD = 1.20, d = .90). Thus, women were more likely than men to overestimate how emotionally distressed they would be when personally witnessing the sexual harassment.

Finally, for participants who heard the harassing comment, emotional distress was positively associated with choosing to work with the victim over the harassers, r (105) = .32, p < .01. For those who did not hear the sexually harassing comment, emotional distress was not related to social rejection of the harasser, r (98) = -.05, p = .62. Thus, the third prediction was supported.

Observers have increasingly been seen as central figures in terms of both reporting the harassment and ultimately ameliorating its prevalence in the workplace. Results from this study, however, suggest that such a position may be overly optimistic. When personally witnessing a sexual harassment event, participants did not experience the emotional distress they had anticipated, and ultimately, social rejection of the harassers did not take place. These results cast doubt as to any actions that observers might take in response to the sexual harassment they witness. Training and educational efforts are needed to better equip people to respond.