

A Male Perpetrator's Sexual Orientation Affects Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Towards Women

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BACKGROUND

- Very little research has examined gay men's harassment of women, even though such harassment is a noted phenomenon in feminist and LGBT circles (Strathman, 2014).
- Existing findings suggest perpetrators' gender and sexuality influences perceived harassment severity:
 - Behavior towards female victims is less likely to be perceived as harassment if the perpetrator is a heterosexual female than a lesbian (e.g., Carlucci & Golom, 2016).
 - Sexual harassment is viewed as less severe when it is perpetrated by a woman than a man (Runtz & O'Donnell, 2003; Shechory Bitton & Shaul, 2013).
- Consistent with these findings, gay men's harassment of women may be perceived as less severe than heterosexual men's harassment, for two reasons:
 - Sexual harassment is motivated by a need for power and control, but lay beliefs convey that it is motivated by sexual attraction (Mackinnon, 2003; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004); thus, gay man may be perceived as not motivated to harass women.
 - Lay beliefs also continue to support implicit inversion theory (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Mitchell & Ellis, 2011), the belief that "homosexuals are similar to opposite-sex heterosexuals" (Deaux & Kite, 1987, p. 83); thus, if they are equated to heterosexual females, gay male perpetrators may be perceived as incapable of harassing women.

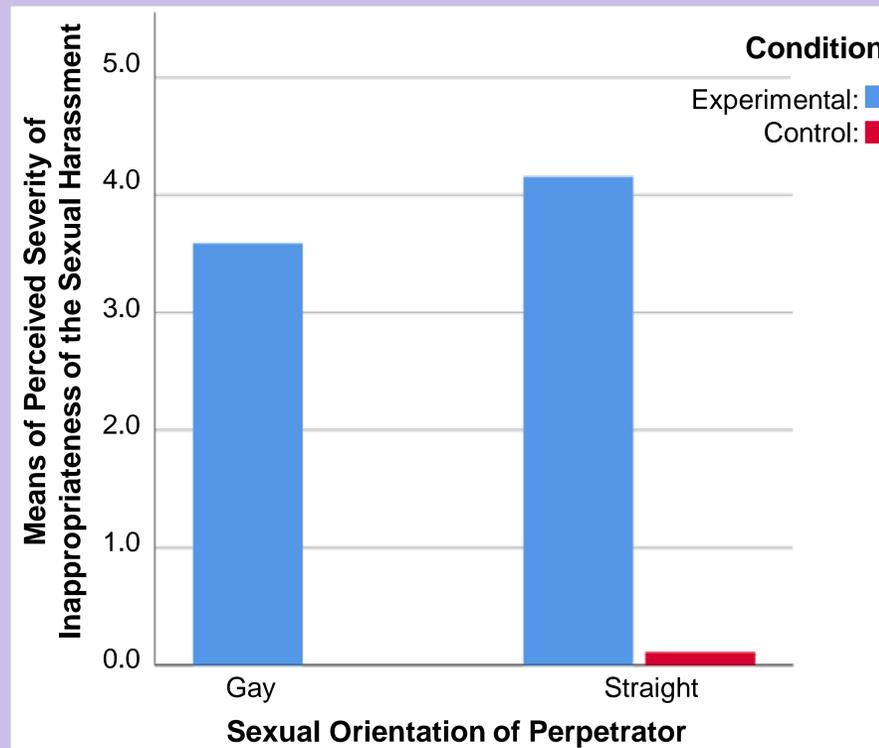
HYPOTHESES

- H1: In conditions where the perpetrator is labeled as gay, the sexual harassment will be perceived as less severe than in conditions where he is labeled as straight.
- H2: In conditions where the perpetrator is labeled as gay, he will be perceived as more feminine and less masculine than in conditions where he is labeled as straight.

METHOD

- Written scenarios were used to simulate a situation in which a man named Matthew or Michael, introduced as either straight or gay, sexually harasses a woman named Ashley or Jessica, respectively.
- Used a 2(Michael or Matthew)x2(Gay or Straight)x2(Experimental or Control) factorial design with the between-subjects factors being the character name and scenario (Michael or Matthew; rear slap or breast pat, respectively), the sexual orientation of the perpetrator, and the condition of the scenario.
- The study was conducted online using Qualtrics & took approximately four minutes to complete.
- Participants were recruited through the Ramapo College Participant Pool and Amazon Mechanical Turk ($N=383$).
- Participants were 61.3% female, 69.3% of participants were white, and 91.6% were heterosexual. Participants were aged 18 to 76 ($M=27.2$, $SD=11.97$).
- The survey featured:
 - Two manipulation checks to assess that participant accurately read the scenario and character description.
 - A measure for the perceived severity of inappropriateness for the scenario, answered by a Likert scale (0 to 5).
 - A measure for the perceived sexual attraction of Matthew/Michael towards Jessica/Ashley, answered by a Likert scale (0 to 5).
 - A personality scale for Matthew/Michael to measure participant beliefs in implicit inversion theory.
 - Demographics: age, gender, sexual orientation, and race of participant.

FIG. 1: PERCEIVED SEVERITY OF SCENARIO INAPPROPRIATENESS



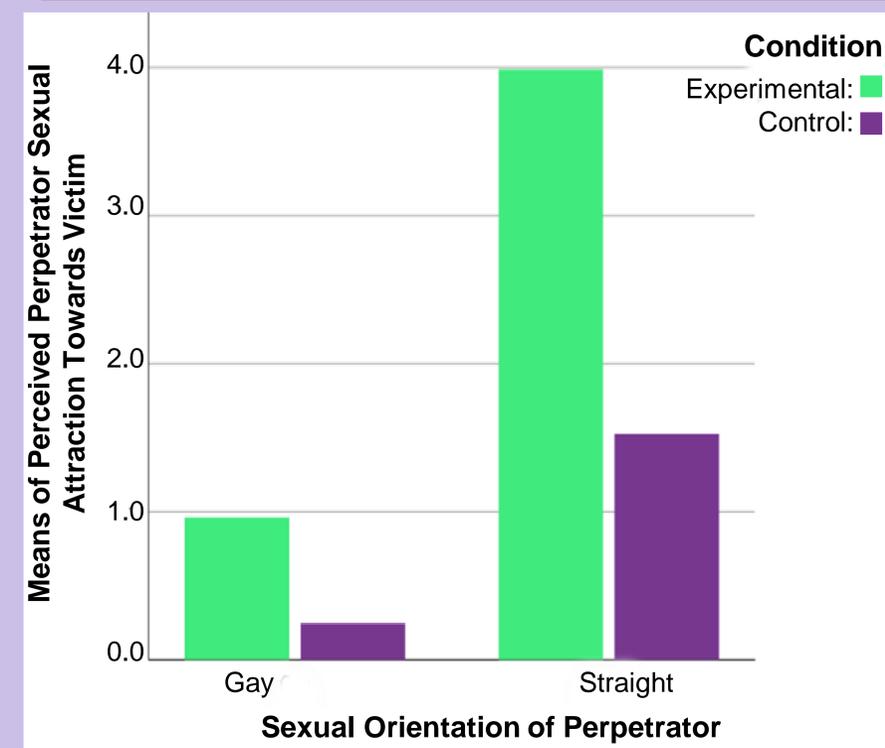
EXAMPLE SCENARIO (MATTHEW)

Matthew and Ashley are sitting outside at a bus stop waiting for the bus. They begin to talk about the weather, current events, and how they spend their free time. Ashley asks Matthew what he did this past weekend, and Matthew says he bought new clothes. Ashley replies that she also bought clothes last weekend [CONTROL: and then she leaves] OR [EXPERIMENTAL: and got the shirt she's currently wearing. Matthew compliments her, saying the shirt looks great on her, and playfully pats her breast. Ashley expresses discomfort with the pat, and then her bus arrives and she leaves.]

RESULTS

- Significant results were found for severity of inappropriateness, but significant results were found for Matthew cases (aka, breast pat), where "gay" experimental scenarios ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.42$) were seen as significantly less severe than "straight" experimental scenarios ($M=4.14$, $SD=1.01$), $F(1, 191) = 5.03$, $p<.05$ (See Figure 1).
- For perceived sexual attraction, a sexual orientation and condition interaction indicated that participants found Michael/Matthew to be significantly more sexually attracted to the victim in experimental conditions than in control conditions, even when he was labeled as gay, $F(1, 379) = 72.77$, $p<.001$ (See Figure 2).
- Participants rated Michael/Matthew as significantly less masculine $F(1, 381)=18.55$, $p<.001$ when he was labeled as gay ($M=2.2$, $SD=1.32$) than when he was labeled as straight ($M=2.8$, $SD=1.32$) and significantly more feminine $F(1,381) = 71.58$, $p<.001$ in scenarios where he was labeled as gay ($M=1.88$, $SD=1.36$) than in scenarios where he was labeled as straight ($M=0.84$, $SD=1.36$).

FIG. 2: PERCEIVED PERPETRATOR ATTRACTION TOWARDS VICTIM



DISCUSSION

- H1 was partially supported; Matthew (breast pat) scenarios were seen as less severe when Matthew was labeled as gay than when he was labeled as straight. However, Michael (rear pat) scenarios found no significant difference.
 - This may be because a pat on the rear could be seen as more socially acceptable than a pat on the breast.
 - Still, this provides evidence that individuals may judge the severity of sexual harassment based on the intent of the perpetrator, rather than on the harm experienced by the victim.
- Regardless of sexual orientation, Matthew/Michael was perceived as being more sexually attracted to Ashley/Jessica in experimental conditions than in control.
 - This provides insight on how individuals may believe that sexual attraction motivates sexual harassment (rather than power and control), as well as how individuals may view the permanence of a gay sexual orientation.
- H2 was supported, and there was no interaction between experimental/control conditions and the perception of masculinity/femininity in Matthew/Michael.
 - The findings are consistent with previous research, for example: Duran et al. (2007) which found that participants' stereotypical expectations of gay men remain the same, even when observing stereotype-inconsistent behavior from a gay man.
- Limitations: online, and mostly white and heterosexual participants.
- This study is the first of its kind for researching how the sexual orientation of a perpetrator affects the perception of sexual harassment towards a cross-gender victim. Future research could include investigating how situations involving a male victim and a lesbian perpetrator are perceived.