
Identifying Sexual Harassment: A Classroom Activity

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We created a classroom activity to illustrate the complexity involved in identifying sexual harassment. In the activity, students decided whether 6 fictional scenarios constituted sexual harassment. The activity stimulates animated discussion, and evaluation data indicate that it received positive feedback from students and refined students' conceptualizations of sexual harassment. We used this activity in teaching courses in Psychology of Women and Sexual Behavior, although instructors can use it in any course that covers sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment exploded into people's consciousness in 1991 when Anita Hill testified against then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas during his Senate confirmation hearings. Since then, awareness of sexual harassment has permeated corporate boardrooms, employee break rooms, and college classrooms.

Why is sexual harassment relevant to psychology courses? Because psychology emphasizes understanding and predicting human behavior, psychology may be uniquely positioned to explore issues related to sexual harassment, including individual and situational variables that affect perceptions of sexual harassment, individual differences in people's likelihood to sexually harass others, the effects of being sexually harassed, and techniques used to prevent sexual harassment (Frazier, Cochran, & Olson, 1995; see also Cohen & Gutek, 1985; Koss, 1990; Paludi & Barickman, 1998; Riger, 1991). Sexual harassment also illustrates other concepts in psychology, such as the importance of labeling in perceptions and reporting of other forms of sexual victimization (rape, domestic abuse; see Koss, 1985) or the importance of operational definitions in research and public policy. Finally, if psychology instructors want to familiarize students with the psychological literature, sexual harassment has been the focus of considerable research in the last generation. A cursory search of titles in the PsycINFO database using the key words *sexual harassment* located 661 articles between 1977 and 2001.

Despite the importance of discussing sexual harassment in courses like the psychology of women, sexual behavior, social psychology, industrial/organizational psychology, forensic psychology, and counseling psychology, it may be challenging for college instructors to clarify what behaviors constitute sexual harassment. Contrary to what students may assume, definitions of sexual harassment vary among organizations. For example, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defined *harassment* as sexual requests in exchange for job-related privileges (e.g., quid pro quo harassment) or conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile working environment (Guidelines on Discrimination Be-

cause of Sex, Sexual Harassment, 1980; see also EEOC, 1990; Notice of Proposed Rule Making, 1993). The American Psychological Association (APA; 1992) defined *sexual harassment* as sexual conduct performed in connection with a psychologist's duties that is unwelcome, that creates a hostile workplace environment, or that would be considered abusive by a reasonable person in the context. Instructors might contrast these policies with the harassment policy at their educational institution (see also Crocker, 1983; Paludi, 1996).

Another reason it may be difficult for instructors to define sexual harassment is that the U.S. Supreme Court has recently made several changes in the legal guidelines regarding sexual harassment. For example, employers can be held liable for same-sex harassment (*Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore*, 1998), and educational institutions receiving federal funds can be held liable for damages in cases involving student peer harassment (*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 1999). Employers can also be held liable for workplace harassment even if the employer was not told about the harassment (*Faragher v. City of Boca Raton*, 1998) or even if the worker was not punished for resisting sexual advances (*Burlington Industries v. Ellerth*, 1998).

The task of defining sexual harassment is further complicated by contextual and individual differences in perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g., Brooks & Perot, 1991; Cohen & Gutek, 1985; Jaschik & Fretz, 1991). For example, behavior is more likely to be labeled *harassment* when the behavior is surprising, when the perpetrator has harassed the target repeatedly, or when the perpetrator behaves in a similar harassing manner toward other people (Pryor, 1985). Studies suggest that there are also age and other differences in the perception of sexual harassment. Undergraduates are generally less likely to perceive behaviors as harassing than graduate students, faculty, university staff, or women employed in nonacademic settings (for a review, see Frazier et al., 1995). One exception to this pattern is that undergraduates are more likely than graduate students to perceive a behavior performed by a person with higher status as sexual harassment (Frazier et al., 1995). Interestingly, individual and contextual differences are more apparent with respect to ambiguous behaviors (e.g., sexual remarks, sexual gazes, flirting, nonsexual touching) than with respect to more extreme behaviors (e.g., unwanted requests for dates, sexual touching; Frazier et al., 1995).

In short, defining sexual harassment is a complex task. Most organizations make their own harassment policies, and legal guidelines regarding harassment are still evolving in the courts.

We created our activity to bring these complexities to life in our Sexual Behavior and Psychology of Women classes. Students judged whether six fictional scenarios contained sexual harassment. To do so, students must conceptualize sexual harassment broadly, considering issues such as peer harassment, harassment committed by a lower status person, and men being harassed by women (Frazier et al., 1995). Like other techniques used in teaching human sexuality (e.g., Byers, Grenier, & Lawrance, 1992; Rosen & Petty, 1989; Walters, 1993), this activity stimulates animated class discussion and encourages students to think more deeply about their values and other relevant issues (for other articles on teaching sexuality, see Hawkins, 1993; Herold, 1997; Moore, 1988; Shrum & Halgin, 1985; Watts, 1977).

Activity

Materials

Six scenarios illustrated different issues related to sexual harassment (see the Appendix for the complete instructions and scenarios). The scenarios varied in terms of the degree to which the potentially harassing behavior was intentionally directed at the target (Scenario 1), the gender of the individuals performing and receiving the potentially harassing behavior (Scenarios 2 and 6), the relative status of the potential harasser (Scenario 3), the degree to which the same behavior could have been perceived differently by different people (Scenario 4), the desirability of the potential harasser (Scenario 4 vs. 5), and potential harassment in an educational setting (Scenario 6). The scenarios at the end of the activity act as foils to the earlier scenarios, revisiting the same behavior in a slightly different context (i.e., Scenario 5 vs. Scenario 4, Scenario 6 vs. Scenario 1). This progression highlights the inconsistencies and individual differences in students' perceptions of sexual harassment.

Procedure

Students individually read the six fictional scenarios and indicated whether they thought sexual harassment was present in each scenario. This step required approximately 10 to 15 min of class time. Then students compared and contrasted several different policy statements regarding harassment, including the EEOC's Guidelines on Discrimination Because of Sex, Sexual Harassment (1980), the APA's (1992) definition of sexual harassment, and our university's sexual harassment policy. After reading these guidelines, students discussed the scenarios, first in groups of three to four, then in a full-class discussion. We explicitly told students that they did not need to come to a consensus (within their small groups or in the full-class discussion) regarding their judgments. Both the small group and full-class discussions focused on differences in students' judgments and their reasoning, particularly any inconsistencies in their reasoning among the scenarios. The small group discussion took 10 to 15 min and the full-class discussion took 10 to 20 min.

In the full-class discussion, students indicated by a show of hands whether they thought each scenario did or did not

constitute sexual harassment. We also discussed why they made each judgment, especially the specific elements of each situation that they thought constituted (or did not constitute) sexual harassment. As the discussion progressed, students struggled to articulate a definition of sexual harassment that was consistent across the scenarios. For example, the majority of students believed Scenario 1 constituted harassment but that the complainant in Scenario 6 was being unreasonable. This inconsistency begged the question of how female swimsuit pictures contributed to a hostile environment, whereas a photo of two nude men (albeit showing only the sides of the body) did not.

Comparing students' judgments among the scenarios also elicited discussion of contextual effects in perceptions of harassment. We discussed how people's perceptions may differ in work versus educational settings. We also asked students to consider how their perceptions of the scenarios might or might not have changed depending on the gender of the individuals involved. Similarly, we asked students to consider how their judgments might or might not have changed given more information about the context of each scenario (e.g., In Scenario 6, would it matter if the office was in the art department or the chemistry department or if the teaching assistant was the photographer?).

As these issues arose, we periodically had students refer back to the various guidelines, to see if they would help resolve any of the conflicts. For some scenarios, some of the policy statements were helpful (e.g., with respect to Scenario 1, the EEOC's Guidelines on Harassment (1993) state that harassment need not be intentionally directed at a person). With respect to other issues, the policies are notably silent. For example in Scenario 2, is feeling ambivalent about a behavior sufficient to consider the behavior "unwelcome"? In Scenario 4, in which two people receive the same behavior from a superior, is it reasonable to conclude that only the person who finds the behavior offensive is being harassed?

Evaluation

We evaluated both students' perceptions of the activity and changes in their knowledge after participating in the activity.

Student Perceptions

Sixty-three students enrolled in our Sexual Behavior and Psychology of Women courses evaluated the activity using eight closed-ended items and three open-ended items. Table 1 lists the items, response scales, and descriptive statistics for the closed-ended items. In general, students responded positively to the activity. Students' responses to the closed-ended items indicated that they thought the activity increased their understanding of issues related to sexual harassment and that it was useful in prompting them to think about issues related to sexual harassment. They also recommended that we use the exercise again and that instructors who teach other courses that cover sexual harassment should use the exercise.

Students also responded to three open-ended items that asked them to describe what it was like to participate in the exercise and to describe the best and worst part of participat-

Table 1. Students' Perceptions: Evaluation Items, Response Scales, and Median Responses

Item	Response Scale	Mdn	SD
How much did you learn about issues related to sexual harassment as a result of this exercise?	1 (<i>very little</i>) to 7 (<i>a great deal</i>)	5.00	1.41
In terms of understanding issues related to sexual harassment, how enjoyable was this exercise?	1 (<i>very enjoyable</i>) to 7 (<i>not at all enjoyable</i>)	2.00	1.77
The instructor should use this exercise again in future semesters.	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	7.00	1.26
How useful was this exercise in prompting you to think about issues related to sexual harassment?	1 (<i>not at all useful</i>) to 7 (<i>very useful</i>)	7.00	0.89
I learned more about issues related to sexual harassment today than if I had not participated in the exercise.	1 (<i>strongly agree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly disagree</i>)	2.00	1.86
Today's exercise was a waste of my time.	1 (<i>strongly agree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly disagree</i>)	7.00	1.52
Instructors who teach other, related courses should use this exercise when they discuss sexual harassment.	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	6.00	1.32
Participating in the exercise increased my understanding of issues related to sexual harassment	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	6.00	1.36

Note. Medians are reported because the distributions were negatively skewed.

ing in the exercise. Many students (46%) noted that the activity was a fun, thought-provoking way to illustrate the complexity of sexual harassment and the need for an unambiguous conceptualization of sexual harassment. The majority (67%) of students commented that the best part of the exercise was observing the diversity in their peers' perceptions and reasoning. Ironically, 34% of students expressed frustration with the exercise, precisely because it did not provide concrete answers to the issues raised in the scenarios.

Learning Evaluation

A few weeks prior to participating in the exercise, 40 students responded to the open-ended item "What is sexual harassment?" Immediately following the activity, students responded to this item again and one additional item (i.e., "What did you learn about sexual harassment from participating in this exercise?"). The second author coded both the pretest and posttest data. Because the posttest had an extra item, the second author was not blind to whether the responses were from the pretest or the posttest.

Before participating in the activity, the majority of students (62%) defined *sexual harassment* as a physical or verbal act that was unwelcome or made the recipient uncomfortable. No students mentioned a hostile work environment as a component of sexual harassment, nor did they mention the disruptive effect harassment could have on the workplace.

After participating in the activity, students conceptualized harassment with greater precision. Although they still acknowledged that sexual harassment could consist of physical and verbal acts (23% and 38%, respectively), 58% of students explicitly noted specific behaviors that they considered sexual harassment, such as flirting and sexual advances. More students insisted that the behavior must be unwanted (50% vs. 31%) or make the recipient feel uncomfortable (60% vs. 40%). In addition, 25% of students included a hostile environment in their definitions of harassment, and 35% noted that harassing behavior could interfere with work-related performance.

The activity also increased students' awareness of individual and contextual differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. When asked what they had learned about sexual harassment after participating in the exercise, 60% of stu-

dents reported that perceptions of harassment are subjective and can vary widely across people. In addition, some students specifically noted that sexual harassment is difficult to define (18%) and is a vague concept (25%). These data suggest that the activity was successful in changing students' conceptualization of sexual harassment.

Conclusions

Identifying sexual harassment in fictional scenarios helps students understand the complexity involved in identifying sexual harassment and provides a good foundation for discussing related material in subsequent classes (e.g., recent changes in the legal guidelines regarding harassment, research on perceptions of harassment). Students leave class with a better appreciation of both the importance of a clear definition of sexual harassment and of the inherent subjectivity involved in applying those standards to everyday situations.

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Appendix

Do any of the following scenarios involve sexual harassment?

If so, identify what elements of the situation make it sexual harassment. Who is doing the harassing and who is being harassed? What should be done to remedy the situation?

If not, identify what the situation is lacking. In other words, what would need to be changed for the situation to constitute sexual harassment? What could have been done to prevent the situation? What can be done to remedy the situation now?

1. Lucy works on the assembly line at an auto parts factory. She eats lunch in the company break room every day. Be-

cause most of the workers are men, the walls of the break room are adorned with swimsuit pictures of women. Although the photos and the conversations they generate make her very uncomfortable, Lucy doesn’t complain to her supervisor. Eventually she starts skipping lunch to avoid the atmosphere in the break room. As a result, she begins to have trouble staying alert on the line.

2. Dave’s boss, Ms. Andrews, consistently compliments him on his clothes, his hair, and his muscular body, although she does not make similar comments to the rest of her staff. Dave finds her attentions both flattering and unnerving.
3. Scott’s new secretary begins to attract his attention. Although her performance in the office is exemplary, she wears very provocative clothes and seems to take any opportunity to touch Scott or brush too closely past him in the hall. Then he notices that she has a tendency to shift office conversation from business to personal topics. Late one afternoon, she suggests they continue their work over dinner. He declines but her attentions persist. Uncomfortable with the situation and afraid of what she might claim if he complained about her behavior, he requests a transfer to another work group, despite the resulting pay cut.
4. Carrie’s boss, Mr. Matthews, asks her out repeatedly, despite her consistent refusals. Although her co-workers tell her she should report his behavior, Carrie considers it only a minor annoyance and takes no action. Mr. Matthews also makes repeated requests to date Molly, one of Carrie’s co-workers. When Mr. Matthews ignores Molly’s refusals, she reports him to their supervisor.
5. After working on a large project together for six months, Jake and Anna became good friends. At the conclusion of the project, they returned to their regular responsibilities in their different work groups. Although they have little work-related contact in the office anymore, Jake continues to call her several times a week. Now their conversations are about personal rather than professional topics. Suspecting that Jake might want to start dating her, Anna tells him she needs to keep their relationship professional. Despite this clarification, Jake sends her flowers at the office and buys her expensive gifts, clearly in an attempt to change her mind.
6. Struggling in class, Chris visits the teaching assistant’s office for help with an assignment. The office is sparsely furnished and decorated with the exception of a large black-and-white photo of two naked men, although only the sides of their body are revealed. Appalled that this photo could be displayed in a university office, Chris complains to the head of the department.

Notes

1. We thank Tara Gray for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.
2. Send correspondence to Laura Madson, Department of Psychology, Box 30001/Dept. 3452, Las Cruces, NM 88003; email: lmadson@nmsu.edu.

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