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Female Nurses and Educators Reactions to Sexual Harassment Charges: A Cross-Cultural Perspective
Sociedad Interamericana de Psicología
Austin, Organismo Internacional

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=28438105
HEADLINE: Woman Says Clinton Made Advances in '91. An Arkansas woman said today that President Clinton made sexual advances to her in a hotel room during a conference in 1991, when he was Governor of Arkansas. The White House denied the accusation and said Mr. Clinton did not recall meeting the woman, Paula Jones (New York Times, February 12, 1994).

In recent years, the print and broadcast media have provided the public with a constant stream of sexual harassment allegations and refutations. People sift through these amalgams of "she said/he said" information and arrive at some marked differences in opinions about whom to believe, what took place, and what should be done about it. For example, a Gallup Poll (1994) conducted a few months after the surfacing of the Paula Jones allegations against former President Clinton found that 27% of the respondents believed her allegations were completely or mostly true, whereas 57% believed that they were completely or mostly false. One potential source of variability in public opinion is, of course, that people are exposed to varying accounts of these high profile cases. Cultural factors also affect how people construe sexual harassment (Barak, 1997; Blumenthal, 1998; Pryor et al., 1997; Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999). These same high profile sexual harassment cases that are the source of so much media attention in the United States are widely covered in the international press as well.

Female Nurses’ and Educators’ Reactions to Sexual Harassment Charges: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract
This study is a direct replication of a previous study involving Brazilian and U.S. college students’ reactions to a written account of sexual harassment accusations. In the current study, the participants were female middle class nurses and public school teachers. Specifically, 155 U.S. professional women (95% White) and 173 Brazilian counterparts read a fictitious newspaper article describing an alleged case of sexual harassment by a male instructor toward a female undergraduate, in which power, romantic interest, and discrimination concerns were manipulated. Next, participants rated the degree to which his actions were punishable. Overall, U.S. professional women advocated more punishment to the alleged harasser than did Brazilian professional women. These findings are in keeping with past studies using college students. Conditions that increase or reduce the punishment ratings are also discussed.

Keywords: Power relations; discrimination against women; romance; sexual harassment; punishment.

Reações de Enfermeiras e Professoras sobre Assédio Sexual: Uma Perspectiva Transcultural

Este estudo é a réplica de uma pesquisa anterior sobre a reação de universitárias e universitários ao relato escrito de acusações de assédio sexual. No presente estudo, a amostra foi composta por enfermeiras de classe média e professoras de escola pública. Especificamente, 155 profissionais norte-americanas (95% brancas) e 173 brasileiras leram um artigo de jornal fictício que descrevia um suposto caso de assédio sexual por um professor, numa história envolvendo poder, interesse romântico e discriminação. Em seguida, as participantes classificaram o grau de punição merecido pelas ações do assediador. De forma geral, as profissionais norte-americanas defenderam mais a punição para o suposto agressor do que as brasileiras. Estes resultados estão em consonância com estudos anteriores com estudantes universitários e universitárias. Também são discutidas aqui as condições que aumentam ou reduzem o grau de punição.

Palavras-chave: Relações de poder; discriminação contra mulheres; romance; assédio sexual; punição.
The literature on cross-cultural factors affecting sexual harassment cases remains scarce, because the mere discussion of sexual harassment can jeopardize a woman's career in some cultural settings (Hardman & Heidelberg, 1996; Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999). Most of what we know internationally about sexual harassment comes from European samples (Gruber, 1997). As a result, the findings reflect an affluent, industrialized, and individualistic context, whereas the vast majority of the world population is poor and collectivistic (Triandis et al., 1993). Another major problem in cross-cultural sexual harassment research is the lack of standardized research instruments across studies, making generalizations problematic (Barak, 1997; Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999).

The purpose of the current study was to examine reactions to sexual harassment charges among Brazilian professionals, who live in a poor and collectivistic country (Triandis et al., 1993), from which comparisons with other Latin countries may emerge. Brazil, like the rest of Latin America, is a patriarchal country where women are underpaid, under-represented in the highest strata of organizations, economically dependent on their jobs, and often dominated and exploited by male supervisors (Baldwin & DeSouza, 2001; Neuhouseur, 1989; U.S. Department of State, 1997).

Much of what Brazilians know about sexual harassment comes from the popular press, which defines sexual harassment as “the use of one’s authority [power] to gain sexual favors” (“Assédio,” 1995, p. 81). A survey conducted by Brasmarket (a research center) in 12 major Brazilian cities found that 52% of employed women reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment (“Assédio,” 1995). Moreover, Brazilians seem to perceive less severe forms of sexual harassment, such as gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention, as culturally “normal” due to a rigid patriarchal structure of male privileges (Baldwin & DeSouza, 2001; Pryor et al., 1997; Sgarbieri, 1997). Brazilian women frequently engage in courtship, e.g., trying to be more private and intimate with the harasser over the recipient affects perceptions of sexual harassment, with the behavior initiated by a superior being perceived as more severe than the same behavior by a peer or coworker (Blumenthal, 1998). On the other hand, potential harassers may disguise sexual advances as courtship, e.g., trying to be more private with the target. The literature on sexual harassment has recently begun to explore the link between content emphasis of a newspaper story and the background of an audience might be career in some cultural settings (Hardman & Heidelberg, 1996; Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999). Most of what we know internationally about sexual harassment comes from European samples (Gruber, 1997). As a result, the findings reflect an affluent, industrialized, and individualistic context, whereas the vast majority of the world population is poor and collectivistic (Triandis et al., 1993). Another major problem in cross-cultural sexual harassment research is the lack of standardized research instruments across studies, making generalizations problematic (Barak, 1997; Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999).

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FEMALE NURSES' AND EDUCATORS' REACTIONS TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT CHARGES: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

DeSouza et al. (1998) also found a country by discrimination interaction, suggesting that discrimination concerns increased Brazilian students' understanding of the ill effects of sexual harassment on women. The ratings for U.S. students, however, were not affected by the addition of discrimination concerns to the story, possibly because U.S. students are frequently exposed to such information through institutional policies created to combat sexual harassment on college campuses (Kelley, 2000), whereas Brazilian colleges have no such policies in place.

Lastly, DeSouza et al. (1998) reported a significant three-way interaction of power by discrimination by romance. Romance lowered the punishment ratings. In the absence of a romantic interest, discrimination concerns increased the punishment ratings when a teaching assistant was involved but not when a professor was involved. In addition, students deemed the professor's behavior inappropriate whether discrimination concerns were mentioned or not. The authors suggested that a perpetrator's romantic interest toward the target made the sexual advances appear appropriate rather than coercive.

In the current study, we explored these same research issues, using the same measures, tasks, and analyses as in DeSouza et al.'s (1998) study, but this time using samples of working women from traditionally female occupations. In addition, whereas DeSouza and his colleagues used samples of college students from southern Brazil (whose residents are affluent and mostly of European origin), we used samples of nurses and teachers from northeastern Brazil (whose residents are poor and mostly of African origin). Thus, this study is a direct replication of their study using samples of participants with actual work experience.

Brazilians do not normally consider gender discrimination when thinking about harassment behavior (Pryor et al., 1997). Thus, we anticipated that discrimination concerns might be strongly related to cultural differences. In addition, we anticipated that planned group comparisons of planned group comparisons of Brazilian professional women with U.S. professional women would provide further evidence that the media could importantly enhance the public's understanding of sexual harassment as a form of gender discrimination important because sexual harassment is widespread across cultures (Barak, 1997; Gelfand, Fitts, 1995), with ill consequences on working women, including job losses, psychological and physical distress, as well as being blamed and ostracized (Ramos, Buchanan, & Trujillo, 1996; Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997).

In addition to the above hypotheses, we also advanced two research questions about potential cultural differences between Brazilians and North Americans. First, what is the impact of a patriarchal culture upon perceptions of how formal power relates to sexual harassment? In a myriad of studies conducted in the U.S., sexually harassing behaviors performed by men with higher power have been perceived as more severe than the same behaviors performed by men with lower power (Blumenthal, 1998). Could the perceived legitimacy of male sexual prerogatives affect how harassers who have higher power would be punished more severely than harassers who have lower power?

The Current Study

In the current study, we examined the potential role of power in situations where male harassers have formal power over women. We hypothesized that as formal power increases, Brazilian professional women would generally react more negatively to a potentially sexually harassing behavior than would their U.S. counterparts. The rationale for this prediction is based on the conjecture that Brazilian society is more patriarchal than U.S. society. Consequently, Brazilian professional women might be more likely than their U.S. counterparts to perceive sexually harassing behavior on the professional women as normative.

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harassing behavior, perhaps making romantic intentions salient to them would have no impact on their reactions to the charges of sexual harassment.

In summary, we hypothesized that U.S. professional women would score higher on the punishment scale than would their Brazilian counterparts. We also predicted a country by discrimination interaction, in which Brazilian professional women who did not receive information emphasizing discriminatory concerns would be the least punishing compared to Brazilian professional women who received such concerns and U.S. professional women, regardless of whether they received such concerns or not.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 328 professional women. In the U.S. sample, 155 were from Central Illinois; 108 were public school teachers (mean age=33.38, SD=8.87; 94% White), and 47 were nurses (mean age=34.68, SD=9.45; 96% White). In the Brazilian sample, 173 were from João Pessoa, Paraiba; 88 were public school teachers (mean age=35.68, SD=8.19), and 85 were nurses (mean age=36.22, SD=8.09). Note that race/ethnicity was not asked of the Brazilian sample because inter-racial individuals are very common in this section of Brazil. Although we did not inquire about their social class, their occupations reflect a middle class background. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

**Measures**

We used the same eight hypothetical scenarios and 10 items about the story, which were previously translated into Brazilian Portuguese by DeSouza et al. (1998) using the back-translation procedure to achieve maximal conceptual equivalency. In half of the stories, the alleged harasser was a male professor (high power) and in the other half a male graduate teaching assistant (low power). Two additional conditions were created with 57-word brief paragraphs (each with 57 words or less) emphasized, a) the salience of his romantic interest in a female student; and b) the salience of gender discrimination or not, a) the salience of his romantic interest in a female student and 2) gender discrimination. The ANOVA only yielded significant differences for race/ethnicity X 2 (nurse or teacher) X 2 (Brazil or U.S.) analysis of variance (ANOVA), full factorial model. The eight possible scenarios represented a 2 (high power or low power) X 2 (romance or no romance) X 2 (discrimination or no discrimination) X 2 (nurse or teacher) factorial design. The dependent variable was a punishment index that ranged from 1 (high punishment) to 7 (no punishment at all). A pilot-study of the follow-up items indicated that they were realistic.

**Procedure**

In 1999, the first author collected the data in the U.S., whereas the third author collected the data in Brazil. Respondents were assured confidentiality of their rights as research participants and promised not to report the names of the alleged harassers or other details. The first and third author reserved large rooms to distribute the questionnaires to groups of 15-25 participants in school or hospital settings. Participants were given time to read each scenario and were instructed not to discuss their answers with others during the administration of the questionnaires. Participants randomly received one of eight possible scenarios by varying the order in which the questionnaires were distributed. Each of the scenarios depicted only one scenario. Respondents were given approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaires, which were put inside an envelope and sealed. Upon completion, we thanked and debriefed the participants.

**Results**

The eight possible scenarios represented a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design. The dependent variable was a punishment index that ranged from 1 (high punishment) to 7 (no punishment at all). To test our hypotheses, we used a 2 (high power or low power) X 2 (romance or no romance) X 2 (discrimination or no discrimination) X 2 (nurse or teacher) full factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA), followed by Tukey's post-hoc tests when appropriate. The alpha for family-wise error was .008. The alpha value for each country was determined by the exact method. The Cronbach’s alpha for the U.S. sample (.81 for teachers and .84 for nurses) was comparable to that of the Brazilian sample (.77 for teachers and .78 for nurses).
power=.69). The means for this interaction are available in Table 1. We used a planned comparison analysis to test the hypothesis that Brazilian professional women in the condition where discrimination concerns were not emphasized would yield a lower punishment score as compared to the other three groups. The data supported our second hypothesis. Brazilian professional women in the condition that did not emphasize discrimination concerns recommended the least punishment, with Brazilian professional women in the discrimination concerns condition more closely resembling U.S. professional women, $F(1,323)=26.63$, $p<.01$.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Two-Way Interaction: Country by Discrimination Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Discrimination</td>
<td>5.72 (.84)</td>
<td>4.89 (.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>5.49 (.86)</td>
<td>5.11 (.86)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers within parentheses represent standard deviations. Higher ratings indicate more punishment, based on the index of punishment that ranged from 1 to 7. Different superscripts indicate a significant difference ($p<.01$).

Discussion

We found important similarities and some differences between professionals and college students regarding reactions to sexual harassment charges using fictitious newspaper accounts. While DeSouza et al. (1998) reported that students suggested punishing the professor ($M=5.35$) significantly more than the teaching assistant ($M=4.96$), we found no significant power differences in the current study (both means were 5.29, indicating moderate agreement for the students in our two cultures) excused sexual advances if their motive was romantic (non-hostile) rather than manipulative.

In keeping with DeSouza et al.'s (1998) study, the main result of the present research is that the factor of country, specifically Brazilian and United States, is significant. We found that Brazilian college students viewed the teaching assistant as significantly more punishable than the teaching assistant in the United States ($M=5.35$), while U.S. college students rated the teaching assistant as significantly more punishable than the teaching assistant in Brazil ($M=4.96$). This finding supports our second hypothesis, which predicted that Brazilian professional women would view the teaching assistant as significantly more punishable than the teaching assistant in the United States.

Also consistent with the study by DeSouza et al. (1998) and with our first hypothesis was a significant difference, suggesting that social-sexual harassment is viewed as less punishable in Brazil than in the United States (Baldwin & DeSouza, 1996; DeSouza, Pierce, Zaal, & Parker, 1990). Such male entitlement is also evidenced in ways that emphasized a potentially romantic quality more than did students from other countries. What we see here with samples of Brazilian professional women is that emphasizing the role of perpetrator’s motives serves to make Brazilian professional women view the behavior as less punishable. Thus, romantic interest as an excuse for these behaviors does not seem to differentiate these two cultures across two studies. Students and professional women in Brazil are much more likely to find the teaching assistant guilty than Ecuadorian students, who also rated the victim as significantly less credible and even alleged perpetrator guilty than Ecuadorian students. These authors also reported that students in the U.S. advocated more severe punishment for the teaching assistant and the professor, with our second hypothesis that Brazilian professional women in the U.S. and with our first hypothesis was a significant country difference, suggesting that social-sexual transgressions by males are generally viewed as abusive, discrimination and more like manipulative. What we see here with samples of professional women in ways that emphasized a potentially romantic or seductive behavior, professional women view the behavior as less punishable than students from the U.S. and other countries. What we see here with samples of professional women is that emphasizing the romantic qualities of a professional women, in a tool and a result of male dominance.

In addition, the literature indicates that social-sexual transgressions by males are generally viewed as abusive discrimination and more like manipulative. What we see here with samples of professional women in ways that emphasized a potentially romantic or seductive behavior, professional women view the behavior as less punishable than students from the U.S. and other countries. What we see here with samples of professional women is that emphasizing the romantic qualities of a professional women, in a tool and a result of male dominance.

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Just as in DeSouza et al.'s (1998) study and consistent with our second hypothesis, we found that discrimination concerns interacted with participants' culture/country. This interaction suggests that discrimination concerns help Brazilians view sexual harassment not as innocuous seductive behavior but as a form of gender-based discrimination that has harmful consequences on the target. Such information did not elevate the U.S. ratings among professionals in the current study or among college students in DeSouza et al.'s study. It could be that additional information about possible discrimination concerns appeared rather redundant for U.S. respondents in both studies. At any rate, such information may be promising in educating Brazilians about sexual harassment. Whether such information helps educate individuals from other patriarchal cultures merits further investigation. Future studies should also investigate the reactions of professional males and of men in blue-collar occupations.

Limitations and Conclusions

There are inherent limitations when conducting cross-cultural research. For example, it is almost impossible to recruit women in male-dominated occupations, because few women go into such careers in Brazil or elsewhere in Latin America (Neuhauser, 1989). There is little or no financial support to carry out research on sexual harassment outside North America (Barak, 1997). In addition, researching sexual harassment is not welcomed in patriarchal countries, requiring "patience, negotiation skills, and the ability to persuade cross-cultural colleagues to join the research team" (Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999, p. 782).

Although there are limitations in this study (e.g., we sampled only women in traditional occupations, the U.S. samples were overwhelmingly White, and we could not afford sampling multiple sites across different regions of the U.S. and Brazil), we used standardized scenarios and validated measures of harassment, which allowed us to control for cultural differences. The media covering sexual harassment may educate lay people to understand that sexual harassment is not "part of the job" or "part of the culture." Rather, discrimination concerns interacted with participants' culture/country. The media covering sexual harassment cases may help educate lay people to understand that sexual harassment is not "part of the job" or "part of the culture." Rather, it is a form of gender-based discrimination that has harmful consequences on the target.

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References


O'Donohue (Ed.), Sexual harassment: Theory, research, and treatment (pp. 84-98). Boston, MA, USA: Allyn & Bacon.


New York Times (February 12, 1994). Woman says Clinton made advances in ’91. Section 1, page 8, column 5.


A formal complaint was filed last week with the University Ethics Committee by a female sophomore who alleged that she had been sexually harassed by a male professor. According to university officials, the female claims that the professor gave her repeated unwanted sexual attention throughout a semester. She claims that the behavior began when she sought help from the professor after class. When she went to his office to ask questions before an exam, he continually stared at her breasts, sat very close to her, and made comments about her appearance. She said that throughout the semester his behavior became progressively more obvious and directly sexual. He suggested that he might have more time to help her in the course at night and asked her to come into his office during evening hours. In one of these evening sessions, he put his hands on her shoulders and asked her if she would like to receive a back rub. She tried to tell him that she was not interested in him, but his sexual overtures persisted. Toward the end of the semester he asked her to have dinner with him at an expensive restaurant. When she declined, he acted very disappointed and became very distant. After this she felt uncomfortable asking him for help after class.

He admits romantic interest. When the university ethics committee questioned the professor about his behavior, he admitted that he did have a romantic interest in the student, but argued that he had not done anything inappropriate. He contended that he had always treated her fairly and had helped her no more or less than any other student.

Possible discrimination against women. A representative from Women’s Studies who sits on the Ethics Committee suggested that the professor’s behavior could discourage women from taking his class or from seeking help if they did take his class. In this way, she argued, the professor’s behavior discriminated against women. The Ethics Committee will review the case and render a decision next Thursday.

Appendix B

Punishment Items

* The Ethics Committee should recommend that the professor [teaching assistant] be fired.
* The Ethics Committee should dismiss the complaint as frivolous.
* The professor [teaching assistant] should be suspended without pay from his job for a semester.
* The Ethics Committee should ignore the complaint.