

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

Resumo

Este estudo é a réplica de uma pesquisa anterior sobre a reação de universitários e universitárias brasileiros e norte-americanos ao relato, escrito, de acusações de assédio sexual. No presente estudo, a amostra foi formada 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 de uma estudante universitária 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 uma 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.

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). "All I know is what I read in the papers." - Will Rogers

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.

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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; Neuhouser, 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 conflict avoidance, denial and even co-optation through complementary systems of rewards and punishment. For instance, Brazilian television often reports cases of women being fired immediately after complaining about sexual harassment at the workplace and of other women refusing to support their claims for fear of retaliation (Schroder, 1997). Additionally, one Brazilian newspaper notes that while many store clerks are shocked when faced with sexual harassment from customers, some clerks use sexual behavior themselves as a way to increase sales ("Vendedores," 1996).

The social-cultural model of sexual harassment postulates that sexual harassment of women by men is a

result of women's inferior status in the workplace and society. A recent theory concerning ambivalence toward women suggests that sexist ideologies are on a continuum from paternalistic views toward women (benevolent sexism) to violence against women (hostile sexism). These two forms of sexism are complementary and widespread across cultures, reflecting and maintaining the oppression of women (Glick et al., 2000). That is, many women may be able to be successful in certain careers, like teaching and nursing, but may be barred from pursuing male-dominated occupations and roles. In most cultures, women's jobs have typically been extensions of the female gender role (Martin, 1995). Martin suggests that "[t]he gendered structure of work opportunities and subordination to male supervisors across workplaces make it difficult and costly for female workers to reject the sexual advances of men in positions of authority" (p. 31). According to many feminist theorists, sexual harassment is a form of discrimination against women as a result of patriarchal systems that treat women as sex objects (MacKinnon, 1979; Tangri & Hayes, 1997). Thus, some men use their power to gain sex. Not surprisingly, the power or status of 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 initiated by a peer or coworker (Blumenthal, 1998). On the other hand, potential harassers may disguise their behavior as courtship, e.g., trying to be more private and intimate with the target. The literature on sexual harassment has only recently begun to explore the link between romance and sexual harassment (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997).

DeSouza, Pryor and Hutz (1998) investigated how content emphasis of a newspaper story and the cultural background of an audience might be related to college students' reactions to sexual harassment charges on campus. Using fictitious but realistic newspaper accounts, DeSouza and his colleagues studied how power differential, discrimination concerns, and romantic interest influence reactions to sexual harassment charges against a male instructor by a female undergraduate in samples of U.S. and Brazilian college students. The charges centered around a series of unwanted sexual advances the professor allegedly made toward a female student. Overall, the authors found that Brazilian college students were less punishing toward the alleged harasser than U.S. college students. Across both cultures, the ratings were higher (i.e., advocating more punishment) if the instructor was a professor than if he was a teaching assistant (i.e., the professor had more power over the victim than the teaching assistant) and if discrimination concerns were emphasized in the newspaper account (i.e., the behavior might

discourage women from taking the instructor's class) than if they were not. On the other hand, if the newspaper story emphasized the instructor's professed romantic interest in the student, respondents were less likely to punish him than if such information was absent.

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.

The Current Study

Based on previous cross-cultural work in this area with college students (DeSouza et al., 1998; Pryor et al., 1997), a major focus of the current study concerned the examination of cultural differences with samples of professional women. We first hypothesized that U.S. professional women would generally react more negatively to a potentially sexually harassing behavior than would their Brazilian counterparts. The rationale for this prediction centers 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 part of men as normative.

Brazilians do not normally consider gender discrimination when thinking about sexually harassing behavior (Pryor et al., 1997). Thus, we also hypothesized that discrimination concerns might be the factor most strongly related to cultural differences. Specifically, we anticipated that planned group comparisons would show Brazilian professional women who did not receive information emphasizing discriminatory concerns to be the least punishing compared to the other groups. If so, this culture/country by discrimination concerns interaction would provide further evidence that newspapers and other media could importantly enhance the lay person's understanding of sexual harassment as a human rights issue in Brazil. Raising the public's social consciousness of sexual harassment as a form of gender discrimination is important because sexual harassment is widespread across cultures (Barak, 1997; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995), with ill consequences on women, regardless of occupation or work situation (Gruber, 1997), including job-related losses, psychological and physical symptoms, as well as being blamed and ostracized (Cortina, Shupe, Ramos, Buchanan, & Trujillo, 1996; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997).

In addition to the above hypotheses, we 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 behavior performed by men of lower power (Blumenthal, 1998). However, if one of the effects of a patriarchal culture is the perceived legitimacy of male sexual prerogatives, then one might expect that harassers with more power would not necessarily be judged so severely by Brazilian women. On the other hand, Brazilian women might come to see the potential harm of sexual harassment to victims more clearly in situations where male harassers have formal power over women. Second, as a research question we ask: What is the impact of considering possible romantic intentions of the harasser upon reactions to such behavior? Pryor et al. (1997) found that Brazilians think of sexual harassment as possibly involving romantic interests on the part of a male harasser and as a consequence see sexual harassment as more innocuous. Perhaps, U.S. professional women would resemble Brazilian professional women more in their reactions to sexually harassing behavior if romantic intentions of the male perpetrator were made salient. On the other hand, because possible romantic intentions are not a common part of what U.S. women think of as sexually

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, Paraíba; 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 brief paragraphs (each with 57 words or less) emphasized, or not, a) the salience of his romantic interest in a female student; and b) the salience of gender discrimination concerns (i.e., concerns that the instructor's behavior could discourage women from taking his class or from seeking help if they did take his class). Appendix A shows the scenario in which romantic interest and discrimination concerns were emphasized. Following each story, respondents rated, on a 7-point Likert-type scale, their relative agreement (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) with 10 items concerning the degree to which the alleged perpetrator should be punished; the scores for the items that advocated no punishment were reversed. Appendix B

lists all 10 items, which were combined into a single punishment index by averaging the 10 scores. Thus, 7 would be the highest punishment possible and 1 would be no punishment at all. A pilot-study of the scenarios and the follow-up items indicated that they were highly 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 and were told of their rights as research participants (e.g., free to withdraw at any time). We did not ask their names and promised not to report the names of their institutions. 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 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 questionnaire depicted only one scenario. Respondents took 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 factorial design. The dependent variable was the punishment index that ranged from 1 to 7. To address 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) X 2 (Brazil or U.S.) analysis of variance (ANOVA), full factorial model.

Initially, we obtained internal reliability coefficients for each country. The Cronbach's alphas were .82 for the U.S. sample (.81 for teachers and .84 for nurses) and .78 for the Brazilian sample (.77 for teachers and .78 for nurses). These alphas compare very well with those reported by DeSouza et al. (1998) with college students.

The ANOVA only yielded significant differences for the romance, $F(1,326)=34.99$, $p<.0001$ ($\eta^2=.11$, observed power=1.00), and the country, $F(1, 326)=39.48$, $p<.0001$ ($\eta^2=.12$, observed power=1.00), main effects. The punishment rating was lower when romance was present ($M=5.01$, $SD=.94$) than when it was absent ($M=5.57$, $SD=.77$). U.S. respondents ($M=5.60$, $SD=.86$) scored significantly higher than Brazilians ($M=4.99$, $SD=.86$), which supported our first hypothesis.

The only significant interaction was discrimination by country, $F(2,326)=6.12$, $p<.01$ ($\eta^2=.02$, observed

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

	United States	Brazil
No Discrimination	5.72 (.84) ^a	4.89 (.84) ^b
Discrimination	5.49 (.86) ^a	5.11 (.86) ^a

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 punishment for the teaching assistant and the professor), nor did we find any interactions involving power relationships. These findings are somewhat surprising considering that many previous studies using samples of college students have found significant differences involving the power of the harasser over the target (Blumenthal, 1998). One explanation may be the different population used in the current study. Professional women might be less sensitive to the power differentials between professors and teaching assistants than college students who routinely deal with individuals in these roles.

In keeping with DeSouza et al.'s (1998) study, the main effect for romance was significant. It appears that men are

excused sexual advances if their motives are romantic (non-hostile) rather than manipulative. In previous research conducted in Brazil and the U.S., Pryor et al. (1997) found that Brazilian college students defined sexual harassment in ways that emphasized a potentially romantic or seductive quality more than did 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 perpetrator's motives serves to make both U.S. and Brazilian professional women view the behavior as less punishable. Thus, romantic interest as an excuse for sexually harassing behaviors does not seem to differentiate participants from these two cultures across two studies involving college students and professional women. These findings are potentially disturbing because even if the men's intentions are free of hostility, it is a form of benevolent sexism that leaves women, especially if the men involved occupy a higher social status than the women's, coerced by pleasant means in return for knowing their place as sex objects (Glick et al., 2000). Sexual harassment can be seen as both a tool and a result of male dominance in society.

Also consistent with the study by DeSouza et al. (1998) and with our first hypothesis was a significant country difference, suggesting that social-sexual transgressions are viewed as more punishable in the U.S. than in Brazil. Pryor et al. (1997) found that Brazilian college students possessed a rather different conceptualization of sexual harassment than U.S. students, with Brazilians viewing sexual harassment less like an abuse of power or gender discrimination and more like innocuous seductive behaviors. In addition, the literature indicates that sexual transgressions by males are generally more tolerated in Brazil than in the U.S. (Baldwin & DeSouza, 2001; DeSouza & Hutz, 1996; DeSouza, Pierce, Zanelli, & Hutz, 1992; Parker, 1990). Such male entitlement is also evidenced elsewhere in Latin America (DeSouza, Madrigal, & Millan, 1999; Magaña & Carrier, 1991). For example, in a similar study using scenarios in which a male professor was accused of sexually harassing either a female graduate student or a junior faculty member, Dutch, Canadian, U.S., and German students were much more likely to find the alleged perpetrator guilty than Ecuadorian students, who also rated the victim as significantly less credible and even crazy (Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999). These authors also reported that students in the U.S. advocated more severe punishment than their foreign counterparts, which is congruent with what we found in our study with professional women. Future research should investigate the relationship between general attitudes toward punishment and the rehabilitation of sexual harassment offenders, as it is feasible that such relationship varies across cultures.

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 (Neuhouser, 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 items with appropriate measurement and language equivalence. Our hypotheses were supported, indicating that culture significantly influenced professional women's reactions to events shown in a realistic newspaper article, just as it did with college students (DeSouza et al., 1998). That is, Brazilian female professionals seemed more tolerant of sexual harassment, especially when discrimination concerns were absent, than their U.S. counterparts. One possible implication of this research is that the media may serve an important educational role, especially in countries like Brazil where the lay person's understanding of sexual harassment seems less likely to encompass discrimination concerns (Pryor et al., 1997).

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 sexual harassment is closely related to the inferior social status of women (Koss, Goodman, Browne, Keita, & Russo, 1994; MacKinnon, 1979). Thus, understanding sexual harassment as a human rights issue may gain wider acceptance.

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Appendix A

Sexual Harassment Alleged

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.^a
- * The professor [teaching assistant] should be suspended without pay from his job for a semester as punishment.
- * The Ethics Committee should ignore the complaint.^a
- * The professor [teaching assistant] should be required to see a counselor.
- * The whole affair should be overlooked as a case of mistaken communication.^a
- * Most professors [teaching assistants] would probably feel that this sort of behavior should be punished.
- * Nothing should be done to the professor [teaching assistant] as punishment or warning.^a
- * Most students would probably feel that this sort of behavior should be punished.
- * The professor [teaching assistant] did nothing wrong.^a

^aThe scores were reversed, so that high scores reflect greater punishment.