

Investigation into the Perceptions and Origins Of Sexual Harassment

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Introduction

For centuries, women's roles have historically been limited to those activities that involve the bearing and rearing of children. Outside the home, women have been viewed as inferior, less important, and less significant.

Recently however, women have made inroads into the previously male dominated society and workforce. Along with this equality and upward social mobility have come tension between men and women who now share the workplace. The following three summaries may shed some light on those issues.

The three article summaries investigate three gender-related issues: the problem of the propensity of a person to engage in severe sexual harassment; the difference in perception of sexual harassment; and the non moderated tendency of preschool and primary school children to gravitate towards same sex play partners. Viewed together, these summaries indicate a possibility that early biosocial tendencies may be internalized as a social construct of gender differences that can be carried forward into adulthood.

Summaries

Article 1: Propensity to sexually harass: an exploration of gender differences.
Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, March 1998, Perry, Elissa L.

The purpose of this article was to explore the propensity of men and women to engage in severe sexual harassment. This type of harassment is typically physical in nature; a man might rub himself against a woman in a provocative manner or engage in a quid pro quo arrangement with a female. It is notable however, that in most cases of a female sexually harassing a male it is usually of the quid pro quo form.

A "likelihood to sexually harass,"¹ (LSH), measure was developed (Pryor), in which the propensity for males to engage in severe sexual harassment could be quantified. This instrument included 10 hypothetical scenarios in which a male is given dominant power over a female target. The men are then told to imagine themselves in the scenario and to indicate the likelihood that they would use this power to sexually exploit the woman given that there would be no consequences as a result of their actions.

Thus, Pryor's LSH (likelihood to sexually harass) instrument measures the readiness to use power for sexually exploitive purposes. "The propensity to harass measured by the LSH instrument appears to be based upon a cognitive association between social dominance and sexuality which results from early socialization experiences."²

¹ J.B. Pryor, 1987

² Bargh & Raymond, 1995; Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Pryor et al., 1993; Pryor & Stollier, 1994

The results of the study confirmed two hypotheses; First, women have a significantly lower LSH score than men. Second, the underlying factors for the LSH differ from women to men: Men focus more on sexuality and women focus more on issues of power. These findings are reinforced by research that suggests that “women more readily differentiate between sexual attraction and power motives than men”³ and that “men who are likely to sexually harass tend to have a cognitive association between power and sexuality.”⁴

Article 2: A Meta –Analytic Review of gender Differences in Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

Journal of Applied Psychology, Oct 2001, Vol. 86, No. 5 914-922
Rotundo, Maria; Nguyen, Dung-Hanh; Sackett, Paul R.

Since the 1980's, the definition of the term "sexual harassment" has become an issue of greater and greater importance. The increasing number of sexual harassment claims has presented our courts with a legal dilemma over this difficult definition. The analysis of 62 studies of gender differences in harassment perceptions of men and women attempts to shed light on the question of what behaviors constitute sexual harassment.

It is well known that the socio-dynamics of men and women are different. Behavior that men might perceive as socially acceptable may be unacceptable to women and vice versa. It is hypothesized that men and women may perceive differently behavior and sexuality and its manifestations in a social context as well. In particular, women may perceive a broader range of behaviors as sexually harassing than do men.

³ Popovich et al., 1996

⁴ Bargh & Raymond, 1995

Legislation regarding sexual harassment has typically been calibrated to the women's perception and standard. As a result, some men might find themselves in trouble with the law or their employer over something that they perceive as a trivial matter.

The measuring instrument used in the study was "The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire."⁵ This questionnaire included items that were designed to reflect one of five categories of sexual harassment. These are gender harassment, seductive behavior, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual assault. For the purposes of this study, the questionnaire focused on three areas: sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion.

Not surprisingly, the results indicated that women were more likely to perceive sexual touching as sexual harassment. Furthermore, men were more likely to view physical contact as a compliment while women viewed the same behavior as a threat. The findings also indicate that when the alleged harasser is in a position of higher power, both men and women are more likely to share similar views regarding what is and is not harassment. If the harasser is of the same status, men's and women's view are more likely to diverge. In other words, if the accused harasser is a supervisor, both men and women tend to agree that a particular behavior is harassment. Conversely, if a co-worker engages in questionable behavior, men will tend to pass it off as a casual social interaction while women tend to view it as harassment.

The study suggests the need to understand the origins of the gender differences in perceptions of social behavior. It is unclear whether gender differences are innate or a product of socialization. Are men and women socialized to perceive different social-

sexual behaviors as appropriate or inappropriate? The next article sheds some light on this issue.

Article 3: Stability and Consequences of Young Children's Same-Sex Peer Interactions

Developmental Psychology, 2001, Vol. 37, No. 3 431-446
Martin, Carol Lynn; Fabes, Richard A.

This article reviews a six-month study of 61 children (28 boys and 33 girls); mean age = 53 months. The purpose of the study was to determine, through observation of the type of play and the sex of the play partners, whether children gravitated towards one sex or the other and whether or not these choices were stable over time.

Many studies have shown that children tend to gravitate towards their own gender when seeking out play partners. It is interesting that children under that age of three have already developed this ability to segregate themselves by gender. Even after adults have moderated the social environment by mixing them up, when left to themselves, the tendency to segregate returns in a relatively short time.

This time spent playing with the same sex peers has led researchers to believe that male and female socialization begins at these very early stages. "Boys and girls grow up in different social environments and distinctive peer cultures."⁶ The result of this socialization yields specific gender type behavior, which may carry over into adult life.

The results of the study showed that boys tend to gravitate towards boys and behave in a much more aggressive manner, whereas girls behave in a much more harmonious way. Boys tend to develop a hierarchy based upon aggressiveness and girls

⁵ Fitzgerald, Shullman, et al., 1988

⁶ Maccoby, 1990

develop a more communal group dynamic. Interestingly, the nature of boy's play, i.e.; aggressive, and assertive, is used to influence peers in the group and as a result they become less likely to respond to more polite styles of influence. Thus if a boy attempts to influence another boy, the other boy will usually respond, but if a girl attempts to influence a boy, he may not.

Female interaction style is much calmer and less aggressive. The lack of a hierarchical relationship dictates a more polite style of influence that works with other girls but is not likely to work with boys. This early segregation is further intensified by the difference of the play dynamic of each group. In other words the play and influence style of boys is offensive to the girls and the boys are not likely to be able to adapt their style to that of the girls. Thus the potential for boys and girls to interact after a given amount of same sex playtime becomes more and more unlikely.

Once these patterns are established, they become more and more ingrained as the children grow older. While there was no causal link between sex segregation and accumulated same sex play time, it was observed that for some bio-social reason, boys and girls undergo different socialization patterns from a very young age, and that these patterns are internalized and form gender personalities that are very different. These differences are a basis for the child's future development into adulthood.

Conclusion

Viewed together, these summaries suggest that the roots of sexual harassment issues may begin in childhood. Gender differences appear at a very young age. While it is still unknown why boys and girls gravitate towards same sex play partners during the pre-operational stage of development, it is clear that the decision to play with same sex partners has a major effect on girls' and boys' cognitive social development. It could be postulated that it is in this developmental stage that gender-based schemas are formed and internalized. f.

If these very different social schemas are carried into adulthood, they could set the stage for the sexual tension that develops when men and women are placed in a close quarters environment such as the workplace. As the studies demonstrate, in early childhood, boys are more aggressive and less likely to listen to girls, something that would easily lead a female to feel belittled or even inferior. As such, females may well perceive male aggression as threatening. Could we be watching seeds of sex discrimination and sexual harassment?

Can it be that these problems relate back to the patterns of social interactions developed when we were as young as five years old? While most males and females agree that certain extreme behaviors are, in fact, inappropriate sexual harassment, there is that gray area where men and women's perceptions diverge. It is obvious that the subject requires much more study if we are to understand the enormous gender differences in perception.

As I write this, gender harassment issues are the subject of pending legislation. With regard to the less extreme forms of male behaviors, it is possible that the women's

standard is not completely fair to males, many of whom - because of their biopsychosocial upbringing - cannot understand why women are offended. In such milder cases, is it fair to expect men to completely abandon their biopsychosocial programming (as if this were possible) and adjust their way of thinking or pay the extreme penalty of losing a job or, worse?