AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF THE INFLUENCES OF GENDER AND NATIONALITY ON DECISIONS TO REPORT SEXUAL HARASSMENT BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the influence of nationality and gender on the effectiveness perception of sexual harassment reporting behaviors. Although gender did not impact whether the respondents viewed reporting harassment behaviors as effective, the influence of nationality was strongly supported. Specifically, we found that the U. S. respondents were more likely than Thai respondents to view decisions to report sexual harassment behaviors as more effective in stopping these unwanted advances. An unexpected, unhypothesized, interactive effect was also found, and its impact is illustrated and discussed. The practical implications and limitations of this study are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

One of the more perplexing, unanswered questions in the sexual harassment literature is why more people are not reporting harassment incidences (Loy & Stewart, 1984; U. S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995). Sexual harassment is a serious and costly problem that occurs in many countries (Fitzgerald, et al. 1995; Maatman, 2000; Ismail & Chee, 2005). However, since there is little agreement as to what actions truly constitute sexual harassment behaviors (O'Connor et al., 2004), victims tend to respond to each harassment incident differently.

Victim responses are important in the sexual harassment process because they significantly alter the situation by either stopping or facilitating more harassment behaviors (Dan, et al., 1995). Failure to promptly respond to harassment usually causes the victim to lose credibility (Seagrave, 1994), as coworkers begin to doubt whether the harassment ever occurred at all. By ignoring the harasser, it may be interpreted as the victim accepting or even welcoming further harassment in the future (Perry et al., 2004). In addition, this inaction may complicate the legal process in establishing and negatively impacting the victim's case (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Since "failure to report" is one of the most intriguing problems of the sexual harassment phenomena, the current authors chose to investigate this particular issue.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the demographic factors that influence an effectiveness perception of the decision to report sexual harassment behavior. Specifically, does a person's gender or nationality establish whether they consider reporting sexual harassment behaviors an effective response? The remainder of this paper will review sexual harassment responses and the determinants of those responses before developing and empirically testing hypotheses. The

results of this investigation are examined and the practical implications and limitations of this study are discussed.

CATEGORIES OF RESPONSES

The most common victim responses to sexual harassment are indirect (Seagrave, 1994). These responses usually consist of ignoring or avoiding the harasser (Loy & Stewart, 1984). Even though more direct approaches such as communicating with the harasser or making complaints are more effective at ending or minimizing harassment, they tend to be used much more infrequently (Benson & Thomson, 1982; Gruber, 1989; Gruber & Smith, 1995; Gutek & Koss, 1993). Dealing more assertively with sexual harassment (e.g., filing a lawsuit) will result in both positive and negative consequences. On the negative side, victims may have to cope with negative emotions, such as retraumatization and feelings of powerlessness (Fitzgerald, et al., 1995; Lenhart & Shrier, 1996; Stambaugh, 1997). On the positive side, victims may receive compensation, settlement, personal growth, confidence, and feelings of self-worth if they effectively confront the harassers (e.g., the victims win the lawsuit) (Stambaugh, 1997). As a result, victims should set realistic goals and carefully consider both the costs and benefits before they decide how to best respond to sexual harassment (Lenhart & Shrier, 1996).

Gruber (1989) reviewed 10 studies and identified four basic types of responses to sexual harassment that vary as a function of their assertiveness. These four types are (1) avoidance, (2) defusion, (3) negotiation, and (4) confrontation. Avoidance is the least assertive response, and occurs when the victim responds by doing nothing or trying to avoid facing the harasser. Defusion is more active and has the potential of resolving the situation. Victims may try to defuse the situation by pretending to go along with the harassment, stalling the behavior, or making jokes. Defusion also includes victim's effort to secure social support. Negotiation is a more assertive response than avoidance and defusion. In this case, the victim reacts to the harasser by asking him or her to stop. Finally, confrontation is the most assertive response; it occurs when the victim adopts a physical defense, gives an ultimatum, or complains through organization channels. Table I provides a summary of these categories.

Terpstra & Baker (1989) developed a taxonomy of responses to sexual harassment that were divided into 10 distinct and mutually exclusive types (Also see Table I). This classification scheme was tested to establish its reliability and validity. The response classifications consist of (1) leaving field, which includes transferring or quitting the job; (2) external reports which involves the reporting to an outside agency such as the local or state EEOC, or filing lawsuits; (3) internal reports, which involves reporting superiors, managers, or other officers in the company; (4) physical reactions, which involves slapping, hitting, shoving, removing hands, physically resisting or retaliating; (5) alteration, which involves changing one's own behaviors, clothing, or the environment; (6) negative verbal confrontation, which may include attacking or threatening verbally, ridiculing, cursing, or screaming; (7) positive verbal confrontation, which includes asking the harasser to stop, talking, discussing, and explaining why the behavior is bothersome; (8) avoidance, which includes avoiding the person or the areas they frequent; (9) ignoring the behaviors or doing nothing; and 10) other responses, which may include feeling flattered or complimented, getting help, telling others, using indirect actions, giving in, or employing an opportunistic view. Of all these responses, positive verbal confrontation, reporting internally, and ignoring or doing nothing were most frequently adopted by the participants in the study.

TABLE I. SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARRASSMENT CATEGORIES

Studies	Basis for Classification	Responses
Gruber (1989)	Assertiveness	1. Avoidance (doing nothing, avoiding the harassers) 2. Defusion (masking by going along, making jokes, seeking social support) 3. Netotiation (requesting the harassers to stop) 4. Confrontation (using physical defense or organization channels)
Terpstra and Baker (1989)		1. Leave field (quitting, transferring) 2. External report (reporting to EEOC, filing lawsuit) 3. Internal report (report to supervisor or manager) 4. Physical reaction (slapping, kicking, physically resisting) 5. Alternation (changing one's behaviors or clothes) 6. Negative verbal confrontation (screaming, attacking or threatening verbally) 7. Positive verbal confrontation (asking to stop, taking or discussing) 8. Avoidance (avoiding the harassers or the area) 9. Ignore / do nothing (ignoring, doing nothing) 10. Other (feeling flattered, enlisting help, giving in)

Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois (1997) suggested that the existing categories of responses are one-dimensional and may not be comprehensive. They suggested a set of two-dimensional response categories, based on the modes and focus of responses, as an alternative. The mode of responses varies in terms of the amount of support received from outside, ranging from self-response (no outside support), to a supported response (using other resources from other individuals, or organizations for support). Responses are categorized based on the extent to which they focus on the victims themselves (self-focus) or the harassers (initiator-focus).

Combining the two dimensions created four categories of responses (see Figure I) that are roughly arranged in order of their effectiveness (from least to most). These categories are (1) avoidance/denial (self-response / self-focus); (2) social coping (supported-response / self-focus); (3) confrontation/negotiation (self-response / initiator-focus); and (4) advocacy seeking (supported-response / initiator-focus).
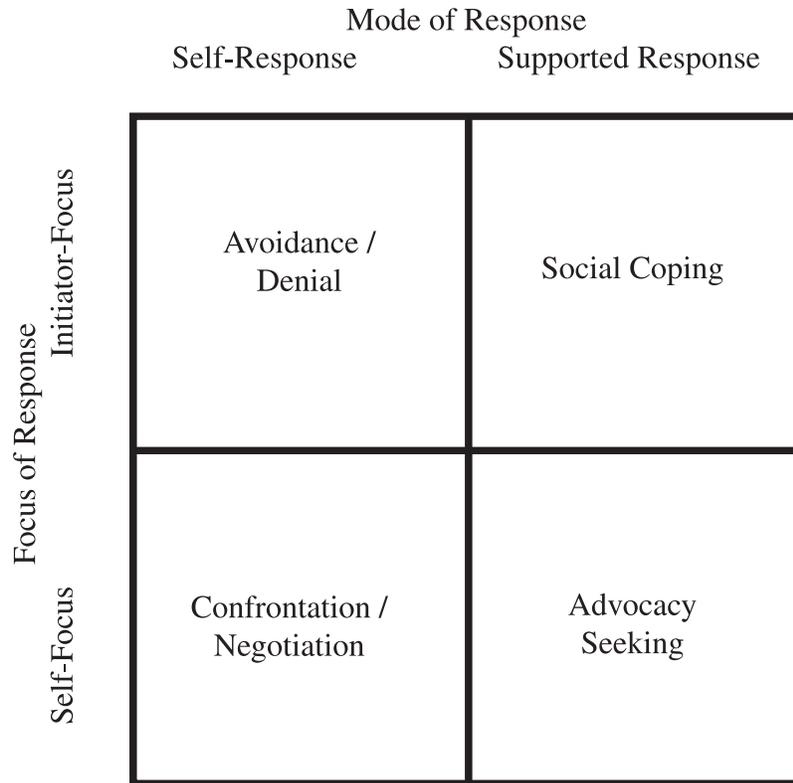
Mode of Response

	Self-Response	Supported Response
Initiator-Focus	Avoidance / Denial	Social Coping
Self-Focus	Confrontation / Negotiation	Advocacy Seeking

(Focus of Response)

FIGURE I. TYPOLOGY OF RESPONSE TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Note: From Determinants of target responses to sexual harassment: A conceptual framework, by D. E. Knapp, R. H. Faley, S. E. Ekeberg, & C. L. Z. DuBois, 1997, *Academy of Management Review 22*(3), pp. 687-729.

The avoidance/denial category response reflects the most commonly used but least effective response. Responses that fall in this category include quitting the job, ignoring the behaviors, or going along with the harassment. Some victims who employ this response also engage in self-blame. Victims who use social coping responses focus on themselves while enlisting the support of others. They may discuss the situation with friends, family, or coworkers, or seek counseling. Such responses, though not effective at stopping the sexual harassment behaviors, may help the victims to cope emotionally. Confrontation and negotiation responses focus on the harassers, without the help of others, and include behaviors such as asking or threatening the harasser to stop. Such responses should be more effective as victims confront harassers more directly. However, confrontation tends to be used relatively infrequently because victims tend to be afraid of retribution. The advocacy seeking category encompasses responses that focus on the harassers, but with the support of others or organizations. Such responses include reporting the behaviors to internal or external agencies, such as supervisors, the EEOC, and filing lawsuits.

In sum, most victims choose not to report the behaviors and tend to use responses that are informal and passive. Only a small number of victims take formal actions and actually report the harassing behaviors (Loy & Stewart, 1984; U. S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995). Victims may also use multiple response strategies or progress from one type of strategy to another. For example, victims who try to restore control over the situation by attempting to stop

the harassment may fail. Subsequently, they simply accept the fact that they have no control over the matter and ignore the behaviors (Thacker, 1992). Whatever response the victim chooses to employ to combat the deleterious effects of sexual harassment, an underlying question still remains: "What factors determine the response category a victim will choose?"

DETERMINANTS OF RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The victims' decision of how to respond to sexual harassment depends on many factors. The person has to first determine that the behaviors constitute sexual harassment before making the decision on how to react. Sexual coercion or quid pro quo sexual harassment behaviors are more severe (U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1992; Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1996) and the more identifiable and agreed upon forms of sexual harassment (Sheffey & Tindale, 1992; Williams & Cyr, 1992; Gutek & O'Conner, 1995).

The severity of sexual harassment behaviors has been shown to be one of the strongest predictor of responses, with the more severe harassing behaviors leading to the more direct responses (Gutek & Koss, 1993; Gruber & Smith, 1995). Severe harassing behaviors are also much easier to identify as sexual harassment, than borderline, less severe behaviors. Some past studies report that females are more likely to report sexual harassment than males (Baker et al., 1990; Perry et al., 2004; Jackson & Newman, 2004), because male victims may perceive the behavior as flattering and respond by consciously denying that the behavior is sexual harassment (Thacker, 1996). Can these studies truly measure male responses to sexual harassment if the males in the studies do not identify the act as sexual harassment in the first place? The research strongly indicates that the more severe the behavior, the more likely both males and females will both believe the sexual harassment behavior in question, is truly sexual harassment. Therefore, in the current study, only the most severe cases of sexual harassment are examined.

National culture may also play a role in influencing the responses to sexual harassment behaviors. According to Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1991), people from different cultures differ in dimensions such as individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term vs. short-term orientation. Collectivistic cultures, for example, may feel that seeking support and not reporting the behavior are more effective responses, while individualistic cultures may prefer a more direct approach. Another example of this cultural impact may be found in the value dimension of power distance. High power distance cultures tend to respect and fear authority and thereby may not perceive reporting sexual harassment behaviors as an effective response. Low power, distance cultures promote equality, even in unequal authority relationships, and thereby may empower sexual harassment victims to perceive reporting harassment behaviors as an effective response.

Since Thailand was identified in Hofstede's study as both collectivistic and possessing a high power distance, and the U. S. was found to be individualistic with a low power distance (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1991) they were utilized as the two major cultures of comparison in this study. Specifically, participants in this empirical investigation were from Thailand and the U. S.

MODEL & HYPOTHESES

From the preceding literature review, the Sexual Harassment Reporting Decision Model was created (see Figure II). The model directly proposes that gender and nationality will be two demographic determinants that will influence the effectiveness perceptions of reporting sexually harassing behaviors. Subsequently, reporting sexual harassment behaviors will lead to certain consequences on both the victim and the harasser. Previous studies have focused on the "decision ‡ consequence" link of the delineated model (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Reese and Lindenberg, 1997; Thacker, 1992). The current study will examine the impact of the demographic determinants on the decision to report.

Based on previous research, it is proposed that when sexual harassment behaviors are severe and easily identifiable, females are more likely than males to believe that a direct response such as reporting harassment behaviors is a more effective strategy. Also, individualistic and high power distance cultures are more likely to identify reporting harassment behaviors as a more effective strategy than collectivistic cultures possessing a low power distance. Thus, the two major hypotheses that form the framework of this study are as follows:

> H_1: When compared to men, women will rate reporting severe sexual harassment behaviors as more effective.

H_2: When compared to participants from Thailand, U. S. participants will rate reporting severe sexual harassment behaviors as more effective.
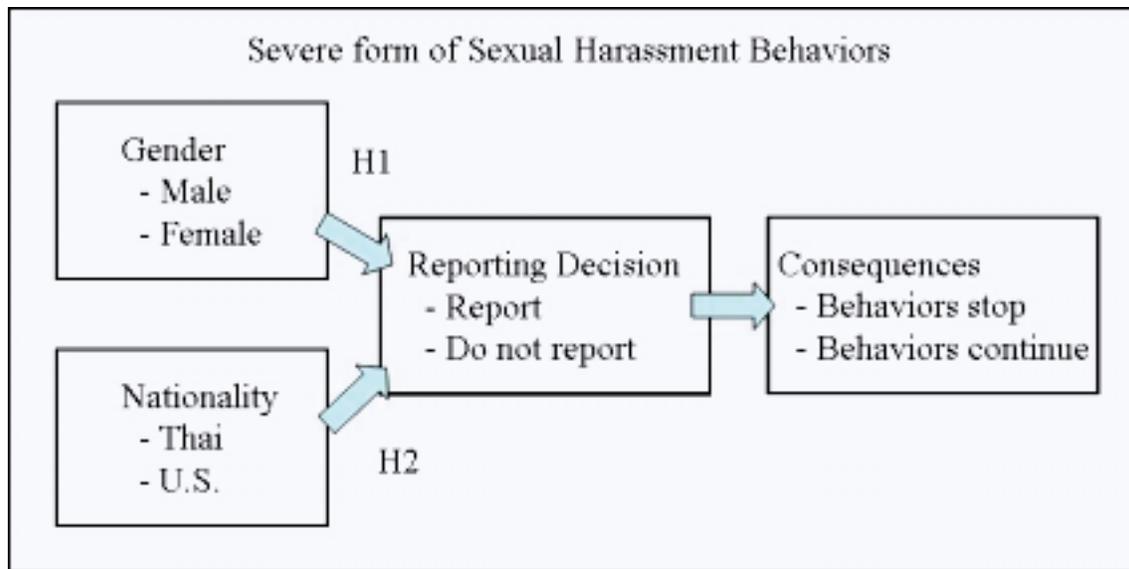

FIGURE II. SEXUAL HARASSMENT REPORTING DECISION MODEL

METHODS

228 students in a southern university in the U. S. and 260 students from an English-speaking university in Bangkok, Thailand who enrolled in upper-level business classes completed questionnaires that included their perceptions of vignettes depicting sexual harassment behaviors

and rankings of effective responses to such behaviors. Of the Thais, 107 were male (41.2%) while 140 U. S. students (61.4%) were male. Over 95% of both groups were under 25 years old.

TABLE II. DEMOGRAPHICS OF THAI AND US PARTICIPANTS

Demographic Variables	Thai	U. S.
Gender		
Male	107 (41.2%)	140 (61.4%)
Female	153 (58.8%)	88 (38.6%)
Age		
Under 20 years old	7 (2.8%)	2 (0.9%)
20-25 years old	244 (93.7%)	217 (95.2%)
Over 25 years old	9 (3.5%)	9 (3.9%)
Academic Classification		
Sophomore	13 (5.1%)	4 (1.8%)
Junior	105 (41.0%)	124 (54.4%)
Senior	126 (49.2%)	99 (43.4%)
Graduates	12 (4.7%)	1 (0.4%)

A 2 x 2 ANOVA (nationality x gender) design was used to test the hypotheses proposed. Both independent variables, nationality and gender, were utilized as between subject factors. The analysis included only sexual coercion behaviors, the most severe form of sexual harassment where both male and female tend to perceive the behaviors easily and similarly. An example of this behavior is a manager threatening to cause trouble to a subordinate if the subordinate refuses the manager's sexual advances. The dependent variable, an effectiveness rank of reporting sexual harassment behaviors, ranged from 1 (most effective) to 10 (least effective).

RESULTS

The first hypothesis contends that women rank reporting as a more effective way to respond to sexual harassment behaviors when compared to men. The results from ANOVA showed no significant differences between the ranking by female vs. male ($F_{(1,407)}$ = 1.273, p = .260). As a result, hypothesis 1 is not supported.

The second hypothesis suggests that the U. S. respondents will rank reporting as more effective response to sexual harassment behavior when compared to Thai respondents. The result affirms that U. S. respondents significantly rank reporting as a more effective response (($F_{(1,407)}$ = 6.075, p = .014). The estimated marginal means of each group are reported in Table III.

We also found a significant interaction effect between gender and nationality ($F_{(1,407)}$ = 7.978 p = .005) which was not previously hypothesized. A plot of estimated marginal means between gender and nationality shows that the U. S. females ranked reporting as the most effective among all groups, followed by Thai and U. S. males who were almost in agreement. The Thai female sample ranked reporting as the least effective among all groups (see Figure III).

TABLE III: SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

Variables		Mean Effectiveness Ranking	Standard Error	F-Statistics
Male		3.206	0.127	1.273
Female		3.409	0.129	
Thai		3.530	0.134	6.075*
U. S.		3.085	0.121	
Thai				
	Male	3.173	0.203	
	Female	3.887	0.173	7.978**
U. S.				
	Male	3.238	0.151	
	Female	2.932	0.190	

* Significant at *p < .05*
** Significant at *p < .005*

FIGURE III. ESTIMATED MARGINAL MEANS OF REPORTING SEXUAL COERCION BY GENDER AND NATIONALI Y
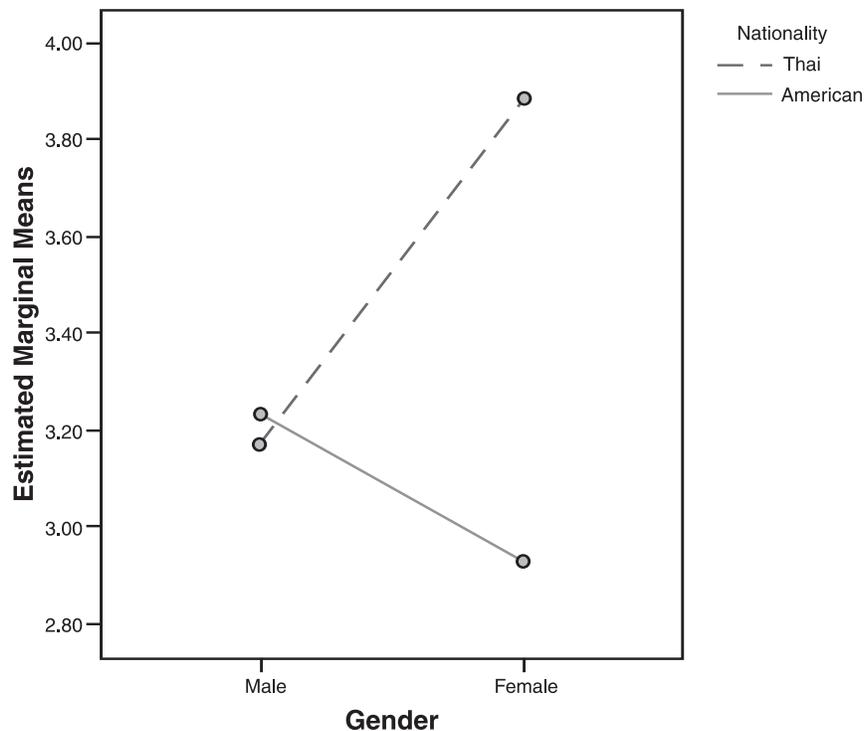
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As indicated by the results discussed above, the current authors found that nationality makes a difference in whether a person thinks reporting sexual harassment behavior is effective. Males and females with different nationalities tend to have different opinions regarding the effectiveness of these harassment reports. In order for businesses to operate smoothly in today's global environment, sexual harassment must be prevented or resolved effectively. However, a

universal sexual harassment policy thought to be useful in the U. S. may not work in other countries. Companies should be sensitive to the local culture and seek to incorporate the differences in their policies and training. It may also be beneficial to create multiple and friendly reporting channels suitable for both males and females, while encouraging the reporting of sexual harassment incidents.

LIMITATIONS

This study has a few limitations, including using self-report and student participants from only two countries. These participants may not be representative of the population as a whole. Although they are still students, the majorities of both samples were juniors and seniors in colleges about to enter the workforce in a year or two. Even though they were not real victims of sexual harassment, the respondents should be able to make a judgment of the situations similar to a typical jury in the real sexual harassment cases.

In addition, the study employed the use of vignettes as the only method of collecting data. Although vignettes have been shown to eliminate the social desirability bias amongst the Eastern cultures, utilizing interviews in addition to the vignettes would have been preferred. This would have also provided a unique opportunity to compare the interview results with the responses on the individual vignettes.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this study will serve as a basis for future investigation in work settings in many countries, and in conjunction with future empirical inquiries, contribute to a better understanding of the numerous adverse effects of sexual harassment. There are many aspects of the international sexual harassment subject area that are considered fertile ground for future studies. For example, are the results found in this study enduring over time, or can the subjects who rejected reporting sexual harassment behaviors as an effective coping method, be trained to report severe sexual harassment on a more frequent basis? These and other questions should be addressed in future studies of cross-cultural human resource management, as the authors view the current study as the starting point of a viable research stream.

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