

## Sexual Behavior at Work: Fun or Folly?

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Sexual behavior at work (e.g., sexual jokes and propositions) has been largely portrayed as offensive and harmful. The current research represents the first studies to test whether this is typically the case. Study 1 surveyed manufacturing and social service workers ( $N = 238$ ) about their psychological well-being, work withdrawal, and exposure to sexual behavior at work. Respondents indicated how often they were exposed to different sexual behaviors and how much they enjoyed or were bothered by them. Study 2 surveyed university staff ( $N = 1,004$ ) about their psychological well-being, drug use, feelings of being valued at work, and exposure to sexual behavior at work. Fifty-eight percent of employees in Study 1 were exposed to sexual behavior in the past 2 years; 40% of employees in Study 2 were exposed to sexual behavior in the past year. Some women and many men reported enjoying sexual behavior at work. Despite this, exposure to sexual behavior at work predicted negative employee work and psychological well-being, even for employees who said they enjoyed the experience.

*Keywords:* sexual harassment, sex, gender, work withdrawal, psychological well-being

In the wake of the 1970s women's movement in the United States, sexual behavior in the workplace became seen as a deterrent to women's entrance, tenure, and ascent in the male-dominated world of work (Farley, 1978). Courts ruled that sexual requests resulting in the loss or denial of a job-related benefit for refusal to cooperate (*Williams v. Bell*, 1978) and sexual behaviors creating a hostile work environment (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1980; *Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.*, 1993; *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986) constitute discrimination based on sex.

There has been disagreement about whether, and which, sexual behaviors are harassing and why. Many people are skeptical—if not resentful—toward the idea that sexual harassment is a serious issue and form of sex discrimination (cf. Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996). Some have argued that sexual banter and jokes provide a fun and jovial atmosphere at work and that sexual flirtation and invitations can be flattering and result in love and romance (Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996; Powell & Foley, 1998; Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 1999). It has also been suggested that “sanitizing” the workplace of sexual behavior hands companies an age-old excuse to keep the sexes separate and unequal at work (Schultz, 1998).

Public confusion and controversy has surrounded the distinction between sexual behavior and sexual harassment, but court opinions

(e.g., *Oncala v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.*, 1998) and harassment scholars (e.g., Franke, 1997; Schultz, 2003; Williams et al., 1999) have been careful to maintain one. Not all sexual behavior at work is harassing: Certainly some employees enjoy some forms of sexual behavior some of the time. Further, not all sex-based harassment is sexual: It often takes nonsexual forms, such as bullying, sabotage, and social undermining, which contain no references to sexuality or gender but are systematically targeted at individuals on the basis of their sex and gender (Berdahl, 2007a; Cortina, 2008; Schultz, 1998). Figure 1 depicts the incomplete overlap between sexual behavior and sex-based harassment. Although research has focused on their overlap, we know little about nonharassing sexual behavior and about nonsexual harassing behavior.

The purpose of this project is to examine nonharassing sexual behavior at work and its consequences for employees. We wished to see whether the negative side of sexual behavior at work has been exaggerated and whether the positive side has been overlooked. Unlike prior research (e.g., Berdahl, 2007b; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Gutek, 1985; Raver & Gelfand, 2005; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1980, 1987, 1994), we do not limit our analysis of sexual behavior to unwanted or offensive behavior. We base our predictions on theories of power and gender and test them with two organizational studies representing the first to systematically examine, without imposing a positive or a negative lens on sexual behavior, both men's and women's experiences of sexual behavior in the work environments and their outcomes for work and psychological well-being.

### How is Sexual Behavior Evaluated at Work and What are its Outcomes?

Research has consistently shown that men tend to view the same sexual behaviors at work as less offensive and harmful than do women (e.g., Berdahl, 2007b; Gutek, 1985; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1994). Some men even report wanting to expe-

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Jennifer L. Berdahl thanks the Connaught Foundation, Petro Canada, and the Social Science Humanities Research Council for financially supporting this research.

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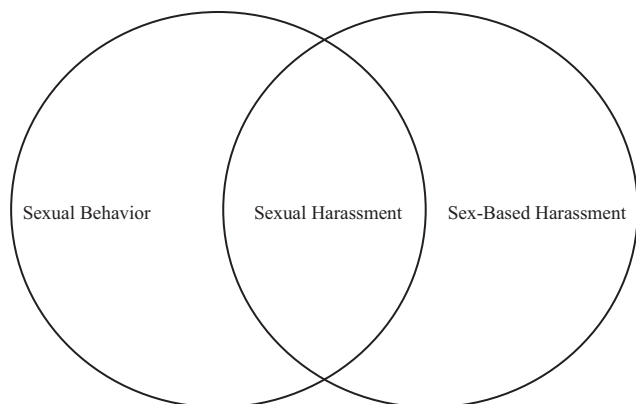


Figure 1. The incomplete overlap between sexual behavior and sex-based harassment.

rience more sexual behavior at work (Berdahl et al., 1996). What accounts for this difference? The most straightforward explanation is gender differences in power (Berdahl et al., 1996; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; MacKinnon, 1979).<sup>1</sup> In general, the less control one has over a situation and the fewer options one has in responding to it, the more threatening, and less enjoyable, that situation is (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). A fundamental difference between being bullied and merely being annoyed is a sense of threat and a lack of control; the victim of bullying feels powerless to escape or retaliate without incurring more harm (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003).

Sexual behavior initiated by individuals with more power should be appraised as more threatening and coercive than sexual behavior initiated by those with equal or less power. This has been demonstrated with studies of formal power in organizations (e.g., Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003). Sexual behavior at work, however, primarily comes from peers (e.g., Gutek, 1985; Gutek & Morasch, 1982; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1994). All else equal, men are likely to view sexual behavior at work less negatively than women because men tend to have more power in organizations. Male employees are likely to be taller and stronger than female employees, making them more physically powerful. Men are likely to earn higher salaries and to hold higher ranks (e.g., Catalyst, 2007a; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007), making them more economically and organizationally powerful. Masculinity is generally accorded higher value than femininity in organizations (Catalyst, 2007b; Cheng, 1996; Connell, 1987), giving men more informal power, or status. Sexual behavior initiated by men should therefore be more potentially threatening and coercive than sexual behavior initiated by women.

Links between power, gender, and sexuality are so historically ingrained that they are culturally truistic (e.g., Butler, 1990; Valdes, 1995). The association between power and sexuality is often automatic (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995). Theory and research on power shows that it leads to an activated approach system (Keltner et al., 2003), disinhibition and action (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), positive emotions (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006), a focus on one's own interest and perspective (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), stereotyping (Fiske, 1993), and the objectification of

less powerful others (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Kipnis, 1972). It is therefore not surprising that as the more powerful sex, men tend to play the role of sexual agents, initiators, and consumers and have positive attitudes toward sexuality. It has also been theorized and shown that powerlessness leads to an activated inhibition system (Keltner et al., 2003), inhibited behavior (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2003), negative emotions (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006), and a focus on others' interests and perspectives (Galinsky et al., 2006). As the less powerful sex, it is not surprising that women traditionally have played more passive roles as sexual objects and subordinates and may have negative attitudes about these experiences.

Though alternative sexualities exist that do not conform to heterosexual male dominance (Butler, 1990; Schultz, 2003), this model is so pervasive that it is safe to assume that most sexual behavior resembles it, if not reminds people of it. Sexual behavior in the workplace, no matter how well or harmlessly intended, may therefore make women's sexual subordination to men more salient. Making their subordination salient is likely to be experienced as aversive by women, especially at work, where women are striving to be seen as colleagues and contenders for promotion, not as inferior sexual objects. Sexual behavior at work therefore likely undermines women's efforts to view themselves, and to be viewed by others, as equal and dignified employees. Research has shown that women evaluate hypothetical harassing behaviors negatively (Blumenthal, 1998; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001). Whether they negatively evaluate actual sexual behaviors described in neutral terms remains to be seen.

In contrast to women's reactions, we expect men have neutral to positive reactions when exposed to sexual behavior at work. If this behavior reminds women of their inferior status to men, then it stands to reason that it reminds men of their superior status to women. This is likely to be nonaversive or pleasurable for men (Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003), especially in the competitive world of work where employees strive to gain advantage over one another.

Men may have different reactions to ambient and direct sexual behaviors. Sexual harassment law and research have distinguished ambient from direct behavior by classifying harassment into hostile environment (ambient) and sexual approach (direct) forms (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1980; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Stockdale, Visio, & Batra, 1999). Ambient sexual behavior (ASB) involves sexual jokes, language, and materials. Assuming that most sexual jokes, language, and materials resonate

<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about the possible role of evolutionary forces on modern-day behavior, and some of this writing has speculated that men and women respond differently to sexual behavior because of different mating strategies (e.g., Browne, 2002; Buss & Schmidt, 1993). Conjectures about human evolution and its effects on modern behavior, however, are plagued by tautological reasoning, nonfalsifiability, and assumptions about human history that have proven, or are likely, to be false (cf. Gailey, 1987). We concur with others (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Eagly & Wood, 1999) that known structural forces, such as power and social roles, are theoretically, empirically, and pragmatically more compelling explanations for understanding and predicting gender differences in observed and self-reported behavior in modern complex societies and organizations.

with the theme of heterosexual male dominance, men are likely to evaluate ASB neutrally or even positively. Direct sexual behavior (DSB) involves direct sexual comments and advances. Men may have more mixed reactions to this type of experience. On the one hand, sex roles pressure men to feel ready and willing to seek out and accept sexual opportunities; on the other hand, being the receiver in a sexual exchange is inconsistent with the male role of sexual agent and initiator. These competing forces are likely to make men feel ambivalent, or neutral, about receiving DSB at work.

To our knowledge, there exists no comparative research of men's and women's experiences of sexual behavior in the workplace that examines these experiences by the sex of the person initiating the behavior. One goal of the current research is to fill this gap by examining how employees evaluate sexual behavior on the basis of different combinations of actor and target sex.

Men's general power advantage might lead all employees to experience sexual behavior more negatively from men than from women: All else equal, an employee will feel less powerful relative to a man than to a woman. It is also important to consider differences in ASB and DSB. ASB committed by men is likely to highlight and reinforce heterosexual male dominance over women because most sexual jokes, language, and materials do. Men should experience this behavior relatively positively, and women should experience it particularly negatively. It is difficult to know whether ASB committed by women reinforces or challenges the sexual status quo, but it should have less impact in general than ASB from men and therefore should not be evaluated particularly negatively or positively by either men or women.

*Hypothesis 1:* There is an interaction between sex of receiver and sex of actor on the receiver's evaluation of ASB at work: ASB committed by men around women is evaluated most negatively, ASB committed by men around other men is evaluated most positively, and ASB committed by women is evaluated relatively neutrally by men and by women.

DSB should also be experienced most negatively by women when it comes from men because of power differences between the parties (*ceteris paribus*) and the way this behavior invokes male dominance over women. Unlike ASB, DSB attempts to engage the target in a personal sexual exchange. We therefore expect that, unlike ASB, DSB is experienced negatively by men who receive it from other men because of the conflation of power, masculinity, and heterosexuality that make this same-sex behavior pose a threat to the receiver's masculine identity and sense of power. We expect that DSB committed by women is relatively flattering and stimulating to men, even though it may go against the grain of traditional sex roles; the promise or experience of sexual reward may trump the threat posed by sex-role deviance. DSB aimed at women from other women should be experienced relatively neutrally; in general, it will be unwanted but does not pose much of a power or symbolic threat (Connell, 1987).

*Hypothesis 2:* There is an interaction between sex of receiver and sex of actor on the receiver's evaluation of DSB at work: DSB is experienced most positively when the receiver is male and the actor is female and most negatively when the receiver

is female and the actor is male. Same-sex DSB is experienced more negatively for men than for women.

The effect of sexual behavior at work on employees should depend on how positively or negatively, combined with how often, employees experience it. In general, we expect that the more positively and frequently employees experience something at work, the better their work and psychological well-being outcomes; the more negatively and frequently employees experience something at work, the worse their work and well-being outcomes. This reasoning should apply to experiences of sexual behavior at work.

How employees feel at work and toward their jobs and their performance on these jobs are work-related outcomes of interest to most employers. Of interest to employers, but also to employees and their loved ones, is employee psychological well-being, or how happy or depressed the employee is in general. This can have tremendous impact on how the employee interacts with and affects others. Another outcome of frequent interest is substance abuse. Whether, and how much, a person uses alcohol or other drugs relates to health and well-being and can have severe repercussions for a person's behavior and performance on and off the job.

Sexual behavior that is unwanted, viewed as offensive, and experienced negatively in the workplace—that is, sexual harassment—has already been related to such measures of well-being. Sexual harassment negatively predicts a variety of work, psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes (cf. Cortina & Berdahl, in press). However, is there an upside to sexual behavior at work that has gone unstudied, as popular depictions and some scholars suggest? If sexual behavior at work is enjoyed and adds to employee experiences of fun and pleasure at work, then it follows that it is likely to contribute to employees' positive feelings and behaviors as well as to their overall happiness and independence from destructive coping habits.

*Hypothesis 3:* The more positively and frequently employees experience sexual behavior at work, the better their work and psychological well-being outcomes; the more negatively and frequently employees experience sexual behavior at work, the worse their work and psychological well-being outcomes.

We tested our hypotheses with two sets of data. The first involved data from employees in male-dominated and female-dominated organizations previously analyzed to examine only negatively experienced sexual and racial behaviors (Berdahl, 2007b; Berdahl & Moore, 2006). We limited our analysis to six neutrally worded sexual behaviors that could be positively experienced. For the first time, we included positively evaluated experiences in our analyses. Also for the first time, we examined (a) the sex of the actor(s) initiating these behaviors, (b) whether employee evaluations of the behaviors depended on employee and actor sex, and (c) work and psychological well-being outcomes.

The second study involved a survey of nonmanagerial staff members at a large research university. Among other things, the survey asked them about their experiences of sexual behavior at work as well as how valued they feel at work, how often they experience symptoms of depression, and their use of alcohol or other drug(s).

## Study 1: Manufacturing and Social Service Workers

### Method

#### Sample

Surveys were mailed to approximately 800 employees at their home addresses from their union. Each employee worked at one of five organizations located in the same major North American city. Three of the organizations were male-dominated manufacturing plants owned by the same parent company, and two of the organizations were female-dominated community service centers overseen by the city government. The survey was accompanied by a letter from the union explaining the study, guaranteeing participants' anonymity, and encouraging recipients to complete the 45-min survey and return it in a postage-paid envelope to the researcher. Participants were paid \$15 for completing the survey.

Two hundred thirty-eight employees completed the survey. This is a good response rate (30%) for survey research of this nature (e.g., Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997), length, and content (cf. Fitzgerald, Weitzman, Gold, & Ormerod, 1988). Of the respondents, 88 (23 women and 65 men) were employed at a manufacturing plant and 150 (135 women and 15 men) were employed at a community center. Modal income was \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year, modal age was 40 to 49 years, and modal tenure in the organization was 10 to 19 years. Forty-eight percent of the respondents' ethnic backgrounds were European; 28% were Asian; 10% were Caribbean; 5% were African; 5% were Latin, Central, or South American; and 4% or less were Aboriginal, Arab, or Pacific Islander.

#### Measures

The survey began with descriptive questions about the respondent's employment profile (e.g., tenure, hours worked per week, and annual income) and followed with questions about the respondent's work withdrawal and psychological well-being. Employees then completed a personality profile. After that, they were asked about various experiences they may have had at work in the past 2 years, including sexual behaviors by others in their work environments. The survey ended with questions about the employee's personal demographics. Measures are presented below in the order they appeared on the survey.

*Work and psychological well-being.* Work withdrawal was measured with Hanisch and Hulin's (1991) scale assessing the degree to which employees avoid work and think about quitting. Work withdrawal has been shown to be positively related to experiences of sexual harassment (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Schneider et al., 1997). We wished to see whether work withdrawal is negatively related to enjoyed sexual experiences at work. Respondents indicated how often they had engaged in the behaviors on their current job in the past year from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*more than once a week*). Responses were averaged across the 15 items ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

Psychological well-being was measured with Veit and Ware's (1983) 14-item Mental Health Index ( $\alpha = .83$ ). This index taps feelings of hope, anxiety, and depression. Psychological well-being has been shown to be negatively related to experiences of sexual harassment (e.g., Schneider et al., 1997). We wanted to see whether psychological well-being is positively related to enjoyed

experiences of sexual behavior at work. Respondents indicated how often they felt each way in the past month from 0 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*).

*Sexual behavior at work.* Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently in the past 2 years they had been in a situation where someone in their work environment had (a) displayed, used, or distributed sexual materials; (b) told sexual stories or jokes; (c) tried to draw them into a discussion of sexual matters; (d) gave them sexual attention; (e) touched their face, butt, thigh, or another "private" part of their body; or (f) exposed a private part of their body to them using ratings from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*most of the time*). If a respondent had experienced a behavior at least once, then the respondent was also asked to indicate how negative or positive the experience had been from  $-2$  (*very negative*) to 0 (*neutral*) to 2 (*very positive*). Responses were averaged across the six frequency answers to measure the frequency of sexual behavior ( $\alpha = .78$ ). Responses were averaged across those items with evaluations to measure evaluation of sexual behavior ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

To analyze sexual behaviors by ambient and direct forms, we combined the first three items of the scale (sexual materials, jokes, and discussions) to measure ASB (frequency  $\alpha = .77$ ; evaluation  $\alpha = .88$ ) and the last three items (sexual attention, touching, exposing) to measure DSB (frequency  $\alpha = .55$ ; evaluation  $\alpha = .91$ ). The correlation between ASB and DSB was .60 ( $p < .001$ ).

*Sex of actor(s).* If a respondent experienced a behavior at least once, then he or she was asked to indicate the sex of the person(s) who did it: (a) "a man—all men," (b) "mostly men," (c) "men and women equally," (d) "mostly women," or (e) "a woman—all women." The sex of the person(s) was averaged across subscale items scores for sex of actor(s) of ASB and DSB (consistent with Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

*Control variables.* Dominant sex in the organization, hours worked per week, annual income, age, relationship status, and

<sup>2</sup> We computed reliability scores for the sex of actor(s) for each behavior in each subscale (i.e., three ASB items and three DSB items). The alpha for ambient behaviors was decent (.61, based on 41 cases who experienced all three items), suggesting that the sex of actor(s) was reasonably consistent across the three behaviors for each respondent. The alpha for direct behaviors was low (.28), perhaps because of the fact that it was based on 6 respondents only (those who experienced all three behaviors). When the DSB item with low frequencies was removed (exposed a private part), this alpha went up to .89 (based on 21 respondents who experienced both sexual attention and touching).

We also computed cross tabulations of the sex of actor(s) for different types of sexual behavior within the same subscales (ambient and direct). Of the 132 people who experienced at least one ASB, only 13 (less than 10%) had opposite-sex actors for different behaviors (e.g., 2 reported that mostly women tried to draw them into sexual discussions but that mostly men told sexual stories or jokes). No respondents reported that only women perpetrated one type of ASB and only men perpetrated another. Of the 65 people who experienced at least one DSB, only 2 (3%) had opposite-sex actors for different behaviors (one had mostly men expose themselves and only women give them sexual attention and touch; the other had mostly women touch them and mostly men give them sexual attention). Given the high consistency of the sex of actor(s) across different sexual behaviors for each employee, we thought it safe to combine sex of actor(s). Reporting the gender of perpetrators for each of the six sexual behaviors separately would have unnecessarily complicated our analyses and presentation for the sake of only a handful of cases for which such an approach would be relevant.

ethnicity served as control variables because they may affect the frequency with which respondents experience sexual behavior at work and their evaluations of this behavior. At the beginning of the survey, respondents indicated the average number of hours they worked per week in their job (“10 or fewer hours per week,” “11–20 hours,” “21–35 hours,” “36–45 hours,” or “46 or more hours per week”) and their annual income (from 1 = \$6,500 or less to 6 = \$45,000 or more). At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their age (“less than 20,” “20–29,” “30–39,” “40–49,” “50–59,” “60+”), relationship status (“single,” “dating casually,” “long-term relationship,” “married”), and ethnic ancestry (“Aboriginal,” “African,” “Arab,” “Asian,” “Caribbean,” “European,” “Latin American,” “Pacific Islander,” or “other”). Ethnicity was coded so that 0 equaled European and 1 equaled non-European ancestry. Respondents also indicated their sex (male or female), which served as an independent variable in the analyses.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, correlations between the study variables, and reliability coefficients, are presented in Table 1. Results presented below mention effects for control variables only when significant.

A majority of respondents (58%) reported experiencing at least one of the sexual behaviors in the past 2 years at work. More men (76%) than women (46%) were exposed to sexual behavior at work, though their average frequencies did not differ,  $F(1, 217) = 2.40, ns$ . Over half of the employees (55.9%) experienced ASB in the past 2 years, and just over one fourth of employees (27.5%) experienced DSB. More men (75%) than women (44%) experienced ASB, though men and women averaged similar frequencies,  $F(1, 217) = 2.73, ns$ . Slightly more men (32.5%) than women (24%) experienced DSB, but their frequencies did not differ,  $F(1, 217) = 0.77, ns$ .

Women rated being exposed to sexual behavior at work negatively ( $M = -0.42, SD = 0.80$ ), whereas men rated it positively ( $M = 0.38, SD = 0.74; B = 1.08, t(130) = 3.24, p < .01, d = 1.04$ ). Most men who experienced sexual behavior at work evaluated it positively (46%) or neutrally (41%); only 13% evaluated it negatively. Most women who experienced sexual behavior at work evaluated it neutrally (47%) or negatively (44%); only 10% evaluated it positively. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the percentage of men and women who enjoyed, disliked, and felt neutrally about being exposed to ASB and DSB at work.

Actor Sex

Hypothesis 1 predicted that ASB is evaluated most extremely when initiated by men—that it is evaluated most negatively by women and most positively by men. In other words, we predicted an interaction between target and actor sex. Linear regression analysis revealed a significant effect for target sex and actor sex, but their interaction did not quite reach significance (see Table 2). Consistent with prior results, women evaluated being exposed to ASB at work more negatively than did men. Both male and female employees liked ASB less when it came from men than when it came from women. Consistent with our hypothesis, ASB was most strongly disliked by women who received it from men. Inconsistent with our hypothesis was that men did not positively evaluate ASB from men but tended to evaluate ASB from both men and women somewhat negatively (see Figure 3).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that DSB is most enjoyed by men who receive it from women and most disliked by women who receive it from men. Results were largely as predicted (see Table 2): There was a significant interaction between target and actor sex. Men positively evaluated DSB from women and negatively evaluated DSB from men (see Figure 4). Women negatively evaluated DSB from men but did not evaluate DSB from women any more positively.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics for Study 1: Manufacturing and Social Service Workers

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Age	3.67	1.04	—											
2. Relationship status	2.96	1.27	.08	—										
3. Ethnic minority	0.75	0.44	.03	-.03	—									
4. Income	3.53	1.09	.24***	.20**	-.10	—								
5. Hours per week	3.43	0.91	.24***	.16*	-.01	.69***	—							
6. Male	0.33	0.47	.28***	.20**	-.07	.47***	.41***	—						
7. Male-dominated organization	0.37	0.48	.28***	.22**	-.09	.55***	.53***	.34***	—					
8. SB frequency	0.47	0.60	-.01	.01	-.06	.23***	.24***	.34***	.47***	.78				
9. SB evaluation	-0.06	0.86	.11	.27**	-.06	.30***	.31***	.46***	.26**	.02	.92			
10. Women actor(s)	2.64	1.19	-.22*	.08	.02	.05	.14	.03	-.24**	.01	.35***	—		
11. Work withdrawal	1.13	0.54	-.15*	-.01	-.08	.09	.06	.10	.10	.36***	.01	-.05	.76	
12. Psychological well-being	2.82	0.94	-.02	.12	.06	.13*	.14*	.12	-.14	-.11	.15	.16	-.25***	.83

Note. Age was coded as 1 = less than 20, 2 = 20–29, 3 = 30–39, 4 = 40–49, 5 = 50–59, and 6 = 60+. Relationship status was coded as 1 = single, 2 = dating casually, 3 = long-term relationship, and 4 = married. Annual income (in 2002, U.S. dollars) was rated from 1 = \$6,500 or less to 6 = \$45,000 or more. Hours worked per week were coded from 1 = 10 or fewer hours per week to 6 = 46 or more hours per week. Frequency of sexual behaviors (SB) was rated as follows: 0 = never, 1 = once or twice, 2 = a few times, 3 = several times, and 4 = most of the time. Evaluation of SB ranged from -2 = very negative to 0 = neutral to 2 = very positive. Women actor(s) was coded as 1 = only men, 2 = mostly men, 3 = men and women equally, 4 = mostly women, and 5 = only women. Work withdrawal ranged from 0 (low) to 5 (high); psychological well-being ranged from 0 (low) to 5 (high). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Work and Psychological Well-Being

Hypotheses 3 predicted that the more positively and frequently employees experience sexual behavior, the better their work and psychological well-being, and the more negatively and frequently employees experience sexual behavior, the worse their work and psychological well-being. We ran regressions on work withdrawal and psychological well-being by frequency of sexual behavior, evaluation of sexual behavior, and their interaction, controlling for sex and other controls (see Table 3).<sup>3</sup>

Only the frequency of sexual behavior predicted work withdrawal. The more frequently an employee experienced sexual behavior at work, the more that employee reported withdrawing from work. In contrast to our prediction that positively experienced sexual behavior decreases work withdrawal, it appears that the evaluation of sexual behavior had no effect. Instead, employees who experienced sexual behavior simply reported more work withdrawal ( $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) than employees who did not ( $M = 0.93$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ), regardless of whether they enjoyed the sexual behavior ( $d = .69$ ). Employees who enjoyed it or who disliked it reported more work withdrawal ( $M = 1.31$ ,  $SD = 0.52$  and  $M = 1.26$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ , respectively) than employees who experienced it neutrally or not at all ( $M = 1.06$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ).

Psychological well-being was also predicted by the frequency of sexual behaviors. The more employees experienced sexual behavior, the worse their psychological well-being (see Table 3). There was also an interaction between the frequency and the evaluation of sexual behavior, driven mainly by the fact that employees who rarely or never experienced sexual behavior and who disliked it had the highest levels of psychological well-being (see Figure 5).

### Discussion

The results of this study reveal that sexual behavior in these manufacturing and social service organizations was not uncommon. ASB was twice as common as DSB. More men than women were exposed to both types of sexual behavior, though when women were exposed, they were exposed more often.

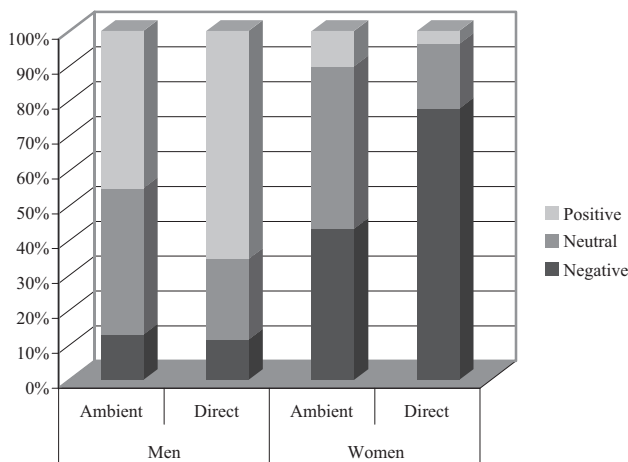


Figure 2. Study 1: Percentage of men and women evaluating their experiences of ambient and direct sexual behavior at work negatively, neutrally, and positively.

Table 2  
Study 1: Regressions on Evaluations of Ambient and Direct Sexual Behaviors

Variable	Ambient sexual behavior	Direct sexual behavior
Age	0.01 (.07)	0.02 (.12)
Relationship status	0.09 (.06)	-0.01 (.09)
Ethnic minority	-0.14 (.15)	-0.15 (.23)
Income	0.05 (.09)	-0.10 (.13)
Hours per week	0.09 (.12)	-0.12 (.15)
Male-dominated organization	-0.04 (.22)	0.36 (.32)
Male	1.06 (.37)**	-0.52 (.77)
Women actor(s)	0.28 (.08)***	0.02 (.14)
Male × Women Actor(s)	-0.22 (.12)†	0.52 (.21)*
$R^2$	.315	.602
$F$	(9, 115) 5.89***	(9, 51) 8.59***

Note. Values presented are betas (and standard errors) unless otherwise noted. Age was coded as 1 = less than 20, 2 = 20–29, 3 = 30–39, 4 = 40–49, 5 = 50–59, and 6 = 60+. Relationship status was coded as 1 = single, 2 = dating casually, 3 = long-term relationship, and 4 = married. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . †  $p < .10$ .

This is the first study we know of that systematically examines how men and women evaluate their experiences of sexual behavior at work—specifically, whether there are any positive experiences of sexual behavior and, if so, whether they lead to positive work and well-being outcomes. We did find evidence that some employees enjoy sexual behavior at work: Over one fourth found it fun or flattering, but slightly more found it stressful or bothersome. Most employees felt neutrally about it. Men tended to enjoy ASB and particularly DSB, but women tended to dislike both types of behavior, as expected.

Women evaluated ASB from men most negatively, and employees evaluated ASB from women neutrally, consistent with Hypothesis 1. Inconsistent with our hypothesis was that ASB by men around other men was not evaluated positively but rather neutrally to negatively. It is possible that sexual jokes, materials, or discussions initiated by men around other men do not always elevate men over women but simply the actor over the target (Berdahl, 2007a).

Results for evaluations of DSB largely supported Hypothesis 2: Men who received DSB from women were the only employees who liked it. From a power perspective, it appears the only time people enjoy receiving sexual attention is when it comes from a less powerful other.

Hypothesis 3 concerned the outcomes of sexual behavior at work. In contrast to our prediction that positively experienced sexual behavior improves work well-being, employees who experienced sexual behavior positively and those who experienced it negatively reported more work withdrawal than employees who did not experience sexual behavior. Similarly, results showed that employees who rarely experienced sexual behavior at work and who disliked it had the highest levels of psychological well-being, whereas employees who enjoyed sexual behavior at work and/or experienced a lot of it had equally low levels of well-being.

These results are surprising and challenge the idea that there are positive benefits to fun and flattering sexual behavior at work.

<sup>3</sup> We set evaluations to zero, or “neutral,” for respondents who did not experience the behavior to keep them in the analysis.

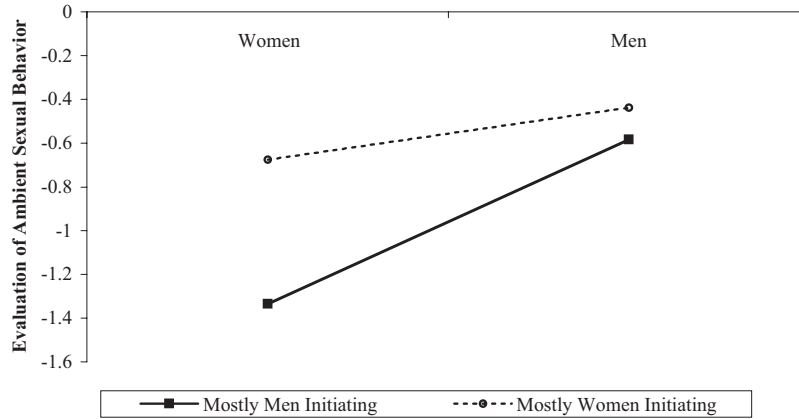


Figure 3. Study 1: Interaction between target sex and initiator sex on evaluations of ambient sexual behavior.

Why would a fun and flattering experience not lead to less work withdrawal and better psychological well-being? It is possible that sexual behavior at work is distracting and interferes with concentrating on work, but most employees in this study did not experience sexual behavior daily or even weekly. Why would employees who enjoy sexual behavior at work have worse outcomes than those who experience none of it?

It is possible that measurement issues account for these results. The time frames used to measure sexual behavior and work and psychological well-being differed. Employees recalled their experiences of sexual behavior at work over the past 2 years, their work withdrawal over the past year, and their psychological well-being over the past month. Although these time frames make it likely that sexual behavior preceded work and psychological outcomes, it is probably better to measure these variables on the same time scale. It is possible that asking respondents to recall social experiences that occurred up to 2 years ago poses a challenging cognitive task and that recollections are biased by more recent work and psychological states.

We conducted a second study to see whether results for work and psychological well-being replicated in another sample of employees. We asked employees to recall how often they experienced

sexual behaviors in the past year (half the time frame) and used the same time frame to measure psychological well-being.

### Study 2: University Staff

#### Method

#### Sample

Approximately 3,400 nonmanagerial staff members at a large university were invited by the president of their union local to participate in an online survey about their work experiences. The letter from the president introduced the researcher, explained the purpose of the study, guaranteed the confidentiality of the data, and provided a key number that participants could enter into the survey if they consented to have their answers linked with a database containing their salary and demographic information. The survey took approximately 30 min to complete. To encourage staff to complete the survey, the union provided four “early-bird” awards to those who completed it within 2 weeks and three more awards to those who completed it by the end of the survey deadline (1 month). After the initial invitation, staff members were sent three reminders during the month of the survey.

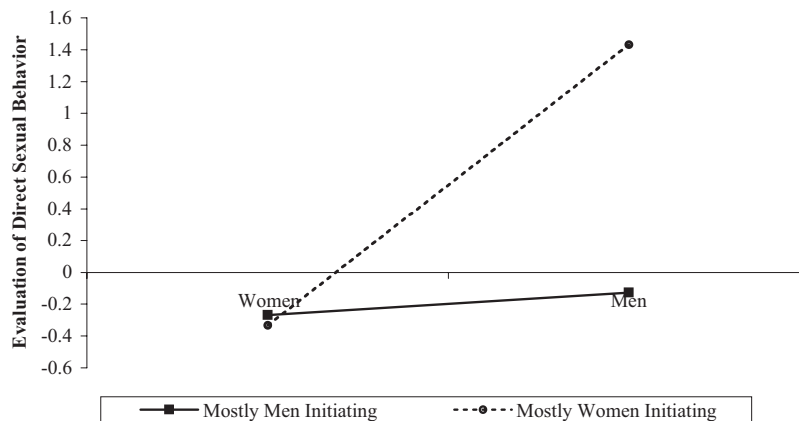


Figure 4. Study 1: Interaction between target sex and initiator sex on evaluations of direct sexual behavior.

Table 3  
Study 1: Regressions on Work Withdrawal and Psychological Well-Being

Variable	Work withdrawal	Psychological well-being
Age	-0.07 (.04) <sup>†</sup>	-0.07 (.06)
Relationship status	-0.01 (.03)	0.07 (.05)
Ethnic minority	-0.04 (.08)	0.20 (.14)
Income	0.04 (.05)	0.06 (.08)
Hours per week	-0.01 (.05)	0.15 (.10)
Male-dominated organization	-0.10 (.11)	-0.28 (.20)
Male	0.04 (.10)	0.31 (.18) <sup>†</sup>
SB frequency	0.36 (.07) <sup>***</sup>	-0.29 (.12) <sup>*</sup>
SB evaluation	0.04 (.09)	-0.26 (.16) <sup>†</sup>
SB Frequency × SB Evaluation	-0.05 (.07)	0.37 (.13) <sup>***</sup>
R <sup>2</sup>	.168	.128
F	(10, 214) 4.31 <sup>***</sup>	(10, 213) 3.12 <sup>***</sup>

Note. Values presented are betas (and standard errors) unless otherwise noted. Age was coded as 1 = less than 20, 2 = 20–29, 3 = 30–39, 4 = 40–49, 5 = 50–59, and 6 = 60+. Relationship status was coded as 1 = single, 2 = dating casually, 3 = long-term relationship, and 4 = married. SB = sexual behavior.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . <sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

One thousand four employees completed the survey in full. Like Study 1, this represents a good response rate (30%) for a survey of this nature. Of the respondents, 274 were men and 730 were women. The average income was \$53,429 per year (in Canadian dollars;  $SD = \$14,081$ ; at this time, as well as at the time of the study, the U.S. dollar equivalent was the same as the Canadian dollar amount, i.e., the U.S. dollar was worth approximately \$1 for every Canadian \$1). Respondents averaged 43.5 years of age ( $SD = 10.82$ ) and 11.59 years at the university ( $SD = 9.65$ ). Fifty-seven percent had ethnic backgrounds classified as White, 19% as Asian, 4% as Caribbean, and 2% or less as Aboriginal, African, Arab, Latino, Israeli, Pacific Islander, or other (15% of respondents did not specify their ethnic background).

### Measures

The survey began with questions about the respondent's perceptions of their work environment and their mental and physical

health. Employees then completed a personality profile. They were then asked about various experiences they may have had in the past year at work, including being exposed to sexual behaviors. The survey ended with questions about the employee's personal demographics. Measures are presented below in the order they appeared.

**Work and psychological well-being.** We assessed how valued employees felt at work with a nine-item scale. Items included statements such as, "My work is valued," "People let me know they appreciate my work," "I am listened to," and "I am treated like an individual." Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) and were averaged across the items to create a measure of feeling valued at work ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Psychological well-being was measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies Short Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they felt different ways within the past year from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*). Responses were averaged across the 10 items to measure depression ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Employees were also asked whether they used alcohol or other drug(s) to relax, with response options ranging from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*).

**Sexual behavior at work.** Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they had been in a situation in the past year in which someone in their work environment had (a) displayed, used, or distributed sexual materials; (b) told sexual stories or jokes; (c) tried to draw them into a discussion of sexual matters; (d) gave them sexual attention; (e) attempted to establish a romantic or sexual relationship with them; and (f) touched their face, butt, thigh, or another "private" part of their body. Response options were 1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *three or four times*, and 4 = *five or more times* and were averaged to measure the overall frequency of sexual behavior ( $\alpha = .71$ ). If a respondent had experienced a behavior at least once, then he or she was also asked to indicate how negative the experience had been for him or her: "not at all negative," "somewhat negative," "negative," and "very negative" ( $\alpha = .98$ ). Evaluations of sexual behavior were reverse-coded so that lower values indicated more negative evaluations (1 = *very negative* to 4 = *not at all negative*).

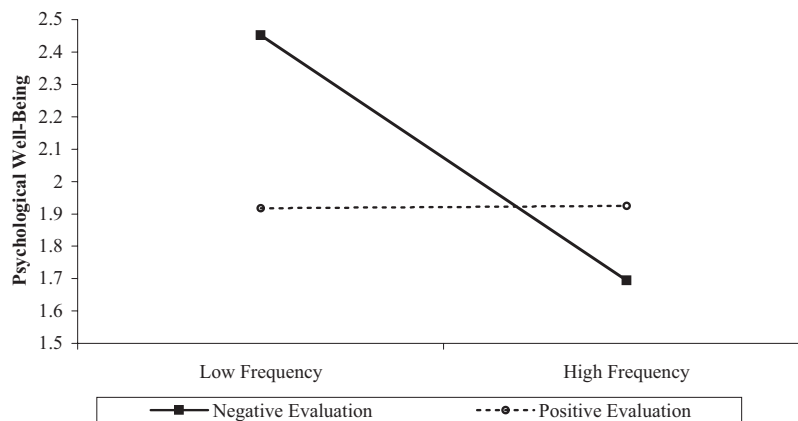


Figure 5. Study 1: Interaction between frequency and evaluation of sexual behavior on psychological well-being.



As in Study 1, the first three items (sexual materials, jokes, and discussions) were combined to measure ASB (frequency  $\alpha = .59$ ; evaluation  $\alpha = .93$ ) and the last three items (sexual attention, attempts, and touching) were combined to measure DSB (frequency  $\alpha = .73$ ; evaluation  $\alpha = .96$ ). One of the DSB items differed between the studies: Having someone expose a private part of their body in Study 1 was replaced by having someone attempt to establish a romantic or sexual relationship in Study 2. The frequency of the exposure item in Study 1 was very low and depressed the reliability of the DSB subscale. The reliability of the subscale in Study 2 ( $\alpha = .73$ ) was quite a bit higher than in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .55$ ). ASB correlated  $.46$  ( $p < .001$ ) with DSB.

Another difference in the way sexual behavior was measured was the time frame. In Study 1, respondents were asked to recall how often they had experienced behaviors in the past 2 years. In Study 2, we limited this time frame to 1 year. The response options for the frequency of the behaviors and the evaluations of them were changed from 5- to 4-point scales, and rather than having separate response options for “neutral,” “somewhat positive,” and “very positive,” these were combined into “not at all negative.”

*Control variables.* Control variables included ethnicity, tenure in the organization, age, annual income, and percentage full time. As in Study 1, respondents indicated their ethnic ancestry, and this was coded so that 0 represented European and 1 represented non-European. Tenure and age were measured in years. Annual income and percentage full time were obtained from the data set provided by the union. At the end of the survey, respondents indicated their sex (male or female); if missing, then sex was obtained from the union database.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, correlations between the study variables, and reliability coefficients, are presented in Table 4. Results presented below mention effects for control variables only when they were significant.

Forty percent of respondents experienced at least one sexual behavior in the past year at work. More men (48%) than women (37%) experienced sexual behaviors, and men experienced them more frequently ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ) than did women ( $M = 1.16$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ;  $B = 0.06$ ),  $t(706) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .039$ ,  $d = .16$ . Thirty-seven percent of employees experienced ASB in the past year, and 12% experienced DSB. More men (46%) than women (34%) experienced ASB, and men experienced it more frequently ( $M = 1.37$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) than did women ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ;  $B = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ),  $t(706) = 2.97$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = .23$ . Men (11%;  $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ) and women (12%;  $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ ) experienced DSB equally frequently.

Women rated being exposed to sexual behavior at work more negatively ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ; 54% evaluated it negatively) than men did ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; 41% evaluated it negatively;  $B = 0.39$ ),  $t(293) = 3.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .38$  (see Table 5). Figure 6 provides a breakdown of the percentage of men and women giving ASB and DSB negative and nonnegative evaluations.

### Work and Psychological Well-Being

The main purpose of Study 2 was to test whether positive and frequent sexual behavior enhances work and psychological well-

being, as predicted by Hypothesis 3. We ran regressions on measures of feeling valued at work, depression, and use of alcohol and drugs by the frequency of sexual behavior, the evaluation of sexual behavior, and their interaction (controlling for sex and the control variables).<sup>4</sup> As seen in Table 6, the frequency of sexual behavior interacted with its evaluation to predict each outcome. Results are highly consistent with those of Study 1 (see Figures 7–9).

The frequency of exposure to sexual behavior at work negatively predicted how valued employees felt at work and also interacted with the evaluation of sexual behavior to predict feeling valued. Figure 7 shows that employees who experienced little or no sexual behavior and employees who experienced a lot of nonnegative sexual behavior felt similarly valued at work. Employees who experienced a lot of negative sexual behavior felt less valued at work than did other employees. To support Hypothesis 3, we would have expected those who experienced a lot of nonnegative sexual behavior to feel more valued at work. There was only a nonsignificant and minor trend in this direction, failing to support our hypothesis.

The frequency of being exposed to sexual behavior at work also predicted depression and interacted with the evaluation of sexual behavior. Figure 8 shows that only employees who experienced a relatively high frequency of negatively evaluated sexual behavior at work stood out with high rates of depressive symptoms. Employees who experienced relatively little sexual behavior and those who experienced relatively frequent nonnegative sexual behavior had similarly low rates of depression.

The use of alcohol or other drugs to relax showed a slightly different pattern. The frequency and evaluation of sexual behavior at work interacted to predict alcohol and drug use. Figure 9 shows that only employees who experienced low rates of sexual behavior and who were not bothered by it rarely used alcohol and drugs. Employees who experienced low rates of sexual behavior and who evaluated it negatively and employees who experienced a lot of sexual behavior, regardless of how they experienced it, showed similarly high rates of alcohol and drug use. We expected high rates of nonnegative sexual behavior to predict the lowest drug and alcohol use, but frequent sexual behavior predicted high rates of drug and alcohol use, regardless of how it was evaluated.

## General Discussion

These studies represent the first to systematically examine men’s and women’s experiences of sexual behavior at work without imposing a positive or negative lens on the behavior. We set out to assess whether the negative side of sexual behavior at work has been exaggerated and whether positive effects on employees who enjoy it have been overlooked. We found evidence that sexual behavior at work is enjoyed more than typically represented in the literature. Of the close to 60% of employees who experienced sexual behavior at work in the past 2 years in Study 1, one fourth found it fun and flattering and almost half assessed it as benign. Forty-six percent of the men and 10% of the women enjoyed the sexual behavior they experienced. Of the 40% who experienced sexual behavior in 1 year in Study 2, 50% rated it neutrally to

<sup>4</sup> We set evaluations to zero, or “neutral,” for respondents who did not experience the behavior to keep them in the analysis.

Table 4  
Descriptive Statistics for Study 2: University Staff

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	43.50	10.82	—										
2. Tenure	11.59	9.65	.64***	—									
3. Ethnic minority	0.33	0.47	.05	-.06	—								
4. Income	53.43	14.08	.26***	.25***	-.06	—							
5. FTE	98.05	8.98	.04	.03	.07	.38***	—						
6. Male	0.27	0.45	-.01	.01	.00	.26***	.04	—					
7. SB frequency	1.18	0.35	-.05	.01	-.12***	-.03	.01	.08*	—				
8. SB evaluation	3.27	0.93	.04	.05	-.06	.08	.07	.17***	-.31***	—			
9. Feel valued at work	4.34	0.97	-.10**	-.05	-.01	.04	-.06	.03	-.13***	.23***	—		
10. Depression	1.88	0.58	.04	.06	-.06	-.02	.04	.00	.17***	-.26***	-.53***	—	
11. Drug and alcohol use	1.40	0.71	-.04	-.08*	-.19***	.03	-.06	.07*	.14***	-.02	-.06	.20***	—

Note. Annual income is in thousands of Canadian dollars (2007). Sexual behavior (SB) frequency (past year) was rated as 1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *three or four times*, and 4 = *five or more times*. SB evaluation ranged from 1 (*very negative*) to 4 (*not at all negative*). Feel valued at work ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Depression symptoms ranged from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*). Use of drugs and alcohol to relax ranged from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*). FTE = percentage full-time equivalent.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

positively. Though equally large proportions of employees experienced sexual behavior negatively, one cannot deny that a good number of employees felt they enjoyed being exposed to sexual behavior in their workplace.

Despite these positive evaluations, we did not find evidence that sexual behavior benefits employees who enjoy it. Employees' work-related outcomes were worse the more they experienced sexual behavior in their workplaces, regardless of whether they disliked or enjoyed the behavior. In Study 1, employees withdrew from work (e.g., neglected tasks, thought about quitting) the more frequently they experienced sexual behavior, even if they enjoyed it. In Study 2, employees felt less valued at work the more frequently they experienced sexual behavior. Experiencing sexual behavior at work neutrally to positively did not lead to feeling more valued than experiencing very little or no sexual behavior.

Employees' psychological outcomes were also worse the more they experienced sexual behavior at work. In Study 1, employees reported worse psychological well-being the more frequently they were exposed to sexual behavior. Only employees who experienced no sexual behavior or very little that did not bother them had relatively high levels of psychological well-being. In Study 2, employees reported more symptoms of depression the more fre-

quently they experienced sexual behavior, especially if they experienced it negatively. The only employees to report relatively low rates of drug and alcohol use were those who experienced no sexual behavior or experienced very little nonbothersome behavior. In short, we did not observe that employees who enjoyed sexual behavior at work had better work or psychological outcomes than those who disliked it or those who did not experience it at all.

The results of these studies raise some interesting questions for organizational policy and research. On the one hand, there can be no denying that some employees, even some women, report enjoying being exposed to sexual behavior in the workplace. On the other hand, there does not appear to be much benefit to sexual behavior that is enjoyed—at least not for reducing work withdrawal and enhancing a sense of being valued at work, psychological well-being, and health habits. Despite the pleasure it brings to some, these data suggest it is wise to avoid sharing sexual jokes and materials and engaging in sexual discussions and interactions

Table 5  
Study 2: Regressions on Evaluations of Ambient and Direct Sexual Behaviors

Variable	Ambient sexual behavior	Direct sexual behavior
Age	0.00 (.01)	-.01 (.02)
Tenure	0.00 (.01)	0.03 (.02)
Ethnic minority	-.06 (.13)	0.14 (.28)
Income	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)
FTE	0.01 (.01) <sup>†</sup>	0.01 (.01)
Male	0.31 (.11)**	0.76 (.29)*
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.04	.11
<i>F</i>	(6, 275) 1.84 <sup>†</sup>	(6, 79) 1.57

Note. Values presented are betas (and standard errors) unless otherwise noted. FTE = full-time equivalent.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . <sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

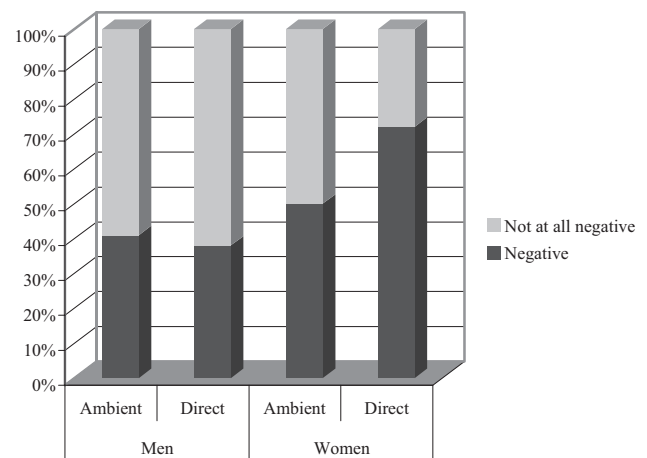


Figure 6. Study 2: Percentage of men and women evaluating their experiences of ambient and direct sexual behavior at work not at all negatively and negatively.

Table 6  
Study 2: Regressions on Measures of Individual Well-Being

Variable	Valued at work	Depression	Alcohol–drug use
Age	−0.01 (.00)**	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)
Tenure	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)	−0.01 (.00)**
Ethnic minority	−0.07 (.08)	−0.06 (.05)	−0.28 (.06)***
Income	0.00 (.00)†	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)†
FTE	−0.01 (.00)**	0.01 (.00)*	−0.01 (.00)*
Male	0.03 (.08)	−0.06 (.05)	0.07 (.06)
SB frequency	−1.03 (.37)**	0.63 (.23)**	−0.31 (.28)
SB evaluation	−0.27 (.17)	0.11 (.10)	−0.27 (.13)*
SB Frequency × SB Evaluation	0.29 (.11)**	−0.16 (.07)*	0.18 (.08)*
R <sup>2</sup>	.054	.058	.083
F	(9, 703) 4.47***	(9, 697) 4.80***	(9, 695) 7.03***

Note. Values presented are betas (and standard errors) unless otherwise noted. FTE = full-time equivalent; SB = sexual behavior.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . †  $p < .10$ .

with coworkers, lest these behaviors offer no pleasure to many and work and psychological harm to all.

By legal standards, the fact that sexual behaviors were associated with negative work and psychological outcomes even when employees enjoyed them suggests that sexual behavior is discriminatory, even if enjoyed, because it is based on sex and causes harm. By psychological standards, sexual behavior is not harassing unless it is subjectively appraised as unwanted and threatening to the receiver’s well-being (Cortina & Berdahl, in press). Our results suggest that sexual behavior is like a stealth poison: As with unhealthy food, some may derive pleasure from it, a fun sense of risk or rebellion, or a positive social identity, even as it harms their mental and physical health. It is a tricky question whether employees’ appraisals or consequences should be used to determine harm and shape policy. Using only appraisals runs the risk of false or socially desirable reporting, relying on different levels of awareness of harm, and other problems incurred by subjective evaluations. Using only proof of harm introduces a strict and difficult standard and denies agency to employees who insist that no harm has been done to them.

Our results are consistent with recent research (Fairchild & Rudman, in press) on how sexual comments and cat-calls from

strangers (e.g., the street, subway, and bars) harm women (men were not studied), even those who interpret these behaviors as benign or flattering. In fact, women who interpreted sexual behaviors from strangers positively were most likely to be psychologically harmed by them. To the extent sexual behavior is consciously or subconsciously linked with negative concepts and feelings, such as shame and vulnerability, dominance and subordination, or objectification and derogation, it is likely to have negative outcomes for those exposed to it, even if they explicitly appraise it as fun and flattering. Employees who enjoy sexual behavior may experience a kind of false consciousness that renders them even more vulnerable to its negative effects.

This suggests a new model of the effects of sexual behavior at work to explore with future research (see Figure 10). Although the literature on sexual harassment has used explicit appraisals to determine whether sexual behavior is harassing, it is possible that implicit attitudes do a better job of predicting the effects of sexual behavior on employees. Research shows that explicit attitudes about sexuality are not correlated with implicit ones (Geer & Robertson, 2005). Theory and research has also shown that sexuality has more subconsciously negative than positive associations and tends to elicit feelings of shame (Geer & Robertson, 2005;

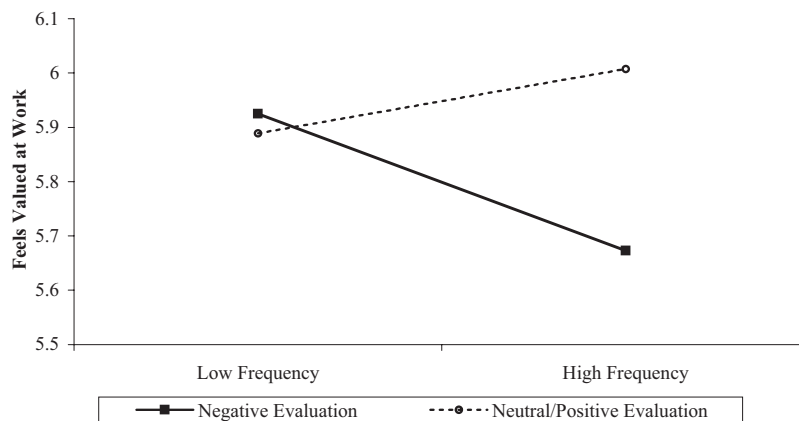


Figure 7. Study 2: Interaction between frequency and evaluation of sexual behavior on feeling valued at work.

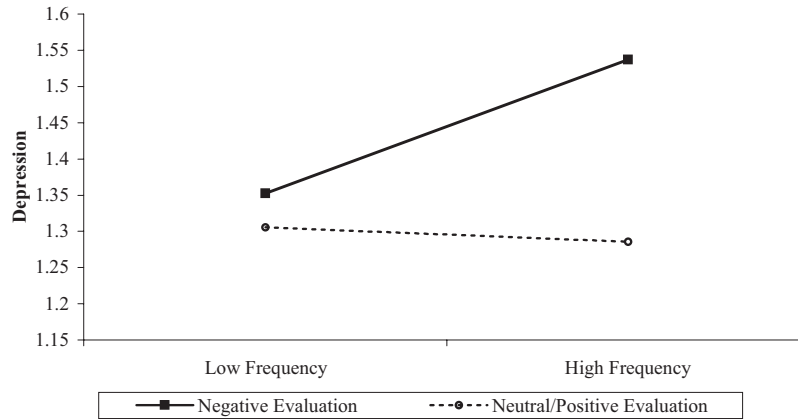


Figure 8. Study 2: Interaction between frequency and evaluation of sexual behavior on depression.

Mollon, 2005). Just as implicit racial attitudes are often dissociated from explicit ones and do a better job of predicting spontaneous rather than deliberate responses (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997), employees' implicit attitudes toward sexual behavior may do a better job than explicit attitudes of predicting spontaneous consequences of sexual behavior. Participants in our studies who reported enjoying their sexual experiences may have had negative implicit associations with the behavior and suffered negative outcomes as a result. Employees may also have been reporting what they saw as socially desirable responses (e.g., if men exaggerated their enjoyment and women exaggerated their dislike of these experiences) rather than how they really felt. Future research would benefit from studying employees' implicit attitudes toward sexual behavior to see whether they are better than explicit appraisals at predicting the consequences of this behavior for employees.

In addition, it is possible that sexual behavior elicits negative social dynamics at work that harm employees in general. If sexual behavior creates a culture of unprofessionalism by eliciting negative feelings, such as embarrassment, shame, vulnerability, rejection, and sexual objectification, then even those who find it fun or flattering may suffer negative consequences as a result. If a majority of employees feel neutrally about or dislike sexual behavior,

as our results suggest, then sexual behavior at work may harm those who really enjoy it because of its overall negative effect on others and the resulting spillover into social relations and the work environment. This and other possibilities for the negative consequences of enjoyed sexual behavior could be explored in future research.

### Limitations

There are limitations to our studies, as is often the case with field research that attempts to do many things, including collecting information those granting access to employees find useful and acceptable. One is the fact that sexual behaviors were appraised from negative to positive in Study 1 (with neutral in the middle) but from not at all negative to very negative in Study 2. It would have been ideal to have the same response scale in Study 2, but the larger survey goals precluded this. Despite this limitation, Study 2, with over 1,000 employees, allowed us to test our prediction about the effects of sexual behavior on employees.

Another limitation to our studies is that they are cross-sectional. Employee work and psychological well-being could have preceded, rather than followed, employee experiences of sexual behavior. Working less hard, feeling devalued, being unhappy, and

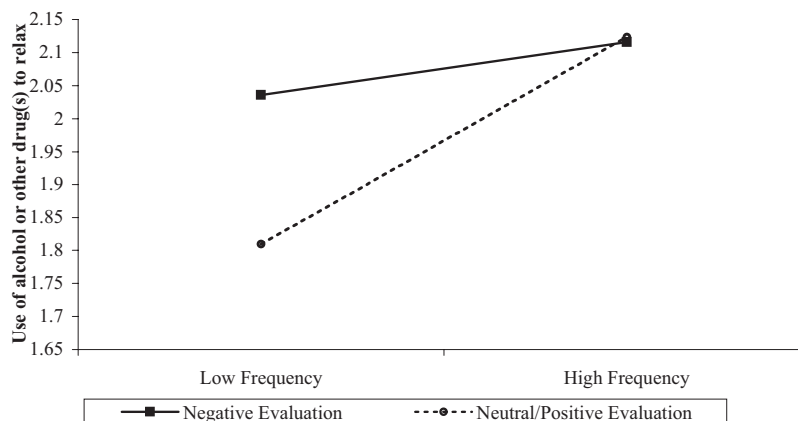


Figure 9. Study 2: Interaction between frequency and evaluation of sexual behavior on drug and alcohol use.

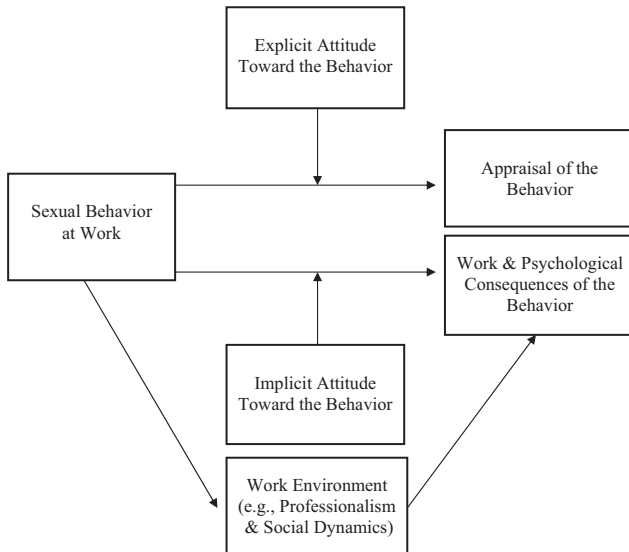


Figure 10. A new model of the effects of sexual behavior on employees at work.

using alcohol and drugs may cause employees to be exposed to more sexual behavior at work or to recall their experiences more easily. We believe this is unlikely, but our data cannot rule this out.

A final limitation to both our studies is the problem of common method variance. We attempted to reduce biases introduced by gathering our data from one source (employees) by guaranteeing confidentiality and temporally separating measures of outcomes and predictors (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We cannot rule out the possibility that relationships between them were subject to common method problems.

### Conclusion

Sexual behavior at work has been frowned upon since courts judged it a potential form of sex discrimination. Some have suggested that sexual behavior at work is typically harmless or even good because it creates a lively and fun work environment. These studies are the first to systematically examine whether this is typically the case. Our results show that sexual behavior at work is enjoyed by some women and by many men but that it is generally associated with negative work-related and psychological outcomes, regardless of whether it is enjoyed or disliked. We encourage future research to explore why this might be the case.

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Received November 29, 2006

Revision received April 21, 2008

Accepted April 28, 2008 ■