

## HARASSMENT BASED ON SEX: PROTECTING SOCIAL STATUS IN THE CONTEXT OF GENDER HIERARCHY

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**I conceptualize sex-based harassment as behavior that derogates an individual based on sex. I propose that sex-based harassment is fundamentally motivated by the harasser's desire to protect or enhance his or her own sex-based status, a desire that stems from the fact that social status is stratified by a system of gender hierarchy. This theory explains currently identified forms of sexual harassment and predicts others, including nonsexual harassment between women.**

Most people think sexual harassment is about sexual desire. Policy and research have focused on behaviors of a sexual nature: a boss who pressures a subordinate into sexual activity, a coworker who repeatedly asks another out on a date, or an environment rife with sexual jokes and materials. This focus has created the widespread assumption that sexual harassers are motivated by a desire for sexual expression and gratification. It has also led to a considerable amount of controversy. Heated debates have taken place over how realistic, or even desirable, it is to regulate sexual expression at work (Schultz, 1998). Sexual harassment is the frequent fodder of jokes, and the idea that it is a problem worthy of attention and sanction is often dismissed.

The first scholars to write about sexual harassment argued that it functions to keep women out of desirable jobs and economically dependent on men (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). It has become clear that most harassment derogates and rejects victims based on sex rather than solicits sexual relations with them (cf. Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Schultz, 1998; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988, 1995). Men who endorse male dominance are more likely than others to sexually harass (Pryor,

1987), and those who challenge male dominance are more likely to be harassed (Berdahl, in press; Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003). This offers quite a different view of sexual harassment than that held by lay observers. Rather than being driven by sexual desire, this suggests that sexual harassment is driven by men's desire to dominate women.

This paper offers a different view of sexual harassment. I argue that the primary motive underlying all harassment is a desire to protect one's social status when it seems threatened, a desire held by men and women alike. Harassment generally is repeated or persistent treatment that pressures, provokes, frightens, intimidates, humiliates, or demeans a person (Adams & Bray, 1992; Brodsky, 1976; Einarsen, 2000). I argue that sexual harassment should be viewed as harassment that is based on sex—as behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual's sex—and that sexual harassers derogate others based on sex to protect or enhance their own sex-based social status, and are motivated and able to do so by a social context that pervasively and fundamentally stratifies social status by sex.

This perspective provides a unified theory of sex-based harassment that both encompasses the variety of forms currently recognized in the literature and suggests others. It identifies a more basic motive than sexual expression or male dominance for sex-based harassment, as well as a more basic conceptualization of sex-based harassment than sexual comments and come-ons. It focuses attention on the social

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structure that encourages individuals to define and protect their status based on sex, and on behaviors that derogate individuals based on sex generally, from sexual behaviors to sex-based insults, exclusion, and sabotage. Importantly, this perspective expands the focus of sexual harassment research and policy beyond male harassers and female targets to consider why women might harass others based on sex, why men might be harassed based on sex, and what these different forms of harassment might look like.

I review how sexual harassers came to be viewed as individuals driven by sexual motives, as men driven by a desire to protect male dominance, or both. I explain why these views are problematic and propose that sexual harassers are driven by a desire to protect and enhance their social status in the context of gender hierarchy. I discuss what factors are likely to predict this desire and which events are likely to trigger it, and I then consider the different forms harassment may take when men harass men, men harass women, women harass men, and women harass women. The paper ends with a discussion of the theory's implications for future research.

#### FROM SEXUAL DESIRE TO MALE DOMINANCE: PRIOR VIEWS OF WHAT MOTIVATES SEXUAL HARASSERS

Sexual harassment largely has been conceptualized as sexual behavior directed at women by men at work. In the late 1970s, quid pro quo sexual harassment, defined as the loss or denial of a job-related benefit (e.g., a promotion, salary increase, or the job itself) for refusing to cooperate sexually, was judged to be a form of sex discrimination (*Williams v. Saxbe*, 1976). The ruling was based on a case of a male boss who sexually coerced his female subordinate, a case resembling other cases to reach the courts at the time (e.g., *Barnes v. Costle*, 1977; *Corne v. Bausch & Lomb*, 1975; *Heelan v. Johns-Manville Corporation*, 1978; *Miller v. Bank of America*, 1979). In the 1980s, sexual behaviors that were not accompanied by tangible or economic job outcomes but created a hostile or abusive work environment for one sex were judged to be sex discrimination (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1980; *Harris v. Forklift Systems*, 1993; *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986). Theorists

argued that persistent sexual attention, repeated requests for dates, and sexual comments, jokes, and materials create an abusive work environment for women by invoking the broader sociocultural context of sexual exploitation and oppression of women by men (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979; Nieva & Gutek, 1981).

#### The Motive of Sexual Desire

Legal and social theories of sexual harassment initially viewed it as sexually motivated. U.S. courts have ruled that sexual harassment constitutes sex discrimination because it is sexual and because sexual acts toward an individual are necessarily motivated by that individual's sex (see Franke, 1997, for a review; *Tietgen v. Brown's Westminster Motors, Inc.*, 1996). Social theories of sexual harassment also have assumed it is motivated by sexual interest (for reviews, see Lengnick-Hall, 1995; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982; Tangri & Hayes, 1997; Welsh, 1999). Proponents of the natural/biological approach view harassment as the expression of natural sexual urges that are expressed more by men than by women because, proponents argue, men are inherently more sexually aggressive and promiscuous than women (cf. Studd & Gattiker, 1991). Proponents of the sex roles approach view sexual harassment as "sociosexual behavior" gone wrong, guided by sex roles that assign men the role of sexual agent and women the role of sexual object (Gutek, 1985; Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Nieva & Gutek, 1981). Proponents of the power approach view sexual harassment as the use of power to extract sexual compliance. According to this perspective, mostly men harass mostly women because men have more power than women (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1980; Evans, 1978; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979; Schultz, 1998; Zalk, 1990). Implicit in this reasoning is the assumption that harassers use their power to sexually coerce others because they desire them sexually.

Viewing sexual harassment as motivated by sexual desire is problematic. It has generated tremendous controversy that has undermined the ability to understand the harassment as a form of sex discrimination and to eradicate it in the workplace. Some forms of sexual expression at work may be benign or even pleasant, and

many workplace romances become long and lasting relationships. Therefore, there has been resistance to the idea that sociosexual behavior at work generally is a bad thing and that attempts to police it are good. Viewing sexual harassment as sexual expression has led to the (largely unfounded) fear that benign expressions of sexual interest may result in lawsuits, demotions, or unwarranted firings. Furthermore, this view of sexual harassment has been convincingly accused of hurting the fight against sex discrimination by promoting policies that ban sexual behavior at work, which, in turn, implicitly encourage employers to keep the sexes separate (and therefore unequal) in order to avoid sexual issues from arising (Schultz, 1998). All this might explain why most research on sexual harassment has taken a defensive stance, focusing on defining the construct (e.g., Blumenthal, 1998; Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001), documenting its prevalence (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gruber, 1998; Gutek, 1985; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988, 1995), and demonstrating its negative effects (e.g., Glomb et al., 1997; Gutek & Koss, 1993; Raver & Gelfand, 2005; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997) rather than theorizing why it occurs in the first place.

More important, viewing sexual harassment as motivated by sexual desire is inconsistent with much of what we now know about sexual harassment. The most common form of sexual harassment is gender harassment, which involves sexual and sexist comments, jokes, and materials that alienate and demean victims based on sex rather than solicit sexual relations with them (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999; Franke, 1997; Schultz, 1998; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988, 1995; Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998). Examples of gender harassment include displaying offensive pornography, leaving soiled condoms in someone's locker, making sexually obscene comments or gestures, and insulting someone's sexual abilities or orientation.

Some have proposed that sexual approach forms of harassment are motivated by sexual desire but that gender harassment is motivated by sexist hostility (Fiske & Glick, 1995; O'Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 2000; Stockdale, Visio, & Batra, 1999). This proposal allows original as-

sumptions about sexual harassment to remain intact by appending to them a separate explanation for gender harassment. This solution is unsatisfactory, for it fails to provide a unified theory of sexual harassment and to account for the fact that all forms of sexual harassment serve the common end of keeping women subordinate to men (Farley, 1978; Franke, 1997; MacKinnon, 1979; Schultz, 1998) and are highly related empirically (cf. Fitzgerald et al., 1999).

### The Motive of Male Dominance

Some have suggested that a desire in men to dominate women drives sexual harassment generally, a view that has been championed by legal theorists. Franke (1997) argues that sexual approach forms of harassment should be reinterpreted as gender harassment rather than the other way around. Schultz writes that "a drive to maintain the most highly rewarded forms of work as domains of masculine competence underlies many, if not most, forms of sex-based harassment on the job" (Schultz, 1998: 1755). Consistent with this view, men who endorse male dominance and female subordination are more likely to say they would sexually exploit a woman if given the chance, and to actually do so (Pryor, 1987; Pryor, La Vite, & Stoller, 1993). Also consistent with this view is the fact that women who challenge male dominance are not only more likely to be targeted for gender harassment (Maass et al., 2003) but for sexual approach forms of harassment as well (Berdahl, in press).

This view of sexual harassment is limiting and problematic as well, though. It implies that only men are motivated to sexually harass, but the little evidence that exists on whether women sexually harass others suggests they do (Magley, Waldo, Drasgow, Fitzgerald, 1999; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995; Waldo et al., 1998). Furthermore, viewing sexual harassers as men who want to dominate women reinforces the negative stereotype of men as "bad but bold." This stereotype is strongly associated with societal male dominance (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Glick et al., 2004) and is likely to reinforce it by suggesting that women need "good" men to protect them from "bad" ones, or that men are bad in general and therefore men and women should be segregated to protect women from men and men from themselves around women (cf. Schultz, 1998). In short, this view is not only

limiting but potentially damaging to the cause of sex desegregation and equality at work.

### REENVISIONING HARASSMENT BASED ON SEX: THE MOTIVE OF SOCIAL STATUS

Instead of viewing sexual harassment as inherently driven by sexual desire, a desire in men to dominate women, or both, I suggest it is fundamentally motivated by the basic desire, present in everyone, to protect or enhance one's social status against threat. Sexual harassment occurs because the motive for social status takes shape in a context of gender hierarchy. The fact that social status is stratified by sex motivates and enables individuals to defend their status based on sex by derogating others' status based on sex. A man may be motivated to protect his status relative to a woman, but not necessarily on the grand scale of wanting to keep women subordinate to men generally. Rather, *both* men and women are motivated to protect their sex-based social standing as individuals, along with the benefits derived from it, and may do so by derogating a woman or a man based on sex.

This view of sexual harassment, henceforth referred to as sex-based harassment (SBH) to deemphasize its sexual nature, is developed below. I begin with a discussion of what SBH is and then articulate a motivational theory of SBH as driven by the basic human motive for social status. I consider what drives individuals to protect or enhance their social status based on sex and what kind of threats are likely to trigger a desire to do so with SBH. I conclude this section with a discussion of who is likely to be targeted for SBH and the forms it may take when it is directed at women by men, at men by men, at men by women, and at women by women.

#### SBH

I define SBH as behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual's sex. SBH may involve acts, comments, or materials that derogate an individual in sex-based ways, such as sexually objectifying and subordinating women. It may also involve seemingly sex-neutral acts, such as repeated provocation, silencing, exclusion, or sabotage, that are experienced by an individual because of sex. SBH casts an individual in a

demeaning role or light by portraying that individual as unworthy, inferior, servile, or a means to an end based on that individual's sex.

To determine whether an episode of harassment was based on sex, it is instructive to ask if the behavior served to derogate an individual in sex-based ways or if an individual of the other sex would have experienced it. If the act itself involved a sex-specific derogation or would not have been experienced by an individual of the other sex, it was harassment based on sex. This does not mean that all individuals of that sex had to experience the harassment. Only some individuals may be singled out for harassment based on their sex, such as an outspoken woman who is sabotaged by her coworkers but whose demure female colleagues or outspoken male ones are not. If a soft-spoken male is demeaned by coworkers in the same organization, the double standard is even clearer in establishing harassment based on sex (cf. Ely & Meyer-son, 2000; Sturm, 2001).

A critical component of harassment is power (cf. Brodsky, 1976; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). Power is relative control over outcomes through the capacity to withdraw rewards or introduce punishments (Dépret & Fiske, 1993; Emerson, 1962; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Kipnis, 1976; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Harassment requires a difference in actual or perceived power between the harasser and the target of harassment that leaves the target little recourse for self-defense or retaliation (Brodsky, 1976; Einarsen, 2000). A harasser may control a target with organizational or economic power, physical intimidation or might, or social norms that define the terms of social inclusion and respect. The latter is a less visible form of power because it takes place against the backdrop of everyday social assumptions and practices, but this does not mean it is less threatening or effective (Fiske & Berdahl, in press). Harassers can use organizational, economic, physical, or social power to harass (e.g., Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979), which explains why organizational subordinates can, and do, harass their superiors (Benson & Thomson, 1982; DeSouza & Fansler, 2003; Grauerholz, 1989; McKinney, 1992).

SBH can also be a cumulative experience. An individual may be targeted by a variety of sources for social slights and harms that seem minor by themselves but add up to have signif-

icant impact when repeated often enough. It may be even more damaging when harassment is experienced in this way because it means the harassment is more pervasive and difficult to escape, more normative and difficult to demonstrate as wrong, and may come from multiple sources, making it more difficult to identify a particular wrongdoer. Several of the examples I give later of sex-based derogations may not amount to harassment by themselves, but would if done repeatedly.

### The Desire to Protect or Enhance Sex-Based Status

I suggest that the primary motive underlying all forms of harassment is the desire to protect or enhance social status when it seems threatened. The need to belong—to receive social acceptance, approval, and admiration—is a basic human motive (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fiske, 2004; Hogan & Hogan, 1991). It may be the most primary or core motive we have as social beings (Fiske, 2004). The degree to which someone receives social esteem and respect is indicated by their social status. Our lives are replete with reminders of the importance of this status, from advertisements selling products to help us achieve it to everyday social comparisons assessing the relative status of individuals. No wonder individuals are motivated to achieve high social status: its many benefits include an increased chance and quality of survival, more influence and control over others (French & Raven, 1959), and a host of other physical, psychological, social, and economic rewards (Keltner et al., 2003; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Morin, 2002; Sartorius, 2003).

While social status is a core social motive, sex is a core social organizer. More than any other social characteristic, sex is used as a basis to differentiate individuals, to assign social roles, and to accord status (Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991; Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glas, 1992; van Knippenberg, van Twuyver, & Pepels, 1994). The primary distinction made is male versus female, with male carrying higher status (Connell, 1987). Distinctions are also made within sex. Men are compared to other men to assess the degree to which they meet masculine ideals, and women are compared to other women to assess the degree to which they meet feminine ones. Masculine and feminine ideals are defined by pre-

scriptive stereotypes that include physical, psychological, and social characteristics (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). A man's social status is based on his being male and on his masculinity relative to other men (e.g., professional success, height, or dominance). A woman's status is based the fact that she is female and on her femininity relative to other women (e.g., beauty, fertility, and warmth).

I propose that all forms of SBH stem from the harasser's desire to protect or enhance his or her own sex-based social status when it seems threatened. Maass and colleagues (2003) have proposed that men are motivated to derogate women to protect their identity as men and the status it confers relative to women. This envisions SBH as an intergroup phenomenon directed at women by men. I expand this to suggest that SBH takes intragroup forms as well. Gender hierarchy is both an intergroup and an intragroup phenomenon: sex-based distinctions are made between as well as within the sexes. At one time or another, and to varying degrees of intensity, all individuals are motivated to defend their sex-based status and the benefits it yields when this status seems threatened, and all individuals are capable of doing so by derogating another based on sex.

I now consider what may strengthen or weaken a desire in individuals to defend sex-based status. Individuals in social contexts that stratify status by sex, who face the loss of valued benefits with a loss in sex-based status, and who endorse beliefs that justify gender hierarchy should be particularly motivated to protect their status based on sex when it is threatened.

**Gender hierarchy.** A social system that emphasizes sex differences and assigns higher status to one sex creates incentives to define and defend social status in terms of sex. Sociocultural systems marked by male dominance are ubiquitous. Being male is associated with higher status than being female in all cultures and societies, consistent with men's relative control over wealth in them (Buss, 1989; Connell, 1995; Williams & Best, 1990). Subsystems, like organizations, tend to mirror the intergroup power relations in their embedding contexts (Alderfer & Smith, 1982). Status is likely to be stratified by sex in organizations in ways similar to the sociocultural context in which they operate. Subsystems may amplify or dampen the stratification of men and women in their embedding

environments, however. Some organizations may emphasize sex differences even more than the societies in which they operate by valorizing male dominance and privilege (e.g., some fraternities, sports teams, police and fire departments, political bodies, or corporate boards), whereas other organizations may deemphasize sex differences and focus on treating people as individuals.

The more an organization differentiates the status of men and women, the stronger the incentives will be to meet sex-based ideals in that organization. Masculine and feminine ideals will differ somewhat by context (Connell, 1987), as when being a "real" man means being courageous and strong on a firefighting squad but being creative and intelligent on a team of scientists. There is much consistency in sex-based ideals across contexts, however (Bergen & Williams, 1991; Buss, 1989; Connell, 1995; Eagly, 1987; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Williams & Best, 1990). Competence and dominance generally are desired in men more than women, whereas deference and warmth generally are desired in women more than men (Bem, 1974; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Fiske et al., 2002, Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

**Position in gender hierarchy.** Gender hierarchy may provide everyone incentives to protect his or her sex-based status when it seems threatened, but it provides stronger incentives for some than for others. Because sharper distinctions are made between men based on their achievement of masculine ideals than between women based on their achievement of feminine ones, and because meeting masculine ideals is associated with more benefits for men than meeting feminine ideals is for women (Connell, 1987), men should be more motivated than women to defend their sex-based status against threat.

Within sex, the status of extreme individuals is not likely to change as easily as the status of average individuals. By definition, most people are "average" in meeting ideals for their sex. Small differences in meeting these ideals should therefore be used to distinguish between average individuals. This is consistent with the idea that those in the middle of the pack in terms of status vie for it more vigorously than those at the top and the bottom (Owens & Sutton, 2001). "Average" men have much to gain from being seen as more masculine and much to lose from being seen as less masculine, whereas

men who have clearly proven themselves as men or who have no hope of doing so are probably more impervious to threats to their sex-based identity. Similarly, "average" women have more to gain from being seen as more ideal and more to lose from being seen as less ideal than do women who unquestionably accomplish or fail feminine standards. In short, individuals whose sex-based status is average, and therefore more negotiable and tenuous, should be more strongly motivated to protect it against threat.

**Beliefs about gender hierarchy.** Holding constant an individual's sex-based status, the more an individual endorses beliefs that justify gender hierarchy, the more that individual will define his or her own and others' social status in terms defined by this hierarchy and the more that individual will want to defend his or her status accordingly. To some extent, all individuals endorse beliefs that justify gender hierarchy, given its ubiquity and the pervasiveness of beliefs that support it. Consistent with self-interest, men are more likely than women to support attitudes that favor male dominance (e.g., Pratto et al., 2000; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994; Twenge, 1997). Women also endorse beliefs that reinforce male dominance, however, consistent with the general tendency of low-status groups to experience and perpetuate false consciousness or beliefs and behaviors that justify their subordination (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Therefore, both men and women are motivated to protect their status in terms defined by male dominance, although men should be more strongly motivated than women to do so. There are also within-sex differences in these beliefs that should predict the likelihood to defend sex-based status. Men and women with particularly sexist attitudes should be more strongly motivated than their same-sex counterparts to protect their status based on sex.

### Threats to Sex-Based Status

We have considered what predicts a desire to protect sex-based status. What triggers this desire? Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje's (1999) typology of social identity threats is useful for analyzing the forms that threats to sex-based status may take. These include (1) distinctiveness threats, which blur distinctions between the sexes, (2) acceptance threats, which

challenge an individual's status as a good or prototypical member of his or her sex, (3) category threats, which categorize an individual in a sex-based group against his or her will, and (4) derogation threats, which threaten the value of an individual's sex group. Maass and colleagues (Dall' Ara & Maass, 1999; Maass et al., 2003) have proposed that acceptance and distinctiveness threats motivate men to gender harass women.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that all four types of threat can trigger a desire in men and in women to defend their sex-based status. The forms these threats may take, and the defenses they are likely to trigger, are discussed below. The threats are grouped by whether they challenge distinctions between the sexes (distinctiveness threats) or emphasize them (acceptance, category, and derogation threats).

**Threats that challenge group distinctions.** Distinctiveness threats are unique among the four types of threats because they challenge the very notion of different groups. Blurring the distinctions that are usually made between men and women suggests these distinctions, and the benefits associated with them, are illusory and illegitimate. Distinctiveness threats involve women performing roles or displaying characteristics traditionally associated with men, or vice versa. Examples include women who perform "men's" jobs or are outspoken and assertive, and men who perform "women's" jobs or wear dresses and date men. Individuals who feel threatened when distinctions between men and women are blurred will try to reassert these boundaries by emphasizing the veracity or value of sex differences. This might include acts of SBH, such as repeated statements about what men and women can and should do, and socially rejecting or humiliating individuals who violate these prescriptions.

Consistent with this, women in male-dominated occupations are more likely than other women to be sexually harassed (Berdahl, in press; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Glomb, Munson, Hulin, Bergman,

& Drasgow, 1999; Gruber, 1998; Mansfield et al., 1991), and women in these occupations who display characteristics considered more appropriate for men than for women are especially likely to be harassed. Case examples include a female police officer and bodybuilder who was subjected to sexually explicit noises and materials and who found vibrators, a urinal device, and a soiled condom and sanitary napkin in her mailbox at work (*Sanchez v. Miami Beach*, 1989) and a woman in a male-dominated accounting office who was denied partnership despite her exceptional performance because she needed to learn to "walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear make-up, have her hair styled, and wear jewelry" (*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 1989). Computer experiments show that women who express an intention to pursue a male-dominated career and the belief that men and women are equal are more likely than women who express traditional career goals and beliefs to be sent offensive pornography from men (Dall' Ara & Maass, 2000; Maass et al., 2003). Finally, field research shows that women in male-dominated jobs with assertive personalities are more likely than men and other women in these same jobs to be sexually harassed (Berdahl, in press).

Men who pose distinctiveness threats are also harassed. Male nurses are frequently targets of bullying (Erikson & Einarsen, 2004), and men in male-dominated jobs are harassed when they are perceived to be too feminine, or not masculine enough, by their supervisors or coworkers (Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996; Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Waldo et al., 1998). For example, men who leave work to care for their children, wear earrings, or refuse to discuss sexual exploits with women have been called "pussy," "fag," and "girlie-man"; incessantly taunted and teased; and subjected to sexually humiliating acts, such as simulated sodomy and threatened rape (cf. Axam & Zalesne, 1999; Berdahl et al., 1996; *Dillon v. Frank*, 1992; *Doe v. City of Belleville*, 1997; Franke, 1997; *Goluszek v. H. P. Smith*, 1988; MacKinnon, 1997; *McWilliams v. Fairfax County Bd. of Supervisors*, 1996; *Oncala v. Sun-downer Offshore Services, Inc.*, 1998; *Quick v. Donaldson Co.*, 1996).

Looking at SBH as a response to threats induced by blurred distinctions between men and women illuminates its role as a basic form of sex discrimination. In this light, SBH clearly can

<sup>1</sup> Maass et al. (2003) added (5) *legitimacy threat*, which challenges the legitimacy of status differences between the sexes. Legitimacy threat, however, may be viewed as a type of distinctiveness threat and as a derogation threat to members of the high-status group because it challenges distinctions in status between groups and, by implication, poses a relative demotion in status to the higher-status group.

be seen as a punitive means of "doing gender": defining, enacting, and enforcing masculinity in men and femininity in women with everyday social practices (cf. Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Ridgeway, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As Franke puts it, sexual harassment is sex discrimination "not because it is sexual, and not because men do it to women, but precisely because it . . . perpetuates, enforces, and polices a set of gender norms that seek to feminize women and masculinize men" (1997: 696). SBH, thus, is one of many negative social repercussions faced by individuals who violate sex roles (for examples of other repercussions, see Gill, 2004; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Herek, 1993; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004).

**Threats that emphasize group distinctions.** Rather than blurring distinctions between men and women, acceptance, category, and derogation threats draw on them. Acceptance threats challenge an individual's status as a good or prototypical member of his or her sex: a man's masculinity (e.g., his virility, courage, or competence) or a woman's femininity (e.g., her purity, attractiveness, or warmth). Such challenges would not be threatening if distinctions between men and women were not considered meaningful or legitimate. Acceptance threats trigger a desire to prove one is a typical and worthy member of one's group (Branscombe et al., 1999), or, for men, a desire to prove their masculinity and, for women, a desire to prove their femininity. Category threats associate an individual with a sex-based group against his or her will. Individuals tend to experience more threat when associated with a low-status group than a high-status group, so in most contexts both men and women will likely experience a category threat when associated with women (e.g., when a man or a woman is called "bitch") than when associated with men (e.g., when a woman or a man is said to "have balls"). Category threats trigger a desire to disidentify from the group with which one has been unwillingly associated (Branscombe et al., 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995), which may involve derogating the group or, in most cases, women. Finally, derogation threats devalue the status of an individual's sex group and are threatening to the extent one identifies with that group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Maass et al., 2003). Derogation threats trigger a desire to defend one's

group or to distance oneself from it, which may involve putting down the other sex or demeaning other members of one's own sex.

Like distinctiveness threats, benign or even egalitarian behaviors that threaten the status quo may be experienced as acceptance, category, or derogation threats and may motivate individuals to retaliate with SBH. SBH, however, may reflect nefarious forms of these threats. For example, a man whose masculinity is threatened by a woman who refuses to date him (acceptance threat) may respond by calling her a "bitch" (derogation threat) or saying she grows hair on her chest (category threat). Episodes of SBH may at times be cycles of retaliatory acts designed to derogate another based on sex, or an "eye for an eye" spiral of incivility (Anderson & Pearson, 1999). It is important to keep in mind, however, the direction and the impact of the acts involved. The guidelines outlined earlier for defining SBH should be used to determine whether a particular act qualifies as SBH—whether the harassment derogated an individual based on sex, would have been experienced by an individual of the other sex with otherwise the same characteristics, and the degree to which organizational, economic, physical, or social power was used to threaten the target.

We have considered what motivates a desire to protect sex-based status and what triggers this desire and SBH. We now consider who is likely to be targeted for SBH and what it may look like when men harass women, when men harass men, when women harass men, and when women harass women.

### Targets of Harassment

If SBH stems from a desire to protect sex-based status when it seems threatened, targets of harassment will be chosen to achieve this goal. *Individuals who pose the threat* to the harasser's status in the first place are likely targets, since the threat will be most satisfactorily quelled if its source is. Individuals who blur distinctions between the sexes, challenge someone's achievement of sex-based ideals, categorize someone in a sex-based group against his or her will, or threaten the value of someone's sex-based group are therefore likely to be targeted for SBH. *Individuals who are less powerful* than the harasser are also likely targets (Blu-

menthal, 1998; Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003; Lester et al., 1986). If the person posing the threat is more powerful than the person threatened, the latter may target another who is less powerful for harassment (e.g., O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000). For example, if a boss threatens a subordinate's status, the subordinate may pick on a coworker instead of the boss to try to restore a sense of status.

Because harassers are likely to target the source of the threat and men are more strongly motivated than women to protect their sex-based status, individuals who threaten men's status are especially likely to be targeted for SBH. Because harassers are likely to target less powerful individuals and because men, on average, are more powerful than women, men more than women will harass and women more than men will be harassed (Berdahl et al., 1996; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Fiske & Stevens, 1993). Combined, this means the most likely form of SBH should be men harassing women, especially women who challenge men's status. The second most likely form of harassment should be men harassing other men, especially men who challenge their status. The relative prevalence of these forms is supported by prior research. When women harass, they should mainly target other women, especially those who challenge their status. The least likely form of harassment should be women harassing men. When a woman harasses a man, she typically will target a man who challenges her status. We now consider these different harassment scenarios and how they reinforce gender hierarchy in the workplace.

**Male-to-female harassment.** The harassment of women by men needs little introduction, since I have already reviewed this most well-documented form of SBH. It requires reinterpretation from the perspective of a sex-based status motivation, however. A man wishing to protect or enhance his status relative to a woman may do so by derogating her as a woman. Hostile environment harassment that includes sexist jokes, comments, and put-downs derogates women, reminds them of their low status relative to men, and reminds men of their high status relative to women. This can even take the form of "not man enough" harassment against women who are told they are not tough enough, or are too sensitive, for the job (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). In a male-dominated environment, a man may ha-

arrass a woman coworker in these ways because she poses a distinctiveness threat to his sex-based status. By undermining her, he may restore his sense of status as a man who can do the job better than a woman and may enhance his status among other men, if they view his behavior as manly and stand to benefit from it (Connell, 1987). When groups of men perpetrate this type of harassment against women, they can gain courage, legitimacy, and cohesion by closing ranks and acting together (Farley, 1978).

Sexual advance forms of harassment may serve a similar purpose of enhancing a man's status by derogating a woman's. By sexually objectifying or dominating her, the man may increase his sense of masculinity by being heterosexually dominant (Franke, 1997). By being sexually objectified and dominated, the woman is relegated to the low status of being a means to a man's sexual ends. Like hostile environment harassment, bystanders are affected by this type of harassment (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Glomb et al., 1997). It yields dividends for all men and subordinates all women by reinforcing male dominance (Connell, 1987).

**Male-to-male harassment.** If a man wishes to protect or enhance his status relative to another man, he may do so by derogating the other man's status as a man. He can "prove" he is manlier than the other man by outperforming him on a masculine ideal, such as virility, courage, athletic ability, or intelligence. The ideal will be specific to what is considered manly in the context of competition (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Prentice & Miller, 2002), although much commonality exists across contexts (Connell, 1995; Williams & Best, 1990). He can also prove he is manlier by emasculating the other man. When such competition and challenge turns to sabotage, threatening insults, and sexual or other forms of derision that undermine the target specifically as a man, it is SBH (MacKinnon, 1997).

Competing with other men in sex-specific ways defined by gender hierarchy has the effect of reinforcing status distinctions within and between the sexes. It enforces the notion that "manly" characteristics are most relevant for evaluating men, but not women, who are omitted from candidacy in the competition. Women may be used in the competition between men as status symbols (e.g., a man who "scores" a more attractive woman has higher status) or as a de-

rogatory reference group to which the male target of harassment is likened (Connell, 1987, 1995; Franke, 1997; Harry, 1992), furthering the view of men as subjects and women as objects for attainment or derision.

**Female-to-male harassment.** The harassment of men by women has received little theoretical attention. Primarily, it has been envisioned as the mirror image of the prototype of harassment against women by men: unwanted heterosexual attention. As research has shown, however, sexual attention from women generally is not appraised by men as threatening or bothersome and is unlikely to be experienced by men as harassment (Berdahl, in press; Berdahl et al., 1996; Gutek, 1985; Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Malovich & Stake, 1990). Power discrepancies between men and women mean that women are less likely to threaten men than men are to threaten women, but this does not mean it never happens. Studies suggest that men are sometimes harassed by women in ways that bother them (e.g., U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995; Waldo et al., 1998).

If a woman wishes to protect or enhance her sex-based status relative to a man, she may do so by derogating him as a man. This might take the form of deriding men as a group, but this is likely to pack relatively little punch in most contexts. It may be somewhat threatening to men in contexts associated with women's skills, as in the context of child care, when a woman asserts superior skills and instincts and suggests that men are incapable of caring for children properly. It may also be threatening to men in contexts led by women, even contexts associated with men's skills, as in military training, when a female officer refers to male recruits as the expendable half of the human race. Even if intended as a form of resistance to male dominance, however, such attempts to demean men may reinforce their dominance by supporting the idea that men and women differ in fundamental and important ways, a logic used to justify keeping men and women in their "places."

Comments that suggest a man does not measure up to other men are likely to be more threatening to a man than are comments suggesting he does not measure up to women. Women may find it more effective, in attempting to knock a man down in status, to compare him to other men and suggest he comes up short. This could involve a direct comparison, such as suggesting

he is less courageous, competent, or virile than other men, or an implicit comparison, such as suggesting he is not courageous, competent, or virile enough. Likening him to women is another way to demote his status, although perhaps less likely from women, who would disparage themselves in the process. Such comparisons draw on sex-specific characteristics to evaluate the man and are thus based on sex; to the degree they succeed in hurting him, they are harassing.

More sexual forms of harassment from women toward men are likely to be rare for three reasons (see Fiske & Stevens, 1993). First, for many men, "unwanted" sexual attention from a woman is a foreign concept. Men evaluate heterosexual attention, even unwanted attention, as a neutral to positive experience (e.g., Gutek, 1985; Berdahl et al., 1996; Waldo et al., 1998). Second, being forceful is contrary to the female sex role and is therefore likely to incur negative consequences for women and deter them from such behavior (e.g., Berdahl, in press; Rudman, 1998). Third, it is physically more difficult for women to be sexually aggressive against men than the other way around, further undermining its likelihood and threat. A woman may be motivated to sexually conquer a resistant man, however, if his resistance poses a threat to her status as a desirable woman. When a woman does overpower a man sexually, *against his will*, it is likely to be experienced as quite threatening by the man. A man who is sexually dominated is likely to experience a substantial threat to his masculinity, defined in terms of heterosexual dominance (e.g., Connell, 1995; Franke, 1997; Gutek, 1985). As such, sexually dominating a man is a potent way to demote his status as a man.

**Female-to-female harassment.** Harassment between women has received the least attention of all. Even a taxonomy proposing to capture all four quadrants of other- and same-sex harassment leaves blank the female-to-female cell for hostile environment harassment (Stockdale et al., 1999), although experimental research suggests women are prone to discriminate against other women (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Rudman, 1998). If sex harassment is targeted at less powerful individuals who threaten the harasser's sex-based status, other women are likely to be the primary targets of harassment by women. Harassment between women should be similar to harassment between men, in the sense that it

involves a woman trying to derogate the other woman in sex-based terms. The style of harassment will differ, however, because ideals for men and women differ.

A woman who feels her sex-based status is threatened may try to outperform another woman in feminine ideals, such as beauty, sexual desirability, warmth, and mothering. Again, ideals will be specific to the particular context (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Prentice & Miller, 2002), but much commonality exists across contexts (e.g., Connell, 1987; Williams & Best, 1990). When a woman tries to demote another woman's status by calling her ugly, a bad mother, a bitch, a slut, or a bull dyke, for example, she undermines that woman in sex-specific ways. Likening a woman to a man should be less insulting than likening a man to a woman, but it still suggests a woman has failed feminine ideals and carries the threat of social rejection. A woman may also attempt to enhance her status relative to another woman by winning the approval of higher-status men. Like other forms of SBH, competing with other women in sex-specific ways has the effect of reinforcing status distinctions within and between the sexes. It enforces the notion that "feminine" characteristics are most relevant for evaluating women, but not men. When this competition turns to active sabotage, insults, and other forms of undermining designed to demote the target as a woman, it becomes SBH.

It is important to keep in mind that being harassed by other women is probably less threatening to women than being harassed by men. The average power a man has over a woman is greater than that another woman has over her. Sex differences in power leave "limited scope for women to construct institutionalized power relationships over other women" (Connell, 1987: 187). Same-sex harassment between men is therefore likely to be more motivated, frequent, and threatening than same-sex harassment between women.

### Summary

SBH was originally conceptualized as a sexual act and more recently has been conceptualized as an act of male dominance. I view SBH as an attempt to protect social status in a system that bases this status on sex. This perspective provides a unified explanation for various forms of harassment based on sex, including same-sex and other-sex harassment, harassment commit-

ted by men as well as by women, and sexual and nonsexual forms of SBH. I now turn to implications of this theory for research.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This perspective provides a new way of thinking about SBH, with several important implications for future research. It moves the focus away from sexual behaviors toward a broader conceptualization of SBH as constituting acts that derogate individuals, men and women alike, based on sex. It highlights the incentives provided both to men and women by a system of gender hierarchy to defend their sex-based status by derogating others based on sex. It moves beyond treating harassers as sexual predators and/or misogynists toward understanding the social environments that motivate their behavior. These implications are discussed in turn below.

#### Moving Beyond Sexual Behaviors

SBH, broadly conceptualized, is behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual's sex. Unlike earlier conceptualizations, this does not limit SBH to sexual comments and behaviors. These are included if they derogate individuals based on sex, but many other behaviors qualify, including sex-based slurs, sabotage, and social exclusion. This expands the concept of SBH to include not only active threats but passive ones as well, consistent with conceptualizations of general harassment (Einarsen, 2000). Future research should expand measures of SBH to include more behaviors designed to derogate individuals based on sex, such as "not man enough" and "not woman enough" harassment, as well as ignoring, excluding, or undermining people in ways that may not contain direct references to their sex or sexuality but may nonetheless be motivated by it.

An important implication of this view of SBH is that it is contextually defined. Whether an act derogates another based on sex depends on the history and the social context of the behavior, power differences between the individuals involved (physical, organizational, and social inequalities), and the target's experience of fear or powerlessness. This means that a priori classifications of certain behaviors as SBH are not

possible. What may be harassing to some may be fun or flattering to others, depending on the context in which it occurs, the relationship between those involved, and the way it was delivered and received. Future studies should assess the degree to which a potentially harassing behavior derogated a recipient before concluding it was harassing and to what degree (cf. Berdahl, in press; Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Einarsen, 2000). This will help avoid classifying experiences as harassing that were not and will help prevent making erroneous estimates of the prevalence and severity of harassment.

Defining SBH in this way may raise the concern that it will become diluted and taken less seriously. I believe just the opposite is the case. Definitions that rely on sexual behaviors or motives pose a much bigger threat to the perceived legitimacy of sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination. Construing SBH as sexual in nature has caused behaviors that are sexual but not harassing to be wrongfully classified as harassment—for example, consensual or desired sexual attention—and behaviors that are harassing and based on sex but not sexual to be overlooked—for example, “not man enough” harassment between men (Schultz, 2003). A focus on sexual behaviors has generated confusion and controversy about sexual harassment as a form of discrimination and has led to policies that focus on policing sexual behavior at work rather than on acts that perpetuate sexual inequality (cf. Schultz, 1998; Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 1999). Viewing SBH as behavior that derogates an individual’s status based on sex offers an improved understanding of harassment as discrimination.

Similar concerns have been raised as new forms of SBH have been considered by the courts. Courts initially worried that recognizing quid pro quo sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination would overwhelm them with litigants, dilute the concept of sex discrimination, and make a joke of discrimination law (MacKinnon, 1979). Hostile environment harassment, particularly against men, met similar resistance (cf. Axam & Zalesne, 1999; Franke, 1997).<sup>2</sup> Some wor-

ried that acknowledging SBH against men would detract from the effort to fight the larger problem of SBH against women. But studying “not man enough” harassment led to an improved understanding of how gender hierarchy is reinforced through harassment at work by derogating not only women but men who are like them. Broadening the lens of SBH to include other acts that derogate individuals in terms defined by gender hierarchy can only help to further understand and prevent this form of discrimination.

### Moving Beyond Male Harassers

This perspective of SBH considers why women, not just men, may be motivated to commit SBH, what this harassment might look like, and how it might differ from harassment committed by men. Earlier views of harassers as motivated by sexual desire allowed for women to harass others in sexual ways, but more recent views of harassers as men motivated to protect male dominance have not left room for understanding why women might harass others based on sex. The current perspective proposes that women and men share the same underlying motive that gives rise to SBH: a desire to protect their social status when it is threatened. How this status is obtained, threatened, and protected differs by sex, however, because status and ideals differ by sex.

A promising line of future research would be to study the forms and prevalence of SBH committed by women. Much research is needed to identify whether women undermine men’s masculinity or other women’s femininity at work, as well as how and to what effect. I predict that women are more likely to harass other women than they are to harass men. Consistent with sex roles and socialization, women may be more

<sup>2</sup> “Not man enough” harassment took especially long to recognize as a form of sex discrimination because it does not fit the original prototype of sexual harassment. Some courts said harassment between men was not actionable because individuals could not discriminate against their own sex

(e.g., *Goluszek v. H. P. Smith*, 1988). Others claimed that such cases were actionable only when harassers were homosexual (e.g., *McWilliams v. Fairfax County Bd. of Supervisors*, 1996). Other courts concluded that “not man enough” harassment was actionable only if sexual in content (e.g., *Doe v. City of Belleville*, 1997). In its *Oncale* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court veered from this logic by recognizing that individuals could discriminate against members of their own sex and that “harassing conduct need not be motivated by sexual desire to support an inference of discrimination on the basis of sex” (*Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.*, 1998: Opinion of the Court, p. 5).

likely than men to harass in passive or indirect ways, with ignoring, exclusion, slander, and sabotage, than in the more active and direct ways that men appear to harass, with direct insults, threats, and physical aggression (cf. Underwood, 2003). If this is the case, the fact that harassment by women largely has been ignored may explain why more passive and indirect behaviors that derogate individuals based on sex are generally absent from the types of SBH currently identified in the literature.

Like other perspectives, this one predicts that most harassers are men and most victims women. It may seem obvious at this point that men commit more SBH than women, but this actually requires more empirical testing. Most surveys have assumed male perpetrators. Even when women are included as potential perpetrators, most research examines male-dominated organizations where base rates alone would predict more male than female harassers (e.g., DuBois, Knapp, Faley, & Kustis, 1998; Waldo et al., 1998). Future studies should measure perpetrator sex and control for expected base rates to test whether men are indeed more likely than women to harass, especially when forms of harassment perpetrated by women are included. It may also seem obvious that mostly women are targets of SBH. Again, this needs to be tested with more research that includes forms of SBH directed at men, such as "not man enough" harassment, as well as forms of harassment committed by women. Finally, the idea that the primary targets of harassment by women are other women is counterintuitive, given prior theorizing. Research on bullying suggests this is the case (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Underwood, 2003). This, too, needs to be tested with research that includes the forms of harassment proposed here to occur between women.

### Moving Beyond Bad Individuals

Another implication of this perspective is that it moves away from viewing harassers as having something uniquely wrong with them to viewing them as having something wrong with their social context. It locates the primary cause of SBH in gender hierarchy and the incentives it provides individuals to define social status based on sex. This perspective suggests that future work on SBH should focus on understand-

ing gender hierarchy and how it relates to harassment. I predict that contexts that emphasize the superiority of one sex over another and distinctions between the sexes are more likely to exhibit SBH. Studies that compare organizations differing in their cultures and structures regarding sex-based stratification are needed to test this prediction, as are studies that examine the particular ideals for men and women in different contexts and how they relate to forms of SBH. Research is also needed to examine the claim that sex-based status stems from the approximation of these ideals, whereby "average" individuals are more easily threatened than extreme ones by challenges to their sex-based status and are therefore more motivated to commit SBH. Individuals high in sex-based status may be more *able* to harass others because of their power advantage, but individuals with average levels of sex-based status are expected to be more *motivated* to do so. Future research can explore whether it is average- or high-status individuals who are likely to *commit* more harassment.

Potential threats to sex-based status need to be studied and related to SBH. Maass and colleagues (Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Maass et al., 2003) have begun this with their computer paradigm experiments studying male-to-female gender harassment. This paradigm could be applied to study harassment between men, between women, and from women to men as well. Research is also needed to see if threats to sex-based status predict SBH outside the lab. Episodes of harassment can be studied within the framework of identifying whether a threat to the harasser's status preceded the event and whether the harassment served to derogate the target's status based on sex and to restore the perpetrator's. Comparative field research can examine whether contexts, events, or individuals that pose threats to sex-based status are associated with more harassment.

The premise of this theory can be applied to study harassment that is based on social distinctions other than sex. This theory locates the basic motivation for harassment in the motive for social status, the terms and conditions of which are in large part defined by sex. Sex may be the primary distinction made between individuals (Fiske et al., 1991; Stangor et al., 1992; van Knippenberg et al., 1994), but other distinctions are made as well, including ethnic, na-

tional, socioeconomic, and age. To the degree a social characteristic is used to define status, individuals will be motivated to protect and enhance their status based on that characteristic and will be able to do so by derogating another's. SBH has probably received the most attention because of the primacy of sex as a category and the resulting pervasiveness of SBH. Future research could broaden our understanding of harassment generally by studying how it serves to derogate individuals based on social characteristics used to define status, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies and the status quo.

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