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Assessing the Gap between Social and Individual Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

PROBLEM

Sexual harassment has important social, psychological, and economic consequences for victims, workplaces, educational environments, and broader society. However, many behaviors that may constitute sexual harassment fall into a "gray area," where people may differ in how inappropriate they consider a given action to be.

A key issue is that individual perceptions may not align with perceived social norms. In other words, what a person personally believes about a behavior may differ from what they think most people believe. These perception gaps may influence behavior, reporting, bystander intervention, and the effectiveness of prevention campaigns.

This study focuses on whether such gaps exist in the context of sexual harassment and whether they differ by gender.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To estimate the gap between individual and social perceptions of sexual harassment and examine the role of gender in shaping these perception gaps.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a laboratory experiment with undergraduate students in Guayaquil, Ecuador. The experiment was carried out in two stages:

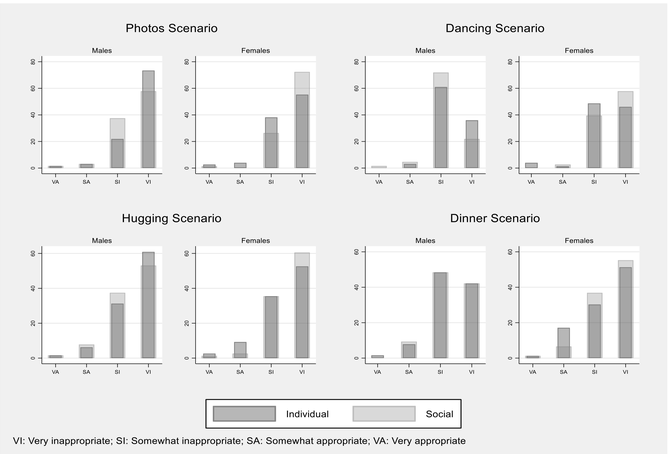
Stage 1: Individual perceptions
Participants rated four hypothetical sexual harassment scenarios using a four-point scale: very appropriate, somewhat appropriate, somewhat inappropriate, and very inappropriate.

The scenarios represented four categories of sexual harassment:
1. Derogatory attitudes — impersonal
2. Unwanted dating pressure
3. Physical non-sexual contact
4. Sexual coercion

Stage 2: Social norm perceptions
Participants were then asked to predict the most common response given by their peers for each scenario. This incentivized method was used to elicit perceived social norms and separate them from personal beliefs.

The study then used regression analysis to compare individual and social perceptions, with particular attention to gender differences.

RESULTS



VI: Very inappropriate; SI: Somewhat inappropriate; SA: Somewhat appropriate; VA: Very appropriate

- When responses are pooled, there is little evidence of a perception gap between individual and social perceptions. However, gender-disaggregated results reveal important differences: men and women often show perception gaps in opposite directions.
- Women tend to believe society judges certain behaviors as more inappropriate than they personally do, while men tend to believe society judges some behaviors as less inappropriate than they personally do.
- Gender matters most for tolerance levels in the Photos and Dancing scenarios, and for the broader appropriate/inappropriate classification in the Hugging and Dinner scenarios. Overall, perception gaps may be hidden when gender is not considered.

Scenario	Category	Description
Photos	Derogatory attitudes — impersonal	Sending photos of women with little clothing in a WhatsApp group
Dancing	Unwanted dating pressure	Repeatedly asking a woman to dance after she says no
Hugging	Physical non-sexual contact	Hugging a coworker from behind at a company event
Dinner	Sexual coercion	A hiring manager inviting a job applicant to dinner before making a hiring decision

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- The findings show that gender shapes the gap between individual and social perceptions of sexual harassment. Even when participants agree that certain behaviors are inappropriate, men and women differ in how they perceive the surrounding social norm.
- These results suggest that prevention campaigns should address not only formal definitions of sexual harassment, but also misperceptions about what others believe. Reducing these perception gaps may help promote safer workplaces, universities, and public spaces.
- The findings also have implications for policy and legal discussions, particularly when standards such as the "reasonable woman" or "reasonable victim" are used.