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Personality, social norms, and sexual harassment in the workplace

Kris Hardies

University of Antwerp, Prinsstraat 13, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the association between personality traits, perceived social norms, and sexual harassment in the workplace, 199 white-collar workers answered an online questionnaire (96 men, 103 women). Based on logistic regression analysis, we investigated the associations between sexual harassment behaviors in the workplace, perceived social norms, and the personality traits extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Results suggest that lower levels of openness are associated with higher levels of sexual harassment behaviors for both men and women. Furthermore, for both men and women, the association between openness and sexual harassment behaviors is greater if one perceives higher acceptance of sexual harassment by their peers. For men, sexual harassment behaviors are also associated with age, sexual harassment myth acceptance, and lower levels of conscientiousness. In contrast, for women sexual harassment behaviors are associated with higher levels of extraversion and neuroticism.

1. Introduction

1.1. Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a topic of great concern, both from a social justice perspective (e.g., Harper & Harris, 2017) and due to its harmful effects (e.g., mental and physical health reductions – see Pina & Gannon, 2012). Sexual harassment encompasses a heterogeneous set of behaviors and occurs when people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, sexual propositions or requests, non-verbal sexual gestures, or sexual actions and assault (McDonald, 2012; Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016). Sexual harassment is unfortunately widespread, both in societies at large and in the workplace, with estimates suggesting that 40–75% of women and 13–31% of men in the U.S. experience sexual harassment in the workplace (Aggarwal & Gupta, 2000). Sexual harassment in the workplace is associated with negative outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, withdrawing from work, ill physical and mental health (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

1.2. Personality, sexism, and sexual harassment

Why do some people, and not others, engage in sexual harassment? While most research has focused on the role of organizational and environmental factors (see Ilies, Hauserman, Schowchau, & Stibal, 2003, for a review), some prior studies also suggest important individual differences. Typically, such studies have focused on people's (most often men's) *proclivity* to engage in sexual harassment. For example, men holding sexists attitudes (Diehl, Rees, & Bohner, 2018; Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995) or men displaying greater acceptance of rape myths (Debowska, Boduszek, & Willmott, 2018; Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014; Pryor, 1987) show greater proclivity to engage in sexual harassment behaviors. In terms of personality traits, Lee, Gizzarone, and Ashton (2003) found sexual harassment proclivity to be associated with low levels of honesty–humility and with lower levels of openness. In contrast, the "Dark Triad" personality traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism are all positively associated with sexual harassment procilivity (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Morag, & Campbell, 2016).

1.3. The current study

Despite a growing body of literature on sexual harassment, knowledge about sexual harassment from the actor's perspective remains scarce (O'Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 2000; Pina, Gannon, & Saunders, 2009). While many researchers have contended that sexual harassment is part of a larger and more general dimension of hostility toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Pryor, 1987), few studies have actually examined associations between sexual harassment and broader (gender) attitudes or personality traits. To expand our understanding of sexual harassment, we rely on the *Person × Situation Model* (Pryor et al., 1995; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993) according to which both personal and situational factors contribute to sexual harassment behavior.

The aim of the current study is to explore the relationship between personality traits, perceived social norms, and sexual harassment behaviors in the workplace. In terms of personality, we look specifically at

E-mail address: kris.hardies@uantwerpen.be.

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the Big 5 personality traits, as they constitute the predominant overall model of personality in contemporary psychology and have been found to be linked to a variety of behaviors, including aggressive and violent behaviors (see Anderson & Bushman, 2002). It was hypothesized that both personality traits and perceived social norms would independently predict sexual harassment behaviors. Additionally, the current study explicitly considers the impact of (perceived) social norms about sexual harassment behaviors and examines the way in which such norms interact with personality in determining whether people engage in sexual harassment behaviors or not. It has been stressed by researchers that sexual harassment cannot be fully understood without accounting for the context in which it occurs (e.g., Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope, & Hodson, 2008; Gutek, 1985). Prior studies that have examined associations between personality and sexual harassment, however, exclusively focused on personality traits (Lee et al., 2003; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016).

Finally, we explicitly consider sexual harassment behaviors by both men and women. Although men are overwhelmingly responsible for the sexual harassment behaviors committed at work, sexual harassment at work is also committed by women (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016). To the best of our knowledge, Zeigler-Hill et al. (2016) is the only other study that included both men and women when studying personality in the context of sexual harassment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited via LinkedIn and were not compensated for their participation. No sample size calculations were performed before the start of the study. After data cleaning, the sample consisted of 199 white-collar workers (96 men, 103 women). Participants were adults with an average age of 31.32 years ($SD = 8.95$) and predominantly identified themselves as heterosexual (95.5%).[1]

2.2. Procedure and measures

All data was collected using an online survey. Participants completed a series of measures capturing sexual harassment behaviors, Big 5 personality traits, sexist attitudes, and perceived norms about sexual harassment. All measures used in the present study were administered in the original English version. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide demographic information. In order to minimize social desirability bias, participants were asked about their experiences and opinions about (sexual) behaviors at work, purposely avoiding the term sexual harassment throughout the entire survey.

2.2.1. Sexual harassment behaviors

To measure whether people had perpetrated sexual harassment behaviors at work, the Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors scale was used (SSB; Jewell & Brown, 2013; Jewell, Brown, & Perry, 2015). This scale consists of 8 items (e.g., "During the past year, I made sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks about someone at work") and was developed to measure behaviors that could be considered as sexual harassment if unwanted. Participants rated how often they had engaged in certain behaviors at work during the past year, using scales that ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily). The internal consistency for this instrument was $\alpha = 0.83$ for the present study. This measure encompasses four categories of behaviors (see Table 1): (1) verbal sexual harassment, (2) physical sexual harassment, (3) indirect sexual harassment, and (3) homophobic sexual harassment.

2.2.2. Big 5 personality traits

We used the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) in order to measure the Big Five personality dimensions (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness,). The TIPI consists of 10 items (e.g., "Extraverted, enthusiastic"). For each item on the TIPI, participants rated the extent to which a number of personality traits apply to them using scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This short-form is strongly correlated with longer measures of Big Five personality (Gosling et al., 2003). The TIPI has only two items for each domain, so within-scale inter-item correlations are appropriate for evaluating the internal consistency of each scale, rather than Cronbach's α coefficients. In this study, the within-scale correlation coefficients between items in each pair ranged from $r = 0.68$ (Extraversion) to $r = 0.21$ (Agreeableness), resembling results from previous studies (e.g., Alper & Yilmaz, 2019; Gosling et al., 2003).

2.2.3. Sexist attitudes

Two scales tapped into sexist attitudes. First, respondents completed the Glick and Fiske's (1996) 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) to measure sexism toward women. This measure gauges two components of sexist attitudes, namely hostile sexism (e.g., "Most women interpret innocent remarks or actions as sexist") and benevolent sexism (e.g., "Women should be cherished and protected by men"). Items were rated on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha were 0.78 and 0.75 for the hostile sexism and the benevolent sexism subscales, respectively. Second, respondents also completed the 20-item Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale (ISHM; Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). The ISHM measures the degree to which people hold attitudes and beliefs that serve to deny and justify sexual harassment (e.g., "Women who claim sexual harassment have usually done something to cause it"). Responses to items were measured on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was 0.70 for the ISHM for the present study.

2.2.4. Perceived norms

Perceived norms about sexual harassment were measured with 6 items (Jewell & Brown, 2013), asking participants to rate the extent to which other people would judge behavior to be acceptable on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items are based on the items of the SSB scale and consist of statements such as "Most people who are important to me think it is okay to make sexual comments, jokes, gestures". This scale captures the perceived rules or expectations about what types of behaviors are acceptable or common within respondents' peer group. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.78 for the present study.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The majority of participants in the current study (53.3%) indicated that they never committed any of the sexual harassments behaviors at work during the past year. Table 1 shows for each behavior the frequency as indicated by men and women in our sample. Participants who did commit sexual harassment behaviors mainly committed verbal sexual harassment (e.g., 53% of men and 35% of women indicated that they had made sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks about someone at work during the past year, a few times or (very) often) and to a lesser extent homophobic sexual harassment (i.e., 22% of men and 7% of women indicated that during the past year they had called someone gay, fag, dyke, or queer or something similar at work, a few

[1] As only very few respondents identified themselves other than heterosexual, we do not take this into account in the rest of the analyses. Results are, however, similar to those reported if we exclude these few respondents from the analyses or if we include a dummy variable to indicate whether individuals identified themselves as heterosexual or not.

Table 1
Sexual harassment behaviors by men (n = 96) and women (n = 103).

	Never		A few times		(Very) often	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks about someone (*verbal sexual harassment*)	47%	65%	43%	30%	10%	5%
Made comments about or rated the parts of someone's body (*verbal sexual harassment*)	50%	68%	42%	29%	8%	4%
Touched, grabbed, or pinched someone in a sexual way (*physical sexual harassment*)	97%	97%	3%	2%	0%	1%
Pulled at someone's clothing in a sexual way (*physical sexual harassment*)	98%	98%	2%	1%	0%	1%
Brushed up against someone in a sexual way on purpose (*physical sexual harassment*)	99%	97%	1%	2%	0%	1%
Shown, given, sent or left sexual pictures or text messages (*indirect sexual harassment*)	96%	99%	4%	1%	0%	0%
Left sexual posts on someone's wall or sent someone sexual messages on websites such as Facebook or Twitter (*indirect sexual harassment*)	100%	99%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Called someone gay, fag, dyke, or queer or something similar (*homophobic sexual harassment*)	78%	93%	19%	6%	3%	1%

times or (very) often). Only a few respondents reported that they had committed physical sexual harassment and indirect sexual harassment behaviors during the past year at work (e.g., 4% of men and 1% of women indicated that they had shown, given, sent or left sexual pictures or text messages a few times).

Men and women had similar scores for openness (M_{Men} = 10.02, M_{Women} = 10.21; t[197] = 0.61, p = 0.54, d = 0.08) and perceived norms about sexual harassment (M_{Men} = 14.14, M_{Women} = 12.87; t[197] = 1.61, p = 0.11, d = 0.23). Men reported higher scores than women for sexual harassment myth acceptance (M_{Men} = 3.62, M_{Women} = 3.23; t[197] = 4.61, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.67), hostile sexism (M_{Men} = 2.62, M_{Women} = 2.19; t[197] = 4.79, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.68), benevolent sexism (M_{Men} = 2.79, M_{Women} = 2.60; t[197] = 2.06, p = 0.04, d = 0.29), and neuroticism (M_{Men} = 10.93, M_{Women} = 10.01; t[197] = 2.65, p = 0.01, d = 0.38). Conversely, women reported higher scores than men for extraversion (M_{Men} = 8.19, M_{Women} = 9.60; t[197] = 3.16, p = 0.002, d = 0.45), agreeableness (M_{Men} = 8.38, M_{Women} = 9.04; t[197] = 2.24, p = 0.03, d = 0.32), and conscientiousness (M_{Men} = 10.47, M_{Women} = 11.36; t[197] = 2.73, p = 0.007, d = 0.39).

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among all study variables are portrayed in Table 2. Sexual harassment behaviors (SSB) were negatively correlated with age ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.01$), sex ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$), and conscientiousness ($r = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$), whereas they were positively correlated with sexual harassment myth acceptance (r = 0.29, $p < 0.01$), hostile sexism (r = 0.28, $p < 0.01$), benevolent sexism (r = 0.15, $p < 0.05$), and perceived social acceptability of sexual harassment (r = 0.40, $p < 0.01$).

3.2. Main analyses

Logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which individual differences could explain the commitment of sexual harassment behaviors at work, separately for men and women. To this end, responses were codes as either 0 (never committed any sexual harassment behaviors during the past year at work) or 1 (committed sexual harassment behaviors during the past year at work). Table 3 shows the relative contribution of each variable in predicting whether participants had engaged in sexual harassment behaviors during the past year at work or not.

The overall model was statistically significant, both for men ($\chi^2_{(15)}$ = 43.98, $p < 0.001$), and women ($\chi^2_{(15)}$ = 56.76, $p < 0.001$). The model provided a good fit to the data, both for men (Hosmer & Lemeshow $\chi^2_{(8)}$ = 6.44, p = 0.598) and women (Hosmer & Lemeshow $\chi^2_{(8)}$ = 11.53, p = 0.173). The model also explained a large portion of the variance, both for men (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.50) and for women (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.59). Within our sample of men, there were main effects of age ($\beta = -0.086$, SE = 0.046, p = 0.061), sexual harassment myth acceptance (β = 1.141, SE = 0.653, p = 0.081), perceived social norms (β = 1.093, SE = 0.528, p = 0.038), conscientiousness ($\beta = -0.696$, SE = 0.371, p = 0.060), and openness ($\beta = -1.203$, SE = 0.507, p = 0.018), such that higher levels of sexual harassment behaviors were reported by younger men, men who displayed greater acceptance of sexual harassment myths, men who perceived higher acceptance of sexual harassment by their peers, men who possessed lower levels of conscientiousness, and men who possessed lowers levels of openness. Within our sample of women, there were main effects of perceived social norms (β = 0.251, SE = 0.068, $p < 0.001$), extraversion (β = 1.221, SE = 0.509, p = 0.016), openness ($\beta = -0.946$,

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables in this study (N = 199).

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Age (in years)	31.32	8.95	1											
2. Sex	0.52	0.50	0.05	1										
3. SSB	1.17	0.24	−0.24**	−0.17*	1									
4. ISHM	3.42	0.63	−0.14*	−0.32**	0.29**	1								
5. HS	2.40	0.65	−0.23**	−0.33**	0.28**	0.61**	1							
6. BS	2.70	0.65	−0.18**	−0.15*	0.15*	0.48**	0.48**	1						
7. Social norms	13.49	5.54	−0.26**	−0.12	0.40**	0.31**	0.31**	0.32**	1					
8. Extraversion	8.92	3.23	−0.00	0.22**	0.10	−0.04	−0.09	−0.02	0.03	1				
9. Agreeableness	8.72	2.11	0.13†	0.16*	−0.08	−0.15*	−0.11	−0.07	−0.11	0.11	1			
10. Conscientiousness	10.93	2.34	0.16*	0.19**	−0.19**	−0.17*	−0.12†	−0.13	−0.16*	0.01	−0.04	1		
11. Neuroticism	10.45	2.48	0.11	−0.19**	0.04	−0.02	−0.08	−0.15*	−0.07	0.03	0.15*	0.08	1	
12. Openness	10.12	2.21	0.05	0.04	0.01	−0.25**	−0.20**	−0.16*	−0.09	0.26**	0.12	0.10	0.22**	1

Note. Means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*). SSB = Sexual harassment behaviors. ISHM = Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale. HS = Hostile sexism. BS = Benevolent sexism. Social norms = Perceived norms about sexual harassment. Sex was dummy coded (0 = male, 1 = female).
† $p < 0.10$.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3
Logistic regressions predicting sexual harassment behaviors by men and women.

Variables	Men			Women		
	β	SE	*p*-Value	β	SE	*p*-Value
Age	−0.086	0.046	0.061†	−0.054	0.043	0.211
ISHM	1.141	0.653	0.081†	−0.299	0.658	0.649
HS	0.480	0.620	0.439	0.409	0.641	0.524
BS	−0.069	0.487	0.887	−0.221	0.597	0.711
Social norms	1.093	0.528	0.038*	0.251	0.068	0.000**
Extraversion	−0.164	0.282	0.560	1.221	0.509	0.016*
Agreeableness	0.369	0.472	0.435	−0.353	0.577	0.541
Conscientiousness	−0.696	0.371	0.060†	−0.303	0.515	0.556
Neuroticism	−0.094	0.375	0.803	0.946	0.535	0.077†
Openness	−1.203	0.507	0.018*	−1.355	0.624	0.030*
Extraversion × Social Norms	0.014	0.020	0.497	−0.072	0.036	0.043*
Agreeableness × Social Norms	−0.036	0.034	0.291	0.037	0.047	0.439
Conscientiousness × Social Norms	0.029	0.024	0.223	0.011	0.034	0.758
Neuroticism × Social Norms	0.014	0.025	0.582	−0.093	0.041	0.023*
Openness × Social Norms	0.092	0.034	0.007**	0.096	0.046	0.035*
Nagelkerke R^2	0.50			0.59		
N	96			103		

Note. SSB = Sexual harassment behaviors. ISHM = Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale. HS = Hostile sexism. BS = Benevolent sexism. Social norms = Perceived norms about sexual harassment. Sex was dummy coded (0 = male, 1 = female).
† $p < 0.10$.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

$SE = 0.624$, $p = 0.030$), and neuroticism ($\beta = 0.946$, $SE = 0.535$, $p = 0.077$), such that higher levels of sexual harassment behaviors were reported by women who perceived higher acceptance of sexual harassment by their peers, women who possessed higher levels of extraversion, lower levels of openness, or higher levels of neuroticism.

Within our sample of men, there was an interaction effect between perceived social norms and openness ($\beta = 0.092$, $SE = 0.034$, $p = 0.007$), suggesting that the positive association between perceived social norms and sexual harassment behaviors was greater for men who possessed higher levels of openness. Within our sample of women, there were interaction effects between perceived social norms and extraversion ($\beta = -0.072$, $SE = 0.036$, $p = 0.043$), neuroticism ($\beta = -0.093$, $SE = 0.041$, $p = 0.023$), and openness ($\beta = 0.096$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = 0.035$), suggesting that the association between perceived social norms and sexual harassment behaviors was smaller for women who possessed higher levels of extraversion or higher levels of neuroticism, and greater for women who possessed higher levels of openness.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Results of this study show that sexual harassment behaviors in the workplace are associated with personality traits. More specifically, lower levels of openness are associated with higher levels of sexual harassment behaviors for both men and women. Furthermore, for both men and women, the association between openness and sexual harassment behaviors is greater if one perceives higher acceptance of sexual harassment by their peers. These results suggest that people who possess higher levels of openness are more readily or easily influenced by social norms about sexual harassment.

For men, sexual harassment behaviors are also associated with age, sexual harassment myth acceptance, and lower levels of conscientiousness. In contrast, for women sexual harassment behaviors are associated with higher levels of extraversion and neuroticism. For women who possessed higher levels of extraversion or higher levels of neuroticism, the association between perceived social norms and sexual harassment behaviors was also smaller. Overall, these results suggest that the association between sexual harassment behaviors and personality traits is different for men than for women.

Overall, the results of the current study extend our understanding of the link between personality, social norms, and sexual harassment. The results complement prior research as there are few studies on sexual harassment from the actor's perspective. While prior research already suggested an association between sexual harassment proclivity and personality traits (Lee et al., 2003; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016), the current study shows that personality is also associated with actual self-reported sexual harassments behaviors. Furthermore, while prior research found an association between sexual harassment and openness in men (Lee et al., 2003), our results suggest that also in women lower levels of openness are associated with sexual harassment behaviors. Finally, our study suggests an important role of social norms in combatting sexual harassment, as perceived social norms appear to have both a direct effect (i.e., people commit more sexual harassment behaviors if they believe that such behaviors are judge to be acceptable by their peers) and an indirect effect (i.e., the effect of social norms is greater for people who possess higher levels of openness).

At a theoretical level, the current study expands our understanding of sexual harassment by providing insights into the factors that contribute to the likelihood that individuals will engage in sexual harassment behaviors. Consistent with the *Person X Situation Model*, both personality and social norms appear to be important to understand sexual harassment from the actor's perspective. Future research might explore to what extent the association between openness and sexual harassment behaviors might also be moderated by other factors such as political orientation. Prior research has documented that openness is related to left-wing political orientation (Furnham & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2018; Sibley, Osborne, & Duckitt, 2012), while political orientation in turn might be related to beliefs about sexual harassment (e.g., Jose, Fowler, & Raj, in press). It would be interesting for future research to examine the relationship between personality, political orientation, and sexual harassment in more depth. At a practical level, results of the current study may help in designing intervention strategies. First, identifying people with high proclivities for sexual harassment and targeting them for training could potentially increase the effectiveness of sexual harassment training (e.g., Pryor et al., 1993). Second, as our results suggest an important role of social norms in combatting sexual harassment, organizations should build a culture that reinforces respectful, non-harassing behaviors and uphold norms that condemn potentially harassing behaviors (e.g., supervisors actively dissuading sexual jokes). Our results suggest that it is important to challenge workplace environments where such behaviors are "normalized" (i.e.,

perceived as socially accepted) as a means to prevent future perpetration. Creating and maintaining a work environment that challenges potentially harassing behaviors is also important to ensure that sexual harassment complaints are taken seriously by organizations internally. Internal investigations of sexual harassment complaints might get undermined by social norms and rape myth acceptance, as recent research shows how such beliefs are associated with victim blaming and trial jurors propensity to doubt a rape complainant's testimony (Klement, Sagarin, & Skowronski, 2019; Willmott, Boduszek, Debowska, & Woodfield, 2018).

The present study had a number of limitations. First, the current study relied on self-reported measures. Participants may thus have responded in a social desirable way. This may have led to an underreporting of sexual harassment behaviors, although we tried to minimize this bias by explicitly avoiding any specific reference to or use of the term sexual harassment throughout the entire questionnaire. Second, although we tried to minimize this bias by asking participants specifically about their behavior during the past year, responses may have been distorted by recall bias as people might not recall certain behavior. Third, the ambiguity of certain behaviors (e.g., making a sexual comment) poses a challenge for all research on sexual harassment, as the same behavior may be interpreted differently depending on the context. To minimize this concern, we specifically instructed respondents that their answers should not pertain to behaviors involving "interactions with their partner", but we cannot entirely rule out that some of the reported behaviors were not necessarily unwanted. Finally, although sexual harassment encompasses a heterogeneous set of behaviors (i.e., verbal sexual harassment, physical sexual harassment, indirect sexual harassment, and homophobic sexual harassment), the current study was not able to examine these behaviors separately due to the low frequencies of physical sexual harassment and indirect sexual harassment reported by our respondents.

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