Is that a "No"? The Interpretation of Responses to Unwanted Sexual Attention

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In this study, we used an interactive perspective to address the issue of responses to sexual harassment. We examined the effect of the consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness of a rejecting response on its perceived effectiveness. Participants were presented with scenarios that described responses to unwanted sexual attention and were required to rate the effectiveness of the responses for their clarity, content, and estimated effect on the future behavior of the perpetrator. The results show significant effects of consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness on perceived effectiveness of the response. As expected, an assertive response that was consistent across time and types of advances was perceived to be the most effective. This effect was found to be stronger for women than for men.

KEY WORDS: sexual harassment; attribution; responses.

Placing one's arm over another person's shoulders can be viewed either as a friendly gesture or as a hostile act of sexual harassment. The labeling of such behavior is related to the target's interpretation of the other person's intentions. In a similar vein, joking in response to sexual attention can be perceived as a rejection, a neutral response, or an encouragement. Furthermore, responses to sexual harassment are often vague because the majority of victims do not respond directly by confronting the harasser (Gruber & Smith, 1995; Rudman, Borgida & Robertson, 1995). Although other researchers have examined observers' perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors, the perception of responses to sexual harassment has not been studied extensively (Smirles, 2004). Instead, responses to harassment have been studied mostly from the point of view of the victim (Cochran, Frazier, & Olson, 1997; Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997; Peirce, Rosen, & Hiller, 1997).

The observer-based approach has often been applied to the interpretation of sexual harassment behaviors (e.g., Baird, Bensko, Bell, Viney, & Woody, 1995; Corr & Jackson, 2001; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991). In the present study, we applied this approach to the exploration of responses to sexual harassment. Specifically, because sexual harassment is a social act, an observer's perspective is critical in the construction of the meaning of the event. The observer serves as a mirror of what happens and provides a normative perspective for judging the interaction. Given those important functions, the observer becomes a major contributor to the construction of the meaning of sexual harassment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Indeed, Smirles (2004) referred to "the importance of understanding how different groups of observers might judge the same alleged incident of sexual harassment differently" (p. 342).

From a practical viewpoint, the findings of studies of observers may be relevant to training programs that address the issue of sexual harassment, because victims as well as perpetrators are likely to benefit from knowledge about the way behaviors are seen by relatively objective observers. Furthermore, observers represent decision-makers within

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organizations, as well as in courts, who determine whether sexual advances should be considered sexual harassment. As such decisions take into consideration the target's reactions, an understanding of the variables that determine observers' interpretations and awareness of possible perceptual biases may contribute to the decision-making process.

Three commonalities can be found across most definitions of sexual harassment: The presence of a behavior that is sexual in nature, unwanted, and experienced as a threat to the victim's job or ability to perform her or his work. According to a widely accepted typology of sexual harassment, three types of behavior can be included: sexual coercion expressed as solicitation, or coercion of sexual activity by promise of reward or threat of punishment; gender harassment, including generalized sexist comments and behaviors that convey insulting, degrading, or sexist attitudes; unwanted sexual attention that ranges from unwanted, inappropriate, and offensive physical or verbal sexual advances to gross sexual imposition, assault, or rape (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald & Hesson-McInnis, 1989).

The issue of the target's acceptance or rejection of the behavior in question is relevant mostly to behaviors categorized as unwanted sexual attention. It may be argued that sexual coercion is by definition unwanted, or there would be no need for coercion. The description of gender harassment also implies that it is not welcomed by the target, as it includes degrading behaviors. Indeed, according to Israeli law the proof that sexual coercion or gender harassment took place is sufficient to establish a case of sexual harassment, regardless of the target's reaction. Nevertheless, certain types of behaviors that fall into the category of sexual attention are not negative by definition (e.g., an invitation for a date). The law states that such behaviors would be considered sexual harassment only if the target showed that they are unwelcome. Thus, the target's response is an important element in sexual harassment claims referring to unwelcome sexual attention. It is therefore important to explore the observer's view of the effectiveness of the response, namely what determines whether it is interpreted as conveying acceptance or rejection.

Responses to Sexual Harassment

Gruber (1989) maintained that reactions to sexual harassment can be described along a continuum of avoidance, diffusion, negotiation, and confrontation. Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) suggested several types of responses to a verbal sexually harassing invitation, such as ignoring the invitation, leaving the place, and filing a report. Furthermore, the literature suggests several types of dichotomies between responses that are direct and active versus those that are indirect and passive (Afifi & Lee, 2000; Sigal, Braden-Maguire, Patt, Goodrich, & Perrino, 2003); assertive versus nonassertive (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Gutek & Koss, 1993); external and problem-focused versus internal and emotion-focused (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995); and formal versus informal (Firestone & Harris, 2003). Magley (2002) found the following clusters of mechanisms for coping with sexual harassment: behavioral engagement or disengagement, and cognitive engagement or disengagement. Knapp et al. (1997) argued that responses to sexual harassment are not part of a single continuum but represent a multidimensional construct that can be characterized by such attributes as the focus (e.g., self or initiator) and mode of response (e.g., self or use of outside support). Indeed, Malamut and Offerman (2001) have found empirical support for the multidimensional perspective of responses suggested by Knapp et al. (1997).

These differentiations between types of responses do not necessarily imply that one mode of response is more effective than the other, as there is no evidence as to what should be considered the absolutely best response to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993). Studies of the effectiveness of responses show a discrepancy between what is perceived as effective and what women tend to do in actual harassment situations. Sigal et al. (2003) found that the direct active response to sexual harassment is perceived as more effective than the indirect passive one. Nevertheless, sexual harassment victims might experience negative outcomes if they respond to the harassment behavior in a direct and confrontational manner (Stockdale, 1998).

The majority of victims of sexual harassment do not respond to harassment by directly confronting or reporting the harasser (Gruber & Smith, 1995; Rudman et al., 1995). The most common reactions to sexual harassment are ignoring it (Benson & Thompson, 1982), deflecting it by joking, going along with it (Gutek, 1985), or avoiding the harasser (Cochran et al., 1997). Possible motives for avoiding a direct rejecting response are the potentially negative consequences of confrontation and the desire to maintain a positive relationship with the harasser

(Afifi & Lee, 2000; Peterson, 1988). Such motives are amplified by the power differentials that usually exist between harassers and victims in the workplace. (e.g., Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). Although confrontation is a rare response, much of the research on responses to sexual harassment has been devoted to a single type of response: filing a formal complaint (Fitzgerald, Swan & Fishcer, 1995).

Previous researchers have addressed responses to sexual harassment from the point of view of the target and explored the factors that affect the mode of coping. Consequently, many responses that were studied are internal (e.g., emotion-focused coping). Such responses might be meaningful to the target but are not evident to the perpetrator. In the present study, we examined responses that are observable by outsiders and address the issue from the perspective of an interaction.

Perpetrator–Target Interaction

Similar to other social contexts, sexual harassment may be viewed as following an interactive script, in which one person initiates an interaction, the other reacts to the initiation, and then the first person reacts to the reaction (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). The ambivalent nature of sexual harassment is connected to the issue of personal interpretation, which emerges in all phases of the interaction as an important dimension. The perpetrator performs a sexually harassing behavior; the target recognizes it as such; recognition leads to a reaction on the part of the target that is either objecting or accepting; the reaction is understood by the perpetrator as rejecting or accepting the harassment. This understanding conceivably influences the perpetrator's subsequent behavior. Thus, to the degree that the target's message is ambiguous it leaves an opening for the perpetrator to interpret the behavior as welcome (Henry & Meltzoff, 1998; Krolokke, 1998). These situations are mainly problematic when the target reacts in a way that she/he thinks sends a message of objection but the perpetrator does not understand this message as such. In such a case, sexual harassment is likely to continue. Indeed, victims' responses have been found to affect judgments of harassment: Even a polite refusal increased the perceived severity of the harassment (Hunter & McClelland, 1991; York, 1989).

Sexual harassment is conceptualized as an interaction that might take place over time and across different situations. Accordingly, we identified three relevant dimensions of interpreting responses to unwanted sexual attention: (1) consistency across time (i.e., the extent to which the target reacts to the event in the same manner on other occasions); (2) consistency across types of advances (i.e., the distinctiveness of the responses, the extent to which the target reacts in the same manner to different sexual initiations) (Kelley, 1972); and (3) assertiveness of the target's response (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Gutek & Koss, 1993; Osman, 2004).

We assumed that the consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and the assertiveness of the response would determine whether it is interpreted as reflecting a stable internal attitude of rejection rather than a haphazard behavior. More specifically, we expected that a discouraging response to sexual attention would be perceived as more effective when it was consistent across time, consistent across types of advances, and assertive. Additionally, we expected to find additive effects, namely that every combination of high levels of the independent variables would significantly increase the perceived effectiveness of the response. Such combinations of two or three variables generate a coherent perception of the response. We expected the effect of such coherence to be significantly stronger than the effect of each variable by itself.

The perceived effectiveness of the response was conceptualized in terms of specific dimensions, namely its clarity and whether it conveyed a message of rejection, as well as an evaluation of its effect on the other person's behavior.

Gender differences in the interpretation of responses to sexual harassment have been studied mostly in regard to the attribution of responsibility. Researchers have found that men attribute more responsibility to the victim than do women and also tend to view the victim as an active contributor to the development of the harassing situation (Jenson & Gutek, 1982; Kenig & Ryan, 1986; Rubin & Borgers, 1990). Thus, we expected men to assign more weight to the victim's response than women and to perceive a consistent, assertive, and not unique response to be more effective.

The following hypotheses were formulated regarding discouraging responses to sexual attention.

Hypothesis 1. An assertive response would be perceived as more effective than a non-assertive response.

Hypothesis 2. A response that is consistent across time would be perceived as more effective than an inconsistent response.

Hypothesis 3. A response that is consistent across types of advances would be perceived as more effective than an inconsistent response.

Hypothesis 4a. A response would be perceived as more effective under high assertiveness and high consistency across time than under low levels of one or more of these variables.

Hypothesis 4b. A response would be perceived as more effective under high assertiveness and high consistency across types of advances than under low levels of one or more of these variables.

Hypothesis 4c. A response would be perceived as more effective under high consistency across time and high consistency across types of advances than under low levels of one or more of these variables.

Hypothesis 4d. A response would be perceived as more effective under high assertiveness, high consistency across time, and high consistency across types of advances than under low levels of one or more of these variables.

Hypothesis 5. Consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness would be more strongly correlated with perceptions of response effectiveness for men than for women.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 374 students from two universities in the north of Israel. Of the respondents 254 were women, 111 were men, and 9 did not indicate their gender. The mean age of the respondents was 26.96 years ($SD = 6.78$). Israeli students are typically older than students in most other countries, as well as more experienced in sexual harassment, due to their 2–3 years compulsory military service and the fact that most of them work in part-time jobs to support themselves during their studies. Thus, their judgments of responses to unwanted sexual attention were expected to be educated and based on either personal experience with the situation or having observed such interactions between others.

Research Design and Instruments

The research design consisted of two between-subjects variables (consistency across time and consistency across types of advances of the response to sexual attention) and one within-subjects variable (assertiveness). Four versions of the scenario combined high and low levels of consistency across time and consistency across types of advances. Each respondent was presented with two scenarios: One described an assertive, and the other a non-assertive, response. The order of presentation of the assertive and non-assertive scenarios was varied so that one-half of the respondents read the assertive scenario, and the other one-half the non-assertive scenario, first.

Manipulation of Independent Variables: Characteristics of the Reaction

Respondents were presented with the following situation: "M (a women's name) and R (a men's name) work in the same organization. R has initiated sexual advances toward M several times, such as sexual remarks about her appearance, invitations to a date, and so on." *Assertiveness*: M's reaction was described either as "Tells him to stop" (assertive reaction) or as "Changes the topic of the conversation" (non-assertive reaction). These responses were derived from a pilot study of students' ratings on a scale of assertiveness, a list of possible reactions to unwanted sexual attention (e.g., leaving the room, giggling, threatening to file a report). *Consistency across time and across type of advances*: The two types of consistency of the reactions to the sexual advances were manipulated as follows. High consistency across time and low consistency across types of advances: "When R makes sexual remarks about M's appearance she always (description of reaction, i.e., tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation). When he initiates other sexual advances she never (tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation)." High consistency across time and high consistency across types of advances: "Each time R makes sexual advances of any kind, M (tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation)." Low consistency across time and low consistency across types of advances: "When R makes sexual remarks about M's appearance she sometimes (tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation), and sometimes she doesn't. When he initiates other sexual advances she never (tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation)." Low consistency across time and high consistency across types of advances: "When R makes sexual remarks about M's appearance she

sometimes (tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation), and sometimes she doesn't. When he initiates other sexual advances she sometimes (tells him to stop/changes the topic of the conversation), and sometimes she doesn't."

Measurement of Dependent Variables: Perceived Meaning and Impact of the Reaction

Respondents were asked to answer the following questions with regard to each scenario: (a) "To what extent does M's behavior convey a clear message to R?" The responses were provided on a 7-point scale (1: "to a very small extent;" 7: "to a very large extent"); (b) "To what extent does M's behavior express acceptance or rejection of R's sexual advances?" The responses were provided on a 7-point scale (1: "a very high level of rejection;" 7: "a very high level of acceptance"); (c) "In your opinion, how would M's reaction affect R's future sexual advances toward her?" The responses were provided on a 7-point scale (1: "would stop the sexual advances;" 7: "would increase sexual advances").

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to university students who volunteered to participate in the study. Respondents were given the following instructions: "In this study you will be presented with scenarios that refer to interpersonal behaviors of a sexual nature. Please answer the questions about the scenarios in a way that reflects your opinions. The confidentiality of your responses is guaranteed. The questionnaire is administered for research purposes only, and only aggregated data will be examined."

The questionnaires were administered in groups during class time.

RESULTS

Table I presents means, standard deviations, and correlations among the dependent variables.

The hypotheses were examined with three analyses of variance for repeated measures. Consistency across time (low, high) and consistency across types of advances (low, high) were the between-subjects variables, and assertiveness (low, high) was the within-subject variable. The dependent variable in the first analysis was the clarity of the response, in the second analysis the acceptance–rejection of the sexual attention, and in the third analysis the estimated effect of the response on future sexual attention. The order of the presentation of assertive and non-assertive responses was entered as a covariate.

The results regarding the clarity of the response, presented in Fig. 1, show that consistency across time, $F(1, 359) = 12.26$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .03$, and consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 359) = 34.19$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .09$, but not assertiveness, $F(1, 359) = 2.39$, $p < .12$, $\varepsilon^2 = .001$, had significant effects on the perceived clarity of response. The magnitudes of the effect show that consistency across types of advances had a stronger effect on perceived clarity than did consistency across time.

Significant additive effects were found for assertiveness and consistency across time, $F(1, 359) = 23.73$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .06$, assertiveness and consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 359) = 40.19$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .10$, and consistency across time and consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 359) = 31.49$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .08$. The additive effect of the three variables was also significant,

Table I. Means Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Response Clarity, Perceived Content of Response, and Estimated Effect of Response on Harasser's Behavior

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Assertive response							
1. Clarity	4.55 (1.73)	—					
2. Content	3.84 (1.65)	−.21*	—				
3. Estimated effect	4.42 (1.52)	−.38**	.48**	—			
Non-assertive response							
4. Clarity	3.86 (1.57)	.49**	−.01	−.07	—		
5. Content	4.08 (1.31)	−.22*	.60**	.42**	−.11*	—	
6. Estimated effect	4.99 (1.28)	.07	.26**	.52**	−.11*	.36**	—

Note. Higher scores on content and estimated effect represent encouragement and increase in behavior, respectively.
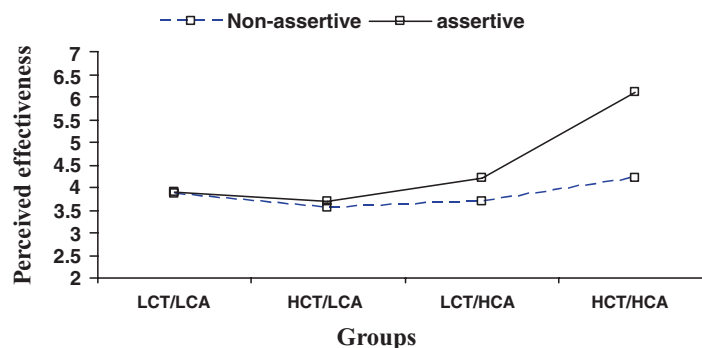*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Fig. 1. The effect of consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness on the perceived clarity of a response to sexual advances. *Note.* Response scale: 1–7; LCT/HCT: low/high consistency across time; LCA/HCA: low/high consistency across types of advances.

$F(1, 359) = 17.54$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .05$. The results suggest that, as hypothesized, the combination of high levels of these response characteristics has a strong effect, which is significantly higher than any other combination of the independent variables: A discouraging response to sexual attention is perceived as most clear when it is assertive, highly consistent across time, and highly consistent across types of advances. The order of presentation was found to have an effect, $F(1, 359) = 5.32$, $p < .05$, on the perceived clarity of assertive response, such that an assertive response presented first was perceived as clearer than an assertive response presented second ($M = 4.81$ and 4.33, respectively).

Figure 2 presents the results for perceived acceptance–rejection of sexual attention. The results show that consistency across time, $F(1, 359) = 10.98$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .03$, consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 359) = 44.59$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .01$,

and assertiveness, $F(1, 359) = 5.67, p < .05, \varepsilon^2 = .02$, have significant effects on the perceived acceptance of the attention, such that acceptance is perceived as lower under high consistency across time, high consistency across types of advances, and high assertiveness. The effect of consistency across types of advances is stronger than those of assertiveness and consistency across time. Nevertheless, contrary to our expectations, no significant additive effects were found among the independent variables.

The results regarding the estimated effects of the response characteristics on future sexual attention are presented in Fig. 3. The results show significant effects for consistency across time, $F(1, 357) = 8.45$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .02$, and consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 357) = 36.97$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .09$, but not for assertiveness. Again, the effect of consistency across types of advances is stronger than that of consistency across time.
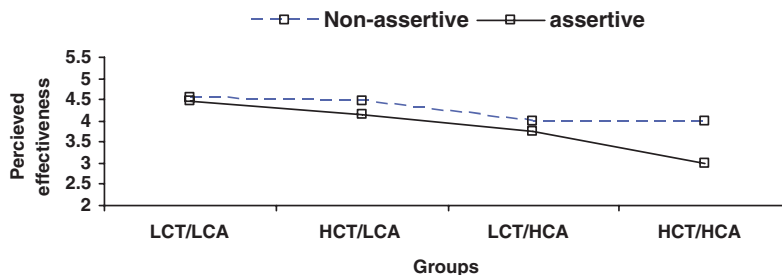

Fig. 2. The effect of consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness on the perceived accepting–rejecting message of a response to sexual advances. *Note.* Response scale: 1–7; LCT/HCT: low/high consistency across time; LCA/HCA: low/high consistency across types of advances. A lower score represents greater perceived rejection of the sexual advance.
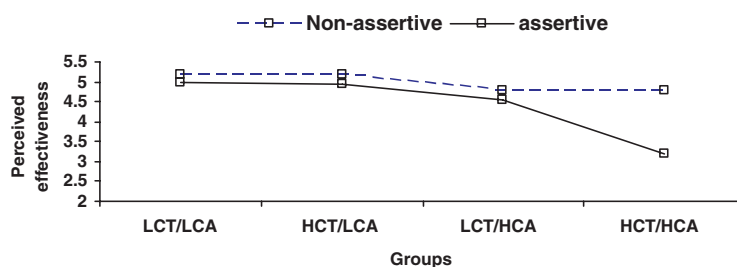
Fig. 3. The effect of consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness on the estimated effect of a response to sexual advances on future advances. *Note.* Response scale: 1–7; LCT/HCT: low/high consistency across time; LCA/HCA: low/high consistency across types of advances. A lower score represents estimated decrease in future sexual advances.

Significant additive effects were found for assertiveness and consistency across time, $F(1, 357) = 26.38$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 07$, assertiveness and consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 357) = 28.68$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .07$, and consistency across time and consistency across types of advances, $F(1, 357) = 6.95$, $p < .05$, $\varepsilon^2 = .02$. A significant additive effect of the three variables, $F(1, 357) = 26.08$, $p < .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .07$, was found: As expected, sexual attention is estimated to be least likely to continue under conditions of high consistency across time and across types of advances and high assertiveness.[3]

The Effect of Gender

To examine the fifth hypothesis, the analyses were repeated with a sample that consisted of equal numbers of men and women (i.e., a smaller sample of women was randomly selected from the larger sample). The results show that with regard to response clarity there was a significant interaction between assertiveness and gender, $F(1, 206) = 5.33$, $p < .05$, $\varepsilon^2 = .02$. The means show that men evaluate a non-assertive response as having a higher level of clarity than do women ($M = 4.12$ and 3.69); evaluations regarding the clarity of an assertive response were similar for men and women ($M = 4.56$ and 4.59). A

[3]To control for the repeated measures aspect of the research design we conducted univariate ANOVAs in which the dependent variables were the responses to scenarios that were presented first. Most of the results were replicated, with the following two differences: A significant additive effect of assertiveness and consistency across time on perceived acceptance–rejection, $F(1, 357) = 8.40$, $p < .01$, and a non-significant additive effect of assertiveness, consistency across types of advances and consistency across time, $F(1, 357) = .7, p > .05$, on the estimated effect of the response.

four-way interaction was found with regard to the estimated effect of the response on future sexual attention, $F(1, 204) = 5.40$, $p < .05$, $\varepsilon^2 = .03$. The means show that there are gender differences in the perception of the estimated effect of the response in two situations: When consistency across time, consistency across types of advances, and assertiveness are low, women believe more than men do that the response will increase further sexual attention ($M = 5.62$ and 4.95). However, under the opposite conditions, that is, under high consistency and assertiveness, women believe more than men do that the response would decrease further attention ($M = 2.66$ and 3.35). Thus, the fifth hypothesis was not supported. It should be noted that, although the ε^2 values are quite low, the main effects and additive effects that were significant in the larger sample remained significant in analyses of the smaller sample, except for the additive effect of consistency across time and consistency across types of advances regarding the estimated effect of the response on future sexual attention, $F(1, 204) = 1.06$, $p < .30$.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we examined the perceived effect of the quality of response to sexual harassment. The working assumption was that a more generalized, stable, assertively administered, negative message would be perceived as more effective in deterring harassing behavior in the future. The results show that high consistency across time, high consistency across types of advances, and high assertiveness positively affect the perceived clarity of the response, its interpretation as expressing discouragement, and the evaluation that it will

reduce further unwanted sexual attention. As expected, these aspects of the response were found to have an additive effect on perceived effectiveness.

In addition to the response dimensions identified in previous studies (e.g., activity, directness), we found that consistency across time and consistency across types of advances are important components in influencing the perceived effectiveness of the response. Given their visibility and operationalizability, their effect on actual harassing behavior is likely to be more discernible than that of more internal and less behavioral dimensions. These results emphasize the need to study the phenomenon from a broader contextualized perspective emphasizing a variety of response dimensions and their interactive effects.

From the point of view of the target, conveying an indirect consistent message that the sexual attention is unwanted is likely to be less threatening than conveying this message through a direct response. The results show that repeating a discouraging response whenever any type of sexual attention occurs conveys a message of rejection even if the response is relatively subtle, as in the case of non-assertive responses. From the point of view of the perpetrator, however, more time might be needed to internalize the message delivered by this type of rejecting response, because even consistent responses might be framed "playing hard to get," particularly when the response is not assertive. Future researchers should therefore focus on the interpretation of the responses from the divergent points of view of the perpetrator and the target.

Of the three response characteristics, consistency across types of advances was found to have the strongest effect on the perceived effectiveness of the response. High consistency across types of advances means that all sexual behaviors elicited the same rejecting reaction. Thus, in cases of high consistency the reactions presumably appear as an honest internalized attitude rather than as an incidental behavior. On the other hand, rejection of only a specific behavior of a sexual nature might be interpreted as reflecting dislike of that behavior rather than as an objection to sexual involvement with the perpetrator.

Future researchers should examine whether this effect of consistency across types of advances is maintained under conditions of repeated similar, but not identical, responses in various harassment situations. Identical responses over different situations are likely to be more meaningful when the response is non-assertive; with subtle responses, variance in both the type of attention and the reactions to it

might decrease the overall effectiveness of the message.

Assertiveness was examined in the present study because it is conceptualized as having a strong impact on the perception of responses to sexual harassment (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Gutek & Koos, 1993; Sigal et al., 2003). However, contrary to expectations, assertiveness in itself affects only the perceived content of the response. Nevertheless, assertiveness combined with response consistency influenced the perceived effectiveness of the response. It may be concluded that an assertive response in itself is insufficient to terminate harassment as it has to be repeated over time and with different types of harassment to be effective.

The fifth hypothesis was not supported. Contrary to expectations, women attributed more effectiveness to a consistent and assertive response than did men. These results apparently contradict previous results regarding the stronger tendency of men to attribute responsibility for sexual harassment to victims. A possible explanation relates to the fact that in this research respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the victim's response, rather than to assign responsibility for the harassment, as in previous studies. The identification of men with the harasser and women with the victim has been suggested as an explanation of gender differences in the attribution of responsibility (Jones & Remland, 1992). The same pattern of identification also may have affected the perceived effectiveness of the response, but in a different direction. Conceivably, women's higher evaluation of response effectiveness might reflect their stronger need for a sense of control in the harassment situation (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Furthermore, previous research shows that women approved less of the victim than men did when her response to harassment was positive (Jones, Remland, & Brunner, 1987). Thus, the attributions of effectiveness to the victim's response might reflect gender differences in the view of what women ought to do in such a situation.

Future researchers should explore the effect of attribution biases on the interpretation of responses to sexual harassment. For example, the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), which is expressed in the tendency to make internal, dispositional attributions and to underestimate the effect of situational factors on behaviors, might affect the perception of response to sexual harassment, especially if the perpetrator

is motivated to believe that the rejection results from the situation. Accordingly, situational factors that might affect the attribution should be taken into consideration. For example, we can identify situational variables that inhibit an explicitly rejecting reaction (e.g., norms and sanctions or relationship variables). The presence of such factors increases the tendency to attribute rejecting responses to internal causes (Kelley, 1972). At the same time, variables that are perceived as enhancing a rejecting response (e.g., norms against the encouragement of sexual advances in the workplace) are likely to reduce the certainty in the target's internal disposition (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). In addition, the role of non-verbal reactions to the sexually harassing behavior should also be assessed given its significant influence, especially in conflicting messages (Osman, 2004).

Finally, the present study was focused on the observer's perspective. In future research it would be desirable to compare the observer, perpetrator, and victim's viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of responses. There may be intriguing contradictory predictions regarding the differences between victim and perpetrator attributions. On the one hand, in terms of different cognitive processes, the observer–actor bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1987), that is the tendency to attribute another person's behavior to his/her personal characteristics, might result in more internal attributions (i.e., a belief that the behaviors reflect stable attitudes) on the part of the perpetrator than on the part of the victim. On the other hand, a motivational self-serving bias might be expected to result in more external attributions on the part of the perpetrator (i.e., a belief that the behavior does not reflect consistent rejection). The perspective of an observer, who is both cognitively and motivationally less biased than the involved parties, might provide a valuable anchor for comparison.

The major limitation of the present study is the manipulation of the independent variables with vignettes presented to the respondents. In their review of studies of responses to sexual harassment, Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) suggested that both the method of presenting vignettes and the method of asking respondents to evaluate how they would have responded have their limitations, as, for example, the over-reporting of clear reactions and the underestimation of negative emotions associated with sexual harassment.

Another limitation is related to the realism of the "low consistency across types of advances"

vignettes, which describe a less consistent response to more severe forms of harassment. Some respondents might have seen these vignettes as presenting an unlikely situation, and their responses could have been affected by that perception.

In conclusion, victims of sexual harassment often find it difficult and counterproductive to confront the harasser and convey their rejection directly. Although assertive responses are perceived as more effective, passive responses to harassment situations are far more common than active and assertive responses (Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000). Our findings indicate that conveying a consistent message may be an influential and less stressful way of expressing rejection. Although when harassment is intentional a clear message of rejection is not effective, in other cases it might prevent sexual attention from escalating into sexual harassment.

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