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**How Do People Perceive Sexual Harassment Targeting Transgender Women, Lesbians,
and Straight Cisgender Women?**

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Abstract

Third-party observers' opinions affect how organizations handle sexual harassment. Prior research has focused on perceptions of sexual harassment targeting straight cisgender women. We examined how targets' sexual orientation and gender identity impact these perceptions. In three preregistered studies, straight cisgender participants imagined a coworker confided that a male colleague had sexually harassed her. The target was a transgender woman, a lesbian woman, or a woman whose sexual orientation and gender identity were unspecified. In Study 1 ($N=428$), participants reported believing that sexual harassment targeting lesbians and women with unspecified identities was most likely motivated by attraction and power, whereas sexual harassment targeting transgender women was seen as most likely motivated by power and prejudice. Despite these differences in perceived motivation, in Study 2 ($N=421$) perceptions of appropriate consequences for the perpetrator did not vary based on the target's identity. Study 3 ($N=473$) demonstrated that the specific behavior of which sexual harassment is assumed to consist differs based on the target's identity. Whereas women with unspecified identities and lesbians were assumed to face stereotypical attraction-based harassment, transgender women were assumed to face gender harassment. Stereotypes about sexual harassment can bias third-party assumptions, invalidating experiences that do not match pervasive stereotypes.

Keywords: sexual harassment; gender identity; sexual orientation; organizational climate

Public Significance Statement

Third-party observers make different assumptions about sexual harassment depending on who the target is. Specifically, sexual harassment targeting lesbian and straight cisgender women was perceived as being most likely motivated by attraction and power and assumed to come in the form of unwanted sexual attention, whereas sexual harassment targeting transgender women was assumed to take the form of gender harassment. Differential third-party assumptions may have powerful effects on organizational climate.

How Do People Perceive Sexual Harassment Targeting Transgender Women, Lesbians, and Straight Cisgender Women?

The #MeToo Movement gained international attention in 2017 as allegations of sexual assault and harassment were made against film producer Harvey Weinstein (Johnson & Hawbaker, 2020). The #MeToo Movement advocates for survivors of sexual violence and harassment (Me Too Movement, n.d.) and has helped to publicize the reality of sexual harassment in an unprecedented way. Despite the critical progress represented by the #MeToo Movement, the primary focus has been on the experiences of straight, cisgender, mostly White women (Arkles, 2018; Dastagir, 2019) and the voices of more marginalized groups are left unheard. Psychological research on sexual harassment has similarly tended to focus on straight cisgender women as targets (Brassel et al., 2019). Little is therefore known about how sexual harassment affects people from more marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. For example, the majority of existing research does not speak to whether sexual harassment is believed to stem from different motivations, whether sexual harassment is expected to occur in the form of distinct behaviors, or whether sexual harassment allegations are handled differently depending on the target's identity. Accordingly, the goal of the present research was to investigate whether people's perceptions of sexual harassment differ as a function of the sexual orientation and gender identity of the target. We specifically compared perceptions of sexual harassment targeting transgender women, lesbian women, and straight cisgender women.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature ... [that] explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an

intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment” (EEOC, n.d.a). This definition goes beyond unwanted sexual attention to also encompass behaviors that reflect hostile attitudes toward a person’s sex or gender (EEOC, n.d.b). Research has identified three main types of sexual harassment: sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment (Holland & Cortina, 2013). Sexual coercion involves leveraging one’s position within an organization (e.g., threatening termination or offering a promotion) to establish a sexual relationship. Unwanted sexual attention is characterized by unwanted and unreciprocated actions that imply sexual or romantic interest in the target. Unwanted sexual attention combined with sexual coercion is termed sexual advance harassment (Berdahl, 2007a; Holland & Cortina, 2013). By contrast, gender harassment does not involve romantic or sexual interest, but instead consists of behaviors that discriminate against or degrade a person on the basis of sex, gender, or perceived violation of gender norms (Berdahl, 2007a; Holland & Cortina, 2013). For example, acts of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia represent gender harassment.

Whereas sexual harassment can occur in any context, the bulk of psychological research on sexual harassment focuses on the workplace. This research has provided a wealth of knowledge regarding the consequences and antecedents of workplace sexual harassment. In terms of consequences, employees who experience sexual harassment report lower job satisfaction, weaker attachment to the organization, higher rates of absenteeism, stronger intentions to leave the organization, and more psychological and physical health problems (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Settles et al., 2014). These negative consequences for both the target and the organization make it necessary to understand what contributes to the occurrence of workplace sexual harassment, how other people in the organization perceive these occurrences, and how these situations are ultimately handled. In terms of antecedents, sexual harassment is

more likely to occur in organizational climates that appear tolerant of it (e.g., Dekker & Barling, 1998; Rubino et al., 2018). Moreover, women in workplaces dominated by men or fields considered traditionally masculine are at a higher risk of being sexually harassed (e.g., Berdahl, 2007a; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014; Leskinen et al., 2015).

The more widespread acceptance of gender harassment as a form of sexual harassment has contributed to the identification of *gender deviance* as another antecedent of sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007a; Holland & Cortina, 2013). Individuals who violate (vs. uphold) traditional gender norms are perceived as gender deviant and are more likely to experience both sexual advance harassment and gender harassment (Berdahl, 2007a; Holland & Cortina, 2013; Leskinen et al., 2015). Gender deviance can take the form of women who possess stereotypically masculine traits, work in male-dominated fields, do not dress in a stereotypically feminine way, or engage in feminist activism (e.g., Leskinen et al., 2015). Notably, these examples of gender deviance come from work that has focused almost exclusively on straight cisgender women as targets of sexual harassment, thus excluding members of the LGBTQ+ community who are frequently perceived as violating traditional gender norms (Konik & Cortina, 2008). The exclusion of this population from sexual harassment research is even more problematic given that well over 50% of LGBTQ+ employees report being harassed at work (Konik & Cortina, 2008).

The limited research that exists on the sexual harassment of LGBTQ+ employees typically examines the self-reported experiences of LGBTQ+ targets. LGBTQ+ employees experience gender harassment, sexual advance harassment, and heterosexist harassment (i.e., hostility toward nonheterosexuality; Holland & Cortina, 2013; Konik & Cortina, 2008; Rabelo & Cortina, 2014). However, barely any research has examined how third-party observers perceive

instances of sexual harassment targeting LGBTQ+ people, despite third-party perceptions being stressed as an important factor in research examining the sexual harassment of straight cisgender women. Specifically, it is important to understand how people perceive occurrences of sexual harassment as perceptions can dictate whether a particular behavior is labeled as sexual harassment, who is held responsible, and whether action is taken to rectify the situation (Hurt et al., 1999; Runtz & O'Donnell, 2003; Smirles, 2004). Third-party perceptions are thus also important in cases where the target of sexual harassment is not a straight cisgender woman.

In a rare exception to the near-exclusive focus on straight cisgender woman targets, Brassel et al. (2019) examined third-party perceptions of sexual harassment directed at targets with varying sexual and gender identities. Participants imagined that a coworker, who was either a straight cisgender man or woman, a gay man, a lesbian woman, or a transgender man or woman, had been sexually harassed by another employee. Participants then reported the perceived likelihood that prejudice, power, attraction, and gender policing (i.e., monitoring and enforcing of traditional gender norms; Konik & Cortina, 2008) motivated the sexual harassment and the perceived acceptability of the perpetrator's behavior. Brassel et al. (2019) found that when the target was a transgender woman or man (vs. a straight cisgender woman or man or gay/lesbian), participants thought the sexual harassment was more likely to be motivated by power, prejudice, and gender policing and less likely to be motivated by attraction. Sexual harassment of transgender women and men (vs. straight cisgender or gay/lesbian targets) was also perceived as less acceptable. Brassel et al.'s (2019) findings therefore provide an important first step toward understanding how third-party observers may perceive sexual harassment targeting sexual and gender minority individuals.

However, existing work does not provide a fully intersectional account of these third-party perceptions. An intersectional approach is particularly important in this context because attitudes toward targets of sexual harassment likely vary as a function of targets' intersecting identities (e.g., gender and sexual orientation; Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Brassel et al., in press; Gazzola & Morrison, 2014; LaMar & Kite, 1998). For example, perceptions of a transgender woman likely are not derived based on her status as a woman and separately based on her status as a transgender person, but rather based on her status as a transgender woman (see Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Thus, perceptions of transgender women are distinct from perceptions of both cisgender women and transgender men (Callahan & Zukowski, 2019; Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). Critically, despite the initial insight provided by Brassel et al. (2019), their results do not directly speak to these comparisons.

Specifically, Brassel et al. (2019) did not examine whether the pattern they observed was qualified by targets' gender. Rather, in their key analyses Brassel et al. (2019) first compared perceptions of sexual harassment targeting heterosexual cisgender, gay/lesbian, and transgender individuals (regardless of gender), and then incidents targeting women versus men (regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity). This approach does not account for the fact that attitudes toward LGBTQ+ targets can differ *qualitatively* (i.e., in their very nature) depending on targets' gender (e.g., LaMar & Kite, 1998). Brassel et al.'s (2019) work is thus limited in three main ways: First, the full pattern of reactions to all six intersectional targets in the design was not analyzed. Second, the sample size did not provide adequate power for examining the statistical interaction of target gender and sexual orientation. Finally, examining statistical interactions based on targets' identities is not always appropriate for an intersectional understanding of how a specific target is perceived (Shields, 2008). Such analytic approaches assume that social

identities such as gender and sexual orientation can be conceived of as separate characteristics of a target that may then impact perceptions of the target in additive or interactive ways. This assumption is incompatible with the possibility that intersecting identities instead produce unique targets, perceptions of whom may not be readily understood in terms of the independent or joint contributions of each separate identity (Parent et al., 2013; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). As such, existing work (including Brassel et al., 2019) does not definitively speak to how perceptions of sexual harassment differ depending on whether the target is a transgender woman, a lesbian woman, or a straight cisgender woman. Our goal was therefore to investigate how straight cisgender people view sexual harassment targeting women from these three groups. Accordingly, unlike Brassel et al. (2019), we provide direct statistical comparisons as a function of these three intersectional identities, allowing us to directly compare participants' perceptions of harassment targeting transgender, lesbian, and straight cisgender women (vs. considering perceptions separately based on targets' identities as women and as lesbian/straight or transgender/cisgender). We focused specifically on incidents in which the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman, as this represents the prototypical case of sexual harassment (Holland et al., 2016).

In particular, we examined whether people believe that different motivations underlie sexual harassment as a function of targets' identities. Observers often assume that sexual harassment of straight cisgender women by straight cisgender men stems from sexual or romantic attraction (for a review, see Berdahl, 2007b). However, not only is gender harassment (a form of sexual harassment not rooted in attraction) more common than sexual advance harassment (Leskinen et al., 2011) – women who deviate from traditional gender norms experience more sexual harassment than women who represent more prototypical targets of

heterosexual attraction (Berdahl, 2007a). Thus, much of real-life sexual harassment stems from motivations such as prejudice (e.g., sexism), the desire to exert power, and the desire to enforce gender norms (i.e., gender policing; Berdahl, 2007b). Perceived motivations are critical because they can affect how sexual harassment incidents are handled. For example, perceiving that harassment is motivated by prejudice is associated with viewing it as less acceptable (Brassel et al., 2019) and may thus predict support for more severe consequences for the perpetrator. We posit that these processes likely differ based on the target's identity. Based on extensive prior work, we anticipated that sexual harassment targeting straight cisgender women would be perceived as primarily motivated by attraction (Berdahl, 2007b; Brassel et al., 2019). By contrast, we predicted that participants would be less likely to assume that sexual harassment of transgender women is motivated by attraction, given findings that simply labeling a target as transgender while holding physical appearance constant reduces perceived attractiveness (Mao et al., 2019). Instead, sexual harassment targeting transgender women might be seen as more likely to be motivated by prejudice and power (Brassel et al., 2019). Due to limited prior work, we did not have specific predictions regarding perceptions of sexual harassment targeting lesbians. However, given that transgender people face more prejudice and stigma than lesbian women do (Norton & Herek, 2013), we expected that power and prejudice motivations might be perceived as distinctively likely motivators of sexual harassment targeting transgender women (vs. both straight cisgender women and lesbians). Such differences in perceived motivation, if observed, may predict different repercussions for perpetrators even when the sexual harassment takes the form of the same behavior.

We conducted three preregistered studies to examine these issues. In all studies, participants (who self-identified as straight and cisgender) imagined that a coworker disclosed to

them that a male colleague had been sexually harassing her. In an attempt to reach respondents of varying ages who are more likely to have work experience than a traditional student sample, we recruited participants from Mechanical Turk. Across the studies, we measured participants' perceptions of the sexual harassment incident, including their perceptions of underlying motivations, acceptability, appropriate consequences for the perpetrator, and specific behaviors that were believed to have taken place. We hypothesized that participants who were asked to think about sexual harassment targeting a woman whose gender identity and sexual orientation were unspecified (i.e., our control condition, in which the target was likely assumed to be straight and cisgender) would be more likely to believe the harassment was motivated by attraction, especially relative to participants who were told the target was a transgender woman. Moreover, based on the findings of Brassel et al. (2019), we predicted that participants who considered a transgender woman (vs. lesbian or straight cisgender woman) target would be more likely to believe the sexual harassment was motivated by prejudice and power. We further explored whether other perceptions (e.g., perceived acceptability, appropriate consequences) varied as a function of the target's identity. Taken together, the present studies provide intersectional insight into how straight, cisgender third-party observers think about sexual harassment targeting transgender women, lesbians, or women assumed to be straight and cisgender.

Study 1

In Study 1, we investigated participants' perceptions of the motivations underlying, as well as the (un)acceptability of, sexual harassment (specifically, unwanted sexual comments) when the target was a transgender woman, a lesbian woman, or a woman whose gender identity and sexual orientation were not specified and who thus was likely assumed to be straight and

cisgender (i.e., the Control condition). We measured perceived motivation in two ways. First, participants responded to an open-ended question asking them to write about what they believed motivated the perpetrator to make unwanted sexual comments to the target. These responses, which were content-coded, provided insight into participants' spontaneous perceptions of sexual harassment as a function of the target's identity. This method of measurement is a procedural improvement over prior research, which has relied on closed-ended formats, thus constraining responses to motivations explicitly represented in the scale items. The open-ended method has shown value in public policy and clinical settings, where it has allowed researchers to assess participants' thoughts beyond what a closed-ended questionnaire would allow in domains such as climate change attitudes and addiction treatment (Tvinnereim et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2016), enabling more fully informed policies and interventions. Second, participants rated the likelihood that attraction, prejudice, power, and gender policing motivated the perpetrator's behavior. We also measured the perceived acceptability of the perpetrator's behavior. We preregistered (see <https://osf.io/9kctg>) the following hypotheses regarding perceived motivation:

Hypothesis 1: Participants will be less likely to spontaneously mention attraction motivation in their open-ended responses when the target is a transgender woman (vs. the Control condition).

Hypothesis 2: Participants will rate attraction motivation as more likely than power, prejudice, and gender policing motivations within the Control condition, and as more likely in the Control condition than in the Transgender Woman condition. Moreover, participants will rate power and prejudice motivations as more likely than attraction motivation within the Transgender Woman condition. Finally, participants will rate

power and prejudice motivations as more likely in the Transgender Woman condition than in the Control and Lesbian conditions.

In addition to testing these preregistered hypotheses, we explored other motivations that may emerge spontaneously from the open-ended responses and whether they varied across conditions, whether ratings of attraction motivation differed between the Control and Lesbian conditions, and whether ratings of gender policing motivation varied across conditions. Lastly, we also explored whether the perceived acceptability of sexual harassment varied as a function of the target's identity.¹ Study 1 stimuli and measures are available at <https://osf.io/tyv9p/> and data are available at <https://researchbox.org/168>.

Method

Participants

Due to a lack of sufficient amount of prior work to suggest a range of plausible effect sizes, we did not compute *a priori* power analyses for any of the three studies. Instead, in each study our goal was to recruit a fixed number of participants per condition. In addition, we computed sensitivity power analyses to determine the effect sizes that we had 95% power to detect as a function of the final sample size (after *a priori* data exclusions had been taken into account) in each study. In Study 1, our preregistered goal (see <https://osf.io/9kctg>) was to recruit approximately 200 participants with complete data in each condition. Given *a priori* exclusion criteria (see below), we made the study available to $n=250$ per cell for a total $N=750$ recruited from Mechanical Turk via TurkPrime (now CloudResearch; Litman et al., 2017) in return for \$1.

¹ In addition to examining perceived motivations and acceptability, we also explored whether the target's identity affected the likelihood that participants labeled the situation as constituting sexual harassment. Participants were asked to rank-order seven labels (including sexual harassment) from most to least descriptive of the situation. This variable will not be discussed further; however, preregistered analyses involving it can be found in Supplemental Materials.

A total of 751 participants provided data. As preregistered, participants were excluded from analyses if they: (a) did not identify as cisgender or did not report their gender; (b) did not identify as exclusively or mostly heterosexual or did not report their sexual orientation; (c) had duplicate IP addresses or duplicate geolocation coordinates; (d) took less than two minutes to complete the study (indicating potential inattention); (e) gave the same numerical response to all items on the dependent measures; (f) provided an incoherent response to an open-ended question (described below); (g) failed any of three memory and attention checks (described below); or (h) responded “no” when asked whether their data should be included in analyses. The final sample included 428 participants with a mean age of 36.08 years ($SD=10.97$; range: 18-73). Of these, 57.5% were women², 68.7% self-identified as White, 98.8% reported being U.S. citizens, and 97.7% reported that their first/native language was English. On average, participants were slightly liberal in terms of political orientation ($M=3.35$, $SD=1.74$, where 1=*very liberal* and 7=*very conservative*) and 61% identified with the Democratic Party, 28% with the Republican Party, and 11% with an “other” party (e.g., independent). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that $N=428$ yielded 95% power (at $\alpha=.05$) to detect Cohen’s $w=.19$ (equivalent to Cramer’s $V=.19$) in a χ^2 test of independence with two degrees of freedom and Cohen’s $f=.19$ in a one-way ANOVA with three levels.

Procedure

All three studies reported here were deemed exempt from review by the authors’ Institutional Review Board. Study 1 participants were randomly assigned to read one of three descriptions of an instance of workplace sexual harassment in which the gender identity and

² In all three studies, we conducted exploratory analyses to assess whether women and men reported differential perceptions of sexual harassment as a function of the target’s identity. We did not observe participant gender differences in any study. These analyses are reported in detail in Supplemental Materials.

sexual orientation of the target (Michelle) was manipulated (adapted from Brassel et al., 2019). In the Control condition ($n=153$), Michelle's gender identity and sexual orientation were not mentioned; participants in this condition likely assumed Michelle was cisgender and heterosexual (a manipulation check was used to confirm this assumption). We chose to not explicitly define Michelle's gender identity and sexual orientation in the Control condition for two reasons. First, we sought to replicate the procedure used by Brassel et al. (2019). Second, explicitly stating that Michelle was a straight cisgender woman (i.e., the societal default in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity) may have elicited suspicion or demand characteristics. In the Transgender Woman condition ($n=136$), Michelle was described as an openly transgender woman and in the Lesbian condition ($n=139$), Michelle was described as openly lesbian. Specifically, participants read the following scenario, with the text within square brackets varying across conditions:

Imagine that you are working in a mid-size sales company. You and your coworker Michelle have built a comfortable rapport after working together for quite a while. One day, [Michelle / Michelle, who is an openly transgender woman (that is, her sex assigned at birth was male, but she identifies and lives life as a woman) / Michelle, who is openly lesbian (that is, she is attracted to women)], tells you that Scott, another person in the office, has been repeatedly making unwanted sexual comments toward her. Michelle tells you that she feels uncomfortable and distressed by Scott's comments but isn't sure how to respond.

Directly after reading the scenario, participants were asked to write a few sentences about what they thought were the reasons behind Scott's behavior toward Michelle. Participants then completed measures of the perceived acceptability of and motivations behind Scott's behavior

and ranked potential labels for Scott's behavior from most to least descriptive. Next, participants completed measures of attitudes toward transgender people and lesbians, in counterbalanced order. Within the measure of attitudes toward lesbians, we included an attention check that instructed participants to select "slightly disagree" as their response.

The next items served as manipulation checks assessing participants' recall of Michelle's sexual orientation and gender identity. Data from participants in the Transgender Woman condition who did not select "transgender woman" for the gender identity manipulation check and participants in the Lesbian condition who did not select "lesbian" for the sexual orientation manipulation check were excluded, as preregistered. Responses in the Control condition indicated that participants generally assumed Michelle was straight (77.8%; an additional 19.0% responded "not sure") and cisgender (92.8%), as expected.³ Lastly, participants provided demographic information and were debriefed.

Measures

Perceived motivation for Scott's behavior toward Michelle was assessed in two ways. First, participants responded to the following question: "We're interested in your perceptions of what might have motivated Scott to act the way that he did toward Michelle. Please write a few sentences about what you think are the reasons behind Scott's comments to Michelle." Written responses were subsequently content-coded. Second, participants completed an 8-item measure of perceived motivation adapted from Brassel et al. (2019). Participants rated the likelihood (1=*not at all likely* to 5=*very likely*) that 8 statements described the reason behind Scott's behavior toward Michelle. The statements represented 4 motivations: attraction ("Scott was

³ For all three studies, we conducted exploratory analyses in which we excluded data from participants in the Control condition who in their responses to the manipulation checks did not explicitly state believing Michelle was straight and cisgender. These analyses replicated all patterns we report in the main text. Full detail can be found in Supplemental Materials.

attracted to Michelle” and “Scott was trying to let Michelle know that he is romantically interested in her”; $r=.72$; $M=3.68$, $SD=1.13$), power (“Scott was trying to be dominant” and “Scott was trying to assert power”; $r=.77$; $M=3.81$, $SD=1.10$), prejudice (“Scott is prejudiced against Michelle” and “Scott is prejudiced against people like Michelle”; $r=.84$; $M=2.98$, $SD=1.30$), and gender policing (“Scott thinks Michelle is not behaving like a woman should” and “Scott thinks Michelle should be more feminine”; $r=.70$; $M=2.51$, $SD=1.16$).

To assess the *perceived acceptability* of Scott’s behavior, participants completed the following 6 bipolar items on 5-point scales (adapted from Brassel et al., 2019):

acceptable/unacceptable (reverse-scored), appropriate/inappropriate (reverse-scored), respectful/disrespectful (reverse-scored), harmful/not harmful, offensive/inoffensive, and wrong/right (e.g., 1=*wrong*, 2=*slightly wrong*, 3=*neither wrong nor right*, 4=*slightly right*, 5=*right*; $\alpha=.89$; $M=1.29$, $SD=0.55$). Higher scores indicate greater perceived acceptability.⁴

Content-Coding of Qualitative Responses

Participants’ responses to the open-ended question regarding possible motivations behind Scott’s behavior were read by the first author, who developed 9 coding categories based on recurring themes. Two independent coders then categorized responses. Coding instructions are available at <https://osf.io/jgd6n/>. Coders were shown the scenarios and the question that participants were presented with, along with descriptions and examples of the coding categories. Coders were told that responses could be categorized into multiple categories or no category. Disagreements were reconciled by the second author. Category descriptions and interrater

⁴ In all three studies, participants also completed measures of attitudes toward transgender people and lesbians. These measures were always completed after the dependent variables but before the manipulation checks and demographic items. Exploratory analyses revealed that adjusting for these measures did not change the observed results. For the sake of conciseness, these measures are thus not discussed further. However, the relevant analyses for all three studies are available in Supplemental Materials.

reliability statistics are presented in Table 1. Greater than 80% rater agreement and Cohen's $\kappa > .4$ -.6 are typically taken to indicate sufficient reliability (Cohen, 1960; McHugh, 2012). All categories reached >80% agreement and only one category (False Beliefs) was below the cutoff for Cohen's κ . Cohen's κ is lowered when expected agreement by chance is high; such a situation can be artificially enhanced when few responses are sorted into a category (which was the case for False Beliefs).

Table 1

Descriptions and Interrater Reliabilities of Coding Categories for Participants' Responses to the Question of What Motivated the Perpetrator's Unwanted Sexual Comments to the Target in Study 1

Coding Category	Category Description: Response Mentions...	Cohen's κ (% agreement)
Attraction	Being attracted to or wanting to have a romantic or sexual relationship with Michelle	.82 (91.1%)
Prejudice	Being prejudiced against or made uncomfortable by a particular group	.61 (83.4%)
Power	Wanting to dominate, control, intimidate, or have power over Michelle	.53 (85.0%)
Entitlement	Scott believing he is entitled or allowed to make these comments, not caring about the rules, or thinking the rules don't apply to him	.52 (83.9%)
Social Ignorance	Scott not knowing the rules or that what he's doing is wrong, being socially awkward, or not understanding social cues	.56 (81.3%)
False Beliefs	Some kind of misconception or stereotype about the group to which Michelle belongs	.30 (86.7%)
Reaction	That Scott's behavior was in reaction or response to something Michelle did	.66 (93.5%)
Doesn't Know	That Scott does not know about Michelle's gender identity or sexual orientation	.76 (98.1%)
Joking	That Scott is trying to joke or be funny	.75 (97.9%)

Results

Open-Ended Data on Perceived Motivation

Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants' written responses to the open-ended question regarding Scott's motivation for making unwanted sexual comments to Michelle would be less likely to mention attraction when Michelle was a transgender woman (vs. the Control condition). Contrary to Hypothesis 1, mentions of attraction motivation did not differ reliably across conditions, $\chi^2(2)=0.03$, $p=.987$, Cramer's $V=.01$ (see Table 2).

In exploratory analyses, we examined whether other motivations spontaneously generated by participants (see Table 1) varied across conditions. These analyses are reported in Table 2. Statistically significant omnibus effects were followed up with Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons. We found that prejudice motivation was evoked more frequently in the Transgender Woman condition than the Lesbian or Control conditions, and more frequently in the Lesbian condition than the Control condition. Moreover, social ignorance was mentioned more frequently in the Control condition than the Transgender Woman or Lesbian conditions (which did not differ significantly from each other). Mentions of Scott's behavior being a reaction to something that Michelle did followed the same pattern as mentions of social ignorance. Mentions of false beliefs about Michelle's identity were mentioned more frequently in the Lesbian condition than the Transgender Woman or Control conditions, and more frequently in the Transgender Woman condition than the Control condition. Finally, mentions of Scott not knowing about Michelle's sexual orientation or gender identity were more frequent in the Transgender Woman and Lesbian conditions (which did not differ significantly from one another) than the Control condition. Mentions of power, entitlement, and joking motivations did not differ reliably across conditions.

Table 2

Number (and Percentage) of Participants in the Transgender Woman, Lesbian, and Control Conditions Who Mentioned Each Motivation in Their Open-Ended Responses

Motivation	Transgender Woman	Lesbian Woman	Control	Inferential Test
Attraction	61 (44.9%) _a	61 (43.9%) _a	68 (44.4%) _a	$\chi^2(2)=0.03, p=.987, V=.01$
Prejudice	70 (51.5%) _a	39 (28.1%) _b	12 (7.8%) _c	$\chi^2(2)=67.58, p<.001, V=.40$
Power	25 (18.4%) _a	12 (8.6%) _a	21 (13.7%) _a	$\chi^2(2)=5.58, p=.061, V=.11$
Entitlement	25 (18.4%) _a	15 (10.8%) _a	31 (20.3%) _a	$\chi^2(2)=5.18, p=.075, V=.11$
Social Ignorance	24 (17.6%) _a	21 (15.1%) _a	62 (40.5%) _b	$\chi^2(2)=30.84, p<.001, V=.27$
False Beliefs	11 (8.1%) _a	30 (21.6%) _b	0 (0%) _c	$\chi^2(2)=39.68, p<.001, V=.30$
Reaction	5 (3.7%) _a	7 (5.0%) _a	29 (19.0%) _b	$\chi^2(2)=24.31, p<.001, V=.24$
Doesn't Know	7 (5.1%) _a	10 (7.2%) _a	0 (0.0%) _b	$\chi^2(2)=10.61, p=.005, V=.16$
Joking	7 (5.1%) _a	6 (4.3%) _a	5 (3.3%) _a	$\chi^2(2)=0.64, p=.727, V=.04$

Note. Values with different subscripts differ from each other as a function of condition at Bonferroni-corrected $p<.05$.

Ratings of Perceived Motivation

Hypothesis 2 concerned ratings of attraction, power, prejudice, and gender policing motivations, anticipating that attraction would emerge as the predominant motivation in the Control condition and that prejudice and power would emerge as the predominant motivations in the Transgender Woman condition. A 3 (Target Identity: transgender woman, lesbian, vs. control) $\times$ 4 (Motivation: attraction, power, prejudice, vs. gender policing) mixed-model ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor revealed a main effect of Condition, $F(2, 425)=4.76, p=.009, \eta^2_p=.02, \eta^2_G=.01$, a main effect of Motivation, $F(3, 1275)=133.33, p<.001$,

$\eta^2_p=.24$, $\eta^2_G=.17$, and the predicted interaction, $F(6, 1275)=19.86$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2_p=.09$, $\eta^2_G=.06$ (see Figure 1).⁵

Figure 1

Ratings of Attraction, Power, Prejudice, and Gender Policing Motivations Underlying Sexual Harassment Targeting a Transgender Woman, a Lesbian Woman, or a Woman Whose Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Were Not Specified (the Control Condition) in Study 1

Note. Error bars reflect standard errors of the mean. Scale range: 1-5.

⁵ For effect sizes, we report generalized η^2 (η^2_G) in addition to partial η^2 (η^2_p) for tests of main and interaction effects in mixed-model ANOVAs (as recommended by Bakeman, 2005). For all other tests, we report η^2_p or Cohen's d (as recommended by Lakens, 2013).

We first tested Hypothesis 2 by analyzing the mixed simple main effects using a heterogeneous error term (following the recommendations of Howell, 2002; this procedure accounts for the mixed design and adjusts degrees of freedom). Perceptions that the sexual harassment was motivated by attraction varied based on Michelle's identity, $F(2, 1640.18)=13.27, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.02$. Perceived attraction motivation was lower in the Transgender Woman condition ($M=3.34, SD=1.13$) than the Lesbian condition ($M=3.64, SD=1.19$), $F(1, 1640.18)=4.83, p=.028, \eta^2_p=.003$, and the Control condition ($M=4.03, SD=0.96$), $F(1, 1640.18)=26.26, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.02$. Perceived attraction motivation was also lower in the Lesbian (vs. Control) condition, $F(1, 1640.18)=8.36, p=.004, \eta^2_p=.01$.

Perceptions that the sexual harassment was motivated by prejudice also varied based on Michelle's identity, $F(2, 1640.18)=28.04, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.03$. Perceived prejudice motivation was higher in the Transgender Woman condition ($M=3.42, SD=1.24$) than the Lesbian condition ($M=3.13, SD=1.28$), $F(1, 1640.18)=4.33, p=.038, \eta^2_p=.003$, and the Control condition ($M=2.44, SD=1.20$), $F(1, 1640.18)=52.32, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.03$. Perceived prejudice motivation was also higher in the Lesbian (vs. Control) condition, $F(1, 1640.18)=26.34, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.02$.

Perceptions that the sexual harassment was motivated by gender policing varied based on Michelle's identity as well, $F(2, 1640.18)=17.70, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.02$. Perceived gender policing motivation was not reliably different between the Transgender Woman condition ($M=2.36, SD=1.12$) and the Control condition ($M=2.23, SD=1.07$), $F(1, 1640.18)=1.01, p=.316, \eta^2_p=.00$. However, perceived gender policing motivation was higher in the Lesbian condition ($M=2.98, SD=1.16$) than the Transgender Woman condition, $F(1, 1640.18)=20.24, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.01$, and the Control condition, $F(1, 1640.18)=31.82, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.02$.

By contrast, perceptions that the sexual harassment was motivated by power did not vary reliably based on Michelle's identity, $F(2, 1640.18)=0.32, p=.724, \eta^2_p=.00$ (Transgender Woman: $M=3.82, SD=1.10$; Lesbian: $M=3.75, SD=1.16$; Control: $M=3.85, SD=1.04$).

To fully test Hypothesis 2, we also examined the within-subjects simple main effect of Motivation (using a non-pooled error term; see Howell, 2002). The omnibus simple main effect of Motivation was reliable in the Transgender Woman condition, $F(3, 405)=40.50, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.23$. Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons showed that when Michelle was a transgender woman, attraction, prejudice, and gender policing motivations were each perceived as less likely than power motivation, all $ps\leq.011$. Furthermore, attraction and prejudice motivations were rated as comparably likely to each other, $p>.99$, and each was rated as more likely than gender policing motivation, $ps<.001$.

The omnibus simple main effect of Motivation was also reliable in the Lesbian condition, $F(3, 414)=16.20, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.11$. When Michelle was lesbian, prejudice and gender policing motivations were each perceived as less likely than power motivation, Bonferroni-corrected $ps<.001$, and also as less likely than attraction motivation, Bonferroni-corrected $ps\leq.023$. Power and attraction motivations were rated as comparably likely to each other, $p>.99$; and prejudice and gender policing motivations were rated as comparably likely to each other, $p=.588$.

The omnibus simple main effect of Motivation was reliable in the Control condition as well, $F(3, 456)=137.37, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.48$. When Michelle's sexual orientation and gender identity were not specified, prejudice and gender policing motivations were each perceived as less likely than power motivation, Bonferroni-corrected $ps<.001$, and also as less likely than attraction motivation, Bonferroni-corrected $ps<.001$. Power and attraction motivations were rated as comparably likely to each other, $p=.916$; and prejudice and gender policing motivations were

rated as comparably likely to each other, $p=.099$. Thus, the pattern was essentially the same in the Lesbian and Control conditions.

Perceived Acceptability

Although we expected that perceived acceptability would vary across conditions, we did not observe reliable differences, $F(2, 425)=1.16, p=.315, \eta^2_p=.01$ (Transgender Woman: $M=1.31, SD=0.59$; Lesbian: $M=1.34, SD=0.60$; Control: $M=1.24, SD=0.46$).

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that the target's identity impacts how third-party observers perceive sexual harassment, particularly with regard to the perpetrator's motivations. Importantly, Study 1 allowed us to compare participants' spontaneous open-ended perceptions of the perpetrator's motivations with their ratings of four specific motivations derived from prior work. Prejudice motivation revealed the same pattern across both formats, being perceived as more likely when sexual harassment targeted a transgender woman than a lesbian or a woman who was assumed to be straight and cisgender, and also more likely when the target was a lesbian than a straight cisgender woman. Moreover, prejudice motivation emerged as the most frequently mentioned motivation in open-ended responses when the target was a transgender woman (and was rated as the second most likely motivation in this condition). The idea that prejudice may motivate sexual harassment may have been relatively easy for participants to spontaneously generate in these cases as it fits with the fact that transgender and lesbian women belong to marginalized groups.

By contrast, power motivation was perceived as equally likely regardless of the target's identity across both measurement formats. Ratings of power motivation were consistently very high across conditions, being surpassed (though not reliably so) only by ratings of attraction

motivation in the Control condition. Intriguingly, however, power motivation was spontaneously mentioned in only a minority of open-ended responses. Instead, attraction (in all conditions), prejudice (in the Transgender Woman and Lesbian conditions), and social ignorance (in the Control condition) were brought up more frequently than power. This pattern may result from what is considered prototypical for sexual harassment or for interactions with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Prejudice might readily come to mind when thinking about interactions with transgender and lesbian women. Attraction and social ignorance (e.g., wanting to flirt but not knowing how to), on the other hand, fit with the prototype of sexual harassment as driven by desire for romantic or sexual relationships (Berdahl, 2007b).

We also observed that spontaneous mentions of attraction motivation did not match the pattern for the likelihood ratings of this motivation. Attraction motivation was mentioned equally frequently across conditions and indeed was spontaneously brought up by nearly 45% of participants in each condition. By contrast, when specifically asked to rate the likelihood of attraction motivation, participants reported believing it was less likely to underlie sexual harassment targeting a transgender woman (vs. a lesbian or a straight cisgender woman). This difference between the two patterns may again reflect the common misconception that sexual harassment is typically motivated by attraction. In reality, women report being sexually harassed for reasons involving power and gender policing more frequently than they report experiencing attraction-based harassment (Berdahl, 2007a, 2007b). The high rate of spontaneously generating attraction as a motivation that we observed suggests that third-party observers default to this explanation. However, when observers are made aware of other possible motivations, they rely less on attraction, particularly when the target is a transgender woman or a lesbian.

Finally, whereas none of the open-ended responses mentioned gender policing, this motivation was rated as more likely when the target was a lesbian (vs. transgender or straight cisgender). However, even in the case of a lesbian target, gender policing motivation was rated as less likely than attraction, power, and prejudice motivations. This pattern suggests that although gender policing is a common motivation for real-world sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007b), it does not readily occur to third-party observers and may be perceived as an unimportant contributing factor. Observers' failure to consider gender policing could be problematic in real-world contexts if it leads them to disregard sexual harassment motivated by gender policing.

Participants' open-ended responses also provided additional insight into assumptions about what might be motivating the perpetrator's behavior. Notably, a number of participants suggested that *entitlement* may have motivated the perpetrator. For example, one participant wrote: "I think Scott is likely a person who has rarely had to experience consequences for his actions. I believe that he probably has lived a fairly privileged life up until now and knows what he's doing is wrong, but thinks he will be able to avoid having to answer for his actions. He probably thinks that he is, or should be, one to be treated specially and that he is more deserving than others despite not being able to justify why that is." As exemplified in this response, psychological entitlement reflects a deep-rooted and enduring sense that one deserves more than others do (Campbell et al., 2004). Entitlement has been linked to sexism, racism, homophobia, and sexual aggression and violence (Anastasio & Rose, 2014; Baumeister et al., 2002; Bouffard, 2010; Grubbs et al., 2014; Hill & Fischer, 2001). However, entitlement has not been examined as a motivator of sexual harassment in prior work. It is possible that displays of entitlement have been mislabeled as displays of power, particularly if entitlement is seen as being derived from

power within a social hierarchy (e.g., gender hierarchy). We further pursued entitlement as a perceived motivation (particularly in comparison to power) in Study 2.

Another noteworthy pattern emerged: Over 40% of participants in the Control condition suggested the perpetrator's actions were a result of social ignorance (e.g., trying to flirt but not knowing how to do so appropriately). A sizable proportion in the Control condition also noted the perpetrator's actions may have been a reaction to something the target did (e.g., she dressed a certain way or was being friendly). This pattern indicates that when the target is assumed to be a straight cisgender woman (vs. a lesbian or a transgender woman), third-party observers are more willing to explain away the perpetrator's behavior. Relatedly, some participants in the Lesbian and Transgender Woman conditions mentioned the perpetrator may not have known about the target's identity or held false beliefs about her identity (e.g., some suggested Scott thought he could "turn Michelle straight" in the Lesbian condition). Participants may have been trying to explain a behavior they found surprising and believed that harassment may not have occurred if the perpetrator had all the relevant information.

The overall pattern emerging from the open-ended responses may help shed light on the unexpected null effect we observed regarding the perceived acceptability of the sexual harassment, which did not vary significantly across conditions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most participants indicated they thought the perpetrator's behavior was unacceptable. However, prior work found that sexual harassment targeting a transgender woman or man was perceived as less acceptable than harassment targeting lesbian/gay or straight cisgender persons (Brassel et al., 2019). Given that we observed sizeable differences in perceived motivation based on the target's identity, differential downstream consequences for the perpetrator seem plausible. For instance, some participants' willingness to explain away the perpetrator's behavior, whether by the idea of

social ignorance or a lack of accurate information, appears to communicate that some forms of sexual harassment are not as unacceptable as others. It is possible that our measure, which assessed the acceptability of the harassment behavior specifically, did not adequately capture all information needed to address this issue. In particular, participants' responses suggested that measuring opinions about the behavior alone is not enough; rather, it is also important to consider the perpetrator's intent (i.e., the behavior can be unacceptable without the perpetrator having malicious intentions). Moreover, it may be useful to examine beliefs about how sexual harassment incidents should be handled, which would presumably take into consideration opinions about both the behavior and the perpetrator. We explored this idea in Study 2.

Study 2

In Study 2 (preregistered at <https://osf.io/ekauw>), we focused on how third-party observers thought instances of sexual harassment should be handled and whether those beliefs differed depending on the target's identity. As in Study 1, participants first imagined that Michelle, a coworker who was described as a transgender woman, a lesbian, or a woman whose gender identity and sexual orientation were unspecified, told them that Scott had been making unwanted sexual comments toward her. Participants were asked whether they thought a supervisor should take action in response to Scott's behavior. If participants responded yes, they were asked an open-ended question of what they thought the supervisor should do. As in Study 1, this method allowed us to capture beliefs that would have been missed by more restrictive measures such as ratings of specific supervisor actions. Responses were content-coded for both type and severity of suggested consequences for Scott, enabling us to examine the potential impact of the target's identity on beliefs about how the situation should be handled and its perceived seriousness.

Moreover, perceptions of the perpetrator's intentions may play a role in how observers judge sexual harassment. Therefore, we additionally asked participants whether they believed Scott acted with malicious intent. Based on Study 1, which revealed that ratings of perceived motivation differed depending on the target's identity, we predicted that participants would be more likely to believe that Scott acted with malicious intent when he harassed a transgender woman (which many Study 1 participants attributed most strongly to prejudice motivation) than when he harassed a woman assumed to be straight and cisgender (which many Study 1 participants attributed most strongly to attraction motivation). Finally, we also explored whether perceptions of power and entitlement motivations varied across conditions. As it is possible that participants are conflating power and entitlement, presenting both as potential motivations allowed us to more accurately capture what third-party observers think about the role of each within sexual harassment. Study 2 stimuli and measures are available at <https://osf.io/jtb7c/> and data are available at <https://researchbox.org/168>.

Method

Participants

As in Study 1, our preregistered goal (see <https://osf.io/ekauw>) was to recruit approximately 200 participants with complete data in each condition. Given *a priori* exclusion criteria, we made the study available to $n=250$ per cell for a total $N=750$ recruited from Mechanical Turk via TurkPrime in return for \$1. A total of 794 participants provided data. We used the same preregistered exclusion criteria as in Study 1, except for the criterion regarding open-ended responses. After exclusions, the final sample included 421 participants with a mean age of 37.29 years ($SD=10.56$; range: 19-74). Of these, 54.2% were women, 73.4% self-identified as White, 97.9% reported being U.S. citizens, and 96.2% reported that their first/native

language was English. On average, participants were slightly liberal to moderate in terms of political orientation ($M=3.54$, $SD=1.74$, where 1=*very liberal* and 7=*very conservative*) and 52.5% identified with the Democratic Party, 35.4% with the Republican Party, and 12.1% with another party. Sensitivity power analyses indicated that $N=421$ yielded 95% power (at $\alpha=.05$) to detect Cohen's $w=.19$ (equivalent to Cramer's $V=.19$) in a χ^2 test of independence with two degrees of freedom and Cohen's $f=.19$ in a one-way ANOVA with three levels.

Procedure

Study 2 participants read one of the descriptions of workplace sexual harassment from Study 1, with random assignment to the Transgender Woman ($n=144$), Lesbian ($n=137$), or Control ($n=140$) conditions. Participants first rated the likelihood that power and entitlement motivations explained Scott's behavior toward Michelle. Participants were then asked whether they thought a supervisor should take action in response to Scott's behavior and, if they answered yes, were asked to write about what they thought the supervisor should do (participants who answered no were asked to explain why they thought the supervisor should not take action). Next, participants reported whether they thought Scott acted with malicious intent. Finally, participants completed the same measures of attitudes toward transgender people and lesbians, attention and manipulation check questions, and demographic questions as in Study 1 and were debriefed. As in Study 1, the majority of participants in the Control condition assumed that Michelle was straight (74.3%; an additional 20.0% responded "not sure") and cisgender (87.9%).

Measures

To measure *perceived power and entitlement motivations*, participants were asked to rate the likelihood (1=*not at all likely* to 5=*very likely*) that 8 statements explained the reason behind Scott's behavior. Four statements assessed power motivation ("Scott is trying to dominate

Michelle,” “Scott is trying to show that he has power over Michelle,” “Scott is trying to intimidate Michelle,” and “Scott is trying to control Michelle”; $\alpha=.89$; $M=3.37$, $SD=0.97$) and 4 assessed entitlement motivation (“Scott thinks he is entitled to make comments like this,” “Scott thinks he can get away with behaving in this way,” “Scott thinks that the rules don’t apply to him,” and “Scott thinks he should be allowed to talk to other people however he wants”; $\alpha=.86$; $M=4.07$, $SD=0.83$).

To assess beliefs about the necessity of supervisor intervention, participants read: “Next, please imagine that Michelle tells you that she has filed a complaint against Scott to a supervisor. Do you think the supervisor should take action in response to Scott’s behavior?” (response options: “yes” or “no”). Participants who selected “no” were then asked “Why do you think the supervisor should not take action?”, whereas participants who selected “yes” were asked “What do you think the supervisor should do?”. Responses were content-coded to index *suggested consequences* for Scott.

To measure *perceived malicious intent*, participants were asked, “Do you think Scott was trying to be malicious in his interactions with Michelle?” (yes, no).

Content-Coding of Qualitative Responses

As only 8 participants indicated they thought the supervisor should not take action in response to Scott’s behavior, these participants’ responses to the question of why the supervisor should not take action were not content-coded. The rest of the sample indicated the supervisor should take action, and their responses to the open-ended question of what they thought the supervisor should do were coded for type and perceived severity of suggested consequences. Responses were read by the first author, who developed categories for type of consequence based on recurring themes. Responses were then coded by the first author and a second

independent coder. Responses could be sorted into multiple categories or no categories.

Disagreements were reconciled by the second author. Category descriptions and interrater reliability statistics are presented in Table 3.

Two additional coders rated the severity of suggested consequences for Scott (1=*least severe* to 5=*most severe*). Coders were given “The supervisor should talk to Scott” as an example of a response that would be coded as “1” and “Scott should lose his job” as an example of a response that would be coded as “5.” Interrater reliability was high (intraclass correlation=.87). Coder ratings were averaged into a single perceived severity score for each response ($M=2.59$, $SD=1.05$). Coding instructions for the type and severity of consequence can be found at <https://osf.io/su6bj> and <https://osf.io/m3q9u> respectively.

Table 3

Descriptions and Interrater Reliabilities of Coding Categories for Participants’ Suggested Consequences for the Perpetrator in Study 2

Coding Category	Category Description: Response Mentions...	Cohen’s κ (% agreement)
Talk	Talking to Scott, giving a warning or reprimand, or setting up a meeting with Scott	.85 (93.0%)
If Repeated	That there should be a more serious consequence if something like this happens again	.93 (96.9%)
Fire	Firing or terminating Scott	.88 (96.9%)
Suspend	Placing Scott on leave or suspending him	.77 (97.6%)
Training	That Scott should attend some kind of training, classes, or some other means of education related to the incident	.96 (99.0%)
HR	Involving HR (i.e., having HR investigate/handle it or reporting the incident to HR)	.90 (98.3%)
Investigate	Opening an investigation, getting more information, or hearing everyone’s side of the story	.89 (97.3%)
Document	Documenting the incident, writing Scott up, giving a written warning, or making a note in his file	.88 (96.4%)
Policies	Following the company’s policies	.83 (98.1%)

Change	Changing Scott's job, transferring him to a different department, or separating Scott and Michelle	.85 (99.0%)
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Results

Suggested Consequences for the Perpetrator

As noted above, all but eight participants reported believing the supervisor should (vs. should not) take action in response to Scott's behavior, and as such this response pattern did not vary significantly across conditions, $\chi^2(2)=3.31$, $p=.191$, Cramer's $V=.09$. We explored whether participants' spontaneously generated suggestions for the consequences Scott should face (see Table 3) varied across conditions; they did not (see Table 4). The most frequently suggested consequence in all conditions was that the supervisor should talk to Scott and issue him a warning or reprimand, followed by the suggestion that Scott should face more severe consequences if the harassment reoccurs. We also tested whether the perceived severity of the suggested consequences (as rated by independent coders) differed by condition; we did not observe reliable differences, $F(2, 410)=0.63$, $p=.531$, $\eta^2_p=.00$ (Transgender Woman: $M=2.51$, $SD=0.99$; Lesbian: $M=2.59$, $SD=1.05$; Control: $M=2.66$, $SD=1.10$).

Table 4

Number (and Percentage) of Participants in the Transgender Woman, Lesbian, and Control Conditions Who Mentioned Each Category of Suggested Consequences for the Perpetrator

Consequence	Transgender Woman	Lesbian Woman	Control	Inferential Test
Talk	94 (66.2%)	93 (68.4%)	80 (59.3%)	$\chi^2(2)=2.69$, $p=.260$, $V=.08$
If Repeated	48 (33.8%)	60 (44.1%)	53 (39.3%)	$\chi^2(2)=3.11$, $p=.211$, $V=.09$
Fire	21 (14.8%)	21 (15.4%)	25 (18.5%)	$\chi^2(2)=0.80$, $p=.670$, $V=.04$
Suspend	11 (7.7%)	4 (2.9%)	8 (5.9%)	$\chi^2(2)=3.10$, $p=.212$, $V=.09$

Training	17 (12.0%)	19 (14.0%)	17 (12.6%)	$\chi^2(2)=0.26, p=.879, V=.03$
HR	13 (9.2%)	10 (7.4%)	13 (9.6%)	$\chi^2(2)=0.49, p=.781, V=.04$
Investigate	19 (13.4%)	20 (14.7%)	22 (16.3%)	$\chi^2(2)=0.47, p=.791, V=.03$
Document	26 (18.3%)	20 (14.7%)	29 (21.5%)	$\chi^2(2)=2.10, p=.351, V=.07$
Policies	12 (8.5%)	9 (6.6%)	5 (3.7%)	$\chi^2(2)=2.68, p=.262, V=.08$
Change	3 (2.1%)	5 (3.7%)	6 (4.4%)	$\chi^2(2)=1.20, p=.549, V=.05$

Perceived Malicious Intent

We predicted the perpetrator would be more likely to be perceived as having malicious intent when the target was a transgender woman than when she was assumed to be a straight cisgender woman (i.e., the Control condition). However, we observed no reliable differences across conditions, $\chi^2(2)=4.31, p=.116$, Cramer's $V=.10$. In the Transgender Woman condition, 65.3% ($n=94$) of participants perceived Scott as having acted with malicious intent, whereas in the Lesbian condition 54.0% ($n=74$) did so and in the Control condition 55.7% ($n=78$) did so.

Perceived Power and Entitlement Motivations

We next explored whether perceptions of power and entitlement as motivations underlying sexual harassment differed depending on the target's identity. A 3 (Target Identity: transgender woman, lesbian, vs. control) $\times$ 2 (Motivation: power vs. entitlement) mixed-model ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor revealed no main effect of Target Identity, $F(2, 418)=0.49, p=.614, \eta^2_p=.00, \eta^2_G=.00$, a main effect of Motivation, $F(1, 418)=288.59, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.41, \eta^2_G=.13$, and an interaction, $F(2, 418)=6.25, p=.002, \eta^2_p=.03, \eta^2_G=.01$. We unpacked the interaction with tests of simple main effects, following the analytic strategy outlined in Study 1.

The simple main effect of Motivation was reliable in the Transgender Woman condition, $F(1, 143)=61.05, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.30$, the Lesbian condition, $F(1, 136)=137.10, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.50$, and the Control condition, $F(1, 139)=93.46, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.40$. Entitlement motivation (Transgender Woman: $M=3.99, SD=0.73$; Lesbian: $M=4.11, SD=0.88$; Control: $M=4.11, SD=0.87$) was rated as more likely than power motivation (Transgender Woman: $M=3.47, SD=0.85$; Lesbian: $M=3.23, SD=1.06$; Control: $M=3.41, SD=0.98$) across all conditions. This difference was particularly large in the Lesbian condition. However, tests of the simple main effect of Target Identity revealed that perceived power motivation did not differ reliably across conditions, $F(2, 637.11)=2.79, p=.062, \eta^2_p=.01$, nor did perceived entitlement motivation, $F(2, 637.11)=0.73, p=.483, \eta^2_p=.00$.

Exploratory Correlational Analyses

Given the unexpected null findings, we conducted exploratory correlational analyses to more fully describe the pattern of results. Participants who perceived (vs. did not perceive) malicious intent behind the harassment behavior suggested more severe consequences for Scott, $r(411)=.27, p<.001$, and found it more likely that Scott's behavior was motivated by both power, $r(419)=.50, p<.001$, and entitlement, $r(419)=.28, p<.001$. More severe suggested consequences were associated with greater power motivation, $r(411)=.23, p<.001$, and greater entitlement motivation, $r(411)=.28, p<.001$. The correlation between power and entitlement motivations was moderate, $r(419)=.56, p<.001$, supporting the interpretation that these motivations are related yet distinct constructs. This overall pattern replicated within each condition, with two exceptions: In the Transgender Woman condition, the correlation between perceived malicious intent and severity of consequences did not reach statistical significance ($r[140]=.15, p=.070$), nor did the correlation between power motivation and severity of consequences ($r[140]=.14, p=.104$).

However, these correlations were not reliably different across conditions, as condition did not reliably moderate the association between perceived malicious intent and consequence severity, $F(2, 407)=1.76, p=.174$, or power motivation and consequence severity, $F(2, 407)=1.26, p=.285$.

Discussion

Study 2 revealed no reliable differences in the type or severity of consequences suggested for the perpetrator, or in perceptions of the perpetrator having acted with malicious intent, as a function of the target's identity. A larger sample size might have enabled us to observe evidence suggesting that participants were more likely to perceive malicious intent behind sexual harassment targeting a transgender woman (vs. a lesbian or straight cisgender woman) – a pattern that is conceptually consistent with Brassel et al. (2019). However, low statistical power is unlikely to explain the other null findings we observed. These unexpected null findings match Study 1, which showed no significant differences in perceived acceptability of sexual harassment depending on the target's identity. Although over half of Study 2 participants thought the perpetrator acted with malicious intent, participants nonetheless recommended fairly light consequences, generally suggesting a mere talking-to or warning. Intriguingly, across all conditions participants also rated entitlement motivation as a more likely explanation for the perpetrator's behavior than power motivation (a pattern that aligns with the open-ended responses in Study 1). Third-party observers who perceive sexual harassers to be motivated by entitlement may see sexual harassment as but one example of how the perpetrator acts on a regular basis. That is, observers might expect an entitled person to treat everyone poorly, thus decreasing the perceived severity of a specific incident of sexual harassment. Despite these null findings, however, exploratory correlational analyses showed that participants did draw

appropriate connections among variables, for example suggesting more severe consequences if they also perceived malicious intent behind the perpetrator's actions.

Given the emerging pattern across Studies 1-2 of perceived motivation but not acceptability, malicious intent, or appropriate consequences varying based on the target's identity, we are left with the question of whether differences in perceived motivation correlate with any other factors involved in sexual harassment. It may be that the target's identity, and perceptions of the underlying motivations associated with that identity, might lead observers to expect sexual harassment to take the form of distinct behaviors. This possibility was not considered in Studies 1 and 2, where participants were specifically told the perpetrator had been making unwanted sexual comments to the target. This possibility may also have contributed to the lack of differences in perceived acceptability, malicious intent, and type and severity of suggested consequences, as participants were being presented with the same behavior regardless of what behavior they might have spontaneously expected based on the target's identity. Study 3 focused on this idea.

Study 3

In Study 3 (preregistered at <https://osf.io/p63vh>), we investigated whether the target's identity impacts what third-party observers assume sexual harassment looks like. The design of Study 3 closely followed Studies 1-2, with the following changes. We changed the description of the incident to note that Scott had been repeatedly sexually harassing Michelle, rather than specifically telling participants that he had been making unwanted sexual comments to her. This change allowed us to ask participants what they thought Scott did or said to Michelle. Participants' open-ended responses were coded for type and perceived harmfulness of Scott's behavior, and we explored whether these differed as a function of the target's identity. As in

Studies 1-2, we employed an open-ended question to measure our key outcome variable so as to capture participants' spontaneous assumptions about the incident they were asked to consider.

We also again investigated whether there were differences in suggested consequences to the perpetrator based on the target's identity. We generated a list of possible consequences based on the open-ended responses collected in Study 2. Participants were reminded of what they thought the perpetrator had done, and were then asked to pick what they believed to be the most appropriate consequence for him. Although Study 2 revealed no differences in what participants thought would be the most appropriate consequence as a function of the target's identity, such differences might emerge in Study 3 if participants have differing ideas about what exactly the perpetrator did. For example, if participants assume a sexual assault had occurred, they may advocate for more severe consequences than if they instead assume the perpetrator had told an offensive joke.⁶ Study 3 stimuli and measures are available at <https://osf.io/8dvyyu/> and data are available at <https://researchbox.org/168>.

Method

Participants

As in Studies 1-2, our preregistered goal (see <https://osf.io/p63vh>) was to recruit approximately 200 participants with complete data in each condition, and we again made the study available to $n=250$ per cell for a total $N=750$ recruited from Mechanical Turk via TurkPrime in return for \$1. A total of 803 participants provided data. We used the same preregistered exclusion criteria as in Study 1. The final sample included 473 participants with a mean age of 37.35 years ($SD=11.32$; range: 19-76). Of these, 51.6% were women, 75.5% self-

⁶ We also measured perceived attraction, power, prejudice, and gender policing motivations using the same measure as in Study 1, to which we added two items to index entitlement motivation (taken from Study 2). We replicated the patterns observed in Studies 1-2. For the sake of conciseness, these results are reported in Supplemental Materials.

identified as White, 98.7% reported being U.S. citizens, and 98.7% reported that their first/native language was English. On average, participants were slightly liberal to moderate in terms of political orientation ($M=3.58$, $SD=1.82$, where 1=*very liberal* and 7=*very conservative*) and 55.8% identified with the Democratic Party, 34.0% with the Republican Party, and 10.1% with another party. Sensitivity power analyses indicated that $N=473$ yielded 95% power (at $\alpha=.05$) to detect an omnibus effect of condition of Cohen's $f=.18$ in a one-way ANOVA.

Procedure

As in Studies 1-2, participants were randomly assigned to read about workplace sexual harassment targeting a transgender woman ($n=151$), a lesbian ($n=154$), or a woman whose gender identity and sexual orientation were not specified (Control condition; $n=168$). Unlike Studies 1-2 (where participants read that Scott had been making “unwanted sexual comments” to Michelle), Study 3 participants read that Scott had been “repeatedly sexually harassing [Michelle] over the last few months.” The scenario was otherwise identical to Studies 1-2. Participants were asked to write about what they thought Scott had said or done to Michelle. Participants were next asked to select what they thought was the most acceptable consequence for Scott's behavior, and then completed a measure assessing beliefs about power, gender policing, attraction, prejudice, and entitlement as possible motivations for Scott's behavior. Questions about acceptable consequences and possible motivations were presented in a counterbalanced order. Lastly, participants completed the same measures of attitudes toward transgender people and lesbians, attention and manipulation check questions (83.3% and 94.6% of participants in the Control condition assumed that Michelle was straight and cisgender, respectively), and demographic questions as in Studies 1-2 and were debriefed.

Measures

Perceptions of what the perpetrator did were measured with the open-ended question, “Based on the information you have, what exactly do you think Scott did? That is, what did he do or say to Michelle?” Participants were told that although many possible behaviors may come to mind, their task was to write down “the one most likely thing that [they thought] Scott did.” Responses were subsequently content-coded.

Participants were next asked to imagine that Michelle had filed a complaint about Scott to a supervisor and were asked, “Based on what you think Scott did, what action do you think the supervisor should take?” Participants selected the most appropriate consequence from a list of five that were developed based on the spontaneous suggestions by Study 2 participants: “No action is needed – the supervisor should do nothing,” “The supervisor should talk to Scott,” “Scott should receive a formal warning,” “Scott should be suspended from work,” and “Scott should be fired” (median and mode=“Scott should receive a formal warning”). Participants were reminded of their own response to the previous question asking about what exactly they thought Scott did before they answered this question.

Content-Coding of Qualitative Responses

Participants’ responses to the open-ended question of what they thought Scott did or said to Michelle were coded for the type and harmfulness of Scott’s behavior. Preregistered coding categories for what the perpetrator did (see <https://osf.io/fkq6c/>) were developed based on the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (Fitzgerald et al., 1988) and the Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire (Kamal & Tariq, 1997; Talukdar et al., 2019). Two coders categorized each response into one of nine categories (see Table 5). Interrater reliability was acceptable (70.4% agreement; Krippendorff’s $\alpha=.62$). Disagreements were reconciled by the first author.

Two additional coders rated the perceived harmfulness of Scott's behavior (1=*no harm to Michelle* to 5=*extreme harm to Michelle*; see preregistered coding instructions at <https://osf.io/p7t4j/>). Interrater reliability was high (intraclass correlation=.79). Ratings were averaged into a single harmfulness score for each response ($M=2.52$, $SD=0.70$).

Table 5

Coding Category Descriptions for Study 3

Category Label	Category Description
None	Response does not fit into any of the coding categories
Quid Pro Quo	Response mentions some offer of reward, advancement, benefits in exchange for sexual favors or some punishment that will result if sexual favors are refused
Unwanted Physical Touch	Response mentions attempts or acts of unwanted physical touch
Unwanted Romantic Advances	Response mentions unwanted romantic attention or advances, or attempts to establish a romantic relationship
Verbal or Nonverbal Reference to Appearance	Response mentions unwanted or inappropriate comments or nonverbal behaviors directed at an individual's appearance
Forced Interaction	Response mentions actions that force interaction or place the perpetrator in the target's space, or the target in the perpetrator's space, which violate the wishes of the target
Gender Harassment	Response mentions actions or comments that reflect hostile, insulting, and/or degrading attitudes about a person due to their sex, gender, sexual orientation, or violation of traditional gender norms
Unwanted Sexual Attention/Comments	Response mentions unwanted sexual attention or sexualized comments, jokes, or interactions
Multiple	Response fits into more than one category and cannot be placed into only one

Results

The Perpetrator's Assumed Behavior

To assess what participants thought the sexual harassment behavior consisted of as a function of the target's identity, we examined the distribution of responses across the categories

described in Table 5. The perpetrator's assumed behavior indeed varied depending on the target's identity, $\chi^2(14)=163.45, p<.001$, Cramer's $V=.42$ (see Table 6 for pairwise comparisons). Gender harassment was by far the most common assumption in the Transgender Woman condition and was mentioned more frequently in that condition than the Lesbian and Control conditions (and also more often in the Lesbian than the Control condition; in fact, no one in the Control condition mentioned gender harassment). By contrast, unwanted sexual attention or comments was the most common assumption in the Lesbian and Control conditions and was mentioned more frequently in the Lesbian and Control conditions (which did not differ significantly from one another) than the Transgender Woman condition. Participants were also more likely to mention that the perpetrator referenced the target's appearance in the Control (vs. Transgender Woman or Lesbian) condition. Unwanted physical touch, unwanted romantic advances, and mentions of multiple behaviors all followed the same pattern, being more common in the Control than the Transgender Woman condition, with the Lesbian condition falling between the other two but not differing significantly from either. There were no reliable differences across conditions for assumptions of the perpetrator doing nothing, engaging in quid pro quo harassment (which no one mentioned), or forced interaction.

Despite these differences in the behaviors in which participants thought the perpetrator engaged depending on the target's identity, the perceived harmfulness of his actions did not differ significantly based on the target's identity, $F(2, 470)=2.36, p=.096, \eta^2_p=.01$ (Transgender Woman: $M=2.51, SD=0.60$; Lesbian: $M=2.44, SD=0.68$; Control: $M=2.61, SD=0.80$).

Table 6

Number (and Percentage) of Participants in the Transgender Woman, Lesbian, and Control Conditions Who Mentioned Each Category of Assumed Perpetrator Behavior

Behavior	Transgender Woman	Lesbian Woman	Control
None	5 (3.3%) _a	5 (3.2%) _a	1 (0.6%) _a
Quid Pro Quo	0 (0%) _a	0 (0%) _a	0 (0%) _a
Unwanted Physical Touch	4 (2.6%) _a	10 (6.5%) _{a,b}	23 (13.7%) _b
Unwanted Romantic Advances	6 (4.0%) _a	15 (9.7%) _{a,b}	20 (11.9%) _b
Reference to Appearance	5 (3.3%) _a	10 (6.5%) _a	28 (16.7%) _b
Forced Interaction	0 (0%) _a	0 (0%) _a	1 (0.6%) _a
Gender Harassment	82 (54.3%) _a	25 (16.2%) _b	0 (0%) _c
Unwanted Sexual Attention/Comments	40 (26.5%) _a	72 (46.8%) _b	71 (42.3%) _b
Multiple	9 (6.0%) _a	17 (11.0%) _{a,b}	24 (14.3%) _b

Note. Values with different subscripts differ from each other as a function of condition at Bonferroni-corrected $p < .05$.

Perceived Appropriate Consequence

Again despite differences in the behaviors in which participants thought the perpetrator engaged depending on the target's identity, perceptions of the most appropriate consequence for the perpetrator did not vary reliably across conditions, Kruskal-Wallis $H(2) = .41$, $p = .814$. "Scott should receive a formal warning" was the most frequently endorsed consequence in all conditions, being selected by 51.7% of participants in the Transgender Woman condition, 46.1% in the Lesbian condition, and 43.5% in the Control condition.

Discussion

Study 3 revealed that third-party observers had differing assumptions regarding a sexual harasser's specific behaviors depending on who he harassed. In particular, over half of

participants who considered sexual harassment targeting a transgender woman believed it took the form of gender harassment. Gender harassment was the most common assumption when the target was a transgender woman, and was more frequent in this condition than in the Lesbian and Control conditions (in fact, no one in the Control condition spontaneously mentioned gender harassment). This pattern is in line with our finding that prejudice is a primary perceived motivation underlying sexual harassment targeting transgender women. Indeed, prejudice and gender harassment are closely related (Berdahl, 2007a; Holland & Cortina, 2013). However, gender harassment is also very commonly experienced by straight cisgender women (Berdahl, 2007a), a reality that was not reflected in participants' spontaneous assumptions.

By contrast, when participants considered sexual harassment targeting either a lesbian woman or a woman whose gender identity and sexual orientation were unspecified (and who was thus typically assumed to be straight and cisgender), they tended to believe that sexual harassment took the form of unwanted sexual attention or comments. This finding suggests that our descriptions in Studies 1-2 (which explicitly stated that unwanted sexual comments had been made) presented a prototypical picture of what sexual harassment looks like when the target is a lesbian or assumed to be a straight cisgender woman. However, participants seemed to not think that unwanted sexual attention is a common form of sexual harassment when the target is a transgender woman. Along similar lines, unwanted physical touch, unwanted romantic advances, and references to appearance were mentioned relatively more frequently when the target was assumed to be a straight cisgender woman (vs. a transgender woman, and a lesbian in the case of physical touch and references to appearance). This overall pattern may be associated with differences in perceived attraction motivation and may again reflect the stereotype that sexual harassment toward straight cisgender women involves sexual or romantic desire. Within a real

workplace environment, these assumptions may validate the experiences of straight cisgender and lesbian women who face these forms of sexual harassment, but run the risk of invalidating the experiences of transgender women who are often subjected to the same behaviors.

Surprisingly, we found no significant differences in how harmful the perpetrator's behavior was or in perceptions of what the most appropriate consequence he should face was. These findings are in line with the lack of reliable differences in perceived acceptability, malicious intent, or type and severity of suggested consequences in Studies 1-2. However, it is important to note that the means for perceived harmfulness in Study 3 fell below the midpoint of the scale. Thus, even as participants assumed that sexual harassment took different forms depending on who the target was, they also assumed that what had taken place was a seemingly everyday experience, albeit an unfortunate one. Furthermore, no one assumed that *quid pro quo* sexual harassment had taken place and only one participant who thought the sexual harassment involved unwanted touching explicitly mentioned rape. These more extreme and harmful forms of sexual harassment simply were not being spontaneously generated, which also may account for participants suggesting relatively lenient consequences for the perpetrator.

General Discussion

By taking an intersectional approach, the present three studies provide insight into the roles of targets' sexual orientation and gender identity in how straight cisgender third-party observers interpret incidents of workplace sexual harassment. We found differences as a function of the target's identity primarily in assumptions about what motivated the sexual harassment and what form it took. Participants (all of whom self-identified as straight and cisgender) tended to think that sexual harassment of a transgender woman was most likely motivated by power and prejudice, whereas they assumed that sexual harassment of a lesbian woman or a straight

cisgender woman was most likely motivated by power and attraction. Moreover, sexual harassment of a transgender woman was assumed to take the form of gender harassment, whereas sexual harassment of a lesbian or a straight cisgender woman was assumed to take the form of unwanted sexual attention or comments. The fact that patterns replicated across Studies 1 and 3 (see Supplemental Materials for results pertaining to perceived motivation in Study 3) suggests that differences in perceived motivation are robust. Thus, in straight cisgender observers' eyes, transgender women are relatively less likely to experience prototypical attraction-based sexual harassment – an assumption that does not match the real-world experiences of transgender women in the workplace (Gurung et al., 2018).

We also found that a number of factors did *not* differ reliably based on the target's identity. Sexual harassment was largely seen as unacceptable regardless of who was harassed. Third-party observers' suggestions for consequences the perpetrator should face also did not vary as a function of who was harassed; generally, suggested consequences tended to be fairly mild (e.g., issue a warning). Moreover, although people assumed that sexual harassment had taken the form of different behaviors depending on the target's identity, the assumed behaviors did not differ substantially in how harmful they were perceived to be. Overall, harassment was perceived to consist of unfortunate, everyday behaviors rather than behaviors deemed extremely harmful. These null effects were unexpected, and we therefore carefully considered whether they may have been caused by low statistical power. As noted above, we did not compute *a priori* power analyses in any of our three studies given the lack of previous work that could inform a plausible range of effect sizes (note, however, that sensitivity power analyses were conducted for each study). Our studies were relatively well powered, with sample sizes approaching $n=150$ per cell. Additionally, the null effects we observed were generally associated with very small effect sizes

(e.g., in Study 1, the largest difference between conditions in terms of the perceived acceptability of the perpetrator's behavior was 0.1 points on a 5-point scale). As such, it is unlikely that these null effects were simply the result of low power. Intriguingly, exploratory analyses (see Supplemental Materials) revealed an additional null effect: Assumptions regarding sexual harassment did not vary as a function of participants' gender in any of our studies. This pattern is consistent with recent work that has similarly observed no participant gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment (Brassel et al., 2019; Goh et al., in press).

The perceptions participants reported across our three studies also revealed a tendency to rely on stereotypical conceptions of sexual harassment. Participants' failure to spontaneously generate particular motivations (e.g., gender policing, power) or forms of sexual harassment points to changes that must be made to how workplace sexual harassment is discussed. The persistence of the ideas that transgender women are typically met with acts of prejudice and lesbian and straight cisgender women are most likely to encounter sexual harassment shrouded in sexual or romantic desire can devalue the experiences of women whose experiences with sexual harassment do not fit the prototypes associated with their identities. Although the present studies do not directly speak to whether some targets' experiences are more likely to be invalidated, this possibility is in line with recent findings that the experiences of nonprototypical women (i.e., women who are not perceived as having feminine physical and psychological characteristics) are indeed less likely to be labeled as sexual harassment, their claims of sexual harassment are seen as less credible, and the sexual harassment targeting them is believed to be less psychologically harmful (Goh et al., in press). Although the effectiveness of sexual harassment training is debated (Roehling & Huang, 2018), any training used in workplaces should therefore reflect diversity in both the persons involved and the forms of sexual harassment discussed.

Furthermore, organizations aiming to educate the public and provide support for victims should continue to create spaces in which all survivors are heard.

Relatedly, it is crucial to consider the implications of our results for workplaces. Our participants were not given comprehensive information about what had taken place before, during, and after the sexual harassment incident they imagined hearing about. Similarly, third-party observers within an organization are unlikely to have all the relevant information when sexual harassment incidents occur, leaving them to make assumptions or draw their own conclusions, much like the participants in our studies. Whereas third-party observers may not be directly involved with sexual harassment situations, their opinions are far from inconsequential. Indeed, their opinions can have powerful effects on organizational climate and may directly impact the actions of perpetrators and targets of sexual harassment (Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Rubino et al., 2018). For example, when learning about a sexual harassment incident that occurred at one's workplace, the typical assumption may be that a relatively harmless form of sexual harassment took place, such as an unwanted sexual comment or a comment about a coworker's gender identity. If, in reality, a more extreme form like *quid pro quo* harassment or sexual assault occurred, this disconnect between third-party assumptions and the target's reality may result in further victimization of the target by being told they are taking the situation too seriously. Furthermore, even if perceptions of underlying motivations do not change how third-party observers think sexual harassment should be handled, targets' knowledge of how others perceive the incident (especially if it differs from how targets themselves perceive it) can impact coping. For instance, if coworkers brush off sexual harassment as being motivated by attraction while the target believes it was motivated by prejudice, the target may not feel supported by the

organization, may have difficulty seeking help, and may choose not to take action against the harasser.

Our findings contribute to an enhanced understanding of how third-party observers perceive sexual harassment incidents targeting people with varying intersecting identities. In particular, we expanded on the first steps taken by Brassel et al. (2019) to begin to address the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in sexual harassment research. Notably, we found that not only are third-party assumptions about what motivates sexual harassment systematically impacted by targets' intersecting identities; perhaps more importantly, observers assume that distinct behaviors have taken place as a function of who was harassed. Although we found no downstream consequences in terms of perceived appropriate consequences or acceptability, practical implications are plausible as incidents assumed to consist of gender harassment versus inappropriate sexual attention are likely handled drastically differently in workplaces (see also Goh et al., in press). As the LGBTQ+ community is profoundly impacted by workplace sexual harassment (Konik & Cortina, 2008), it is crucial that future research continues to examine these issues through an inclusive and intersectional lens.

Despite these valuable contributions, we acknowledge key limitations. First, we focused on incidents in which the perpetrator was a man and the target was a woman. This does not describe all sexual harassment incidents (Bitton & Shaul, 2013). In particular, it will be important for future work to examine how third-party observers perceive sexual harassment targeting men. Additionally, we did not investigate perceptions of bisexual women as targets. Bisexual women face prejudice that differs from that aimed at lesbian women (Burke & LaFrance, 2016), and assumptions about sexual harassment targeting them may differ from what we observed here. Furthermore, whereas we examined the intersection of the target's gender

identity and sexual orientation, we did not investigate intersections with other important identities such as race or ethnicity. Future research would benefit from examining how the intersections of multiple social identities impact perceptions of sexual harassment.

Additionally, whereas we sought to present participants with a realistic description of a sexual harassment incident, scenario studies can suffer from artificiality and our results may not fully reflect how observers might respond to a similar situation occurring in real-life workplaces. Nonetheless, stereotypes associated with sexual harassment targets' identities are likely to occur to and impact the perceptions of third-party observers in real-life workplaces, as with our participants. Moreover, our use of experimental designs is a methodological advance in sexual harassment research. A great deal of prior research in this domain is correlational (Goh et al., in press). Correlational designs are even more common in research on sexual harassment targeting the LGBTQ+ community, the majority of which has focused on targets' self-reported experiences of being sexually harassed. Experimental studies (such as the present work) can shed light on differential perceptions of harassment incidents as a function of the target's identity, providing information that is critical for improving institutional responses to sexual harassment.

We also note that although collecting free-response data was a distinctive strength of our studies in that these data allowed us to assess participants' spontaneous assumptions, this methodological choice also created an unexpected potential limitation. Specifically, participants tended to assume that relatively mild forms of sexual harassment had taken place. Accordingly, our results do not speak to the effect of targets' identity on perceptions of more severe forms of sexual harassment. Moreover, none of our participants self-identified as LGBTQ+. It would be beneficial for future research to investigate the perspective of third-party observers who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, as their assumptions regarding sexual harassment targeting lesbian

or transgender women may be more accurate and rely less on stereotypes. Additionally, we did not collect information about participants' work backgrounds or their own experiences with sexual harassment. Obtaining such information in future research would add another important level of insight into what contributes to third-party perceptions of sexual harassment, particularly with regard to whether individuals who have managerial experience or have been targets of sexual harassment themselves might make different assumptions about harassment incidents they observe.

Finally, our null findings regarding acceptability, suggested consequences, and malicious intent also represent a limitation, leading us to consider whether there are perceptions or assumptions related to these variables that we did not capture. That is, we are left with the question of what downstream effects result from differences in perceptions of underlying motivations and assumptions of what form the sexual harassment took. Asking participants to explain their ratings of these factors in future work might shed some light on this issue.

Conclusion

Both sexual harassment research and societal conversation about sexual harassment have recently been criticized for focusing primarily on the experiences of straight cisgender women as targets (Bitton & Shaul, 2013; Brassel et al., 2019; Brassel et al., in press). This singular focus has excluded lesbian and transgender women, despite the fact that *all women* experience sexual harassment at high rates. The aim of the present studies was to shed light on one aspect of workplace sexual harassment targeting lesbian and transgender women, namely, the perceptions of third-party observers. We found that a woman's sexual orientation and gender identity do influence third-party perceptions of the motivations underlying the sexual harassment, as well as assumptions of what form the sexual harassment took. Accordingly, prior research that has

focused mainly on the sexual harassment of straight cisgender women is not an accurate depiction of all women's experiences. As such, there is a need for continued research on LGBTQ+ employees' unique experiences with workplace sexual harassment.

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