Gender-Based Vicarious Sensitivity to Disempowering Behavior in Organizations: Exploring an Expanded Concept of Hostile Working Environment

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The purpose of this study was to explore evidence of gender-based vicarious sensitivity to disempowering behavior in organizations, expanding the concept of hostile working environment beyond the context of sexual harassment. Male and female graduate and undergraduate students viewed 10 video segments of Anita Hill's interview by U.S. senators during the October 1991 confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Nominee, Clarence Thomas. Although no significant relationship was found between the personal attributes of age and ethnicity to perceptions of disempowering behavior, female participants reported seeing significantly more offensive behavior in the video segments than did male participants. The results are discussed in terms of greater female sensitivity to common forms of disempowering behavior in organizations, and having a disparate negative impact and systematically placing women at a disadvantage in today's workforce.

KEY WORDS: disempowerment; gender-based sensitivity; hostile environment.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1991 confirmation hearings were held by the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee for Clarence Thomas, who recently had been nominated by Republican President George Bush to serve as a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. During this confirmation drama filled with the usual partisan politics between Democrats and Republicans, Anita Hill, a law professor from the University of Oklahoma, came forward to testify regarding Thomas' alleged sexually harassing workplace behavior several years earlier, painting him clearly unfit for this lofty position influencing national law. Many supporting Thomas and the Republican Bush agenda suspected that Hill's case had been dreamed up and fabricated as the Democrats' attempt to spoil the confirmation of Thomas. Hill was grilled by the

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senators (mostly Republicans doing the grilling) over several hours, and presented a credible and plausible testimony. However, since there were no other witnesses to corroborate her testimony, and Thomas' own ardent denial of this offensive behavior was supported by many others lauding his character and qualifications, Hill's testimony failed to foil Thomas' eventual confirmation.

Even though Hill's testimony has never been proven, her very persuasive witness greatly heightened the awareness of the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace. A direct result of this awareness was a significant increase in litigation by women claiming they were victims of sexual harassment (Dworkin, 1993). In the 2-year period between 1989–1990, there were 6,127 sexual harassment cases filed before the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, whereas in the 2-year period 1992–1993, there were 11,908 cases filed, nearly a doubling of complaints (Lee & Greenlaw, 1995). There also was an increase in training efforts within organizations to increase sensitivity, to change offending behavior, and to help avoid sexual harassment litigation (Geber, 1994; Olson, 1993).

Sexual harassment in the workplace frequently is defined as actions made by those (most often males) in more powerful positions of legitimate authority to assert and to maintain power and influence over others who are in less powerful positions that are experienced by the targets of the harassment as intimidating, uncomfortable, offensive, and demeaning (Powell, 1993; Tangri *et al.*, 1982). Sexual harassment may be viewed as an attempt at domination and a form of coercion, relying on the harasser's power to punish the target for noncompliance (Thacker & Gohmann, 1993). Although some of these actions involve direct sexual overtures requested in exchange for some employment benefit (called quid pro quo cases), the issues discussed in this paper concern actions that create a hostile environment. A hostile environment results from society's differential distribution of power and status between men and women, and the (typically) male presumption of privilege (Paetzold & Shaw, 1994). The framework currently used in defining "hostile environment" in sexual harassment requires that the plaintiff prove (1) membership in a protected class; (2) that the harassment was unwelcome; (3) that the harassment occurred as a result of the plaintiff's sex; (4) that the harassment was serious or pervasive enough to alter the terms, conditions, or privileges of employment; and (5) that the employer should be held liable (Paetzold & Shaw, 1994).

Men and women differ in their perceptions of what constitutes offensive behavior and harassment. Women more often label behaviors as sexual harassment than do men (Powell, 1986; Tangri *et al.*, 1982) and perceive harassment as more serious than do men (Jones *et al.*, 1987). Women are also more likely than men to view sexual harassment as an exercising of power over them (Tangri *et al.*, 1982). Gender differences are larger for less extreme and more ambiguous behaviors, such as derogatory attitudes, than it is for sexual coercion (Rotundo *et al.*, 2001). Men are less likely to attribute responsibility for sexual harassment to the alleged harasser than are women and are more likely to place blame on the target than are women (Thacker & Gohmann, 1993). Not only do men and women differ in terms of how they perceive behavior, men are more likely to accept denials of (claiming the action did not take place) and excuses for (attributing the action to external or unintentional events) harassing behavior as valid reasons to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the behavior, and thus the need for disciplinary action. On the other hand, women are more likely to be influenced by men's accepting responsibility for the action and apologizing

(Tata, 2000). A major reason that men and women see sexual harassment so differently is that in addition to traditionally being denigrated as inferior to men, women are disproportionately victims of sexual and domestic violence. As a result, women have a stronger incentive to be concerned with sexual behavior and to be wary of male attentions (White, 1998).

As a result of these differences, the legal standard for labeling a behavior as sexual harassment has become the perspective of the person who has been harassed, who in most cases is a woman. In *Ellison v. Brady* (54 FEP Cases 1347, 1991) the court refined the "reasonable person" standard for deciding whether hostile environment harassment was indeed sexually harassing, and restated it to be based on the standards of a "reasonable woman" (Thacker & Gohmann, 1993). The judge in the case noted that a sex-blind reasonable person standard would tend to be male-biased and systematically ignore the experiences of women (Paetzold & Shaw, 1994).

There can be severe psychological reactions to a hostile environment (Hadjifortiou, 1983), leading to negative results in organizational performance measures, such as loss in productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates (Cox, 1994). Women are more likely to report the need for emotional or medical counseling as a result of experiencing hostile environment harassment than are men (Thacker & Gohmann, 1993). Furthermore, the sexual harassment literature has shown that even indirect or vicarious exposure to sexual harassment, also referred to as "ambient" sexual harassment, can have the same destructive and debilitating effects as direct exposure (Glomb *et al.*, 1997). According to EEOC guidelines, employees are protected even when the harassing behavior is not targeted specifically at them. For example, a woman could file a sexual harassment charge if she repeatedly witnessed a male supervisor harassing another female employee (Lee & Greenlaw, 1995). As with direct sexual harassment, the effects of experiencing an ambient hostile environment include decreases in productivity, impaired job performance, and a greater propensity to terminate employment (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Evans, 1978; Kaplan, 1991).

Sexual harassment may manifest itself in disempowering behavior that is nonsexual but based on gender; that is the environment can be negatively focused against a gender without reference to sexual behavior. Cases of women being told, "You're a woman. What do you know?" and female road crew workers who were watched by male coworkers with surveying equipment were deemed harassment under Title VII, which bars any unequal treatment that would not occur but for the sex of the employee (Lee & Greenlaw, 1995). Social learning theory suggests that aggressive behavior is learned through the same processes as other behaviors via direct experience and observational learning. Observational learning occurs when individuals watch others being rewarded for behavior in aggressive ways and learn that such behavior is instrumental to positive outcomes (O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 1995). Thus, a hostile environment not only harms employees but also suggests to potential offenders that such behavior is acceptable.

Just as a manager or supervisor's empowering messages may result in a sense of personal power felt by an employee in the form of increased self-confidence, feelings of competence, and positive performance expectations (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), disempowering messages, whether conscious or unintentional, may result in an employee's *decreased* sense of personal control, self-confidence, perceived ability, as well as a lowered expectations for performance success (Eylon & Bamberger, 2000). All of these

results have a measurable impact on work performance. A particular problem related to the wide array of disempowering behaviors in organizations is that they tend to be meted out disproportionately to the traditionally less powerful labor segments—women and minorities. With an increased awareness among supervisors and managers of the need to avoid overt behaviors constituting sexual harassment, more subtle forms of disempowering behavior may continue to be used and even encouraged (consciously or unconsciously) to protect men's traditionally held power and influence. The negative net result would be the same—continued systematic disempowerment of women resulting in personal dissatisfaction, career stultification, and underutilization of talented human resources. Yet those engaging in the disempowering behaviors would remain free from the charges of sex discrimination and sexual harassment.

The thesis of gender-based perceptual differences (e.g., Tannen, 1986, 1990) relates to the often-heard gender-dichotomous stereotype in organizations of men being "insensitive" and women being "too sensitive." In her work on ethical development, Gilligan (1982) proposed that there are two essentially different ways of approaching relationships with others: a "separate" self and a "connected" self. Gilligan was writing of women's "ways of knowing" in developing a scheme of moral development. Although her view that women were more likely than men to live in a connected state has been controversial, the concept of a "connected" self has important implications when considering sexual harassment. For the "connected" person, life is seen as a web of relationships, and safety rests in close, dependable, and trusting relationships. When sexual harassment is viewed in the context of a "connected" life, it is seen as a violation of the victim's network of relationships. Denigration and violence by members of a woman's network is earthshaking, creating anxiety, fear, and disorientation. Viewing sexual harassment from the perspective of an ethic of care gives a fuller picture of the harm experienced by many victims and offers a more persuasive account of how it affects women's lives. For the "separate" person, when sexual harassment is viewed as an issue of justice and fairness, it is judged as wrong based on its being a violation of the autonomy, integrity, and rights of an individual. The language and concepts of autonomous selves described in an ethic of justice lack the descriptive power necessary to explain the emotional pain felt by victims of harassment (White, 1998). However, "reasonableness" continues the male emphasis on the rational and cognitive over the emotional or subjective. The reasonableness requirement signals to targets of harassment that they cannot trust their own perceptions or personal feelings about their experiences (Paetzold & Shaw, 1994).

In a utilitarian sense, it matters little which gender's perspective is *right* if the ultimate result of the power holders' behavior (experienced directly or vicariously by women as offensive) is the pragmatically *wrong* outcome of systematic disempowerment and decreased productivity of a female segment of the workforce. Disempowerment experienced vicariously by those witnessing behaviors in their work environment that they deem offensive and inappropriate or "toxic" would predictably have a multiplicative impact upon organizational climate and, ultimately, productivity (Fletcher, 1998; Frost & Robinson, 1999). Furthermore, if this vicarious disempowerment can be clearly demonstrated as disproportionately adversely affecting females in the organization and is based on fundamental gender differences, this situation is similar to the legal characteristics of a hostile working environment based upon a reasonable woman standard (Blumenthal, 1998; Wiener *et al.*, 1997; Woody *et al.*, 1996).

Disempowerment and Anita Hill's Experience

The experience of Anita Hill presented an opportunity to examine a situation in which men (Republican senators) had a clear motive to diminish the credibility of a woman who was threatening their goal—in this case effecting the successful confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. However, especially in this most public arena, they would logically be compelled not to disempower her in a socially unacceptable fashion through blatant sexual harassment, which could damage their own political careers. Thus they were placed in a situation in which they would have to use more subtle and socially acceptable measures to attempt to accomplish the same disempowering outcome.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of disempowerment is that it may persist even when the more powerful person has little conscious desire to limit another's potential performance contribution or render the person less powerful. It may even persist when the powerful person's goals can actually benefit from the other person being successfully empowered. For example, in viewing Anita Hill's experience with the U.S. senators, both women and men (but mostly women) have perceived condescending behaviors expressed toward Professor Hill by Senator Joseph Biden (a Democrat senator who was politically in Hill's camp or at least neutral as Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee) in the form of the lower status title "Miss" Hill juxtaposed with the higher status professionally titled "Judge" Thomas; or paternalistically expressed by the also Democrat Senator Howard Metzenbaum in likening Anita Hill to one of his own daughters.

It has been suggested that the biggest losers of the Anita Hill interview were the Democrat and Republican senators themselves who, whether consciously or unconsciously, displayed in a most public manner verbal and nonverbal behaviors that were vicariously experienced by multitudes of voting viewers as condescending, demeaning, and disempowering. So too could disempowerment be experienced vicariously in organizations today by those observers who are more sensitive to or aware of the disempowering behaviors occurring around them, even though they are not necessarily the direct targets of these behaviors.

The purpose of this study was to examine evidence of a possible gender-based vicarious sensitivity to disempowering behavior in organizations. This vicarious sensitivity was examined in the particular context of male and female participants viewing the same video segments featuring behavior expressed by White male U.S. senators in their interview of Anita Hill, a Black female, to assess the veracity of her testimony accusing Clarence Thomas of past sexual harassment behavior. On the basis of a gender-based sensitivity thesis, it was hypothesized that when viewing the same disempowering behavior, women would report higher levels of offensive behavior than would men.

METHOD

Video Treatment

One of the present researchers examined several hours of Anita Hill's televised testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee during the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas, and identified several video segments that could be feasibly interpreted

as depicting "put down" or disempowering behavior toward Hill expressed by the U.S. senators. These videotaped segments were then presented in a pilot study to male and female undergraduate students who rated them by degree of perceived offensive content. Ten segments ranking highest by these students in terms of offensive behavior were finally selected and used in this study. A description of each of the 10 video segments is provided in Table I.

Sample

A total of 303 undergraduate and graduate students from two private and two public universities in Southern California viewed the 10 video segments. Within this group there were 159 females (52%) and 144 males (48%). A total of 148 (49%) of the participants were between 18 and 22 years of age, 107 (35%) were between 23 and 29, and 48 (16%) were 30 years or older. A total of 117 participants (39%) were Caucasian, 82 participants (27%) were Asian American, 55 (18%) were Latino/Hispanic American, 21 (7%) were African American, and 28 (9%) were "other" (e.g., mixed ethnicity). Although there were several students from different European, South American, and Asian countries, there was not an adequate number from any given country to justify a statistical comparison. Furthermore, there did not appear to be an adequate theoretical justification of homogeneity to support a distinct "non-U.S." grouping for comparison. Therefore, to control for any extraneous international cross-cultural effects, non-U.S. participant responses were not used in this study.

Measures

Although the video treatment featured actual human interactions, they were set in a strong "national politics" political context that would not be found in typical organizations. To obtain measures to help control for participants' possible political inclinations or preexisting perceptions about Anita Hill and her experience that might bias their reactions to the video segments, participants were asked prior to viewing the video segments to indicate on a response form (1) whether or not they were familiar with the testimony of Anita Hill, and (2) their level of belief (on a 7-point Likert scale) in Hill's testimony. Only approximately 53% indicated that they were familiar with Hill's testimony, and of those approximately 71% indicated that they had no opinion or were neutral in terms of believing her testimony.

After each of the 10 segments the video was stopped briefly, and participants were instructed to circle on a 7-point Likert scale a number representing the degree to which they believed the behavior expressed toward Hill was offensive (1 = *not at all offensive*, 7 = *extremely offensive*). To provide some qualitative information to help confirm and elucidate the nature of responses, especially those registering perceptions of disempowering behavior, the participants were also encouraged to briefly explain for each segment why they rated it the way they did.

To determine if the 10 video segments were measuring different aspects of offensiveness, an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed that revealed only one factor. However, 3 of the original 10 items did not load highly on this factor, and therefore the remaining 7 items were combined to form one overall measure of offensiveness, resulting in a reliability measurement of .74.

Table I. Description of Treatment's 10 Video Segments

Video segment	Speaker	Description
1	Sen. Arlen Specter Republican, Pennsylvania	Asks that as an experienced attorney, why didn't Hill make any notes to defend herself at the time of the alleged behavior by Clarence Thomas. After she replies that she doesn't know why she didn't at the time. He then mentions very basic law school principles that Hill should have followed.
2	Sen. Howell Heflin Democrat, Mississippi	Explores possible ulterior motives behind Hill's testimony, each of which Hill denies; "Are you a scorned woman? . . . a zealot civil rights believer that progress will be turned back if Clarence Thomas goes on the Court? . . . Do you have a militant attitude with regard to civil rights? . . . Do you have a martyr complex? . . . Do you want to be a hero in the Civil Rights Movement? There may be other motives. . . are you interested in writing a book?"
3	Sen. Joseph Biden, Democrat, New Jersey	Refers twice to Professor Hill as "Miss Hill" (rather than "Professor Hill") following previous segments that referred to "Judge Thomas."
4	Various senators, then Joseph Biden speaking as Committee Chair	Senators discuss procedure among themselves. Biden presents a choice to Hill. When she hesitates, saying that she is given a hard choice, Biden interrupts her and says, "Well then as chair, I will make the choice," followed by brief moment of silence, then Hill's forced, polite light laughter.
5	Sen. Arlen Specter Republican, Pennsylvania	Poses a question to Hill, then (with wrinkled brow) makes her repeat her simple answer twice as if he doesn't understand her response.
6	Sen. Arlen Specter Republican, Pennsylvania	Poses a very long, convoluted question. Hill politely asks him to please *rephrase* the question, after which Specter replies sarcastically, "I'll be glad to *repeat* it." Specter then rephrases the question.
7	Sen. Arlen Specter Republican, Pennsylvania	Confounds as a legal claim Hill's previously recorded official statements describing Clarence Thomas' past behavior as sexual harassment. Hill begins with, "Maybe I'm not making myself clear," then strongly asserts that she was not making a legal claim in past statement, only that this form of behavior took place, and that a legal claim would be very different. Specter then replies, "So you are not now drawing the conclusion that Judge Thomas sexually harassed you?" And Hill firmly replies, "Yes I *am* drawing that conclusion!" after which Specter replies, "Well, then *I* don't understand," leaving Hill frowning in apparent frustration.
8	Sen. Arlen Specter Republican, Pennsylvania	Listens, sitting back with a stern, skeptical look, and other senators talk among themselves while Hill gives a similar response as her assertion in #7 above. After this further explanation of Hill's, Specter simply answers, "OK." (with raised inflection on the "K" that clearly conveys his doubting her or dissatisfaction with her answer).
9	Sen. Arlen Specter, Republican, Pennsylvania Sen. Edward Kennedy Democrat, Massachusetts	Kennedy interrupts Specter saying, "Mr. Chairman, let the witness speak in her own words rather than having words put in her mouth." Specter angrily replies to this intrusion upon his allotted time with a personal attack, "Mr. Chairman, I object to that—I object to that vociferously! I am asking questions here. If Senator Kennedy has anything to say, let him participate in this hearing."
10	Sen. Alan Simpson Republican, Wyoming	Over 2 min of a rather rambling, dramatic attempt to lay guilt upon Hill for possibly ruining Thomas' career by her minimal, questionable evidence, with "All we've heard for 103 days is about a most remarkable man. . . .They scoured his every shred of life and nobody but you. . . alleges sexual harassment. . . All I can say is maybe, maybe you really didn't intend to kill him, but you might have, and that's pretty heavy, I don't care if you are a man *or* a woman. . . ," ". . . a singular torpedo blow below the water line, and he sinks, while 103 days of accumulated things never penetrated the armor. . . " "It is a really troubling thing to me, it really is," and "If what you say this man said to you is true, why in *God's* name. . . would you ever speak (begins pounding for emphasis) to a man like that the rest of your life?"

The methodology of this study built upon a previous exploratory study by Montgomery *et al*. (1996), which used the same videotaped treatment but failed to take the "familiarity" and "level of belief" control measures regarding Anita Hill before presenting the video segments. This study also measured participant perceptions in terms of their assessment of "inappropriate" behavior rather than the present study's "offensive" behavioral assessment, a criterion that we believe is more meaningful in relation to the personal affect construct of disempowerment.

Results

A significant correlation was found between familiarity with Hill's testimony and perceived offensiveness ($r = .88$, $p < .01$) and between level of belief in Hill's testimony and perceived offensiveness ($r = .28$, $p < .05$). Therefore, familiarity and level of belief were used as control variables using an ANCOVA procedure. After controlling for familiarity and level of belief, our hypothesis was supported: women ($M = 4.26$) were significantly more offended than men ($M = 3.65$) by the video segments portraying the individual senators' behavior expressed toward Anita Hill, $F(1, 273)$, $p < .001$.

To test a competing hypothesis that perceptions of greater offensiveness are due more to the increased sensitivity and vulnerability of traditionally less powerful status (e.g., minority) than to gender-based differences, the variable of participant ethnicity also was examined. After controlling for familiarity and level of belief, it was found that minority group members did not perceive more offensive behavior than did White males. To test a competing "identification with target" hypothesis, the responses of African American females were compared with those of other gender and ethnic groups. This competing hypothesis was also not supported. In addition, there were no significant interactions found between gender, race, or age in this analysis.

The qualitative comments on the response form were also examined to confirm responses and gain a greater sense of how participants perceived the behavior in the video segments expressed toward Anita Hill. The participants entered qualitative comments almost exclusively on segments that they rated high in offensiveness (e.g., circling a 5, 6, or 7), and identified a variety of behaviors, however all of a "put-down" or disempowering nature, and of plausible relevance to general workplace situations (see a summary of the qualitative responses in Table II).

DISCUSSION

This study found evidence that, regardless of age or ethnicity, women perceived more offensive behavior expressed toward Anita Hill than did men, lending support to the notions of gender-based sensitivity and of greater vulnerability to disempowering behavior in organizations. These gender-based perceptions of a significantly different nature pose a critical implication for women in organizations: with their possible greater awareness of the presence of disempowering behavior in their work environment, whether they are targets themselves or they observe others as targets, women may personally experience more negative affect and dissatisfaction, and as a result may be more prone to feeling threatened, uncomfortable, and unable to work at a high level of performance.

Table II. Summary of Participants' Perceived Forms of Disempowering Behavior Expressed by U.S. Senators in 10 Video Segments of Anita Hill Interview

–Condescending, suggesting target inferiority
–Patronizing (treat as a child)
–Questioning (doubting) target's competence
–Suggesting unethical ulterior motives
–Badgering and intimidating
–Being purposely argumentative, contentious
–Suggesting lower status of target
–Confusing target, confounding with irrelevance
–Pretending not able to understand target
–Making target feel guilty, blaming
–Implying target's dishonesty
–Not listening
–Judging prematurely
–Treating target rudely
–Interrupting
–Using nonverbal body language and tone of voice expressing disbelief, ill will

Because women are disproportionately represented in more subordinate positions in organizations, they are more likely to be targets of their superiors' disempowering behaviors, and, according to our results, are more sensitive and vulnerable to these kinds of behaviors. And just as the illegality of sexual harassment is based upon the premise of the existence of a hostile working environment that contributes to disparate and adverse treatment of women as a protected group (Tangri *et al.*, 1982), such relatively common disempowering behaviors as those noted in Table II may also contribute to a similarly hostile working environment with a disparate negative impact and discriminatory force that places women at a disadvantage.

The use of the "reasonable woman" standard by some circuit courts in sexual harassment cases has been controversial, primarily due to the claim that the reasonable woman standard, assuming gender-based perceptual differences, simply serves to perpetuate the stereotype of women as much more sensitive and delicate, and hence less desirable to employ in key positions within a very competitive, "rough and tumble" work environment. In a similar fashion the present research could be criticized as perpetuating a stereotype that could cause differential gender-based employee use and deployment due to fears about excessive female sensitivity to today's real work environment. However, the considerable empirical and anecdotal evidence that significant gender-based perceptual differences do exist argues for more research in this area, especially when we face the threat of suboptimal utilization of such a vast segment of the workforce. Furthermore, the coexistence of perceptual differences has widely been described as a potential source of organizational viability and productivity (Cox, 1994).

Similarly, the faultfinding debate over whether women are "too sensitive" or that men are "too insensitive" due to their inherently different perceptions of and reactions to the same behaviors that they experience in organizations is irrelevant from a strictly pragmatic standpoint. Any form of disparate, adverse treatment of a significant segment of the workforce, resulting in personal performance debilitation and decreased organizational productivity, represents a critical misuse and waste of valuable human talent. Organizations that are able to minimize disempowerment will likely have a more productive workforce and a distinct competitive advantage over organizations where some groups remain disproportionately disempowered (Cox, 1994).

An underlying assumption in this study is that greater sensitivity to or awareness of disempowering behavior implies greater vulnerability to and tendency toward disempowerment. It may be possible that people can become inured to the offensive behavior around them, whether directed to themselves or others, and although they are still quite aware of the offensive behavior, they choose to ignore and/or tolerate the behavior, particularly if past organizational response to complaints of offensive behavior have been less than favorable (DuBois *et al*., 1999). Nevertheless, research has indicated that the occurrence of offensive behavior (i.e. sexual harassment) in the workplace influences both distal and proximal work-related variables such as job satisfaction, job withdrawal, and work withdrawal. Additionally, psychological variables (e.g., emotional well-being, life satisfaction, distress) are also threatened by workplace offensive behavior (Glomb *et al*., 1999). There are clearly negative professional outcomes that result because of offensive workplace behavior, ranging from low overall job satisfaction to a deteriorating ability to work with others (Evans, 1978; Kaplan, 1991; Laband & Lentz, 1998; Tangri *et al*., 1982).

Present Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

A strength of this study is its dealing in a real world situation without simulation, yet a possible limitation of this study was the highly political context of the video treatment. Although we statistically controlled for familiarity with the Hill experience and previous bias toward her testimony, it is still possible that participants could have had difficulty focusing completely on the behaviors expressed by the senators and not be influenced by the politicized context. Future research should include video segments of similar behaviors, however presented within a more common organizational work environment context. Nevertheless, although these treatment changes would enhance the external validity of this study, we still found gender-based differences in perceived offensiveness regarding the same behaviors.

Another potential limitation of this study is the nature of the sample, comprising college students, most of whom were relatively young. Although many of the students in our sample were working part-time and were not full-time employees, our particular sample composition and college class experimental setting may limit the confidence with which we can generalize these findings to the overall workplace. A sample inclusive of a wider range of individuals with a greater variance in life and work experience should be considered in future research. Disempowerment, however, is not exclusive to the workplace, but is perpetrated, experienced directly, and observed by individuals in all aspects of life. Therefore, we believe that reactions and perceptions of individuals in this sample do not abate the usefulness of the findings.

Although qualitative data were collected in this study to confirm and elucidate the nature of participants' perceptions of disempowering behavior, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate our hypothesis of a possible gender-based sensitivity to disempowering behavior. Future qualitative research should examine in more detail the nature and possible patterns of disempowering behaviors experienced directly or perceived vicariously in organizations. For example, this research might help identify which disempowering behaviors tend to be exhibited most frequently in organizations, and which behaviors tend to have the greatest deleterious impact. And related to the focus in this study on gender-based differences, it would be useful to begin to clarify and examine through qualitative, empirical research which kinds of disempowering behaviors tend to be perpetrated

against women in the workplace with the greatest frequency and with the greatest negative effect.

An additional limitation of this study is the presence of only a female as a target of disempowering behavior. It is not possible to assess with this study whether or not the results would be the same if the target of the disempowering behavior had been male. Rather than the assertion that women are more sensitive and vulnerable to disempowering behavior itself, an alternative explanation, based on intergroup and reference group theory (Alderfer, 1986; Bell *et al.*, 1993; Clark, 1972) may be that the female participants in this study merely identified more with the same-gendered Anita Hill, and perceived the same confrontational behavior in a more offensive light than did the male participants. Or the finding that men perceived less offensive behavior might have been due to their identification with the perpetrators of the behavior and their deeming those behaviors more acceptable. In addition, there was an inadequate sample size of Black women (14) to test the further "identification with target" thesis that would predict that Black women in this study would perceive more offensive behavior than would White women. Additional research with greater African American representation should compare male and female perceptions of and reactions to disempowering behavior in various video segments where men and women who serve are both providers and targets of disempowering behavior. To further assess potential organizational costs, it might be useful in future research to also have the participant indicate for each video segment the perceived likely impact of the viewed behavior upon personal work productivity, as well as such factors as self-esteem, stress, and depression.

CONCLUSION

The design of this study is consistent with the reality of today's organizations where women represent close to half of the workforce, yet are found at predominantly lower organizational levels where they, as subordinates, are more likely to serve as targets of the disempowering behavior of their male superiors. Whether nontargeted women vicariously perceive more offensive behavior because of their greater sensitivity to disempowering behavior around them in work environments, or simply because of their same-gender identification with the target, the compelling results are the same: greater female perceptions of "hostile" offensive behavior in the work environment, potentially contributing to a disparate condition of greater female dissatisfaction and disempowerment. Unfortunately it has taken government legislation on sexual harassment followed by both the threat of and actual legal action to direct many organizations' attention to the wasteful costs of allowing the existence of a gender-based hostile working environment.

However, legal action and government legislation often are not successful in changing basic motives aimed at disempowerment. As we suggested in the beginning of this paper, such uncorrected underlying motives may simply be channeled into different and more socially acceptable, yet still disempowering forms of behavior, and continuing to exact a wasteful cost in reduced individual and organizational productivity. Organizations that are seriously committed to moving beyond legal compliance and to seek to identify and remove as much disempowering behavior as possible will have a competitive edge. It is hoped that this study on vicarious and greater female sensitivity to disempowering behavior within an expanded concept of hostile working environment will not result in a wider range of

litigation, but will alert organizations to seize the opportunity of proactively working to remove all costly and unnecessary forces of disempowerment in their work environments, gender-based or otherwise, to enhance productivity.

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