

Chapter 8

Beliefs About Gender and Meritocracy and the Evaluation of Sexual Harassment in a University Research Setting

Julie A. Kmec, Lindsey T. O'Connor and Shekinah Hoffman

Abstract

Building on work that explores the relationship between individual beliefs and ability to recognize discrimination (e.g., Kaiser and Major, 2006), we examine how an adherence to beliefs about gender essentialism, gender egalitarianism, and meritocracy shape one's interpretation of an illegal act of sexual harassment involving a male supervisor and female subordinate. We also consider whether the role of the gendered culture of engineering (Faulkner, 2009) matters for this relationship. Specifically, we conducted an online survey-experiment asking individuals to report their beliefs about gender and meritocracy and subsequently to evaluate a fictitious but illegal act of sexual harassment in one of two university research settings: an engineering department, a male-dominated setting whose culture is documented as being unwelcoming to women (Hatmaker, 2013; Seron, Silbey, Cech, and Rubineau, 2018), and an ambiguous research setting. We find evidence that the stronger one's adherence to gender egalitarian beliefs, the greater one's ability to detect inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment while gender essentialist beliefs play no role in their detection. The stronger one's adherence to merit beliefs, the less likely they are to view an illegal interaction as either inappropriate or as sexual harassment. We account for respondent knowledge of sexual harassment and their socio-demographic characteristics, finding that the former is more often associated with the detection of inappropriate

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behavior and sexual harassment at work. We close with a discussion of the transferability of results and policy implications of our findings.

Keywords: Gender beliefs; meritocracy beliefs; sexual harassment; engineering culture; gender; workplace harassment

In 2017, sexual harassment received renewed attention from the public and media when the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements went viral (Keplinger et al., 2019) and exposed women's on-going experiences with sexual harassment. Women publicly shared their experiences of sexual harassment via online platforms like Twitter and Facebook to illustrate the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault, to push for justice and social change, and to show solidarity with other victims (Chowdhury et al., 2019; Keplinger et al., 2019). Whereas the public may have initially learned about sexual harassment incidences from media coverage of a high-profile case (e.g., Justice Thomas, Harvey Weinstein) before the widespread movements, learning about others' sexual harassment experiences through social media is now common (Anderson and Toor, 2018). A 2018 Pew Research Center study, for example, reported that 65 percent of US adults surveyed reported that they regularly see content related to sexual harassment or assault on their social media platforms (Anderson and Toor, 2018). This exposure to acts of harassment suggests that people are forming opinions about sexual harassment more frequently than ever (Keplinger et al., 2019).

The increased frequency with which the public is now engaged with other people's experiences of sexual harassment raises questions about the factors that shape their perceptions of those experiences. Indeed, public perceptions following the exposure of a sexual harassment tend to be quite varied. Take recent harassment claims against a US senator accused of kissing and groping a woman without her consent; 44 percent of a sample of nearly 1,000 Americans said he should resign while 56 percent said they should not or could not form an opinion about the behavior (we are assuming that saying he should resign implies they considered his behavior to be sexual harassment, or at least inappropriate and unbecoming of someone in such a role) (Huffington Post, 2017). What motivates these divergent views about an instance of sexual harassment, especially since it has been an illegal form of discrimination in the United States for decades? In other words, what makes some label an interaction as workplace sexual harassment, while others do not?

Our study adds to the growing body of research concerning sexual harassment (see Minnotte and Legerski, 2019, for review) by examining the source of these differences in individual's opinions about what constitutes sexual harassment. Specifically, we focus on the role of personal belief systems and the way these beliefs influence individuals' understanding of a situation involving sexual harassment. Our study addresses two research questions: (1) To what extent do personal beliefs about gender and meritocracy relate to "seeing" an illegal male-female interaction as inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment? (2) Does the relationship between personal beliefs and "seeing" a male-female interaction as

inappropriate behavior and as sexual harassment differ in male-dominated versus ambiguous research settings? The answers to these questions are important because they tell us more about how to reduce workplace sexual harassment; one must first be able to see sexual harassment before believing something can be done about it (see Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat, 1980).

In response to the widespread occurrence and public awareness of sexual harassment, scholars have studied a variety of issues related to it, including the role of perpetrators, the role the victim, and the effects of sexual harassment on women's work and health outcomes (see Minnotte and Legerski, 2019). Our study updates and extends this research in several important ways. First, like others (see Pempel, 2011; Lee, Kim, and Choi, 2013; Meyer and Gelman, 2016; Ronen, 2018), we consider the relationship between personal beliefs and labeling sexual harassment, but we are among the first to consider both gender essentialist (i.e., broad beliefs about the innate source of gender; that gender differences are natural) and egalitarian beliefs (i.e., beliefs that people – regardless of their gender – are equally able to participate in paid work, education, social, and family roles) in perceptions of sexual harassment.¹ These personal beliefs about gender are not just the inverse of one another; each considers a different dimension of gender. Our analysis also considers the role that beliefs about meritocracy, beliefs so widespread in the United States that some consider it to be the “national” American ideology (Eyer, 2012), have in the likelihood of labeling an act as sexual harassment. Researchers have thus far overlooked the relevance of meritocratic beliefs for seeing sexual harassment, yet beliefs about merit may relate to detecting sexual harassment in the workplace. A core element of meritocracy is that internal factors (e.g., work effort, skill) rather than external ones (e.g., discrimination, harassment) are to blame for what happens to an individual; in other words, you get what you deserve because of something you do (or do not do). If meritocrats typically explain situations as “you get what you deserve,” they may say the victim of sexual harassment deserved the treatment.

Third, our data, collected in 2020, updates analyses involving the effect of personal gender beliefs on seeing sexual harassment (Klemmack and Klemmack, 1976; Jensen and Gutek, 1982; Pryor, 1987). For the past several decades, beliefs about gender have become more liberal. Compared to the 1970s, in the 2010s, Millennials (born 1980s–1990s) and Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) became more gender egalitarian in their views (Donnelly et al., 2015). While our data do not allow us to draw longitudinal conclusions about the relationship between gender attitudes and labeling of sexual harassment, our study situates this relationship in a snapshot of time when gender beliefs look very different than in the past.

Fourth, most existing studies of sexual harassment or more generally, perceptions of discrimination, rely on self-reported discrimination (e.g., Shorey, Cowan, and Sullivan, 2002; Cech, Blair-Loy, and Rogers, 2018) or experimental

¹For detailed discussion of these gender belief scales, please see King and King (1983) and Beere et al. (1984) on the development and testing of the concepts. See Appendix 2, Table A1 for examples of the measures included in this scale.

laboratory studies of undergraduate students (e.g., Major, Quinton, and McCoy, 2002; McCoy and Major, 2007). We use a unique methodological approach – a survey-experimental design – which exposes all respondents to the same fictitious act of sexual harassment in one of two university settings. So, unlike commonly used self-reports of sexual harassment – which may or may not accurately reflect seeing sexual harassment – exposing all respondents to the same sexual harassment behavior avoids complications caused by analyzing different scenarios. Because our sample consists of American adults in different life stages with different workplace experiences, our study has greater external validity than experimental studies in laboratory settings using undergraduate student subjects.

Finally, our analyses recognize that sexual harassment is not experienced equally across workplace settings and within these workplaces, sexual harassment experiences differ across gendered workplace cultures. Sexual harassment is especially rampant in academia (Fredrickson, 2017; Wang and Widener, 2017; Anderson, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Aguilar and Baek, 2020; Karami et al., 2020). Academic settings have the second highest rate of sexual harassment against women, second only to the military (Ilies et al., 2006). Recent accounts of women in the academy corroborate this information (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Aguilar and Baek, 2020; Karami et al., 2020). For example, approximately 50 percent of female medical school faculty surveyed had experienced sexual harassment (Carr, Ash, and Friedman, 2000; Jagsi et al., 2016; Ray, Freund, McDonald, and Carr, 2020), and about 70 percent of female anthropologists and other field scientists surveyed experienced sexual harassment (Clancy et al., 2014).

The Relevance of Personal Beliefs

Our investigation of the way one's personal beliefs help them make sense of a situation involving sexual harassment grows out of research exploring how beliefs relate to seeing discrimination more generally. A body of research examines the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and seeing discrimination; holding a meritocratic view has been used to explain why people are unable to recognize discrimination and if they do, why they blame the victim for it (Eyer, 2012), and, more generally, whether people see themselves as victims of discrimination and understand the costs of reporting it. (for a review, see Kaiser and Major, 2006). Gender essentialism, for example, predicts individuals' support for gender inequality and discriminatory practices at work, and the fairness of gender-based treatment (Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018), endorsement of the gender gap in STEM (Liben and Coyle, 2014), the gender-typed preferences of parents and their children and parents' prescriptive stereotyping behavior (Meyer and Gelman, 2016), and is related to the devaluation of women (Ronen, 2018). Individuals in a representative sample of Americans who held conservative gender role beliefs (a concept similar to gender egalitarianism) had a lower likelihood of identifying family responsibilities discrimination (i.e., discrimination based on one's family caregiving responsibilities) compared to those with more liberal views (O'Connor and Kmec, 2020).

On (Not) “Seeing” Sexual Harassment: Personal Beliefs About Gender and Meritocracy

Gender Essentialism. The phrase “girls will be girls, and boys will be boys” depicts the core of gender essentialist thinking; women and men are who they are because they are fundamentally and naturally so. Gender itself stems from biological, rather than social factors. Essentialists believe that gender categories are immutable and part of the “essence” of being female or male (see Gurian, Henley, and Trueman, 2001; Rangel and Keller, 2011; Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018). Gender essentialism, like other essentialist explanations of human behavior, arise from a desire to justify fairness of a behavior (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Brescoll, Uhlmann, and Newman, 2013) and gender differences in outcomes are as unalterable as the essence of women and men. A person who subscribes to essentialist thinking might think that males and females are inherently best suited for different fields of study and jobs (Meyer and Gellman, 2016) or that intrinsic gender differences cause occupational sex segregation (see Pruitt, 2018).

Gender Egalitarianism. Gender egalitarians subscribe to the belief that women and men are relatively equal in their ability to participate in work, education, social, and family roles. Said differently, gender egalitarianism implies that whatever a man can do, so can a woman (i.e., they can both participate in the paid labor market, they have similar ability to pursue an education, etc.). Gender egalitarians place equity between females and males at the center of their thinking. For example, a person with gender egalitarian beliefs would argue that access to resources is the right of women and men and that opportunities for advancement are equally beneficial to women and men.

Meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea that success is a product of one’s hard work and talent while failure results from a lack of these traits. Individuals with meritocratic beliefs see the world as fair and any failure the result of individual action as opposed to structural forces or discrimination (Cech et al., 2018). For example, someone with a meritocratic view would attribute the lack of women in upper management positions to lower work effort, lack of prioritization of work over family, or lack of leadership traits compared to men. In general, in a meritocratic system, an outcome as the result of internal, individual-level factors: a person “deserves” what they get.

Attribution Theory: Connecting Personal Beliefs to Seeing Sexual Harassment

Attribution theory helps make sense of how personal beliefs affect one’s ability to see behaviors like sexual harassment. The theory argues that our sense-making abilities result from what we believe the cause of what we see is (see Taylor and Fiske, 1978; Kelley and Michela, 1980; Harvey and Weary, 1984). According to this central tenet of attribution theory, for example, an inherent belief that men are more aggressive may lead individuals to believe that this inherent nature can explain a particular man’s behavior in A particular scenario (see Jensen and Gutek, 1982). If a person believes that women are innately meek, they may

attribute the justification of a woman's behavior to her meekness. In both examples, gender stereotypes about aggression and meekness are a "mental label," or tool, that is used to understand and assign blame to the behavior of women and men. As we explain next, these "mental labels" play an important role in whether a person sees a behavior as sexual harassment.

Gender Essentialism and Seeing Sexual Harassment

Attribution theory suggests that gender essentialists who encounter an illegal act of workplace sexual harassment may not recognize it as such. Instead, the "mental label" they draw upon to interpret behaviors is rooted in the idea that women and men are fundamentally different by nature. For example, in the mind of a gender essentialist, if a woman "acts" like a man (e.g., she is assertive at work), she violates the mental label that the genders are inherently different. Their mental label leaves little room for them to see sexual harassment. Instead, an illegal behavior of a man toward a woman is an attempt to affirm their belief that men and women are inherently different.

Gender Egalitarianism and Seeing Sexual Harassment

Attribution theory suggests that gender egalitarians who encounter an act of sexual harassment at work will recognize it as such. The "mental label" they draw upon to interpret behaviors is rooted in the idea that women and men are equals. The unequal treatment of a woman by a man violates a gender egalitarian's mental label that men and women deserve equal treatment. Their view that women are no less deserving of good treatment than are men suggests that gender egalitarians' mental label gives them accessibility to define illegal male-female interactions as sexual harassment.

Others have found that gender egalitarian beliefs relate to views about the occurrence and prevalence of sexual harassment. For example, women who hold gender egalitarian beliefs are more likely to report being harassed than women with more traditional gender beliefs (Hart, 2019; Lucarini et al., 2020; Otterbach, Sousa-Poza, and Zhang, 2021). Individuals with gender egalitarian beliefs were likely to say they would report sexually harassing behaviors; to report a behavior means that one sees a behavior as sexual harassment and thus deserving of being reported (Baker, Terpstra, and Larntz, 1990).

Meritocracy and Seeing Sexual Harassment

Attribution theory also suggests that individuals with meritocratic beliefs who encounter an act of sexual harassment may not label it as such. Meritocrats draw on a "mental label" which views individuals' success as a product of internal traits, in particular hard work and talent. A meritocrat's mental label can impair their ability to see anything but internal factors as the cause of negative outcomes. A negative outcome – in this case, sexual harassment – happens because the person on the receiving end of it somehow brought it on or "deserves" it because of a

characteristic under their personal control. Drawing on the literature discussed here, we hypothesize:

H1. The stronger one's adherence to gender essentialist beliefs, the lower their likelihood of seeing inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment.

H2. The stronger one's adherence to gender egalitarian beliefs, the greater their likelihood of seeing inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment.

H3. The stronger one's adherence to meritocratic beliefs, the lower their likelihood of seeing inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment.

Beliefs Situated in a Gendered Culture: Academic Engineering

Workplace cultures influence the prevalence and severity of sexual harassment incidences but may also shape personal beliefs and individuals' ability to see sexual harassment within those cultures. Gendered cultures – those that make salient, emphasize, or are otherwise understood as male or female – are especially important. Gendered cultures are prevalent in university settings; some disciplines (e.g., English, fine arts) are female-typed while others (e.g., STEM) male-typed. Engineering, the discipline of focus in this study, is a particularly male-gendered context. It is one of the most gender segregated STEM fields (NSF, 2020) and evokes a culture of machismo: a tolerance and pleasure of grease, dirt, hard work, physical risk, and rigor (Carlone, 2003). It also emphasizes a heavy workload (Frehill, 2004), a sense that engineers are men with interests in technology and a natural talent for technical and mechanical skills (Cheryan et al., 2017; Faulkner, 2009), and that the field deliberately tries to exclude women and limit the display of feminine interaction styles (Dryburgh, 1999; Rhoton, 2011). Women are more likely to experience frequent incidents of sexual harassment in traditional male occupations, organizations where leadership is male-dominated, and organizations where men outnumber women – cultures like engineering (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Berdahl, 2007a; Willness, Steel, and Lee, 2007; Schneider, Pryor, and Fitzgerald, 2011; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Engineering and Gender Essentialism

Women remain underrepresented in the field of engineering in the United States and elsewhere; in the United States, for example, from 2008 to 2018 white women's presence in the field rose from 10.7 percent to 12 percent, Black women's remained the same at only 1 percent, and Latinas' share increased from 1.8 to 2.5 percent (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2020; National Science Foundation, 2020). Their underrepresentation stems in part from cultural cues that STEM-related competencies are "masculine" (Hyde et al., 1990; Correll, 2001,

2004; Cech et al., 2011; Cech, 2015), from women's marginalized identity in the field (Hatmaker, 2013), and a supposed incompatibility of their personal identity with the profession (Hirshfield, 2010; Peterson, 2010; Charles, 2011; Cech, 2015). These mechanisms (cultural cues, marginalized and incompatible identities) can shape the response of gender essentialism to an act of sexual harassment. If a gender essentialist draws on a "mental label" that men and women are naturally different, a perception bolstered by the above mechanisms and noted underrepresentation of women in the field, they may feel justified in thinking that women do not "belong" in engineering in the first place and feel less sympathy toward women's experiences there and an obliviousness to sexual harassment against women engineers (see Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018). A recent study on politics confirms this essentialism-negative treatment relationship; the authors found that individuals with a strong adherence to gender essentialism responded negatively to women seeking political candidacy (a male-typed domain) but did not respond so to men seeking the same (Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018).

Engineering and Gender Egalitarianism

Gender egalitarians believe that women can "fit" in male gender-typed spaces like engineering. If gender equitable beliefs are the "mental label" describing the behavior of women and men, egalitarians may view an illegal male-female interaction involving harassment in *any* setting as an act of sexual harassment; women's presence in engineering is no different than her presence elsewhere. For gender egalitarians, the relationship between their personal beliefs and seeing sexual harassment in an engineering setting would be like their interpretation of the same behavior in a gender-ambiguous cultural setting.

Engineering and Meritocracy

Academia in general prides itself on being a meritocratic institution, an idea that is becoming increasingly challenged by the inaccuracy of publication-based evaluation, vastly different levels of financial support, and a growing gender, race, and class divide in who succeeds (Zivony, 2019). Within the academy, some fields still strongly embrace meritocratic ideals. Engineering prides itself on being a meritocratic field; engineers succeed because they work hard and have the talent to do so (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010). Societal impressions that women do not "fit" in the field may also reflect an assumption that women do not work as hard as men in engineering. Beliefs that women engineers work do not work as hard as men may inform the "mental label" meritocrats use to make sense of an illegal interaction. So, for those who subscribe to the meritocratic point of view, an engineering setting which emphasizes the notion of merit may exacerbate their inability to see sexual harassment. In line with this, for example, Seron et al. (2018) found that meritocratic beliefs were associated with one's capacity to identify discrimination at work. STEM faculty members with strong meritocratic beliefs perceived little discrimination happening in their departments. Drawing on the literature above, we hypothesize:

H4. The negative relationship between gender essentialists beliefs and the likelihood of labeling an interaction as inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment will be more negative in an engineering setting than an ambiguous setting.

H5. The positive relationship between gender egalitarian beliefs and the likelihood of labeling an interaction as inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment will be similar across settings.

H6. The negative relationship between meritocratic beliefs and the likelihood of labeling an interaction as inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment will be more negative in an engineering setting than an ambiguous setting.

Data and Methods

Our data comes from a survey experiment of 210 adults living in the United States. We recruit respondents and administer the survey through the professional survey firm, Qualtrics. Qualtrics recruited a proportionally representative sample of the US population's sex, race/ethnic, and age composition.² Qualtrics invited prospective respondents to complete our study via email. Interested respondents followed a link provided in the email to a webpage that described our study as "seeking their attitudes on various social issues and their opinions about interactions that happen in the workplace."

We took several measures to ensure data quality. We dropped survey respondents who did not pass all attention checks and/or the three manipulation checks, those who straight-lined (e.g., those who answered "slightly agree" to all questions – even those that were reverse coded), and those who completed the survey in less than half the median survey completion time.

We first asked consenting respondents the extent to which they endorsed gender essentialist, gender egalitarian, and meritocratic beliefs. Then we asked a series of questions that measured their opinions about the field of engineering (e.g., openness to women, sex composition, among others). Next, we presented respondents with a fictitious scenario describing an interaction between a female faculty and her male department director at a research university.³ In the interaction, the department director engages in an action that meets the US legal defi-

²To achieve a sample that was proportionally representative of the United States on three attributes, Qualtrics first verified that a respondent was over the age of 18 and to report their sex, race, and year they were born. Once a particular sex, race, and age category was filled to quota, Qualtrics "ended" the survey for a respondent, while continuing to collect data from respondents who fell in the other demographic categories.

³To create this scenario, we drew on interviews that the third author conducted with women about their experiences of sexual harassment at work in the gaming industry (Hoffman, 2018). Thus, the scenario described here is taken from one woman's actual experience of sexual harassment.

nition of sexual harassment⁴ – specifically he remarks on a female researcher’s clothing and physical appearance. Respondents also learn that the comments are part of a repeated pattern of similar behavior, on male department director’s part.

Our focus on university settings is intentional. Because nearly all universities have similar hierarchical structures and rigid systems of merit, the public is likely to have a general sense of the nature of academic settings. More importantly, academic disciplines with varying gendered cultures are the mainstay of any university; most university settings are either female-typed (e.g., nursing, English) and others male-typed, including engineering. We randomly varied the gendered context in which the interaction takes place. In one condition, the interaction occurs between two engineering faculty. In the other condition, we describe the setting in which the same interaction takes place in neutral terms, so it is unclear what academic field the faculty are in. In both scenarios, they are described as researchers (see the Appendix 1 for the scenario wording). After reading the interaction, respondents answered a series of comprehension check questions to ensure they read the scenario carefully and then gave their opinion about the interaction and the individuals involved in it. Finally, respondents answered a series of demographic questions, a question on their own experience with sexual harassment, and questions about their knowledge of sexual harassment.

Measures

Dependent Variable

We are interested in respondents’ interpretation of the interaction between a man (Mark) and his subordinate (Sally). Specifically, we investigate whether they label the scenario as inappropriate and/or sexually harassing behavior. To capture respondent’s interpretation of the male-female interaction, we first asked: How appropriate or inappropriate are Mark’s repeated comments about Sally’s appearance? Respondents could indicate that the repeated comments are: definitely inappropriate, possibly inappropriate, definitely not appropriate. To capture whether a respondent views the interaction as sexual harassment, we ask: Would you classify Mark’s repeated comments about Sally’s appearance as sexual harassment? Respondents could indicate that the repeated comments are: definitely sexual harassment, possibly sexual harassment, definitely not sexual harassment.

Responses to the questions describing Mark and Sally’s interaction are skewed. Seventy-four percent of the sample view the interaction as definitely inappropriate, 16 percent think it is possibly inappropriate, and 6 percent see it as definitely appropriate. At the same time, 43 percent feel the interaction is definitely sexual

⁴The federal government indicates that “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct 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, 2021).

harassment, 40 percent possibly so, and 10 percent definitely not sexual harassment. To estimate models, we create two dichotomous variables: 1 = definitely inappropriate versus 0 = possibly and definitely not inappropriate and 1 = definitely sexual harassment versus 0 = possibly and definitely not sexual harassment. We are interested in understanding both reactions – seeing the interaction as inappropriate *and* as sexual harassment – we combine these dichotomous variables into a measure with three possible outcomes: 1 = sees the interaction as *neither* sexual harassment *nor* as inappropriate (i.e., seeing nothing problematic with Mark and Sally’s interaction), 2 = sees it as *either* inappropriate *or* as sexual harassment (i.e., being ambivalent about the interaction), 3 = sees the interaction as *both* inappropriate and as sexual harassment (i.e., viewing the interaction as unacceptable).

Independent Variables

Gender Beliefs. Independent variables of interest are respondent’s *gender essentialist* and *gender egalitarianism beliefs*. Following previous research on the effects of gender essentialist beliefs on support for gender equality (Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018), we use the previously developed 25-item “Gender Essentialism Scale (GES)” to measure endorsement of gender essentialist beliefs. We use the previously developed 25-item “Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale (SRES)” to measure the extent to which respondents endorse gender egalitarian roles in marriage, parenting, employment, education, and social-interpersonal-heterosexual domains (see King and King, 1983 and also Beere et al., 1984). See Table A2 for the full gender essentialism scale and example items from the gender egalitarianism scale and alpha levels).

Merit Beliefs. Another independent variable of interest is respondent’s *meritocratic beliefs*. We use a 6-item scale to measure the extent to which a respondent endorses beliefs about meritocracy, coded so higher values represent stronger meritocratic beliefs (see Table A2 for scale items) (Cech, 2017).

Controls

Knowledge of Sexual Harassment. Misunderstanding what constitutes sexual harassment may influence recognizing sexual harassment when it happens. For this reason, we control for respondents’ self-rated knowledge of harassment with the question: “How confident would you be in explaining to a friend what constitutes sexual harassment?” (1 = very confident to 4 = not at all confident). Further, the knowledge a respondent may gain from attending a sexual harassment training may influence their ability to see sexual harassment in the workplace, so we include a second proxy measure of knowledge: a dichotomous variable measuring if a respondent attended a training with the question: “In the past 10 years, have you ever participated in any sexual harassment training (e.g., watched videos, received material, etc.)?” (1 = yes, 0 = no)

Male-typing and Male-dominated Engineering. To gauge whether respondents consider engineering to have a male-typed culture, we measure the extent to

which respondents view engineering as male-typed field by asking the extent to which they agree or disagree with five statements: (1) Engineering work is best performed by men; (2) Compared to men, women are at a disadvantage in engineering; (3) Women perform engineering work as well, if not better, than do men (R); (4) The culture of engineering rewards behaviors more generally attributed to men than to women; and (5) If I were the director of an engineering department, I would often believe that hiring men is a better investment in the future of the university than hiring women (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). These statements loaded on a single factor, so we combine them into a scale ($\alpha = 0.70$). We also ask respondents to indicate if they consider engineering to be made up of mostly men, mostly women, or about the same proportion of women and men (coded into a set of dichotomous variables).

Public Perception of Sexual Harassment. The cultural narrative around workplace sexual harassment has shifted considerably in the #MeToo era. Increased media consumption pertaining to workplace sexual harassment may influence the labeling of an interaction as sexual harassment. To gauge respondents' perceptions of public reactions to sexual harassment, we ask a series of questions that measure the extent to which a respondent agrees or disagrees with the following statements: (1) The public exaggerates the amount of sexual harassment at work; (2) the public spends too much time talking about sexual harassment; (3) the public over-emphasizes the seriousness of sexual harassment at work (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). We averaged their responses to create a scale measuring respondents' view of the public's response to sexual harassment.

Demographic Characteristics. Models account for individual attributes thought to influence the labeling of sexual harassment and personal beliefs. Research on the factors that affect the labeling of an experience as sexual harassment and reactions to that experience focus on the gender of the person evaluating the experience. Women are more likely than men to label problematic situations as sexual harassment (Gutek et al., 1980; Collins and Blodgett, 1981; Gutek et al., 1983; Baker, Terpstra, and Larntz, 1990; Fitzgerald and Ormerod, 1991; Rosette, Akinola, and Ma, 2018). The intersection of gender and race may also influence the relationship between beliefs and seeing sexual harassment. Often women of color may be more likely to experience various forms of workplace harassment, including sexual harassment (see MacKinnon, 1979; DeFour, 1990; Murrell, 1996; Berdahl and Moor, 2006; Onwuachi-Willi, 2018; Cantalupo, 2019; Minnotte and Legerski, 2019; Brassel et al., 2020; Jones, Trina, and Wade, 2020) BUT it is white women who are most likely to label AND REPORT their experiences as sexual harassment (Shupe et al., 2002; Wasti and Cortina, 2002; Ho et al., 2012). In line with the above research, we include a control for *respondent race and gender* with a dichotomous variable (1 = White women, 0 = White men and women and men of color).⁵

⁵We estimated models with a separate measure of race and gender; findings were substantively similar to what we present here.

Age and employment status together relate to beliefs and detecting sexual harassment. Young workers are less likely to see and report sexual harassment (Chan et al., 2008). They are more likely to be “precarious workers” who are likely to be the target of sexual harassment but may lack knowledge about their workplace rights or formal harassment reporting processes (see Good and Cooper, 2016). Models include a set of dichotomous variables that combine *age and employment status*: young workers (18–30 years), mid-age workers (30–45 years), and older workers (45+ years). We control for *education level* with a dichotomous variable indicating a respondent’s highest level of education (1 = Bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, PhD or advanced degree, 0 = Associate’s degree, high school diploma/GED, less than high school). We control for *political orientation* with a dichotomous variable (1 = very conservative or conservative, 0 = moderate, liberal, very liberal). Finally, we control for whether the *respondent ever experienced EEOC-defined workplace sexual harassment* by asking if they had ever experienced unwanted sexual behaviors, advances, remarks, attention, or requests for sexual favors at work (1 = yes, 0 = no) (Stockdale, O’Connor, Gutek, and Geer, 2002; EEOC, 2021).

Models

We first calculate means of all analytic variables. To determine whether respondents view engineering as a male-dominated field, we calculate their average score on two male-typed engineering indicators. To address our first research question (To what extent do personal beliefs about gender and meritocracy relate to seeing an illegal male-female interaction as inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment?) we estimate a set of multinomial logistic (ML) logistic regression models with all controls. ML produces estimates coefficients for different dichotomizations of the interpretation of the interaction between Mark and Sally as: (1) *neither* sexual harassment nor inappropriate; (2) *either* inappropriate or sexual harassment; (3) *inappropriate and* sexual harassment. The first set of analyses includes the gender belief measures while the second only the merit measure.⁶ ML models produce beta coefficients, but we transform them into odds ratios when describing results.

To address our second research question (Does the relationship between personal beliefs and seeing a male-female interaction as inappropriate behavior and/or as sexual harassment differ in male-dominated versus ambiguous settings?), we estimate the same models described above but separately for half of sample randomly assigned to the ambiguous research setting and the other half randomly assigned to the engineering setting. To test whether observed differences in the relationship between beliefs and our outcome are statistically significant, we estimate statistical interactions (*belief x condition*) in models.

⁶We estimate logistic regression models (Appendix 3, Table A2) assessing whether a respondent labeled the interaction as inappropriate and in a separate model, as sexual harassment. In these models, results did not differ across engineering versus an ambiguous research setting.

Results

Sample Description

Table 36 shows that the typical respondent is ambivalent about Mark and Sally's laboratory interaction; on average, they see it as *either* sexual harassment or inappropriate (mean = 2.23) as opposed to seeing nothing problematic with the interaction or viewing it as unacceptable. Twenty percent of respondents think nothing was untoward about the interaction (i.e., it is not problematic), 37 percent are ambivalent about it, and 43 percent view it as inappropriate *and* sexual harassment (i.e., they view the interaction as unacceptable).

Table 36. Sample Descriptives (Mean, Standard Deviation), $n = 210$.

	Mean	SD	Coding
Labeling of interaction between Mark and Sally	2.24	0.77	1 (Neither sexual harassment nor inappropriate), 2 (either sexual harassment or inappropriate), 3 (sexual harassment and inappropriate)
Scale components			
Neither sexual harassment <i>nor</i> inappropriate*	20%	—	0.1
Either sexual harassment <i>or</i> inappropriate*	37%	—	0.1
Both sexual harassment <i>and</i> inappropriate *	43%		0.1
Gender Essentialism Scale	3.98	0.64	1 (low) to 5 (high)
Gender Egalitarian Scale	3.28	0.60	1 (low) to 5 (high)
Merit Scale	3.07	1.03	1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
Controls			
<i>Knowledge of Sexual Harassment</i>			
Confidence in explaining to a friend what constitutes sexual harassment	3.11	1.00	1 (Not at all confident) to 4 (very confident)
Participated in any sexual harassment training in past 10 years	36%	—	0.1

(Continued)

Table 36. (Continued)

	Mean	SD	Coding
<i>Demographic and Individual-level Characteristics</i>			
White female (vs. white men and non-white men and women)	28%	0.1	
Age (years) and employment status			
18–30 and employed	13%	—	0.1
31–45 and employed	19%	—	0.1
46–81 and employed	17%	—	0.1
Ever experienced sexual harassment	33%	—	0.1
Bachelor's degree or above (vs. less than HS degree, HS degree, Associate's degree, some college)	52%	—	0.1
Conservative/very conservative political orientation (vs. very liberal, liberal, moderate)	30%	—	0.1
Public Overreacts to Sexual Harassment Scale	2.39	1.02	1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
Scale components: Public ...			
... exaggerates amount of sexual harassment at work	2.62	1.25	1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
... spends too much time talking about sexual harassment	2.05	1.52	1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
... over-emphasizes seriousness of sexual harassment at work	2.49	1.17	1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Notes: * for the outcome measure, coding indicates the outcome definitely sexual harassment/inappropriate (vs. possibly and definitely not); 50% of the sample received the engineering setting version while the other half received the ambiguous setting version; mean differences across condition (engineering vs. ambiguous research setting) not significant.

Respondents lean slightly more to being gender essentialists than gender egalitarians while they fall even slightly lower on the meritocratic scale. That is, the beliefs of the sample are somewhat more essentialist than egalitarian while the sample is middle of the road regarding merit beliefs – they are very close to neither agreeing nor disagreeing with statements that comprise our measure of merit.

Respondents are confident in their ability to explain to a friend what constitutes sexual harassment. Just over one-third participated in a sexual harassment training in the past decade, a measure we consider to be a proxy for knowledge

(assuming here that sexual harassment training informs participants of the aspects of workplace sexual harassment).

When asked to consider the public's reaction to sexual harassment, respondents mostly conclude that the public does not overreact to sexual harassment (mean = 2.39, so somewhere between “disagree” and “neither disagree nor agree”). To be more specific, on average respondents are closer to agreeing that the public exaggerates the amount of sexual harassment at work (mean = 2.62) and that they over-emphasize its seriousness (mean = 2.49) but disagreed to a greater extent with the idea that the public spends too much time talking about sexual harassment.

Just about one quarter of the sample is a white female, over half hold a BA degree or more, 30 percent self-identify as politically conservative or very much so. One-third of sample reported experiencing sexual harassment at work at some point. Among the employed in our sample, most are between the ages of 31–45 (19 percent), followed by ages 46 and above (17 percent), and ages 18–30 (13 percent). The remainder of the sample is unemployed. Mean values did not differ in engineering versus ambiguous research settings.

To summarize, the typical respondent is an employed, 31- to 45-year-old white female with a BA or higher degree and for the most part, is not conservative. This typical respondent sees Mark and Sally's interaction in the laboratory as sexual harassment or as inappropriate, but not as both nor as none of these behaviors. She is slightly more gender essentialist than egalitarian or meritocratic but even so, she is not on one extreme – very much aligned with or very much not so – on each set of beliefs. She is very confident in her sexual harassment knowledge and has, for the most part, not widely participated in sexual harassment training. The typical respondent has not experienced sexual harassment in their work life and disagrees, for the most part, that the public overreacts to sexual harassment.

Half of the respondents were led to believe that Mark and Sally were engineers in a research setting while the other half were given no indication of their academic discipline to see whether a male-typed (engineering) setting might matter differently than an ambiguous one in shaping the relationship between beliefs and the sight of sexual harassment or an inappropriate behavior. To assess whether respondents understood engineering as a male-typed and male-dominated field, we asked them to assess the gender-typing and gender composition of the field of engineering. Table 37 shows that 72 percent of respondents recognized engineering as mostly male (compared to 14 percent who thought it was mixed gender and less than 1% who thought it was female-dominated). We asked their response to a set of statements (see Table 37) and combined these statements into a scale, the average score of which was 2.62, suggesting respondents are middle of the road (but slightly higher) in their view that engineering has a male-typed culture.

Below we describe the results from multinomial logistic models comparing the three levels of the outcome variable. We start with a description of findings in models that include two measures of gender beliefs and follow with a discussion of the results in models that include the merit belief measure.

Table 37. Perception of Engineering Culture, $n = 210$.

	Mean	SD	Scale
Engineering is comprised mostly of men	73%	—	0,1
Engineering has roughly the same number of women and men	14%	—	0,1
Engineering is mostly women	<1%	—	0,1
Engineering masculine typing scale	2.62	0.78	1 (least masculine) to 5 (most masculine)
Scale components:			
Engineering work is best performed by men	2.27	1.22	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
Compared to men, women are at a disadvantage in engineering	2.97	1.22	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
Women perform engineering work as well, if not better, than do men (R)	2.25	0.97	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
The culture of engineering rewards behaviors more generally attributed to men than to women	3.35	1.04	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
If I were the director of an engineering department, I would often believe that hiring men is a better investment in the future of the university than hiring women	2.31	1.17	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

Note: Mean differences across condition (engineering vs. ambiguous research setting) not significant.

Gender Beliefs

For ease of interpreting results (i.e., the two contrasts in multinomial model outcomes), we describe respondents who see Mark and Sally's interaction as *neither* inappropriate *nor* as sexual harassment as seeing "nothing problematic" with the interaction. We describe respondents as "ambivalent" if they see *either* sexual harassment *or* inappropriate behavior. If a respondent views Mark and Sally's interaction as inappropriate *and* sexual harassment, we say they view the interaction as "unacceptable."

Columns A and B in Table 38 tell an important story about gender beliefs. Gender essentialist beliefs (i.e., the belief that gender itself stems from immutable, biological factors) play no role in seeing Mark and Sally's behavior as inappropriate or as sexual harassment. In contrast, gender egalitarian beliefs are associated with lower odds of viewing Mark and Sally's interaction as unproblematic

Table 38. Multinomial Logistic Model Predicting Reaction to Mark and Sally's Interaction with Gender Belief Scales (Columns A and B) and Merit Scale (Columns C and D), $n = 210$ (Beta Coefficients).

	Gender Beliefs		Merit Beliefs	
	A	B	C	D
	Neither SH nor inappropriate (<i>entirely acceptable</i>) versus both SH and inappropriate (<i>unequivocally not acceptable</i>)	Either SH or inappropriate (<i>ambivalent</i>) versus both SH and inappropriate (<i>unequivocally not acceptable</i>)	Neither SH nor inappropriate (<i>entirely acceptable</i>) versus both SH and inappropriate (<i>unequivocally not acceptable</i>)	Either SH or inappropriate (<i>ambivalent</i>) versus both SH and inappropriate (<i>unequivocally not acceptable</i>)
Gender Essentialism Scale	-0.23 (0.47)	0.12 (0.37)	—	—
Gender Egalitarian Scale	-1.32** (0.54)	-1.15* (0.45)	—	—
Merit Scale	—	—	0.60* (0.28)	0.28 (0.23)
Controls				
<i>Knowledge of sexual harassment</i>				
Confidence in explaining to a friend what constitutes sexual harassment	-0.57* (0.25)	-0.58** (0.21)	-0.69** (0.25)	-0.66** (0.22)
Participated in any sexual harassment training in past 10 years	0.56 (0.51)	0.81* (0.43)	0.64 (0.50)	0.76^ (0.42)

<i>Engineering Culture</i>					
Engineering masculine typing scale	-0.24 (0.41)	-0.11 (0.32)	0.04 (0.34)	0.28 (0.29)	
Engineering mostly men (omitted: mostly women, mixed)	0.77 (0.58)	0.28 (0.45)	0.62 (0.56)	0.15 (0.43)	
<i>Demographic and Individual-level Characteristics</i>					
White female	0.19 (0.58)	0.48 (0.46)	-0.18 (0.57)	0.17 (0.45)	
Age and Employment status (omitted: 31–45 and employed and unemployed, all ages)					
18–30 & employed	-1.64 [^] (0.88)	-0.06 (0.57)	-1.24 (0.86)	0.16 (0.54)	
46–81 & employed	-0.56 (0.64)	0.15 (0.50)	-0.93 (0.65)	-0.07 (0.49)	
Ever experienced sexual harassment at work	-0.48 (0.54)	-0.50 (0.43)	-0.55 (0.53)	-0.49 (0.42)	
Bachelor's degree or above	1.28** (0.49)	0.42 (0.40)	1.38** (0.49)	0.40 (0.40)	
Conservative/very conservative political orientation	0.17 (0.56)	0.73 [^] (0.45)	-0.13 (0.56)	-0.66 (0.45)	
Public Overreacts to Sexual Harassment Scale	0.70** (0.25)	0.49* (0.22)	0.64** (0.26)	0.53* (0.23)	
Engineering setting	-0.29 (0.46)	0.15 (0.39)	-0.24 (0.46)	0.14 (0.37)	
Constant	5.07	4.11	-2.83	-1.59	
Pseudo R ²	0.18	0.18	0.17	0.17	

Notes: [^] $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$.

compared to viewing it as entirely acceptable ($b = -1.32$, odds ratio = 0.26) or being ambivalent about it ($b = -1.15$, odds ratio = 0.31). Said differently, the greater one's gender egalitarian beliefs, the more explicit they are in labeling Mark and Sally's interaction as both sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior. Although the gender belief measures are not highly correlated ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.001$) to cause collinearity, we estimated models (not shown but available upon request) with only one measure of gender beliefs at a time. Results were substantively similar.

The relationship between some control variables and the outcome are useful to note. Being confident in one's ability to explain sexual harassment is associated with lower odds of being ambivalent about the interaction ($b = -0.58$, odds ratio = 0.55) or seeing nothing problematic about it ($\beta = -0.57$, odds ratio = 0.56) compared to seeing it as unacceptable. So, the odds someone is confident in their knowledge of sexual harassment and either sees nothing problematic with or is ambivalent about the interaction are roughly 45 percent the odds of seeing that interaction is *both* inappropriate *and* sexual harassment.

Turning to Column A in Table 38, we see that the percentage odds that an employed individual between the ages of 18–30 sees the interaction as non-problematic (vs. seeing it as unacceptable) are roughly 80 percent lower than the odds of the non-employed and older employed individuals ($\beta = -1.64$, odds ratio = 0.19). Those with at least a BA degree have greater odds ($\beta = 1.28$, odds ratio = 2.60) of seeing the interaction as non-problematic (vs. unacceptable). Looking to Table 38, Column B shows that having received sexual harassment training in the past decade is relevant to the comparison between being ambivalent about Mark and Sally's interaction (they consider it *either* inappropriate *or* sexual harassment) versus seeing the lab interaction is unacceptable. Having had this training increases the odds of being ambivalent about the interaction ($\beta = 0.18$, odds ratio = 2.24). Being politically conservative relates to the outcomes in a similar way; compared to political moderates and liberals, politically conservative respondents are more likely to be ambivalent (compared to being certain the interaction is unacceptable) in their labeling of Mark and Sally's interaction; the odds are roughly 107 percent ($\beta = 0.73$, odds ratio = 2.07) greater for conservatives versus those of different political leanings. Finally, the stronger one's belief that the public overreacts to sexual harassment, the greater their odds ($\beta = 0.49$, odds ratio = 1.63) of seeing nothing problematic with Mark and Sally's interaction as opposed to seeing it as entirely unacceptable.

Beliefs About Merit

Results in Columns C and D of Table 38 establish how merit beliefs relate to the outcome. Greater adherence to meritocratic beliefs is positively related to seeing Mark and Sally's laboratory interaction as unproblematic versus seeing it as entirely unacceptable. That is, the stronger one's belief that good things come from hard work and talent – the mainstay of meritocratic beliefs – the greater their net odds ($\beta = 0.60$, odds ratio = 1.82) of seeing nothing problematic with the interaction compared to finding it both inappropriate and sexual harassment.

Confidence in knowledge about sexual harassment, conceptualized as being able to explain it to a friend, is associated with the labeling of the interaction. The odds are similar—about 50% lower—for seeing nothing problematic or being ambivalent about it versus it being entirely unacceptable. Our second measure of sexual harassment knowledge operates in a different direction. Having been trained is associated with roughly 113 percent greater odds of being ambivalent versus entirely certain the lab interaction is unacceptable. Finally, the more one believes that the public overreacts to sexual harassment, the greater their net odds of being ambivalent about the interaction compared to viewing it as entirely unacceptable ($\beta = 0.53^*$, odds ratio = 1.69).

We found no difference in the relationship between either gender or merit beliefs in engineering laboratory versus an ambiguous laboratory setting. We tested the robustness of this finding of no difference across setting in three ways. First by observing the non-significance of the control for version (engineering vs. ambiguous) in the full models. Second, by estimating separate models for the engineering versus ambiguous models (not shown, available upon request) and seeing the same pattern of relationship between beliefs and the outcome in both settings (and as the relationship between the setting and outcomes in the full model). Third, by estimating a statistical interaction between beliefs and setting in the full model (not shown, available upon request).

Discussion

Overall, we find an association between holding some gender beliefs and meritocratic beliefs and one's likelihood of "seeing" inappropriate, sexual harassment as it occurs to others. Contrary to previous research on gender essentialist beliefs and support for gender discrimination (e.g., Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018), we find no relationship between holding gender essentialist beliefs and describing the interaction between Mark and Sally as inappropriate and/or as sexual harassment and so we find no support for *H1*. We suspect that gender essentialist thinking may relate better to seeing sexual harassment happen to oneself because one is best able to assess their own supposedly innately gendered traits. One way to test this explanation is to ask an individual to imagine being involved in an incidence of workplace sexual harassment (i.e., a scenario in which they imagine they are the "victim"). It is important to note that when we predict sexual harassment *or* inappropriate behavior separately (see Table A2), gender essentialism is positively related to labeling the interaction as inappropriate but not as sexual harassment. This finding aligns with the notion that essentialists' "mental label" leaves no room to consider sexual harassment between a man and woman; instead, the interaction between Mark and Sally is an attempt to affirm the idea that men and women are inherently different. We are not surprised then that the measure describing the interaction as unacceptable in our models (the interaction between Mark and Sally is inappropriate *and* sexual harassment) is not related to gender essentialist views, net of controls.

Holding gender egalitarian beliefs are related to labeling an illegal interaction as inappropriate and as sexual harassment, results that support our second

hypothesis. An egalitarian's "mental label" that women and men have the same rights and deserve equal treatment makes them more likely to detect inappropriate behavior and illegal sexual harassment. We suspect the mechanisms whereby egalitarian beliefs relate to identifying sexual harassment are two-fold. First, egalitarians may have a better understanding of broader gender inequalities, both in the workplace and outside of it. Their capacity to see broader inequality may account for their ability to see a specific type of gender-based inequality: sexual harassment. Our models control for knowledge of sexual harassment, but we cannot control for knowledge of general gender-based inequalities or any other legal rights of women and men at work and elsewhere. Second, our fictitious interaction occurs in a laboratory and gender egalitarians may be well-cued into STEM women's challenges. While results do not differ across laboratory context (engineering laboratory vs. an ambiguous laboratory setting), it suggests that they understand all women as easy targets of inappropriate and sexually harassing behaviors. Studying the same interaction in a non-research setting could test this last mechanism.

While research to date has examined the association between holding meritocratic beliefs and seeing workplace discrimination (see Eyer, 2012), we are among the first to empirically test whether beliefs about merit relate to viewing an interaction as inappropriate behavior and/or sexual harassment. We hypothesized that the stronger one's adherence to beliefs about merit, the less likely one is to identify inappropriate and/or sexually harassing behavior (*H3*). Our results partially support our hypothesis; stronger adherence to meritocratic beliefs is associated with seeing nothing wrong with Mark and Sally's interaction.

Knowledge of sexual harassment, which we measure as the confidence to explain what constitutes sexual harassment to a friend and sexual harassment training attendance, stands out as a significant predictor of seeing the interaction as inappropriate and sexual harassment in models including both gender beliefs and merit beliefs. Ones' confidence in explaining sexual harassment to a friend could stem from increased social media exposure to sexual harassment cases in the #MeToo era. With this greater exposure may come the belief (either real or perceived) that one can identify sexual harassment. Attending sexual harassment training, as 36 percent of respondents have done in the past decade, is associated with a feeling of ambivalence toward rather than unaccepting of an illegal act of sexual harassment. That is, our results demonstrate that those with training are less likely to call Mark and Sally's interaction completely unacceptable compared to someone without training. We suspect this happens because trainees are more familiar with the legality of sexual harassment and may be uncertain if the fictitious scenario presented qualifies as such. At the same time, we do not know the content of the training a respondent had. Sexual harassment trainings are common forms of sexual harassment prevention in American workplaces (Perry, Kulik, Bustamante, and Golom, 2010), yet evidence of their effectiveness is inconclusive (Roehling and Huang, 2017). Nor are all trainings alike; most attempt to change employees' behaviors, attitudes, skills, and knowledge around sexual harassment (Roehling and Huang, 2017) but do so differently and have varying effectiveness. For example, traditional video trainings can change employees' knowledge, but

may not change behaviors and attitudes (Perry et al., 1998). Further, anti-discrimination trainings can unintentionally exaggerate differences between demographic groups and benefit the majority group. These trainings can also increase bias by making it more cognitively available in the minds of those undergoing training (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018; Wynn, 2018). Sexual harassment trainings which prohibit specific behaviors and signal that men trainees are probable perpetrators can lead to a decrease in the number of women managers within a company. In companies with a high proportion of women in management positions, sexual harassment trainings may activate group threat among men and with it, backlash against women, especially against women managers (Dobbin and Kalev, 2019).

#MeToo changed the general public's views on sexual harassment, reducing both women and men's dismissal of sexual misconduct (Szekeres, Shuman, and Saguy, 2020). The attitudes of respondents reflect this new understanding; overall they felt the public does not overreact to sexual harassment. The media often highlights extreme acts of sexual harassment altering public perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment. Thus, when seeing milder acts of harassment, like our scenario, even those who believe the public does not overreact to sexual harassment may not label Mark and Sally's interaction as such.

On the other hand, the stronger one believes that the public overreacts to sexual harassment, the more likely it is that they see Mark and Sally's interaction as acceptable. Believing the public overreacts to sexual harassment may also be closely related to the idea that some have been punished unfairly for sexual harassment, that workplaces are to blame for harassment (Grimsley, 1996), or that women exaggerate, lie, and misinterpret events as sexual harassment rather than just a "misunderstanding" (Buddie and Miller, 2001). Exposing respondents to a scenario depicting a more extreme act of sexual harassment could further help us explain this finding. We were especially interested in seeing whether one of the most male-typed and male-dominated fields, engineering, would exacerbate the relationship between gender beliefs (gender essentialism and egalitarianism), merit (personal responsibility for sexual harassment), and recognition of sexual harassment. We find no evidence that the connection between gender and meritocratic beliefs differ in an engineering research setting versus an ambiguous one. We did find belief systems operate similarly across setting, possibly because both are laboratory research settings. No matter what type of setting (male-typed or gender ambiguous), just knowing that the interaction occurred in a research lab made the settings similar in the respondent's minds. That is, for respondents, a lab is just a lab; the STEM discipline of the lab users is irrelevant. Contrasting an engineering research setting outside of a laboratory with, for example, a research setting in a female-typed non-laboratory setting can help tease out whether the gender-typing of a field moderates the relationship between beliefs and seeing sexual harassment.

Conclusions

Our study addresses a valid and growing social problem. Given growing concern about gendered workplace experiences, sexual harassment is an increasingly

common discussion topic among employers, workers, and academics. Women are the most likely to be targets of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and workplace harassment, particularly in male-dominated work environments like engineering (Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout, 2001; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, and Owen, 2002; Berdahl, 2007; Rospenda, Richman, and Shannon, 2009). They experience higher rates of workplace mistreatment than men, including sexual harassment and generalized workplace harassment (Uggen and Blackstone, 2004; McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone, 2012; Harnois and Bastos, 2018; Minnotte and Legerski, 2019; Roscigno, 2019). In 2019, the United States EEOC received 7,514 sexual harassment complaints, 10 percent of *all* workplace harassment charges (EEOC, 2019a). Women filed nearly 80 percent of these charges (EEOC, 2019b). Yet the pervasiveness of sexual harassment experiences in women's lives is far greater than the number of EEOC filings suggest (Fitzgerald and Cortina, 2018). Anywhere from 80–87 percent of women in the USA have experienced an incidence of sexual harassment in their adult lifetimes (Keplinger et al., 2019).

Regardless of its form, sexual harassment experiences have serious implications for the health, well-being, and organizational commitment of victims, particularly for women. Women who experience sexual harassment suffer from severe health problems and work-related stressors that lead to lower job satisfaction, lower leadership ambition, and even job loss (see Barling et al., 1996; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald, 1997; Piotrkowski, 1998; Richman et al., 1999; Harned and Fitzgerald, 2002; Willness, Steel, and Lee, 2007; Chan et al., 2008; Merkin, 2008; Rospenda, Fujishiro, Shannon, and Richman, 2008; de Haas, Timmerman, and Höing, 2009; Ho, Dinh, Bellefontaine, and Irving, 2012; Okechukwu et al., 2014; Reed, Collinsworth, Lawson, and Fitzgerald, 2016; Fitzgerald and Cortina, 2018; Lindquist and McKay, 2018; Thurston et al., 2019). Specifically relevant to our current study, interviews with women faculty working in science, engineering, and medicine who had been sexually harassed revealed that some victims stepped down from leadership positions, left their institutions, or left their fields all together following their sexual harassment experiences (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Limitations

While the study contributes to an important understanding of sexual harassment experiences in research settings and the influence of gender and merit beliefs on the recognition of such incidents, we would be remiss if we did not discuss study limitations. First, we examine what shapes peoples' recognition of sexual harassment in a scenario in which respondents have very little context with which to form opinions. The labeling of an act of sexual harassment at work depends on a multitude of contextual factors we cannot account for here. In-depth interviews with workers in an organization may provide greater perspective on how individuals' adherence to certain beliefs matter in recognizing sexual harassment in the workplace. Our study explores how beliefs shape the recognition of sexual harassment, not how an individual's beliefs about gender and meritocracy might

affect their reactions to the behavior (e.g., intervene, do nothing, approach the accuser, etc.). It is important to understand the behavioral outcomes of holding these beliefs for universities and employers interested in reducing sexual harassment incidents by seeking bystander assistance training within their institutions.

Contributions

Intersectionality and an Agenda for Future Research

Transferability of the Results to Other Types of Workplace Discrimination. Discriminatory behaviors and harassment at work are not limited to sexual harassment. Men and women encounter other types of gender-based discrimination and harassment, like that found on the basis of family status (family responsibilities discrimination [FRD]). FRD is unique from sexual harassment in that society sees FRD as a “status of choice” (see [Blaine and Williams, 2004](#); [Major and Sawyer, 2009](#); [Eyer, 2012](#)). In other words, many people no longer think of having children as a “natural” or inevitable part of the adult life course, but rather as a choice that some individuals make. When a status is “chosen” or “controllable” – as in the case of family responsibilities – individuals’ ability to detect FRD may be especially influenced by their beliefs because they already lean toward seeing the harassment as warranted (see [Savani et al., 2011](#); [Hebl, Moreno, and King, 2018](#)). Future research should consider how adherence to beliefs beyond those studied here affect individuals’ ability to detect discrimination on the basis of characteristics that are perceived to be both within (e.g., family) and outside of (e.g., gender or race/ethnicity) employees’ control.

Transferability of the Results to Other Social Spaces. The link between one’s beliefs and interpretations of workplace interactions occur in a social context. They occur in informal spaces, highly regulated ones, and in spaces with varying cultures. Our analyses focused on a male-typed space, a university engineering department, and a gender-ambiguous space. Engineering is one of the most male-dominated and male-typed disciplines in university settings, both in the USA and elsewhere (for an exception, see [Kmec et al., 2019](#)). Studying engineering departments serves to highlight its male-typed culture. It is very likely that the connection between beliefs and the labeling of an illegal male-female interaction is very different in, for example, female-typed settings like education or nursing. Women “fit” in female-typed settings; society does not challenge their presence in them. As such, a negative male-female interaction, like sexual harassment, may seem more obvious or unacceptable in these spaces. Further, negative male-female interactions take place beyond academia, in work contexts with less inflexible and traditional career progressions, organizational cultures with varying power dynamic structures. Beliefs on meritocracy and gender matter in, for instance, corporate cultures.

What is more, the link between beliefs about gender and merit matter outside of the workplace. Currently Americans are deeply divided on an array of political and social issues ([Pew Research Center, 2017](#)), and the rest of the world grapples

with similar divisions as seen with Brexit (Schumacher, 2019). Our findings hint that people's belief systems are at the root of their interpretation of these issues. Future research should continue here, investigating the role of gender and meritocracy beliefs on sexual harassment in social spaces inside and outside of academia.

Transferability of the Results to Other Socio-Demographic Groups. The relationship between gender beliefs, meritocratic beliefs, and sexual harassment recognition may operate differently when members of different socio-demographic groups are involved in workplace sexual harassment. We suspect that when individuals attempt to make sense of a situation involving an illegal act of sexual harassment, they draw on widely shared beliefs about a person's socio-demographic characteristics. Seeing an act as sexual harassment is a social process involving at least two actors (a perpetrator and a victim), so like any social process involving actors, individuals draw on deeply ingrained status beliefs and biases about the groups to which those actors belong to help make sense and form opinions of the situation. When a victim is an underrepresented racial/ethnic minority, status beliefs about race and ethnicity inform the interpretation. Seeing sexual harassment may differ if a victim is from a lower social class compared to a higher one or when one is young versus old. Our scenario made the gender of Mark and Sally obvious so we believe what we observe will operate similarly with a female victim. Our observations may differ with a male victim; people may assume that only a "weak" man is harassed and so their beliefs about gender may operate differently. Our findings may not transfer the same way to situations involving race and ethnic minority victims (although we did not indicate Mark and Sally's race, respondents' likely assumption is that they are white absent other signals). Future research should vary the victim's socio-demographic characteristics to test this idea.

Research and Applied Contributions

This study contributes in multiple ways to the growing body of work on the sexual harassment of women, especially as it occurs in male-dominated work cultures. We are among the first to survey a representative sample of America's sex, race, and age composition and to expose each respondent to the same instance of sexual harassment in a research setting. By exposing all respondents to the same interaction, we are confident that we capture a real relationship between individuals' beliefs and their labeling of an act as sexual harassment.

Our study updates research on sexual harassment by collecting data in a time when the media regularly expose individuals to acts of and discussion about sexual harassment. The exposure to these conversations likely impacts the detection of sexual harassment. One of the first studies to investigate individuals' knowledge about sexual harassment is decades old, published near the time when US federal government recognized sexual harassment as an illegal workplace act. For example, 1981 study of roughly 7,000 subscribers to the Harvard Business Review (Collins and Blodgett, 1981) concluded that nearly all

respondents were able to label extreme behaviors as sexual harassment (e.g., “Mr. X has told me it would be good for my career if we went out together. I guess that means it would be bad for my career if I said no”) but far less able to identify an ambiguous interaction (e.g., “My supervisor (a man I work with) puts his hands on my arm when making a point”) as sexual harassment. Because the public’s knowledge of what constitutes sexual harassment and legal remedies around it have dramatically changed since the early 1980 – the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2018) found that by 2016, 94% of men knew that unwanted sexual remarks were sexual harassment and 97% of men knew that pressuring a female coworker for sex was sexual harassment – accounting for this knowledge is important. By including measures of sexual harassment knowledge using data collected in 2020 we can better capture how knowledge matters for “seeing” sexual harassment.

Second, we add to the growing body of research that examines the ways beliefs matter for individuals’ ability to see discrimination that *happens to others* (e.g., Cech et al., 2018; O’Connor and Kmec, 2020). Rightfully so, researchers have paid close attention to understanding sexual harassment as it happens to them but understanding the factors that lead people to see sexual harassment that happens to others is increasingly important considering the broader movement asking allies and bystanders to intervene in instances of workplace discrimination (Miller, 2017). In fact, the EEOC (2016) issued a report providing a series of recommendations for reducing workplace harassment that included a section on bystander intervention training.

Finally, our study has policy implications for the workplace. To reduce sexual harassment and discrimination of all kinds, individuals must be able to identify discriminatory behaviors, yet largely missing from attempts to mitigate workplace discrimination is consideration of personal beliefs about gender and merit. As we see in some models, having received sexual harassment training in the last decade does not always lead one to believe that the interaction between Mark and Sally is entirely unacceptable. If these beliefs are strongly tied to seeing inappropriate or sexually harassing behaviors, it is possible that when training employees about sexual harassment discrimination, appealing to their understanding of gender and the role of personal responsibility can be useful. For example, employer-led sexual harassment trainings, in both university and non-academic institutions, may be more effective (or at least more appealing) if they start with a recognition of the influence of gender beliefs on interpretation of an action (i.e., a discussion of attribution theory) before moving to discussions of the legality of the harassment.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1

Scenario

Dr Sally Fisher and five other [engineer/researchers] have been working together for several months [to develop a new cell phone battery/on an important new research project]. They frequently work into the late evening. Dr Mark Holmes, the Department Director, recently attended one of these evening work sessions.

To support the [engineers/researchers], he brought them pizza and told them they could skip the next day's department meeting. On his way out, he noticed Dr Sally Fisher's appearance. He approached her and said, "You look very attractive in that skirt. You should wear it more often."

For the rest of that work session, Sally could not focus on her work. She frequently wore skirts to work and Mark often made comments like this about her appearance in them. These repeated comments made her feel uncomfortable. And like the other times, she felt uneasy with Mark's comments at the work session, so she left and tried to avoid Mark for the rest of the week.

Appendix 2

Table A1. Scale Operationalizations.

Gender Essentialism Scale

A scale ($\alpha = 0.89$) that combines respondents' agreement with the following statements: "Differences between women and men's personalities are in their DNA," "Men and women have different abilities," "Genes are at the root of differences between the sexes," "People generally over-estimate how much sex differences in behavior are biologically based (reverse)," "Differences between men and women in behavior and personality are largely determined by genetic predisposition." "Fathers must learn what mothers are able to do naturally," "People tend to be either masculine or feminine: there's not much middle ground," "Wherever you go in the world, men and women differ from one another in the same kinds of ways," Members of each gender have many things in common (rev)," "It is possible to know about many aspects of a person once you learn their gender," "Trying to make boys and girls have similar likes and dislikes is pointless," "In 100 years, society will think of the differences between women and men in much the same way as today," "Women and men are fundamentally different," "Women are innately more nurturing than men," "Knowing that someone is a man tells you very little about what the person is like (rev)," "Men and women's personalities are more or less the same (rev)," "Men and women differ in numerous ways," "Their underlying nature makes it difficult for men to learn to behave more like women," "Differences between boys and girls are fixed at birth," "Mothers are naturally more sensitive to a baby's feelings than fathers are," "Men and women have different personality types," "Male and female brains probably work in very different ways," "Differences between men and women are primarily determined by biology," "Women are naturally less aggressive than men," "Upbringing by parents and the social environment have far greater significance for the development of sex differences than inborn differences in female and male brains (rev)" (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale (SRES).

A scale ($\alpha = 0.94$) that combines respondents' agreement with items that measure beliefs about equality across five dimensions: marital roles (e.g., "Cleaning up the dishes should be the shared responsibility of husbands and wives"), parental roles (e.g., "A husband should leave the care of young babies to his wife", reversed), employment roles (e.g., "Women have as much ability as men to make major business decisions"), social-interpersonal-heterosexual roles (e.g., "A woman should be careful not to appear smarter than the man she is dating", reversed), and educational roles (e.g., "Expensive job training should be given mostly to men", reversed).

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued)

Meritocracy Scale

A scale ($\alpha = 0.88$) that combines respondents' agreement with the following statements: 1. Overall, U.S. society is equitable and fair. 2. Individuals are personally responsible for their position in society. 3. Opportunities for economic advancement are available to anyone who cares to look for them. 4. Society has reached a point where poor people and rich people have equal opportunities for achievement. 5. Society has reached a point where white Americans and racial/ethnic minority Americans have equal opportunities for achievement. 6. Society has reached a point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement.

Appendix 3

Table A2. Logistic Models Predicting Seeing Sexual Harassment (Columns A and B) and Inappropriate Behavior (Columns C and D), $n = 210$ (Odds Ratios).

	A: Sexual Harassment ^a	B: Sexual Harassment	C: Inappropriate ^a	D: Inappropriate
Gender Essentialism Scale	0.86 (0.29)	—	1.69 (0.66)	—
Gender Egalitarian Scale	2.44* (0.98)	—	2.07^ (0.88)	—
Merit Scale	—	0.75 (0.15)	—	0.64^ (0.15)
Controls				
<i>Knowledge of Sexual Harassment</i>				
Confidence in explaining to a friend what constitutes sexual harassment	1.83** (0.36)	1.95*** (0.39)	1.14 (0.22)	1.2 (0.23)
Participated in any sexual harassment training in past 10 years	0.42* (0.16)	0.43* (0.16)	1.29 (0.52)	1.20 (0.48)
<i>Engineering Culture</i>				
Engineering masculine typing scale	1.16 (0.35)	0.85 (0.21)	1.12 (0.38)	1.10 (0.30)
Engineering mostly men (omitted: mostly women, mixed)	0.42* (0.18)	0.48^ (0.19)	0.93 (0.40)	1.05 (0.45)
<i>Demographic and Individual-level Characteristics</i>				
White female	0.62 (0.27)	0.82 (0.34)	1.29 (0.59)	1.53 (0.71)

Age & Employment status (omitted: 31–45 and employed and unemployed, all ages)

18–30 and employed	3.37* (1.82)	2.64 (1.37)^a	1.65 (0.93)	1.19 (0.66)
46–81 and employed	1.34 (0.60)	1.59 (0.71)	1.39 (0.75)	1.84 (0.99)
Ever experienced sexual harassment at work	2.02^ (0.79)	1.98^ (0.77)	0.89 (0.39)	0.97 (0.41)
Bachelor's degree or above	0.53^ (0.19)	0.52^ (0.19)	0.36** (0.14)	0.32** (0.13)
Conservative/very conservative political orientation	0.68 (0.29)	0.73 (0.31)	0.98 (0.43)	1.03 (0.46)
Public Overreacts to Sexual Harassment Scale	0.61* (0.12)	0.61** (0.13)	0.64* (0.13)	1.43 (0.63)
Engineering setting	1.17 (0.40)	1.16 (0.39)	1.27 (0.48)	1.22 (0.45)
Constant	0.03	2.67	0.07	16.64
Pseudo R ²	0.21	0.20	0.11	0.11

Notes: ^p ≤ 0.10, *p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01, ***p ≤ 0.00.1.

^a For outcome measures, coding indicates the outcome definitely sexual harassment/inappropriate (vs. possibly and definitely not).