

Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disempowering Acts: A Comparison of Gender and Identity-Based Explanations for Perceived Offensiveness

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Policy-makers, courts, employers, and individuals must understand perceptual differences among individuals when managing workplace behaviors. Offensive acts that lead to employee disempowerment require particular attention as these behaviors are related to several negative organizational consequences. Women tend to be more sensitive to offensive behavior, but it is unknown whether gender or other factors explain this higher sensitivity. In this study, sensitivity to disempowering acts was assessed by measuring perceived offensiveness reported by male and female observers of videotaped segments of highly confrontive verbal exchanges. Competing hypotheses tested gender and identification with the target of disempowering acts as the underlying reason for women's higher sensitivity. Findings indicated that women reported higher perceived offensiveness regardless of the gender of the target of disempowerment.

KEY WORDS: disempowerment; offensiveness; gender.

Every employer must deal with problem behaviors in the workplace that range from subtle occurrences of hostility or incivility to obvious acts of harassment (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Negative consequences of mismanaging or ignoring such problem behaviors range from mild dissent and lowered job involvement (Laband & Lentz, 1998) to costly lawsuits (Livingston, 1982) and high turnover (Dworkin, 1993). When hostile or unproductive exchanges occur, regardless of how subtle, negative emotions can permeate the organization and adversely affect entire groups of employees, not just the few directly involved in a hostile exchange (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Frost & Robinson, 1999; Glomb, Richman, Hulin, & Drasgow, 1997).

The well-known construct of empowerment has been studied in organizational settings (Spreitzer, 1995), and recently an obverse construct, disempowerment, has been introduced (Eylon & Bamberger, 2000; Vance, Ensher, & Hendricks, 2000). Disempowerment is any form of diminished employee performance or productivity that results from some interfering force or influence. One particular source of this interference can be in the form of disempowering behavior enacted by someone in the workplace (e.g., supervisor, colleague, customer, subordinate). In this article, we define disempowering acts as any intentional or unintentional, verbal or nonverbal behavior expressed in the workplace that can be interpreted by the disempowered employee as hostile, offensive, intimidating, demeaning, or threatening (Vance et al., 2000; Young, Vance, & Ensher, 2002). The focus of this study is upon disempowering acts that may be directed toward a target individual or group, and that upon perception, result in a negative affect response (i.e., disempowerment experience) and, ultimately, interfere with the target's work performance and productivity. The disempowerment experience may result from being the direct recipient or indirect recipient (e.g.,

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through observation) of disempowering acts, and has been linked to harmful effects on a person's self-efficacy, perceived personal control or power (Eylon & Bamberger, 2000; Vance et al., 2000), and a diminished sense of credibility. At its worst, disempowerment results in perceived offensiveness, and, as attendant to sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination in the workplace, it may lead to lower job performance or leaving a job (Laband & Lentz, 1998).

As more resources are being committed to developing policies and legislation to measure behavior and enact justice in cases of workplace harassment, there is an increased urgency to understand how men and women perceive behaviors in the workplace (Woody, Viney, Bell, & Bensko, 1996). Moreover, employers must be aware that healthy interaction within the workplace is important to employee well-being and productivity (Danna & Griffin, 1999). An exploration of disempowering acts and their effects in the workplace is needed to further our understanding of organizational behavior and, on a practical level, to prevent damaging and costly lawsuits (Vance et al., 2000).

Although we have some evidence that women and men perceive the same behaviors differently (Baird, Bensko, Bell, Viney, & Woody, 1995; Montgomery, Kane, & Vance, in press), we do not know whether the cause of such perceptions is gender-based or influenced by other factors. Vance et al. (2000) found that women perceived disempowering acts as more offensive than did men, but they questioned whether the finding had a gender-based explanation or was more a matter of the female participants' identification with the female target of disempowering acts. Other researchers have attempted to challenge the gender-based "essentialism" view (e.g., Krefting, 2000) of sensitivity to harassing or disempowering acts, but no compelling evidence has emerged (Jones, Remland, & Brunner, 1987; Powell, 1986; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). The purposes of this study are to examine possible gender differences in sensitivity to disempowering acts, and assess the extent to which the affective response of offensiveness upon perceiving disempowering acts is gender-based or perhaps better explained by an identification with the target of disempowerment.

DISEMPOWERMENT

Eylon and Bamberger (2000) described disempowerment as an opposing construct to empowerment, and speculated that just as empowerment is as-

sociated with feelings of high self-efficacy and higher levels of performance, disempowerment is associated with reduced feelings of self-efficacy and levels of performance. A disempowering act is any intentional or unintentional, verbal or nonverbal behavior that impedes productivity. Disempowering acts are typically characterized as intimidating, hostile, or demeaning. Disempowering acts may not necessarily be perceived as offensive (Vance et al., 2000), and they are typically directed at one or more individuals, referred to here as the target of disempowerment. The disempowerment experience involves a negative affective response that may result from perceiving various forms of disempowering acts such as hurtful, domineering, or destructive verbal or nonverbal behavior (Eylon & Bamberger, 2000; Vance et al., 2000). The disempowerment experience and its potentially negative affective response are not limited only to direct targets of disempowering acts, but also can be experienced "vicariously" through observation of a target of disempowering acts, such as when one takes offense at the perceived mistreatment of another.

The negative affective response that stems from disempowering acts could manifest itself in a number of forms, such as psychological withdrawal, fear, feelings of incompetence and lack of self-efficacy, a perceived loss of credibility, personal control or power, and feelings of displeasure and personal offense—all of which can diminish response strength and distract from work performance. Of course, the mere perception of a disempowering act does not guarantee a negative affective response, because two people can perceive the same behavior yet experience very different personal reactions to that behavior. Therefore, someone may observe a disempowering act upon another person, but neither the person who is the target of the disempowering act nor the observer may perceive it to be offensive.

Disempowering acts also are not limited to active incivility or conscious low-intensity deviant behavior, such as rudeness, discourtesy, or showing lack of respect, which are aimed to produce a negative impact upon another person (e.g., see Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Disempowering acts can also include "innocent" behavior that unintentionally evokes offense or other forms of disempowerment experience, such as George W. Bush's use of the word "crusade" to explain his commitment to fighting world terrorism, which resulted in a decidedly negative affective response among many Muslims who were directly reminded of the origin of the term. Thus it is difficult to claim that specific behaviors are universally offensive.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SENSITIVITY TO DISEMPOWERING ACTS

To examine gender differences in sensitivity to disempowering acts, Vance et al. (2000) used videotaped segments of disempowering verbal behaviors from Senate interviews with Anita Hill during confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Nominee, Clarence Thomas. The authors showed the videotaped segments to men and women and found that women perceived more offensive behavior than did men who viewed the same segments. The authors noted that it was unclear whether or not gender was the main cause of perceived offensiveness. Perhaps other factors, such as identification with the female target, Anita Hill, was the reason for women's perceptions of greater offensiveness.

That women perceive behaviors as harassing or disempowering more often than men was also found by several other researchers (Baird et al., 1995; Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Jones et al., 1987; Powell, 1986). In fact, some of these authors have explored alternatives to the gender-based explanation of sensitivity. Powell (1986), for example, examined differences between men's and women's definitions of sexual harassment and tested sex and gender-role identity as possible effects on individuals' definitions of sexual harassment. Powell found that sex was a predominant factor in defining harassment whereas gender-role identity (i.e., masculine or feminine) had only a minor impact on respondents' definitions of harassment. In addition, Jones et al. (1987) hypothesized that perceived power of an individual would influence observers' perceptions of harassing behavior; however, no support was found for this contention.

Granted, these studies deal specifically with sexual harassment, but perceptions and evaluations of the appropriateness and harmfulness of behaviors is included in these studies. Further, disempowering behaviors, whether or not they are conscious or intentional, encompass harassing behaviors and have been used to extend the concept of hostile working environment under a "reasonable woman" standard (Vance et al., 2000). Gender has remained a prepotent factor in explaining differences between men's and women's perceptions of harassing or disempowering acts, and despite investigation of other factors, possible alternative explanations remain unexplored. One possible explanation for gender differences in sensitivity to disempowering acts is the effect of gender identification formed for a target of disempowerment.

Identity Groups

Several theorists have provided explanations for why we identify with certain individuals or groups. The similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) suggests that we are attracted to individuals or groups of individuals who are perceived to be similar to us. Similarity provides a foundation of familiarity from which individuals draw comfort and liking for another person. Similarity effect has been studied in several work settings on facets such as race, gender, or age. For example, Strauss, Barrick, and Connerley (2001) applied the similarity effect in a performance-rating process and found that perceived similarity on some personality dimensions was positively related to supervisor and peer ratings of performance. Although the similarity effect has not been examined in relation to disempowerment, it provides a possible explanation for the relationship between perceived similarity and positive affect or evaluation of another person.

From a different but related perspective, Bell, Denton, and Nkomo (1993) suggested that intergroup theory is relevant to the explanation of why we identify with groups of similar others and why groups of individuals with shared characteristics may perceive situations similarly. Intergroup theory (Alderfer, 1986; Alderfer & Smith, 1982) distinguishes between two main groups with whom we form an identification: identity and organization. Identity groups are composed of individuals with whom we share similar characteristics such as age, race, gender, ethnicity, and family. Organization groups are made up of those individuals who hold similar rank or organizational position.

Related to intergroup theory and even more specific to group identification is reference group theory (Clark, 1972; Shibutani, 1961). Reference group theory suggests that we select groups of individuals to use for comparative purposes. Reference groups can be composed of individuals with whom we share characteristics such as age, gender, or race, or with whom we share a common situation or experience. We also tend to develop a perceived association with individuals who belong to groups with whom we seek acceptance or share values.

Strong perceptual and physical alliances are formed with members of reference groups (Clark, 1972). Of course, the strength of association with reference group members depends upon the extent to which we identify with group members. However, both reference group theory and intergroup theory

support the idea that physical characteristics are the most obvious indicant of a possible membership in a reference group. In fact, Cox (1993) contended that our perceived identification with group members is probably stronger and more automatic in characteristic or identity groups (i.e., groups of individuals with similar physical characteristics) than in other types of reference groups. Further, Cox believes that the strength of identification with a group, based on shared physical identity, influences our self-identity (Cox, 1993).

Most individuals seek to preserve a self-identity consistent with personal values and self-concept (Katz, 1960), and reference groups that enhance or support an individual's self-identity are typically preferred (Clark, 1972). Considering the strong perceptual connection perceived by reference group members and the linkage of group membership to our self-identity, it may be that we not only form an identification with reference group members but that we are influenced by events that affect reference group members. Clark presented evidence that the strong perceptual connection to reference groups is often the source of shared emotions from which reference group members form similar opinions. Furthermore, group members may interpret events differently when those events impact other group members (Bell et al., 1993; Clark, 1972).

Related to disempowerment, it seems that individuals may be influenced on the basis of perceptions of common group membership. That is, perhaps we interpret disempowering acts differently depending upon the characteristics of the target of disempowerment and whether or not the target of disempowerment is a member of our reference group. We know that disempowering acts can lead to perceived offensiveness, and it is likely that women will report higher levels of perceived offensiveness than will men (Vance et al., 2000). We do not know, however, how identification with the target of disempowering acts influences perceived offensiveness. Thus, a view that challenges a presumption of gender-based sensitivity is supported by identity theories, which would suggest that, among other physical-identity characteristics, observers will be more sensitive to disempowering acts when the target of disempowerment is of the same gender as the observer.

To determine whether higher sensitivity to disempowering acts is a function of an observer's gender or based on identification with the target of disempowering acts, we tested two competing hypotheses. The first hypothesis tests the prepotency of gender

itself as an explanation for perceived offensiveness:

H1: After viewing the same disempowering behavior, women will report higher levels of offensive behavior than will men, regardless of the gender of the target of disempowerment.

The second hypothesis emphasizes identification with the target of disempowerment. If identification with the target of disempowering acts has prepotency or is a stronger explanation for perceived offensiveness, then it is likely that men will report higher perceptions of offensiveness when the target is a man and women will report higher perceptions of offensiveness when the target is a women:

H2: After viewing the same disempowering behavior, women will report higher levels of offensive behavior than will men when the sex of the target of disempowerment is female, and men will report higher levels of offensive behavior than will women when the sex of the target of disempowerment is male.

METHOD

Video Treatment

One of the present researchers examined several hours of two separate televised testimonies. The first testimony was the footage of Anita Hill appearing before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee during the 1991 televised confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas. The second was an interview by the U.S. Senate Banking Committee with Roger Altman during the 1994 televised Whitewater hearings. These particular incidents were selected because they represented real situations where individuals had a clear motive in an easily observable manner (in these cases political) to attempt to disempower or diminish the credibility of a male and a female target.

From these two incidents, several video segments were identified as "put down" or disempowering behavior by the U.S. senators toward Hill and Altman. These videotaped segments were presented to 14 undergraduate students (6 men and 8 women) who rated them for degree of perceived offensiveness expressed toward Altman or Hill. The 11 video segments that received the highest rankings of perceived offensiveness were selected for use in this study: six Altman and five Hill video segments. A description of each of the 11 video segments is provided in Table I. The disempowering behaviors shown in these

Table I. Description of Altman and Hill Video Treatment Segments

Speaker	Description
<i>Altman segments</i>	
1 Sen. Alfonse D'Amato Republican, New York	Continues asking questions of Altman, interrupting when Altman attempts to respond
2 Sen. Alfonse D'Amato Republican, New York	Continues to interrupt and not allow Altman to respond in a way he prefers for clarification, instead pressing Altman for a simple <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> response
3 Sen. Alfonse D'Amato Republican, New York	Continues to interrupt Altman as he tries to respond, then begins talking aside to others, ignoring Altman, and suggesting that Altman is not being responsive
4 Sen. Phil Gramm Republican, Texas	In a directly confronting manner, "He is challenging your evasive term to which you say, 'no.' Now what part of 'no' don't you understand?"
5 Sen. Phil Gramm Republican, Texas	Loudly and vigorously attacks Altman's reference to a particular White House interaction as "incidental," interrupting Altman as he attempts to explain
6 Sen. Phil Gramm Republican, Texas	Asks Altman where a particular meeting took place. Altman seems unsure and tries to recall, giving a possible location, whereupon Gramm contradicts his answer, stating, "... and we have four witnesses" (also holding up four fingers for emphasis). He then begins another question with "Why on earth..." and then tries to make Altman's previous explanation appear ridiculous with "I wouldn't try to set up an interview in Senator D'Amato's office."
<i>Hill segments</i>	
1 Sen. Arlen Specter, Republican, Pennsylvania	Asks why didn't Hill, an experienced attorney, make any notes to defend herself at the time of the alleged behavior by Clarence Thomas. After she replies that she does not know why she did not 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, Delaware and Committee Chair	Biden presents a choice to "Miss 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 a brief moment of silence, then Hill's forced, polite light laughter.
4 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 then strongly asserts that she was not making a legal claim in past statements, 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." He then listens, sitting back with a stern, skeptical look, and other senators talk among themselves while Hill gives a similar response. Then Specter responds "OK." (with raised inflection on the "K" that clearly conveys his doubting her or dissatisfaction with her answer).
5 Sen. Alan Simpson Republican, Wyoming	Over two minutes 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?"

video segments were characterized by the students in such terms as *distrusting*, *confusing*, *insulting*, and *sermonizing*.

According to our first hypothesis (H1), we would expect that female participants would perceive higher levels of offensiveness in both video treatments regardless of the gender of the target of disem-

powerment. However, according to our competing "identification-based" second hypothesis (H2), we would predict that men would perceive higher levels of offensiveness for the Roger Altman video treatment whereas women would perceive higher levels of offensiveness for the Anita Hill video treatment.

Participants

A total of 679 undergraduate and graduate students from one private and one public university in Southern California viewed the Altman and Hill video segments. Fifty-one percent were women and 49% were men. Sixty-two percent were between the ages of 18 and 22 years, 25% were between 23 and 29, and 13% were 30 years or older. They reported their ethnicity as follows: 5% African American, 30% Asian American, 32% European American, 24% Hispanic, and 9% classified themselves as "Other" (includes Multiracial and Native American).

Measures

Both the Anita Hill and the Altman/Whitewater incidents were politically charged, which could easily influence perceptions of offensiveness in our video treatments. To obtain measures to control for participants' possible preexisting perceptions about Altman or Hill and experiences that might bias their reactions to the video segments, participants were asked, prior to viewing the video segments, about their level of familiarity with each person's testimony. Two sets of questions, one for Altman and the other for Hill, were used to assess familiarity and believability. First, one question was presented to assess the participant's familiarity with the Altman and Hill testimonies: "Are you familiar with the testimony given by Roger Altman (Anita Hill)?" Participants indicated their familiarity with a *yes* or *no* response. After each question regarding familiarity and an affirmative response, participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they believed Altman's or Hill's testimony. One question, measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, was used to assess believability. Participants were asked to circle the number that represented their opinion of the testimony of Altman or Hill where "1" was *Do Not Believe Him (Her) at All* and "7" was *Believe Him (Her) Completely*. Eight percent indicated that they were familiar with Altman's testimony, and 61% indicated that they were familiar with Hill's testimony. On average, participants had no opinion on believability of either Altman ($M = 3.95$) or Hill ($M = 4.03$).

After each segment, the video was stopped briefly, and participants were instructed to circle on a 7-point Likert scale the number that ranged from 1 (*not at all offensive*) to 7 (*extremely offensive*). The number represented the degree to which they believed that the behavior expressed toward the targets

(Altman or Hill) was offensive. To determine if the video segments were measuring one or several constructs of offensiveness, two separate exploratory factor analyses with varimax rotation were performed for the Altman and Hill questions. For Altman, all six items loaded highly on one factor, thus these items were combined to form one overall measure of offensiveness with a reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of .71. For Hill, all five items loaded highly on one factor, thus these items were combined to form one overall measure of offensiveness with a reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of .67.

RESULTS

No significant differences were found on offensiveness between those who were familiar with Hill's testimony and those who were not. However, there were significant differences on offensiveness between those who indicated that they were familiar with Altman's testimony and those who were not, $t = -2.03$, $p < .05$. Therefore, for consistency in analysis between the two video treatments of Altman and Hill, familiarity was used as a covariate. In addition, level of belief was highly correlated with both Altman's measure of offensiveness, $r = .28$, $p < .01$, and Hill's measure of offensiveness, $r = .19$, $p < .01$. Therefore, belief also was used as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

Two separate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed to assess the influence of gender of the disempowerment target upon men's and women's perceptions of offensiveness. In the Altman treatment, we found that there was a main effect for gender as female participants ($M = 5.51$) were more offended than male participants ($M = 4.96$) at the way that Altman was treated by the senators, $F(8, 671) = 21.12$, $p < .001$.

In the Hill treatment, we also found that there was a main effect for gender as female participants ($M = 3.06$) were more offended than male participants ($M = 2.36$) at the way that Hill was treated by the senators, $F(8, 671) = 14.07$, $p < .001$. There were no significant interactions found between gender, race, or age in this analysis.

DISCUSSION

The purposes of this study were to extend existing findings that women are more sensitive than men to

disempowering acts (Vance et al., 2000) and to distinguish the prepotency of gender or identification as the underlying explanation for sensitivity to disempowering acts and perceived offensiveness. Two competing views were used to determine whether perceived offensiveness is more strongly related to the observer's gender identification with the target of disempowering acts than with observer's gender. Male and female observers were shown videotaped segments of confrontive or disempowering behavior on male and female targets of disempowerment. On the basis of the results of this study, gender emerged as the predominant factor in explaining levels of perceived offensiveness, and these findings support a more gender-based explanation for sensitivity to disempowering acts.

From the gender-identification perspective it was expected that women would have strong gender identification with Anita Hill, and, therefore, they would report higher perceived offensiveness than would men after viewing the Hill segment. Similarly, men would identify with Roger Altman, and, therefore, they would report higher perceived offensiveness than would women after viewing Altman's segment. However, we found that women reported higher levels of offensiveness than men in both segments, regardless of the gender of the target of disempowerment.

Our findings provide useful initial evidence that women are not merely more sensitive to perceptions of disempowering acts upon other women, but that women may vicariously experience higher perceived offensiveness regardless of the gender of the target of disempowerment. The findings from this study are useful for managers, human resource professionals, and anyone who deals with employment law, diversity training, workplace conflict, or sensitivity training. That perceived offensiveness can be experienced vicariously by individuals who are not the target of disempowerment broadens our perspective on the management of relationships in the workplace. Moreover, that women may vicariously experience higher perceived offensiveness, whether the target of disempowerment is a man or a woman, adds depth to our understanding and effective management of workplace perceptions.

Certainly more needs to be done to understand perceived offensiveness and the effects of disempowering behaviors across groups and individuals, beyond gender. Although there is reason to believe that gender is a strong and compelling factor by which we develop an identification with group members

(Clark, 1972), there may be other relevant variables that require investigation. For instance, other factors of identification such as age, race, or ethnicity may yield different results. Although there were no significant interactions between gender, race, or age in this study, a post hoc analysis revealed that Asian Americans reported higher perceived offensiveness as they viewed the Altman testimony, whereas Hispanics and European Americans reported higher perceived offensiveness as they viewed the Hill testimony. Certainly group identity theory supports the notion that ethnic groups share similar experiences and may develop similar perceptions of situations (Chung, 1997). Further exploration would be worthwhile into group identity as a rationale for shared perceptions among people of the same ethnicity about perceived offensiveness. Moreover, it is equally critical to understand perceptual differences based on ethnicity as well as gender in our increasingly diverse workplace.

A possible limitation of our study is the highly political context of the two video treatments. The benefit of using the Hill and Altman video segments is that real behavior in two separate but similar settings was the focus of our study. Although the senators' behaviors have clear transference to those that occur in organizations on a regular basis, and we statistically controlled for participants' familiarity with the Hill and Altman experiences and existing bias regarding their testimony, it is still possible that participants could have had difficulty focusing completely on the behaviors expressed by the senators and not being influenced by the political context. Controlling for the political nature of the video segments, we found that 61% of the participants were familiar with the Hill testimony, but only 8% were familiar with Altman's testimony. So among an extremely large group of participants well-balanced in terms of gender (i.e., 51% women and 49% men), the majority of whom were unfamiliar with Altman's testimony, women perceived greater offensiveness even when the target of disempowerment was male. Future researchers should include video segments of similar behaviors that are presented in a more common organizational work context to further enhance the external validity of this study.

In addition to the political nature of the video segments, the sample was composed of 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 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 would add strength to the findings. Disempowerment, however, is not exclusive to the workplace; it is perpetrated, experienced directly, and observed by individuals in all aspects of life. Therefore, we believe that the reactions and perceptions of the individuals in this sample do not abate the usefulness of the findings. This study focused on men enacting disempowering behaviors on both a male and a female target. Other combinations of actors and targets, such as a male target and a female target being confronted by a woman, were not examined. In addition, gender subgroups across ethnic or race groups was not a focus in this study, and our small subgroup sample sizes did not warrant further analysis. Yet for future research, parsing out interaction effects of race, ethnicity, and gender could greatly increase our understanding of events that can physically and perceptually disrupt and harm organizations and their members. If intergroup theory provides reasonable grounds for understanding disempowering acts in the workplace, then it would be expected that the more closely an observer identifies with a target of disempowerment, the higher the perceived offensiveness. So Black men, for example, would perceive more offensive behavior than would other individuals when the disempowerment target is a Black man, Black women would register more offensiveness when viewing a Black woman as the disempowerment target, and White women would pick up more offensive behavior when the target is a White woman.

Situational commonality is another factor that may be useful in explaining sensitivity to disempowering acts. Identity theories maintain that we identify with individuals with whom we share characteristics, events, and situations. Thus, when we observe disempowering acts, perhaps the more similar the target is in regard to our position or situation, the higher will be our perceived offensiveness. Related to the videotaped segments used in this study, this would mean that attorneys or individuals who have recently participated in a deposition or given testimony may be more sensitive to the affrontive behavior of the senators. If we examined a combination of factors, perhaps we would see that Black female attorneys, for example, would more strongly identify with Anita Hill and, therefore, perceive more offensiveness after viewing the videotaped segments.

An examination of multiple identification factors that extend beyond the more obvious shared char-

acteristics such as gender or race requires that researchers measure the extent of identification with targets of disempowerment, which we did not attempt in our study. The basis of identity theories is a perceived identification with another person, and the extent of identification depends upon perceived similarity with the potential referent. The challenge in future research is to assess the extent to which observers identify with targets of disempowering acts and perceptions of disempowerment itself. An assessment of the level of identification would enable us to test more thoroughly the strength of identification theories in relation to sensitivity to disempowerment.

CONCLUSION

Sensitivity to disempowering acts is subjective and likely to vary depending upon a number of factors. In this study we sought to distinguish between gender and identification with a target of disempowerment as competing explanations for sensitivity to disempowering acts. It was thought that perhaps women would be more offended by disempowering acts when the target of the disempowerment was a woman. However, this was not the case, and women reported higher perceived offensiveness regardless of the gender of the target of disempowerment.

Behaviors that are interpreted as offensive can have detrimental effects on both targets and observers of such behavior. Disempowering acts such as those verbal exchanges examined in this study are linked to perceived offensiveness in individuals. Negative consequences of disempowering acts and their resultant offensiveness can range from subtle forms of isolation to leaving the organization, or seeking resolution through litigation. This study sheds light on the strength of gender differences in sensitivity to offensive, disempowering behaviors that can have potentially detrimental effects on people and their organizations. An understanding of gender differences in sensitivity to disempowering acts is necessary to manage and sustain healthy workplace interactions and develop just and useful policies and standards for assessing workplace behavior. As policy-makers, courts, employers, and individuals attempt to define and assess appropriate behaviors, it is important that we understand how behaviors may be interpreted and affectively experienced differently in the workplace. For organizational productivity's sake alone, we cannot afford to allow the power holders (traditionally White men) to serve as the *sole* adjudicants

of offensive or disempowering behavior in the work environment.

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