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Public Backlash Against Sexual Harassment and What Organizations Can Do About It

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Abstract

The current level of public attention focused on sexual harassment is unprecedented. In part due to societal pressure and collective efforts (e.g., #MeToo movement), several high-profile men have been dethroned following accusations of harassment and assault. At the same time, not a lot of research exists that has examined the psychology underlying third-party (i.e., the general public) backlash to sexual harassment claims. The current work breaks new ground by showing how sexual harassment claims elicit public backlash against organizations (Studies 1-4), how this backlash differs from responses to other claims of misconduct (i.e., financial fraud; Study 3), and how this backlash can be circumvented or worsened by organizational responses to sexual harassment claims (Study 4). Across four experiments (N_{total}=1,621), we find that a sexual harassment claim reduces perceived gender equality of a given organization, which not only reduces attractiveness of the organization as a potential employer, but also increases the extent to which people demand social change (i.e., that the organization increases its numeric representation of women employees). These responses are particularly pronounced among those who endorse gender equality rather than hierarchy. Importantly, we show that when an organization responds to a sexual harassment claim in a way that is considerate and proactive, rather than dismissive and minimizing (or showing no response at all), perceived gender equality of the organization can be restored—in some cases to the same level as an organization where no claim was made. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: sexual harassment, gender equality

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Sexual harassment is the most prevalent form of sex-based discrimination, and in recent years, sexual harassment charges constituted almost half (48%) of all 26,396 sex-based discrimination charges submitted to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2016a; 2016b; 20016c). Data from a nationally representative sample suggest that 43% of men and 81% of women have experienced sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime (Kearl, 2018). Sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon, but the current level of public attention it has garnered is unprecedented—labeled by some as "a revolution no one saw coming" (Bunch, 2017).

A wave of sexual harassment reports, coupled with rising public backlash, has resulted in the condemnation and dethroning of a growing list of high-profile men in entertainment, sports, business, news media, and politics who have been accused of sexual harassment (Almukhtar, Gold, & Buchanan, 2018; Corey, 2017; Ponsot, 2017). Aside from the public pressure on the accused to step down from positions of power, organizations linked to the accused also face social pressure to take action following sexual harassment allegations. For example, following the news of sexual harassment allegations against the CEO of Wynn Resorts, and after the accused CEO stepped down, the company appointed three women to its Board of Directors, stating "We have made it a priority to implement meaningful change at Wynn Resorts and are committed to elevating our corporate governance practices and fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace" (Smith, 2018). The new level of public backlash against sexual harassment seems to constitute a tipping point in the longstanding problem of workplace sexual harassment (Dunaway, 2018). At the same time, not a lot is known about the psychological process underlying public backlash following sexual harassment claims.

Most research on the psychological consequences of sexual harassment has focused on victims and direct witnesses of harassment. This work spotlights individual differences in classifying sexual harassment as such (Icenogle, Eagle, Ahmad, & Hanks, 2002; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001) and its psychological and physical health detriments (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Rospenda, Richman, Ehmke, & Zlatoper, 2005). Moreover, witnessing incivility or hostile behavior towards women lowers work satisfaction and commitment (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007), and observing sexual harassment in the workplace can reduce direct bystanders' job satisfaction (Salvaggio, Hopper, & Packell, 2011), and performance based self-esteem (Bradley-Geist, Rivera, & Geringer, 2015), particularly among women. Taken together, this large body of work shows that sexual harassment has far-reaching detrimental effects on those who experience, as well as witness, it (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

Beyond the consequences of sexual harassment for victims and bystanders, some research has also examined outsiders' (e.g., general public) perceptions of sexual harassment. This work has identified gender and attractiveness of the victim as well as the credibility and status of the complainant as important antecedents of people's perceptions of sexual harassment claims, including support for punitive action against the aggressor (for review see McDonald, 2012). However, still little is known about how sexual harassment claims might affect broader perceptions or attributions of gender equality at the organization associated with the accused. Indeed, recent public calls for change—such as by the #MeToo movement—extend beyond punishing the accused of sexual harassment, and include calls for structural change toward gender equality. The current work examines how single sexual harassment claims shape broader perceptions of gender equality in the organizations where sexual harassment has been claimed.

Sexual Harassment Claims and Public Perceptions of Gender Inequality

We predict that when individuals learn of a sexual harassment claim in a given organization, this can influence perceptions of gender equality —i.e., the extent to which men and women receive equal treatment and opportunities—of that entire organization. We base this prediction on work showing that a *single* event can dramatically shape perceptions of systematic gender equality. For example, research has shown that the outcome of a political election between a man and a woman candidate shapes perceptions of gender inequality of a country as a whole. Namely, when a woman rather than a man wins the election, people perceive that country as having greater gender equality, as well as more adequate handling of sexual harassment claims (Does, Gündemir, & Shih, 2018). Thus, we predict that a single claim of sexual harassment could influence perceptions of gender equality of the organization as a whole.

Perceptions of inequality are important drivers of behaviors and attitudes. For example, in the context of economic inequality, it has been shown that people's perceptions of inequality, rather than actual levels of inequality, are strongly associated with attitudes toward redistribution and reported conflict between the poor and the rich (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). To the extent that sexual harassment claims affect perceptions of gender inequality, we expect that the latter will be associated with demand for social change and personal avoidance of the organization associated with the accused. In indirect support of the prediction that outsiders will be motivated to stay away from organizations facing a sexual harassment claim, is the finding that the occurrence of sexual harassment has been linked to employees' increased turnover intentions (Hershcovis, Parker, & Reich, 2010). Thus, studying the effect of sexual harassment claims on perceptions of inequality can help shed light on the underlying psychological process of public backlash to harassment.

Organizational Reactions in Responses to Sexual Harassment Claims

While we predict that sexual harassment claims will negatively affect perceptions of gender inequality and willingness to work for the organization associated with the accused, we also theorize that organizations can dampen this form of public backlash. Namely, we theorize that the way an organization reacts to a sexual harassment claims can have dramatic effects on its public image—such that it can either worsen or circumvent backlash.

Organizations can react to a sexual harassment claim in several different ways. Organizations often respond to sexual harassment claims with an avoidance focus, suspicion, inaction and encouragement for retraction of the claim (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002). This type of reactions is defined as "organizational minimization." Because this kind of minimization of sexual harassment claims restricts victims' voice and fails to acknowledge their experiences, it is likely to amplify the public's perception of gender inequality in a given organization. Rather than organizational minimization, organizations can also choose to react to sexual harassment claims with an approach (rather than avoidance) focus, which gives voice to the alleged victim and shows consideration of their experiences. We coin such an approach "organizational responsiveness" and predict that it will have a positive impact on perceived fairness compared to organizational minimization of sexual harassment claims.

Overview

Based on the above, we predicted that general public will use a single sexual harassment claim as a cue for reduced gender equality in a company, which in turn will be associated with lowered organizational attractiveness (i.e., willingness to work for the organization) and enhanced demand for social change (i.e., increasing women's representation). We tested these predictions in four experiments. In Study 1, we tested the impact of a sexual harassment claim on perceived gender equality the subsequent organizational attractiveness and demand for social

change. Studies 2 and 3 were designed to replicate and address shortcomings of Study 1. Study 2 was aimed at establishing causality by manipulating the proposed mediator; perceived gender equality (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala & Petty, 2011; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Study 3 included an active control condition (i.e., a financial misconduct claim) to the passive control condition (i.e., no sexual harassment claim), allowing us to contrast the effect of sexual harassment claims also with claims about another type of transgression. Study 3 also examined whether sexual harassment claims, more so than financial misconduct claims, are construed as signaling an organizational culture problem. Study 4 tested how organizational reactions to a sexual harassment claim (i.e., minimization vs. responsiveness) shape perceptions of gender equality, organizational attractiveness and demand for social change.

Data collection was done through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. We report all measures, manipulations and exclusions either in the main text or in the Online Supplement. Sample size was determined per study before any data analysis (see Online Supplement for more details) and was not increased after a preliminary data analysis. For all our studies testing the key hypothesis (i.e., the relationship between a sexual harassment claim and perceived gender equality) we conducted an 80% sensitivity power analysis (α=. 05; two-tailed), which showed that the analyses had sufficient power to detect the reported effect size.

Study 1

Method

Participants. We recruited 497 participants (230 women, 266 men, one other, M_{age}= 36.61, SD_{age}=11.21). Three hundred ninety-four participants identified as White/European American, 43 as Black/African American, 14 as Latinx or Hispanic, 31 as Asian American, 15 as other.

Procedure. All participants received a brochure about a fictitious company

("Blockstrout") containing generic background information. Participants were randomly assigned

to either the sexual harassment condition, consisting of a press release about a sexual harassment

lawsuit being filed against the company, or the control condition which contained no additional

information. Participants reported their perceptions of gender equality (e.g., "I think women and

men are treated the same way at Blockstrout."; 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree;

4items; α=.96; adapted from Kaiser et al., 2013), organizational attractiveness (e.g., "I would

exert a great deal of effort to work for Blockstrout."; 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree;

3 items; α=.93; adapted from Turban, 2001). To assess demand for social change, participants

read that the company was planning to hire more employees and were asked to indicate—using a

slider on a bipolar scale—whether they thought the company should hire more men (1) or more

women (10). As a manipulation check, participants answered whether or not they read about a

sexual harassment lawsuit filed against the company. In all studies participants reported basic

demographic information and completed an attention check (see Oppenheimer, Meyvis, &

Davidenko, 2009), which, together with the manipulation check(s), enabled us to filter inattentive

participants prior to analyses.[1]

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[1] Note that, in our studies, we have included a measure of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; i.e., the extent to which individuals endorse group-based hierarchy; Ho et al., 2015) to examine its potential moderating impact on the relationship between the presence of a sexual harassment claim and perceived gender equality. Prior research has shown that SDO shapes individuals' perceptions, preferences, and behaviors, as they pertain to maintaining versus challenging intergroup hierarchy (e.g., Does & Mentovich, 2016; Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, & Ho, 2017; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Individuals high on SDO are less prone to perceive inequality than those who endorse equality between groups (Kteily et al., 2017). Moreover, Berdahl (2007) proposed that sexual harassment is inherently rooted in power differences and hierarchy. That is, sexual harassment is not primarily driven by the pursuit of sexual gratification, but by the motivation to retain sex-based hierarchy, with men at the top and women at the bottom. To the extent that sexual harassment can be seen as a mechanism to maintain hierarchy, one can thus expect individual differences in the endorsement of gender-based hierarchy to play an important role in shaping responses to sexual harassment claims. Thus, perceivers scoring higher on SDO may be less prone to construe sexual harassment claims as evidence of gender inequality than those scoring lower on SDO. Across studies, analyses consistently yield support for SDO's moderating effect on the link between the presence of a sexual harassment claim and increased perceived gender equality. As predicted, those who endorse hierarchy between groups are less affected by sexual harassment claims in terms of their perceptions of gender equality, than those who endorse intergroup equality. These results are detailed in the Online Supplement and their implications discussed in the Discussion section.

Results

Fifty participants were excluded because they failed manipulation and/or instructional checks. The final sample had 447 participants (205 women, 241 men, one other, M_{age}= 37.17, SD_{age}=11.32). Participant gender did not have any systematic moderating effects on any of the analyses below (see Online Supplement for details). Descriptive statistics and correlations of all studies are presented in the Online Supplement.

Perceived gender equality. As predicted, participants in the sexual harassment condition perceived less gender equality, M=2.76, SD=1.38, than participants in the control condition, M=5.22, SD=1.14, $t(445)$=-20.56, p<.001, d=1.94.

Mediation analysis. Next, we tested the indirect effect of condition on organizational attractiveness and demand for increased representation of women via perceived gender equality (Hayes, 2013; Model 4). The path coefficients are presented in Figure 1. There was a significant indirect effect of condition via perceived gender equality on participants' attraction towards the organization, *indirect effect*=1.70, SE=.12, 95%CI [-1.959, -1.474,], and on demand for increased representation of women, *indirect effect*=.46, SE=.21, 95%CI [0.042, 0.847]. To establish causality, we conducted Study 2, in which we manipulated perceived gender equality.

Study 2

Method

Participants. We recruited 154 participants (58 women, 94 men, two other, M_{age}=35.16, SD_{age}=11.85). One-hundred and fifteen participants identified as White/European American, 19 as Black/African American, four as Latinx or Hispanic, 11 as Asian American, and five as other.

Procedure. Participants received generic information about a fictitious company and read that the company went through an audit regarding gender dynamics. Depending on condition,

participants read that there was gender equality or inequality in the company. Participants then completed the same outcome measures as in Study 1 and a manipulation check.

Results

Ten participants were excluded because they failed the instructional check. The final sample had 144 participants (56 women, 87 men, one other, M_{age}=34.82, SD_{age}=10.67). The manipulation was successful, participants in the gender equality condition perceived more gender equality (M=6.59, SD=0.96) than participants in the gender inequality condition (M=2.08, SD=1.69), t(115.07)=13.37, p<.001, d=3.28.

As predicted, participants in the gender inequality condition (M=2.53, SD=1.56) reported less organizational attractiveness, than participants in the gender equality condition (M=5.58, SD=1.15), t(132.26)=13.37, p<.001, d=2.23. Moreover, participants in the gender inequality condition (M=5.92, SD=2.60) reported higher demand for increasing women's representation than those in the gender equality condition (M=5.23, SD=1.02), t(94.09)=-2.13, p=.037, d=0.35.

Study 3

Method

Participants. We recruited 453 participants (200 women, 252 men, one other, M_{age}=35.36, SD_{age}=10.37). Three hundred twenty-eight participants identified as White/European American, 40 as Black/African American, 34 as Latinx or Hispanic, 36 as Asian American, and 15 as other.

Procedure. The procedure was similar to Study 1, with the addition of an active control condition in which participants read about a fraud claim. Participants completed the same measures as in Study 1: (a) perceived gender equality (α=.97; Kaiser et al., 2013), (b) organizational attractiveness (α=.93; Turban, 2001), and (c) demand for increasing women's representation. We included an additional measure in the two misconduct conditions to assess the

extent to which participants thought the transgression was indicative of a problematic organizational culture (e.g., "The alleged behavior of the manager could not have occurred in a company with a healthy culture."; 3 items; α = .80).

Results

Thirty-seven participants were excluded because they failed manipulation and/or instructional checks. The final sample had 416 participants (191 women, 224 men, one other, M_{age}=35.64, SD_{age}=10.38).

Perceived gender inequality. There was a simple effect of condition on perceived gender equality, $F(2,413)$=142.06, $p<$ .001, η_p^2=.41. Replicating Study 1's findings, contrast analyses revealed that participants in the sexual harassment condition perceived less gender equality (M=2.59, SD=1.36) than those in the control condition (M=5.31, SD=1.27), $p<$.001. Participants in the fraud condition perceived less gender equality (M=4.13, SD=1.41) than those in the control condition, $p<$.001. Participants perceived less gender equality in the sexual harassment condition than in the fraud condition, $p<$.001.

Next, we tested whether perceived gender equality explained the relationship between experimental condition (dummy-coded; sexual harassment as the reference condition) and organizational attractiveness and demand for increasing women's numeric representation (Hayes, 2013; Model 4). The path coefficients are presented in Figure 2.

There was a significant indirect effect of control (vs. sexual harassment) on organizational attractiveness through perceived gender equality, *indirect effect*=1.63, *SE*=.13, 95%CI [1.386, 1.895]. There was also an indirect effect on fraud (vs. sexual harassment) on organizational attractiveness through perceived gender equality, *indirect effect*=0.92, *SE*=.11, 95%CI [0.717, 1.142].

There was a significant indirect effect of control (vs. sexual harassment) on demand for increasing women's representation through perceived gender equality, *indirect effect*=-0.47, *SE*=.24, 95%CI [-0.933, -0.005]. There was also an indirect effect on fraud (vs. sexual harassment) on demand for increasing women's representation through perceived gender equality, *indirect effect*=-0.27, *SE*=.14, 95%CI [-0.543, -0.003].

Auxiliary analysis: cultural generalization of misconduct claim. We examined the extent to participants view a sexual harassment claim versus a fraud claim as indicative of a problematic organizational culture. Type of misconduct claim predicted cultural generalization of the claim, $t(270)=2.91$, $p =.004$, $d=.35$, with greater generalization of the claim in the sexual harassment ($M=4.62$, $SD=1.55$) compared to the fraud ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.67$) condition. Cultural generalization was negatively associated with perceived gender equality and organizational attractiveness and positively associated with intention to boycott the organization as well as with moral outrage (see Online Supplement). In sum, people perceived a sexual harassment claim as more indicative of a problematic organizational culture than they did a financial fraud claim.

Study 4

Method

Participants and Design. We recruited 517 participants (253 women, 264 men, $M_{age}=35.70$, $SD_{age}=11.43$) online. Four hundred and three identified as White/European American, 43 as Black/African American, 24 as Latinx or Hispanic, 28 as Asian American, and 19 as other.

The study consisted of a four-level, single factor between-subjects design, with the following conditions: (a) no sexual harassment claim [control condition], (b) sexual harassment claim, but no information about organizational response [no response condition], (c) sexual harassment claim, and information about organization's proactive response [organizational

responsiveness condition], (d) sexual harassment claim, and information about organization's

dismissive response [organizational minimization condition].

Procedure. Similar to Study 1, all participants, except those in the control condition, read

about a sexual harassment claim. In the organizational responsiveness condition, participants read

that the HR-department launched an investigation following the complaint, provided process

information and offered psychological support to the alleged victim. In the organizational

minimization condition, participants read that the HR-department did not launch an investigation,

reminded the victim of the alleged perpetuator's high status, and advised her to reconsider her

claim. Participants completed the following measure from Study 1: Perceived gender equality

(α=.95; Kaiser et al., 2013), organizational attractiveness (α=.91; Turban, 2001) and demand for

increasing women's numeric representation.

Results

Preliminary analyses. Thirty-four participants were excluded because they failed

manipulation and/or instructional checks. The final sample had 483 participants (233 women, 250

men, M_{age}=35.72, SD_{age}=11.44).

Hypothesis testing. An ANOVA showed a significant effect of condition on perceived

gender equality, $F(3,479)$=104.17, p<.001, η_p^2=.40 (See Figure 3). We used custom l-matrices to

examine simple contrasts between conditions. Replicating our prior findings, participants in one

of the sexual harassment conditions perceived less gender equality than those in the control

condition, $F(1,479)$=115.92, p<.001, η_p^2=.20. Moreover, compared to control, participants

perceived less gender equality in the no response condition, $F(1,479)$=84.10, p<.001, η_p^2=.15, the

minimization condition, $F(1,479)$=242.06, p<.001, η_p^2=.34, and marginally less in the responsive

condition, $F(1,479)$=3.24, p=.073, η_p^2=.01. Those who received no information about the

organization's response to the sexual harassment claim perceived more gender equality than those

exposed to the organization's minimization approach, $F(1, 479)=39.73$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.08$, but perceived less gender equality than those exposed to the organization's responsive approach, $F(1,479)=56.77$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.11$. Finally, as predicted, those in the organizational minimization conditions perceived less gender equality than those in the organizational responsiveness condition, $F(1,479)=196.73$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.29$.

Contrasting the control condition to the remaining conditions, we examined the indirect effect of sexual harassment claim on organizational attractiveness and demand for increasing women's numeric representation through perceived gender equality. Replicating previous findings, reading about sexual harassment reduced organizational attractiveness through perceived gender equality, *indirect effect*=.22, *SE*=.03, 95%CI [0.276, 0.176]. Moreover, sexual harassment claims enhanced demand for increasing women's numeric representation through perceived gender equality, *indirect effect*=-.08, *SE*=.03, 95%CI [-0.129, -0.030].

Next, we performed indirect effect analyses for each condition where a sexual harassment claim was made. We designated the control condition (where no sexual harassment claim was made) as the reference condition and created three dummy variables representing one of the other conditions in contrast with the control condition. The path coefficients and indirect effects are presented in Table 1. Results show that following a sexual harassment claim, gender equality perceptions drop, which is associated with less perceived organizational attractiveness and increased demand for hiring more women. This effect is even more pronounced for those in the minimization condition—indicating that organizations can make backlash worse. One exception is when the company has a responsive approach to the claim. In this case, perceptions of gender equality, and subsequent perceptions of organizational attractiveness do not significantly drop in comparison with a company where no sexual harassment claim was made.

Discussion

Sexual harassment is a highly prevalent form of workplace aggression. Recent developments, such as the "#MeToo" movement, have propelled the issue of sexual harassment to the forefront and the unprecedented public backlash against organizations and individuals accused of sexual harassment have resulted in the firing of several high-profile men (Almukhtar et al., 2018; Corey, 2017; Ponsot, 2017). In the current contribution, we examined outsiders' responses (i.e., the general public) to a sexual harassment claim in terms of its effect on perceptions of gender equality, more broadly.

In line with our predictions, we find support for two sets of responses. Studies 1-4 show that individuals construe a sexual harassment claim as signaling gender inequality in a given organization. These perceptions, in turn, impact their responses towards organizations in at least two domains—for which we provide causal evidence in Study 2. As sexual harassment claims reduce perceived gender equality, this (a) decreases perceived organizational attractiveness (i.e., less willingness to work for a given organization), and (b) increases demand for increased representation of women. Study 3 further shows that a sexual harassment claim is seen as more indicative of a problematic organizational culture than a claim of a different kind of organizational misconduct, such as financial fraud.

Study 4 demonstrates how distinct organizational responses can worsen or mitigate public backlash following sexual harassment claims. A minimizing response amplified the decrease in gender equality following sexual harassment claims. In contrast, a response characterized by considerateness and a proactive approach was found to circumvent the link between sexual harassment claims and perceived gender equality—in some instances to the same level as perceptions of an organization in which there was no mention of sexual harassment claim.

Together these findings demonstrate the key role organizations can play in managing public responses to sexual harassment claims.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The current work has several theoretical and practical implications. First, to our knowledge, the current work is the first to show that sexual harassment claims increase the public's demand for increased representation of women over men. This suggests that people perceive sexual harassment as a problem related to the gender composition of an organization. This assertion is consistent with empirical evidence demonstrating that women experience higher levels of sexual harassment in job contexts that are dominated by men rather than by women (Fitzgeral, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Gruber, 1998; Gutek & Cohen, 1987; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014). Beyond the question of whether hiring more women is an effective way to redress a sexist organizational culture, these results suggest that people perceive it as a way of coping with gender inequality in organizations.

Second, the current work complements existing literature showing that turnover increases following sexual harassment (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2010) by demonstrating that outsiders are also more likely to avoid the organization as a potential future employer following a sexual harassment claim. This finding can be understood from a social identity perspective. Namely, as individuals derive an important part of their self-worth from the social groups in which they have membership, they are motivated to belong to groups (e.g., organizations) that are seen a fair (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). To the extent that a sexual harassment claim reduces perceived fairness of an organization (Studies 1-4), it will motivate individuals to avoid membership in said organization. A practical implication is that, following sexual harassment, organizations may experience difficulty attracting new employees and miss out on the inflow of new talent.

Relatedly, additional analyses show that the observed backlash effect was moderated by individuals' endorsement of gender hierarchy versus equality (i.e., SDO), such that backlash was more pronounced among pro-equality compared to pro-hierarchy individuals. This finding is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it highlights the role of individual beliefs around maintaining gender hierarchy when it comes to perceptions and attitudes toward sexual harassment. Those who endorse the notion that men should be on top of that hierarchy are less likely to adjust their perceptions of gender equality and fairness based on a sexual harassment claim than those who endorse equal standing between men and women. Second, this finding suggests that recruitment and selection following public sexual harassment allegations, may not only result in less inflow of job applicants in general, but in a reduced inflow of applicants who are egalitarian, in particular. Taken together, this finding is in line with prior work showing that sexual harassment is motivated by gender-based dominance (Berdahl, 2007), and shows one potential mechanism through which hostile organizational cultures are perpetuated: By a reduced inflow of those individuals who are most likely to oppose sexual harassment and gender inequity.

Third, while a sexual harassment claim can be incidental and does not necessarily reflect gender inequality in a given organization, Study 3 shows that individuals are more prone to attribute a sexual harassment claim to a hostile organizational culture than they are to perceive it as a single, "bad apple" manager. Indeed, this work shows that participants were more likely to generalize a sexual harassment claim to the organizational culture than a financial fraud claim. As such, the current work highlights the importance of identifying management strategies that specifically focus on responding to sexual harassment claims—versus claims of misconduct in general—rather than relying on broader guidelines regarding crisis management.

Fourth, a clear practical implication of these findings is that grievance procedures should address fairness concerns by being timely, informative and considerate. In contrast, grievance

procedures that minimize the (alleged) victim's experience and voice are not only ineffective for victims (Bergman et al., 2002), but—as our results show—they also elicit backlash against organizations from the public. Although it seems self-evident that organizations should adopt a responsive rather than minimizing approach to sexual harassment claims, the latter occurs often. Media reports on sexual harassment lawsuits often report organizational minimization preceding escalating negative public exposure (e.g., Edwards, 2016). Beyond benefitting victims of sexual harassment, the current contribution suggests that responsive rather than dismissive organizational approaches to harassment can help circumvent public backlash following sexual harassment claims.

Fifth, these findings begin to answer the question of "now what?" Considering the heightened public attention on sexual harassment, and ample "real-world" examples of public backlash against organizations and (alleged) perpetrators of sexual harassment, it seems of particular relevance to identify best practices for organizations to handle instances of sexual harassment. Complementing legal perspectives—namely, laws/mandates prescribing adequate responses to sexual harassment claims—the current findings offer a psychological perspective on what constitutes an adequate organizational response to sexual harassment claim.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current contribution's focus on fictitious organizations has a key advantage of isolating the causal impact of sexual harassment claims, without interference of individuals' pre-established impressions or ties to organizations. A limitation of this approach, however, is that we cannot draw conclusions about how individuals respond to organizations of which they have already formed an impression. It is possible that the observed effects are magnified or reduced for organizations with which people identify (e.g., their favorite brand). Future work should examine

how the effects are manifested when people have pre-established ties to a given organization or brand.

In conclusion, four experiments provide insights into the psychological process underlying third-party responses to sexual harassment claims, as well as outline potential avenues for organizations to restore positive perceptions of organizational integrity. Clearly, prevention of sexual harassment should remain an important priority for organizations. At the same time, and given the consistent prevalence of sexual harassment, it is important to identify optimal ways in which organizations can respond to sexual harassment when it occurs. Our findings suggest the way in which an organization responds to sexual harassment claims significantly impacts on public perceptions of gender inequality and attractiveness of the organization as a potential employer. By demonstrating the benefits of pro-active rather than minimizing organizational reactions to sexual harassment claims, the current work can help inform organizational procedures surrounding adequate handling of sexual harassment claim, complementing organizational efforts aimed at prevention.

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A.

Perceived gender equality in organization

-2.46***

0.69***

Condition
(1=sexual harassment,
0=control)

-0.32* (-2.02***)

Organizational attractiveness

B.

Perceived gender equality in organization

-2.49***

-0.18**

Condition
(1=sexual harassment,
0=control)

0.33 (0.13)

Demand for increasing women's numeric representation
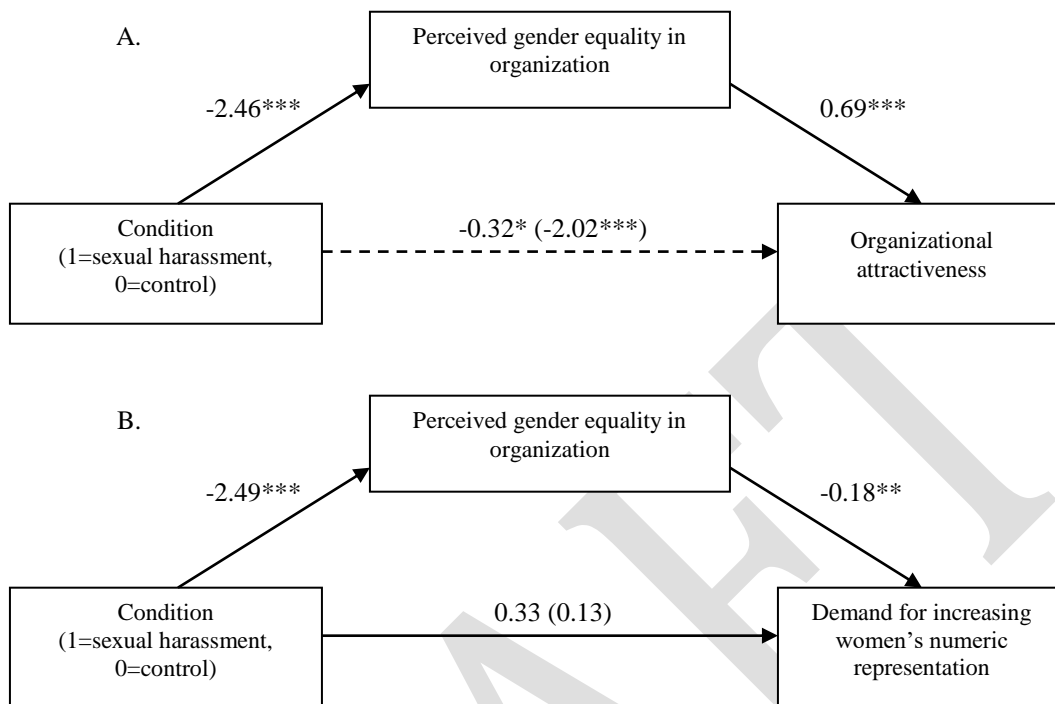
Figure 1. Unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between condition and (A) organizational attractiveness and (B) demand for increasing women's numeric representation through perceived gender equality in Study 1. Coefficient for the effect of condition on outcome variable without controlling for mediator is in parentheses.
*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

A.

Perceived gender equality in organization

2.71***

0.60***

Dummy control
(sexual harassment = 0,
financial misconduct =0,
no claim = 1)

0.84***(2.47***)

Organizational attractiveness

Perceived gender equality in organization

1.54***

0.60***

Dummy financial misconduct
(sexual harassment = 0,
financial misconduct =1,
no claim = 0)

-0.07 (0.86***)

Organizational attractiveness

B.

Perceived gender equality in organization

2.71***

-0.17*

Dummy control
(sexual harassment = 0,
financial misconduct =0,
no claim = 1)

0.29 (-0.19)

Demand for increasing women's numeric representation

Perceived gender equality in organization

1.54***

-0.17*

Dummy financial misconduct
(sexual harassment = 0,
financial misconduct =1,
no claim = 0)

- 0.29 (-0.56*)

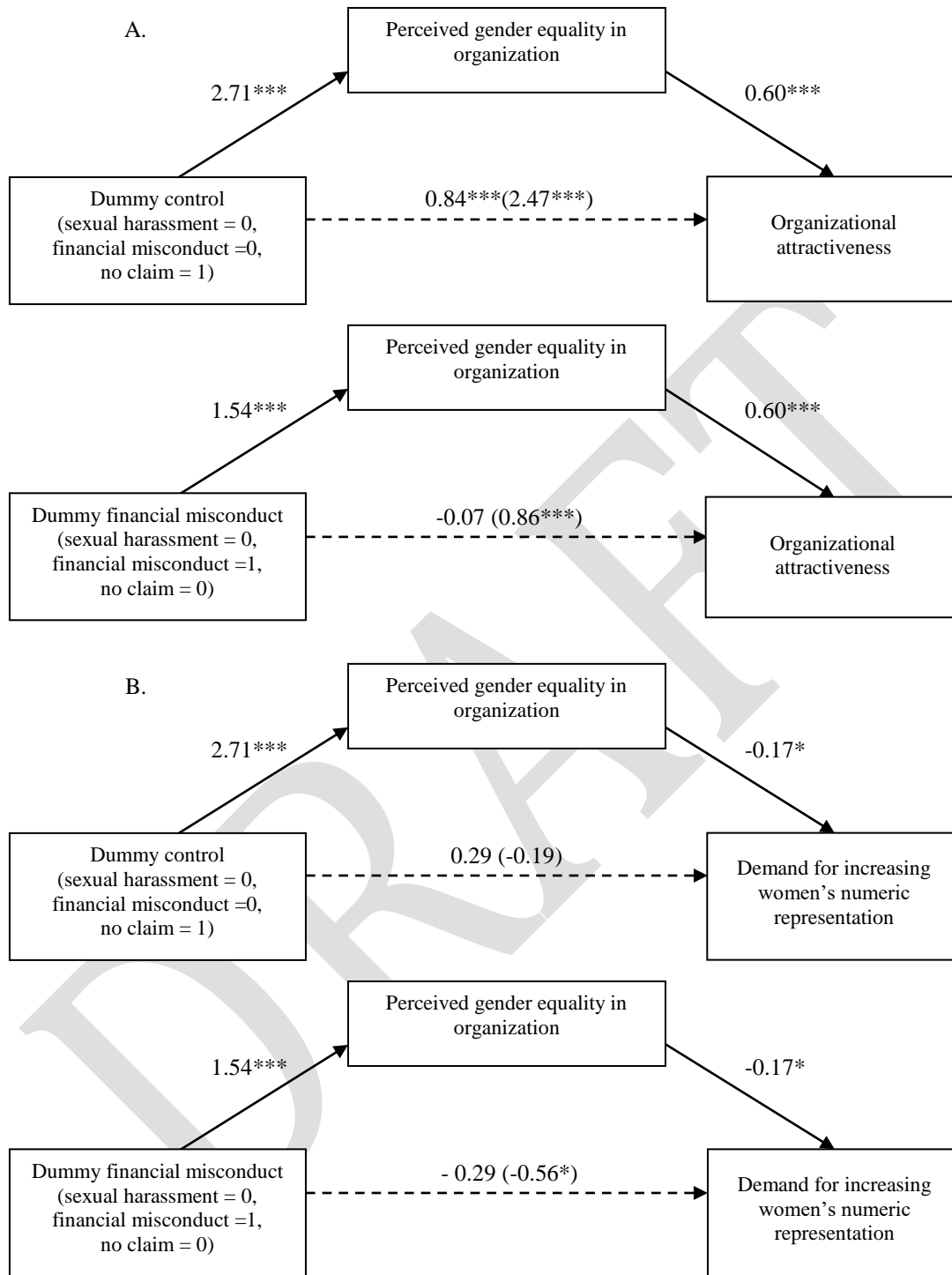Demand for increasing women's numeric representation

Figure 2. Unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between condition and (A) organizational attractiveness and (B) demand for increasing women's numeric representation through perceived gender equality in Study 3. Coefficient for the effect of condition on outcome variable without controlling for mediator is in parentheses. *Note*: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
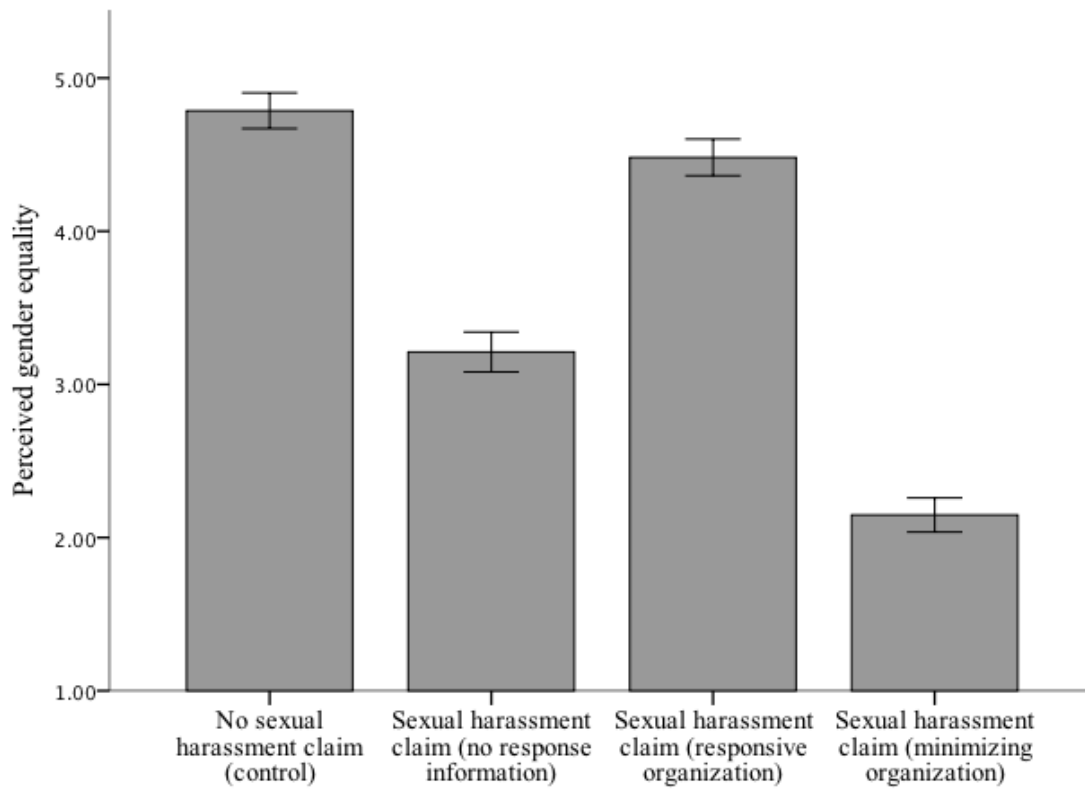
Figure 3. Perceived gender equality per condition in Study 4 (error bars represent standard errors)

Table 1.
Path Coefficients and Indirect effects in Study 4.

Predictor[a]	→ (Path a)	Mediator	→ (Path b)	DV	Path a	Path b	Path a x b Indirect effect *(SE)*	95% CI of the indirect effect
No Response		Perceived gender equality		Organizational attractiveness	**-1.57 (.17)**	**0.53 (.05)**	**-0.83 (.11)**	**-1.078, -0.632**
Organizational Responsiveness		Perceived gender equality		Organizational attractiveness	-0.30 (.17)	**0.53 (.05)**	0.16 (.09)	-0.341, 0.105
Organizational Minimization		Perceived gender equality		Organizational attractiveness	**-2.64 (.17)**	**0.53 (.05)**	**1.40 (.14)**	**-1.703, -1.142**
No Response		Perceived gender equality		Demand for hiring more women	**-1.57 (.17)**	**-0.25 (.07)**	**0.40 (.12)**	**0.187, 0.657**
Organizational Responsiveness		Perceived gender equality		Demand for hiring more women	-0.30 (.17)	**-0.25 (.07)**	**0.08 (.05)**	**0.001, 0.193**
Organizational Minimization		Perceived gender equality		Demand for hiring more women	**-2.64 (.17)**	**-0.25 (.07)**	**0.67 (.18)**	**0.321, 1.032**

Note: [a]The predictors are the focal dummy-coded variables coded as 1; non-focal conditions and the reference condition (control) are coded as 0. Significant effects ($p < .05$) are in bold print.