From Misperception to Misconduct: Dominance Motivation as a Driver of Workplace Sexual Harassment

Abstract

Sexual misperceptions refer to instances in which individuals wrongly infer sexual interest from other people. Traditionally, such sexual misperceptions have been studied within the dating context among student samples primarily. Our research extends this line of research and examines sexual misperceptions in the workplace. In a two-wave survey ($N = 212$), we show that employees with a higher dominance motivation are more likely to perceive sexual interest in the behavior of a co-worker with a different gender, regardless of one's own gender or formal power position. In a preregistered three-wave survey ($N = 349$) we further show that perceptions of sexual interest are positively associated with the likelihood to sexually harass co-workers, and that perceptions of sexual interest mediate the positive relationship between dominance motivation and sexual workplace harassment. We discuss theoretical and practical contributions of our findings as well as suggestions for future research.

Keywords: dominance motivation, sexual misperceptions, sexual overperception, workplace sexual harassment, #MeToo

Consider a situation in which Sarah arrives at the office on her first day of work. In the hallway she approaches a male colleague, Dave, smiles at him, and strikes up a friendly conversation. While Sarah's approach was intended as platonic, she soon realizes that Dave misinterprets her friendliness as sexual interest. Abundant research has shown that such sexual misperceptions, in which someone interprets fairly neutral behaviors (e.g., being friendly, smiling, or making small talk), as indicative of sexual interest are common in interactions between men and women and can potentially have detrimental consequences, for instance, resulting in sexual assault (Abbey, 1982; Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Bouffard & Miller, 2014; Johnson et al., 1991; Stockdale, 1993).

To date, however, our understanding of sexual misperceptions in the workplace and its implications for workplace sexual harassment are limited. The reason for this is that research has primarily examined perceptions of sexual interest among (potentially) romantic partners and settings (i.e., dating context) using mostly student samples (e.g., Abbey, 1982; de Jong & Reis, 2014), while few attempts have been made to examine sexual misperceptions among other types of interactions partners, such as among co-workers. Moreover, researchers, to date, have primarily focused on studying gender differences, showing that men, compared to women, are more likely to perceive sexual interest in the behaviors of others (e.g., Abbey, 1982; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Howell et al., 2012; Perilloux et al., 2012; Saal et al., 1989; Stockdale, 1993). An evolutionary social psychology explanation for this so called sexual-overperception bias is that the costs of missing out, and the benefits of

capitalizing on, sexual opportunities, are higher for men (compared to women) given the - on average - lower parental investments that are required of men (Haselton & Buss, 2000).

In workplaces, however, gaining, or missing out on, sexual opportunities may not be as salient as in the student dating context and additional motives might play a role as well in sexual misperceptions. In particular, over-perceiving sexual interest from colleagues in the workplace may not just be about increasing sexual opportunities, but also about dominating co-workers in the competition for scarce resources (e.g., promotions; Berdahl, 2007; Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Drawing on the dual-strategies theory of social rank (Cheng & Tracey, 2014; Maner, 2017), the first aim of the present research is therefore to show that employees with a high dominance motivation (who use their power and/or coercion to attain social rank in their organizations) are more likely to perceive sexual interest in the behaviors of their co-workers. Second, we aim to show that such perceptions of sexual interest, in turn, are positively associated with sexual harassment at work, and can account for the relationship between dominance motivation and workplace sexual harassment.

Our work makes potentially four important contributions to the literature and practice. First, we take the phenomenon of sexual misperception to the domain of work. We argue that heightened perceptions of sexual interest are not limited to young men and women seeking a romantic relationship, but instead show that sexual misperceptions are a widespread phenomenon which is also relevant to

understanding mixed-gender interactions in the workplace. Second, we adhere to prior calls to move beyond solely examining gender differences of sexual misperceptions (Fisher & Walters, 2003), by examining the role of individual differences in power motivations in understanding of who is more likely to misperceive sexual interest in the behaviors of others. In doing so, we extend Error Management Theory's explanation of sexual misperceptions (Haselton & Buss, 2000), as our findings suggests that in a work context, perceptions of sexual interest are also partly driven by an attempt to dominate and control others for the purpose of enhancing one's position at work. Third, this work provides new insights into a psychological mechanism that underlies workplace sexual harassment - sexual misperception - and increases our understanding what leads those high in dominance motivation to sexually harass co-workers. Finally, our research findings might have important implications for practice. Sparked by the #MeToo movement, there has been a steep increase in the number of sexual harassment charges put forward in the workplace, making it increasingly hard for organizations to ignore this wrongdoing (e.g., CBS, 2022; EEOC, 2022). Our findings offer these organizations important insights in how to potentially combat workplace sexual harassment and thereby helps in creating a safer and more inclusive working environment.

Theoretical Background

Sexual Misperceptions

Sexual misperceptions are considered a specific type of judgement bias. A useful way to conceptualize these biases is with Signal Detection

Theory (SDT; Green & Swets, 1966; Macmillan & Creelman, 2004). This theory describes how people interpret ambiguous behaviors from others and assess if something is a signal or not. To judge if a signal - in our case sexual interest – is present there are four possible outcomes: a correct detection (i.e., an individual perceives sexual interest, when there is sexual interest), a missed detection (i.e., an individual perceives no sexual interest, when there is sexual interest), a false alarm (i.e., a person perceives sexual interest, when there is no sexual interest), and a correct rejection (i.e., a person perceives no–sexual interest, when there is no sexual interest). These four outcomes, in turn, are associated with different costs and benefits to the perceiver (Brandner et al 20).

According to Hasselton and Buss' (2000) Error Management Theory the average costs and benefits associated with sexual misperceptions are about missing out on sexual opportunities. Therefore, they argue that men overperceive female sexual interest because, from an evolutionary perspective, for men the costs of a missed detection (i.e., missing out on a sexual opportunity) is higher than the cost of a false alarm (i.e., waste of energy trough failed courtship). This logic is built on the asymmetry in parental investment costs that exists between men and women - and among males and females in the animal world more generally - such that, on average, men's investment in children is substantially lower than that of women (i.e., pregnancy, lactation; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This so called sexual- overperception bias was first described by Abbey (1982) who let men and women observe a conversation between a male and female actor and showed that both male observers and male actors rated

the female conversation partner higher on seductiveness and promiscuousness than either of the women did. This effect has been replicated using different methods (e.g., Abbey & Melby, 1986; Haselton & Buss, 2000) and in a variety of cultures and countries, such as Japan (Hiraishi et al., 2016), Norway (Bendixen, 2014), France, Spain and Chile (Perilloux et al., 2015), yet among primarily student samples, who are likely to be actively seeking romantic relationships.

In workplace settings, however, the costs and benefits associated with sexual misperceptions are probably more diverse and complex. In addition to gaining - or missing out on - sexual opportunities, perceptions of sexual interest in the workplace may also be a way to sexualize co-workers for the benefit of maintaining one's status position and dominating colleagues in the competition for job-related resources like salaries and promotions (Berdahl, 2007). As such, in the next section, we consider the role of dominance motivation for perceptions of sexual interest.

Dominance Motivation and Sexual Misperceptions

Hierarchy is a fundamental feature of organizations and working life (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Given the benefits of obtaining a powerful role in organizations, individuals are generally motivated to attain a high position in organizational hierarchies. The dual-strategies theory of social rank proposes that that there a two pathways to attain a higher social rank in organizations: dominance and prestige (Cheng & Tracy, 2014; Maner, 2017). Individuals with a dominance motivation gain and maintain social rank by using coercion, threats and displays of power to intimidate

colleagues (Lee et al., 2021). Individuals with a prestige motivation, on the other hand, navigate social hierarchies by displaying their knowledge, skills and generosity, thereby earning respect and admiration from their peers or colleagues (Cheng et al., 2013). While both strategies are effective for attaining social rank (McClanahan et al., 2022), dominance motivation is generally associated with the pursuit of power (i.e., the control over valued resources), while prestige motivation is associated with the pursuit of status (i.e., the relative standing in a group; Cheng et al., 2010).

Here, we propose that individuals with a higher dominance motivation, but not those with a higher a prestige motivation, are more likely to misperceive sexual interest in the behaviors of co-workers with a different gender. Our prediction is based on two lines of reasoning. First, we argue that sexual misperceptions reflect a tendency to establish dominance and control over others in competing for scarce resources (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Berdahl (2007) theorized, for instance, that sexualizing colleagues of another gender, is an expression of power and dominance, and a way to protect and reinforce one's social status at work. By objectifying and oversexualizing co-workers with another gender, individuals derogate them based on their sex, and consequently protects their own social status and privileges. Indeed Berdahl (2007) proposes that men and women who engage in so called sex-based harassment (i.e., behavior that derogate and individual based on sex) are "driven by a desire to protect and enhance their social status in the context of gender hierarchies" (p. 642).

Second, people who seek power through dominance are generally less concerned about what others think of them compared to people seeking to gain power via prestige (Keltner, 1983). The reason is that prestige depends upon the respect and admiration that people get from their colleagues, and erroneously inferring sexual interest may be damaging to their reputation as a kind and competent person. In contrast, people motivated by dominance are not so interested in what others think of them and so the reputation costs of sexual misperceptions may be lower than the costs of missing out on a sexual opportunity for these people (Lee et al., 2021).

Consistent with our reasoning that dominance (but not prestige) motivation is associated with perceptions of sexual interest, previous research has indeed characterized dominance as the anti-social, and prestige as the pro-social pathway to social rank (Cheng et al., 2010). This line of research has shown, for instance, that prestige motivation has been associated with pro-social traits like agreeableness (Cheng et al., 2010), generosity (Henrich et al., 2015), fear of negative evaluations (Case et al., 2018), and high-quality interpersonal relationships (Cheng et al., 2010). Dominance motivation, on the other hand, is associated with higher scores on the Dark Triad traits, including narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Semenyna & Honey, 2015) and with poorer interpersonal relationships (Cheng et al., 2010). Building on this theorizing and empirical support, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Dominance motivation is positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest in the behavior of co-workers with a different gender.

Implications for Workplace Sexual Harassment

Next, we consider the downstream consequences of sexual misperceptions in the workplace by individuals high in dominance motivation. In particular, we focus on the implications for workplace sexual harassment. Sexual harassment includes a wide range of behaviors, and can range from sexual coercion to receiving unwanted sexual attention (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Fitzegerald, 1995, 1997). Sexual coercion refers to explicit and implicit attempts to make employment conditions contingent on sexual favors. Examples of such behavior include threatening to fire someone unless they perform a sexual act or suggesting that a sexual relationship might help a colleagues' career. Examples of unwanted sexual attention include repeatedly being asked out on a date by a colleague or having a colleague ask intimate questions about one's sex life.

Here, we propose, that dominant individuals who perceive greater sexual interest in the behaviors of their colleague are also more likely to engage in sexually harassing behavior. Our prediction is again based on the argument that dominant individuals are more likely to sexually harass co-workers as a means to control their access to resources (Berdahl, 2007). In support of the dominance approach to workplace sexual harassment, McLaughlin and colleagues (2012), for instance, showed that men, in particular, are more likely to sexually harass women when they

form a threat to their power position. Additionally, dominant individuals may view sexual harassment as a viable option to gain sexual access to colleagues of another gender, because they are less fearful of the reputational consequences of sexual misconduct (Browne, 2006; Cheng et al., 2010). Both lines of research indicate that a higher dominance motivation are more likely to engage in sexually harassing behavior.

Moreover, we build on previous research that suggests that sexual misperceptions are a trigger for sexual assault. Abbey and colleagues (1996), for instance, showed that women who reported more sexual misperception experiences also reported higher levels of sexual victimization. Abbey and colleagues (1998) further showed that college men who were likely to misperceive a female's sexual interest in a dating context, self-reported a higher incidence of perpetrating sexual assault themselves (e.g., fondling or kissing a women when she didn't want to and having intercourse with a women when she didn't want to). More recent, Bouffard and Miller (2023) showed that both men and women who perceived more sexual interest from respectively a hypothetical female or male individual also report higher levels sexual coercion intentions. Building on this line of work, we propose that:

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of sexual interest in the behavior of co-workers with a different gender mediate the relationship between dominance motivation and workplace sexual harassment.

Overview of Studies

We conducted two studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1 is a two-waved survey in which we examine the relationship between dominance

(and prestige) motivation and perceptions of sexual interest. Study 2 is a three-waved study in which we aim to replicate our findings of Study 1 and examine the implications for workplace sexual harassment. In both studies, we consider two moderating variables for the relationship between dominance motivation and our outcome variables. First, theory highlighting the dominance perspective regarding perceived sexual interest (Berdahl, 2007; Browne, 2006; Cortina & Areguin, 2021) suggests that gender moderates the relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest and harassment in the workplace. A male misperceiving the behaviour of a female co-worker as sexual interest will be perceived as more threatening by women than a female misperceiving the sexual interest of a male co-worker by men. Building on this theorizing, in the studies reported below, we therefore consider whether the relationships between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest and workplace sexual harassment are moderated by gender, such that dominance motivation is a stronger predictor for male's perceptions of female co-workers compared to female's perceptions of male co-workers.

Second, research suggest that individuals' place in the organizational power hierarchy might operate as a moderators for the relationship between dominance motivation and our outcome variables. Research on power, in particular, has shown that individuals higher in the organizational hierarchy are particularly motivated to protect their privileged power positions (Feenstra et al., 2020; Magee & Galinsky, 2008) as well as convert their power position into sexual opportunities

(Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Pérusse, 1993). Hence, we consider employees' gender and power level as moderating variables for the relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest (in Study 1 and 2) and workplace sexual harassment (in Study 2). These moderating variables were post-hoc analyses and were not part of our initial theorizing and therefore are not part of the preregistration of Study 2.

We further note that we describe our sampling plan, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. A list of the full measures is available in the Supplementary Materials. Study 1 was not preregistered and the preregistration for Study 2 can be accessed here: https://osf.io/rb4eg?view_only=2c3dee08cb3249bf9cdc7004280be5ad. The Supplementary Materials, deidentified data, and analysis code for bothstudies are available here: https://osf.io/3n8uf/?view_only=30d258b21b3f4fee922b41a0919e8bc0.

Study 1

Method

Procedure and Participants

We conducted a two-waved survey via Prolific Academic. An a priory power analysis using G*Power indicated we required 219 participants to detect a small to medium effect size ($f^2 = .06$) with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .95. To account for retention loss (Jolley et al., 2022), we sampled 280 participants. We invited working adults to participate in a two-part study on their perceptions of their co-workers' behaviors at

work. They received a payment of 1.50 pounds for participating in both parts of the study. At Time 1, 274 completed our demographics and measures of sociosexual orientation and dominance and prestige motivation. A week later we send the participants who completed all measurements at Time 1 a link to the second part of the survey. At time 2, 268 participants completed measures of perceptions of sexual interest of colleagues. We matched participants' responses at Time 1 and 2 using their Prolific IDs and deleted 25 participants who only completed Part 2 and 31 participants who only completed Part 1. We further deleted 1 participant because they reported a different gender at Time 1 versus Time 2 and we deleted 2 participants because they failed the attention check at Time 2 asking them to select a specific answer option. We finally deleted 31 participants because they did not have a heterosexual orientation. We thus conducted our analyses using 209 participants (M_{age} = 37.89, SD = 10.29; age ranges from 20 to 68 years; 50% female; all located in the United Kingdom). All participants worked for an organization at the time of the study, their average organizational tenure was 6.44 years (SD = 6.91) and most worked in education (17%), human health and social work activities (14%) or financial and insurance activities (12%).

Measures

Dominance and Prestige Motivation. Following Cheng and colleagues (2010), we measured dominance motivation with 8 items (α = .84; e.g., I enjoy having control over others) and prestige motivation with

9 items (α = .85; e.g., My colleagues respect and admire me). The items were rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7(very much).

Perceptions of Sexual Interest. We measured perceptions of sexual interest with seven items taken from Hasselton and Bus (2000). We slightly adapted these item such that they applied to a working context. We asked participants to rate the behavior of colleagues of another gender for sexual interest. Furthermore, in line with previous research (e.g., Abbey, 1982; Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Saal et al., 1989), we asked participants to rate their colleagues behavior towards another other-gendered colleague.

In particular we asked to what extent a list of behaviors indicated 'sexual interest' on the part of one of their female [male] colleagues. Examples of the behaviors listed are: "On the first day of work, approaching a male [female] colleague, smiling brightly, and striking up a friendly conversation", "Making prolonged eye contact with a male [female] co-worker during a meeting", and "Dancing provocatively with a male [female] colleague at the office party" (α = .87). The behaviors were rated on a scale from 1 (no sexual interest) to 7 (a lot of sexual interest). Prior to our measure of sexual interest we included two filler scales in which we asked participants to rate the extent to which a list of behaviors of their male/female colleague was indicative of laziness (4 items; e.g., calling in sick the day after the office party; α = .81) and hostility (3 items; e.g., not responding to your email; α = .86).

Control Variables. We include participants' gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age (in years), socio-sexual orientation (9 items; α = .84; i.e.,

past behavioral experiences; attitudes toward uncommitted sex; and sociosexual desire; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), and power level (1 item; Lammers and colleagues, 2010) as control variables, as previous research has shown that these are associated with perceptions of sexual interest (e.g., Howell et al., 2012; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lee et al., 2020).

Results

Table 1 depicts the descriptive statics for Study 1. In line with Hypothesis 1, dominance motivation was positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest in the behavior of colleagues with a different gender ($r = .26$, $p < .001$). Of the potential control variables, age was positively ($r = .12$, $p = .09$) and gender negatively ($r = -.18$, $p = .01$) associated with perceptions of sexual interest. The later relationship indicates that men perceive less sexual interest in the behavior of women than women do in the behavior of men[1]. In addition, prestige motivation was not associated with perceptions of sexual interest ($r = .05$, $p = .45$). Contrary to previous research, the behavior ($r = -.11$, $p = .10$) and desire aspects ($r = .05$, $p = .52$) of sociosexual orientation were not significantly related to perceptions of sexual interest and the attitude aspect of sociosexual orientation was negatively associated with perceptions of sexual interest ($r = -.21$, $p = .002$), suggesting that promiscuous individuals are not systematically biased to overperceive sexual intent in the behavior of a colleague with a different gender. Sociosexual orientation was positively associated with dominance motivation ($r = .25$,

[1] Note that this does *not* indicate evidence contradicting the sexual overperception bias as this would require a comparison of men versus women's perceptions of the behavior of women towards men.

$p < .001$), but not with prestige motivation ($r = .05$, $p = .45$), suggesting that dominant individuals are sexually more promiscuous.

We then conducted hierarchical regression analyses on perceptions of sexual interest to test our first hypothesis (See Table 2). In Step 1, we included our control variables. In Step 2, we included dominance and prestige motivation. We standardized all continuous predictor variables prior to the analysis. In line with Hypothesis 1, results showed that dominance motivation was positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest ($B = .35$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.20, .50]). We further showed that prestige motivation was not ($B = .00$, $SE = .08$, $p = .98$, 95% CI [-.15, .16]). We note that conducting the analyses without control variables did not meaningfully change any of the reported findings (See Table 1 in Supplementary Materials). Moreover, conducting the analyses above with perceptions of laziness and hostility included as control variables did also not meaningfully change any of the reported results (See Table 2 in Supplementary Materials). Finally, neither gender, nor power moderated the relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest (See Table 3 and 4 in the Supplementary Materials).

Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

Discussion

Supporting our predictions, Study 1 demonstrated that dominance motivation was positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest. Analysis further showed that prestige motivation was not related to perceptions of sexual interest and that the association between dominance motivation and sexual interest perceptions was not dependent on participants' gender nor power level. These findings demonstrate that individuals who or motivated to obtain higher hierarchical positions in organizations through dominance are perceiving greater sexual interest in their co-workers. These findings suggest that, in work settings, sexual misperceptions, at least partially, serve the role of dominating and controlling others.

Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 regarding the relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest. Moreover, we aimed to extend this finding by examining the downstream consequences of sexual misperceptions for dominant individuals' willingness to engage in workplace sexual harassment. Similar to Study 1, we conducted an online survey to test our hypotheses. To avoid concerns with common method bias we measured our key constructs at three different time points (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Study 2

Method

Procedure and Participants

We conducted a three-waved survey via Prolific Academic. An a priori power analysis (Fritz and MacKinnon, 2007) suggested that we needed 391 participants to test our mediation hypothesis. To account for

retention loss (Jolley et al., 2022), we recruited around 500 participants at time 1. At time 2, we invited all participants who completed wave 1, and at time 3, we invited all participants who completed wave 2. Similar to Study 1, we invited working adults to participate in a study on their perceptions of their co-workers' behaviors at work. They received a payment of 0.75 pounds for participating in each part of the study (2.25 pounds in total). At Time 1, 524 completed our demographics and measures of sociosexual orientation and dominance and prestige motivation. Two weeks later we send the participants who completed all measurements at Time 1 a link to the second part of the survey[2]. At time 2, 464 participants completed measures of perceptions of sexual interest of a co-worker with a different gender. One week later, we send the participants who completed all measurements at Time 2 a link to the third part of the survey. At Time 3, 419 participants completed measures of sexual harassment and general misconduct. We matched participants' responses at Time 1, 2 and 3 using their Prolific IDs and deleted 126 participants that could not be matched (N = 398; response rate = 76%). We further deleted 46 participants because they did not have a heterosexual orientation. Finally, we deleted 1 participants because they reported a different gender at the different parts of the survey and we deleted 6 participants because they failed the attention at one or more of the surveys asking them to select a specific answer option. We thus conducted our analyses using 345 participants (Mage = 39.87, SD =

[2] We intended to send out the second wave of the survey *one* week after the first wave. Contrary to our depiction in the preregistration, however, due to technical difficulties with the Prolific Academic account of the first author, the second wave of the survey was send out *two* weeks after the first wave.

11.10, ranges from 20 to 71 years; 48.4% female; all located in the United Kingdom). All participants worked for an organization at the time of the study, their average organizational tenure was 8.24 years (*SD* = 8.65), and most worked in education (17%), other service activities (15%), or professional, scientific and technical activities (13%).

Measures

Dominance and Prestige Motivation. Similar to Study 1, we measured dominance motivation with 8 items (α = .82) and prestige motivation with 9 items (α = .84). The items were rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7(very much).

Perceptions of Sexual Interest. Similar to Study 1, we measured perceptions of sexual interest with seven items adapted from Hasselton and Bus (2000; α = .87). We again asked participants to rate another-gendered colleagues behavior towards another-gendered colleague. The behaviors were rated on a scale from 1 (no sexual interest) to 7 (a lot of sexual interest). Prior to our measure of sexual interest we included two filler scales in which we measured perceptions of laziness (4 items; α = .81) and hostility (3 items; α = .81).

Sexual Harassment. We measured sexual harassment with 6 items taken from Dekker and Barling (1998; α = .58). We asked participants how often they had engaged in the behaviors listed towards a colleague with another gender over the last 3 months. Examples of behaviors include: “Asked intimate questions about their sex life” and “Suggested that a sexual relationship with you might help their career”. We also

included two filler items that asked about giving support and feedback. The items were rated on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (often).

Control Variables. Similar to Study 1, we include participants' gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age (in years), socio-sexual orientation (9 items; α = .85; i.e., past behavioral experiences; attitudes toward uncommitted sex; and sociosexual desire; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), and power level (1 item; Lammers and colleagues, 2010) as control variables (e.g., Howell et al., 2012; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lee et al., 2020).

Results

Table 3 depicts the descriptive statics for Study 2. Supporting Hypothesis 1, and similar to Study 1, dominance motivation was positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest (r = .18, p < .001). In line with Hypothesis 2, dominance motivation (r = .11, p = .04) and perceptions of sexual interest (r = .15, p = .006) were both positively associated with self-reported sexual harassment. Prestige motivation was not associated with perceptions of sexual interest (r = .07, p = .22), nor with self-reported sexual harassment (r = -.02, p = .67). Of the potential control variables, gender was negatively associated with perceptions of sexual interest (r = -.24 p < .001) and positively associated with self-reported sexual harassment (r = .14, p = .01). These relationships indicate that men perceive less sexual interest in the behavior of women than women do in the behavior of men and that men report engaging in sexual harassing behavior towards women more often than vice versa. Similar to Study 1, sociosexual orientation was not associated with perceptions of sexual interest (r = -.01, p = .87), indicating that sexual

promiscuous individuals are not more likely to perceive sexual interest in the behaviors of colleagues with a different gender. Furthermore, sociosexual orientation was positively associated with dominance motivation (r = .24, p < .001), but not with prestige motivation (r = -.02, p = .74), suggesting that dominant individuals are sexually more promiscuous. Finally, results showed that sociosexual orientation was positively associated with self-reported sexual harassment (r = .20, p < .001), showing that promiscuous individuals are more likely to sexually harass a coworker with a different gender.

Insert Table 3 about here

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses on perceptions of sexual interest to test Hypothesis 1 (See Table 4). In Step 1, we included our control variables. In Step 2, we included dominance and prestige motivation. We standardized all continuous predictor variables prior to the analysis. In line with Hypothesis 1, results showed that dominance motivation was positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest (B = .28, SE = .06, p < .001, 95% CI [.17, .40]). Analysis further revealed that prestige motivation was not associated with sexual intent perceptions (B = .06, SE = .06, p = .25, 95% CI [-.05, .17]).

Insert Table 4 about here

We then employed the SPSS macro “PROCESS” (Hayes, 2012) using a bootstrapping procedure (with 5,000 resamples), as proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008), to test Hypothesis 2 (see Figure 1). This analysis again revealed a positive relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest ($B = .29$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.17, .40]). Furthermore, in line with our expectations, perceptions of sexual interest were positively associated with self-reported sexual harassment ($B = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.01, .05]). Finally, in support of Hypothesis 2, analysis revealed an indirect effect of dominance motivation on sexual harassment via perceptions of sexual interest ($B = .01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [.001, .021]).

We note that conducting the analyses reported above without control variables or including perceptions of laziness and hostility as control variables did not meaningfully change any of the reported findings. See Tables 5-8 in Supplementary Materials for results of regression analyses without control variables and with perceptions of laziness and hostility as control variables. Furthermore, neither gender, nor power, moderated the relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest (See Tables 9 and 10 in the Supplementary Materials).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Post-hoc Analyses. To further increase confidence in our proposed theorizing we also explored the implications of perceptions of sexual

interest for general misconduct in organizations. We expected that perceptions of sexual interest would be an important mechanism explaining the relationship between dominance motivation and *sexual* misconduct, but not the relationship between dominance motivation and *general* misconduct. Note that this prediction was more exploratory and was therefore not included in our preregistration. We measured general misconduct with ten items taken form Bennett and Robinson (2000; α = .75). An example items is "I took property from my work without permission." All items were measured on a scale form 1 (never) to 7 (daily). Although general misconduct was positively associated with sexual harassment ($r = .17$, $p = .002$) and dominance motivation ($r = .18$, $p = .001$), we found no support that perceptions of sexual interest were associated with general misconduct ($B = .06$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [-.003, .13]) or that perceptions of sexual interest mediate the relationship between dominance motivation and general misconduct ($B = .02$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.001, .04]; See Table 5). These findings indeed suggest that perceptions of sexual interest are important in explaining *sexual* misconduct, but not *general* workplace misconduct.

Discussion

The findings of Study 2, replicated the findings of Study 1, showing that dominance motivation, but not prestige motivation, was positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest. Similar to Study 1, analysis further revealed that dominance motivation is related to socio-sexual orientation but socio-sexual orientation is not related to perceptions of sexual interest, supporting the notion that sexual

misperceptions in the workplace are not a function of sexual promiscuity and desire. We further extended the findings of Study 1, by showing that dominant individuals who misperceive their colleagues' sexual interest are more likely to engage in sexually harassing behaviors, thereby casting sexual misperceptions as an underlying mechanism driven sexual workplace harassment. Finally, we showed that perceptions of sexual interest are associated with sexual misconduct but not with workplace misconduct in general, suggesting that sexual harassment is not a generic anti-social strategy but is tied to mixed-gender workplace interactions in the workplace.

General Discussion

The present research examined sexual misperceptions in the workplace. Across two studies, our findings consistently showed that employees high in dominance motivation, but not those high in prestige motivation, are more likely to perceive sexual interest in the behaviors of co-workers with a different gender. We further found no evidence that this relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest was dependent on employees' own gender and/or power position. Moreover, our findings showed that such perceptions of sexual interest, in turn, were associated with higher levels of self-reported workplace sexual harassment and explained the positive relationship between dominance motivation and sexual harassment at work.

Theoretical Contributions

These findings make several important theoretical contributions. First, the present investigation extends previous work on sexual

misperceptions by examining this construct in the workplace. In particular, by showing the role of dominance motivation and demonstrating the detrimental implications for sexual workplace harassment, we underlie the importance of studying this concept in a wide range of contexts and samples, including the workplace.

Second, our results advance Hasselton and Buss' (2000) Error Management Theory explanation of sexual misperceptions. This theory argues that men, in particular, are likely to misinterpret sexual intentions of women as the costs of missing out, and the benefits of capitalizing on, sexual mating opportunities is higher for men compared to women. Our findings suggest that in workplace settings additional costs and benefits of sexual intent perceptions are important as well. Across two studies, we consistently show that dominance motivation is positively associated with perceptions of sexual interest in the workplace, suggesting that dominant individuals are more likely to over-sexualize co-workers.

Third, the present research extends previous work on the predictors of sexual misperceptions by examining important consequences as well. In particular, we contribute to the development of a coherent body of evidence that casts perceptions of sexual interest as an important mechanism that can explain sexual misconduct (Abbey et al., 1998; Farris et al., 2008; Stockdale, 1993). Moreover, our findings suggest that while sexual misperceptions are an important mechanism shaping workplace *sexual* misconduct, sexual misperception cannot explain *general* workplace misconduct. This study thus shows the importance of distinguishing between *sexual* workplace misconduct and *general*

workplace misconduct considering that they are shaped by different mechanisms and therefor require different interventions.

Finally, this study extends previous work on workplace sexual harassment. This line of research has predominantly adopted a victim's perspective by, for instance, examining the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and the detrimental consequences for its victims (cf. Willness et al., 2007). We extend this line of important work by shining more light on the perpetrators of workplace sexual harassment as well. Hence, we add to a growing body of work that explains when and why sexual harassment at work is likely to occur (Maass et al., 2003; Pryor et al., 1993; Siebler et al., 2008).

Practical Contributions

The current findings also offer relevant practical contributions for reducing sexual workplace harassment. Sparked by the #MeToo movement, attention towards the topic of sexual harassment in the workplace has exploded the last few years (Atwater et al., 2019). In response to that, recent figures suggest that reporting of sexual misconduct at work has also increased substantially (e.g., CBS, 2022; EEOC, 2022). This puts more pressure on organizations, and society as a whole, to combat such workplace sexual harassment.

Our research offers organizations important insights in how to do just that. In fact, our findings suggest that in order to reduce the occurrence of sexual misperceptions and workplace sexual harassment, organizations should avoid selecting, attracting, and/or reinforcing dominant-motivated employees. First, organizations can prevent selecting

individuals high in dominance motivation by including measures of dominance (and prestige) motivation in their selection procedures. Moreover, organizations can avoid attracting and promoting dominated-motivated employees by ensuring that their organizational rank is not based on dominant tactics, but instead, that power and status are granted and based on employees' friendliness and overall reputation (de Waal-Andrews et al., 2015; Ronay et al., 2012). In doing so, organizations would create more safe working environment where sexual misperceptions and workplace sexual harassment are less likely to occur.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current research is not without limitations. First, our use of single-source data limits or ability to make causal claims and raises the concern of common method bias and social desirability (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, we have taken on various steps to reduce these issues. Most importantly, we have adopted multi-waves survey designs in which we measured our independent, mediator, and dependent variable one, or two, weeks apart. Doing this substantially reduces concerns about the artificial inflations of our observed relationship, as well as, issues of reversed causality. Moreover, we have assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses and included filler items throughout the surveys in order to reduce socially desirable answers. Nevertheless, future research could benefit from studying the observed relationships between dominance motivation, sexual misperceptions, and workplace sexual harassment with (field-) experiments and/or using data from multiple sources.

Second, our items of sexual workplace harassment had a rather low internal consistency. This low internal consistency was a result of one item (i.e., how often do you make jokes with sexual insinuations?) being rated higher and receiving more variations than the respective items of the scale. To increase reliability (and potentially validity) of the workplace sexual harassment measurement, future research could benefit from adopting a more indirect measurement of workplace sexual harassment or by assessing sexual harassment trough observational data (Maass et al., 2003; Siebler et al., 2008).

Third, in the two reported studies, we consistently measured sexual perceptions in a cross-gendered design, such that women rated male colleagues (who interacted with another female colleague), while men rated female colleagues (who interacted with another male colleague). This designs was effective for testing our hypotheses regarding the role of dominance motivation for sexual intent perceptions and workplace sexual harassment. However, this cross-gendered design prevented us from examining potential gender effects. Future research could benefit from adopting a full cross-over design, where men and women rate both their male and female colleagues' behaviors. By doing so, research can test whether the sexual overpeception bias is also present in organizational settings in the post #MeToo era, or that men tend to shy away from inferring sexual interest from female colleagues nowadays (Gloor et al., 2022).

Fourth, we have argued that employees perceive heightened sexual interest in the behaviors of colleagues (of a different gender) as a

strategy to enhance or protect their own position in the competition for scarce job-related resources (Berdahl, 2007). Yet it is important to note that one's formal power position was unrelated to perceptions of sexual interest and that power level did not moderate the relationship between dominance motivation and perceptions of sexual interest, which goes against this social status hypothesis to some extent. A different explanation for the sexual misperception is that dominant individuals– both men and women – are more concerned about missing out on sexual opportunities. The positive relationship between dominance motivation and sexual promiscuity (assessed by the socio-sexual inventory) suggests some evidence for the sexual desire hypothesis, although the lack of an association between sexual promiscuity and sexual intent perceptions goes against it. Future research could benefit from more directly comparing and testing these two explanations, for example, by considering whether dominant individuals are particularly likely to perceive sexual interest when their power position is threatened by a rival from another gender (Case & Maner, 2014; Feenstra et al., 2020) which would support the social status hypothesis. Alternatively, if it is about sexual desire, dominant individuals should be particularly likely to perceive sexual intent behaviors when the mate value of a colleague is high rather than low (Kohl & Robertson, 2014).

Finally future research could expand the current model by examining moderating variables that could mitigate the relationship between dominance motivation and sexual intent perceptions and workplace sexual harassment. Although we found no evidence that power

or gender mitigates these relationships, it is important to identify organizational variables that might. The organizational environment (Padilla et al., 2007), cultural tightness (Gelfand, 2019), and in particular, the organization's tolerance for sexual harassment, (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Hulin et al., 1996) might prove to be particular important in this regard. So far, we have argued that for employees high in dominance motivation it is less costly to misperceive sexual interest in one's colleagues. It is possible that in more tight organizational cultures, where the shared perception is that reports of sexual harassment are taken seriously and trigger severe penalties, even individuals high in dominance motivation will deem sexual misperceptions as relatively costly, leading them to shy away from showing this bias.

Conclusion

Overall, the present research took a dominance perspective on sexual misperceptions in the workplace. Across two studies we showed that employees with a higher dominance motivation, but not those with a higher prestige motivation, were more likely to perceive sexual interest in the behavior of a co-worker with a different gender. We further showed that perceptions of sexual interest, in turn, were positively associated with a likelihood to sexually harass co-workers with a different gender, and that perceptions of sexual interest mediate the positive relationship between dominance motivation and workplace sexual harassment. To our knowledge, this constitutes a first attempt to examine sexual intent perceptions in the workplace and thereby provides new and important

insights into the psychological process that underlies workplace sexual harassment.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Variables in Study 1

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	.50 (.50)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Age	21.02 (10.36)	.11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Power	39.27 (24.24)	.07	.17*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Socio-sexual orientation (SOI)	3.80 (1.21)	.37**	-.09	.12	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. SOI - behavior	2.88 (1.66)	.13	.01	.15*	.72**	-	-	-	-	-
6. SOI - attitude	5.02 (2.53)	.21**	-.15*	.09	.85**	.52**	-	-	-	-
7. SOI - desire	3.21 (2.12)	.48**	-.05	.05	.75**	.26**	.42**	-	-	
8. Dominance motivation	3.02 (.91)	.14*	-.10	.23**	.25**	.16*	.16**	.25**	-	-
9. Prestige motivation	4.68 (.76)	.03	.11	.40**	.05	.12	.07	-.04	.07	-
10. Perceptions of sexual interest	2.82 (1.07)	-.18**	.12	.08	-.12	-.11	-.21**	.05	.26**	.05

Notes. N = ranges from 204 to 209. For gender 0 = female, 1 = male. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 2
Results of Regression Analyses Predicting Perceptions of Sexual Interest for Study 1

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	*SE*	*95% CI*	*B*	*SE*	*95% CI*
Age	.13	.08	-.02, .28	.18**	.07	.04, .33
Gender	-.38**	.16	-.70, .-.07	-.43**	.15	-.74, -.14
Power	.09	.08	-.06, .24	.02	.08	-.14, .17
Socio-sexual orientation	-.05	.08	-.21, .11	-.12	.08	-.27, .04
Prestige motivation				.00	.08	-.15, .16
Dominance motivation				.35***	.08	.20, .50
R^2		.06			.16	
R^2 change		.06*			.10***	

Notes. $N = 203$. For gender 0 = female, 1 = male. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Variables in Study 2

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	.52 (.50)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Age	39.97 (25.17)	-.06	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Power	39.40 (25.17)	.11	.10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Socio-sexual orientation (SOI)	3.71 (1.15)	.34***	-.16**	-.01	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. SOI - behavior	2.86 (1.59)	.13*	-.01	.06	.73***	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. SOI - attitude	5.20 (1.14)	.22***	-.20**	-.03	.86***	.50***	-	-	-	-	-
7. SOI - desire	3.06 (1.98)	.44***	-.13*	-.06	.77***	.32***	.29***	-	-	-	-
8. Dominance motivation	3.01 (.88)	.24***	-.12*	.29***	.24***	.14**	.07	.23***	-	-	-
9. Prestige motivation	4.75 (.81)	-.01	.08	.33***	-.02	.06	-.03	-.01	.13*	-	-
10. Perceptions of sexual interest	2.93 (1.07)	-.24**	.06	-.05	-.01	-.02	-.05	.08	.18**	.15*	-
11. Sexual	1.07	.14**	-.02	-.03	.20***	.13*	.02	.26***	.11*	.01	.15**

harassment	(.19)

Notes. N = ranges from 340 to 345. For gender 0 = female, 1 = male. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .002$

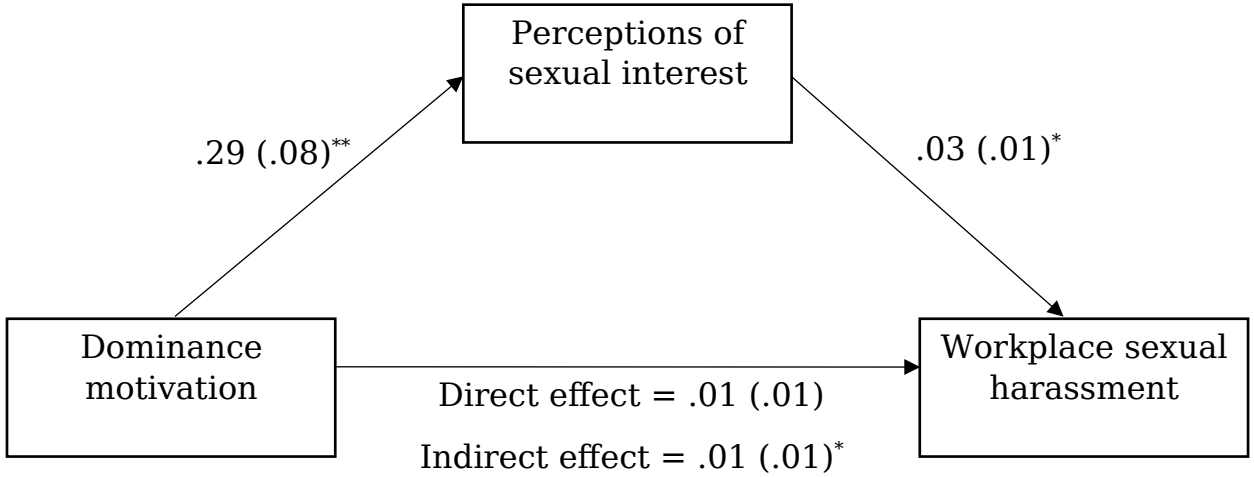
Table 4
Results of Regression Analyses Predicting Perceptions of Sexual Interest for Study 2

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	*SE*	*95% CI*	*B*	*SE*	*95% CI*
Age	.06	.06	-.05, .17	.09	.05	-.01, .20
Gender	-.55	.12	-.78, -.32	-.62	.11	-.84, -.40
Power	-.03	.06	-.14, .08	-.13	.06	-.25, -.02
Socio-sexual orientation	.09	.06	-.02, .21	.04	.06	-.07, .15
Prestige motivation				.06	.06	-.06, .17
Dominance motivation				.28	.06	.17, .40
R^2		.07			.14	
R^2 change		.07***			.07***	

Notes. $N = 340$. For gender 0 = female, 1 = male. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Figure 1

Results for Mediation Analysis of Perceptions of Sexual Interest in the Relationship Between Dominance Motivation and Workplace Sexual Harassment in Study 2.



Notes. $N = 340$. Standardized regression coefficients. Controlling for age, gender, power, and socio-sexual orientation. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.