

Cultural differences in reporting harassment: A study of Asian /international university students in Australia

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Abstract

As the number of international students in Australia increases, there is a greater need to understand their values and attitudes toward equal opportunity issues such as sexual harassment. The current study investigates cultural differences in student attitudes toward harassment in the Australian context. Participants included 47 Asian women students and 47 non-Asian women local students; all participants were undergraduates in major Australian universities. The results show a range of attitudes toward sexual harassment that are not entirely explained by ethnic identification. The results are discussed in light of previous research, mostly conducted in North America, showing Asian students to be more conservative in sexual attitudes and more tolerant of sexual harassment compared to non-Asian students.

Keywords

Sexual harassment, cross-cultural differences, Asian student attitudes

Introduction

In recent years, Australia has experienced a large influx of international students from Asian countries in particular. According to the faculty profiles at the University of Melbourne, the number of international students grew by 44% over a period of five years from 1998 to 2002 (The University of Melbourne, 2004). As the number of international students continues to rise, there is a greater need to understand their values and attitudes in adjustment to their new educational and cultural environment, including equal opportunity issues such as sexual harassment.

A recent report prepared by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2003) states that “sexual harassment is an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated (p. 13).” Such a definition includes direct sexual contact as well as a broader range of less intimate behaviours that may be considered sexual harassment.

Albeit the growing awareness of sexual harassment such as the recent federal government’s “Violence against women: Australia says no” campaign (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004), there is still a stigma against reporting such incidents. This stigma may be associated with fear of subsequent victimisation, fear of being disbelieved, loss of job security and shame (Haynes, 2004). An Australian population-based study found that 18% of women who were assaulted in a period of twelve months never told anyone (Amnesty International, 2004).

Chan (1996) notes that to use the term ‘Asian’ requires a degree of generalisation as it consists of over 30 separate and distinct ethnic groups. Studies of Asian groups show a common foundation of cultural values based upon Confucian and Buddhist values, that emphasise filial piety, harmony with others and the importance of a woman’s role as a daughter, wife, and mother in the family (Chan, 1996; Okazaki, 2002). Inherent in these

values is the importance of family where individual desires are subsumed under duty and obligations to the family (Fong, 1994).

Although the area of ethnic differences is an important one, the study of sexuality is a sensitive topic. Since the 1980s, research on sexuality in several Asian ethnicities has found a 'conservative' nature where sexuality is considered a taboo subject (Chan, 1996; Okazaki, 2002; Tang, Yik, Cheung, Choi, & Au, 1995). Chan (1996) stated that in most Asian ethnicities, "sexuality, including discussing sexual matters, should only be expressed within the context of one's private self (p. 125)." A report by the Women's International Network News (WIN) noted that Asian women who have been sexually harassed do not speak out for fear of being labelled as 'loose women' (Burn, 2000).

Meston, Trapnell and Gorzalka (1998) investigated ethnicity and gender influences on student attitudes toward sexual knowledge and attitudes. The Sexual Information subscale of the Derogatis Sexual Functioning Inventory (DSFI) was used to measure sexual knowledge. Sexual attitudes were measured using the Sexual Attitudes subscale of the DSFI and the attitude items from the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory. The researchers found that Asians demonstrated significantly less accurate sexual knowledge than non-Asians and Asians held significantly more conservative sexual attitudes on issues such as homosexuality, masturbation, multiple sex partners, premarital sex and sex roles.

Another study that specifically measures different ethnic attitudes toward sexual harassment was conducted by Kennedy and Gorzalka (2002). Undergraduate students completed a questionnaire that assessed different forms of harassment, attitudes toward coercive sexual behaviour and general attitudes toward sexual activity. Attitudes toward coercive sexual behaviour were measured using the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and the Sexual Harassment Attitude Scale. General attitudes toward sex were measured using the Sexual Attitudes subscale of the DSFI. The study reported similar findings to that of Meston, Trapnell and Gorzalka (1998). Asians, compared to non-Asians, were significantly more tolerant of 10 of the 11 rape myth items presented. Asians were also significantly more tolerant of sexual harassment on a number of items such as: "Most women who are sexually insulted by a man provoke his behaviour by the way they talk, act, or dress" and "The notion that what a professor does in class may be sexual harassment, is taking the idea of sexual harassment too far." In terms of sexual attitudes, Asian students were significantly more conservative in sexual attitudes compared to their non-Asian counterparts on 12 of the 30 items.

Most of the research in this area has been conducted in North America. The current study investigates cultural differences in young women student attitudes toward harassment in the Australian context. In contrast to previous studies that have primarily focused on ascertaining the ethnic difference hypothesis, this study also addresses the motivations underlying people's actions to report harassment. When presented with scenarios of sexual harassment, it is hypothesised that Asian women, compared to their non-Asian peers, will be less likely to perceive these scenarios as sexual harassment. Second, Asian women compared to non-Asian women, will report they are less likely to seek help when faced with the possibility of sexual harassment. Third, it is hypothesised that Asian women, compared to non-Asian women, will be more conservative in their attitudes toward sexual harassment.

Method

Participants

Participants were 94 women (47 Asian, 47 non-Asian) undergraduate students from major Australian Universities who volunteered to complete a self-report questionnaire. Participants ranged from 18 to 25 years (median ages: Asian 21 years; non-Asian 20 years). The "Asian"

group comprised all participants who indicated they were of Asian origin in response to the question: "What ethnic group do you belong to?", all other respondents were grouped as "non-Asian". Thus, responses to this question were: "Asian" or "non-Asian".

Instruments

Demographic information was collected by asking participants to provide their age, gender, country of birth, country of birth of parents, age of arrival in Australia, first language, and ethnic group (Asian or non-Asian) to which participants believe they belonged.

Participants' views toward scenarios of sexual harassment were measured using four case studies. Case studies (names changed) were created from advice provided by senior sexual harassment officers at one of the Universities. Cases were designed to elicit differences in cultural responses such as relational power and the concept of face. Case 1 presents a scenario of a woman harassed by her ex-boyfriend. In Case 2, a female student is harassed by her male lecturer. Case 3 presents a scenario of a male student harassed by his female tutor. Case 4 presents a scenario of a woman harassed by her male friend. All cases would fit a definition of a sexual harassment complaint.

Attitudes toward sexual harassment were measured using the Sexual Harassment Attitude Scale (SHA, Mazer & Percival, 1989). The SHA contains items that measure the perception of sexual harassment (e.g., an attractive woman has to expect sexual advances and should learn how to handle them). Items are scored using a 5- point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater conservatism in attitudes.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through advertisements placed at University bulletin boards. Those who responded were mailed a copy of the anonymous self-report questionnaire. The questionnaires were in the order of plain language statement, consent form, case studies, SHA Scale and debriefing statement. Completed anonymous questionnaires were returned to the researchers in return reply-paid envelopes.

Results

Following presentation of each of the sexual harassment scenarios, several questions were asked about reactions to the particular incidents. Responses to the first question, "Do you consider this scenario as sexual harassment?" for all four scenarios are presented in Figure 1.

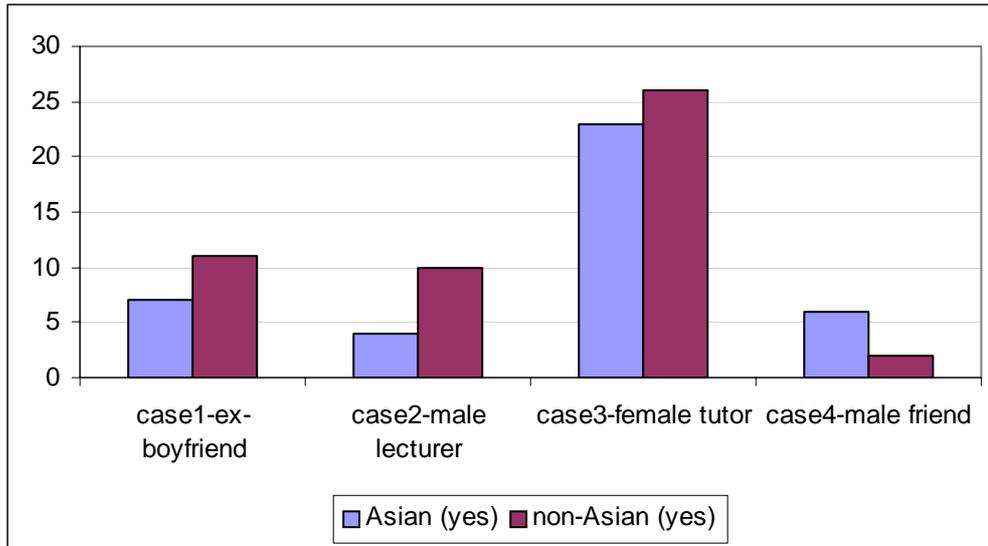


Figure 1. Frequency responses to question “Would you consider this as sexual harassment”

As shown in Figure 1, Case 3 was considered most indicative of sexual harassment (49 ‘yes’ responses), followed by Case 1 (18 ‘yes’), Case 2 (14 ‘yes’) and Case 4 (8 ‘yes’). In Cases 1, 2 and 3, fewer Asians (A), compared to non-Asians (NA) considered the scenarios to be indicators of sexual harassment (Case 1: A 7, NA 11); Case 2: A 4, NA 10; Case 3: 23, NA 26). Only in Case 4 did a higher number of Asians consider the scenario to be sexual harassment compared to the non-Asian group (A 6, NA 2). Chi-square tests found no significant differences between the Asian and non-Asian groups in their response to all four cases (case 1: $\chi^2(1) = 1.09, p > .05$; case 2: $\chi^2(1) = 3.02, p > .05$; case 3: $\chi^2(1) = 0.38, p > .05$; case 4: $\chi^2(1) = 2.09, p > .05$).

Figure 2 presents the distribution of responses for all four cases to the second question “Do you think he/she should speak to someone about this?” (referring to the incident)

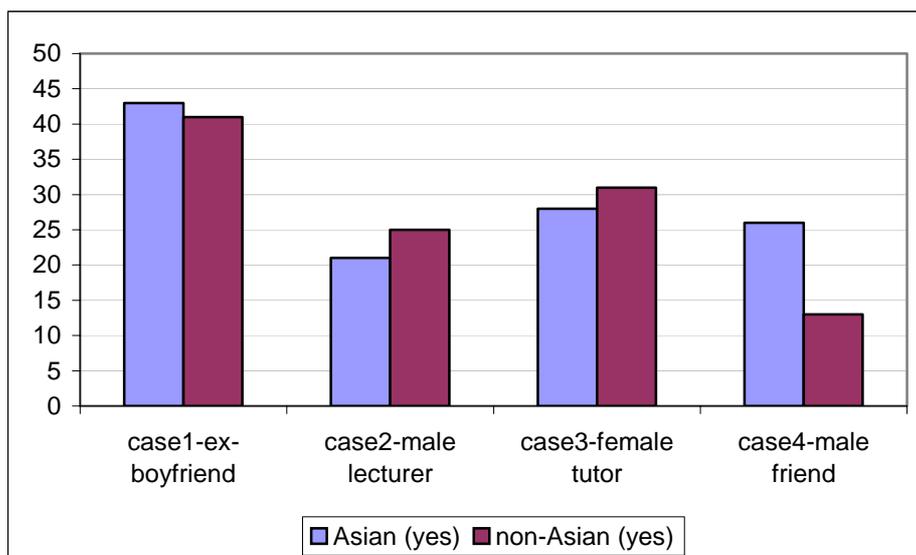


Figure 2. Frequency responses to question “Do you think he/she should speak to someone about this?”

As shown in Figure 2, more Asians than non-Asians indicated that the protagonist in Cases 1 and 4 should speak to someone (Case 1: A 43, NA 41; Case 4: A 26, NA 13). The reverse pattern is shown in Cases 2 and 3 where more non-Asians indicated that the protagonists should speak to someone about it (Case 2: A 21, NA 25; Case 3: A 28, NA 31). Chi-square tests showed no significant differences in responses to this question between Asian and non-Asian groups for Cases 1, 2 and 3 (Case 1: $\chi^2(1) = 0.45, p > .05$; Case 2: $\chi^2(1) = 0.69, p > .05$; Case 3: $\chi^2(1) = 0.26, p > .05$). However, significant differences in responses between Asians and non-Asians were found for Case 4 ($\chi^2(1) = 6.99, p < .05$).

In response to the question, "Who do you think he/she should speak to?", all participants indicated a 'close friend' as the person to speak to (Range: 18 to 61 responses), over all other choices (sexual harassment advisor, parent, lecturer/tutor, other; Range: 0 to 16 responses). Inspection of the qualitative data provided by participants who responded to the 'other' category found that participants mostly identified the antagonist as the person to speak to. There were no differences between Asian and non-Asian groups in response to this question for all four cases.

Of those who said the protagonist should not speak to someone about the incident, the main reason given was they did not consider the case to be a serious issue. Inspection of the qualitative data provided by participants who responded to the 'other' category found that participants mostly indicated that they believed that gestures or messages sent by the antagonists could have been misunderstood.

An independent samples t-test was used to test ethnic group differences on the total SHA scores. The results showed the Asian group had significantly higher SHA scores ($M = 2.75, SD = 0.35$) compared to the non-Asian group ($M = 2.34, SD = 0.46$), $t(92) = 4.89, p < .01$. A further multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test ethnic group differences on responses to separate SHA items. The results revealed significant main effects on eight of the sexual harassment items: "An attractive woman has to expect sexual advances and should learn how to handle them," $F(1,94) = 33.87, p < .05$; "Most women who are sexually insulted by a man provoke his behaviour by the way they talk, act, or dress," $F(1,94) = 33.63, p < .05$; "It is only natural for a woman to use her sexuality as a way of getting ahead in school or at work," $F(1, 94) = 5.33, p < .05$; "An attractive man has to expect sexual advances and should learn how to handle them," $F(1,94) = 30.82, p < .05$; "One of the problems with sexual harassment is that some women can't take a joke," $F(1,94) = 5.63, p < .05$; "The notion that what a professor does in class may be sexual harassment is taking the idea of sexual harassment too far," $F(1,94) = 11.47, p < .05$; "Many charges of sexual harassment are frivolous and vindictive," $F(1,94) = 23.12, p < .05$; and "Sexism and sexual harassment are two completely different things," $F(1,94) = 5.13, p < .05$. On each of these items, the Asian group, compared to the non-Asian group, had higher mean scores indicating greater agreement with the statement.

Discussion

The first hypothesis that Asian women, compared to their non-Asian peers, will be less likely to perceive these scenarios as sexual harassment, was not supported. The second hypothesis that Asian women compared to non-Asian women, will report they are less likely to seek help when faced with the possibility of sexual harassment was not supported for Cases 1, 2 and 3. However, the hypothesis was supported for Case 4: Asian respondents were more likely to indicate that the protagonist should speak to someone. This case involved a female harassed by her male friend. Overall, this study found that there were no significant differences between the Asian and non-Asian group in reporting sexual harassment. However, the trend in the Asian group suggested they were less likely to seek help for particular situations involving academic staff (scenarios involving a male lecturer and female tutor).

Third, the hypothesis that Asian women, compared to non-Asian women will be more conservative in their attitudes toward sexual harassment was accepted. These results are similar to those found by Kennedy and Gorzalka (2002) with the Asian group indicating greater conservatism on a number of items. Inspection of these items suggest that the Asian group had more tolerance toward sexual harassment when they perceived that the behaviour was provoked by women. In addition to the three hypotheses, this study also explored underlying motives in reporting sexual harassment and found that both the Asian and non-Asian group were more likely to report they would seek help from a close friend in instances of sexual harassment. They were less likely to seek help from their parents or a sexual harassment advisor. These findings are important for researchers in understanding the likely responses of women to the experience of sexual harassment.

Respondents in both the Asian and non-Asian groups who reported they would not speak to anyone about the incident tended to view the scenarios as not serious enough to be reported. Although the scenarios were designed to fit the legal definition of a sexual harassment complaint, these findings suggest the level of perception of sexual harassment is an important deciding factor for women. This could also explain why so few women actually come forward to report sexual harassment. Contrary to the cultural specific notion that Asians are less likely to report sexual harassment because of fear of bringing shame to their family, the Asian group did not consider “shame” as one of the factors affecting their decision to report sexual harassment. Participants were also less likely to report when they believed that gestures and messages sent by the antagonist could have misunderstood or misinterpreted. Again, this suggests that the perception of sexual harassment is more important than ethnic differences in reporting.

It should be noted that the size of the sample studied here was small, and the study needs to be replicated with a larger sample to test whether these trends are indicative of cultural differences. A major limitation of this study, with respect to cultural differences, was the labelling of the two groups as “Asian” and “non-Asian” and the assumption that these labels represent “true” categories. Although respondents placed themselves into these categories, it is clearly not an adequate representation of “Asianess”. The purpose of this study was to explore factors related to differences in reporting sexual harassment and was not meant to address the full diversity of the Asian experience, migration and generational issues, and the evolving nature of the experience. These are important issues to consider in future research investigating cultural factors reflected in attitudes to sexual harassment as well as the reporting of incidents that may be construed as sexual harassment.

Acknowledging these limitations, the present findings suggest that women show a range of attitudes toward sexual harassment that are not entirely explained by ethnic identification. Cultural perceptions of sexual harassment and motivations cannot be neatly placed into categories but rather, they exist on a continuum. Further research on cultural differences in this area should look into varying responses between cultures as well as individual differences between participants. Rater characteristics such as gender role attitudes and self esteem could be examined to determine their effect on attitudes toward sexual harassment.

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