



Comparing Gender Hierarchy and Evolutionary Psychology Explanations of Workplace Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

Understanding and preventing workplace sexual harassment requires a good scientific explanation. At present, two scientific explanations compete in the literature. According to the gender hierarchy maintenance account, sexual harassment is a mechanism for maintaining workplace gender hierarchies of power and status, while Evolutionary Psychologists posit that sexual harassment is caused by conflicts between evolved, sex-specific mating and reproductive strategies and sexual psychologies. This article draws on established criteria for scientific explanations to evaluate these competing explanations of workplace sexual harassment. It concludes that the gender hierarchy maintenance explanation better meets the desiderata of identifying causes that make sense of a broad range of sexual harassment phenomena, generating testable predictions, and identifying interventions.

Keywords Sexual harassment · Evolutionary psychology · Gender hierarchy · Scientific explanation

Introduction

What is sexual harassment? What causes it, how does it relate to other workplace dynamics, and what can be done to prevent it? These are the kinds of questions we can only successfully answer with a good scientific explanation. As with other gender-related phenomena, explanations from gender role theories are often pitted against

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those generated from Evolutionary Psychology (e.g., Schmitt, 2015; Wood & Eagly, 2012). For contemporary gender role theorists, sexual harassment is not so much about sexuality, as a mechanism for maintaining workplace gender hierarchies (e.g., Berdahl, 2007). In contrast, Evolutionary Psychologists posit evolved sex differences in sexuality. These psychological mechanisms evolved because they were adaptive for hunter-gatherer societies during the Pleistocene epoch but, today, give rise to an “evolutionary mismatch” in modern, sex-integrated workplaces (Buss, 2022, p. 173). (We follow the convention established by Buller (2006) of capitalizing Evolutionary Psychology to distinguish this specific research program from evolutionary psychology as a broad field of inquiry).

These competing explanations offer a specific example within a longstanding debate about the (relative) scientific value of Evolutionary Psychology versus sociocultural accounts of human behavior (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 2011; Costello et al., 2026; Defant, 2025; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Fine, 2025; Moore, 2026). We focus on Evolutionary Psychology as the only major subfield within evolutionary psychology to offer an explanation of sexual harassment. Moreover, some advocates of Evolutionary Psychology assert its superiority over sociocultural explanations for gendered phenomena (e.g., Defant, 2025; see Fine, 2025 for counterview), and the critical importance for policy makers of incorporating its insights (e.g., Buss, 2023; Defant, 2026; Stern & Madison, 2022). Yet these claims have rarely been subjected to systematic comparative evaluation against established epistemic criteria. We aim to address this gap by offering a brief case study in how epistemic desiderata can help arbitrate between these opposing theoretical frameworks. Drawing on established criteria for scientific explanations, this article evaluates these competing explanations of workplace sexual harassment.

First, we briefly sketch the gender hierarchy account of sexual harassment offered by gender role theorists, followed by its rival from Evolutionary Psychology. Next, drawing on well-regarded philosophical work, we lay out three criteria for a good scientific explanation of sexual harassment. We then evaluate gender hierarchy and Evolutionary Psychology explanations against those criteria. We conclude that, although the Evolutionary Psychology account does meet some of these criteria, they are met more fully by the gender hierarchy account. We close by briefly discussing some scientific and policy implications.

The Gender Hierarchy Maintenance Explanation

The very term, *sexual harassment*, reflects its origins in second-wave cultural radical feminism. This theorized heterosexual relations as inherently oppressive and pivotal to gender inequality (see Schultz, 1998). These feminists’ groundbreaking work, which established the concept in public consciousness and discrimination law, narrowly conceptualized sexual harassment as sexual in nature, and precisely harmful for that reason. Paradigmatic sexual harassment involved a senior man abusing his organizational power to extract sexual favors from a younger female subordinate. In many ways, this remains the prototype of sexual harassment in media portrayals and, perhaps, popular understanding (see Schultz, 2018). Think Harvey Weinstein,

abusing his power within Hollywood to sexually predate attractive female actors and models.

However, in 1998, an important article by legal scholar Vicki Schultz reconceptualized sexual harassment “as an expression of workplace sexism, not sexuality or sexual desire” (Schultz, 1998, 2018, p. 24). Grounded in detailed analysis of legal cases and social science research, Schultz persuasively argued that sexual harassment is both a consequence and cause of occupational sex segregation that maintains men’s overall greater status and power over resources. Key to Schultz’s argument is the prevalence and co-occurrence within work settings of a broad range of behavior “that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual’s sex” (Berdahl, 2007, p. 641). This includes not just sexual coercion (i.e., acts of *quid pro quo*) and unwanted sexual attention, but also gender harassment. The latter includes sexist jokes, comments, and material and sexually degrading imagery, but does not overtly (or plausibly) convey sexual interest. For instance, according to the findings of a four-month investigation by the New York State Attorney General, Weinstein demanded that female staff perform gendered roles like childcare, handling his medical prescriptions, and facilitating his sexual conquests. He made derogatory comments about the psychological effects of their menstrual cycles and would refer to them as “cunt” and “pussy”. He would sometimes similarly degrade male employees with homophobic and gendered slurs (People v. The Weinstein Company, 2018). Research continues to confirm that these gendered “put-downs” are far more common than “come-ons”, and that both sexes can be both perpetrators and targets (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

On this view, sexual harassment functions to preserve “masculine-identified turf” in the workplace, forming part of a broader suite of mechanisms used to maintain gender-based power structures when challenged by the presence of women or gender non-conforming men (Schultz, 1998, p. 1755). A key psychological mechanism underlying this process is men’s tendency to respond to ‘masculinity threats’ with compensatory acts of dominance. Such threats can arise when the presence or success of women or gender-nonconforming individuals in male-dominated spaces challenges men’s sense of masculine identity (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Maass et al., 2003). These threats are theorized to inspire compensatory acts of dominance to reestablish one’s personal masculinity, and to defend masculine authority in the workplace more broadly. Supporting this, experimental research has found that men are more likely to sexually harass after receiving a masculinity threat (for instance, when told their female partner outperformed them on a male-coded task) by sending greater amounts of pornographic images and sexist jokes to female partners (Hitlan et al., 2009; Maass et al., 2003). This hierarchy maintenance explanation of sexual harassment has become the dominant social science account, replacing the earlier emphasis on sexual desire.

The Evolutionary Psychology Explanation

In contrast, sexual desire remains central to the explanation of sexual harassment offered by Evolutionary Psychologists, who identify evolved sex differences in sexuality, rather than patriarchal norms, as the primary cause. A core assumption of Evolutionary Psychology (which is not shared by other evolutionary psychology research programs) is that the evolutionary processes of natural (including sexual) selection “create structured, domain-specific, reliably developing mechanisms that solve adaptive problems with high efficiency.” (Costello et al., 2026, p. 5; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). One such adaptive problem is successful reproduction. In 1991, Studd and Gattiker, drawing on the work of Trivers (1972) and Daly and Wilson (1983), hypothesized that the dynamics of workplace sexual harassment “are ultimately a consequence of the evolution of sex-specific psychological mechanisms related to the evolution of male and female reproductive strategies” (Studd & Gattiker, 1991, p. 253). These conflicting evolved strategies, which give rise to sex-differentiated sexual desires, goals and perceptions of sexual interest, are posited to be the ultimate cause of sexual harassment and “sexual misunderstanding” (Studd & Gattiker, 1991, p. 253).

This evolutionary version of the sexual desire account has persisted within Evolutionary Psychology. For example, Browne (2023, p. 606) similarly proposes that “much behavior that is labelled sexual harassment reflects the different sexual strategies of males and females”. Sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention are hypothesized to be the product of an evolved male bias to over-perceive sexual interest (according to Error Management Theory; Haselton & Buss, 2000), together with a greater interest in pursuing casual sex with fertile females (according to Sexual Strategies Theory; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Preliminary conclusions that harassers are typically male, and targets typically female and young (Studd & Gattiker, 1991), a proxy for fertility, supports the interpretation that the motivation is sexual. Same-sex sexual harassment is also understood in terms of sexual motives, namely an evolved tactic to derogate potential competitors for mating opportunities (Bendixen & Kenair, 2017).

Like the radical feminists, the evolutionary sexual desire account sees the harm of sexual harassment for women as lying in its sexual nature. According to Evolutionary Psychologists, evidence that women are more likely than men to perceive sexual advances as harassing (Rotundo et al., 2001) can be explained in terms of higher obligatory female investment in reproduction. As a consequence, women have evolved to be more sensitive to threats to sexual autonomy (e.g., Buss, 2023). In short, males’ harassment behaviors and females’ sensitivities to harassment are explained by genetically inherited psychological mechanisms which were adaptive in our ancestral past.

Explaining Sexual Harassment

Which of these accounts offers the best explanation of workplace sexual harassment? To evaluate their respective merits, we need to consider what scientific explanations are *for*. The intrinsic value of explanations is to provide *understanding*: better explanations generate greater understanding. Scientific explanations typically advance understanding by identifying causes (Woodward, 2003) that account for observed phenomena in a manner that is logically consistent and minimally ad hoc, and cohere with a broader set of accepted scientific beliefs (Lipton, 2004). Scientific explanations also have instrumental value. Causal explanations can be used to generate predictions about as yet unobserved phenomena, which can be used to test and refine the explanation at hand (Douglas, 2009). In this way, explanations link individual occurrences to general principles, which can be used to anticipate the nature and occurrence of future individual events (Lombrozo, 2011). This relates to better explanations also being *fruitful*—they generate novel, testable predictions that guide future scientific research and inquiry (Douglas, 2009; Lipton, 2004). Lastly, causal explanations can be used to identify factors that can be manipulated or controlled—aspects of the world that can be *intervened on*, offering influence over the outcomes scientists wish to explain (Lombrozo, 2011; Woodward, 2003, 2021).

Thus, a good explanation of sexual harassment should (1) identify causes that make sense of a broad range of sexual harassment phenomena and cohere, or at least do not conflict, with a broader set of accepted scientific beliefs, (2) generate testable predictions about where and how sexual harassment occurs, as well as specific characteristics of perpetrators and victims, and (3) point to interventions. With these criteria in hand, we now evaluate the gender hierarchy and Evolutionary Psychology explanations against them. Specifically, we do so by comparative assessment of these two explanations according to how well they satisfy the three epistemic desiderata. Assessment of explanatory desiderata is a theoretical methodology popular in philosophy of science for appraising competing scientific explanations (Douglas, 2009; Woodward, 2003, 2021). While assessments are typically qualitative, the three desiderata can be operationalized as follows. (1) *Understanding* via *causes* can be assessed along two dimensions: identifying the number of sexual harassment phenomena that cohere with the proposed cause, and identifying the number of accepted scientific beliefs that conflict with the proposed cause. Causes that are congruous with more phenomena and conflict with fewer beliefs are deemed better explanations. (2) *Fruitfulness* is assessed as the number of novel, testable predictions generated by a scientific explanation. The more predictions generated, the better the explanation (Douglas, 2009). *Intervention potential* is assessed by how well the features identified can be practically controlled or manipulated in order to influence the phenomenon under investigation, in this case, sexual harassment. Better explanations point to features of the world that can be targeted and altered, thereby offering clear and practical guidance for improving sexual harassment outcomes.

Evaluating the Explanations

With regards to the first criterion, the gender hierarchy maintenance explanation is clearly superior in identifying causes that make sense of a broad range of sexual harassment phenomena. It accounts for a greater number of phenomena compared to the Evolutionary Psychology account. Most notably, it accounts not only for sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention, but also gender harassment. Whether it is a demand for sexual favors, requests for note-taking, or sexist remarks, all are understood as behaviors that reinforce traditional gender roles that confer greater status and authority to men (Berdahl, 2007). These behaviors are not well explained by the Evolutionary Psychology explanation.

The grouping of these forms of sexual harassment under a unified construct is supported by multiple lines of empirical research. Studies show these behaviors sufficiently co-occur to warrant their inclusion in a single empirical framework (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1995; notably, Lim & Cortina, 2005, found that 99 percent of women who experience unwanted sexual harassment also experienced gender harassment or incivility in their workplaces). Qualitative research further demonstrates this co-occurrence, revealing that men who engage in the sexualization of female coworkers simultaneously employ gender-policing tactics, suggesting behaviors operate as interconnected elements of a broader hierarchical system (Quinn, 2002). Finally, a meta-analysis of studies of harmful workplace experiences and women's occupational wellbeing found that long-term gender harassment elicits comparable reductions in organizational commitment, work satisfaction, and physical and mental health to other forms of sexual harassment (Sojo et al., 2016), suggesting these experiences share similar mechanisms of harm despite their surface differences.

Conceptualizing sexual harassment as hierarchy maintenance also better reflects the often murky phenomenology of sexual harassment, which includes behaviors that are not easily demarcated as either sexual in nature or degrading to one's gender (e.g., making crude sexual remarks about another's appearance, showing porn). In contrast, the Evolutionary Psychology account artificially separates these subtypes, and cannot make sense of the most common form of sexual harassment: men's gender harassment of women (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

In addition, only the hierarchy maintenance framework accounts for patterns of harassment targeting other social groups. For instance, men who work in female-concentrated occupations or who are otherwise gender nonconforming are targets because they "fail to conform to the definition of masculine mastery that the dominant group has projected onto the work" (Schultz, 1998, p. 1776). The elevated risk of sexual harassment experienced by gender minorities, such as transgender workers (Devís-Devís et al., 2022) can be attributed to the threat they pose to the sex-based gender categories on which the gender hierarchy depends.

The hierarchy maintenance account also sheds light on why women are more likely to be sexually harassed in male-dominated organizations: that is, ones in which men outnumber women, leaders are mostly men, or when jobs and duties are stereotypically associated with men. These are contexts in which gender is most salient as a basis for status, and in which women's presence is most likely to be perceived as a threat to masculine dominance (see Cortina & Areguin, 2021). In contrast, although

Evolutionary Psychology theories do posit some facultative adaptations, sensitive to local ecological cues (Schmitt, 2015), this prefigured plasticity is limited to what was adaptive for ecological variation experienced in Pleistocene environments. Such theories therefore offer limited conceptual resources for explaining why sexual harassment occurs more frequently in modern male-dominated workplace contexts.

Both explanations fare equally well on the second dimension of causal understanding: the extent to which the explanation coheres with a broader set of scientific beliefs. The hierarchy maintenance framework does not understand workplace sexual harassment as a matter of individual bad character, or good faith error. Rather, it is understood as a manifestation of hierarchical gender relations that intersect with other social hierarchies, such as race and economic status, giving rise to elevated experiences of harassment for minority women (Berdahl & Moore, 2006), as well as for women in precarious work (Bertrand, 2020). This coheres with a well-established body of research on intergroup relations demonstrating that individuals are strongly motivated to maintain high-status social identities, and that aggression is a common mechanism by which dominant groups defend hierarchical categories, especially when they perceive their position is challenged (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Weick, 2020). It is also consistent with findings that sexual harassment co-occurs with other forms of dominance-based workplace mistreatment, such as incivility and bullying, particularly in hierarchical organizations (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

Evolutionary Psychology's explanation of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion also coheres with a broader set of scientific beliefs. It is understood as one of several manifestations of men's stronger tendency to seek casual sexual opportunities (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This, in turn, is regarded as an adaptive trait arising from sexual selection pressures, whereby men who engaged in short-term mating strategies enjoyed increased reproductive success compared with those who did not (Buss, 1998). At first glance, it might therefore seem that the Evolutionary Psychology account of sexual harassment additionally coheres within a broader set of scientific beliefs regarding the evolution of sexual conflict and sexual coercion across the animal kingdom within the context of sexual selection, a line of inquiry that also sometimes deploys the term 'harassment' (Watson-Capps, 2009). However, it is far from clear that sexual harassment in humans is equivalent in some deep, meaningful way to various sexually coercive behaviors observed in other species (see Dupré, 2007). Most obviously, the demeaning, derogating, and humiliating dimensions of sexual harassment in humans have no clear non-human counterparts. But nor can it be safely assumed that 'sexual coercion' in humans, as it is understood in the context of workplace sexual harassment, has a common function or phylogeny with behaviors labelled as sexual coercion in other animals, including our closest genetic relatives. In chimpanzees, for example, direct sexual coercion sometimes occurs in the form of low-ranking males harassing and intimidating females reluctant to mate with them in the presence of sexually interested males who are higher-ranking and engaged in mate-guarding. However, the most common form of sexual coercion comes in the form of charging displays, chases, and attacks, directed predominantly toward fecund females, that function in the long-term to influence those females' future mating decisions (Muller et al., 2009).

Regarding the second criterion, both the gender hierarchy maintenance and Evolutionary Psychology frameworks have successfully generated, tested and confirmed novel predictions. For example, women with relatively ‘masculine’ personalities, feminist activists, gender and sexual minorities, and powerful women—who all induce masculinity threats—are particularly likely to experience sexual harassment (see Berdahl & Bhattacharyya, 2021), supporting a gender hierarchy maintenance explanation. Predictions about perpetrators include that men reporting higher intentions to sexually harass are particularly likely to consider being ‘a man’ as central to their identity, and are more likely to endorse sex stereotypes, sexist attitudes, and gender and other forms of inequality (Berdahl & Bhattacharyya, 2021; Maass et al., 2003; Siebler et al., 2008)—presumed correlates of concern with maintaining sex-based status.

The Evolutionary Psychology framework has likewise generated and tested predictions, such as that a short-term mating orientation is associated with sexually harassing others, same-sex derogation, and being harassed (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017; Kennair & Bendixen, 2012), indicating sexual motives. A recent life history strategies account of Evolutionary Psychology (Xu et al., 2025; Zhu & Chang, 2019) has begun to test individual- and population-level predictions arising from this account. Specifically, it proposes that experiences of early life adversity (extrinsic risks and societal competition) trigger prioritizing of present-oriented rather than future-oriented reproductive strategies. This exaggerates two drivers of sexual harassment: male misperception of sexual difference and preference for short-term mating (Xu et al., 2025).

Both research programs must contend with the limitations of commonly used empirical methods, such as reliance on self-report and an inability to control confounds in comparisons of organizational or country contexts in which sexual harassment occurs. However, it is important to note that, in addition, some core predictions of the EP account are impossible to test: we cannot observe the behavior of ancestral women and men or infer it from fossil records; we cannot draw on other species with comparative methods; nor can we identify whether ancestral sexual harassment increased reproductive success (Smith, 2020). It seems at least as plausible that such behavior would have wrought fitness costs via damaged reputation within a close-knit community.

Finally, we turn to the desiderata that a scientific explanation should identify interventions. The gender hierarchy maintenance account points to organizational structures and norms that uphold hierarchical gender relations as sites for intervention. Such interventions could target gender distinctions and hierarchies, such as by increasing gender balance in work teams and leadership and flattening organizational hierarchies as a strategy for preventing or mitigating sexual harassment.

The Evolutionary Psychology account hypothesizes an ultimate cause in the form of ancient selection pressures, and proximate causes in the form of genetically inherited psychological mechanisms. Neither offer scope for useful intervention: selection pressures of the past cannot be undone; and intervening on one’s genetics or other aspects of biology in order to modify behavior is neither practically possible, nor desirable. As for interventions inspired by the Evolutionary Psychology account, some have argued that evolved sex differences in sexual psychology mean that there

can be no genuinely shared perception of what is “reasonable” workplace behavior (Browne, 2023; Buss, 2023). Browne (2023, pp. 622–623) thus recommends educating workers “about sex differences in perspectives to avoid miscommunication rather than simply heightening sensitivity to what may be ambiguous or misunderstood conduct”. Yet the effect size of sex differences in perceptions of sexual harassment are modest ($d=0.3$), indicating substantial overlap in women’s and men’s perceptions (Rotundo et al., 2001). Moreover, addressing this kind of interpersonal misunderstanding – where male workers overestimate sexual interest and female workers overestimate sexual threat – will at best help with mild instances of well-intentioned but clumsy sexual or romantic overtures. Many such instances are unlikely to even meet legal definitions of sexual harassment, and the evidence suggests that training workers in such definitions is ineffective (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019).

Our assessment of the explanatory desiderata of Evolutionary Psychology and hierarchy maintenance accounts favors hierarchy maintenance explanations. While both accounts cohere with a broader set of scientific beliefs, gender hierarchy maintenance accounts explain more phenomena, faring better in causal understanding. Both explanations generate predictions, though some predictions generated by Evolutionary Psychology are impossible to test, making hierarchy maintenance explanations more fruitful. Gender hierarchy maintenance accounts also point to more practical interventions to prevent or mitigate sexual harassment.

Finally, is there room for both accounts? Some Evolutionary Psychologists acknowledge the role of gender hierarchy maintenance functions in some manifestations of sexual harassment, but contend that “incorporating the insights of evolutionary psychology provides a more robust understanding than the purely sociocultural explanation” (Browne, 2023, p. 607). However, the foregoing analysis poses a challenge to this assertion. Evolutionary Psychologists are surely correct that sexual attraction and motives are sometimes involved in sexual harassment. However, this might simply reflect the unremarkable fact that men (and women) are sometimes sexually attracted to their coworkers and in some cases misuse their position and opportunities afforded by the organization to act on these desires. Sexual motives seem neither necessary nor sufficient for sexual harassment to occur.

Implications

Our analysis of the relative scientific merits of hierarchy maintenance versus Evolutionary Psychology explanations of workplace sexual harassment has implications for our understanding of organizational dynamics, the prospects for Evolutionary Psychology accounts in this domain, and cultural beliefs about men’s ‘nature’.

First, in relation to organizational dynamics, as Schultz (1998) persuasively argued decades ago, understanding sexual harassment as driven primarily by sexual desire is too narrow, as it eclipses gender harassment and links to broader patterns of sex discrimination and inequality. While her critique was directed at the second-wave cultural radical feminist conceptualizations of sexual harassment, it is no less relevant for Evolutionary Psychology. Research has consistently demonstrated that sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention are typically part of a broader pattern of

behavior that reinforces gender difference and male authority. Sexualized harassment typically co-exists with sexist and generalized harassment (Leskinen et al., 2011), suggesting that even sexualized forms of harassment may be driven by non-sexual motives. Moreover, men who strongly endorse stereotypical gender roles are more prone to engaging in both sexual and nonsexual forms of harassment against women (Maass et al., 2003; Mumford et al., 2020), again suggesting hierarchy-maintenance motives.

Schultz (1998), in addition, argued that the sexual desire conceptualization of sexual harassment is also too *broad*, as it feeds sexual conservatism by casting all sexualized behavior as inherently harmful for women. Contrary to that position, and to Evolutionary Psychologists' pessimistic predictions about the enduring nature of an "evolutionary mismatch" in sexual desires, interests and perceptions, there is some evidence that women have positive experiences of sexualized interactions in relatively gender-balanced and egalitarian work settings in which they have greater power to shape workplace culture (see Schultz, 2003).

Such observations bring us to the implications of our analysis for organizational prevention programs. As noted earlier, there is little evidence of the efficacy of harassment training focused on "forbidden behaviors" (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020, p. 46). While both bystander and manager training hold promise as interventions for reducing sexual harassment, the gender hierarchy maintenance account accords with proposals that flattening (gender) organizational hierarchies is also critical (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020; Schultz, 2018). More broadly, it suggests the importance of cultivating workplace cultures characterized by mutual respect and inclusion, in which gender is not a salient source of status or power and thus need not be defended through acts of dominance or degradation (Cortina, 2008).

Second, turning now to scientific implications, by moving beyond empirical contrasts between competing accounts (Schmitt, 2015), or a focus on a single epistemic criterion (like falsifiability; Costello et al., 2026), we have sought to leverage conceptual tools from philosophy of science to chip at a longstanding and somewhat unproductive impasse between gender role and Evolutionary Psychology explanations, that we hope will provide a model for future analyses. Moreover, we hope that this might motivate more consideration of the scope for other research programs within evolutionary psychology to offer promising scientific explanations of sexual harassment and other important gendered phenomena. For example, cultural evolutionary psychology theory (Heyes, 2018) posits culturally evolved and inherited psychological mechanisms (or "gadgets"), such as explicit cognitive and motivational mechanisms specialized for understanding others' thoughts and feelings, or norm psychology (Heyes, 2024). Thus, unlike Evolutionary Psychology, in order to understand the roles of inherited biology, environmental contributions, and culture in sex differences in misperception of sexual interest, cultural evolutionary psychology theory would look to individual and cross-cultural variation in learning opportunities.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Evolutionary Psychology explanation does not just come second to its gender hierarchy maintenance counterpart on epistemic desiderata. Unwarranted acceptance of the explanation entails social costs for both sexes. It tacitly demonizes all men, by assuming that, due to universally shared sex-specific psychological mechanisms, they are evolutionarily predisposed to sexually harass

in modern, sex-integrated workplaces, albeit that social and cultural influences may mean that such predispositions are never behaviorally expressed. At the same time, it implicitly exculpates at least some male harassers, on the grounds that their sex-specific standpoint means that behavior perceived as sexually harassing by a female target may be judged “reasonable” by their male peers.

Conclusion

To understand what sexual harassment is, what causes it, and how to prevent it, we need a good scientific explanation. Based on well-established epistemic criteria, we conclude that the gender hierarchy maintenance account of the phenomenon offers the best available scientific explanation: it provides greater causal understanding, is more fruitful, and has greater intervention potential. In response to repeated calls for policy makers to take account of the supposed evolved, biological roots to gender inequalities, it is helpful for scientists to consider competing accounts against well-established epistemic desiderata for scientific explanations. We hope that the application of this approach to workplace sexual harassment provides a useful template for future analyses.

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Declarations

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