When Good People Sexually Harass: The Role of Power and Moral Licensing on Sexual Harassment Perceptions and Intentions

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Abstract

History has shown that people who embody responsibility-focused power have been credibly accused of sexual harassment (SH). We seek to understand why. Drawing on Power-Approach Theory (Keltner et al., 2003) and moral licensing theory (Effron & Monin, 2010) we present two complementary studies examining how responsibility-focused power triggers moral licensing, which, in turn, decreases perceptions of SH (Study 1) and increases intentions to engage in SH (Study 2). In Study 1, 376 adults read scenarios of a man who embodies responsibility-focused power, egocentric power, or low power and then made moral crediting ratings (a form of moral licensing). Then they read a case where the man had been accused of SH. SH judgments against the responsibility-focused power holder, compared to others, were less severe, and several effects were mediated by moral crediting. In Study 2, 310 adults were primed to experience responsibility-focused power or low power. Responsibility-focused power increased SH intentions through effects on communal feelings and moral crediting. This research develops a new theoretical perspective on why SH occurs and why we deny perceiving it. We provide practical recommendations for abating the effects of power and moral licensing.

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