

The Moral Intersection of Political Ideology and Gender: A Study on Harm Perception

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Abstract

This study investigated how the gender of an alleged victim and the political ideology of an observer influence perceptions of non-physical harm. In an online vignette-based experiment, participants read an allegation made by either a man or a woman in the workplace and rated the severity of alleged harm. The total sample size was $N = 146$, and participants were recruited to voluntarily participate from a pool of university students. It was hypothesized that allegations made by a woman would be perceived as more severe than those made by a man, and that participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning would evaluate harm as more severe overall. An interaction was also predicted: participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning were expected to evaluate allegations of harm made by a woman more severely, while those who identified as more conservative or right-leaning were expected to evaluate allegations of harm made by a woman less severely. The results supported both main effects of gender and political ideology on perceived severity of alleged harm. A significant interaction indicated that political ideology moderated the effect of the claimant's gender on the perceived severity of alleged harm, however, this effect was observed only among participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning due to limited representation of conservative or right-leaning participants in the sample. These findings highlight how the identity of both a victim and an observer can influence how harm is perceived.

Keywords: gender, harm allegations, moral judgment, political ideology, vignette-based experiment

The Moral Intersection of Political Ideology and Gender: A Study on Harm Perception

The World Society of Victimology (2007) states that the definition of a victim is “a person who, individually or collectively, has suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, or economic loss...”. On the surface, this appears to be a very objective definition of what it means to be a victim. However, defining who a victim is deeply complicated by the highly subjective interpretations of victimhood across individuals. What defines a “true victim” is far from an objective fact but is instead a matter of perception (Gray & Kubin, 2024). Evaluating an instance of harm inflicted by a perpetrator on a victim is not always as straightforward as it seems. Harmful acts are more easily recognized when they take physical form - but what about when inflicted wounds are invisible? Over time, harm-related concepts have expanded to include a wider range of phenomena considered to be harmful (Haslam et al., 2020). Subtle forms of harm that are not evidently visible, such as emotional and psychological harm, are more ambiguous and therefore allow more room for subjectivity. The variation in individual definitions of victimhood revolves around how one perceives acts of harm and moral transgressions. Such nuanced harms surround us in everyday contexts, such as in educational, interpersonal, and organizational domains. For instance, in the workplace, an employee who feels consistently excluded by their colleagues may not suffer physical scars but can experience significant psychological distress.

It would be most rational for the ethicality of an action to be judged solely for what it is, though research has demonstrated that various extraneous factors exert significant influence on the outcomes of these judgments (Gino et al., 2009). Among these extraneous factors are central components of identity such as gender and political ideology. These aspects of our identity can function as filters for how observers process information in morally charged situations.

Ideological differences may skew perceptions of harm severity, while gender stereotypes can influence who is more readily perceived as vulnerable, and thus more likely to be seen as a “true” victim. These influences are often derived from implicit cognitive biases and attitudes that pervade daily life, exercising influence on virtually all our judgments, opinions, and decisions (Brownstein, 2015). Operating beneath conscious awareness, implicit biases are particularly influential in morally ambiguous contexts where the absence of clear evidence of harm paves the way for subjective interpretation to fill in the gaps (Holroyd et al., 2017). Taken together, these internal filters of biases, ideology, and identity-based expectations that differ so largely between individuals can directly shape how harm is recognized and judged.

The current study aims to investigate the extent to which individual factors such as gender and political ideology affect how individuals perceive allegations of harm. Specifically, I will examine how perceptions differ depending on whether the alleged victim is a man or a woman. I will also investigate whether the political ideology of the observer moderates this relationship.

Theoretical Foundation

Harm Perception in Social Contexts

To understand why perceptions of harm can vary so much between individuals, particularly based on the identity of the alleged victim and the observer, it is important to consider how people reach moral conclusions. These judgments are best understood as a process of general categorization where individuals decide how well a situation aligns with their definition of immorality (McHugh, 2022). One theory that provides a framework for how these judgments are made is the Theory of Dyadic Morality, which posits that moral evaluations are formulated based on an intuitive mental framework, or a cognitive template, of harm which

involves a powerful agent inflicting harm on a vulnerable patient (Schein & Gray, 2018). The more a situation is perceived to align with this template, the more immoral it becomes in the eyes of an observer. However, what makes a situation more “dyadic” to one person can be incredibly different for another. Individual beliefs and cultural learnings can shape one’s impression of how immoral a situation is (Gray & Pratt, 2024). This framework aids our understanding of how a single allegation of harm can be perceived in a multitude of different ways.

While the Theory of Dyadic Morality provides a valuable framework to understand how moral judgments are structured, it fails to explain why perceptions vary so widely between individuals. To address this question, other research suggests that our moral judgments are made before we are even consciously aware of them. According to the Social Intuitionist Model (Haidt, 2001), moral judgments are primarily driven by intuitive emotional responses rather than deliberate, conscious reasoning. Considering moral evaluations are the direct product of these intuitions, this suggests that moral judgments lack objectivity as they emerge from automatic “good” or “bad” feelings. These emotional reactions that people have when faced with the same situation are deeply affected by their individual histories and cultural contexts (Schein, 2020). This link between emotional intuitions and moral judgment offers further explanation for why people may arrive at different conclusions when faced with the same situation (Haidt, 2001).

Both models highlight the subjectivity that guides moral judgments, demonstrating how malleable one’s perception of harm can be as a result of their personal and cultural context. Naturally, this means the process of identifying someone as a victim is equally as subjective. Gray & Kubin (2024) define a victim as someone harmed without good reason, justification, or precedent. The definition of “good reason” is not static, though it is often contingent on expectations about how people should behave in group contexts, also known as social norms

(McDonald & Crandall, 2015). When these norms are violated, observers are more likely to perceive harm (Gray & Kubin, 2024). In cases of more subtle forms of harm lacking unambiguous evidence, identifying a victim becomes further complicated by individual biases and subjective interpretation. This also applies to subtle forms of interpersonal mistreatment which violate social expectations of fairness, such as exclusion, dismissal, and being overlooked in professional settings. This thesis focuses on these particular forms of harm. Based on the links between perceptions of harm and morality, I expect that the same allegation will be perceived in significantly different ways.

The Role of Gender in Perceptions of Harm

Having established the subjective nature of moral judgment, it is important to explore how aspects of one's identity can bias perception. Among the most salient characteristics is gender, which research has consistently cited as extremely influential in moral judgment (Hester & Gray, 2020). This influence is grounded in normative expectations about men and women that affect how they are perceived and how their behavior is evaluated. A landmark study by Eagly et al. (1991) assessed overall attitudes and attributes participants designate to the two sexes revealed that women are evaluated more positively than men. The underlying reason for more positive attitudes towards women lies in gender stereotypes that are unconsciously held and enforced. (Eagly et al., 1991).

Understanding how stereotypes function and dictate our social cognition is essential for exploring how gender impacts perceptions of harm. Stereotypes reflect what is generally expected from members of particular social groups (Ellemers, 2018). Descriptive gender stereotypes serve to describe the typical differences between men and women, and they are often organized around two distinctly polar dimensions of traits (Ellemers, 2018). Agency, which

encompasses attributes such as autonomy, rationality, and achievement-orientation, is the defining characteristic of the male stereotype (Heilman, 2012). Communality, composed of attributes like concern for others, deference, and emotional sensitivity, is the defining characteristic of the female stereotype (Heilman, 2012). Gender stereotypes prevail in settings where women are underrepresented due to a lack of counterexamples challenging traditional assumptions (Valian, 1999).

These deeply embedded beliefs not only shape how men and women are perceived differently but also dictate how they are expected to behave. The prescriptive nature of gender stereotypes is critical for understanding judgment, particularly in situations where observed behavior deviates from the stereotypical expectation. Research shows that society is more tolerant of certain undesirable traits in one gender than the other (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Their framework introduces gender-relaxed proscriptions, which refers to traits that are generally undesirable but more acceptable for a specific gender, such as emotional vulnerability in women and rebelliousness in men. Contrarily, gender-intensified proscriptions are especially inappropriate for a specific gender, such as rebelliousness in women and emotional vulnerability in men. Violations of these norms tend to provoke the most severe backlash and social penalties. This framework strengthens the bridge between descriptive stereotypes and behavioral expectations, offering insight into why the same behavior can produce greater backlash depending on who displays it. (Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

Gendered expectations also play a pivotal role in shaping moral judgments. The Theory of Dyadic Morality (Schein & Gray, 2018) provides a basic structure for moral evaluations, though it does not account for characteristics that are more easily aligned with either the perpetrator or victim role. Integrating the dyadic template and gender stereotypes, moral

typecasting theory proposes that while people perceive moral behavior through the dyadic template, the process of casting an individual into the role of either an intentional agent or suffering patient is systematically biased by gender stereotypes (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2020). As men are often associated with more agentic traits, they are more easily aligned with the role of being an agentic perpetrator. Contrarily, women being associated with more communal traits makes them more likely to fit the role of the suffering patient. The biased application of moral typecasting demonstrates that a cognitive link exists between the categorization of women as victims and men as perpetrators. This was supported by Study 1 of Reynolds et al. (2020), which found that participants were more likely to assume that a harmed target in a workplace scenario was female, particularly when explicitly labeled as the victim.

Based on these cognitive biases and the persistence of gender stereotypes, my first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: I hypothesize that allegations of harm will be evaluated more seriously when made by a woman and less seriously when made by a man.

The Role of Political Ideology in Perceptions of Harm

Similar to how gender stereotypes influence moral judgment, political ideology is another aspect of identity that shapes how individuals perceive harm. Alexander (2014) defines ideology as “a view about what ought to be thought, said and done about politics in terms of a sole, usually secular, criterion best understood in terms of debt.” For liberals, this debt is owed to the self, emphasizing individual liberty, independence of external authority, legal equality, and rationality. Contrarily, conservatism owes its debt to time, emphasizing tradition and familiarity (Alexander, 2014). This conceptualization illustrates that political ideologies are not only relevant within the political realm but also guide how individuals interpret the world around

them and frame the values underlying their moral judgments.

One theory that helps explain the variation in harm perception across different political ideologies is System Justification Theory, which provides insight into understanding why conservatives are particularly motivated to preserve existing social structures. According to Jost and Banaji (1994), individuals are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify the status quo out of a need to satisfy basic psychological needs for consistency, certainty, and meaning. This motivation manifests itself through denial, stereotyping, and certain ideologies, including conservatism (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Given that conservatism is characterized by its emphasis on tradition and continuity (Alexander, 2014), conservatives may be more resistant to change and less willing to acknowledge forms of harm that threaten the status quo (Jost et al., 2003), suggesting that more conservative individuals may be less likely to interpret subtle harm as severe.

An additional way that system justification manifests is through the endorsement of essentialist explanations, which portray social differences as fixed and immutable characteristics (Brescoll et al., 2013). When conservatives are driven to defend the status quo, it becomes easier to reason that injustice or alleged harm are an inevitable consequence instead of a byproduct of an unbalanced system. Essentialist thinking may directly contribute to the decreased likelihood that conservatives recognize an instance of harm as an unjust problem, reinforcing a general resistance to change. This provides further reason to predict that more conservative individuals may be less likely to perceive harm as severely.

Building on how violations of societal norms influence how conservatives perceive harm, it is logical to shift focus to how political ideology shapes perceptions of victimhood. Research suggests a link between ideology and how individuals define victimhood. Farwell and Weiner

(2000) argue conservatives tend to attribute harm to internal causes, implying a greater sense of personal responsibility for the inflicted harm. On the contrary, they argue liberals are more likely to attribute harm to extraneous factors such as flawed social systems and are therefore more likely to support and acknowledge victims. Considering these ideological differences in perceiving victimhood, liberals may be more likely to perceive harm as generally more severe. (Farwell & Weiner, 2000).

Expanding on how ideological differences affect attributions of victimhood, Wetherell et al. (2013) provide further evidence of a relationship between moral judgment and political values. According to their findings, conservatives are less likely to acknowledge instances of harm involving individuals perceived to be violating core conservative values, such as self-reliance and adherence to tradition. In contrast, core liberal values are associated with tolerance and egalitarianism, meaning liberals are less likely to dismiss harm regardless of whether they perceive their values to be violated or not. This greater tendency towards tolerance among liberals supports the argument that more liberal ideologies positively correlate with sensitivity to perceiving harm. (Wetherell et al., 2013)

Given the illustrated link between differences in political ideology and moral judgment, my second hypothesis is the following:

H2: I hypothesize that allegations of harm will be generally rated more seriously by individuals who score higher in liberalism than individuals who score higher in conservatism.

Intersection of Victim's Gender and Observer's Political Ideology

Building on how moral judgment is shaped by both gender and political ideology, investigating how these factors can provide additional insight into how alleged harm is perceived. Considering the interaction between gender and political ideology can further explain

why a single allegation of harm can either be taken seriously or dismissed, depending on who is alleging harm and who is evaluating the claim.

Schein and Gray (2015) identified harm as the most essential component of moral cognition for both liberals and conservatives. Their research established that the dyadic template is universally applied to moral situations, though conflicting beliefs about who is more susceptible to harm was cited as a primary source of political disagreement. Their findings suggest that liberals view marginalized groups as more vulnerable and emphasize group-based harm, while conservatives tend to minimize group-based differences and emphasize individual responsibility. Given that women are identified as a marginalized group, liberals may be more likely to perceive women's allegations of harm more severely.

Elaborating on the divisive perceptions of vulnerability, Gray and Kubin (2024) identify differences in victimhood perception as a primary source of political division. In their research, the difference in victim perception is attributed to contradicting Assumptions of Vulnerability, a term referring to perceptions of who is vulnerable to mistreatment. Their findings indicate that liberals tend to view marginalized groups as more vulnerable to harm, while conservatives tend to perceive those who hold power as more vulnerable. (Gray & Kubin, 2024). System justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2003) further supports conservatives' amplified sensitivity to powerful groups, as this can function as an effort to maintain social hierarchies and resist change. The conservative tendency to perceive more powerful groups as more vulnerable may lead them to perceive women's allegations of harm less severely.

Previous research on sexual assault serve demonstrate how both political ideology and gender mitigate perceptions of harm. Lambert and Raichle (2000) investigated how political ideology influenced judgments of blame in date rape scenarios and found that conservatives were

more likely to blame female victims than male perpetrators in scenarios of date rape. Their findings align with the legitimization hypothesis, which suggests that conservatives may be more inclined to blame female victims to preserve traditional power differences between dominant and nondominant groups (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). Though rape is a clear, unambiguous form of harm, the ideological motives underlying these findings may generalize to situations where harm is more subtle. In situations where harm is ambiguous, these biases may become more prominent, making conservatives less likely to perceive allegations made by women as severe.

Based on these findings on the effects of political ideology on attitudes towards women, my third hypothesis is the following:

H3: I hypothesize that individuals scoring higher in liberalism will rate women's allegations of harm more severely, and individuals scoring higher in conservatism will rate women's allegations of harm less severely.

Methods

This study was part of a larger research project¹ investigating several independent variables and their influence on perceptions of harm. I extracted the variables most relevant to my research question.

Participants

After receiving ethical approval, we recruited from within our university circles to fill out our survey, which explored perceptions of workplace harm. Recruitment occurred through convenience sampling, utilizing social media platforms and student group chats. We used a

¹ This study was a part of a larger research project that included additional questions, variables, and scenarios aiming to investigate various factors influencing perceptions of harm. These included gender, political ideology, immigrant status, and sexual orientation. Participants also completed measures of benevolent sexism and the Big Five personality traits. The extensive survey included a total of five distinct scenarios for different independent variables. Participants were randomly assigned to a different sub-condition for each scenario, and the order of the vignettes was randomized to control for order effects. Variables other than gender and political ideology are beyond the scope of my thesis and will therefore not be discussed in the present paper.

standardized, prewritten prompt containing information about the topic of our study and the expected duration as well as the link to the survey. Participants were eligible to complete the survey if they were above the age of 16 and demonstrated sufficient comprehension of English. A total of 234 individuals began the survey. Following data evaluation, only individuals who completed the survey and provided consent were included in the analysis, resulting in a final sample size of 146. The remaining 88 participants were excluded due to incomplete responses or failure to provide consent, which was interpreted as withdrawal from the study. The final sample size was $N = 146$, with 67% ($N = 98$) being female, 32% ($N = 46$) being male, and 1% ($N = 2$) who preferred not to say. Prior to completing the study, participants were requested to provide informed consent and were informed about their right to withdraw their participation as well as that their responses would be anonymous.

Procedure and Study Design

Upon providing informed consent, participants began the first phase of the study where they indicated their political ideology. Additionally, they responded to several demographic questions and scales which were used as distractors.

The second phase of the study presented participants with a vignette that they were asked to read and evaluate. Our study employed a between-subjects experimental design where participants were randomly assigned to one of two sub-conditions of the vignette. The vignette described an ambiguous scenario depicting an allegation of non-physical harm, or more specifically, social exclusion in the workplace. Once participants completed the survey, they were debriefed on the purpose of the study and were given the option to confirm or rescind their consent.

The objective of this study is to investigate how the gender of an individual claiming harm influences perceived severity of the alleged harm, and whether this relationship is moderated by the observer's political ideology. To test these effects, I designed a short vignette that held the nature of the alleged harm constant and the only manipulated issue was the gender of the claimant. Two sub-conditions of the vignette were created, both describing an employee claiming to feel socially excluded and undervalued in the workplace. The only additional difference between the sub-conditions, apart from the claimant's gender, was what was said to each individual when they initially raised concerns. In the female condition, the claimant was told she was "too sensitive," while in the male condition, the claimant was told "not to take it personally." All other wordings and elements of the scenarios were held constant to isolate the effect of gender. The exact scenarios used were as follows:

Female Condition: Talia's Experience at a Start-Up Company

"Talia recently started working at a start-up where she is one of the few women.

Early on, she noticed her input was received with less enthusiasm than that of her male colleagues. She rarely hears about informal after-work social events until after they happen. When she voices concerns, she is dismissed or told she is being too sensitive.

She was recently passed over for a mentorship program, despite meeting the qualifications. The role went to a male colleague with less experience. When she raised the issue, her manager assured her that opportunities are "based on merit," but the pattern of exclusion has continued."

Male Condition: Thomas's Experience at a Start-Up Company

"Thomas recently started working at a start-up where he is one of the few men.

Early on, he noticed his input was received with less enthusiasm than that of his female colleagues. He rarely hears about informal after-work social events until after they happen. When he voices concerns, he is dismissed or told that he shouldn't take it so personally.

He was recently passed over for a mentorship program, despite meeting the qualifications. The role went to a female colleague with less experience. When he raised the issue, his manager assured him that opportunities are "based on merit", but the pattern of exclusion has continued."

Measures

Harm Severity Perception

To assess participants' evaluations of the allegation, they completed a 3-item scale measuring perceived severity of the alleged harm. Specifically, I asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed that "The behavior the individual is describing is (...)": "serious," "concerning," and lastly "harmful." Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=*strongly disagree* to 7=*strongly agree*. This scale was modeled after the scales used in Reynolds et al. (2020) and Dakin et al. (2022) which included measures of harm perception and severity. A reliability analysis was conducted with Cronbach's α as .79, suggesting satisfactory reliability.

Political Ideology

Among other demographic items, all participants were asked to self-report their political ideology. This was measured using a single item on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = *very liberal/left-leaning* to 7 = *very conservative/right-leaning*.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to conducting the analyses, I executed necessary checks to verify that the model met assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of residuals, and multicollinearity. The evaluation of scatterplots confirmed linearity, and residual plots showed a random scatter, indicating no violation of homoscedasticity (Figure 1). Further, the examination of a P-P plot indicated a normal distribution of residuals (Figure 2). Lastly, multicollinearity was ruled out as all Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were below 4. Taken together, the data met all assumptions

for a linear regression, justifying its application in the analyses. See Appendix for Figure 1 and Figure 2.

The data was analyzed with a linear regression analysis using PROCESS Version 4.2 (Hayes, 2022) in SPSS. The regression analysis involved regressing the gender of the claimant on the perceived severity of harm, as well as a moderation analysis for the observer's political ideology. For political ideology, the moderator, descriptive statistics showed that the sample was predominantly left-leaning with an average score on political ideology of $M = 2.61$ and $SD = 1.25$. Observed frequencies within the sample included 76.8% positioning themselves on the liberal/left-leaning end of the spectrum, 15.8% positioning themselves in the center of the scale as moderates, and only 7.6% positioning themselves on the conservative/right-leaning end of the spectrum.

To test my three hypotheses, I conducted a moderation analysis using gender as the predictor, political ideology as the moderator, and perceived harm severity as the outcome variable. The overall model was significant, with $F(3, 142) = 9.03$, $p < .001$, $R = .40$, and $R^2 = .16$, indicating that approximately 16% of the variance in perceived harm severity was explained by the predictors.

Hypothesis 1: Main Effects of Gender

For my first hypothesis, I investigated whether the gender of the alleged victim would affect how severely participants perceived allegations of harm. I expected that allegations made by women would be evaluated more seriously than allegations made by men. On average, allegations made by women ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.05$, 95% CI: [5.66, 6.17]) were perceived as more severe than allegations made by men ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.16$, 95% CI: [4.90, 5.43]). The independent variable, gender of the alleged victim, was binary (0=*allegation made by woman*,

1=*allegation made by man*). A Pearson correlation showed a significant negative relationship between the claimant's gender and perceived harm severity ($r = -.32, p < .001$). The regression analysis showed a significant main effect of gender ($b = -.76, SE = 0.18, t = -4.26, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-1.12, -0.41]$) with a moderate effect size ($\beta = -.33$), suggesting that allegations made by women were evaluated more seriously than allegations made by men. Based on these findings, I conclude that my first hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 2: Main Effects of Political Ideology

For my second hypothesis, I investigated whether the participant's political ideology would affect how severely they perceived allegations of harm. I expected that participants who scored higher in liberalism would evaluate allegations of harm more harshly than participants who scored higher in conservatism. On average, participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning perceived allegations of harm more severely ($M = 5.61, SD = 1.12, 95\% \text{ CI: } [5.40, 5.82]$) than participants who identified as more conservative or right-leaning ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.80, 95\% \text{ CI: } [3.61, 6.02]$). Participants who identified as politically moderate fell in the middle of these groups ($M = 5.44, SD = 0.98, 95\% \text{ CI: } [5.03, 5.87]$). A Pearson correlation showed a non-significant negative relationship between political ideology and perceived harm severity ($r = -.13, p = .12$). However, the regression analysis showed a significant main effect of political ideology ($b = .31, SE = 0.10, t = -3.04, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-.50, -.11]$) with a small to moderate effect size ($\beta = .26$). These findings suggest that participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning evaluated allegations of harm as generally more serious than participants who identified themselves as more conservative or right-leaning. Based on these findings, I conclude that my second hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 3: Interaction Effect between Gender and Political Ideology

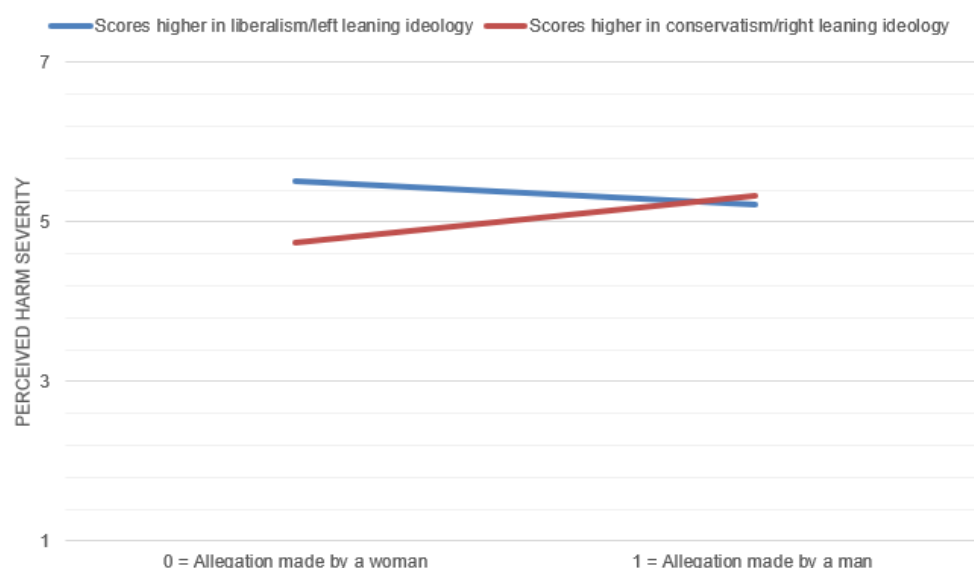
For my third hypothesis, I investigated how political ideology would moderate the relationship between the gender of the alleged victim and perceived harm severity. I expected that participants who identified themselves as more liberal or left-leaning would evaluate allegations of harm made by women more severely than those who identified as more conservative or right-leaning, and that participants who identified as more conservative or right-leaning would evaluate allegations of harm made by women less severely than those who identified as more liberal or left-leaning. The moderation analysis showed a significant positive interaction ($b = .35$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = 2.46$, $p = .0015$, 95% CI: [0.07, 0.64]) with a moderate effect size ($\beta = -.33$), suggesting that the effect of the claimant's gender on perceived harm severity depended on the participant's political ideology.

I conducted a simple slopes analysis at low (-1 SD), average (mean), and high ($+1$ SD) levels of political ideology to clarify the direction of the moderation. This analysis revealed that the interaction was significant at low levels of political ideology ($b = -1.21$, $SE = 0.25$, $t(142) = -4.75$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [-1.71, -0.70]), indicating that individuals who identified as very liberal or left-leaning evaluated allegations of harm made by a woman more severely than allegations made by a man. The interaction was also significant at the mean level of political ideology ($b = -0.76$, $SE = 0.18$, $t(142) = -4.26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [-1.12, -0.41]), indicating that individuals who identified as slightly liberal or left-leaning evaluated allegations of harm made by a woman more severely than allegations made by a man. However, the interaction was not significant at high levels of political ideology ($b = -0.32$, $SE = 0.25$, $t(142) = -1.27$, $p = .21$, 95% CI: [-0.82, 0.18]), indicating that the effect of the claimant's gender on perceived harm was no longer significant for individuals who identified as political moderates.

It is important to note that as a result of the sample being skewed toward responses from individuals who identified as liberal, the value one standard deviation above the sample mean corresponds to a political ideology score of 3.85. This value is below the median of the 7-point scale used to measure participants' political ideology, aligning with the "politically moderate" option. Therefore, this analysis fails to accurately assess the effects for individuals who identified as conservative or right-leaning and no conclusions can be drawn due to this limited representation. Based on these findings, I conclude that my hypothesis 3a is supported, but hypothesis 3b is rejected.

Figure 3

Visualization of Interaction Between Claimant Gender and Political Ideology on Perceived Harm Severity



General Discussion

This study aimed to explore how perceptions of an instance of non-physical harm in the workplace are shaped by the gender of the alleged victim and the political ideology influence

perceptions of an allegation of non-physical harm in the workplace. I was particularly interested in whether the gender of the individual claiming harm would affect how severely the harm would be perceived, as well as how the participant's political ideology would mitigate this relationship. I was also interested in whether the effect of the alleged victim's gender on perceptions of alleged harm would depend on the participant's political ideology, as well as if there was an interaction between this judgment and the political ideology of the participant. I predicted that allegations of harm made by women would be rated more severely overall, as well as that higher scores in liberalism would positively correlate with allegations being rated more severely. Additionally, I predicted an interaction between the alleged victim's gender and the participant's political ideology, postulating that more liberal or left-leaning individuals would rate women's allegations of harm more severely and more conservative or right-leaning individuals would rate them less severely.

Prior to conducting the study, I proposed three hypotheses. My first hypothesis focused on whether the gender of the alleged victim would influence perceptions of harm. I expected that allegations made by a woman would be evaluated as more severe than those made by a man, and the results were consistent with this expectation: when an allegation of social exclusion was made by Talia, participants rated the harm as more severe than when the same allegation was made by Thomas. Secondly, I expected that participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning would rate allegations more severely overall than those who identified as more conservative or right-leaning. This was also supported by the findings, as more liberal participants rated harm as more severe across both conditions. Finally, I predicted an interaction effect: more liberal or left-leaning participants would rate women's allegations of harm more severely, while more conservative or right-leaning individuals would rate them less severely. The

results reflected that this hypothesis was partially supported, as limited representation of participants who identified as conservative or right-leaning restricted this pattern to be observed only in liberal or left-leaning participants.

Theoretical Implications

Given that the results demonstrated strong support for the first two hypotheses, and partial support for the third, the theoretical frameworks previously presented are largely supported. The first hypothesis regarding the gender of the victim was informed by the Theory of Dyadic Morality, which posits that moral judgments conform to an intuitive dyad of harm directed from a powerful agent towards a vulnerable patient (Schein & Gray, 2018). The process of moral typecasting proposes that we tend to categorize individuals into either the perpetrator or victim role when making moral judgments, and that this process is heavily dictated by gender stereotypes (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2020). While we did not test the mechanism, prescriptive gender stereotypes that ascribe communal traits such as emotional sensitivity and deference to women (Heilman, 2012) may help explain why women are more readily categorized into the victim role. This theoretical background supports the notion that perceptions of harm are constructed through the intuitive application of the dyadic harm template, and that women are more likely to be morally typecast as victims.

The second hypothesis, grounded in System Justification Theory (Jost et al, 2003; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012), predicted that political ideology would influence perceptions of harm. This theory proposes that more conservative individuals are motivated to defend existing social order. Based on this theory, it was predicted that more conservative or right-leaning participants would be less likely to perceive allegations of harm as severe while more liberal or left-leaning participants would perceive harm more severely. The results supported this prediction, showing

that participants who identified as more liberal or left-leaning rated harm as generally more severe regardless of the victim's gender. This finding also aligns with research suggesting that liberals attribute harm to systemic factors, which elicits more support towards victims, while conservatives comparatively emphasize personal responsibility in perceiving victimhood (Farwell & Weiner, 2000; Wetherell et al., 2013).

The third hypothesis explored the interaction between the alleged victim's gender and the observer's political ideology. Based on the Assumptions of Vulnerability framework (Gray & Kubin, 2024), liberals are more likely to perceive marginalized groups, such as women, as more vulnerable to harm, while conservatives are more likely to view the powerful as more vulnerable. Relying on this framework, I predicted that more liberal or left-leaning participants would rate women's allegations of harm as more severe, whereas more conservative or right-leaning participants would rate them less severely. The results supported part of the prediction for more liberal or left-leaning participants, who evaluated allegations made by women more severely than those made by men. However, due to the limited number of participants who identified as conservative or right-leaning, no conclusions can be drawn about this group. Therefore, this aspect of the hypothesis was not supported.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for real-world settings, particularly in workplace environments where moral judgments directly shape interactions and decision-making processes. These results highlight the salience of stereotypes and implicit biases that skew fair and objective perceptions and responses to various situations. Implementing training or workshops that are designed to explicitly address these biases may help individuals better understand how their own beliefs impact their judgments. As stereotypes and biases often

operate unconsciously, people can be unaware of the subtle influence on their judgment. These initiatives can support organizational decision-making, promote more inclusive environments, and create stronger collaboration among diverse groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations which should be considered when contextualizing the findings that emphasize the need for continued research. First, our sample was not very equally representative of both liberal and conservative populations that I was interested in. Out of 146 participants, only 11 identified themselves as conservative or right-leaning. This unbalanced distribution restricted the ability to accurately capture ideological variation in responses and thus limited the conclusions made about ideological differences and their contribution to perception of harm. Future research should strive for a larger, as well as a more balanced sample to better understand perceptions of harm across the ideological spectrum.

Second, the sample was recruited through convenience sampling, primarily from a population of university students. This population may not have been fully representative of the general population, given the likelihood of shared characteristics such as educational background and political ideology. To preserve anonymity of responses, only limited demographic information was collected, which may have prevented the identification of potentially confounding variables that could moderate the observed effects. A more diverse sample would allow for more comprehensive data to be collected and a better understanding of how different variables influence moral judgment. Future research should aim to recruit participants that are more representative of the general population to improve generalizability.

Lastly, the hypothetical vignettes included in this study were independently written scenarios that were designed to facilitate controlled manipulation of the variables of interest.

However, reliance on these hypothetical vignettes also restricts the ecological validity of the findings. As participants were asked to evaluate scenarios that did not personally affect them, their responses may have been more detached or idealized compared to how they would have reacted in real-life situations. In actual contexts, individuals tend to be more emotionally and socially invested in the outcomes, which can substantially influence their perceptions. Future research should employ more immersive methods, such as interactive simulations or behavioral experiments, to more accurately assess how harm allegations are evaluated in realistic environments.

Conclusion

As explored in this thesis, perceptions of non-physical harm are significantly influenced by the ideological beliefs we hold and how those beliefs shape our own identities. These findings highlight the fragile subjectivity of moral judgment, exposing how the same instance of alleged harm can so easily be construed in dramatically different ways depending on the biases of the observer. In an increasingly polarized world, addressing the ubiquity of these biases is an essential first step towards cultivating a society capable of navigating the interplay between personal beliefs and subjective judgments.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Scatterplot of Standardized Predicted Values and Standardized Residuals

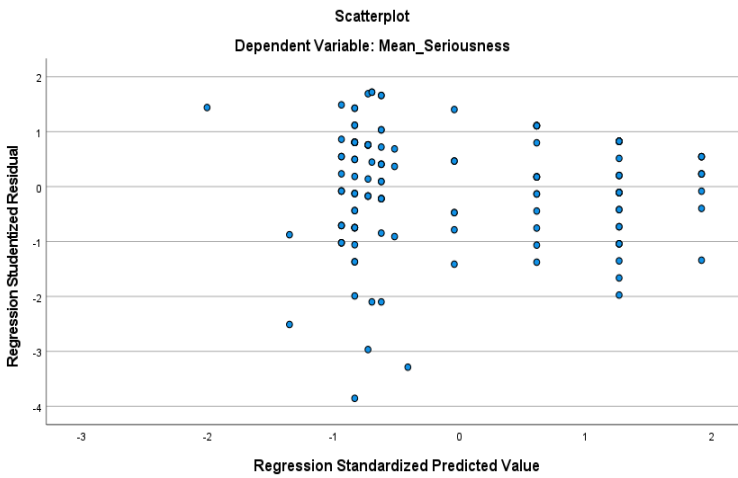
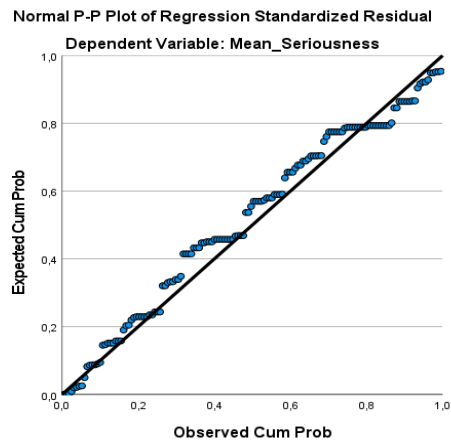


Figure 2

P-P Plot of Standardized Residuals



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