

Ambient Sexual Harassment: An Integrated Model of Antecedents and Consequences

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Research on sexual harassment as a prevalent job stressor has focused primarily on outcomes for the direct targets of harassment; the antecedents and consequences of *indirect* exposure to sexual harassment have not been explored. Ambient Sexual Harassment is proposed as an assessment of indirect exposure to sexual harassment. Ambient Sexual Harassment is defined as the general or ambient level of sexual harassment in a work group as measured by the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors experienced by others in a woman's work group. The integration of Ambient Sexual Harassment into the model of sexual harassment developed by Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, and Magley (1997) proposes that indirect exposure to sexual harassment will have similar antecedents and job-related, psychological, and health outcomes as direct exposure. An empirical test of the model, using samples of female employees from a public utility company ($N = 455$) and a food processing plant ($N = 194$), generally supports predictions. © 1997 Academic Press

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Research on sexual harassment indicates that between 40% (United States Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981; 1987) and 68% (Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997) of female employees report experiencing sexually harassing behaviors in their workplaces. Given that these incidents occur within an organizational context with such a high frequency, it is not surprising that researchers have begun to examine sexual harassment as one of several potential job-related stressors within comprehensive models of organizational behavior (Hulin, 1993). For example, Fitzgerald, Hulin, and Drasgow (1995) have developed an integrated model of sexual harassment that explores the organizational antecedents of sexual harassment, as well as its consequences within the context of other job-related stressors.

Although the conceptualization of sexual harassment as a stressor and attention to organizational factors has advanced our understanding of sexual harassment, this research has focused solely on outcomes for the *direct* (i.e., *individual*) target of sexual harassment; the possible effects of sexual harassment that may reach beyond the target (i.e., co-workers and others in the organization) have not been examined. Given the interdependence of employees in a work group, however, co-workers who witness, hear about, or are cognizant of the sexual harassment of others may experience negative outcomes similar to those of the victim. This study proposes that the negative job-related, health, and psychological outcomes associated with sexual harassment will affect other women in the targets' work groups. Discussion of this proposition draws on literature regarding general workplace stressors, research on co-victimization, and concepts from group research.

Direct and Indirect Exposure to Sexual Harassment as a Workplace Stressor

Attempts to place sexual harassment into a framework comparable to that of general job stress have focused attention on the organizational antecedents and job-related outcomes of sexual harassment as a stressor (Fitzgerald, Hulin, & Drasgow, 1995). The majority of research on work stress focuses on stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, environmental stress, and qualitative or quantitative work role overload. Research demonstrates that work stress experienced as a result of these traditional job stressors has negative effects on employees' job attitudes and behaviors, psychological well-being, and physical health (Tetrick & LaRocco, 1987). Characterizing sexual harassment experiences as stressors seems appropriate given Kahn and Byosiere's (1992) definition of job stressors as "stimuli generated on the job and having negative consequences, physical or psychological, for significant proportions of people exposed to them" (p. 598). These stimuli are characteristics of a work environment that may be conceived of as either *discretionary* stimuli that are transmitted to individuals differentially or *ambient* stimuli that pervade the group setting and are potentially available to all group members (Hackman, 1992). Both discretionary and ambient stimuli can have informational, affective and behavioral impacts on group members (Hackman, 1992). Similarly, sexual

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