

## Confirmatory Factor Analysis of U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board's Survey of Sexual Harassment: The Fit of a Three-Factor Model

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Research over the past decade and a half exploring the psychological dimensions of the definition of sexual harassment has converged on a three-factor model: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. The current study used confirmatory factor analysis to determine whether the most widely used sexual harassment survey, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB; 1981) survey, measures this three-factor structure. Data from a sample of the USMSPB's 1988 survey of Federal employees ( $n = 1070$ ) and from a midwestern university's survey of undergraduates ( $n = 572$ ) and graduate students, faculty, and staff ( $n = 575$ ) were analyzed. The three-factor model fit reasonably well in all samples, but two survey items, measuring sexual assault and sexual favors, were weakly related to their respective factors. This model, however, was only marginally stable across female and male subsamples, and gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention had low discriminant validity. Both practical and theoretical implications are discussed. © 1997 Academic Press

In the past decade and a half, sexual harassment in the workplace and in educational institutions has not only been recognized, researched, and made illegal, it has been the topic of much public discourse and debate. One reason it remains an enigma is that a clear, unambiguous consensus on the definition of sexual harassment has only begun to emerge, with recent advances in both legal theory (see Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1996) and psychological theory (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995). Clarification of the definitional issues surrounding sexual harassment is important not only to inform the public debate, but also to construct instruments that adequately measure these experiences. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the most widely used survey of sexual harassment experiences in the United States, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board Survey (USMSPB, 1981; 1988; 1995) for its fitness in measuring the constructs that have been identified in the emerging psychologi-

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cal theory of the structure of sexual harassment (Gelfand et al., 1995). Furthermore, we will call attention to the possible inadequacies in our knowledge about sexual harassment experiences due to the use of this and related instruments in large-scale survey research.

The USMSPB is an office of the executive branch of the federal government created by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 to conduct research and issue reports on federal personnel issues. In three, large-scale, comprehensive surveys, (1981, 1988, 1995) the USMSPB assessed the prevalence of sexual harassment in the federal government. The survey employed in these studies was developed to be content valid based on the understanding of sexual harassment at the time. A congressional subcommittee directing the 1980 project instructed the USMSPB research team to use the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) definition of sexual harassment as the basis of the questionnaire:

. . . deliberate or repeated unsolicited verbal comments, gestures, or physical contact of a sexual nature that is considered to be unwelcome by the recipient. (USMSPB, 1981, p. 2)

An interdisciplinary team of professionals assisted in the development of the survey, including social psychologists, academic sex researchers, and representatives from the OPM and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Further, the questionnaire was field tested on more than 300 federal workers and underwent numerous revisions before the actual study was executed.

It is important to note that the 1980 USMSPB survey was developed when the concept of sexual harassment was just beginning to emerge in both the public consciousness and as a research topic. Gutek (1993) noted that the first accounts of sexual harassment were journalistic reports (e.g., Safran, 1976), followed by two influential books. Farley's (1978) *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job* documented the first public speakouts against sexual harassment. MacKinnon's (1979) *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* argued that because sexual harassment is mainly a problem for women it should be considered a form of sex discrimination and compensable under sex discrimination laws. Consistent with MacKinnon's position, the EEOC declared in 1980 sexual harassment to be illegal pursuant to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The development of the USMSPB survey followed closely on the heels of these important political and legal events. Leading writers and activists of the time had defined sexual harassment in various related ways such as "any repeated and unwanted sexual comments, looks, suggestions or physical contact that you find objectionable and causes you discomfort on your job" (Farley, 1978). The EEOC defined sexual harassment as

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical

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