

Sexual Harassment: The Relationship of Personal Vulnerability, Work Context, Perpetrator Status, and Type of Harassment to Outcomes

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This research examined the relationships between the antecedents and outcomes of sexual harassment as well as the influence of different types of perpetrators and different types of harassment via a survey of 214 women university employees. Gender harassment was the most frequent type of harassment reported. A canonical analysis indicated that it was not related to age in a linear fashion—both the youngest women and those who were middle aged were particularly vulnerable. Male-dominated environments were associated with gender harassment by higher, equal-, and lower level men. In the case of gender harassment perpetrated by lower and equal-level men, opportunity to interact with them was an important contributor, whereas it was negative perceptions of the organization's sanctions against harassment that were important in the case of gender harassment perpetrated by higher level men. In general, the more formal power that the harassers held over their targets, the more likely the targets were to report experiencing negative outcomes. For example, there were no significant negative outcomes reported in the case of gender harassment by lower level men. Gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention by peers was associated with higher perceived stress and turnover intentions. By contrast, gender harassment of professional women by higher level men was associated with a wide variety of negative outcomes including increased stress, turnover intentions, and negative mood and decreased satisfaction with their supervisor. The exception to this pattern was that gender harassment of clerical staff by higher level men was associated only with decreased work satisfaction. © 2000 Academic Press

Sexual harassment has emerged as an issue of great concern in contemporary workplaces and institutes of higher learning. Recent well-known cases like those alleging harassment by Clarence Thomas and President William Clinton have certainly accentuated the issue. Most sexual harassment, however, occurs outside the media spotlight, with survey data suggesting that about half of all working women will be subject to sexual harassment in one form or another (Fitzgerald, 1993). Surveys show that men report being the targets of sexual harassment far

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less frequently than women do (e.g., 15% versus 40%) [United States Merit Systems Protection Board (USMPB), 1981]. Given the higher incidence of sexual harassment reported by women, the current study chose to focus primarily on women.

The present study was intended to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of sexual harassment in the workplace by exploring the relationships among various antecedent variables (such as the target's personal vulnerability and the work context) and outcome variables (i.e., work-related, psychological, and physical). In addition, the influence of the type of relationship between the perpetrator and the target (i.e., their status differential) and the type of sexual harassment involved was explored.

Sexual Harassment as a Multidimensional Construct

The prevailing tendency in the literature has been to regard sexual harassment as a unitary construct. Fitzgerald and her colleagues (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995) have, however, proposed that sexual harassment is composed of three related, yet conceptually distinct, dimensions: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment involves the display of insulting, hostile, and degrading attitudes toward women. Unwanted sexual attention includes both verbal and nonverbal behavior and can range from repeated, unreciprocated requests for dates, intrusive letters, and phone calls to touching, grabbing, cornering, and gross sexual imposition. Sexual coercion involves bribes or threats, whether subtle or explicit, that condition some job-related benefit on sexual cooperation.

Because many targets experience extended episodes of sexual harassment in which various types of harassment might occur (USMPB, 1988), these three aspects of harassment often covary (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). However, confirmatory factor analyses provide extensive evidence that the latent construct of sexual harassment is composed of three separate dimensions (Gelfand et al., 1995). Because it offered a more detailed and clarified conceptualization of sexual harassment, the present study employed this multidimensional framework. This provided an opportunity to examine whether these three types of harassment might be related to different antecedent conditions and different outcomes as well as whether they might be associated with different types of perpetrators.

Perpetrator-Target Status

Currently, there is little comprehensive research on how the source of the harassment or the perpetrator-target status relationship impacts upon other aspects of the harassment process. It has been argued, particularly from a feminist perspective, that sexual harassment is fundamentally about power and, more specifically, about the subordination of women in society (MacKinnon, 1983). Sociocultural explanations of sexual harassment focus on the patriarchal norms and stereotypes that confer dominant status upon men. In this view, gender is a status characteristic that accords men the power to harass women.

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