

MODELING SUBORDINATE PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT: THE ROLE OF SUPERIOR–SUBORDINATE SOCIAL–SEXUAL INTERACTION

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The last 25 years have seen a dramatic increase in empirical studies in the area of sexual harassment. Yet no conceptual model exists that incorporates the complexity of moderators of sexually harassing behavior, attributions made due to this behavior, and how this behavior affects social–sexual interaction, which may lead to variations in the perception of sexual harassment. This article breaks new theoretical ground by proposing an integrative framework, which seeks to examine antecedents of the perception of sexual harassment in organizations from an interactional perspective. The model highlights and examines the intermediate stages of social–sexual interaction that may be critical in understanding the nature and perception of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Even as we begin the twenty-first century, controversial incidents involving allegations of sexual harassment against high-level public and private sector managers continue to grip our attention. An EEOC Notice issued on June 18, 1999, states, “Harassment remains a pervasive problem in American workplaces. The number of harassment charges filed with the EEOC and state fair employment practices agencies have risen significantly in recent years. For example, the number of sexual harassment charges has increased from 6,883 in fiscal year 1991 to 15,618 in fiscal year 1998” (EEOC Notice Number 915.002, 1999). Although all types of sexual harassment are of concern, harassment by immediate or higher level superiors can be the most threatening due to the fear of job-related consequences for the harassed employee. Perhaps that is why Paula Jones’ sexual harassment allegation against President Clinton fascinated the nation. Jones claimed that President Clinton

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made an unwanted sexual advance towards her in May of 1991 while he was the governor of Arkansas and she was a state employee. The political issues with regard to the case and the national drama that followed are well-known. It is worth noting that the Chief Executive of the nation was not immune to sexual harassment charges and ended up paying \$850,000 to settle the case. Further, the President was held in contempt of court by Judge Wright for false testimony in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case and ordered to pay \$90,686 (Lewis, 1999).

Interestingly, a study in 1994 by the U.S. Merit System Protection Board (U.S. MSPB), based on surveys returned by over 8,000 federal employees, noted that 28 percent of the women and 14 percent of the men reporting sexual harassment had said that an immediate or a higher level superior had been responsible for the harassment (U.S. MSPB, 1995). The unique and serious nature of supervisory harassment has been reviewed by the United States Supreme Court. In two important sexual harassment cases decided in 1998 (*Burlington Industries v. Ellerth*, 1998; *Faragher v. City of Boca Raton*, 1998), the Supreme Court made it clear that an employer is always liable for a supervisor's harassment, if the supervisor's harassment led to a tangible employment action against the employee.

Given the broad interest in the subject of sexual harassment in general, it is not surprising that it is being studied and debated extensively and vigorously in both the academic and practitioner journals (Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995; Burgess & Borgida, 1997; DeCoster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999; Dougherty, 1999; Driscoll, Kelly, & Henderson, 1998; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Franklin, 1999; Kaesebier, 1999; Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997; Luthar, 1995–1996; O'Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 1995; Overman, 1999; Shelton & Chavous, 1999; Shepela & Levesque, 1998; Thacker, 1996). Legal scholars, as well as social psychologists, have made important contributions to the understanding of sexual harassment in the workplace. Much of this research focuses on identifying variables that are correlated to the occurrence of sexual harassment (Baker, Terpstra, & Larntz, 1990; Barak, Fisher, & Houston, 1992; Driscoll et al., 1998; Fain & Anderton, 1987; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Keyton & Rhodes, 1997; Knapp et al., 1997; Shepela & Levesque, 1998; Terpstra & Baker, 1988, 1992; Thacker, 1996) or to the nature of social–sexual behavior at work (Burgess & Borgida, 1997; Cohen & Gutek, 1985; Dougherty, 1999; Gutek, 1985; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Konrad & Gutek, 1986; Pierce & Aguinas, 1997).

Due to the extensive empirical studies and findings in the area, it is possible to develop a conceptually sound model of sexual harassment grounded in reality. The conceptual model would be of benefit to scholars interested in conducting future research, as well as to managers, who must implement organizational policies and ensure the fair treatment of workers within ethical and legal parameters. Before discussing the variables and building the model, it is important to summarize our current understanding of the legal foundation of this issue. The law is clearly the driving force widely influencing both the creation of organizational policies on sexual harassment as well as implemen-

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