

The Impact of Organizational Culture on Perceptions and Experiences of Sexual Harassment

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In sexual harassment research, the importance of organizational variables has become increasingly clear. Utilizing the results of a survey conducted at a telecommunications company in 1997 ($N = 458$), this study elaborates on the impact of organizational culture on the incidence of unwanted sexual behavior in the workplace. Drawing on organizational and gender theory, we proposed that three organizational variables would be related to the levels of reported experiences of unwanted sexual behavior. First, the social climate in the organization is important: respondents who are positive about the social climate in their workplace have reported experiencing fewer unwanted sexual behaviors than respondents who perceive their organizations as less socially oriented. Second, a relationship was found between gender-specific aspects of the organizational climate and the extent of unwanted sexual behavior: respondents who think that their department has a positive attitude toward the equal treatment of women and men at work have themselves reported less frequently experiencing unwanted sexual behavior. Furthermore, it appears that the respondents who judge the attitude of management toward the combination of work and family to be positive have reported experiencing fewer incidences of unwanted sexual behavior within the department. © 2000 Academic Press

The extent to which sexual harassment is prevalent in organizations varies considerably. A review into the incidence of sexual harassment in 11 northern European countries showed that between 2 and 90% of women workers had reported experiencing some form of unwanted sexual behavior (Timmerman & Bajema, 1997). An explanation for the variance in incidence rates can be attributed to the definition and methodology used in studies of sexual harassment. In addition, differences in incidence rates have been attributed to individual as well as organizational variables. Several authors have suggested that characteristics of the victim (age, sex, occupational status, marital status, ethnicity) influence the perception of sexual harassment (Fain & Anderton, 1987; Gutek, 1985; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988). For example, Stockdale, Vaux, and Cashin (1995) found that gender was important: harassed women were almost four times more likely to acknowledge their experience as sexual harassment than men were.

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Personal characteristics of the perpetrator have also been proposed as an influence on the occurrence of sexual harassment. Several authors have found that rape offenders can be characterized by traditional sex role attitudes (Koss, Leonard, Beezly, & Oros, 1985). Although rape offenders are not sexual harassment offenders per se, some researchers propose a similar relationship between sexist attitudes and sexual harassment (Grauerholz & Solomon, 1989). Several of these individual traits of harassers have become well known in the concept of the "Likelihood to Sexually Harass" (LSH), developed by Pryor and his colleagues (Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993). However, recent trends in sexual harassment research show that individuals tend to sexually harass only in circumstances that allow them to do so. Men who want to sexually harass female employees have more opportunities to do so when the organizational context permits or facilitates such behavior. Generally speaking, there is a growing consensus that organizational characteristics of the workplace are relevant in determining the incidence of sexual harassment (Stockdale, 1996).

One of the earliest attempts to address the impact of organizational factors was made by Lafontaine and Trudeau (1986). They found a strong relationship between the level of (perceived) equal employment opportunity for women within a company and the incidence of sexual harassment. Women who rated their company high on the equal opportunity scale reported themselves as less likely to experience sexual harassment than those who rated their company low on this aspect. Pryor et al. (1993) contributed to our knowledge of organizational factors in their research on local norms of the workplace. Pryor and his colleagues examined the relationship between the attitude of work group leaders to sexual harassment and the perceived incidence of these experiences by women working in the organization. It was found that women who had experienced some form of unwanted sexual behavior were more likely to view local management as having made fewer responses to sexual harassment. In their view, management discouraged complaints about sexual harassment and did not make reasonable efforts to prevent the problem. Results of another study indicated that these local norms are not only set by management, but may also evolve out of peer interactions in the workplace. In either case, acceptance or condoning appears to have a disinhibiting effect on men who are likely to harass. The researchers state that sexual harassment is fundamentally social behavior, governed by local norms, specifically, management's norms (Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995).

Recently, Hulin, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow (1996) also proposed that organizational climate, as reflected in an organization's tolerance of sexual harassment, is a critical antecedent in the occurrence of this behavior. To study the impact of organizational climate, Hulin developed the Organizational Tolerance for Sexual Harassment (OTSH). This instrument consists of six vignettes describing three types of sexual harassment (gender harassment, unwanted sexual behavior, sexual coercion). These aspects of organizational climate increased the incidence of sexual harassment: the risk to the victim of complaining, the likelihood that

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