

Disentangling the Power Bases of Sexual Harassment: Comparing Gender, Age, and Position Power

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To better understand the effects of organizational and sociocultural power on decisions in a sexual harassment case, harasser gender (male/female), position power (supervisor, subordinate, and coworker), harasser age (older/younger), and target age (older/younger) were manipulated. Participants read a sexual harassment case and rated their verdicts, perceived unwelcomeness of the behavior, and the organization's responsibility. Subordinate-to-supervisor cases were rated more harshly than coworker cases. Behavior by older males and younger females was perceived as more welcome. Female mock jurors rated the organization as more responsible than did males, but males and females did not differ on verdict or unwelcomeness ratings. Findings for harasser gender were inconsistent. Results suggest more support for a role-discrepant model of sexual harassment (Pryor, 1985) than either the organizational or sociocultural model. © 2000 Academic Press

Since the scientific study of sexual harassment (SH) began in 1980, hundreds of studies have documented the negative effects of SH on individuals and organizations. Traditional models suggest that SH occurs because of an "abuse of power," and therefore, many formal definitions specify that the harasser must have power or authority over the target (Pryor, 1985). The meaning of "abuse of power" can get murky because one individual may have power over another in numerous ways (Leeser & O'Donohue, 1997). Two theoretical models suggest that power may be derived either through power differentials within the organizational hierarchy (i.e., the organizational model) or from societal inequalities between men and women that are brought into the workplace (i.e., the sociocultural model) (Fain & Anderton, 1987). Despite the vast literature on SH, relatively little is known about which form of power has a stronger impact on SH perceptions and decisions. One challenge in addressing the relative influence of sociocultural and organizational power is that they are typically confounded in actual occurrences of SH and have sometimes been confounded within the empirical literature. In particular, the societal status characteristics of age and

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gender are typically confounded with position power in that older men are more often supervisors than younger women.

The present study sought to unconfound organizational power and two forms of sociocultural power (age and gender) to determine their relative influence on decisions about whether sexual behavior was unwelcome, whether the behavior met the legal criteria for SH, and whether a hypothetical organization was held responsible for the harassment. This study built upon the extant literature in three ways. First, most previous theoretical discussions and empirical investigations of organizational power have focused on supervisor-to-subordinate and coworker-to-coworker SH because they are most common. More recently, researchers have recognized contrapower SH which occurs when a subordinate harasses a supervisor (Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998). According to the organizational model, contrapower SH should not occur because harassment results from hierarchical power which is not present in subordinate-supervisor situations. Yet, SH by subordinates to supervisors does occur and is presently underinvestigated. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of SH, the present study examined sexual behavior initiated by a supervisor, coworker, *and* subordinate.

Also, most previous studies have focused on males harassing females and relatively little is known about perceptions of females harassing males (Marks & Nelson, 1993). Although males' harassment of females is the most common form of SH, male employees do report SH. In 1997, men filed approximately 1800 SH claims with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 1998). The SH experiences of men may be underreported since males may be less likely to report SH because of social stereotypes (McQueen, 1982; Pryor, 1985). Consequently, researchers have noted this gap in the literature and emphasized the need to study females as harassers and men as targets (e.g., Marks & Nelson, 1993). Of the few studies that have compared perceptions of male and female harassers, results have been mixed. One explanation for these conflicting findings is that male harassers may be evaluated more negatively than female harassers only in cases of coworker SH (Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, 1983). By manipulating harasser gender and position power simultaneously, it will be possible to determine if harasser gender affects decisions in SH cases and whether this depends upon the organizational position of the harasser.

A final contribution of the present study is that previous research has sometimes confounded the effects of organizational power and/or harasser gender with harasser age. To determine the relative influence of each form of sociocultural and organizational power, these factors need to be unconfounded. Additionally, Marks and Nelson (1993) suggested the need to examine the effect of age on SH perceptions because "it seems reasonable to believe respondents may observe differently distinctive age groups initiating sexual behaviors" (p. 215). Thus, this study also examined the effect of harasser and target age on SH decisions.

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