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Supervisory support, social exchange relationships, and sexual harassment consequences A test of competing models

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Abstract

This article examines the role that the immediate supervisor has in mitigating the negative consequences of sexual harassment experiences when he or she is not the perpetrator of the harassment. We examined a competing mediating/moderating effects model of perceived supervisory support and social exchange relationships on the consequences of perceived sexual harassment experiences. Using survey data gathered from military personnel, we found support for direct effects of both perceived sexual harassment and leadership on individual outcomes but failed to confirm our initial hypothesis of perceived leadership as a moderator. However, we found significant support for a moderating effect when the sample was subgrouped by gender of the leader. We also found partial support for leadership as a mediator of the relationships between sexual harassment and individual outcomes. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is an issue of major concern for leaders in organizations. A great deal of attention has been given to leadership in the “diversity literature” where individual differences based on demographics have been shown to influence subordinate perceptions

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of leader behavior, particularly with regard to gender (Van Velsor & DiTomaso, 1996). Many other studies have noted that perceptions of sexual harassment behavior emanate from the power a leader has over the subordinate (e.g., Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & DuBois, 1997; Lengnick-Hall, 1995). Research in leadership has demonstrated that the leader, and the role that leader's play in the dyadic interaction with her/his subordinates, influences subordinate outcomes both positively and negatively (e.g., Bass, 1990). However, there is a striking paucity of literature that deals with the consequences of the perceived leader's actions relevant to sexual harassment — when the leader is not the perpetrator.

What is needed are more studies that examine whether positive perceptions about the leader's role will buffer the negative effects of sexually harassing organizational environments when the supervisor is not the harasser. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine the role the immediate supervisor has in mitigating the negative consequences of sexual harassment experiences. Does the subordinate reduce his or her negative outcomes as a result of the social exchange relationship with a nonharassing supervisor? In the following sections, we give a brief explanation as to the nature of sexual harassment, discuss the relationship between gender and leadership, and then argue that effective leadership will reduce the impact of perceived sexual harassment experiences.

2. Sexual harassment and leadership

2.1. Overview of sexual harassment

Considerable research has been done regarding the conceptual and empirical antecedents, consequences, and moderators of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald, Hulin, & Drasgow, 1995; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995; Gutek, 1985). Sexual harassment has been variously defined over the years, beginning with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1980 (Federal Register, 1980), which identified two specific categories of sexual harassment — quid pro quo and hostile work environment. Quid pro quo, a transactional form of sexual harassment, points to a harasser who seeks sexual favors in exchange for preferential treatment, such as in the granting of promotions and of job assignments (Stockdale, 1993). Hostile work environment, on the other hand, includes the making of *repeated* sexual comments, touching, leering, and other less overt behaviors.

Fitzgerald, Gelfand, et al. (1995) identified three dimensions of sexual harassment. These consist of quid pro quo and two categories of hostile work environments — gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. Gender harassment is an expressed behavior that consists of verbal and nonverbal actions not aimed at sexual cooperation but rather which demonstrates insulting, hostile, and degrading attitudes toward women (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, et al., 1995, p. 430). Gender harassment includes displays of sexually explicit materials and verbally communicated sexual slurs. Unwanted sexual attention consists of overt direct victim-focused behaviors that include touching, repeated requests for dates, and lurid stares. These definitions of sexual harassment are quite common in the empirical literature, but researchers know little about their relationship to supportive leadership. To determine this

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