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Sexual harassment as unethical behavior The role of moral intensity

Anne M. O’Leary-Kelly^{a,*}, Lynn Bowes-Sperry^b

^a*Department of Management, Sam M. Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas,
Fayetteville, AR 72701, USA*

^b*Western New England College, Springfield, MA, USA*

Abstract

This article examines sexual harassment phenomena from an ethical perspective. Specifically, it argues that sexual harassment may occur less frequently if actors are encouraged to regard sexually harassing behavior as involving a moral component. Jones’ work on moral intensity is used to describe reasons why, given the nature of sexual harassment phenomena, actors often may not recognize the moral aspects of harassing behavior. Finally, the implications of this perspective for the prevention of sexual harassment are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

An *ethic* can be defined as “a principle of right or good conduct; a system of moral principle or values” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1982). During the past half century, American society and its organizations have been struggling to develop systems and principles that distinguish and describe ethical and unethical work behavior. One of the most recent foci of this struggle has been the issue of sexual harassment. High profile cases, such as the Thomas-Hill hearings, Tailhook, incidents at the Citadel and US Army’s Aberdeen facility, and legal action against Mitsubishi Motor and Astra AB’s US pharmaceutical subsidiary have brought this issue to the attention of the public and of researchers. In addition, the development of legal theory (e.g., MacKinnon, 1979) and a recognition by

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-501-575-4566; fax: +1-501-575-3241.

E-mail address: aokelly@walton.uark.edu (A.M. O’Leary-Kelly).

managers that sexual harassment has significant costs for employees and organizations have contributed to our acknowledgement of sexual harassment as a critical work issue.

In her groundbreaking legal treatise 20 years ago, MacKinnon (1979, p. xii) stated “to date, there are no ‘systematic’ studies of sexual harassment in the social–scientific sense.” In the two decades since, social scientists have acknowledged the issue of sexual harassment. Numerous researchers in a variety of disciplines (e.g., human resource management, organizational behavior, social psychology, feminist studies, law) have examined this issue scientifically in an effort to understand its causes, consequences, and prevention.

Within the organizational sciences, sexual harassment has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. In his recent review, Lengnick-Hall (1995) identified several frameworks apparent in current research: gender approaches, which view harassment as a consequence of interactions between different sexes (e.g., Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990); role approaches, which suggest that different sex role expectations contribute to sexual harassment (Gutek & Morasch, 1982); power approaches, which define sexual harassment as a product of power differences between men and women in society and the workplace (e.g., Hemming, 1985); and demographic approaches, which examine imbalances in organizational demographics as contributors to harassment (Fain & Anderton, 1987). In addition, more recent approaches frame sexual harassment as a form of violence or aggression (Fitzgerald, 1993; O'Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 2000).

Although these varied approaches have provided significant insights, it is interesting that there has been little effort to conceptualize sexual harassment as an *ethical* issue (Keyton & Rhodes, 1997). One exception is Vaux (1993) who classified sexual harassment as a type of moral exclusion, wherein “individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules and considerations of fairness apply” (Opatow, 1990, p. 1). While Vaux acknowledged that sexual harassment encompassed an ethical dimension, he did not provide a detailed analysis of the phenomenon as an ethical issue. Bowes-Sperry and Powell (1996) developed the first detailed theoretical model of sexual harassment from an ethical perspective as well as the first empirical test of this model (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999). However, they note that their work focused exclusively on *observers' reactions* to sexual harassment, and “recommend that an ethical decision-making perspective be applied to the cognitive and behavioral reactions of perpetrators of social–sexual behavior and their targets” (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1996, p. 122). The purpose of this article is to apply an ethics framework in order to enhance our understanding of actors' perceptual and decision-making processes regarding sexual harassment.

2. Is sexual harassment an ethical issue?

A moral issue exists when an individual's unrestrained (i.e., freely chosen) behavior can help or harm another or others (Jones, 1991; Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985). An *ethical decision* occurs when an individual resolves a moral issue through a choice that is “both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community” (Jones, 1991, p. 367). Many choices about how to treat others in the workplace, then, might be conceptualized as moral or ethical issues. Certainly, the identification of deviant and aggressive work behavior in recent research

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