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Answering accountability questions in sexual harassment: Insights regarding harassers, targets, and observers

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Abstract

Despite the existence of formal organizational and legal policies, anecdotal literature suggests that sexual harassment remains prevalent. Harassers continue to harass, targets of harassment often respond passively, and observers seldom take action to prevent harassment by the harasser or help the target. This article uses accountability theory to help explain why sexual harassment remains commonplace. Specifically, research on accountability theory and sexual harassment is integrated in order to provide insights into the action or inaction of harassers, targets of harassment, and observers. We examine issues from accountability research that allow sexual harassers to renounce accountability for their actions. We address why targets of harassment often choose passive, rather than direct, responses to harassing incidents. In addition, we identify reasons why observers often fail to respond in a helpful way to prevent sexual harassment. The final discussion focuses on the implications of these arguments for future research.

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1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is an issue that has captured the attention not only of managers and organizational researchers, but also of American society generally. High-profile incidents played out in the national spotlight, as well as more local incidents within individual workplaces, have led many Americans to develop beliefs about sexual harassment, what it is, and why it occurs. These beliefs influence, and are influenced by, conceptualizations of sexual harassment in our business organizations, institutions, and legal system. In essence, this cycle of sense making has resulted in a set of behavioral

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expectations, which did not exist several decades ago, for the actions of individuals involved in sexual harassment incidents.

These expectations have implications for the behavior of potential harassers, targets, and observers. For example, through the development of sexual harassment theory, our society has communicated expectations for the behavior of all employees (i.e., we officially have denounced offensive actions based on sex within the workplace). Similarly, legal theory states that targets of harassment must establish the unwelcomeness of the offensive conduct, a requirement that communicates behavioral expectations about the appropriate ways for targets to respond to harassment. Legal theory even communicates expectations for the behavior of some observers. For example, the courts have stated that managers who witness (or who “know or should have known” about) sexual harassment have a responsibility to take preventative action (Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1994).

Not surprisingly, business organizations prefer that employees act in accordance with these behavioral expectations. That is, employers generally prefer that employees do not initiate harassment, that targets promptly report offensive conduct, and that observers take direct action (e.g., reporting, intervention) when they witness harassment. In many instances, however, the actions of parties involved in harassment incidents do not conform to these expectations. For example, harassers continue to harass, despite legal and organizational penalties for such behavior (e.g., U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995); targets often respond passively, despite the organization's preference that they report the conduct (Gutek & Done, 2000; Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997); and individuals who observe harassment often remain silent and inactive, despite the reasonable expectation that their intervention might prevent harassment from progressing (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2001).

This inconsistency between the behaviors that organizations (and the legal system) expect, and those that individuals often enact is both interesting and puzzling. Essentially, this inconsistency raises questions about *accountability*. When behavioral expectations exist and individuals' compliance/noncompliance with these expectations is evaluated by some audience, issues of accountability are raised (Cummings & Anton, 1990; Frink & Klimoski, 1998).

Theoretical frameworks of accountability are useful for understanding why individuals make the decisions, and take the actions, they do. The purpose of this paper is to use research and theory on accountability to enhance our understanding of three fundamental questions regarding sexual harassment: (1) Why do harassers continue to harass even when there are sanctions for this behavior? (2) Why do targets of harassment often respond passively to harassment when it is unwelcome. (3) Why do individuals sometimes observe sexual harassment without taking action to prevent it or minimize its negative effects? We begin with a brief discussion of existing research on accountability and on sexual harassment. We then describe the implications of the accountability perspective for sexual harassment research and prevention.

2. Accountability: definition and previous research

Scholars have been unable to develop one succinct conceptual definition of accountability; however, certain general elements are part of most definitions. They are that (1) people are held answerable to their own actions, (2) the party being held accountable to has the power to give rewards and sanctions, and (3) accountability is the link between individuals and others. Frink and Klimoski (1998) offered a working definition of accountability. They suggested that accountability is the, “. . . perceived need to

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