



The role of power in sexual harassment as a counterproductive behavior in organizations

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ABSTRACT

We present sexual harassment (SH) as a counterproductive behavior and show how revealing the role of power as an underlying motive in SH and other counterproductive work behavior (CWB) incidents may help us to more fully understand these negative phenomena. We offer a model explicating the role of power in SH based on French and Raven's (French, J. R. & Raven, B. H. (1959). The bases of social power. In Cartwright, D. (Ed.), *Studies in social power*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute of Social Research) description of sources of power, and expanded to include individual, organizational, and societal levels of such influences. Specifically, we propose that: 1) Recognizing the various bases of power can help identify and rectify power issues in SH, as well as in other CWB incidents; 2) SH and related CWBs are symptoms of a culture of power issues (including abuse) in the organization.

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1. Introduction

There is now no doubt that sexual harassment (SH) is an important issue in any organizational setting. What was once considered to be an acceptable fact of work life is now recognized as a phenomenon that can negatively affect not only those directly involved, but can also have more far-reaching consequences for the organization and its members. One has only to look to the SH charges made by Anita Hill during the Senate confirmation hearing for Clarence Thomas in 1991 to realize that such a situation can go so far as having impacting an entire country. Certainly for an organization, even a single incident of SH can have significant legal, financial, and psychological consequences across the entire organization. However, in order to more completely understand the impact of SH in an organization, it is important to recognize that SH should not be considered as an isolated negative organizational behavior, but rather as part of the cadre of behaviors included under the rubric of "counterproductive work behaviors" (CWB).

Sexual harassment can be considered counterproductive in terms of both the process and outcome of organizational functioning. Soon after the 1981 publication of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Guidelines prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace, early research in Federal offices included estimated costs of SH to be upwards of \$180 million over a two-year period (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). These costs were the result of a number of outcomes, including employee turnover, absenteeism, insurance costs and lost productivity. Psychological distress of the individuals involved was also recognized as a potential casualty of SH early on in the SH literature (Crull, 1982). More recently, Lim & Cortina (2005) list a number of potentially damaging reactions to SH (as well as other incidents of workplace mistreatment), including a variety of both affective and cognitive variables. While some of these outcomes may be measurable in terms of individual and/or organizational productivity, there are other, less quantifiable consequences, such as damage to the organization's external reputation.

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Despite its costs to the organization as a negative organizational behavior, the role of SH in the developing CWB construct has been inconsistently defined. Developers of early CWB taxonomies (such as Hollinger & Clark, 1982) concentrated on “property” and “product” deviance, and did not recognize the inclusion of more interpersonal CWB incidents (Gruys & Sackett, 2003). While more recent authors have classified SH incidents as an actual CWB (Gruys & Sackett, 2003), others still consider it to be a “related construct” (Spector & Fox, 2005).

In this paper, we propose that SH is a counterproductive behavior and that its occurrence in an organization is often a symptom of other problems in the organization, which may also be reflected in other incidents of CWB. However, one of the major limitations in understanding both SH and other CWB incidents is the lack of theory development, particularly in the area of the motivation that drives such negative behaviors (Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007). In this paper, we identify power as an underlying motive of both SH and other CWB incidents. Understanding SH as a function of power can help provide greater insight, not only into incidents of SH, but may also contribute to a better understanding of other incidents of counterproductivity in the organization.

Specifically, we begin this paper with a definition and description of CWBs, and then integrate SH into the CWB literature using the underlying motive of power. We then propose a model explicating the role of power in SH and extend it to other CWB incidents. Finally, we note the importance of recognizing the culture of power in the organization when dealing with SH and other CWB incidents.

2. Counterproductive work behaviors

Counterproductivity as a problem has long been recognized by organizational researchers and practitioners (c.f., the Hawthorne Studies, Roethlisberger, & Dickson, 1943). However, there has been difficulty in coming to agreement on various definitions and elements of this complex construct. Although it is recognized that CWB does include a variety of behaviors, differences in opinions arise in defining counterproductivity as being either multiple constructs or a singular, multifaceted construct (Gruys & Sackett, 2003). These disagreements have been reflected in issues including definitions, theories, and the measurement of CWB incidents.

One of the basic problems with understanding counterproductive behaviors in organizations is the fact that researchers have used various labels to encompass or categorize a variety of negative behaviors. Examples of these terms include; deviant workplace behavior (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), organizational misbehavior (Vardi & Weiner, 1996), bad behavior (Griffin & Lopez, 2005), counterproductive workplace behavior (Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002), and counterproductive work behavior (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001). Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is the most commonly used of these terms, and will be the label used here.

Despite the use of different terms, it appears that definitions of CWB do share similar conceptualizations of these negative organizational behaviors. Typical of these CWB definitions, is that offered by Robinson and Bennett (1995), who characterize workplace deviance as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (p. 556). It was also Robinson and Bennett (1995) who made a significant step in further organizing deviant workplace behavior into a typology including four categories of deviant workplace behavior; “production deviance,” “property deviance,” “political deviance,” and “personal aggression.”

Following the work of Mangione and Quinn (1975), Robinson and Bennett (1995) coined the term property deviance to describe the unauthorized obtaining of employer belongings, whereas production deviance includes engaging in acts that would violate the production norms of the organization. These authors define political deviance as engagement in social interaction that puts other individuals at a personal or political disadvantage (e.g. gossiping, blaming co-workers, competing non-beneficially). Finally, personal aggression refers to behaviors towards another individual that are hostile or aggressive.

The Robinson and Bennett (1995) typology further organizes each of the deviances into classifications of the severity of acts as minor vs. serious and the direction of acts as towards the organization vs. the individual. Production and property deviance typically have organizational costs, whereas political deviance and personal aggression usually target an individual or co-worker. Personal aggression and property deviance can also be considered as more severe than both political and production deviance.

Although the Robinson and Bennett typology continues to be popular, some concerns remain. Gruys and Sackett (2003) point out that “While the current literature provides some insight into the structure of CWB, there remain questions regarding the dimensionality of such behavior.” (p. 31). Their own investigation of 11 categories of CWBs found these behaviors to be positively correlated. One possible explanation for this correlation is that there is an underlying characteristic, such as motivation, that drives the performance of these negative behaviors (Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007). Identification of such an underlying characteristic is essential to the further development of theory concerning CWB incidents.

There have been a number of theories applied to the study of CWB as a construct. Martinko et al. (2002) have taken these various approaches (including some of the most influential theories in psychology such as expectancy theory, reinforcement theory as well as social learning theory) and developed an integrative paradigm, which they label as a “Causal Reasoning Perspective (p. 37).” Their model begins with the person by situation interaction of “individual differences” and “situational variables.” To this interaction, they added the causal reasoning element of “cognitive processing,” which in turn, includes as one element, the attributions made by the individual about this situation. Nevertheless, even their integrative model does not include the actual role of underlying characteristics including the norms and motives which may contribute to CWB incidents in an organization. It is on these topics which the SH literature can make a contribution to further understanding of CWBs.

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