

Situation-Specific Assessment of Sexual Harassment

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Although empirical investigations into the phenomenon of sexual harassment have increased exponentially over the past decade, many basic questions about the measurement of this construct remain unanswered. Most research has utilized an aggregate-level approach, which assesses the frequency of all offensive sex-related behaviors experienced by an individual within a given time period. However, this approach has several limitations, including obscuring the etiology and impact of separate harassment incidents on a particular individual. Consequently, in the present study, a situation-specific approach to the measurement of sexual harassment experiences, the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire—Specific Experience version (SEQ-SE), was evaluated. Results of confirmatory factor analysis suggested that the measure has adequate construct validity. In addition, the substantive information yielded by this measure indicated that it is an important tool in the investigation of the prevalence and correlates of sexual harassment experiences. © 2001 Academic Press

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It is a truism that any construct studied by the methods of empirical science must be reliably and validly measured; sexual harassment is no exception. However, despite growing interest in this topic, a number of basic questions remain (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995). Of these, perhaps the most perplexing has to do with the level of specificity at which such experiences should be measured. Early studies were primarily designed to collect frequency data and typically examined

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harassment at the item level; that is, they calculated the number of individuals who experienced one or more of a number of specific acts (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Martindale, 1990; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). The general procedure was to present individuals with lists of behaviors and count as harassed all respondents who reported experiencing any of these during the time frame of the study.

Recent work has begun to conceptualize harassment as a higher order construct (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1995) that is more appropriately assessed by a scale score than by individual items. Such an approach has the advantage of being amenable to traditional reliability and validity investigations as well as to examination by IRT methodologies (see Donovan & Drasgow, 1999, for an example in the harassment context). Research at the aggregate level assesses the frequency of all offensive sex-related behaviors experienced by an individual within a given time period. This methodology has taught us a great deal. For example, we now know a considerable amount about the dimensions of harassment (e.g., Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995), its prevalence in various organizational settings (e.g., Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999), and its consequences (Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Magley, Waldo, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 1999; Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997). Possibly most important for preventive purposes, a number of antecedents (i.e., facilitating conditions) have been identified, with many studies confirming that a masculinized job context and permissive organizational climate are associated with higher levels of sexual harassment for women (see, e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993; Culbertson & Rosenfeld, 1994).

Despite these insights, aggregate methodology suffers from its own limitations. Specifically, aggregate measurement ignores the fact that behaviors can combine to produce both more and less than the sum of their parts. More because the meaning of complex experiences is not well captured by simply summing their components; less because such aggregations obscure the experience of multiple incidents, possibly perpetrated by different people across time, departments, and so forth. When separate experiences are aggregated, their etiology cannot be determined. Thus, it is impossible to explore potential associations between antecedents (e.g., organizational climate) and specific types of experiences. Similarly, the impact of a given experience is difficult to evaluate when data are "collapsed" over multiple incidents and perpetrators.

Another problem of aggregation is that it equates incidents of varying types and can thus underestimate the importance of situations that, though rare, are particularly severe. For instance, a woman who reports hearing offensive jokes at work "many times" over the past 2 years receives 5 points (on a 5-point scale) toward her score on the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald et al., 1988, 1995), a widely used aggregate measure of harassment. In contrast, a woman whose supervisor tried to rape her in a single violent incident theoretically receives only 2 points. Because items on the SEQ are unit-weighted, the measure's major source of variance is the frequency ratings assigned by the participants; thus,

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