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SCIENCE FOR A SMARTER WORKPLACE

Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

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Table of Contents

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With the explosion of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, sexual harassment in the world of entertainment has been brought to the forefront of the public's attention. Although perhaps not an exact microcosm of society, the recent revelations in Hollywood are no different than those that have plagued workplaces for decades. This was clearly demonstrated by the 1.7 million tweets, posted throughout 85 different countries, using the #MeToo hashtag (Park, 2017). Additionally, Facebook reported 12 million posts within 24 hours, all regarding the #MeToo movement (Gillaspie, 2018). These numbers shed light on the sheer magnitude of the problem of harassment in general, which has prompted exploration of the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace and what can be done to eliminate it. A recent poll on workplace harassment by Langer Research Associates estimates that 33 million women in the United States experience workplace instances of sexual harassment (Langer, 2017). Thirty percent of female respondents stated the behaviors they experienced were perpetrated by their male colleagues, with 25% stating these men had power over their careers. However, the most alarming statistic is that 95% of these women said their harassers did not see any punishment or repercussions.

Given the extremely low incidence of punishment for perpetrators, along with the intimidation, humiliation, and shame targets report (Langer, 2017), it is not surprising that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) reports a significantly smaller number of cases received compared to actual accounts that occur. In 2017, there were 12,428 sex-based harassment allegations filed with the EEOC (EEOC, 2017). This number has remained relatively unchanged since 2010, possibly demonstrating a lack of acknowledgment of the problem by organizations. Though the number of cases filed seems relatively small compared to the number of individuals who anonymously report experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace, the fiscal costs are enormous, with $46.3 million paid out in monetary benefits in 2017 (EEOC, 2017). This number has increased by $5 million since 2010 and does not include additional money obtained through litigation or spent on the legal process. With the increased media attention on issues of sexual harassment, it is very possible—and likely—we will see an increased number of cases submitted to the EEOC in 2018 (Bomkamp, 2017).

On top of this, the United States Supreme Court ruled that organizations can be held liable for sexual harassment even if they were not directly aware of its occurrence (Fick, 1998; Woodford & Rissetto, 2003), which means it is the employer's responsibility to prevent and be aware of sexual harassment in the workplace. For employers to be vicariously liable, the harasser must be a supervisor of the employee, except if the employee reasonably believes someone who is not their direct supervisor has authority over their day-to-day tasks or power over their employment (Castro, 1999). One additional concern for employers is that they may be liable for sexual harassment if any tangible employment action occurred, which can include anything from firing and demotions to undesirable work assignments (Castro, 1999). This means an employee does not need to prove any changes in salary or benefits to file suit against their employer. Due to the murkiness of when an organization is liable and who is able to claim sexual harassment, as well as the psychological, legal, and financial consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace, it is important to understand how and why it happens as well as what we can do to decrease its occurrence.

What Is Sexual Harassment?

In order to understand how and why sexual harassment occurs, it is important to define what it is. Unfortunately, there is no single, agreed-upon definition across all contexts. Below, we identify themes from academic and legal definitions to provide a comprehensive definition of sexual harassment.

There are several definitions of sexual harassment. Fitzgerald et al. (1997) defined it as "unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her resources, or threatening her well-being" (p. 15). Farley (1978) defined it as "unsolicited nonreciprocal male behavior that asserts a woman's sex role over her function as a worker" (p. 14).). More recently, McDonald (2012) described sexual harassment as "one of a range of abusive or counterproductive workplace behaviors which have hierarchical

power relations at their core…[with] an explicitly sexual dimension" (p. 2). The EEOC identifies "unwelcome sexual advances [as] requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature" (EEOC, n.d.). Many other countries have defined and created legislation to prohibit sexual harassment. Although there are differences in these definitions, they typically include similar ideas of unwanted and hostile behavior of a sexual nature (McDonald, 2012).

At its core, sexual harassment is unwanted, threatening, and often involves an exploitation of power differentials. It is a form of abusive behavior in the workplace. Importantly, the definition of harassment may vary from person to person, as employees' perceptions of what constitutes harassment may differ. It is also somewhat common to frame definitions around the act of men harassing women. This is not to say that men cannot be targets of sexual harassment—they can be and are (Timmerman & Bajema, 1999). However, as Fitzgerald and Shullman (1993) pointed out, sexual harassment is overwhelmingly directed toward women. Furthermore, the negative effects of harassment are generally much more severe for women than for men (Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996). Therefore, many definitions and discussions of harassment tend to focus on men harassing women. Despite this, it is important for organizations' definitions of sexual harassment to include instances where both men and women are targets and perpetrators of sexual harassment.

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How Big Is the Problem?

The occurrence of sexual harassment at work has proven difficult to assess accurately. Estimates of sexual harassment targets in the United States range from 24% to 75% of women and 13% to 31% of men (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003; Aggarwal & Gupta, 2000), with a very recent estimate placing these rates at 38% for women and 13% for men (Stop Street Harassment, 2018). A survey by the Pew Research Center (Parker, 2018) estimated that 49% of employed women in majority-male workplaces believe sexual harassment is a problem at their work, whereas 32% in majority-female workplaces believe it is a problem at their workplace. Estimates of prevalence in European countries have indicated that anywhere from 17% to 81% of women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Timmerman & Bajema, 1999).

The wide range in prevalence estimates is largely because incidents, which qualify as sexual harassment by definition are often minimized or downplayed by targets. Targets of sexual harassment may underreport or underemphasize experienced harassment due to fear of consequences (Vijayasiri, 2008), lack of faith in the organization's desire or ability to do anything (Harlos, 2001), a reluctance to make waves in a male-dominated environment (Collinson & Collinson, 1996), or related concerns (McDonald, Charlesworth, & Graham, 2015). In addition, definition and measurement of sexual harassment may differ by country or study, leading to some variation in prevalence estimates. Overall, it is clear that sexual harassment is not uncommon in workplaces and evidence suggests that estimates of prevalence may be underreported (Ilies et al., 2003).

What Does Research Tell Us?

Research on sexual harassment has identified several of its risk factors. Organizations with high power differential (organizations where power is more concentrated at higher levels of the organization than usual; Ilies et al., 2003), those in industries characterized by traditionally masculine behaviors and expectations (Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope, & Hodson, 2008), and organizations with large numbers of male workers (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007) are most conducive to sexual harassment. An organization's climate toward sexual harassment is also an important predictor of its occurrence. Hulin, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow (1996) identified three important characteristics that enable a climate for sexual harassment: perceptions of risk to targets if they complain, a lack of sanctions for offenders, and the belief that one's complaints of harassment will not be taken seriously.

Evidence suggests that proper training can reduce the probability of sexual harassment occurring (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). Importantly, training should take place throughout all levels of an organization. Bell, Quick, and Cycyota (2002) suggest that incoming employees should receive such training as part of their orientation to the company. Additionally, McDonald and colleagues (2015) reviewed the literature on sexual harassment training and identified four key points that are important for effective training. These are summarized briefly in Table 1. First, prior to training, organizations should identify the prevalence of sexual harassment and risk factors of sexual harassment within the organization. If organizational data on sexual harassment incidents are not available, a measure such as the revised Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995) may be useful if anonymously administered to the workforce. Second, training content should include clarification of what sexual harassment is and clarification of what behaviors are acceptable. Common misconceptions about sexual harassment should be addressed. If possible, training should include exercises such as roleplaying to give employees the opportunity to model and practice appropriate behavior. Third, training managers on communication, listening, and emotional skills can also prepare them to deal with complaints in an appropriate manner. If possible, training all employees on these skills would prove beneficial. Last, training should address organizational culture issues that could result in climates conducive to sexual harassment, such as valuing traditionally masculine behaviors and high power differential.

Table 1.
Four Keys to Effective Training (From McDonald, Charlesworth, & Graham, 2015)

1	Identify the prevalence of sexual harassment and risk factors to identify when sexual harassment is likely to occur in the organization.
2	Raise awareness about sexual harassment and clarify what constitutes sexual harassment.
3	Train managers on interpersonal skills such as emotion and conflict management.
4	Challenge gendered of organizational culture, including traditionally masculine norms and values.

Researchers have also explored the consequences of sexual harassment. Targets of harassment are usually women and most perpetrators of harassment are men. In addition, women who are in a minority group based on characteristics such as race or sexual orientation are even more likely to be targeted (Berdahl & Moore,

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2006). Targets of sexual harassment experience lower job satisfaction, lower job performance, increased stress, worse physical and mental health, lower organizational commitment, and withdrawal from work (Willness et al., 2007). They may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the harassment (Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008). Moreover, reporting sexual harassment can often worsen these outcomes depending on the organization's response to the report (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002). Targets of harassment often find the reporting process of their organization to be hostile, risky, or ineffective (McDonald et al., 2015).

Implications

Sexual harassment has wide-ranging implications for both targets and employers. Some outcomes are strictly individual or strictly organizational, but most are of consequence for both individuals and employers, including: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, stress, task performance, extra-role performance/ withdrawal, turnover, mental health, physical health, financial consequences, and potential increased risk for escalated sexual misconduct. These outcomes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.
Primary Negative Outcomes of Sexual Harassment

1	Decreased job satisfaction
2	Decreased organizational commitment
3	Poorer task performance
4	Lower extra-role performance
5	Increased employee turnover
6	Harm to physical health
7	Harm to mental health
8	Legal fees, including settlements and damages paid
9	Financial cost of reduced productivity, absenteeism, and turnover
10	Damage to organizational reputation
11	Escalation to sexual assault and other forms of misconduct

Impact on Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

The links between sexual harassment and both job satisfaction and organizational commitment have been established in many empirical studies (e.g. Herschovis, Parker, & Reich, 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 1997) and meta-analyses (Cantisano, Domingue, & Depolo, 2008; Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Willness et al., 2007). A statistical summary of 41 studies found that perceptions of sexual harassment are associated with lower work satisfaction and organizational commitment (Willness et al., 2007). In a study of working adults, Clarke et al. (2016) found that the relationship between sexual harassment and job attitudes was affected by status of the harasser. Specifically, job satisfaction and organizational commitment plummets when the harasser is a supervisor as compared to a peer.

Impact on Task Performance

The effects of sexual harassment on performance are observable from the outset of the employment process: the job interview. In a study of 50 women, Woodzicka and LaFrance (2005) found that women who were asked sexually suggestive questions during an interview spoke less fluently, provided answers of lower

quality, and asked fewer job relevant questions of the interviewer than women who were asked questions that were not sexually suggestive. In a study of Chinese employees in the hospitality industry, sexual harassment was negatively correlated with proactive customer service performance. Interestingly, this relationship was due to job engagement (Li, Chen, Lyu, & Qiu, 2016). Although the relationship between harassment and engagement has not been extensively examined, employee engagement does predict positive job outcomes including performance (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011). Therefore, a lack of engagement may be the reason harassment leads to decreased performance.

Impact on Extra-Role Performance

A dissertation study of 197 women found that perception of sexual harassment was related to enacted incivility, theft, sabotage, and withdrawal (Gettinger, 2008). Although this study suggests negative effects on extra-role performance, more research is needed to draw more definitive conclusions about these outcomes. Moreover, these outcomes are less direct and observable consequences of sexual harassment and are thus generally not included in cost analyses of sexual harassment effects.

Impact on Turnover

Sexual harassment has been widely linked to turnover (Chan et al., 2008; Willness et al., 2007). Turnover due to sexual harassment is generally examined within a reasonably short amount of time following the experience of sexual harassment—typically 2 years. In a study of female lawyers, both sexual harassment by superiors and sexual harassment by peers was statistically significantly related to intent to turnover within 2 years (Laband & Lentz, 1998). In a military sample, Sims et al. (2005) found that harassment predicted actual turnover after controlling for the effects of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. There is a greater probability that women will leave if they experience sexual harassment at work.

Impact on Physical and Mental Health

Hefty costs to physical and mental health are borne solely by the targets of workplace sexual harassment. These include stress, lowered self-esteem, depression, suppressed immune functioning, and heightened inflammation (Chan et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that targets of sexual harassment experience lowered life satisfaction and higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (Willness et al., 2007).

Financial Consequences of Sexual Harassment

It is difficult to empirically study the dollar costs of sexual harassment. However, ERC, an Ohio-based human resources consulting firm, estimated that the average harassment claim settled out of court costs an organization between $75,000 and $125,000 in legal fees. This estimate does not include any additional costs from settlement, damages paid, lost productivity, absenteeism, and other factors. In addition, ERC states that a typical case that does go to court will cost twice as much in legal fees. A 1988 study that calculated the costs of absenteeism, lost productivity, and turnover found that an average *Fortune* 500 company would have lost $6.7 million annually due to sexual harassment (ERC, 2017). Although there are no estimates of what this figure might have been in more recent years, the $6.7 million estimate from 1988 would be equivalent to over $14 million in 2017 (Parramore, 2018). Furthermore, this cost does not include the prices of legal fees, settlements, or damages paid. Parramore (2018) also points out that reputational costs to companies can be high. For example, Fox News lost several advertisers in the wake of sexual harassment lawsuits against former show host Bill O'Reilly. Overall, the average financial cost of sexual harassment incidents is difficult to quantify. How-

ever, it is clear that costs have the potential to be very high and can come from a multitude of sources (e.g., legal fees, productivity loss, reputation).

Escalation of Sexual Misconduct

Research on the relationship between sexual harassment and sexual assault has largely centered on the United States military and the U.S. higher education system. Within U.S. military research, one study of African American female veterans indicated that sexually traumatic events (i.e. childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment) tend to cluster together, and the more categories of sexual violence experienced by a target, the more likely the target was to experience negative mental and physical health outcomes (Campbell, Greeson, Bybee, & Raja, 2008). In a study of graduate students, the association between peer sexual harassment and peer sexual assault was high for both women and men (Rosenthal, Smidt, & Freyd, 2016). Although sexual assault is somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, heightened sexual violence must be recognized as a potential outcome of sexual harassment.

In recent popular press, the occurrence of sexual harassment within the Dallas Mavericks organization of the National Basketball Association (NBA) is believed to have eventually led to domestic assault (Wertheim & Luther, 2018).[1] Although it may be improper to conclude that sexual harassment causes sexual assault, correlational data and workplace case studies of escalation are compelling and show a clear association between the two. Additionally, steps aimed at eliminating sexual harassment are likely less expensive than even a single incident of sexual assault. The White House Council on Women and Girls reported that a single sexual assault costs between $87,000 and $240,776 prior to litigation expenses (The White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). Therefore, an organization should take action against sexual harassment before it escalates.

Next Steps

Sexual harassment is entrenched in societies around the world (Senthilingam, 2017). For example, a study of U.S. middle-school students indicated that sexually inappropriate behavior, including making sexual comments and jokes, spreading sexual rumors, making homophobic comments, and forcible sexual contact begins as early as the fifth grade (Espelage, Hong, Rinehart, & Doshi, 2016). Simply hoping that the prob-

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lem will go away as perpetrators exit the workplace is not a viable strategy for organizations. Organizations can and should emerge as role models against sexual harassment in society. Moreover, many believe that organizations are partially responsible for the occurrence and frequency of sexual harassment in the workplace and should protect their employees (Willness et al., 2007). Thus, it is in organizations' best interests to take steps against sexual harassment. A good first step is simply to begin a conversation about sexual harassment prevention. Resources to begin such a conversation can be found at the National Women's Law Center (https://nwlc.org/issue/sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/). Below, we discuss several other steps organizations can take to prevent sexual harassment.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

Although a variety of organizational structure initiatives have been suggested to prevent sexual harassment, unfortunately, many of the predictors of sexual harassment are not within the direct control of the organization. Specifically, the percentage of men within the occupation and within the organizational setting may prove difficult to alter. However, other relevant workplace characteristics may be more within the scope of organizational control. For example, perceptions of autonomy, coworker support, and supervisor support have been associated with lower rates of sexual harassment (Mueller, DeCoster, & Estes, 2001). Thus, organizations that can provide workers with more autonomy over how they do their jobs may be less likely to experience sexual harassment. Organizations should also encourage supervisors and coworkers to support employees and work cooperatively with them. Proper training on interpersonal skills may be helpful in achieving this goal. In addition to these factors, an organization can also control its climate for sexual harassment.

Organizational climate for sexual harassment is a vital antecedent to sexual harassment frequency (Willness et al., 2007). A climate that does not tolerate sexual harassment has been repeatedly linked to lower levels of sexual harassment in research (Bergman et al., 2002; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Glomb, Munson, Hulin, Bergman, & Drasgow, 1999, Glomb et al., 1997; Wasti, Bergman, Glomb, & Drasgow, 2000). For example, in a military sample, the only organizational contextual variable predicting sexual harassment was sexist organizational climate. In contrast, unit-level (as opposed to organization-level) climate for sexual harassment, group cohesion, and job satisfaction did not predict sexual harassment perceptions (Harris, McDonald, & Sparks, 2018). These studies generally conclude that a climate of tolerance for sexual harassment is the best predictor of its occurrence. There are several ways in which an organization can instead foster a climate of harassment prevention. Organizations can implement sexual harassment awareness trainings, form policies, and integrate effective reporting and follow-up procedures.

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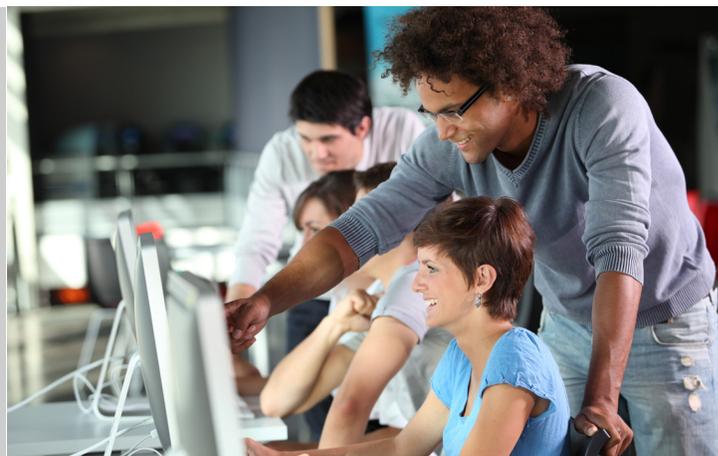
Training and Policy. The literature on training as a preventative mechanism is decidedly mixed. In their practical forum, Bell and colleagues (2002) suggest that regular, directed training is beneficial in the reduction of sexual harassment. Employees in organizations with sexual harassment awareness trainings were more likely to label sex-related behavior as sexual harassment compared to those in organizations without such training (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). Moreover, Buckner and colleagues (2014) found that manager training increased sensitivity to sexual harassment but also found that there was a decrease in their ability to identify sexual harassment and had no effect on their ability to recommend an appropriate response to sexual harassment. Although results may sometimes be mixed, properly implemented training programs (including organizational assessment of risk factors, appropriate training content, management training in emotional skills, and acknowledgement of cultural issues in the organization) will benefit organizations wishing to reduce sexual harassment. If possible, it may also be beneficial for organizations to clearly connect this training into an organization's mission statement, emphasizing that the occurrence of sexual harassment can undermine the organization's stated mission and purpose.

Although little research has been conducted on specific prevention strategies, a clear, consistent, antiharassment message is necessary. This message should include a written sexual harassment policy statement, sexual harassment training, and follow-up training at regular intervals (Perry, Kulik, Bustamante, & Golom, 2010; Buchanan, Settles, Hall, & O'Connor, 2014). Given that organizational training and policies can establish a climate of intolerance for sexual harassment immediately, particularly for new hires, an organization next needs to consider how to handle reports of sexual harassment to maintain such a climate.

Reporting Procedure. Several aspects of sexual harassment procedures appear key in reducing harassment, particularly perceptions of equal opportunity support and employee confidence in a company's grievance procedures (Hershcovis, Parker, & Reich, 2010). Harassment is more likely to be excused when the perpetrator is a high performer (Summers, 1996) and when the target does not report the event. This may occur for a variety of reasons, such as concerns about job security and expectations that the harasser will not be punished (McDonald et al., 2015). In this way, abuse of power may also facilitate sexual harassment (Popovich & Warren, 2010). Moreover, Salin (2009) found that punitive measures were rarely utilized in response to workplace harassment. Therefore, it is not enough to have an organizational statement against sexual harassment; organizations need to have a reporting procedure and follow through on the consequences, regardless of the status of the perpetrator. Bergman et al. (2002) concluded that organizational climate was the single most important factor in encouraging reporting of sexual harassment. An organization must show that it takes claims of sexual harassment seriously, does not minimize targets' reporting, does not tolerate sexual harassment, and acts swiftly

> **An organization must show that it takes claims of sexual harassment seriously, does not minimize targets' reporting, does not tolerate sexual harassment, and acts swiftly to investigate sexual harassment and create consequences for perpetrators.**

to investigate sexual harassment and create consequences for perpetrators. In other words, the key is not the act of reporting but what the organization does subsequently with the report (Bergman et al., 2002). Thus, an organization needs to take steps toward creating a climate that fosters an intolerance of sexual harassment and takes reports of sexual harassment seriously, including procedures for investigating the report and repercussions for the perpetrator. Similar conclusions were reached by Adams-Roy and Barling (1998), who found that targets were more likely to report incidents if their organizations used fair and just procedures to ensure that policies preventing sexual harassment were followed.

Organizational Climate Measurement. Organizations should frequently attempt to assess the current climate for sexual harassment within each unit/department. This can be used to gauge the effectiveness of any of the above steps if they are taken. Even if those steps are not taken, organizational stakeholders should always be aware of whether their climate is conducive to sexual harassment. The Psychological Climate for Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (Estrada, Olson, Harbke, & Berggren, 2011) provides an excellent starting point as a tool for conducting this assessment. I-O psychologists can be consulted for their expertise and training in climate surveys to measure and analyze the climate for sexual harassment.

Conclusions

Sexual harassment is a complex and pervasive workplace issue, one that will not be solved overnight or with a focus paper. However, every step is an important step. Recent media attention has raised awareness of sexual harassment, increasingly made sexual harassment a priority for organizations, and has begun to give women a voice going forward. Organizations must address sexual harassment or face increasingly costly consequences. Future research must continue to identify actionable antecedents of sexual harassment to ensure that organizations promote prevention and accountability.

Note

[1] Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban agreed to donate $10 million to organizations that help those affected by domestic violence and encourage the hiring of women in leadership roles after an independent investigation found current and former Mavericks employees committed "serious workplace misconduct," according to the findings released by the NBA (A. J. Perez & J. Zillgitt, *USA TODAY*, September 19, 2018).

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