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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is not an isolated phenomenon and should, therefore, not be studied in isolation. Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination and can be studied from a theoretical framework that addresses discrimination. In analyzing sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, it is important to distinguish between prejudice (an attitude) and discrimination (a behavior). A conceptual model can be drawn for the behavior of sexual harassment and the attitude of sexism. Such a model shows that the nonsexist nonharasser or nonsexist exhibits consistent attitudes and behavior. Such a person is not prejudiced against women and treats them accordingly. Nonsexist sexual harassers or naive sexists, although nonsexist, may participate in sexual harassment, or at least not condemn others who participate in sexual harassment because it is institutionally or personally expedient. Sexist nonharassers or closet sexists believe many of the sexist stereotypes about women but in most cases do not act on their beliefs. Sexist harassers or open sexists openly express their beliefs and practice active harassment. Nonsexists and closet sexists present few problems. Neither group is likely to sexually harass women in organizations. An effective strategy against the naive sexist's behavior is direct confrontation, unless the behavior is encouraged by social pressure. The best that can be expected from an open sexist is to change him into a closet sexist. A harasser whose attitudes are sexist should be dealt with differently than a harasser whose attitudes are not sexist. (HOD)

Sexual Harassment as Discrimination: Guidelines for Effective Responses.

by

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Sexual Harassment as Discrimination: Guidelines for Effective Responses

Sexual harassment in the workplace is receiving increasing attention from both organizational management and researchers. Yet, there is conflicting evidence on how often sexual harassment occurs, what behaviors constitute harassment, and how victims should respond to sexual harassment. This conflict occurs, at least in part, because much of the writing on sexual harassment is based on unsystematically gathered anecdotal evidence which lacks a clear theoretical foundation. Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination and victims of sexual harassment respond to it as other groups in the past have responded to discrimination. Viewing sexual harassment from a theoretical perspective which addresses discrimination leads to specific suggestions on how victims can respond effectively to sexual harassment.

Because sexual harassment often occurs in private with no witnesses (Safran, 1981), information on the frequency of sexual harassment is primarily anecdotal (Neugarten and Shafritz, 1980). Surveys of working women report conflicting, yet startling, results. In a 1976 survey conducted by Redbook magazine (Safran, 1981), nine out of 10 of the female respondents said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment on the job; most, however, had experienced subtler forms of harassment such as sexual jokes. Forty-five percent of the respondents indicated that either they or a woman they knew had quit or been fired from a job because of sexual harassment. In a survey of 50 food service workers and 100 women who attended a Speak-Out on Sexual Harassment conducted by Working Women United, 70 percent of the

respondents had experienced at least one instance of sexual harassment on the job (Silverman, 1976-77). The Center for Women Policy Studies estimates that at least 18 million women were sexually harassed on the job in 1979 and 1980 (Ms. Magazine, July 1981). Ten percent of the respondents in a study conducted jointly by Redbook magazine and the Harvard Business Review had heard of or observed a situation in which a supervisor gave a woman a poor evaluation because she refused to have sex with him. A survey of over 20,000 Federal employees indicated that 42 percent of the women and 15 percent of the men had been sexually harassed in the previous two years (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). In other surveys, up to 100 percent of the respondents reported experiencing some type of sexual harassment at work (see Neugarten and Shafritz, 1980, for a discussion of other surveys). Even taking the most conservative estimates into account, sexual harassment is clearly a problem for women at work.

This paper examines the situation in which the sexual harasser is male and the recipient of the harassment is female. This focus does not imply that male employees are never harassed; however, women are more often the victims of harassment than men (Neugarten and Shafritz, 1980; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). In addition, the processes involved in sexual harassment may be different for men than women. For example, 22 percent of the male respondents to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board's survey reported that their harassers were male, while only 3 percent of the female respondents reported female

harassers. Thus, to avoid possibly confounding the analysis, this paper focuses upon the male harasser/female victim situation.

In November 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) adopted its final guidelines on sexual harassment. These guidelines provide that:

> Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individuals, (3) or such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. (Mastalli, 1981, p. 94)

This definition will be used as the operational definition of sexual harassment throughout this paper.

Numerous suggestions have been offered to women on ways to respond to sexual harassment. Suggested strategies include ignoring the harassment, jokingly or bluntly asking the harasser to stop, and taking legal action (cf. Backhouse and Cohen, 1978a). Ignoring sexual harassment, generally, is an ineffective response. In the Working Women United survey, for the 76 percent of the respondents who used this strategy, the harassment continued in the same form or worsened (Silverman, 1976-77). Most discussions of strategies encourage the victim of sexual harassment to "attack the problem" herself (cf. Collins and Blodgett, 1981). Most discussions of sexual harassment, however, do not offer guidelines on which response is most appropriate in a particular situation.

The dirth of specific advice to the yictim of sexual harassment is due, in part, to the lack of a theoretical foundation for the study of individuals' responses to harassment. Sexual harassment is not an isolated phenomenon and should, therefore, not be studied in isolation. Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination and can be studied from a theoretical framework which addresses discrimination. According to Parillo (1980), discrimination is "the unequal treatment of outgroup members, whether in job opportunities, housing, social interaction, or other areas" (p. 61). As a form of discrimination, sexual harassment is not a "sex game," but a way of expressing authority and dominance either consciously (Backhouse and Cohen, 1978b) or unconsciously (Safran, 1981). In this way, sexual harassment is a social mechanism which preserves the status quo of male dominance in organizations (Neugarten and Shafritz, 1980).

In analyzing sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, it is important to distinguish between prejudice, an attitude, and discrimination, a behavior (Parillo, 1980). Given this distinction, Parillo argues that although prejudice may lead to discrimination and discrimination may lead to prejudice, there is no necessary causal relationship between the two. People who are prejudiced against a particular group may never make their feelings known to members of that group; conversely, people may discriminate against a group without being prejudiced. According to Parillo (1980):

> it is wrong to assume that discrimination is always the acting out of prejudice. It may be instead the result of a policy decision protecting the interests of the majority group . . . It may be due to social conformity, such as when people submit to outside pressures

despite their personal views. (p. 37)

To illustrate this idea, Parillo focuses on Robert Merton's conceptualization of the possible relationships between prejudice and discrimination, which can be illustrated as follows:

Prejudice	Discriminates: Yes	Discriminates: No
Yes	All-weather illiberals	Fair-weather illiberals
No	Fair-weather liberals	All-weather liberals

According to Parillo (1980), nonprejudiced nondiscriminators or all-weather liberals are consistent; they are not prejudiced and they do not practice discrimination. They are, Parillo contends, "properly motivated to illuminate others and to fight against all forms of discrimination" (p. 38). Although some all-weather liberals are activists, others feel there is no need to be active because they tend to talk only to people who share their viewpoint and, therefore, assume that their ideas represent the consensus of the community. Nonprejudiced discriminators or fair-weather liberals believe in expediency; as Parillo (1980) notes, their "actions often conflict with their personal beliefs" (p. 38). Fair-weather liberals who are not racially prejudiced, for example, may not openly condemn acts of discrimination. Parillo notes that "these people frequently feel guilt and shame because they are acting out against their beliefs" (p. 38). Merton calls prejudiced nondiscriminators or fair-weather illiberals the "timid bigots." According to Parillo (1980):

> They believe in many of the stereotypes about minorities and definitely feel hostility toward these groups. However, they keep silent in the presence of those who are more tolerant; they conform because they must. If there were no law or pressure to be unbiased in certain actions, they would discriminate. (p. 38)

Prejudiced discriminators or all-weather illiberals are active bigots. Parillo (1980) maintains that "not only do they openly express their beliefs, practice discrimination, and defy the law, if necessary, they also believe that it is their duty to do so" (p. 38).

Merton's conceptualization deals with discrimination (a behavior) and prejudice (an attitude). A similar model can be drawn for the behavior of sexual harassment and the attitude of sexism, that is, prejudice based on biological gender:

Sexism [Attitude]	Sexually Harasses [Behavior]: Yes	Sexually Harasses [Behavior]: No
Yes	Open Sexist	Closet Sexist
No	Naive Sexist	Nonsexist

Nonsexist nonharassers or nonsexists exhibit consistent attitudes and behavior. They are not prejudiced against women and treat them accordingly. Just as Merton's all-weather liberals, however, they may not see sexual harassment as a particular problem because they tend to associate only with other nonsexists. This may help to account for the finding that men think sexual harassment is a much smaller problem than women do (cf. Collins and Blodgett, 1981). Nonsexist men who would never participate in sexual harassment associate mainly with similar

types of men and are, therefore, isolated from the problem.

Nonsexist sexual harassers or naive sexists, like their fair-weather liberal counterparts, believe in expediency. Although they are not sexist, they may participate in sexual harassment or, at least, not condemn others who participate in sexual harassment because it is institutionally or personally expedient. A naive sexist may participate in sexual harassment because his boss or co-workers do.

Sexist nonharassers or closet sexists believe many of the sexist stereotypes about women but, in most cases, they do not act on their beliefs. As long as there are either formal or informal prohibitions against sexual harassment in the workplace they will not participate in harassment.

Sexist harassers or open sexists openly express their beliefs and practice active harassment. Harragan (1977) calls them the "vicious players of sex checkers." Like Merton's all-weather illiberals, they feel they are doing their duty. They treat women as they feel women should be treated, often with overt hostility. According to Parillo (1980):

> Hubert Blalock, developing an earlier idea of Robert Park, argues that extreme discrimination will usually result when the dominant group feels that its self-interests--such as primacy and the preservation of cherished values--are threatened. Blalock believes that the dominant group will not hesitate to employ discriminatory action if it thinks this will be an effective means of undercutting the minority group as a social competitor. (p. 39).

Open sexists use sexual harassment as a tool to block the advancement of women in organizations.

In the past, women were advised to deal with sexual harassers without regard to the harasser's attitude toward women.

Separating the behavior of sexual harassment from the attitude of sexism, should allow women to deal more effectively with harassment.

In terms of sexual harassment, nonsexists and closet sexists present few problems. Neither group is likely to sexually harass women in organizations, although for different reasons. Nonsexists can be used as supporters of sexual harassment guidelines provided they are convinced that harassment does occur. Training programs aimed at nonsexists should emphasize the frequency with which sexual harassment occurs. Once this group is convinced that sexual harassment is a genuine problem for women in organizations, they will actively support programs to rid organizations of sexual harassment. Closet sexists, on the other hand, will never be active supporters of guidelines against sexual harassment, although they will not sexually harass women as long as formal or informal rules against harassment exist. Although closet sexists do nothing to actively support women in organizations, they will not actively hinder women's careers as long as other male members of the organization are supportive of women. Appeals to closet sexists should emphasize the EEOC guidelines and should be delivered by a male member of the organization who they find credible. Although closet sexists may not agree with the EEOC guidelines, they will support them as long as that is the organizational norm.

Active sexual harassers can be divided into open sexists and naive sexists. To effectively respond to these two types of harassers, the victim must realize that they have different

attitudes underlying their behavior. Open sexists are prejudiced against women while naive sexists are not.

Naive sexists are participating in sexual harassment because it is institutionally or personally expedient, not because of prejudice against women. Thus, strategies aimed at naive sexists should be designed to change their behavior not their attitudes. Naive sexists can listen to abstract discussions of sexual harassment and agree that sexual harassment should be avoided, but continue to harass women. The continuation of this behavior may stem from two sources: ignorance or social pressure. In the first instance, the naive sexist may not realize that his behavior contradicts his attitudes. He may not realize that women are interpreting his behavior as sexual harassment. If this is the case, direct confrontation should be the most effective strategy. The woman should explain to the naive sexist how his behavior is being interpreted. Since he is not prejudiced against women, once he is aware of the effects of his behavior upon women he should be willing to change his behavior. Direct confrontation is an effective strategy unless the naive sexist's behavior is encouraged by social pressure.

Unfortunately, some naive sexists may be encouraged by other members of the organization to sexually harass women. For example, executives in a particular department may touch their secretaries execessively. Although a new executive is not explicitly told to touch his secretary, he may model his peers' behavior (just as he models their style of dress) and begin to touch his own secretary, perhaps without even realizing it. If the secretary uses direct confrontation and tells the executive

how she is interpreting his behavior, he may be sympathetic to her arguments but unable to stop his behavior because of the pervasiveness of that type of behavior in the organization. This type of sexual harassment will only end if it is no longer functional for the naive sexist, that is, if it is no longer encouraged, openly or subtly, by the organizational members. Naive sexists will stop sexual harassment if they are rewarded for alternative behaviors. Thus, a woman who is confronted by this type of harasser will be able to change his behavior if she can provide social pressure which discourages harassment. Formal company guidelines against sexual harassment are ineffective against this type of harasser if the organization or influential members of the organization continue to sanction harassment. This subtle pressure to harass women employees may explain the response of the respondent to the Redbook/Harvard Business Review survey who said:

> We don't want to lose people, but if a harassment charge is proven correct, we terminate the management person. Within the last year we have had to terminate three managers for harassment. Interestingly, the problem continues to plague us. Heart-to-heart, man-to-man talks, policy statements, and a proven corporate response have been no visible deterrent. (Collins and Blodgett, 1981, p. 91).

Heart-to-heart talks will not deter a naive sexist if sexual harassment is still encouraged in subtle ways. If that is the case, the victim of sexual harassment must try to convince someone with enough power to rid the organization of these subcultures. If she cannot find a powerful enough person to help her do this, unfortunately, the only other solution is to leave the company and warn other women not to take jobs there.

Open sexists are sexual harassers whose attitudes and behavior are consistent. Ideally, the best tactic to handle an open sexist would be to change his attitudes (convince him not to be prejudiced against women) and, consequently, his behavior. Unfortunately, given the stable nature of attitudes, this is unlikely to happen. Instead, the best that can be expected is to change an open sexist into a closet sexist. The open sexist is unlikely to change his behavior in response to mild appeals, but behavior such as his cannot be tolerated within an organization. If the organization is not willing to do everything in its power to control an open sexist, the victim of his sexual harassment must take legal action, remembering, however, that just because behavior is unjust it may not be illegal (Farley, 1979). Legal threats are useless unless the victim of sexual harassment has well-documented evidence against the harasser, including, if possible, witnesses. Legal action is a costly and time-consuming process, but it may be the only strategy useful against an open sexist.

Thus, in order to deal effectively with sexual harassment, a women must first determine the motive behind her harasser's actions. A harasser whose attitudes are sexist should be dealt with differently than a harasser whose attitudes are not sexist. Using the theoretical framework presented in this paper, victims of sexual harassment should be better able to deal with instances of harassment.

Notes

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