Sexual Harassment on the Job: What Are We Missing?

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Today’s Talk: Sexual Harassment
Contours, Consequences & Response Systems

- Definitions, examples
- Measurement
- Prevalence
- Individual risk factors
- Environmental risk factors
- Consequences for individual targets
- Why policies and practices aren’t enough
- Q&A
How does behavioral science define and measure sexual harassment?
What exactly is sexual harassment?
How does social science define & measure it?
Sexual Harassment Defined

Psychological/behavioral science definition: “behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual’s sex” (Berdahl, 2007)

THREE BROAD CATEGORIES:
- Sexual Coercion
- Unwanted Sexual Attention

Gender Harassment: verbal and non-verbal behaviors that disparage, objectify, or humiliate people based on their gender
  a) Sexist
  b) Crude
Sexual Harassment Measurement

Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald et al.)

First-hand; behavioral; focus on recent past; 16-20 items; no reference to “sexual harassment”

“During the PAST YEAR, has anyone at your workplace...”
(Response scale: 1 = “never” to 5 = “many times”)

- **Sexual Coercion**: “implied faster promotions or better treatment if you were sexually cooperative” (sample item)
- **Unwanted Sexual Attention**: “made unwanted attempts to establish a romantic relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it”
- **Gender Harassment - Sexist**: “referred to people of your gender in insulting or offensive terms”
- **Gender Harassment - Crude**: “made offensive remarks about your appearance, body, or sexual activities”
Sexual Harassment Examples:

- America's watershed debate on sexual harassment
- Sexual Predator of the Year
- Donald Trump
  President of the Divided States of America
Pelting women with rocks
Threatening to block women’s access to funding
Pushing, grabbing, spitting on women
Blowing volcanic ash (w/ glass shards) into eyes
Daily name-calling: “slut”, “idiot bitch,” “dumbass”
Male witness: “clearly stated he did not believe women should be field geologists”
Female victim: “His taunts, degrading comments about my body, brain, and general inadequacies never ended ... Every day was terrifying”
Female victim: “The worst experience of my life”
Can Men Be Sexually Harassed? Yes. (more often than not, by other men)

Gender Harassment: “Not man enough” insults
- for doing childcare, housework
- for not participating in crude/lewd commentary about women
- for being small, weak, petite, gay (e.g., “sissy”, “mama’s boy”, “p**sy”, “girl”, “fag”)

Unwanted sexual attention, sexual assault
- For example, *Polly v Houston Lighting & Power*: male plaintiff alleged male coworkers forcibly kissed him, grabbed/pinched his genitals, buttocks, chest
- *Oncale v Sundowner*: male coworker threatened rape
Parallels Between Science and the Law

**Behavioral science conceptualization**

- **Sexual Harassment**
  - Sexual Coercion
  - Unwanted Sexual Attention
  - Gender Harassment (Sexist or Crude)

**Legal conceptualization**

- **Sex/Gender Discrimination (prohibited by Title VII)**
  - Equal pay, hiring, firing, etc.
  - Sexual Harassment
    - Quid Pro Quo (Sexual Coercion)
  - Hostile Environment
    - (Unwanted Sexual Attention & Gender Harassment)
How common is sexual harassment (and its subtypes)?
Percent of Women Facing At Least One Harassing Behavior in Past Year at Work

Mostly Male Settings

Percent of Sample

- Women in Law Enforcement
- Women in United States Military
- Women in Higher Education (Staff & Faculty)
- Women Working for Federal Courts

Percent of Sample

0 25 50 75 100
Of the Subtypes of Sexual Harassment: Gender Harassment = Most Common

(percent of women employees who were harassed by coworkers or supervisors at a large public university)
Also for Women Students:
Gender Harassment = Most Common
(percent of women students harassed by faculty or staff within a large state university system)
sexist insults
("women don’t belong")
unwanted sexual discussions
graphic images at work
vulgar name-calling ("slut", "c**t")
"not man enough" insults
sexist insults ("women don’t belong")
infantilization ("baby", "dear")
derisive remarks about working mothers
crude comments about bodies
obscene gestures (e.g., about masturbation)
relentless pressure for dates
coerced sex
groping
"not man enough" insults
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Who is most at risk for being targeted with sexual harassment?
Major Risk Factor: Being Female (or Feminine)

Percent of sample facing at least one harassing behavior at work (or graduate school) during past year

(no significant difference)
Major Risk Factor: Being Sexual Minority

Percent of university faculty/staff facing at least one harassing behavior on the job during the past year (faculty & staff at a small public R2 university)

- Gender Harassment (sexist and/or crude)
- Sexual Advance Harassment (unwanted sexual attention and/or sexual coercion)

Percent of Sample

- Heterosexual
- Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual
How does sexual harassment relate to work and wellbeing?
Sexual Harassment Outcomes
(for reviews, see Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; Cortina & Leskinen, 2013; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2017; Holland & Cortina, 2016)

Professional wellbeing
- job satisfaction
- job commitment
- job burnout
- job stress
- work withdrawal
- job withdrawal
- quitting
- performance impairment (verbal, spatial)
- team conflict
- lowered team cohesion
- lowered team financial performance

Psychological wellbeing
- anxiety
- depression
- posttraumatic stress
- problem drinking
- disordered eating
- anger, disgust, fear
- lowered life satisfaction

Physical wellbeing:
- headaches
- sleep problems
- GI problems
- weight loss/gain
- increased cardiovascular reactivity
Faculty/Staff Distress Increases as Harassment Becomes More Frequent (public university faculty/staff, male & female)

![Graph showing mean scale scores for Job Stress, Anxiety, and Depression with categories None, Low, Moderate, and High.

- Job Stress: Moderate > High > Low > None
- Anxiety: Moderate > High > Low > None
- Depression: Moderate > High > Low > None]
Faculty/Staff Burnout Rises as Harassment Becomes More Frequent (public university faculty/staff, male & female)

Mean Scale Means

- Disengagement Burnout
  - None
  - Low
  - Moderate
  - High

- Exhaustion Burnout
  - None
  - Low
  - Moderate
  - High
Faculty/Staff Think About Quitting as Harassment Becomes More Frequent (public university faculty/staff, male & female)
Outcomes are *NOT* explained by

- Experience of other stressors (e.g., prior physical or sexual assault)
- Other features of the employee’s job (occupational level, years on the job)
- Features of personality (neuroticism, tendency to experience negative emotions)
- Other demographics (age, education, race)
Similar Patterns of Outcomes in Studies Using Variety of Methods

- Longitudinal designs (e.g., multi-wave surveys conducted over a series of years)
- Experience sampling methods (aka “daily diaries”)
- Laboratory experiments
- Qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews)
Do outcomes depend on the type of harassment (e.g., gender harassment is no big deal, sexual coercion is "the worst")?
Outcomes of Gender Harassment (women working within U.S. military)

After accounting for effects of race, rank & service branch...

Standardized Means

- Psychological Well-Being
- Health Satisfaction
- Organizational Commitment
- Work Satisfaction
- Coworker Satisfaction

Non-victims vs. Gender Harassment Victims
Outcomes of Gender Harassment (women working within U.S. military)

After accounting for effects of race, rank & service branch...

- Performance Decline - Physical
- Performance Decline - Emotional
- Turnover intentions

Standardized Means

- Non-victims
- Gender Harassment Victims
Key conclusion: Gender harassment has at least as great - if not greater - impact on professional & personal health, compared to unwanted sexual attention & sexual coercion.
“Sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention are traumatic for the people involved, and more likely to result in court cases and public reporting. However, in many work settings, these intense experiences are low-frequency events...The more frequent, less intense, and often unchallenged gender harassment, sexist discrimination, sexist organizational climate...appear at least as detrimental for women’s well-being. **They should not be considered lesser forms of sexism.**”
Is Gender Harassment Illegal???

Gender harassment can meet all legal criteria for “hostile environment” sexual harassment:
- Occurring “because of” the victim’s sex
- Being “severe or pervasive” enough to adversely alter conditions of employment
- Creating an environment that a “reasonable” person would find, and the victim finds, hostile/abusive

Title VII: no mention of sexual behavior
- Focus on sexual behavior emerged over time as the courts revised their interpretations of Title VII

Regardless, we should expand protections beyond those required by law: even without a Title VII violation, harassment can be corrosive to work and wellbeing
It’s often not “just” gender harassment: Environments high in gender harassment tend to have other indignities...
Workplace Incivility

Definition: “low intensity deviant (rude, discourteous) behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect”

CFA results (interfactor correlations):

N = 833 female court employees

N = 1,425 female attorneys

Nearly all gender-harassed women reported incivility

Implication: Incivility may be a “gateway drug” – opening door to identity-based abuses (e.g., gender harassment)
Racial/Ethnic Harassment

Definition: “threatening verbal conduct or exclusionary behavior that has an [ethnic/racial] component” (Schneider et al., 2000)

Strong correlation, in work lives of people of color

Where there is one form of identity-based harassment, others are not far behind

N = 476 Latinas (range of organizations)

.53

Racial Harassment

Gender Harassment
Heterosexist Harassment

Definition: Workplace conduct that “overtly conveys devaluation, rejection, and/or hatred of non-heterosexuality” (Konik & Cortina, 2008)

WHOPPING correlation

We can separate these types of harassment in research, but they’re difficult to disentangle in life

Where there is one, you will find the other

N = 629 university faculty/staff
(58% female; 36% LGBQ)

.86

Heterosexist Harassment

Gender Harassment
**Key Take-Aways**

Sexual harassment takes different forms:
- Sexual Coercion, Unwanted Sexual Attention, and (most commonly) Gender Harassment

Sexual harassment derails work and wellbeing, even without sexual advance or legal violation

Along with sexual harassment come other assaults to individual dignity

To move the needle on this problem, need to think outside the box
- Beyond policies, procedures, penalties for the most sexualized and coercive (and rare) acts
#TimesUp: How can organizations move the needle on sexual harassment???
Beyond Sex Policies

Contrary to popular belief, sexual harassment often entails no sexual advance.

Need to move away from emphasis on unwanted sexual pursuit as quintessential sexual harassment.

U.S. EEOC (1980):

“Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual’s employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.”

Need to take gender harassment seriously.
Beyond Reporting

Reporting is rare

- Fewer than 1 in 3 targets talk informally with leadership
- Fewer than 1 in 4 file formal reports

Targets have many reasons to avoid reporting

- Fear of blame, disbelief, inaction, retaliation, humiliation, ostracism, career damage
- Fear of triggering an investigation; police involvement
- Fear of triggering consequences for perpetrators

Widespread belief: reporting is only appropriate for the most egregious acts (sexual, assaultive, coercive)

Reporting mechanisms are necessary, but not sufficient to move departmental cultures
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What are we doing here?
One Promising Practice: Focus on Cultivating a Culture of Respect

- Leaders: model respectful work behavior
- Mission statements, policies, codes of conduct: Explicitly state expectations for respect
- Educate all faculty & staff on those expectations
  - Explicitly discuss respect toward all social groups
  - Emphasize that discrimination includes subtle acts of devaluation, exclusion, interruption
- Reference checks: ask about interpersonal behavior
- Provide communication coaching/training as needed
- Pay attention & intervene: don’t dismiss any insult as trivial, a “personal issue that will work itself out”
That’s all Folks!
Comments, questions, ideas?

• For more information or copies of research articles, please contact me: lilia.cortina@umich.edu
• Or: visit my lab website (google “Gender and Respect in Organizations Lab”)