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Sexual Harassment:
A Big Issue for Small and Medium Enterprises?

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Sexual Harassment: A Big Issue for Small and Medium Enterprises?

Most organizational research continues to focus almost exclusively on large firms (Cooper & Otley, 1998; Wilkinson, 1999), and perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, large corporations are the subject of much media interest, and attract more attention from legislation, lobbyists and labor than do small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In addition, organizational scientists do not necessarily research the aspects most relevant to a vibrant economy and healthy employees (O'Leary & Almond, 2009). While we of course do not deny the need for comprehensive information on large organizations, the neglect of SMEs in the organizational sciences leaves a sizable and consequential gap in our knowledge. Much remains unknown when it comes to the companies that employ the majority of working individuals in the United States (Headd, 2000) and Canada (Wong, 2009), their working experiences, and associated well-being.

Recognizing that the unique nature of SMEs and the environments in which they function may limit the generalizability of empirical findings derived from larger firms, some organizational scholars have begun to focus specifically on SMEs (e.g., Bacon & Hoque, 2005; Deshpande & Golhar, 1994; Heneman, Tansky, & Camp, 2000; Katz, Aldrich, Welbourne, & Williams, 2000; Wilkinson, 1999). Despite this new focus, we still know very little about issues that affect the health and well-being of employees and managers in these organizations, especially when it comes to matters of aggression and victimization. This gap in knowledge becomes even less acceptable when we realize that employee health and well-being in large organizations has been extensively researched, as is evident from the attention given to this issue in specialist academic journals (e.g., the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* and *Work and Stress*), handbooks on work stress (Barling, Kelloway & Frone, 2005) and workplace

violence (Kelloway, Barling & Hurrell, 2006), and occupational health psychology (Quick & Tetrick, 2010).

Recognizing this gap in knowledge, our goal in this chapter is to expand our understanding of one threat to employee well-being in SMEs, namely sexual harassment. Previous research in larger organizations has revealed much about the prevalence of this problem, its antecedents, and the significant costs it produces for employees and organizations alike (for a review, see Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). Given the substantial lessons learned from this literature, we are now well-placed to investigate the prevalence of sexual harassment within SMEs, identify risk factors, and consider how this form of workplace aggression might be reduced and prevented within these unique organizational environments. To this end, we first briefly review what is currently known about sexual harassment in general. Thereafter, we focus on sexual harassment in SMEs, first outlining the limited literature that has been produced to date on this topic, followed by a discussion of several SME characteristics that we believe may impact the prevalence and effects of sexual harassment in these firms. More specifically, we emphasize the role of the climate for sexual harassment in SMEs, and factors associated with the workforce composition of these organizations. While we will suggest that in many cases these variables leave SMEs more vulnerable to the problem of sexual harassment, we also draw attention to situations where the nature of SMEs may actually thwart the occurrence, and minimize the effects of this type of victimization. Finally, ideas for research will be suggested, and practical recommendations will be offered for practitioners looking to reduce or prevent sexual harassment from occurring in their SMEs.

The time has come for sexual harassment scholars to focus their attention on SMEs, take what has been learned from larger organizations, and use it to help produce new knowledge

pertinent to the unique conditions and challenges faced by SMEs. In so doing, we offer ideas and suggestions that will directly enhance the safety and well-being of SME employees, and indirectly facilitate the survival and growth of these organizations.

What is Sexual Harassment?

Although numerous definitions of sexual harassment have been proposed, Louise Fitzgerald and her colleagues' contribution has been particularly influential in our understanding of this construct, offering a formal definition that is most widely accepted in current research. Thus, sexual harassment represents any "unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her (his) resources, or threatening her (his) well-being" (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997, p. 15). Furthermore, it is now accepted that sexual harassment comprises three separate but related dimensions: (1) gender harassment (e.g., insulting verbal/nonverbal behavior conveying hostile or degrading attitudes); (2) unwanted sexual attention (e.g., touching, repeated and unreciprocated requests for dates); and (3) sexual coercion (e.g., sexual bribes or threats) (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995). This represents a significant advance in our understanding of this phenomenon, as the original conceptualizations of sexual harassment developed in the 1970's solely acknowledged *quid pro quo* harassment - the loss or denial of job-related benefits for refusal to cooperate sexually. Today, more encompassing and nuanced understandings of sexual harassment exist, moving us away from the exclusive focus on sexually-harassing *behaviours*, towards the recognition of hostile environments and more psychologically-based conduct (Cortina & Berdhal, 2008).

Considerable advances have also been made in our understanding of sexual harassment victimization and perpetration. No longer is sexual harassment seen as something that solely affects women or those directly targeted, nor is this phenomenon one that is only perpetrated by

men. Instead, it is now understood that sexual harassment can be directed against males (e.g., Berdahl, Magley & Waldo, 1996; Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998), perpetrated by females and same-sex individuals (e.g., Gerrity, 2000; Stockdale, Visio, & Batra, 1999; Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998), and can be detrimental to employees who are not the direct targets, but who are vicariously exposed to sexual harassment (e.g., Glomb, Richman, Hulin, Drasgow, Schneider, & Fitzgerald, 1997; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004, 2007; Raver & Gelfand, 2005). Recent investigations have also concluded that equal status co-workers, clients, and even subordinates, can and do, sexually harass others (e.g., Barling, et al., 2001; DeSouza & Fansler, 2003; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

Previous research in larger organizations has revealed the pervasiveness of sexual harassment. The general consensus from this research is that between 23 and 68 percent of all women (Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997; Gruber 1997; USMSPB, 1987; 1994 Welsh & Nierobisz 1997), and between 10 and 19 percent of all men (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; USMSPB, 1994), will experience sexual harassment while at work at least once over the course of their careers. When we consider that sexual harassment is linked to job-related outcomes (e.g., decreased productivity, satisfaction, commitment; Barling et al., 2001; Gruber, 1992; Shaffer et al., 2000), as well as psychological (e.g., increased anxiety, depression, fear, self-blame, PTSD, drinking and drug use; Barling et al., 2001; Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Harned & Fitzgerald, 2002; Richman et al., 2002; Vogt et al., 2005), and somatic (i.e. sleep disturbance, nausea, headaches; Gutek & Kross, 1993) costs to victims, the importance of understanding and preventing sexual harassment is clear. Further still, sexual harassment exerts costs on organizations through employee absenteeism, turnover, reduced productivity (Faley, Knapp, Kustis, & Dubois, 1999; Sims, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 2005), legal expenses incurred in

defending itself and its officers, and the considerable psychic drain and time required of those involved in dealing with sexual harassment complaints. But what causes sexual harassment?

Numerous theories have addressed this question in an attempt to illuminate the underlying factors responsible for the problem of sexual harassment. The ‘nurture’ or socio-cultural perspective (e.g., Studd & Gattiker, 1991) for instance, argues that harassment is caused by the socialization of negative sex role stereotypes and associated cognitive and attitudinal biases that demean and devalue women. Alternatively, the ‘power’ perspective conceptualizes sexual harassment as a consequence of the power differences (both organizational and social) that exist between males and females, and the way that such inequalities enable men to sexually coerce and objectify the less powerful (e.g., Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). Combining these approaches, the ‘nurture x power’ perspective maintains that sexual harassment results from the desire to protect valued social identities (e.g., Berdahl 2007a; Dall’Ara & Maass, 1999; Franke, 1997). Although each of these theories has contributed to our understanding of the causes of sexual harassment, theoretical approaches that offer organizational-level explanations for this phenomenon are particularly relevant to this chapter, as the size of SMEs renders their environments unique in many ways. Whether asserting that this form of aggression results from gender-role expectations becoming equated with work roles (i.e. sex-role spillover; e.g., Gutek 1985; Tangri & Hayes 1997, Stockdale 1996), numerically skewed sex ratios in workgroups (e.g., Gruber 1998), the organization of work and/or its culture (e.g., Fitzgerald et al, 1997; Hulin et al 1996; Kauppinen-Toropainen & Gruber 1993; Miller 1997, Hearn & Parkin 1987), or an interaction between various personal and situational factors (e.g., Dekker & Barling, 1998; Pryor, LaVite & Stoller, 1993), organizational-level theories of harassment reveal much about the contextual variables in need of attention, to understand and manage sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment in SMEs

Like so many other areas of organizational inquiry, the amount of knowledge about sexual harassment that has emanated from large organizations stands in stark contrast to what is known about sexual harassment in SMEs. Of the few studies that have addressed sexual harassment in these organizations, the focus has primarily been on the beliefs that owners and managers have about the nature and extent of this problem. For example, in a national study on the perceptions of small business professionals about ethical conduct within organizations, Vitell and colleagues (2000) found that sexual harassment was not seen to be much of a problem by those in SMEs. Further, less than half of the managers/owners surveyed indicated that they would create formal sexual harassment policies for their organization, and only half said that they would take disciplinary action if cases of harassment were brought to their attention. Wagar (1998) and Eberhardt and colleagues (1999) confirm the hesitation of many SME stakeholders to implement formal sexual harassment policies. Their data suggest that only one third and approximately one half (respectively) of the small businesses surveyed in their studies had human resource practices specific to sexual harassment. Even more revealing, perhaps, are the findings that less than 25% of organizations with such guidelines had them posted, less than 15% offered sexual harassment prevention training, and only around half included procedures for investigating complaints about sexual harassment (Eberhardt et al., 1999). Thus, it is likely that very few SME stakeholders believe that sexual harassment is a serious workplace issue; certainly the policies in place in SMEs would suggest this is the case.

Of course, if sexual harassment was not as issue, the lack of policies would not be a problem—but all indications suggest that this is not true. For example, according to Wagar (1998, p. 20), “.... a number of small business owners have found themselves embroiled in

sexual harassment litigation due to a failure to recognize what constitutes sexual harassment and an incomplete understanding of the legal rights of employees and employers in sexual harassment cases.” Further, from a business perspective, the lack of formal attention given to sexual harassment by SMEs is surprising, given that all federally regulated organizations in Canada (including SMEs) are covered by the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Canada Labour Code (III)*, while any organization in the U.S. with 15 or more full-time employees is covered by the *Civil Rights Act*, and is thus subject to sexual harassment lawsuits (Robinson, Jackson, Franklin, & Hensley). Further, in many states, legislation has been implemented to prohibit workplace sexual harassment regardless of the number of individuals employed (Robinson, et al., 1998). We believe that a major factor underlying the failure to implement relevant policies is not a lack of care on the part of SME stakeholders, but rather a lack of awareness. If SME owners and managers understood the extent and effects of sexual harassment, they would be much more likely to actively confront this issue and strive to improve workplace conditions. As such, the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to identifying both the characteristics of SMEs that make them more susceptible to sexual harassment and its effects, as well as those that may encourage stakeholders to fight back against this problem.

A Cautionary Note

We begin with an important cautionary note. Critiques of SME research caution against the homogenization of the way in which we think about these organizations (e.g., Wilkinson, 1999; Woodhams & Lumpton, 2006). The idea that all SMEs are similar in light of their unique size obscures how both internal (e.g., management style) and external (e.g., technology, ownership, industry characteristics, economic factors, regional culture) factors shape the social dynamics that occur within these organizations (e.g., Goss, 1991; Kinnie, Purcell, Hutchinson, Terry,

Collinson, & Scarbrough, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999). Thus, SMEs not only differ from larger organizations, but there is also a remarkable degree of variation within SMEs. As such, the arguments we present in this chapter are neither meant to suggest that all SMEs possess the same contextual risk factors that leave them vulnerable to the occurrence of sexual harassment, nor that all SMEs will be affected by sexual harassment in the same way. Rather, we offer this discussion as a first step towards understanding how climate and workforce composition factors might differentially influence the prevalence and experience of sexual harassment in these unique organizations. In so doing, our goal is to lay the foundation for additional discussion and empirical research, potentially resulting in preventive steps for SMEs.

Sexual Harassment Climate

In an influential and wide-accepted model of sexual harassment, Fitzgerald and her colleagues (1997) find support for the argument that sexual harassment is primarily a function of organizational and job characteristics. More specifically, they showed that organizational climate was among the most influential environmental factors for the occurrence of sexual harassment. Referring to the meaningful representations and perceptions of organizational structures, processes, and events that reside within individuals and groups (Parker, Baltes, Young, Huff, Altmann, LaCost, & Roberts, 2003), the concept of climate describes organizational settings (i.e. its policies, procedures, and practices) in psychological terms (Joyce & Slocum, 1984), and provides an important link between higher-order contextual factors, and the actors embedded within them. From our perspective, sexual harassment climate is interesting and important as it enables us to understand employees' perceptions of their environments (whether personal or shared) and the routines that an organization implements, rewards, and supports (James, Joyce, & Slocum, 1988; Naumann & Bennett, 2000; Schneider & Reichers, 1983; Schneider, 1990).

Thus, sexual harassment climate refers to employee beliefs about the organizational policies, procedures, and practices in place for dealing with this form of aggression (Kath, Swody, Magley, Bunk, & Gallus, 2009) – or in other words, the organizational characteristics that communicate whether a company and its stakeholders tolerate sexually harassing conduct (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996).

Previous research has documented the powerful impact of organizational tolerance for sexual harassment, on its occurrence in the workplace (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Glomb, Richman, Hulin, & Drasgow, 1997; Gruber, 1998; Hesson-McInnis & Fitzgerald, 1997; Willness, Steel & Lee, 2007). In one study, for example, Williams, Fitzgerald and Drasgow (1999) showed the predictive importance of implementing policies for sexually harassing conduct, procedures for filing complaints and investigating incidents, and practices to punish perpetrators, for both the prevalence of sexual harassment and outcome severity. Willness, Steel, and Lee's (2007) meta-analytic findings provide further support, showing again that climate for sexual harassment was the strongest antecedent of this phenomenon in their analysis. Findings have also shown that men are significantly less likely to engage in sexual harassment if they believe the organization has policies and sanctions against sexually harassing conduct (e.g., Dekker & Barling, 1998; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993).

Importantly, perceptions of organizational tolerance for sexual harassment go beyond predicting whether the behavior is likely to occur or not; they are also related to the consequences of sexual harassment. Hulin and colleagues (1996), for instance, showed that climate for sexual harassment predicted the outcomes experienced by targets, more strongly than did their actual experience of victimization. Subsequent research by Williams and colleagues (1999) also showed how in many cases, individual perceptions of harassment climate moderate

the effects of sexual harassment. When employees believe that the organization will tolerate conduct of this nature, the negative impact of sexual harassment on the work-related outcomes of commitment and satisfaction with work, supervisors, and coworkers is worsened significantly. Further, any effects of believing that the organization will tolerate sexual harassment are even more widespread, having a negative impact not only on the direct victims of harassment, but also on other employees who witness these events. Several studies by Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2004, 2007) document the role played by perceptions of organizational unresponsiveness in reducing bystanders' commitment to the organization, job satisfaction, and health.

Climate for Sexual Harassment & SMEs

Given that climate for sexual harassment is related to both the prevalence and severity of this workplace problem, how can these findings from research benefit SMEs? We suggest that the lesson to be learned concerns the importance of developing and implementing policies, procedures, and practices that communicate organizational *intolerance* of sexual harassment, and provide employees with channels for obtaining organizational support if faced with this issue. Notwithstanding this, and consistent with survey data showing that sexual harassment is not a priority for SME stakeholders, only rarely will one find formal policies, procedures, and practices in place in SMEs to address this issue. Indeed, the problem may even be more complex and widespread than sexual harassment; research exploring Human Resource Management (HRM) more generally within SMEs has consistently revealed that a lack of resources, expertise, and/or beliefs in the legitimacy of HRM often results in failure to implement any formal control systems in these organizations (Katz et al., 2000; Matlay, 1999; Ritchie, 1993; Wilkinson 1999). Instead “informal routinisation” seems to characterize SMEs (Scott et al., 1989), resulting in inconsistent practices within and across these organizations, and what would appear to be—to

employees at the very least—an indifference toward human resource issues in general, and the occurrence of sexual harassment in particular (e.g., Ritchie, 1993).

The finding that many SMEs lack HR departments may not be surprising, as there is a close association between the size of the organization, the likelihood that there will be an HR department, the size of the HR department, and the intensity of traditional HR activities in the organization, such as staffing selectivity, training opportunities and the presence of grievance procedures (Delaney & Huselid, 1996). Further still, for many SMEs in the “start-up” phase or those that are trying to establish a fast-paced and entrepreneurial character, HR policies may be seen as limitations that hinder the autonomy of the founder and/or CEO, and impede rapid growth and change. As such, for these SMEs the absence of HR departments and policies is again not surprising.

SME Climate for Sexual Harassment: Incidence & Effects. Unfortunately, as HR departments invariably hold primary responsibility for developing, implementing, managing, and enforcing the policies, procedures, and practices creating psychological climates that could limit workplace sexual harassment, we suggest that the absence of such a department will leave many SMEs vulnerable to this form of interpersonal aggression. Without a formal department charged with the responsibility to proactively address the issue of harassment, the likelihood increases that the guidelines necessary to encourage appropriate workplace conduct, and the penalties for dissuading improper behaviour, will be absent. As such, SMEs would become more vulnerable to experiencing increases in the prevalence of this type of aggression. Any lack of formalized attention given to this issue may also have indirect negative effects on employees’ perceptions. More specifically, the absence of sexual harassment policies, procedures, and practices may implicitly communicate to workers that their employer condones this behaviour and similar

forms of mistreatment and unfairness. Reasoning that formal steps to address sexual harassment would be taken if those in positions of legitimate authority were concerned about this issue and employee well-being, the perception that management does not care about staff may result, which in turn, may produce a number of detrimental secondary effects (e.g., reduced loyalty and satisfaction, perceptions of injustice, reduced performance). Thus, tolerant sexual harassment climates may not only encourage more frequent expressions of sexually harassing behaviors, but also exacerbate the suffering of targets and detrimentally impact organizations.

SME Climate for Sexual Harassment: Target Coping. The impact of organizational tolerance for sexual harassment may have even more wide-ranging effects for SME employees, as previous research has demonstrated a link between climate for sexual harassment and target coping. In one study by Malamut and Offerman (2001), for example, the more that targets of sexual harassment perceived their organizations were tolerant of harassing conduct, the more likely they were to use avoidance-denial coping strategies to counteract their victimization. This finding is important, because avoidance-denial coping strategies are among the least effective in ending sexual harassment, likely because they involve tactics such as “ignoring the behavior, going along with the behavior, treating the incident as a joke, or doing nothing” (Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997, p, 691). Similarly, Cortina and Watsi (2005) found that women who perceived their organizations to be tolerant of sexual harassment, tended to behaviorally avoid and cognitively deny their adverse circumstances.

In contrast to avoidance-denial coping, research findings also show that targets who use more assertive coping strategies such as reporting harassment, are more satisfied with the outcomes they experience than those who use the more passive strategies common in organizational environments that tolerate harassment (Cochran, Frazier, & Olson, 1997).

Extending these research findings, Gruber and Smith (1995) demonstrated that women respond more assertively to being victimized (file a grievance or tell someone of authority about their mistreatment,) when the organization had practices in place (i.e. training, complaint procedures, pamphlets and posters displayed) to address incidents of sexual harassment.

Finally, research also suggests that the sexual harassment climate impacts organizational and perpetrator responses to particular coping behaviors. Bergman and colleagues (2002), for example, found that employee perceptions of organizational tolerance for sexual harassment are significantly and positively related to organizational minimization of the problem (i.e. ignoring the report of sexual harassment), and retaliation against employees for filing reports. Taking these findings together, therefore, we argue that many SMEs may be inadvertently encouraging victims of sexual harassment to use maladaptive coping strategies to address their suffering, which in turn could worsen any negative consequences already being experienced.

SME Climate for Sexual Harassment: Bystander Intervention. Intriguingly, the climate for sexual harassment in SMEs may also influence the suffering of harassment victims through its effects on those who are not directly targeted with harassment, but instead witness it (i.e., see it, hear about it). In their discussion of the factors that increase or decrease the likelihood that bystanders will intervene in cases of sexual harassment, Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) suggest that witnesses to this aggression often determine whether taking action is appropriate or necessary, from characteristics within their social and organizational environments. This is consistent with findings on bystander intervention in general (e.g., Latane & Darley, 1970), as well as social information processing theory - the latter of which explains how and why the social environment signals to individuals what beliefs, attitudes, and opinions are socially acceptable, and provides cues to employees that are used to construct and interpret

events (Salancik, & Pfeffer, 1978). That said, when one must interpret and respond to an ambiguous or disconcerting situation encountered at work (such as an instance of observed sexual harassment), employees will look to the organization, to make sense of what they perceive (i.e., answer the questions “Is what I just witnessed sexual harassment?” “Is what I just witnessed serious enough to warrant intervention given all of my own fears and anxieties?” etc.). The presence or absence of an organization’s sexual harassment policies and procedures would undoubtedly be a powerful source of information regarding what is appropriate, desirable, and normative within an SME, and by extension, determine the extent to which bystanders feel compelled to intervene. In situations where no sexual harassment policies or procedures are in place, SME employees are likely to interpret this to mean that such behaviors are not problematic, and thus conclude that intervention is unnecessary. Furthermore, as we know that close others typically come to agree with one another in their perceptions of organizational events and environments (e.g., Klein, Conn, Smith, & Sorra, 2001), and that bystanders in SMEs will also look to one another for cues in choosing how to respond (Salancik, & Pfeffer, 1978), beliefs in the needlessness of intervention will fast become systematic and self-perpetuating. Taken together, we argue that climate for sexual harassment should therefore impact the extent to which victims are left to suffer on their own, thus exacerbating any negative consequences they experience.

Although findings from research on bystander intervention and social information processing theory seem to suggest that sexual harassment may be more frequent and damaging in SMEs, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that the smaller workforce present in these organizations might also reduce the likelihood of sexual harassment and its negative effects. Again resorting to the bystander intervention literature, we learn that bystanders (e.g., to

sexual harassment) feel a greater responsibility to intervene in situations in which they cannot pass responsibility on to others; the fewer the bystanders, the greater the felt obligation. Thus, consistent with research exploring the diffusion of responsibility among those who witness emergency events (Gottlieb & Carver, 1980; Latane & Darley, 1968), employees in SMEs may feel *more* inclined to intervene if they see or hear about incidents of sexual harassment, as the pool of other observers is smaller. Further, this diffusion of responsibility becomes more likely when bystanders share cohesive ties, as individuals feel more accountable for the well-being of others with whom they are close (e.g., Levine, Cassidy, Brazier & Reicher, 2002). Based on these well-established findings, it could thus be argued that the size of SMEs, coupled with the cohesive ties that typically result from smaller work groups, will create conditions that increase feelings of accountability and mutual responsibility among organizational members, encouraging them to intervene in the harassment situation of a colleague.

Finally, Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) point out that observers are also more likely to intervene if they believe there is no one else in their environment who is more qualified to do so (Cramer, McMaster, Bartell, & Dragna, 1988; Pantin & Carver, 1982; Schwartz & Clausen, 1970). Without an HR department or organizational authorities formally appointed to deal with issues of sexual harassment, employees in SMEs may again feel *more* compelled to extend assistance to victims of harassment. To the extent that bystanders intervene on behalf of a colleague following an incident of victimization, target suffering should be reduced – both as a result of tangible assistance in dealing with the harassment, the potential discouragement of future acts, and in light of the positive psychological consequences that are associated with social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Thus, when thinking of whether bystander intervention might occur in the face of sexual

harassment in SMEs, a double-edged sword exists. On the one hand, a psychological climate that implicitly communicates a tolerance for sexual harassment may send messages to employees that discourage them from helping a colleague. On the other hand, the small size of these organizations may create conditions that increase perceptions of one's felt responsibility to act. So which is it? Do SMEs encourage or discourage bystander intervention? Unfortunately, there are no research findings that would guide us in answering this question. However, as bystander intervention likely plays an important role in reducing sexual harassment and preventing some of its negative effects in SMEs, we suggest that researchers should confront this question, investigating the extent of witness involvement in SMEs, and examining factors that could encourage such behaviour.

In summary, while there is no research that would directly inform our understanding of sexual harassment in SMEs, a large body of related work suggests that the climate for sexual harassment likely present in many of these organizations, may leave employees more vulnerable to this form of aggression. Specifically, the perception that an SME is tolerant of sexual harassment may increase the likelihood that this form of aggression will occur in the first instance, encourage maladaptive coping strategies by the targets of sexual harassment, exacerbate its negative impact on victims, and discourage bystander helping behaviour. At the same time, however, we do note that the small size of SMEs could also increase the likelihood of bystander intervention, thus helping to counteract some of climate's negative effects.

SME Workforce Composition

Any attempt to understand SMEs' will eventually reveal the widespread existence and influence of a family business culture within these organizations; and as will be seen, this will be of some importance when considering sexual harassment in SMEs. Even when SMEs are not

characterized by employees who share blood relations, the ideology of the “family” often prevails within these firms, influencing the social relationships that take place within them (Ram & Holliday, 1993). Previous research has documented both the advantages and disadvantages that a “family” culture can have on an SME. In fact, wider literature on SMEs tends to characterize these unique organizations as one of two types, each of which reflects a potential manifestation of the family ideology. According to the first - the “small is beautiful” perspective (e.g., Ingham, 1970) - the small size of SMEs provide intimate environments that value closeness and the cultivation of strong ties. Reflecting the image of a “happy family,” such workplaces are believed to promote and benefit from interpersonal trust and commitment, increased flexibility, reduced conflict, and facilitated communication (Ram, 1994; Schumacher, 1973; Wilkinson, 1999). In sharp contrast, the “bleak house” perspective suggests that SMEs might also be characterized by dictatorships that expose employees to poor working conditions, low levels of unionization, and limited employee autonomy and control (Dundon & Wilkinson, 2003; Rannie, 1989; Wilkinson, 1999). Within the “bleak house” perspective, the “family philosophy” is thought to be simply a front for authoritarianism, as loyalties create a sense of obligation to accept the status quo, however undesirable it may be for the individual employee. While SMEs are of course far more complex than any dichotomous representation can convey (Wilkinson, 1999), we question how the familial relations and ideologies that permeate many SMEs influence the manifestation and experience of sexual harassment. Might the characteristics of the “happy family” or the “bleak house” work against the occurrence of this aggression and the severity of its negative effects, or instead could they contribute to the silencing of victims and the dismissal of sexual harassment as an issue that negatively affects employees’ well-being?

Blurring the Boundaries: SME Workforce Composition & Harassment Spillover

Contrary to a more traditional Parsonian conception of work as an aspect of life that is distinct and separate from one's private, social experiences (Parsons, 1952), research reveals the opposite; work and family roles are inextricably linked (Barling, 1990) - a pattern of findings that has been replicated for decades (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Grzywacz & Butler, 2008). When specifically focusing on SMEs, we now appreciate how readily work and family intersect for employees in these organizations, largely as a result of their recruitment processes. Indeed, previous research has revealed the centrality of personal connections and informal networks of those already employed by such firms, in the hiring new employees (Dick & Morgan, 1987; Kitching, 1997). In one study, for instance, Matlay (1999) found that the vast majority of the 540 small business owners/managers who were interviewed, relied exclusively on informal channels of recruitment involving family members, friends, relatives, and neighbors. Similarly, in describing findings from their ethnographic research exploring the role of the family in small manufacturing firms, Ram and Holliday (1993) note that the "grapevine" is still the most utilized system of recruitment in these organizations. According to the researchers (1993, p. 640)

... Generally, the process involved the owners asking their workers to encourage friends and relatives to come to work for them. The whole process was very informal.... These particular channels of recruitment made it more likely that the workers recruited would be from the workers' familial and social milieu.

Given this finding, it should not be surprising that many SMEs are characterized by a familial culture (Ram & Holliday, 1993), which as noted, may be a blessing or a curse for these organizations and their employees. However, the important point from our perspective is that the resulting familial nature that characterizes many SMEs blurs the boundaries separating work and personal life, ultimately fostering conditions that worsen the experience of sexual harassment

victims. More specifically, we suggest that as many employees in SMEs will have deep personal relationships with one another that extend beyond their shared employment, it is probable that individuals who are victimized while on the job may be in a situation where they must continue to have contact with their harassers after work hours. Findings by Handy (2006) concerning the sexual harassment experiences of employees working in small towns are informative in this regard. Handy (2006) showed how contextual factors such as population size can result in sexual harassment diffusing from the job to non-work situations. For example, in some cases workplace sexual harassment continued when women were shopping or interacting with friends or family. The fact that harassment could continue outside of the work environment "... meant that women could, in the worst instances, be literally trapped in their own homes, knowing they would experience harassment if they ventured into town" (Handy, 2006:17).

Although Handy's (2006) research focused on the permeability of workplace boundaries as a result of the residential environment within which the organization is located, we suggest that these findings inform our understanding of sexual harassment within SMEs more generally. Thus, in light of the recruitment and staffing procedures commonly used in SMEs, we expect that the social networks of SME employees – including targets and perpetrators of sexual harassment - will intersect outside of the workplace, creating opportunities for sexual harassment to reach well beyond the organization, and to persist long after work hours. As previous research has demonstrated how the pervasiveness of sexual harassment is associated with the severity of its effects, the implications of harassment spillover into the personal domain must be considered. Langhout and colleagues (2005) revealed how victims experiencing harassment more frequently and for longer durations of time, appraised their circumstances as more stressful, and experienced greater declines in psychological, health, and job-related well-being. Earlier

research by Stockdale (1998) and Malamut and Offerman (2001) also revealed the role played by sexual harassment frequency in exacerbating the negative consequences faced by victims. As such, we suggest that the “family-friendly” hiring practices that characterize SMEs will blur the boundaries between work and home life for employees, will promote sexual harassment spillover, and will thus worsen consequences for victims.

Importantly, this spillover from work to non-work situations is not uni-directional. Instead, just as sexual harassment may spillover into the private lives of SME employees, so too might the consequences of any victimization occurring outside of the workplace, spillover *into* SMEs. Previous research has shown that the diffusion of intimate partner violence (IPV) – aggressive acts committed by a spouse, ex-spouse, or current or former boyfriend or girlfriend (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003) - into the organizational context is anything but rare. For example, 19 percent of male employees and 30 percent of female employees have experienced IPV at some point during their working lives, while 70% of employed victims say their abusers have harassed them at work (e.g., O’Leary-Kelly, Lean, Reeves, & Randel, 2008). Whether manifesting as job interference before or after employment hours (e.g., cutting up clothes so victim cannot go to work; threatening to cause harm for something done at work) or physical and/or non-physical acts of harassment that actually take place on the job site (Swanberg & Logan, 2005, Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2006), we argue that IPV, including sexualized violence occurring at home, may be a concern for SMEs. Subsequent research has shown how IPV that spills over to the workplace has negative effects on women’s withdrawal both from work, and at work (Leblanc, Barling & Turner, 2010). As the recruitment and staffing processes of SMEs make the co-employment of intimate partners more likely than in larger organizations, it is probable that SMEs are environments where sexualized IPV can enter the

workplace quite readily. Although our focus is on sexual harassment specifically, previous work has found that IPV can include various forms of sexual victimization such as forced sexual acts, threats for refusing to have sex, forcing one to use or look at pornographic materials and demeaning verbal insults (Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2006; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) - all behaviours that have also been included within the definition of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Further, as previous work has documented the detrimental consequences of this form of aggression to both individual employees and the larger organizations for which they work (e.g., LeBlanc et al., 2010; Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007; Swanberg & Logan, 2005; Swanberg, Logan, & Macke, 2006), addressing this issue in our discussion of sexual harassment in SMEs is critical. In summary then, we argue that the family nature of many SMEs can foster an environment wherein IPV is more likely to cross organization boundaries, ultimately producing detrimental consequences for the organization and employees.

'Family' Loyalties: SME Workforce Composition & Whistle-Blowing

Although the workforce composition characterizing many SMEs is likely to enable sexual harassment to cross organizational boundaries, it is also possible that the unique nature of the labor force within SMEs may make exposing sexual harassment difficult. Previous research exploring whistle-blowing has highlighted the moral dilemma that often arises when employees must decide whether to expose the misconduct of colleagues (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Henik, 2008; King, 1997; King & Hermodson, 2000; Trevino & Victor, 1992). Defined as "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, and illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to affect action" (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4), whistle-blowing is a phenomenon that is difficult for

those who engage in it. We argue that when the unethical behavior (i.e. sexual harassment) is being perpetrated by a close peer or even family member (as is likely to be the case in many SMEs), choosing to blow the whistle will become even more demanding. When immersed in an organizational environment that values strong ties and closeness, reconciling personal feelings about the wrongness of sexual harassment with group norms of loyalty and solidarity can produce moral conflict in would-be whistle-blowers (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Schwartz, Feldman, Brown, & Heingartner, 1969). Faced with the decision of whether to report a family member, neighbor, or friend to organizational authorities, employees in SMEs who witness or experience sexual harassment by close others may opt to preserve their bonds with members of the group – or even the perpetrator – rather than risk disrupting the cohesiveness and trust of the collective.

Support for this assertion derives from a study by King (1997), who found that employees were reluctant to report a friend's misconduct, only doing so when the behavior was perceived to be very serious. Likewise, studies have shown that pressure from peers to stay silent in the name of group unity, can prevent employees from choosing to report instances of wrongdoing. Research by Greenberg and colleagues (1987) for example, shows the social disapproval of coworkers around "tattling" behavior. When the individual being implicated belongs to a cohesive group, the condemnation for whistle-blowing is likely to be severe.

Finally, as existing decision-making models of whistle-blowing suggest (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003), witnesses to misconduct must first conclude that a wrongdoing has taken place, before they can contemplate a course of action. However, in light of the close and personal relationships shared by many SME employees – including targets and perpetrators of sexual harassment – bystanders may question whether what they are witnessing is harassment at all, or simply horseplay and/or joking between friends. Previous research has

demonstrated that bystanders are less likely to become involved in altercations between individuals believed to share a personal relationship (e.g., Levine, 1999; Moriarty, 1975). For instance, when observing an aggressive interaction between a man and a woman, bystanders are less inclined to intervene if they believe the two individuals are husband and wife (Shotland & Straw, 1976). Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005, p. 295) summarize this counterintuitive situation, noting that "intimate relationships somehow legitimate violence, causing it to be perceived as less harmful and as 'none of my business'." Taken together, it would thus seem that blowing the whistle on sexual harassment within contexts characterized by a family culture (and its associated structure), is something that would prove to be quite challenging.

However, extending the "small is beautiful" approach to SMEs outlined above, it is also possible that the close and intimate ties resulting from a smaller workforce and familial ideology may create conditions that *encourage* whistle-blowing. First, the smaller size of SMEs facilitates communication among colleagues, and makes employee behaviors more visible (Knapp et al., 1997). As such, employees within smaller firms are more likely to witness sexual harassment occurring in their midst, and feel a responsibility to intervene in some way on behalf of the victim. In addition, the sense of interpersonal closeness and trust fostered within SMEs by personal and perhaps familial relationships, may create safe environments that support victims and/or witnesses of harassment who choose to blow the whistle. While fear of retaliation for whistle-blowing often prevents this action from being taken (Gutek & Koss, 1993; Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1992; Miceli & Near, 1985, 1988; Miceli, Near, & Schwenk, 1991), targets or witnesses of harassment who feel cared for and supported by their colleagues may have fewer concerns about reprisals. Having the support of peers may even facilitate whistle-blowing in light of the social power it gives employees. In line with Near and Miceli's (1995) model of effective

whistle-blowing, power plays an important role when it comes to exposing wrongdoing, as those higher in power are more likely to believe they can bring about change, and fear retaliation less (Knapp et al., 1997). Thus, the ‘power in numbers’ that derives from close ties and shared group membership, may make whistle-blowing more likely in SMEs.

The “small is beautiful” atmosphere provides yet another explanation for why the motivation to blow the whistle on sexual harassment might be greater in SMEs. According to social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people come to understand and evaluate themselves based on the social groups to which they belong, and the extent to which these social groups are valued compared with relevant others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The organization to which one belongs serves as one such reference group, and the smaller and more cohesive this group is, the more salient it becomes in identity formation. While this might create pressure to protect one’s “own”, the *black sheep phenomenon* (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) remains possible. When a member of one’s social group behaves in a deviant or disgraceful way, concerns about being perceived in a similarly undesirable manner arise, and some form of corrective action is taken (Cooper & Jones, 1969; Eidelman and Biernat, 2003; Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994; Taylor & Mettee, 1971). Research exploring this *black sheep effect* (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) has demonstrated that members try to protect valued group identities by derogating the group member who threatens the esteem of the collective. According to Eidelman and Biernat (2003:603) “those who share group memberships with unfavorable others may also appear “guilty” simply by way of their resemblance. Harshly evaluating an unfavorable group member indicates dissociation and limits the likelihood of being cast in the same negative light.” As sexual harassment can disgrace a group and discredit its members,

employees in a close-knit SME may choose to report colleagues responsible for perpetrating such acts, regardless of their in-group status.

Previous research has also demonstrated the role of empathy – a sentiment that is experienced when people recognize aspects of themselves in other individuals – in promoting helping behaviour (Baston, 1991; Davis, 1996), and thus might be of importance in SMEs. According to Stürmer and colleagues (2006: 944) “group-level similarity indicates that the target is “of one’s kind,” which renders his or her welfare of immediate self-relevance.” As such, when SME employees see their colleagues being sexually harassed, empathetic concern is likely to arise, which in turn, will engender helping behaviour. Previous work by Stürmer and colleagues (2005; 2006) provides support for the notion that in-group membership facilitates empathy-motivated helping. Victor, Trevino and Shapiro (1993) also found that the inclination (and in turn, actual whistle-blowing) to report a peer for misconduct was associated with perceptions that other group members were being harmed. Thus, the drive to preserve a positive social identity, as well as to protect valued members of the social group, might motivate employees in SMEs who are faced with the sexual harassment of a close colleague, into some form of positive action.

Taken together, any effects of the family culture and cohesive workforce characteristic of SMEs are complex, and seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, this unique workforce and its associated alliances may make whistle-blowing difficult for targets and bystanders, while on the other hand, may foster heightened feelings of in-group solidarity, efficacy, and support to whistle-blower – all of which would enhance the motivation to put a stop to sexual harassment.

Recommendations

Understanding the nature, antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment in SMEs is an important goal in itself. However, accumulating knowledge about this issue is also critical to

the extent that it forms the basis for actions to prevent sexual harassment from occurring in these organizations, and reducing its negative consequences for employees. While we have deliberately pointed to the absence of data specific to sexual harassment in SMEs throughout the preceding discussion, we suggest that enough is known at this stage about the phenomenon of sexual harassment more generally, and about the unique organizational environments of SMEs, that several recommendations can be made that may benefit these organizations and their stakeholders.

Develop and implement policies, procedures, and practices to limit sexual harassment in SMEs.

Data from a variety of sources strongly suggest that the development and implementation of policies, procedures, and practices for sexual harassment is a necessary first step for SME management, in reducing and preventing sexual harassment (e.g., codes of conduct, sexual harassment training, formalized grievance process). Such policies, procedures, and practices will not only directly influence employees' psychological climate for sexual harassment (or perceptions of the organization's tolerance for sexual harassment), but in turn, will impact employee behaviour (e.g., discourage sexually harassing conduct, encourage positive coping behaviours and target reporting/ bystander intervention), and indirectly influence employees' feelings of being supported by the organization.

Nonetheless, while critical, it is also important to recognize that merely having such policies in place is not sufficient. Previous research also reveals that SME owners and senior leaders must essentially "practice what they preach" when it comes to sexual harassment, publically demonstrating a commitment to the elimination of this issue, adequately communicating any policies, procedures, and practices that have been implemented, and modeling appropriate behaviour (Murry, Sivasubramaniam, & Jacques, 2001; Offermann &

Malamut, 2002). Research by Adams-Roy and Barling (1998) also demonstrates the importance of procedural fairness in the way that policies, procedures and practices are enacted. In essence, it would seem that sexual harassment policies are only as good as the leaders who implement them, thus pointing to our second recommendation.

Ensure leaders are adequately trained to deal with sexual harassment.

In general, SMEs have fewer resources available to them than do larger organizations; and training and development for leaders and leadership would be no exception. Yet SME owners and managers are still expected to lead by example, despite the resource constraints and role overload they experience (Dekker & Barling, 1995). In general, owners and senior leaders in SMEs would benefit considerably from training and development opportunities, and would benefit even more so if these opportunities included knowledge about sexual harassment in general, their effects on employees and organizations, and how management might respond most effectively. The direct and indirect effects of such training on employees and SMEs would help reduce the occurrence of sexual harassment in the first instance, as well as then mitigate the harm to victims (Murry et al., 2001; Offermann & Malamut, 2002). As such, it follows that sexual harassment interventions and training must also be directed at senior level managers and leaders. Importantly, as suggested above, the first two recommendations we offer are not mutually exclusive. Instead, we would propose that they be implemented simultaneously.

Collect data on organizational size.

As noted, sexual harassment is pervasive within larger organizations; and a substantial body of research has addressed this phenomenon. In contrast, there is a dearth of research on sexual harassment in SMEs. While there are simply insufficient financial resources and researchers to redress this empirical imbalance in the short term, SMEs and their employees are

sufficiently dissimilar to large organizations (Headd, 2000), to warrant their own unique body of sexual harassment research. While we do put forth a general call for more work on sexual harassment in SMEs, we acknowledge that this may not currently be feasible for some researchers. As such, as a first step that can be implemented immediately, and that would provide valuable information at no cost, we call upon researchers to ensure that in describing their research participants, they automatically include information on the size of the organization(s) from which respondents were drawn. Were this information available, statistical analyses could be conducted to develop a more formidable body of knowledge on the nature, prevalence, and effects of sexual harassment in SMEs.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment in SMEs has largely escaped the interest of organizational researchers. This would be acceptable if sexual harassment did not occur within SMEs - but there is no reason to suspect that this is the case. In fact, drawing on diverse bodies of research, we have identified a number of factors that suggest sexual harassment is quite likely within these organizations. Further, based on our analysis it also seems probable that the damaging impact of sexual harassment on employee well-being, could be aggravated by a number of contextual variables present in many SMEs. Interestingly, it may also be possible that the smaller size and unique employee composition typical of these organizations, could work to counteract the harm caused by sexual harassment. In light of these possibilities, we encourage researchers to consider this important occupational health issue, developing theoretical insights and empirical knowledge that can help us understand what sexual harassment looks like in SMEs, and in what ways their unique organizational environments moderate the effects of this aggression. In this chapter we have highlighted the importance of implementing policies, procedures, and practices

to confront sexual harassment in SMEs, and offering training and support to both the employees and leaders within these organizations. Going forward, it will be critical for researchers and management alike to acknowledge the reality of sexual harassment in SMEs, build a base of knowledge about this topic that is specific to these organizations, and then implement the lessons learned from this research within these contexts. It is not until these things occur, that the well-being and health of SME employees can be enhanced, and the survival and growth of SMEs will be facilitated.

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