Predicting the decision to confront or report sexual harassment

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Summary   We examined the predictors of women's decisions to confront or report sexual harassment from a sample of 802 employed women, 142 of whom indicated they had been sexually harassed. Analyses of variance showed that personal assertiveness predicted the decision to confront the harasser. In addition, perceived procedural justice was associated with reporting sexual harassment. However, the direction of this relationship was opposite from that predicted: women who had reported sexual harassment through formal channels manifested lower perceptions of justice. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Introduction

Although it is almost two decades since the first studies identified the extent of workplace sexual harassment (Farley, 1978), it remains a major problem. Recent studies indicate that 35–45 per cent of female employees report being sexually harassed (Barak, Fisher and Houston, 1992; Barling, Dekker, Loughlin, Fullagar, Kelloway and Johnson, 1996; Mazer and Percival, 1989). However, this figure may underestimate the extent of the problem. First, many women only label the most severe of the range of harassing behaviors as sexual harassment (Barak *et al.*, 1992; Jaschik and Fretz, 1992). Second, when women are given a list of behaviors which constitute sexual harassment and are asked to state which they have experienced, endorsement rates escalate to 80–90 per cent (Barak *et al.*, 1992).

Victims of sexual harassment manifest negative mood, difficulties in concentrating and elevated stress (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Crull, 1982; Jensen and Gutek, 1982). From an organizational perspective, sexual harassment is associated with job dissatisfaction, increased absenteeism and turnover, and productivity losses (Barling *et al.*, 1996; Gill, 1993; Gutek, 1985). Gutek and Dunwoody (1987) suggest that sexual harassment prevents women from effectively contributing to the organization by creating a hostile environment.

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Clearly, a reduction in the incidence of sexual harassment is desirable both for employees' health and safety and the organization's optimal performance. Identifying factors that influence people to take action against a harasser forms the basis of this study. However, the hesitancy of victims to take any action when harassed is well-documented (Clair, McGoun and Spirek, 1993; Jones and Remland, 1992). This failure to take action perpetuates the problem, as it may signal to the perpetrator and the organization that the harassing behaviour is not offensive and not a real concern. Taking no action may allow the harasser to believe the behavior is acceptable, and may encourage future harassment (Payne, 1993).

There are several courses of action women can take after being harassed[1]. (a) They can invoke formal procedures by reporting the harassment to appropriate organizational authorities (e.g. supervisor, union representative, grievance officer), (b) personally confront the harasser, (c) both confront the harasser and report the harassment, or (d) choose to do nothing about the harassment. In general, we expect that organizational factors would predict the decision to report the harassment to relevant authorities, whereas personal factors would predict the decision to confront the harasser himself. Previous research in this area has been limited to descriptive accounts of the actions women say they would engage in *if* sexual harassment was to occur (e.g. Terpstra and Baker, 1989).

We hypothesized that two organization variables would influence a woman's decision to formally report experiencing sexual harassment, namely perceptions of formal organizational justice and perceptions of interactional organizational justice (Greenberg, 1990, 1994). Formal organizational justice reflects the degree to which the organization is perceived to have fair and just policies for its employees. For the purposes of this study, we were concerned with employees' perceptions of sexual harassment policies. We hypothesized that if women believed that the organization would treat a report of sexual harassment in a fair and just manner, they would be more likely to file a complaint. Interactional justice reflects the perceived fairness of the manner in which the sexual harassment policies and procedures are actually enacted or followed; in other words, the way in which officers of the organization would deal with the formal complaints. We believed that reporting sexual harassment would be more likely if women believed they would be treated fairly and respectfully in the ensuing process. Our hypotheses that formal organizational and interactional justice would be associated with reporting sexual harassment are consistent with Clair *et al.*'s (1993) suggestion that support from the organization would facilitate individual attempts to report sexual harassment. Indirect support also emerges from a study on men (Dekker and Barling, in press), which showed that men were less likely to engage in sexual harassment if they believed that organizational sanctions against sexual harassment would be invoked consistently and rigorously.

In contrast to the predictors of reporting sexual harassment, which are primarily organizational in nature, we expect that two personal factors (assertion and self-esteem) would result in confronting the harasser. Positive assertion reflects the willingness to express positive feelings to another (compliment others, express affection) while negative assertion is the ability to express annoyance or irritation (Gambrill, 1977). We believed that the willingness to engage in negative assertion would influence whether or not a woman confronted her harasser following an incident of sexual harassment. Therefore, it was hypothesized that women who manifested more negative assertion would be more likely to confront their harasser than women who manifested lower

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[1] In this study, we only focused on sexual harassment of females by males. This does not deny that there are other targets of sexual harassment, e.g. female on male sexual harassment. However, our research shows that sexual harassment by males on females is far more common, and equally importantly, that the consequences of sexual harassment differ significantly for males and females (Barling *et al.*,1996).

negative assertiveness. Second, we predicted that self-esteem would be associated with the decision to confront the harasser. Women who thought highly of themselves, who had a strong sense of self-worth and were less concerned with maintaining traditional sex-role stereotypes would be more willing to go beyond conventional sex-role boundaries and confront their harasser.

We will also investigate the predictors of both confronting the harasser *and* reporting the harassment. Consistent with our suggestions regarding the prediction of either confronting or reporting, we anticipate that women who chose to engage in both these actions following sexual harassment will manifest higher levels of assertion and self-esteem and more favorable perceptions or organizational justice.

Lastly, it is possible that job tenure is associated with the decision to confront and/or report sexual harassment. The reason for this is that exposure to job conditions provides an indirect source of information to job holders about the organizations' attitude toward, and tolerance of, sexual harassment. For this reason, the potential role of job tenure will be addressed.

Method

Respondents

Eight hundred and two women from seven different Canadian organizations (three military bases ($n = 326$), one penitentiary ($n = 318$), one hospital ($n = 52$), one manufacturing plant ($n = 98$) and a real estate agency ($n = 8$)) participated in the research. Their mean age was 38 years ($S.D. = 8.70$) and the mean number of years of education was 14 ($S.D. = 2.50$). Of the 802 women, 142 (17.7 per cent) stated they had been sexually harassed at work at some prior time. The mean age of these 142 respondents was 36 years ($S.D. = 7.60$) and the mean number of years of education was 14 years ($S.D. = 2.90$).

Measures

First, we had to ascertain whether the respondents had been exposed to sexual harassment, and used a single item ('Have you ever been sexually harassed at work', yes or no) for this purpose. Respondents who answered in the affirmative were then asked: 'What did you do in response to the incident? Did you take any action such as: reporting the incident or confronting the perpetrator?' Four alternatives were offered: did nothing, confronted the harasser, reported the harasser, both confronted and reported the harasser.

Descriptive statistics, internal consistencies and intercorrelations of all continuous variables appear in Table 1. In all cases, scale scores were summed and divided by the number of items in the scale for comparative purposes.

Moorman's (1991) 8-item organizational justice scale measures an individual's perception of the degree to which fair and just procedures (in this instance, those concerning sexual harassment) are used in the organization. Although no items were altered, the initial question was changed to read 'If someone laid a sexual harassment complaint, your organization would ...' (e.g. 'follow standards or policies so that decisions could be made consistently', 'ensure your privacy is protected'). Moorman's (1991) 7-item interactional justice scale was also modified for

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, intercorrelations and reliabilities for continuous variables

	M	S.D.	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	α	M	S.D.	t
1. Age (years)	35.63	7.63			0.42*	0.07	0.06	−0.17*	0.07		38.61	8.89	4.02*
2. Job tenure (years)	4.42	3.83		0.40*		0.11*	0.05	−0.07	0.11*		9.20	6.81	0.86
3. Formal justice	4.99	1.50	0.92	0.18†	0.07		0.38*	−0.03	0.11*	0.95	5.61	1.22	4.62*
4. Interaction justice	4.79	1.76	0.95	0.10	0.15	0.52*		−0.01	0.14*	0.95	5.90	1.24	7.14*
5. Assertion	3.94	0.70	0.79	0.07	−0.12	0.01	−0.10		0.46*	0.84	3.76	0.79	2.71*
6. Self-esteem	3.52	0.50	0.86	0.24*	0.05	0.08	−0.07	0.39*		0.86	3.54	0.48	0.34

* $p < 0.01$.
† $p < 0.05$.

the current research to focus on the perceived fairness of the way in which supervisors would enact formal procedures. Like the formal organizational justice scale, the items used were the same as Moorman's (1991) but the initial statement read 'If you were to speak to your supervisor about a sexual harassment complaint, your supervisor would . . .' (e.g. 'treat you with kindness and consideration', 'treat your concerns confidentially'). The response categories for both perceived justice scales ranged from 'strongly agree' (1) to 'strongly disagree' (7).

We used the 19-item shortened version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973); all 19 items correlate significantly with at least one of the set external criteria of boldness, outspokenness, assertiveness, aggressiveness and confidence (e.g. 'When the food served at a restaurant is not served to my satisfaction, I complain about it to the waiter or waitress'). In the present study, the concern was to emphasize *negative* assertion which would be most consistent with confronting someone after a sexually harassing incident, which makes the RAS the most appropriate assertiveness questionnaire (Furnham & Henderson, 1983). The response category ranged from 7 (very characteristic of me, extremely descriptive) to 0 (very uncharacteristic of me, extremely nondescriptive). We chose the widely-used 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) as our measure of self-esteem. Items reflect respondent's opinions of themselves ('I feel that I have a number of good qualities') and are scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 'almost always' to 'never'.

Results

Before computing any analyses, the role of job tenure was assessed. There were no significant correlations between job tenure and any of the predictor variables (see Table 1), and job tenure did not differ across the four groups ($F = 0.23$, $df = 3, 138$, $p > 0.05$). Consequently, job tenure was not included in any further analyses.

To analyze the relationship between the organizational and personal variables and the decision to report or confront sexual harassment, we first computed a multivariate analysis of variance because of significant correlations between some of the independent variables (see Table 1). A significant MANOVA effect was obtained (Pillai's $F(12, 408) = 1.86$, $p < 0.05$), justifying computation of separate univariate ANOVAs. As can be seen from Table 2, perceived formal justice and assertiveness were both associated with taking some form of action; perceived interactional justice and self-concept were not.

Table 2. Results of the four separate one-way analyses of variance

	Do nothing		Report		Confront		Report and confront		F
	M	$S.D.$	M	$S.D.$	M	$S.D.$	M	$S.D.$	
Formal justice	5.16	1.12	4.32	2.08	5.29	1.38	4.37	1.72	2.79*
Interactional justice	4.71	1.57	4.70	2.08	5.15	1.70	4.35	1.94	1.35
Assertiveness	3.71	0.67	3.92	0.74	4.05	0.67	4.15	0.72	3.04*
Self-esteem	3.41	0.54	3.61	0.40	3.60	0.41	3.53	0.62	1.41

*$p < 0.05$.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to predict women's decisions to report sexual harassment, and/or confront their harassers. Some support emerged for our hypotheses that organizational factors would predict the decision to report sexual harassment to formal authorities, while personal variables would lead women to confront harassers. Specifically, perceptions of the justness of the organizations' policies concerning sexual harassment were associated with decisions to report sexual harassment. However, the direction of this relationship was opposite of that predicted: women who reported sexual harassment through formal organizational channels manifested poorer perceptions of organizational justice than women who chose to do nothing or to confront the harasser. Perhaps the most plausible explanation for this finding can be inferred once the postdictive nature of the data is emphasized, i.e. measures of the perception of organizational justice were taken *after* the response to the harassment had occurred. Thus, women who reported an incident of sexual harassment probably perceived the resulting process negatively.

Our initial hypothesis that personal factors would predict the decision to confront the harasser was partially supported. There was a significant linear association between confronting the harasser and assertiveness. Although the magnitude of this relationship was modest, it is possible that the general nature of the assertion variable might partially account for this. Future studies might investigate the relationship between confronting the harasser and self-reported negative assertion relating to sexual harassment. Likewise, it is possible that self-esteem is too general: for example, studies show that specific self-efficacy beliefs do predict non-traditional behavioral choices by women (e.g. Nevill and Schlecker, 1988), and future research should assess whether self-efficacy beliefs predict the decision to confront the harasser.

From an organizational perspective, the findings of this study are optimistic. Two relationships emerged upon which organizations can exert an impact. First, organizations choose not only whether to institute sexual harassment policies, but also choose whether to invoke the policy seriously or not. Given other findings showing that men will be significantly less likely to engage in sexual harassment if they perceive an organization to have serious policies and substantial sanctions against sexual harassment (Dekker and Barling, in press), the present findings argue strongly for such policies in the workplace. Second, assertiveness was related to action-taking behavior and it is a behavior which can be taught. Further, regardless of the type of action taken, expressing opposition to the harasser should increase the victims's sense of confidence (Payne, 1993).

As with all research, this study had certain limitations. Perhaps the most serious methodological issue centers around the fact that the data are 'postdictive', i.e. they were collected *after* the harassing incident had already occurred. Future research should replicate these findings in a predictive sense using longitudinal data. Second, all the data were based on self-reports. However, while self-report data can place some limitations on the interpretation of the findings (Spector, 1994), it is doubtful whether the same research question could be asked while avoiding the use of self-reports. Third, we asked respondents directly whether they had been sexually harassed in the past. This may have served to limit the number of women who report having been harassed, as many women only identify the most extreme behaviors as sexual harassment (Barak, *et al.*, 1992; Jaschik and Fretz, 1992). For the purposes of the current study, however, it was critical that the respondent perceive themselves as having been harassed: presumably they could only confront or report the harasser if they perceived harassment to have occurred. Still, it is clear that there are wide variations on the operationalization of sexual harassment that will affect self-reports of experiencing harassment. For example, we may have obtained fewer self-reports of

experiencing harassment in this study had we limited the time period to the past year, or had we listed the most severe forms of sexual harassment and excluded gender harassment. Just how this might affect the results obtained remains an empirical issue.

In conclusion, this study revealed two variables (perceived organizational justice, and assertiveness) that predict the constructive action women might take after experiencing sexual harassment. These results are optimistic in the sense that organizations exert control over the nature of the policies that are in place and the way in which they are enacted. In addition, assertiveness training could be offered, perhaps sponsored by the organization. However, we emphasize that the results of this study should not be misconstrued to mean that the onus for stopping workplace sexual harassment lies with women alone. Reporting workplace sexual harassment, or confronting the harasser is only one option available. Systemic changes in the organization, such as instituting meaningful policies and then enacting significant sanctions against sexual harassment are within the control of the organization, are more preventative, and decrease the likelihood that sexual harassment will occur (Dekker and Barling, in press).

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