

The Impact of Workgroup Composition and Other Work Unit/Victim Characteristics on Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

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Data from two major surveys indicated that patterns of sexual harassment differed across two aspects of work group composition: females in traditional male jobs and females in male-dominated work units. Specifically, in examining responses from more than 14,000 females the study found that female gender pioneers and females in male dominated work units may be more susceptible to sexual harassment than females who are not in those situations. Further, the results indicated that victim race and marital status, work unit size and work space privacy provided significant interaction with workgroup composition in explaining differences in incidents of sexual harassment. The results provide support for the "contact hypothesis" explanatory model of sexual harassment, suggesting that the greater the degree of contact females have with males in the work environment, the greater the likelihood of being sexually harassed.

Several explanatory models of sexual harassment have been advanced during the past decade (Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). These models focus primarily on power differences between the harasser and the victim or on the male/female ratio of the victim's work unit. This concern with the causes of sexual harassment has added to the rapidly growing body of sexual harassment literature with both scholarly and legal emphases. The interest in sexual harassment has been heightened by the lack of consistency in the interpretation of the definition and dimensions of the phenomenon.

The present research concentrates on the sexual harassment phenomenon associated with the composition of the workgroup. While sexual harassment can occur in any environment, this study specifically examines situations which have female gender pioneers (female workers who are the first of their sex in their job type) and females in male-dominated work units. The investigation also includes an examination of several additional individual/group attributes (e.g., victim race, workgroup size) which may be contributing factors to the extent of sexual harassment encountered by females already in a minority position with regard to the sex role orientation of their work unit.

Operational Definitions

Although sexual harassment can occur in various environments, it is generally defined as undesired sexually oriented behavior in the workplace (Coles, 1986). Three basic approaches have been taken to further develop the meaning of sexual harassment. First, the legal environment has classified sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination. Some researchers have looked at sexual harassment in the context of attribution or cause for the behavior. As a result, sexual harassment has been further classified into gender harassment caused by something visual, such as appearance, and social-sexual behavior, caused by something perceived about the victim. Further explanation of these three approaches are given in the next few paragraphs.

Legal Definition: The United States Supreme Court defined sexual harassment as a form of discrimination in Section 703 of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and, as such, complaints of this nature fall under the jurisdiction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). From the first case litigated under Title VII, *Barnes v. Train* (1974) to the more recent ruling of *Nelson v. Reisher* (1989), the courts have lacked consistency in their handling of sexual harassment in those cases where there is no direct link to concrete job-related consequences, for example, discharge or demotion (Attanasio, 1982; Baxter, 1982; Terpstra & Baker, 1988; Woerner & Oswald, 1990).

Gender Harassment: Gender Harassment is defined as generalized sexist remarks and behaviors that are not necessarily designed to elicit sexual cooperation. Such remarks are intended to convey insulting,

degrading, or sexist attitudes (Till, 1980). The attribution of such harassment is often based purely on gender rather than any noticeable attire or mannerism. The vast majority of cases of gender harassment have been reported with female victims; however, males are not precluded from harassment. Review of published arbitration cases indicates only one case involving a female disciplined for harassing a male co-worker (Nowlin, 1988).

Social-Sexual Behavior: Social-sexual behavior is any non-work-related behavior having a sexual component, including aspects such as off-color remarks, pressure for dates, and flirting. It is broadly defined to include sexualization of the work environment, direct nonharassing behavior, and direct harassing behavior. Sexualization of the work environment is described as off-color jokes, comments, or general ambience which creates a hostile or offensive environment. Direct non-harassing behavior is defined as making sexual comments intended to be taken as complimentary, attempts to initiate dating, flirting, presenting sexually oriented jokes or cartoons, and whistling. Direct harassing behavior includes sexual propositions, touching, grabbing, and brushing (Schneider 1984; Sheppard, 1989). In cases other than direct harassment, the intent of the harassment is left to the perception of the victim.

As noted, sexual harassment is generally defined as "deliberate" actions or "perceived" actions. The definition provided by the United States Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB) (1988) and adopted for this study states that sexual harassment is "employee perceptions of different forms of uninvited sexual attention" (p. 9). As such, the specific research hypotheses investigated in this study focus on the social-sexual behaviors as perceived by females in workgroups which have either female gender pioneers or females in male-dominated work environments. As previously noted, female gender pioneers are defined as female workers who are the first of their sex in their type of job. The definition of a male-dominated work environment is less clear-cut. Gutek and Morasch (1982) suggest that male-dominated is any work environment with less than 15 percent female workers. For the purpose of this study, the definition of male-dominated will coincide with the definition adopted by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB, 1988), which is any environment where the majority of the workers are male.

Theoretical Framework

Because there is no widely accepted framework for examining sexual harassment or other social-sexual behaviors in the work environment, the present research is best explained in the context of the "contact hypothesis" recently proposed by Gutek *et al.* (1990). The contact hypothesis suggests that "reports of sexual harassment, non-harassing sexual behavior, and the sexualization of a work environment are associated with the amount of contact individuals have with members of the other gender at work" (p. 560). The model is rooted in both the sociology and social psychology literature. Early works by Rubin (1973) and Zajonc (1968) suggest that increased contact leads to increased liking. Later findings of Blau, Blum, and Schwartz (1982) supported this theory in regard to ethnic heterogeneity and the probability of intermarriages between ethnic groups. Finally, a study by Sampson (1984) found that intergroup victimization increased with higher degrees of race and age heterogeneity. Gutek's contact hypothesis argues that the greater the degree of contact a female has with a male, for example, the more likely she is to be propositioned by the male and the more likely she will report acts of sexual harassments (again, this does not preclude males from being harassment victims). The contact hypothesis would suggest that female gender pioneers and females in male-dominated work groups would report more occurrences of sexual harassment.

The general proposition that drives this research study is that patterns of sexual harassment differ as a function of work group composition. Two primary hypotheses will be evaluated:

Hypothesis 1. Female gender pioneers are more likely to be harassed and will report a greater extent of sexual harassment than will females who are not gender pioneers.

Hypothesis 2. Females in male-dominated work groups are more likely to be harassed and will report a greater extent of sexual harassment than will females in more heterogeneous work groups.

Adding to the contact hypothesis in further explaining sexual harassment is the recognition that differences in status or power will also have an impact on harassment incidents (Tangri *et al.*, 1982). The contact hypothesis model and power differential model suggest that a number of variables may contribute to the pattern of social-sexual behaviors among

both female gender pioneers and females in male-dominated work units. Any characteristic of the work setting which potentially contributes to a more sexualized work environment (e.g., a remote work location) would likely result in a greater probability of harassment for the gender pioneer or the female in a male-dominated work group. Additionally, any individual characteristics which places these harassment-susceptible females in an even less powerful position (e.g, race) would also result in a greater probability of harassment.

Given this theoretical support and past evidence that a number of personal and work situation characteristics have been related to sexual harassment incidents (Fain and Anderson, 1987; Tangri et al., 1982; Niebuhr and Boyles, 1991) four additional hypotheses, which focus on the interaction between workgroup composition and individual or workgroup characteristics, will be examined:

Hypothesis 3. Minority female gender pioneers and non-married female gender pioneers will, in general, report a greater extent of sexual harassment than will non-minority or married females in these same disadvantaged situations.

Hypothesis 4. Minority females or non-married females in male-dominated work units will, in general, report a greater extent of sexual harassment than will non-minority or married females in these same disadvantaged situations.

Hypothesis 5. Female gender pioneers are more likely to be harassed if they are in potentially more sexualized work situations, (e.g, overseas location, large work units, and/or private work areas, than if they are not in these situations.)

Hypothesis 6. Females in male-dominated work units are more likely to be harassed if they are in potentially more sexualized work situations, (e.g., overseas location, large work units, and/or private work areas, than if they are not in these situations.)

RESEARCH METHOD

The data for this study was obtained from two major surveys: the 1987 U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board Survey of Federal Employees

(USMSPB, 1988) and the 1988 Department of Defense (DoD) Survey of Sex Roles in the Active- Duty Military (Martindale, 1990). The Federal employees and U.S. military personnel were located throughout the world, but were strongly influenced by U.S. norms and culture. The survey questionnaires included items relating to (1) general questions about sexual harassment, (2) questions about the respondents' experiences of uninvited and unwanted sexual attention, and (3) several demographic items, such as age, marital status, and items related to the work unit. Both surveys had response rates of more than 60 percent and the 4,385 females from the MSPB database and the 9,497 females from the DoD database were used for this study. Only females were chosen for this particular investigation dealing with the influence of opposite-gender dynamics of workgroup composition since 30% of the perceived sexual harassment of males in the DoD survey came from other males. Only 1% of the harassment of females came from other females, thus allowing the focus on opposite-gender influences in group composition (i.e. female gender pioneers and females in male-dominate work units). The average age of the respondents in the DoD survey was 27 and 62% were from a non-white racial/ethnic group. (These demographics were not available from the MSPB database, the two surveys not being exactly identical).

The items that focused on each respondent's experiences with uninvited and unwanted sexual attention dealt with the frequency of behaviors in a number of areas:

- (1) actual or attempted rape or sexual assault
- (2) pressure for sexual favors
- (3) deliberate touching
- (4) sexual looks or gestures
- (5) sexual letters or calls
- (6) pressure for dates
- (7) sexual teasing or remarks
- (8) whistles or hoots (not in MSPB survey)
- (9) pressure for participation in sexual activities (not in MSPB survey)
- (10) other evidences of sexual attention (not in MSPB survey)

Respondents reported on the frequency of each of these events over the most recent two year period for the MSPB survey and over a one year period for the DoD survey. The response set varied as follows: (1) never, (2) once, (3) once a month or less, (4) 2-4 times a month, or (5) once a

week or more. The sum of these responses over the harassment categories provided the dependent measure of sexual harassment for this study. The other study variables (gender pioneer status, male/female group composition, race, marital status, work location, work unit size, and workspace privacy) were obtained from responses to single items in the demographic section of the surveys.

Analysis

To test the hypotheses postulated, appropriate statistical tests were performed on the databases. While the primary dependent variable was computed in a manner to provide a continuous variable, the nominal and categorical nature of much of the rest of the data resulted in focusing on the differences in the pattern of sexual harassment among the respondents. To determine if any particular study group (e.g., a racial/ethnic group) was over- (or under-) represented in the pattern of responses, a chi-square analysis was performed to compare the differences between the observed and expected frequencies for this study group. Other analyses (t-tests, analysis of variance) were conducted where the nature of the data and the hypotheses indicated their appropriateness.

RESULTS

The hypotheses in this study focused on whether group composition would affect the likelihood of occurrence of sexual harassment of females as well as the frequency of sexual harassment when it did occur. The DoD survey asked for responses regarding gender pioneer status and male/female composition from only those individuals who indicated that they had been sexually harassed in the last year. Consequently, Table 1 provides an analysis of these two parameters for both harassed and non-harassed females from only the MSPB database. The chi-square statistics and an examination of the percentage breakdown among the subgroups provide support for hypotheses 1 and 2 by indicating that the gender pioneers and females in male-dominated workgroups were over-represented in the pattern of responses of harassed females (51.7% and 50.1%, respectively, versus 43.1% for the entire sample).

Table 2 presents the analysis of variance (ANOVA) results from both databases with gender pioneer status as the independent variable for females who indicated they had been sexually harassed. The overall

Table 1**Percentage of Women Claiming Harassment**

Variable	% Harrassed	X ²
Gender Pioneer Status		26.3*
Pioneer	51.7	
Not a Pioneer	41.4	
Male/Female Composition		66.4*
Mostly Male	50.1	
Equal	39.8	
Mostly Female	36.7	
All Subjects	43.1	

* $p < .001$

ANOVA for the combined sexual harassment measure indicated that gender pioneer status is a statistically significant explanatory factor in predicting the extent of sexual harassment for both sample populations examined. For the MSPB database, gender pioneer status was also a significant factor for each of the seven harassment types. The results from the DoD database indicated that gender pioneer status was a factor in five of the ten harassment types.

Table 3 provides ANOVA results similar to Table 2 except that the independent variable is the male/female composition of the workgroup. The results do suggest an impact of group gender composition on sexual harassment incidents, both databases indicating significant influences on the combined measure of perceived sexual harassment. For the MSPB database, group gender composition was a significant factor in six of the seven harassment types; with the DoD database, it was a significant factor in nine of the ten types.

Table 2

Degree of Sexual Harassment Means by Gender Pioneer Status

Type of Harassment	MSPB Database			DoD Database		
	Pioneer	Not a Pioneer	F	Pioneer	Not a Pioneer	F
Rape/Assault	1.03	1.01	16.3***	.10	.07	7.6**
Sexual Pressure	1.21	1.13	12.2***	.41	.41	.0
Touching	1.67	1.43	38.9***	1.44	1.36	2.9
Sexual looks	1.77	1.57	19.5***	1.95	1.84	4.2*
Letters/Calls	1.24	1.15	15.6***	.55	.42	13.6***
Pressure for Dates	1.35	1.22	19.4***	.99	.96	.3
Teasing/Remarks	2.09	1.73	50.3***	2.55	2.31	26.3***
Whistles/Hoots	NA	NA	NA	1.71	1.57	7.6**
Sexual Activities	NA	NA	NA	.22	.18	3.3
Other	NA	NA	NA	1.11	.89	2.4
Combined	8.63	7.76	40.9***	8.97	8.15	16.2***

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 3**Degree of Sexual Harassment Means by Male/Female Composition**

MSPB Database

Type of Harassment	Mostly Male	Equal	Mostly Female	F
Rape/Assault	1.02	1.01	1.01	2.2
Sexual Pressure	1.19	1.10	1.10	13.5***
Touching	1.62	1.38	1.35	39.5***
Sexual looks	1.76	1.50	1.47	32.6***
Letters/Calls	1.21	1.13	1.11	15.2***
Pressure for Dates	1.33	1.18	1.17	25.5***
Teasing/Remarks	2.00	1.65	1.62	48.1***
Whistles/Hoots	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sexual Activities	NA	NA	NA	NA
Other	NA	NA	NA	NA
Combined	8.47	7.52	7.45	48.5***

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 3 (continued)**Degree of Sexual Harassment Means by Male/Female Composition**

Type of Harassment	DoD Database			F
	Mostly Male	Equal	Mostly Female	
Rape/Assault	.09	.05	.06	4.8*
Sexual Pressure	.44	.32	.25	10.5***
Touching	1.40	1.27	1.33	3.0*
Sexual looks	1.92	1.70	1.69	10.1***
Letters/Calls	.47	.43	.43	.6
Pressure for Dates	1.03	.87	.75	10.7***
Teasing/Remarks	2.46	2.04	2.04	43.3***
Whistles/Hoots	1.67	1.37	1.45	14.3***
Sexual Activities	.20	.14	.14	3.1*
Other	1.00	.83	.53	3.1*
Combined	8.47	7.11	7.24	32.2***

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

In addressing the hypotheses that interactions exist between individual or work situation characteristics and being a female gender pioneer or a female in a male-dominated work unit, cross-tabulation analysis of the DoD database was performed for those females indicating that they had experienced sexual harassment at some time in their career (the MSPB database did not contain these individual/work situation variables). Table 4 provides a summary of these results.

Table 4

Interactions with Personal/Work Variables for Sexually Harassed Females

Variable	Gender		X ²	Male		X ²
	Pioneers %	All %		Dominated %	All %	
Victim Race			4.7*			18.2***
White	45.7	42.9		42.9	41.7	
Non-White	54.3	57.1		57.1	58.3	
Marital Status			.0			9.8**
Married	32.0	32.1		30.6	31.7	
Not Married	68.0	67.9		69.4	68.3	
Work Location			.0			4.2
U.S.	74.0	74.7		74.8	75.1	
Non U.S.	25.2	25.3		25.2	24.9	
Work Unit Size			4.8			22.1***
Small	27.8	30.4		29.8	31.3	
Medium	56.1	54.7		54.7	53.9	
Large	16.0	14.9		15.5	14.8	
Work Space Privacy			49.3***			4.7
Private	17.7	12.3		11.6	12.0	
Semi-Private	24.7	22.4		22.6	22.2	
Open	57.5	65.2		65.9	65.8	

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001

Of the eight interactions examined, five were significant at the .05 level or better:

- Victim race and gender pioneer status
- Work space privacy and gender pioneer status
- Victim race and male/female group composition
- Victim marital status and male/female group composition
- Work unit size and male/female group composition

An examination of the cell percentages across categories in Table 4 indicates that the patterns for victim race were in the opposite direction than predicted. For harassed gender pioneers and females in male-dominated groups a greater percentage were white than expected of the total harassed female sample.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results obtained in this study support the hypothesis that patterns of sexual harassment differ as a function of work group composition (female gender pioneer status and male/female group composition). The data also suggest that these work group composition variables interact with additional individual characteristics and work situation characteristics, specifically, victim race, victim marital status, work unit size, and work space privacy, to provide a differential pattern of harassment among the various sub-categories. The findings in this study provide support for the contact hypothesis (Gutek *et al.*, 1990) which bases frequency of sexual harassment on the amount of contact with the opposite gender.

The interaction found between work unit size and group composition provides additional support for the contact hypothesis since females in large male-dominated work units were a higher percentage of the sexually harassed females than would have been expected. The larger work unit provides an opportunity for contact with more males, some of whom may have the propensity to sexually harass.

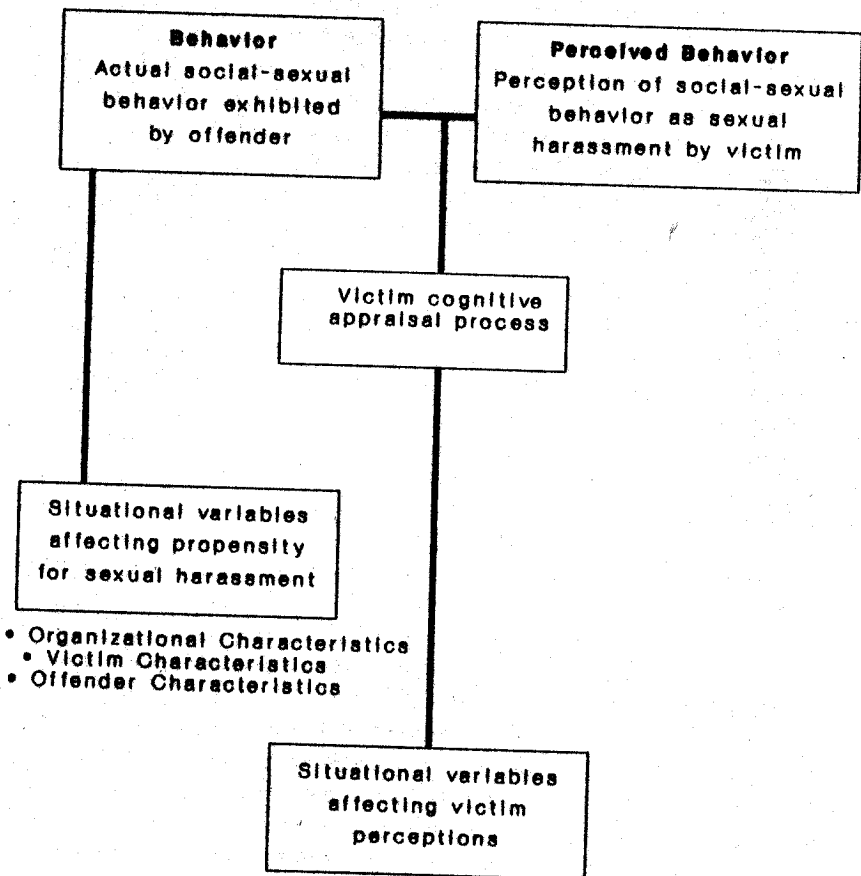
The interaction between female gender pioneer status and work space privacy indicates that a "contact intensity" factor might be an appropriate amendment to the contact hypothesis model since it is likely that open work areas would provide greater contact potential while private areas would result in greater content intensity potential. Private work areas

would also reduce the harasser's perception that the incident might be witnessed by someone else.

The power differential model for harassment received only mixed support from the results of this study. While non-married sexually harassed females were over-represented in the percentage of male-dominated groups (Table 4), marital status did not interact with gender pioneer status. The influence of victim race for harassed individuals was actually in the opposite direction than hypothesized, the analysis revealing that non-white females (assumed to have less power/status than white females) were under-represented relative to expectations for both gender pioneers and male-dominated groups. It could be that power is not adequately represented by race differences or that the organizational setting has attenuated these differences.

Fitzgerald and Hesson-McInnis (1989) presented a two dimensional (severity and type of harassment) structural model to better clarify the concepts dealing with the definition and seriousness of sexual harassment. The results from this study, however, focus more precisely on differential patterns of sexual harassment in the work environment and appear to suggest an attributional model which may include more than just a "power" dimension and a "contact" dimension. For this expanded attribution model, a number of factors need to be considered to derive a more complete explanation for sexual harassing behavior. In addition to the power and contact dimensions, other factors might include victim attractiveness, harasser characteristics, and perceptions of organizational policies (e.g. past enforcement and disciplinary practices), and even legal remedies. The recent passing of new civil rights legislation resulted in a 71% increase in EEO sexual harassment charges in the first quarter the law became active (*Wall Street Journal*, 1992). Figure 1 provides an extension of an earlier model of sexual harassment perceptions developed by Terpstra and Baker (1986). The model recognizes that a female's perception of sexual harassment is dependent on her cognitive appraisal of an offender's social-sexual behavior (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Even though females may find this social-sexual behavior as offensive and demeaning they frequently do not label the behavior as sexual harassment (Jaschik & Fretz, 1991). Fitzgerald (1990) has suggested that this gap between the objective social-sexual incidents and the labeling of events as sexual harassment may be a function of the severity dimension, that is, the greater the severity of the behavior, the greater the tendency to perceive and label the incident as sexual harassment.

Figure 1. The Process of Sexual Harassment



The study reported here focused on the influence of several situational variables (group and victim characteristics) on the victim's perceptions of sexual harassment. Figure 1 recognizes that these variables (as well as offender characteristics) are part of the construct that affects the probability that a social-sexual incident will occur in the work environment. A range of causal variables in this construct from personal attractiveness (Ellis, Barak, & Pinto, 1991) to victim-offender relationships (Jones, Remland, & Brunner, 1987) to organizational policies and culture (Hotelling, 1991; Howard, 1991) will contribute to the likelihood that these events will occur. Databases with sufficient sample size and a breadth of attributional variables are needed to more precisely evaluate the individual and combined importance of these parameters.

While there has been some concern with the attribution of motives by both offenders and victims (Pryor, 1988), it appears that an explanatory model of sexual harassment which combines a number of the dimensions discussed above would help explain the differential pattern of harassment that exists across society. This approach would not only clarify the understanding of the sexual harassment phenomenon but would also provide practical guidance for organizations regarding the monitoring and prevention of sexual harassment in their environments.

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