

Theoretical Orientation to Sexual Harassment at Work Place

Noopura Sundaresh- Research scholar, Department of Social work, Christ University, Bangalore

Dr K Hemalatha- Associate Professor, Department of social work, Christ University, Bangalore.

ABSTRACT

To understand the complexity of sexual harassment it requires more complex models but the general problem in the models of sexual harassment in the literature today is their over simplicity. The research paper examines three existing models of sexual harassment from the literature- the psychological model, the organizational model, and the socio-cultural model. From the psychological models, the author examines the impact that "attitudes towards women" has upon the presence of sexual harassment; from the organizational model, "power distance" has been examined; and, from the socio-cultural model, "gender based role expectations" has been examined. The research paper throws light on the fact that sexual harassment cannot be understood from the perspective of a single model or predictor but it is always a combination of different factors or predictors which lead to sexual harassment at work place.

Key words- workplace sexual harassment, models of sexual harassment, predictors of sexual harassment.

Introduction

In the past several years, sexual harassment has received increasing attention from researchers and organizations. Considerable data have accumulated confirming that harassment is widespread in both the public (Culbertson, Rosenfeld, Booth-Kewley, & Magnusson, 1992; Martindale, 1990; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1987, Fitzgerald et al, 1997) and the private sector (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gutek, 1985; Saunders, 1992) and that it has significant consequences for employee health and psychological well-being (Fitzgerald, 1993; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997). Specific job-related consequences include decreased satisfaction (Gruber, 1992; Morrow, McElroy, & Phillips 1994; Schneider & Swan, 1994); self-reported decrements in job performance (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1987); job loss; and career interruption (Coles, 1986; Gutek, 1985; Livingston, 1982, Fitzgerald et al, 1997). Despite an abundance of data, little agreement exists concerning the causes of sexual harassment, and no coherent theory has been developed concerning factors that may exacerbate or moderate its consequences (Fitzgerald et al, 1997).

During the last decade some progress has been made in the development of theories of sexual harassment and with the passage of time these theories have become increasingly diverse, complex, and sophisticated. As the social sciences become increasingly sophisticated about the inadequacy of single and sovereign theories about any realm of social behaviour, it is perhaps inevitable that a comprehensive theory of sexual harassment will require incorporating factors operating at several levels of social life (Kamal

1998). In some cases the same explanatory construct appears at several levels of analysis, the prime example being "power" which operates at cultural, organizational, and individual levels. The researchers suggest that no single explanation covers the full range of phenomena labelled sexual harassment Brewer & Berk, 1982; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). None of the literature has demonstrated that any one "cause" is both necessary and sufficient (Kamal 1998). Furthermore, how one defines sexual harassment will, of course, determine how apt a given theory will be. Sexual harassment is usually defined as something that men do to women (Backhouse & Cohen, 1981; Bularzik, 1978; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979; Studd & Gattiker, 1991, Kamal 1998). Definitions that specify the sex of the harasser and of the victim invoke either sociobiological or sociocultural explanations. Furthermore, defining sexual harassment as the abuse of organizational power (Dzeich & Weiner, 1984; Gutek & Morasch, 1982; MacKinnon, 1979; Hughes, 1992; Nieva & Gutek, 1981, Kamal 1998) incorporates causal assumptions into the definition, and excludes theories that would explain "contra-power" harassment. Definitions that include negative consequences for the individual or the organization (Gutek & Koss, 1993) will not produce theories that easily explain females harassing males or contra-power harassment (Kamal, 1998).

Tangri and Hayes (1996) have reviewed the theories about sexual harassment. They observe

that different models of various levels of analysis are organised like the layers of an onion: the "deep structure" or inner most representing species-wide evolutionary behavioural adaptations and other biological processes; the next representing sociocultural norms, values, and institutions; the next representing organizational structures and arrangements; and the outermost layer represents idiosyncratic individual and dyadic characteristics, the most outwardly visible variables(Kamal,1998)

In this paper some organizational characteristics and individual attributes which contribute most prominently to the propensity for sexual harassment to occur will be identified. The primary purpose is to examine the interaction of these variables. The ability to truly understand sexual harassment lies in understanding how different variables interact with one another to produce different types of sexual harassment.

Environmental, Organizational, And Individual Attributes as Predictors Of Sexual Harassment

There are numerous theories and models of sexual harassment in the literature of the 1980's and 1990's. A general criticism of the existing models is their simplicity. They tend to focus on main effects of the factors relating to sexual harassment. That is, they fail to look at how new effects can arise as a result of unique combinations of contributing factors. Complex models which focus on interaction of factors are needed to understand the concept of sexual harassment.

Tangri et M. (1982) described the Natural/Biological model which suggests that sexual behaviour is simply a natural extension of human sexuality. It interprets sexual harassment as natural sexual attraction between people. Its assumptions include a natural, mutual attraction between men and women, a stronger male sex drive, and men in the role of sexual initiators. According to this model, the harassing behaviour is not meant to be offensive or discriminatory, but is merely the result of biological urges. This model does not consider the consequences of sexual harassment on women's mental, physical health, job security and career aspirations. Tangri et al. (1982) suggest that if this model is adequate in explaining sexual harassment, then certain conditions should be the norm- women victims should be similar to their harassers in age, race and other socially relevant characteristics; both parties should be unmarried or eligible as partners; the behaviours exhibited should closely resemble typical 'courtship' behaviours and, of course, the harasser should stop if the woman shows disinterest. Thus this model implies that the

concept of sexual harassment is a mistaken one; the relevant interactions are most appropriately viewed as courtship behaviour. Biologically men has strong physiological urge for sexual activity hence may exert coercive powers towards women, the weaker link, in order to satisfy the sex drive, where as the other version has perspective that, naturally men and women has mutual attraction and likeness hence they both are responsible for sexual acts at workplace. This implies that a person may not have an intention of sexual harassment but still would involve in the act owing to the motivation provided by opposite sex attraction, a natural attribute. (Tangri et al., 1982,Kamal,1998).

Power as a predictor of Sexual Harassment

The organizational model of sexual harassment proposes that the structural and environmental conditions found in the workplace will provide opportunities for harassment or implicitly encourage harassment on the basis of workplace norms, gender bias, and imbedded power relations between men and women(Dekker,Barling,1998).

The organizational model suggests that sexual harassment results from the opportunities presented by power and authority relations which derive from hierarchical structures of organisations. Sexual harassment is seen as an issue of organisational power. Since work organisations are characterised by vertical stratification individuals can use their power and position to extort sexual gratification from their subordinates. This model also explains why women feel less comfortable, receive less professional support and fewer intellectual challenges from male colleagues. Women are viewed by this model as being vulnerable to economic, psychological, social physical consequences of sexual harassment. This model thus relates sexual harassment to aspects of structure of the workplace that provide asymmetrical relations between supervisors and subordinates. Females who have relatively lower position in organizational hierarchy and have a vulnerable career position are most likely to be the victims. On the other hand perpetrators would be the one who are higher in hierarchy chain and not likely to be reported by the victim.(Cleveland et al., 2005, Whaley, 2001)

Formal organizational power is derived from the structure of occupations within the organization (the levels of hierarchy and how they are related vertically and horizontally), who occupies what positions, and who has access to the most important resources of the organization. Women are generally positioned at a disadvantage to men, occupying positions of less formal authority and in

departments that are not central to the mission of the organization (Kanter, 1977, Whaley, 2001).

Power is a factor central to sexual harassment. Power can also be examined here as a dimension or characteristic of an organization's culture. The operationalization of power to be examined here is that of Hofstede's power distance. Hofstede (1991) defined power distance as "...the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept the fact that power is distributed unequally." Whereas Hofstede assessed power distance as a cultural characteristic of a country, the concept has been employed at the organizational level (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994, Whaley, 2001).

The *quid pro quo* form of sexual harassment is most likely to occur in a high power distance organizational culture. *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment is the offer, by one in power, to enter into an exchange of organizational rewards for sexual favors from a subordinate. This type of harassment is likely because the supervisor has all the power and the subordinate is submissive and not likely to report the abuse of that power to anyone of higher authority. The motive for the act would be simple personal gratification. The perpetrator of the harassment is likely to view the behaviour as within his or her power and right and the victim is likely to view the situation as just his or her own personal misfortune (Whaley, 2001).

Attitudes Towards Women as a predictor of Sexual Harassment

Studies abound which find that women and men differ in their perceptions of the extent to which behaviors are sexually harassing (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Reilly et al., 1986; Powell, 1986; Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Gutek et al., 1980). These studies and others have demonstrated that women tend to be more likely to recognize that sexual harassment is a problem and that men have a higher threshold for judging a particular harassing behaviour as sexual harassment. Malovich and Stake (1990), in studying attitudes towards harassment, and Tucker and Whaley (1996), while examining perceptions of harassing behaviours, have suggested that the main effect of gender as a predictor of perceptions of sexual harassment is lost when attitude towards women is controlled. Gender, it is suggested, is just a surrogate measure of gender based attitudes.

Historically cultures and societal norms have developed in a way that males exercise their dominance over women, basically due to physical, economical and political superiority (Tangri et al.,

1982). Socio-cultural theory posits that sexual harassment is only one manifestation of much larger patriarchal system in which men are the dominant group. Therefore sexual harassment is an example of men asserting their personal power based on sex. Sexual harassment is a way for men to express dominance hence are more likely to be perpetrators whereas due to intrinsic physical weakness and submissive behavior, females are the most possible victims (Cleveland et al., 2005). According to this model sex would be a better predictor of both recipient and initiator status than would organisational position. Thus women are much more likely to be victims of sexual harassment.

Gender/Job Match as a predictor of Sexual Harassment

Research has demonstrated that women in traditionally male-dominated careers or blue collar jobs experience more sexual harassment than women in other work settings (Gutek, 1992; Gutek, et al. 1990; Izraeli, 1983; Hagman 1988; Hogbacka et al., 1987, in O'Donohue, 1997). The sex-role spillover model (Gutek & Morasch, 1982) offers one explanation of this phenomena. The spillover theory suggests that men hold role perceptions of women based on their traditional role in our culture. These traditional role expectations include the nurturing role (as mother), the sex-object role, and helper role (as wife). What have been traditionally viewed as women's careers is consistent with these role expectations (Whaley 2001).

When women take jobs outside of these traditional areas to work with and for men there is the potential for the men to perceive the women in their gender role over and above their work role. It's argued that men in traditionally male-dominated careers and with little experience in working with women in these roles, may rely on these inappropriate gender-based role expectations in guiding their

interactions with women. The result of the inappropriate expected role is male behaviour which is likely to be inappropriate and perceived to be sexually harassing (Whaley 2001).

A criticism of the models of sexual harassment mentioned above is their over simplicity, and in large part these models have not considered how different factors may interact with one another to result in different types of sexual harassment and differing levels of severity. Presenting below are models/theories which focus on the interaction of individual, environmental and organisational characteristics predicting sexual harassment.

Person by Situation.

Support for a Person \times Situation interaction was found in the work of Pryor et al. (1993) which showed that men high in the likelihood to sexually harass are more likely to behave in a sexually harassing way toward a woman if they perceived that sexual harassment could occur with no negative consequences. Men who were low on the likelihood to sexually harass were not affected by a model's behavior (Pryor et al., 1993, Dekker, Baring, 1998). Sexually harassing behaviour may be predicted from an analysis of social situation and person factors. The social norms in specific organizational settings may "permit" sexual harassment. Certain individuals may possess proclivities for sexual harassment. When individuals with a proclivity for sexual harassment are placed in social situations that permit or accept this sort of behaviour, the behaviour is most likely to occur. Women are found more likely to experience sexual harassment in workplaces where men perceive the social norms as permitting such behaviour (Pryor et al 1995)

Illinois Model

Organizational climate and job gender ratio have been identified as the two most important antecedents to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997, Fitzgerald et al., 1995, Mcinnis and Fitzgerald, 1997, Willness et al., 2007). According to Fitzgerald et al, the extent of organizational tolerance for sexual harassment is determined by the group behavior at workplace (Fitzgerald et al., 1995) Organizational power structure can also be used to predict the occurrence of sexual harassment at workplace which is not gender specific (Jeanette and Melinda, 1993). The second antecedent variable in the Illinois model of sexual harassment, Job gender context is also discussed in the spillover theory with detail (Gutek and Cohen, 1987, Gutek and Morasch, 1982). It refers to the gender ratio in an organization and measure of gender dominance (masculine or feminine) (Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

The Illinois model posits that the experience of sexual harassment is a workplace stress whose antecedents and outcomes are to be explored with organizational and its environmental context as other organizational stressor (Fitzgerald et al., 1995, Weiner &Hurt, 2000). Organizational stress is a psychological state which occurs when an individual perceive a potential threat of lose something they value because they feel helpless in properly fulfilling work roles or the return on effort may not be as significant as expectations (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004) and would result in negative job attitudes and negative workplace behaviors such as job satisfaction, coworker perceptual support, psychopathological and

physiological outcomes, absenteeism, turnover intentions, anxiety, strain, tardiness, low commitment, depression, burnout, boredom, job performance (Sullivan and Bhagat, 1992).

Organizational internal environment parameters such as permissiveness of the organizational climate (tolerance for sexual harassment), gendered occupations, and organizational ethics, norms and policies affect the likelihood of sexual harassment occurrence but the majority of literature empirically declare organizational climate as the most important predictor of sexual harassment at organizations (Tangri et al., 1982, Pryor et al., 1995, Fitzgerald et al., 1997, Mcinnis and Fitzgerald, 1997). Hulin, Fitzgerald and Drasgow (1997) identified three important aspects of organizational climate i.e potential danger faced by the harassed on complaining, power status of the harassed which disallows any legal and organizational action, and importance given by the organization to the complain.

Four Factor Model

O' Hare and O' Donohue incorporated socio-cultural factors, organizational factors and individual characteristics in relation to the both perpetrator and harasser, propose the four factor theory (O'Hare and O'Donohue, 1998) hypothesizing that four factors are necessary for sexual harassment to take place:

Some motivation force like physical attractiveness of opposite sex, power and control needs; Overcoming internal resistive forces like perceiving sexual harassment as illegal, immoral, hazardous and possible empathy for victim; Overcoming external resistive forces like organizational and environment variables such as organizational procedure for handling sexual harassment complaints, professionalism, gender ratio, privacy at work place and socio cultural variables like sexist attitudes, possible outcomes for the victim; Overcoming the resistance of victim for example emotional stability of the victim, the familiarity with complain procedures, job status and perceived sex role.

The four factors encapsulates organizational and socio cultural theories and individual characteristics making it a comprehensive framework. In order to empirically test the model, O'Hare and O'Donohue administered questionnaires for sexual harassment experience (Fitzgerald et al., 1988), personality traits and characteristics of organizational climate and found significant associations between all these factors and sexual harassment incident.

The Chappell – di Martino model

The model is based on an interaction between individual and organizational factors leading to work place harassment which includes physical, psychological, sexual harassment. The individual characteristics of both the perpetrator and the victim play an important role in the determination of harassment situations.

In most instances of sexual harassment the harasser tends to be male; a colleague or a supervisor. A common characteristic of many harassers is that they tend to read or interpret acts of a friendly nature in a sexual manner, which was not the intention of the individuals they then harass. The victims are usually female; young (20-40 years), single or divorced, lower level education, low self-esteem, high anxiety levels, introverted, conscientious, neurotic and submissive (Di Martino 2003)

Incidents of sexual harassment are more common in male dominated jobs as opposed to gender-balanced or female-dominated jobs; this is particularly the case where women (or men) are employed as the only representative of their sex (European Commission, 1998). However, while women in such an environment may be more conscious about their situation, they are less likely to label their experience as sexual harassment since they may tend to consider their experience 'normal' (Di Martino 2003).

Power differences are likely to affect all forms of psychological violence, although the power may be of a formal nature (such as status) as well as informal (such as experience). Sexual harassment appears to be more likely in organisations where there is a substantial power differential between men and women. This is particularly true for those situations where female employees gradually have improved their position in relation to their male colleagues. In such cases, instances of sexual harassment may be the result of exclusionary behaviour on the part of men (Veale and Gold, 1998). Finally the model identifies the likely impact of all relevant factors and situations on the victim and the enterprise, and assesses the "feedback" of this impact as a regenerator of violence at the workplace (Chappell and di Martino, 1998).

All the above models of sexual harassment which consider how power distance, attitudes towards women, and gender/job match might interact.

The *quid pro quo* form of sexual harassment is most likely to occur in a high power distance organizational culture, when the immediate supervisor and/or male coworkers hold traditional attitudes towards women and the women are in traditionally female careers or jobs. This type of harassment is likely because the supervisor has all the power and the subordinate is submissive to

superiors and not likely to report the abuse of that power to anyone of higher authority. The motive for the act, as stated earlier, is simple sexual gratification. The perpetrator of the *quid pro quo* harassment is likely to view the behaviour as within his power and his right. The victim is likely to view the situation as simply her own personal misfortune, a circumstance she will have to endure (Whaley 2001).

Bargh and Raymond (1995) explain how unintended sexual harassment is the result of an automatic mental link between the harasser's concepts of power and sex. In some men the idea of power is habitually associated with the idea of sex. For these men, the sex act itself is a woman's submission to a man's control and power. When an attractive woman, in deference to a male supervisor's organizational power, behaves submissively, compliantly to his wishes, or politely laughs at his jokes, her behaviours trigger an unconscious sexual schema in the man's attribution of her behaviours. Thus, he perceives her behaviours as being sexually receptive to him and he responds accordingly. The outcome of this phenomenon is that she views herself as a victim of harassment and he sees himself as "led on" by the woman. The harasser acknowledges his behaviour but does not ascribe the same motive to that behaviour as the victim; he perceives his actions as complimentary—she, as threatening.

Pryor and Whalen (1997) argue that when women are the minority of a work group their gender becomes an outstanding identifying characteristic. This magnifies the use of gender based categorizations and can lead to exaggerated and often stereotypical evaluations of the female in a predominately male environment. According to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the recognition of the interpersonal differences can also result in the development of an ingroup-outgroup perspective of the work environment which can result in the devaluation of the outgroup (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1993). The outgroup women are perceived as a threat, either an economic threat in the sense of competition for jobs or promotions, thus taking away from the masculine image of the male ingroup. Either type of threat may result in a gender-based hostility directed towards the female outgroup. In other words, the males are likely to respond with a hostile environment form of sexual harassment which is meant to intimidate the victim and drive her away, thus eliminating the perceived threat.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a serious problem in organizations today. Attempts to effectively cope

with the problem have not achieved the success level desired. To reduce the risks of sexual harassment it is essential to first understand the nature of the problem and its causes. As the whole sexual harassment process becomes more fully understood, strategies for attacking the problem will become more effective. Therefore models which consider interaction of multiple causative factors allow to identify groups with the greater risk and implement preventive action rather than corrective action(Whaley,2001)

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