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Been There, Done That: Experienced Sexual Harassment and Severity Perceptions

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Sexual harassment (SH) remains a pervasive workplace phenomenon (Gutek, 2001; Williams, Giuffre, Dellinger, 1999). Research has investigated factors that influence perceptions of the severity of sexual harassment behaviors. We know that individuals differ in how they perceive the severity of SH behaviors (Birdeau, Somers, Lenihan, & Genie, 2005; Moradi, 2006) and we have some understanding of what underlies these perceived differences. Because the courts use the 'reasonable person' standard to determine what constitutes SH (O'Donohue & Bowers, 2006), a persistent need exists for better understanding the factors that impact severity perceptions.

Research on severity perceptions of SH behaviors first focused on type of SH behavior, and then extended to contextual variables such as gender, frequency, duration, and perpetrator characteristics. Early SH research (e.g., Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Till, 1980) established the notion of a continuum of SH behaviors from least (gender harassment) to most severe (sexual coercion). Further research recognized that females tend to assign higher severity ratings to SH behaviors than do males (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991), and this female-male difference is more pronounced for hostile environment type SH behaviors (Brase & Miller, 2001). Status of the perpetrator relative to that of the target also impacts severity perceptions (Tata, 1993), with SH from a supervisor perceived as more severe than SH from a peer or subordinate. The interaction of pervasiveness (frequency and duration) and type of SH behavior predict subjective appraisal of SH (Langhout, Bergman, Cortina, Fitzgerald, Drasgow, & Williams, 2005). SH from a female perpetrator is perceived as less severe than SH from a male perpetrator, and SH from an attractive perpetrator is perceived as less severe than SH from an unattractive perpetrator (LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999).

This study extends our understanding of severity perceptions by examining how personal experience with SH, both as a target and perpetrator of SH, impacts severity perceptions of the full range of SH behaviors. Because targets of SH report negative outcomes from their SH experiences (e.g., Cortina, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 2002), we expect that individuals who have been targets of SH

will have heightened sensitivity to the potential severity of SH behaviors. Alternatively, because perpetrators of SH fail to show compassion for the targets of their attention, perpetrators are likely to be insensitive to the potential severity of the impact of SH behaviors. Thus, we propose that previous targets of a particular SH behavior will rate the severity of that SH behavior as more severe than those who have not experienced that SH behavior. We also propose that those who perpetrated a particular SH behavior will rate that behavior as less severe than those who have not perpetrated the behavior.

Two samples of survey data were collected for this study. One sample is comprised of university students from 3 different institutions of higher learning, and includes both graduate and undergraduate students, working and full time students. The other sample is comprised of working adults who were employed at the same large company. Subjects were asked to rate the severity of 20 SH behaviors using a Likert scale with a range of 1 to 9. Subjects were also asked whether they had been a target of each SH behavior, and whether they had been a perpetrator of each SH behavior.

Student sample results provided mixed support for the proposed relationships. Contrary to expectations, subjects who had been targets of SH behavior gave lower severity ratings to the behaviors they experienced than did subjects who had not experienced the SH behavior. As expected, perpetrators of SH behaviors gave lower severity ratings to those SH behaviors than did subjects who had not perpetrated the SH behaviors. However, these general trends did not apply to the most severe types of SH (such as rape), for which there was no significant difference in severity ratings between those who did and did not have experience with those behaviors. At the submission of this proposal, additional analyses remain to be completed. Further analyses include working adult and combined sample comparisons, and comparison of working students with working adults, as well as full time students with full time workers.

Results indicate that any experience with a given SH behavior renders one's perceptions of SH behaviors as less severe than those who have no experience with SH, irrespective of whether that experience is as a target or perpetrator of SH. Further research is necessary to understand why either

type of experience with SH impacts severity ratings similarly. Potential implications for SH training and incident resolution will be discussed.

References

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