

After Sexual Harassment: From the Perspective of Interpersonal, Intercultural, and Organizational Communication

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Abstract

Sexual Harassment is one of the most controversial issues we have to deal with in our society. Although it has been highlighted for the past years, it is becoming more complicated than ever, because of the ambiguity of its definition, the increase in the number of women working in organizations, and ethnic diversity in the workplaces. In this paper, therefore, sexual harassment is reexamined from interpersonal, intercultural, and organizational perspectives with focusing on reporting behavior which is a key element to solve this complicated problem. By doing so, we can grasp the actual situation and take effective countermeasures. Much literature on sexual harassment is reviewed and a model to predict reporting behavior is discussed. Then, a new model for reporting behavior is introduced.

[要約]

セクシャル・ハラスメントは、現代社会において最も物議を醸し出している問題のひとつであり、解決しなくてはならない問題であるにもかかわらず、企業や組織は表面上の国際化だけが進み、異なった文化・価値観を持った人が増え、問題は複雑化する一方である。この問題の解決の糸口を探るため、セクシュアル・ハラスメントの定義・調査研究を検証し、潜在している問題について議論する。セクシャル・ハラスメントの本質上、その行為が報告されない限り問題解決はおろか、現状把握さえ出来ない。その点から、この論文では「報告する」という行為を文化という枠組みで分析している。修士Comprehensive Exam.を加筆・修正。

Definition of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is one of the major topics in organizations, and not to mention, it is very controversial. At the very early stage, sexual harassment was defined as “unsolicited, nonreciprocal male behavior that asserts a woman’s sex role over her function as a worker. It can be any or all of the following: staring at, commenting upon, or touching a women’s body; requests for acquiescence in sexual behavior; repeated nonreciprocated propositions for dates; demands for sexual intercourse and rape” (Farley, 1978, pp. 14-15). Although this definition was frequently cited, legal, managerial, and feminist perspectives on sexual harassment differed (Gutek, 1985). For the legal purpose, however, the definition by The US Equal Employment Opportunity Committee is considered most appropriate: Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of

a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment can occur in a variety of circumstances, including but not limited to the following:

- The victim as well as the harasser may be a woman or a man. The victim does not have to be of the opposite sex.
- The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or a non-employee.
- The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct.
- Unlawful sexual harassment may occur without economic injury to or discharge of the victim.
- The harasser's conduct must be unwelcome.

Sexual Harassment Status Quo

As women's opportunities for work increase, sexual harassment has become highlighted. And to make the situation worse, workplaces are increasingly becoming ethnically diverse. Even within one organization, there are many workers from different cultures. The problems such as sexual harassment in workplaces now are more complicated than ever, because people from different cultures may have different sex-role orientations. Some people are highly sensitive to sexual behavior but others are not. It is very important, therefore, to manage sexual harassment and reduce its occurrence in an effective way for the benefit of any firms and organizations as well as of individuals. In order to do so, examining sexual harassment from different perspective, which seems not to have done much so far, is very crucial.

A survey of over 20,000 government workers conducted in 1987 revealed that 42 percent of women and 14 percent of men had been sexually harassed. The same survey of over 13,000 workers conducted in 1994 indicated that 44 percent of women and 19 percent of men had been sexually harassed (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995). This tells us that the rates of harassment remained virtually unchanged, even though the public's level of awareness, if not anxiety, had definitely been raised. Although little research had been done in the academic field on sexual harassment until 1980s, it has become one of the major issues after US MSPB conducted the initial survey in 1981.

In 1981, Driscoll introduced sexual harassment as management's new problem. Tangri, Burt, & Johnson (1982) explored sexual harassment at work by means of three explanatory model. Also, some researchers examined sexual harassment focusing on the phenomenon itself (Bingham & Burleson, 1989; Booth-Butterfield, 1989; Petrocelli & Repa, 1992), others investigated sexual harassment in a performance appraisal interview situation (e.g. Remland & Jones, 1985), Fairhurst (1986) insisted that the study of sexual harassment should significantly contribute to understanding how the problem can be managed. Peters and Van Bronkhost (1982) advocated face-to-face communication as a means for

rebuffing sexual harassment and suggested some potentially effective message strategies. Nichols (1987), Ruiz (1994), and Schwartz (1995) referred to sexual harassment from a linguistic perspective. However, these studies have not yet resulted in a well-defined approach to managing sexual harassment in organizations.

According to the past research, the amounts of sexual harassment vary vastly, ranging from very little to frequent, as well as types of behaviors vary from looks to touching. Bingham and Burleson (1989) offered an interpersonal approach to managing sexual harassment in organizations, and also provided guidelines for developing education and training programs on managing sexual harassment through interpersonal communication. The problem of sexual harassment is, in reality, more deep-rooted. Much research showed that there are significant differences in perception of sexual harassment between male and female. As Pease (1999) indicated in their book that men and women perceive the same world through different eyes, the same incident can be interpreted differently.

It seems clear, however, that if victims want to be free from sexual harassment, some action must be taken. The harasser won't understand what they have done or have been doing, and they are likely to continue the same behavior, unless victims report that they have been sexually harassed. Although it is very difficult to draw a clear boundary between what is considered to be sexual harassment and what is not, we can't grasp the actual situation with which victims are now facing unless they report the experience. Thus, the most critical deterrent is that victims report the experiences of sexual harassment.

It is, nevertheless, difficult for women to reveal their experiences because of several reasons. First, the definition of sexual harassment still remains ambiguous. Second, women are wondering if they will receive negative outcomes such as cutting down wages as a result of reporting. Finally, the most important and the most difficult deterrent for women is that the phenomenon is highly related to the private nature of human beings, so that they can't reveal their experiences with sexual harassment without being highly embarrassed.

Reporting Sexual Harassment

In spite of the incidence of sexual harassment and its negative psychological and vocational effects on organizational members, research has proved that only a few victims report their experiences. For instance, only three percent of their sample had attempted to report sexual harassment experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1988), and only six percent of the survey respondents who had experienced sexually harassing behaviors indicated that they took formal action in response to the harassment (US MSPB, 1994). It may be expected that victims will not report the experience until they consider the incident as being sexually harassed or as serious enough to warrant such action.

In the study of Brooks and Perot (1991), they argued that women should perceive the behavior as highly offensive (perceived offensiveness), and that three independent variables (age, marital status, and feminist ideology), and one situational variable, which is "frequency of behavior" were presumed to directly influence perceived offensiveness. Further, the perceived offensiveness of the

behavior as well as normative expectations for reporting and perceived outcomes of reporting were presumed to have a direct influence on reporting behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Normative expectations are defined as “the perceived social norms or expectations of others for the behavior (i.e., the extent to which others believe the behavior is important). Perceived outcomes are the perceived likelihood of various outcomes of the behavior (see Figure 1).

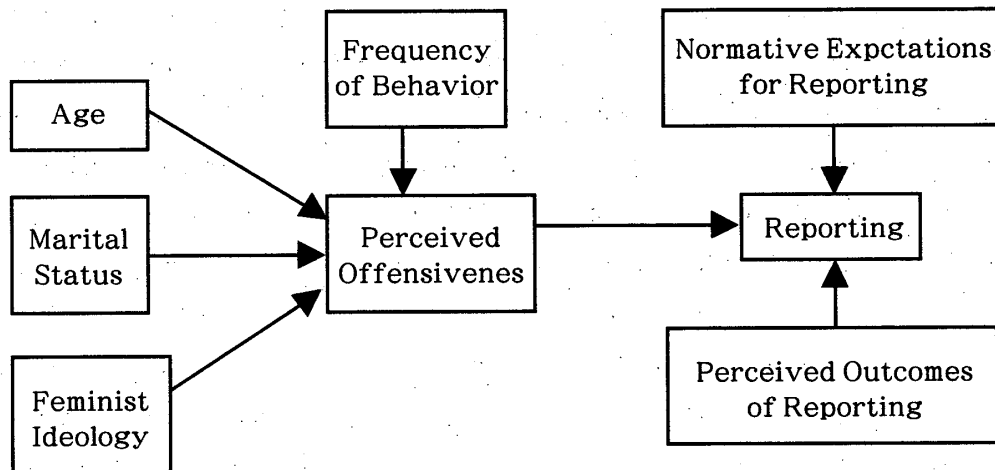


Figure 1. Model to Predict Reporting of Sexual Harassment

Their model is a good illustration on prediction of reporting sexual harassment. However, normative expectations and perceived outcomes are external factors which influence the victim’s reporting behavior. The model above, therefore, fails to consider the internal factor which may have great influence on victim’s reporting behavior. In order to report sexual harassment experiences, victims have to highly disclose themselves. The action of reporting involves revealing of personal secrets which people usually don’t want to let others know. Moreover, it is always highly embarrassing. Much literature on “self-disclosure” revealed that there are significant sex differences and cultural differences in the pattern of self-disclosure. Therefore, “self-disclosure pattern” should be added as an internal dependent variable in the model for better prediction.

“Self-disclosure” is defined as “a type of communication in which information about the self which is normally kept hidden is communicated to another person” (DeVito, 1983; Burnlund, 1989; Klopf, 1996). It is considered as one of the most important forms of communication that helps to facilitate the development of meaningful and authentic interpersonal relationships.

In the field of intercultural communication, many comparative studies on self-disclosure have been conducted. It is assumed that people from different cultures may have better understandings of each other in the process of communication through the knowledge of self-disclosure differences. In terms of cultural differences, Lewin (1948) first investigated the degree of openness to strangers between

Germans and Americans. Burnlund (1975, 1989) found in his study that Japanese people display very different self-disclosure patterns from Americans. Japanese substantially revealed less information than Americans on particular topics such as sexual adequacy, physical appearances, and personal traits.

In terms of sex differences, Jourard and Lasakow (1958) first reported that females disclose more than males. Cline (1986), and Wheelless, Zakahi, and Ahan (1988) also reported that men tend to disclose themselves less often than women in many situations.

As you may see, self-disclosure pattern will play an important part on reporting sexual harassment. It may influence quite differently among people from different cultures. Although self-disclosure, normative expectations, and perceived outcomes may be intercorrelated one another, all three variables are very significant so as to predict reporting sexual harassment experiences.

A new model is proposed simply by adding “self-disclosure pattern” as a factor which may have great influence on reporting (see Figure 2).

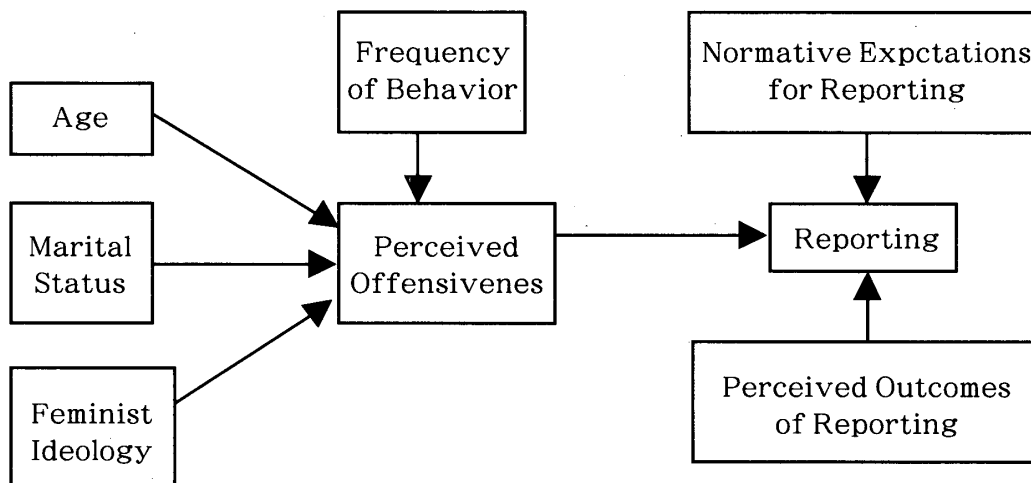


Figure 2. A New Model to Predict Reporting of Sexual Harassment

In sum, the model describes that the perceived offensiveness of the behavior as well as normative expectations for reporting, perceived outcomes of reporting, and self-disclosure pattern are hypothesized to show a direct influence on reporting.

Discussion

Organizations rely much on some type of formal hierarchy of authority, where particular members have legitimate rights over others. These rights include the assignment of work, supervision, and evaluation of job performance. The key feature of the superior-subordinate relationship is that of

status. Since supervisors have higher status by virtue of their position, they have power over subordinates in many respects. As evidence shows, the victims of sexual harassment are frequently female subordinates in organizations, so that the power distance between supervisors and subordinates should be taken into consideration in order for better prediction in the model. The larger the status difference becomes, the lower the number of reporting will be. Because the power distance gives a negative effect on three variables; normative expectation, perceived outcomes, and self-disclosure pattern.

Organizational culture is a good example to perceive the model from an organizational view point. Organizational culture refers to all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of given people. It is a body of common understandings, including action, feeling, values, religious practices, social rituals, and material traits such as dress, food, and equipment. Obviously, organizational culture is a very pervasive phenomenon. It influences almost everything in an organization. For instance, if an organization has a masculine oriented culture, then a "men should be respected" atmosphere would be common in that particular organization. Since all three variables are affected under such a situation, the amount of reporting will decrease as a result. Whereas in an organization which has a feminist ideology in its culture, victims may feel like reporting the experiences that they have been sexually harassed. It is obviously predicted, however, that only a few females would experience sexual harassment in such an organization. Although changing organizational culture may sound very difficult, it would be one of the best ways to reduce the problem of sexual harassment.

Interculturally, even a comparative study on sexual harassment has not been done yet. However, we can compare reporting behavior from the cultural differences known to exist in self-disclosure pattern. Comparing the US to Japan, for instance, the US amount of reporting may be much greater than that of Japan (this doesn't mean that US females may suffer from sexual harassment more than Japanese females). To support this argument, some research on self-disclosure merits mention.

First, according to Nakanishi (1986), Japanese respondents generally considered a low level of self-disclosure as positive, and females are very much likely to feel comfortable in the low disclosure patterns, which is contrary to American's tendency. Gudykunst and Nishida (1984), Burnlund (1989), and Klopff (1996) reported that Americans in general showed much higher levels of self-disclosure than did the Japanese.

Therefore, it is safe to say that Japanese women are much more reluctant to report their experiences with sexual harassment than American women. Even normative expectation and perceived outcome of reporting are lower than those of the US. Followings are the features that affect three variables in the model:

- (1) Japan is a highly masculine society so that males have power over females in the workplace as well as in the society itself
- (2) Japanese women are more likely to feel comfortable in the low-disclosure situation
- (3) Japanese culture is highly collectivistic so that people think much of "harmony" than "conflict"

In conclusion, the subject of sexual harassment in the workplace is proving to be a difficult one to investigate, and findings in this area should be regarded as tentative. Nevertheless, organizations must, at least, reduce sexual harassment, and develop educational programs to increase employees' understanding of sexual harassment situation.

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