ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE, LEADERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY

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ABSTRACT

This analysis explores patterns of response to the harassment experiences that had the greatest effect on the respondents to the "1988 Department of Defense (DoD)Survey of Sex Roles in the Active-Duty Military." We analyze the respondent's perceptions about effectiveness of their responses, and respondents' opinions about the efforts of senior military leadership, and their own immediate supervisor's efforts to "make honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment in the active-duty military" (DoD, 1988). Results indicate that attempts to stop sexual harassment must focus on two efforts simultaneously: lowering actual incidence, and providing a safe organizational environment in which policies to redress incidents can be utilized without fear of negative consequences.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on responses to sexual harassment and perceptions of the effectiveness of those responses. Data are taken from the 1988 Department of Defense (DoD) Survey of Sex Roles. This sample is large enough to identify patterns and effectiveness of responses by type of harassment experienced. We begin with a review of the legal and organizational context of sexual harassment, followed by a discussion of possible responses by those harassed, as well as the perceived effectiveness of those responses. Then the context of the military is assessed to place our findings in a generalizable framework.

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Legal definitions of sexual harassment have been in existence for fifteen years, and most large organizations have policies against sexual harassment in place.[1] In spite of laws and organizational policies, it is evident that sexual harassment in the work place remains commonplace (Firestone, Harris 1994; Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, Ormerod, Weitzman 1988; Harris, Firestone 1997; Martindale 1991). This pervasiveness suggests that present legal and organizational structures are inadequate in controlling harassing behaviors (Hulin, Fitzgerald, Drasgow 1996). This inadequacy is further supported by research which suggests that employees seldom respond to harassment by using established grievance procedures (Bingham, Scherer 1993; Gruber, Bjorn 1986; Hulin et al 1996; Riger 1991).

Most incidents involve male harassers and female targets. This has led to arguments that men and women have different definitions about what actions become defined as intimidating, hostile, or offensive (Saal 1996; Saal, Smalley, Gruver 1993; Thomas 1995), which may contribute to the ineffectiveness (whether real or perceived) of current policies. Sociologist Barbara Gutek (1985) in a survey of 1200 respondents in Los Angeles County, found that 67 percent of the men said they would feel flattered if a colleague of the opposite sex propositioned them, while 63 percent of the women would be offended. Such ambiguities of definition supposedly lead to problems in establishing and implementing effective policies against sexually harassing behaviors because only individuals who define a situation as sexual harassment will report it (Malovich, Stake 1990; Saal et al 1993).

Specific organizational characteristics such as type of technology, worker proximity, sex ratios, availability of grievance procedures, etc. may moderate the extent of harassing behaviors as well as the nature of responses to such behaviors (Gruber, Bjorn 1986; Gutak, Morasch 1982; Hulin et al 1996; Kanter 1977; Martin, Fein 1978). As a result, policies regarding sexual harassment tend to be organization specific.[2] Lack of consistency in policies across organizations could also aggravate enforcement problems, which could in turn reinforce underreporting of incidence. Lack of clear and consistent policies across organizations could contribute to concern about whether the complaint will be taken seriously and confusion about appropriate steps to be taken. Both whether incidents are reported and the type of response initiated by the target impact perceptions about the effectiveness of solutions (Bingham, Scherer 1993; Grauerholz 1989; Livingston 1982; Maypole 1986; U.S. Merit System Protection Board 1988).

POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Responses to sexual harassment can be formal or informal, as well as individual or institutional in form. Most informal responses are individual attempts by the target to confront the harasser, although "off the record" discussions with supervisors are possible. Formal responses typically entail utilizing institutional procedures.

After experiencing harassment, the largest proportion of individuals either attempt to ignore the situation or ask the harasser to stop (Bingham, Scherer 1993; Grauerholz 1989; Gruber, Bjorn 1986; Harris, Firestone 1997; Loy, Stewart 1984; U.S. Merit System Protection Board 1988). Both responses overtly put the burden of ending the behavior on the person being harassed.[3] Perhaps even more importantly, both presuppose a safe environment in which the person being harassed feels comfortable telling the harasser to stop. While it is clear that women typically use individual rather than organizational venues when they respond to sexual harassment in the work place, it is less clear why that is the case.

Other research illustrates how rather than furnishing a safe reporting environment, organizations provide the opportunity structures which perpetuate sexual harassment and inhibit formal responses (Fain, Anderton 1987; Gruber, Bjorn 1986; Kanter 1977). In other words, individuals use their structural positions within an organizational system to compel others to provide sexual gratification. Individuals in a position to compel such behavior may also be in a supervisory role. Under such a scenario the person to whom the incidents are supposed to be reported may be the very perpetrators from whom the women seek relief. Filing a complaint through formal organizational channels may depend on perceptions that the complaint will be taken seriously, and that the prevailing policies will assist in a fair resolution (Hulin et al 1996; Tangri, Burt, Johnson 1982). As the Clarence-Thomas Hearings and the Tailhook scandal clearly illustrate, fear of retaliation discourages formal reporting of incidents (Staples 1994; Zimmerman 1995.)

PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Perceptions about the expected effectiveness of the available strategies may be related to the type of response used by individuals who have been harassed. Research which examined the effectiveness of response strategies indicates that satisfaction with outcome may be related to the severity of the harassment (Hulin et al 1996; Terpstra, Baker 1986); perceptions of organizational tolerance of harassment (Hulin et al 1996); gender (Bingham, Scherer 1993); and type of response used by sexually harassed individuals (Bingham, Scherer 1993; Grauerholz 1989; Livingston 1982; Maypole 1986; U.S. Merit System Protection Board 1988).

According to the Merit Systems survey (1988) the simplest and most effective way to put an end to harassment in most instances is to ask or tell the person to stop. This tactic worked for 61 percent of the women who tried it. Telling or threatening to tell other colleagues proved the second-best response, effective 55 percent of the time. Pretending to ignore the behavior, which was the most common response of the women in the Merit Systems study, usually did not work at all. These findings are consistent with other research indicating that a majority of those harassed believed directly confronting the harasser was either effective or somewhat effective in alleviating the situation (Bingham, Scherer 1993; Grauerholz 1989; Livingston 1982). Both direct confrontations and telling other colleagues require perceptions of a safe work environment in which colleagues will take the complaints seriously.

In contrast, use of formal organizational structures is associated with more mixed opinions about the outcome. Livingston (1982) found that 50 percent of those who filed formal complaints felt it made the situation better, while 33 percent thought that the situation became worse. Grauerholz (1989) found that all who filed a formal complaint found it "somewhat effective," while only half of those employing informal complaints found that type of response "somewhat effective." However, Bingham and Scherer (1993) reported that using formal procedures was unrelated to whether or not the person harassed was satisfied with the outcome. Regardless of perceived effectiveness, researchers agreed that formal channels were the least utilized methods of resolving harassment situations.

THE U. S. MILITARY.

The U. S. military provides an interesting context for analyzing data regarding sexual harassment in public service organizations.

First it is large enough to provide an adequate sample of individuals across categories of gender, race, ethnic and organizational position (as measured by rank). Second, leadership claims it as the largest equal opportunity employer in the United States. Third, following orders is ingrained in the organizational culture so that personal opinions/prejudices are supposed to be irrelevant while on duty. Thus, the military provides both a representative sample of public sector workers and a bureaucratic structure typical of public sector organizations.

The military organization is also unique in several important ways which may exacerbate the problems associated with individual responses to harassment. First, the military is governed by the U.S. Code of Military Justice rather than by the national and state laws which regulate other organizations.[4] Second, organizational cohesion is very highly valued within the military, thus divulging negative information about a fellow soldier is considered taboo.[5] Finally, harassment in general is part of the culture of the military, thus sexual harassment is sometimes a subset of general harassment (see for example, Patrow, Patrow 1986; Rogan 1981; Schneider, Schneider 1988; Steihm 1989; Zimmerman 1995). All of these factors may combine to reinforce an organizational climate which is neither open to informal complaints nor a safe place in which to lodge formal complaints.

Much of the published research on sexual harassment is based on case studies, small specialized samples and/or responses to hypothetical scenarios. As a result, it is difficult to assess the generalizability of the findings. Using freedom of information access, data from this very large probability sample are now available, providing an opportunity to confirm and expand upon earlier findings.

Our analysis explores patterns of response to the harassment experiences that had the greatest effect on the respondents to the "1988 DoD Survey of Sex Roles in the Active-Duty Military." We analyze the respondent's perceptions about effectiveness of their responses. Additionally, we report their opinions about the efforts of senior military leadership, and their own immediate supervisor's efforts to "make honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment in the active-duty military" (DoD 1988).

DATA AND METHODS

The "1988 DoD Survey of Sex Roles in the Active-Duty Military," conducted for the Office of the Secretary of Defense by the Defense Manpower Data Center, provides the data base for this analysis. This was a "worldwide scientific survey of how men and women work together in the four DoD Active-duty Military Services..." (Martindale 1990, 1991). The stated purpose of the survey was to ask about "...observations, opinions and experiences with ALL KINDS of sexual talk and behavior that can occur at work." The instrument emphasized the importance of responses both from those who have not been sexually harassed as well as those who have been harassed. Responses were voluntary, but the instrument indicated that "...maximum participation is encouraged so that data will be complete and representative..." and that the "...information will assist in the formulation of policies which may be needed to improve the working environment." Almost all results comparing differences between men and women are statistically significant due to the large sample size; therefore a comparison of the magnitude of differences in results is the key to interpreting our evidence. As reported in Martindale (1990, 1991) and Firestone and Harris (1994) a stratified random sample of 20,249 respondents was drawn for the survey, representing male and female enlisted personnel and officers in the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard. The original sample includes 10,752 males and 9,497 females, illustrating the oversampling of women. Marines and Coast Guard members were also oversampled. A weighting scheme was developed by the original survey team at the Defense Manpower Data Center tied to branch of service, rank, sex and race. The full weights provide estimated numbers of respondents that approximate the total active force at the time of the survey. For the analyses that follow, the full weight was divided by the mean weight, retaining estimates of the approximate total number of cases in the original survey. See Firestone and Harris (1994) for more detail.

RESULTS

The overt official policy context regarding sexual harassment in the military is addressed by measuring two different types of perceptions of the respondents. One set of questions focuses on whether particular persons or organizations make "...honest and

Table 1: Perception of Leadership Efforts to Make Honest and Reasonable Efforts to Stop Sexual Harassment in the Active-Duty Military by Harassment Experience

	Senior Military Leadership				Immediate Supervisor/Commanding Officer			
	Never	Env. Only	Ind. Only	Both	Never	Env. Only	Ind. Only	Both
			Males				Males	
Yes	68.9	65.0	72.0	62.2	65.0	61.2	65.0	54.6
No Opinion	21.6	22.1	15.6	18.9	20.7	19.4	20.5	16.7
No	4.0	8.5	7.3	14.6	7.8	13.9	9.7	24.8
Not Applicable	5.5	4.4	5.1	4.3	6.7	5.5	4.7	3.9
Col.%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	13235	1293	536	1138	13166	1305	528	2210
Row%	75.3	7.4	3.0	12.7	75.3	7.5	3.0	12.6
			Females				Females	
Yes	61.4	59.5	57.7	52.0	68.0	66.9	69.4	55.0
No Opinion	28.5	26.9	31.1	29.1	20.8	18.5	16.7	19.9
No	3.2	8.3	7.9	14.6	6.2	11.8	11.1	23.5
Not Applicable	7.0	5.3	3.3	4.3	5.0	2.8	2.8	1.6
Col.%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	441	315	87	1163	442	315	86	1168
Row%	21.8	15.5	4.3	57.5	21.8	15.5	4.2	57.5

reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment in the active duty military, regardless of what is said officially." Another question measures perceptions about the "...attitude toward sexual harassment of the commanding officer at your base/post." Additionally, respondents are classified on whether they report having been ever sexually harassed while in the active duty military and, if so, on the nature of the harassment. As developed in Firestone and Harris (1994), harassment is classified into two major types: environmental (sexual teasing, jokes; suggestive looks, gestures; sexual whistles, calls, hoots) and individual (actual or attempted rape; pressure for favors, dates; sexual touching, cornering; phone calls, letters). Here these concepts are further refined to identify four distinct categories of experience: those never sexually harassed, those experiencing environmental harassment only, those experiencing individual harassment only, and those experiencing both forms.

Table 1 provides data on the perceptions of "honest and reasonable" efforts on the part of the Senior Military Leadership and the Immediate Supervisor/Commanding Officer by type of harassment experience separately for males and females. Note first the overall row percentages that establish the extent of self-reported sexual harassment. Only about 22 percent of the females report that they have never been sexually harassed while in the active duty military, while three fourths of the males indicate that they have never been harassed. Nearly 58 percent of the women and nearly 13 percent of the men report both environmental and individual harassment experiences. Reporting environmental only or individual only occurs, but less frequently. As established in Firestone and Harris (1994), individual harassment is only rarely reported in situations where no environmental harassment is portrayed.

Overall, a majority of men and women in all categories indicate "yes" they believe that honest and reasonable efforts are made to stop sexual harassment. Interestingly, males are slightly more likely to have a positive sense of the senior military leadership than their immediate supervisors, while the opposite is true for the women. Comparing the responses about immediate supervisors to those about senior military leadership, the women are more likely to say both "yes" and "no," with substantially fewer expressing no opinion. Type of harassment experience makes a difference in respondent assessment only in the situation where both environmental and individual harassment are reported. In that case, both males and females report a less favorable perception of the efforts of both administrative levels. It is noteworthy that nearly one quarter of both males and females who report both types of harassment say "no" they do not

Table 2: Attitude Toward Sexual Harassment of the Commanding Officer at Your Base/Post

	Harassment									
	Never	Env. Only	Ind. Only	Both	Total	Never	Env. Only	Ind. Only	Both	Total
	Males					Females				
Actively discourages	39.2	30.4	35.8	31.5	37.4	36.9	31.0	33.8	24.4	28.6
Spoken against & wants it stopped	19.3	25.2	19.3	20.7	19.8	15.1	24.1	18.1	20.9	20.0
Not spoken against wants it stopped	5.7	5.8	6.7	5.9	5.8	3.8	6.8	4.3	6.1	5.6
Spoken against but doesn't care	1.7	2.1	0.7	5.8	2.2	1.7	3.0	3.7	6.4	4.8
Seems uninformed	1.7	1.0	5.8	3.5	1.9	0.4	1.6	0.7	2.4	1.8
Seems to condone	1.8	0.7	1.1	2.9	1.9	2.6	1.4	1.7	2.1	2.1
Not spoken against & doesn't care	1.1	2.7	3.2	4.9	1.8	1.2	2.1	1.6	4.5	3.3
Seems to encourage	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.5	0.4
Attitude unknown/CO is new	29.5	31.7	27.4	24.3	29.0	37.8	29.9	35.8	32.6	33.4

believe honest and reasonable efforts are made to stop sexual harassment by the immediate supervisor/commanding officer. This could reflect failure in the effectiveness of implementing current policies, including failure to communicate effectively about existing policies/procedures and failure to make it clear that charges will be taken seriously. In this situation, those experiencing harassment may be unwilling to respond through official channels.

Table 2 presents results of the respondent's assessment of the attitude of the commanding officer. Overall, only 37 percent of the men and 29 percent of the women think that the commanding officer "very actively discourages sexual harassment." Another twenty percent of both men and women indicate that the commanding officer "has spoken out against it and does seem to want it stopped." This means that well over forty percent of the men and over fifty percent of the women are not aware of any overt action by the commanding officer to stop sexual harassment. Interestingly again, those reporting harassment experiences are only a little less likely to think the commanding officer wants to prevent the behavior. This suggests that, in the aggregate, both those never harassed and those reporting some form of harassment have similar perceptions about commanding officers. Such perceptions clearly could shape the pattern of individual responses to their own sexual harassment experiences.

Table 3 presents results on behavioral responses to the "one experience that had the greatest effect on you" in terms of uninvited and unwanted sexual attention within the last twelve months, and the perceived effect of the action. Most immediately noteworthy is the small proportion of both men and women who reported the behavior to an official — 11 percent and 23 percent respectively. Of these, only 51 percent of the women and 45 percent of the men thought this action made things better. Over one out of five men who reported to an official actually thought this made things worse, while 14 percent of the women thought it made things worse.

The predominant responses for both men and women, though not in exactly the same rank order, include ignoring the behavior, avoiding the person, telling the person to stop, and making a joke of the incident. Obviously, there might be several patterns of responses to the same incident over a period of time. It is clear that most men and women employed individual level responses and, in most cases, a substantial majority did not think that their responses made things better.

Interestingly, the category "I did something else (Specify:)" also ranked among the next most frequently used responses, and this response is the one that has the highest percentages of both males and females reporting that it made things better. Apparently these unidentified mechanisms provide the most effective means of managing a situation in which a formal response may be too costly. Unfortunately, none of the open-ended qualitative data from the survey are available to determine the nature of these alternative, but effective responses.

CONCULSION

Our results are consistent with previous research in finding that only a small proportion of individuals experiencing sexual harassment respond through official channels. To cope with their harassment experience, both men

Table 3: Effect of Individual Responses

	Percent Ever Used		Result if Used					
			Worse		No Difference		Better	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Ignored Behavior	64.8	69.7	11.7	16.2	63.9	66.3	24.4	17.5
Avoided Person	50.5	66.2	8.9	10.7	54.7	59.3	36.4	30.0
Told Person to Stop	48.1	69.3	10.9	11.0	40.6	50.2	48.5	38.8
Threatened/Told Others	21.5	38.5	12.9	15.6	48.3	45.6	38.8	38.9
Reported to Official	11.4	22.6	21.0	13.8	34.3	35.6	44.7	50.6
Made a Joke of It	64.9	47.6	18.9	26.6	56.9	51.4	24.2	22.0
Went Along With Behavior	27.4	12.4	28.8	36.1	53.1	50.2	18.2	13.9
Trans/Disc/Poor Report	5.6	5.0	18.3	15.1	40.7	26.1	41.0	58.7
Asked Other to Speak	17.8	31.6	20.2	11.5	47.8	35.1	32.1	53.5
Threatened Harasser	12.8	9.8	18.9	14.1	28.4	39.3	52.8	46.7
Did Something Else	24.0	40.0	3.5	7.4	28.5	18.8	68.0	73.8

and women were most likely to use individual, informal strategies such as ignoring the behavior, making a joke of the incident, or telling the harasser to stop. Of the responses employed most frequently, ignoring the behavior or making a joke of it were least likely to be perceived as making the situation better.

While few of those in our sample who were harassed reported the behavior to an official, of those who did about 50 percent of the women and 45 percent of the men thought it made things better. It seems unusual that such an infrequently used response has among the highest levels of reported effectiveness. Perhaps the individuals who use official channels are either more familiar with the organizational procedures for dealing with harassment incidents, or more likely to perceive the organizational climate as actively discouraging sexual harassment. In either circumstance they may be more likely to find the situations resolved to their satisfaction.

The decision to report harassment through official channels may, of course, be a costly one. The cost may be particularly high in the military where complaints about sexual harassment, whether formal or informal, may be viewed both officially and unofficially as disrupting cohesion and a sign that the individual complaining does not "fit" into the organization. Such perceptions would have negative consequences for an individual's job rating and ultimately on that person's career.

Even attempts to deal with the problem outside the formal channels may appear a rejection of the masculine culture of the military. Thus, the large proportion of respondents who say they "did something else" may reflect attempts to find mechanisms which are both effective and less likely than formal responses to hold negative consequences for the individual experiencing the sexual harassment. While we cannot know the nature of these other responses, their prevalence and reported effectiveness clearly call for further research.[6]

The small numbers of those reporting harassment who use official channels to seek help suggests the lack of clear understandings about policies and procedures, or a lack of trust in them. In either case, the result may be part of a vicious cycle: the unwillingness of those reporting harassment to use official channels could aggravate enforcement problems, which could in turn reinforce underreporting of incidences. The evidence portrayed here clearly indicates that two types of initiatives are required. One line of effort should be directed to actions that would lower the actual incidence of sexual harassment. This would include strong public statements regarding existing policies and enforcement strategies, as well as educational programs designed to increase understanding of what constitutes harassment. The other line of effort should be directed to providing effective options to redress the sexual harassment incidents that continue to occur. At a minimum, this must include safe reporting channels outside of the normal chain of command and protecting the complainant in her or his usual job assignment. The tendency to "blame the victim" must be overcome before those experiencing harassment will operate through official channels.

END NOTES

[1] Most organizations use the U.S. Office of Personnel Management policy statement as the model for defining sexual harassment. The original statement defined sexual harassment as "deliberate or repeated unsolicited verbal comments, gestures, or physical contact of a sexual nature which are unwelcome" (reported in U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1988). In 1980 the initial definition was expanded to include any conduct of a sexual nature which created "an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment" (reported in U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1988).

[2] The U.S. military offers a good example of this problem. One finding of the Report of the Task Force on Women in the Military (January 1988) included difficulty in assessment of the extent of sexual harassment because each service branch keeps separate statistics and has different policies regarding grievances.

[3] Note that filing a formal complaint does not necessarily shift the burden of handling the situation to the organization. The process of completing the formal procedures may be so onerous and difficult that the burden is still primarily on the person experiencing harassment.

[4] Of course, sexual harassment is illegal in the military as well as in civilian organizations.

[5] While cohesion is highly valued in the military, it has been used to exclude rather than include women into the organization. Thus, women are accused of intruding on the male bonding which creates strong cohesion among members.

[6] According to Defense Manpower Data Center personnel, the qualitative responses to open-ended questions were "lost."

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