Job-Related and Psychological Effects of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Empirical Evidence From Two Organizations

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Previous evidence regarding the outcomes of sexual harassment in the workplace has come mainly from self-selected samples or analogue studies or those using inadequate measures. The sexual harassment experiences, coping responses, and job-related and psychological outcomes of 447 female private-sector employees and 300 female university employees were examined. Discriminant function analyses indicated that women who had not been harassed and women who had experienced low, moderate, and high frequencies of harassment could be distinguished on the basis of both job-related and psychological outcomes. These outcomes could not be attributed to negative affective disposition, attitudes toward harassment, or general job stress. Results suggest that relatively low-level but frequent types of sexual harassment can have significant negative consequences for working women.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is increasingly recognized as a stressor with serious consequences for employees and organizations alike. Spurred originally by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines (EEOC, 1980) and, more recently, by the controversy surrounding the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, research on this topic has increased exponentially within the last decade. The EEOC regulatory guidelines state that unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when submission to requests for sexual favors is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of employment; submission to or rejection of such requests is used as a basis for employment decisions; or such conduct unreasonably interferes with work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. On the basis of these guidelines, current legal frameworks generally support two causes of action that claimants may state: coercion of sexual cooperation by threat of job-related consequences (quid pro quo harassment) and unwanted and offensive sex-related verbal or physical conduct, even absent any job-related threat (hostile work environment).

Research has documented some of the negative effects of harassment experiences, including decreased morale and increased absenteeism (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1987), decreased job satisfaction (Gruber, 1992), job loss (Coles, 1986; Crull, 1982; Loy & Stewart, 1984), and deteriorating relationships with coworkers (Gutek, 1985; Loy & Stewart, 1984). Such studies illustrate that harassment represents a serious risk to employees' psychological and physical well-being. On the basis of self-report survey data, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1981, 1987) reported that literally thousands of female federal employees experienced deterioration in their emotional or physical condition as a result of sexual harassment. Crull found that 63% of the
women who sought help from the Working Women's Institute reported adverse physical symptoms and 94% experienced emotional distress as a result of their experiences. Loy and Stewart reported that 75% of their sample of harassed women experienced symptoms of emotional or physical distress, the most frequent being nervousness, irritability, and anger.

Exacerbating these consequences, it appears that most victims of harassment are subjected to extended patterns of offensive behavior, rather than isolated incidents. A U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1987) study of federal employees indicated that most harassed women were subjected to an ongoing pattern of stress: 75% of those experiencing sexual teasing and jokes reported that it was not a one-time occurrence, and 54% of those pressured for sexual favors reported that it had occurred more than once. For most women, the harassment lasted more than a week, and often as long as 6 months.

The prevalence of such harassment in the workplace is now acknowledged to be widespread, with some estimates suggesting that as many as one in every two women will experience a sexually harassing behavior at some point during their working lives (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gutek, 1985; Gutek & Koss, 1993; Koss et al., 1995; Martindale, 1990). Despite the pervasive nature of this problem, few rigorous examinations of the consequences of sexual harassment have been undertaken. There is some evidence that sexual harassment has negative job-related, psychological, and health effects on the women who experience it (Coles, 1986; Crull, 1982; Gutek, 1985; Gutek & Koss, 1993; Koss, 1990; Loy & Stewart, 1984). Although they provided an important initial analysis of the negative effects of harassment, most of these studies were not designed with outcomes as the primary focus. In addition, many studies relied on samples of self-identified victims, and several asked victims about the negative outcomes they experienced as a result of the harassment (e.g., Martindale, 1990). Other investigations used an analogue format, asking respondents to determine whether a particular situation depicted sexual harassment or to describe what they believed they would do in such circumstances; such studies provide little insight into the experiences of actual victims or the personal or organizational consequences these experiences may entail. To date, few studies have examined outcomes using standard measures with known psychometric characteristics, although a few exceptions are noteworthy.

One such study was recently completed by Morrow, McElroy, and Phillips (1994), who surveyed over 700 employees at a state agency. Female employees who experienced at least one harassing behavior reported less satisfaction with work, supervision, coworkers, and promotions, as well as less organizational commitment and greater role ambiguity, role conflict, and stress. Another exception is a study of the psychological outcomes of sexual harassment completed by Dansky and Kilpatrick (1997), who interviewed over 4,000 women selected from a national probability sample. Women who had experienced unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion at some point during their careers were more likely to be experiencing current depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. These results are particularly striking given that an average of 11 years had passed since the harassment experience and that the study used a very narrow definition of sexual harassment. Dansky and Kilpatrick's operational definition of sexual harassment did not include coworker harassment or many of the behaviors that constitute a hostile environment; thus, the overall impact of harassment is likely to be even greater than they suggest. Both studies provide evidence of the damaging effects of harassment. However, because no measures of method bias were obtained in either of these studies, the extent to which response bias influenced the reported relationship between harassment and outcomes is unclear.

In an attempt to develop a framework for the study of sexual harassment, Fitzgerald, Hulin, and Drasgow (1994) specified a model of the antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment. That model serves as the basis for the hypotheses derived here. The model presents a specification of the antecedents of harassment in the workplace, including organizational climate for sexual harassment and the gendered nature of the job (i.e., job traditionality and gender ratio of the work group), and relates harassment experiences to a wide range of negative job-related, psychological, and health outcomes. Harassment is viewed as one type of workplace stressor that may have effects that are similar to, if not more negative than, other job stressors. In the present study, we focus on the latter part of the model, which specifies the consequences of sexual harassment. Other studies of the antecedents of harassment are reported elsewhere (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996; Zickar, 1994).

We argue that it is important to examine sexual harassment experiences within a general stress framework. Following the stress and coping literature, "Psychological stress . . . is a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21). Situations appraised as stressful may include a wide range of experiences ranging from major life events to the more frequent, but less extreme, daily hassles of life (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Like other stressors, sexual harassment most frequently consists of events that, in isolation, may be minor but, cumulatively, may be very stressful (e.g., offensive comments, insults, or pranks),
as well as less frequent but severe events, such as sexual coercion and assault (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997). We conceptualize sexual harassment as a workplace event that, by definition, is appraised by the recipient as stressful. This definition of harassment is consistent with both the stress and coping literature and current legal considerations. For example, the Supreme Court ruled in Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc. (1993) that courts must consider the harassment plaintiff’s subjective perception that the work environment is abusive.

The study of sexual harassment within a framework of workplace stress should include measures of a wide range of attitudinal and behavioral consequences, such as the family of behaviors known as organizational withdrawal. Organizational research has indicated that job attitudes are related in stable ways to patterned job behaviors (Hanisch & Hulin, 1991). Hanisch and Hulin reported that work dissatisfaction led to higher levels of both work withdrawal and job withdrawal. We propose that like other occupational stressors, there may be measurable effects of sexual harassment on the job attitudes and job behaviors of the women who experience it. Furthermore, the literature on coping with harassment suggests that few women make formal complaints about harassment experiences. It is likely that these women react in alternative ways that are included in the construct of organizational withdrawal (i.e., absenteeism, tardiness, and other unfavorable job behaviors). For example, studies of university students indicate that female undergraduates and graduate students who experience sexual harassment change career plans, change majors, and drop courses to avoid harassment, exhibiting what might be considered job withdrawal from the job of "student" (Adams, Kottke, & Padgitt, 1983; Fitzgerald et al., 1988).

We also include an assessment of the psychological effects of sexual harassment experiences in the present study. We propose that harassment experiences negatively affect satisfaction with life and psychological well-being and lead to symptoms of posttraumatic stress (e.g., heart pounding or racing or having thoughts or images of a frightening nature). The theoretical basis for these hypotheses comes from models of traumatic experiences (Hobfoll, 1991). These models specify that severe psychological consequences may follow traumatic experiences, particularly when victims are isolated from one another, their core beliefs are threatened, or they do not have preexisting coping strategies available to respond to the event. We hypothesize that women who experience harassment in the workplace may exhibit similarly negative psychological effects as other victims of trauma, given that harassment is often unexpected and women’s beliefs about a supportive and nonhostile work environment may be threatened.

To accurately assess the impact of harassment on job-related and psychological outcomes, it is critical to isolate the effects of harassment from other variables that may be correlated with both harassment and outcomes. For example, employees who experience harassment also experience other work-related stressors that may influence outcomes. Thus, we included a measure of general job stress in our assessment of the effects of harassment to determine if harassment has consequences above and beyond the numerous stressors encountered in the workplace (Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Hanisch, 1996). Other measures included as control variables in the present study address the fundamental question of whether sexual harassment does indeed have negative effects on people who encounter it or whether harm only accrues to "oversensitive" people who may overreact to innocuous events. For example, affective disposition has been found to influence employees’ job attitudes; employees with negative dispositions tend to be less satisfied with their jobs than people who have more positive dispositions (Judge & Hulin, 1993). Given both the scientific evidence of dispositional effects on job outcomes and the potential labeling of sexual harassment victims as oversensitive to relatively mild events, it is particularly important to determine if harassment has effects on outcomes independent of affective disposition. Finally, if it is true that in most cases harassment is trivial and only oversensitive people are bothered by it, such persons should also believe that harassment is more serious and harmful than people who are not as sensitive to the issue of harassment. Thus, attitudes toward harassment were included in the present study as another individual-differences variable that might account for the effects of sexual harassment on outcomes.

Another area of both theoretical and practical significance in the study of the effects of sexual harassment is the manner in which women cope with and respond to harassment. An organization intolerant of sexual harassment may have a climate in which victims feel they can directly tell harassers to stop; if that is ineffective, they can report the behavior to management without risk. In general, however, research indicates that the more direct and assertive the coping strategy, the less often women use it (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995). The most common responses to sexual harassment appear to be avoiding the harasser and trying to appease him without direct confrontation. A substantial number of harassed women also seek social support from friends or family members. Fewer women confront the harasser, and very few women seek formal relief from the organization. Coping strategies that manage the cognitions and emotions associated with the event are generally more common; such strategies include simply tolerating the harassment, denying that it is happening or that it has any effect,
reinterpreting the behavior as benign, trying to forget about it, and (less commonly) blaming oneself (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995). The incidence of these various coping strategies were examined in the present study.

The current study examines the impact of sexually harassing behaviors on the job attitudes, job behaviors, psychological well-being, and coping responses of employed women in two independent samples: a private-sector organization and a large research-oriented university. Standardized measures of outcomes were collected on the basis of one of two methodologies, and an attempt was made to estimate the effects of method bias, including disposition, harassment attitudes, and general job stress on the relationship between harassment experiences and outcomes. Specifically, we predicted that women who experienced harassing behaviors would report lower job satisfaction, higher levels of organizational withdrawal, worse psychological well-being, and more symptoms of posttraumatic stress than women who did not experience harassing behaviors in the workplace.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from two independent samples. Sample 1 consisted of 447 female employees of a large, private-sector organization in the Northwest, who were surveyed regarding their job attitudes, job behaviors, job stress, experiences with sexual harassment, harassment attitudes, and psychological well-being. The mean age of participants was between 40 and 44 years, and they reported an average of nearly 10 years of service with the organization. The sample was over 90% Caucasian, 66% were married, and approximately 33% were college graduates. A stratified sample of departmental units with an oversampling of women in nontraditional work roles within units was selected to participate in what was labeled a study of the quality of working life. Because sessions were held during work hours, a small number of scheduled employees could not attend due to absences or work conflicts, but a total of 91% of the selected employees participated.

Sample 2 was drawn from female faculty and staff of a large Midwestern university. Data were obtained from 300 female employees, including 115 faculty members and 185 staff. As with Sample 1, participants had a mean age of between 40 and 44 years and were mainly Caucasian: 64% were married or living with a partner. Participants in Sample 2 were chosen through a stratified random sample of academic and administrative units; within units, women working in nontraditional jobs were oversampled. Overall participation rate for this sample was 76%; the most frequent reason employees gave for not participating in the study was that they were not willing to spend the time necessary to complete the interview, an average of 40 min. In the university sample, nonparticipants did not differ from participants in terms of gender or academic status.

Measures and Procedures

All participants completed materials described as a Workplace Environment Survey. They were informed that they would be asked about their job attitudes, job behaviors, and a wide range of stressors that might occur on their jobs. The private-sector participants (Sample 1) were assessed in groups of varying size, on the basis of the nature of the facility in which they were employed. With the exception of the employees working in company headquarters, who were surveyed in large groups in the company training auditorium, average group size was approximately 20. The survey was administered through a traditional paper-and-pencil methodology. It assessed participants' satisfaction with their work itself, their coworkers, and their supervision and organizational commitment, work withdrawal, job withdrawal, job stress, satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, symptoms of posttraumatic stress, affective disposition, harassment attitudes, and experiences of sexual harassment. Participants who reported experiencing any harassing behavior during the previous 24 months at their organization were asked to complete a section describing the incident and their manner of responding to and coping with it. The academic employees (Sample 2) completed a similar survey through an interactive computerized interview administered individually at their place of work or an alternative private site of their choosing. Related measures are grouped together and described below; when measures differed for the two groups, this is so indicated, and the differences described.

Sexual harassment experiences. The respondents' sexual harassment experiences were assessed by a revised, 18-item version of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995). This scale, generally considered the most psychometrically sound measure of its type (Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995), presents respondents with behavioral items describing three types of sexual harassment: Gender Harassment, Unwanted Sexual Attention, and Sexual Coercion. These three types of harassment have been confirmed empirically in factor analyses of the instrument (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1985; Gelfand et al., 1995). Gender Harassment includes generally sexist behavior, crude comments or jokes of a sexual nature, and other behaviors that disparage the gender of the target or convey hostility toward women. Unwanted Sexual Attention includes unwanted touching, hugging, stroking, or repeated unwanted requests or pressure for dates. Sexual Coercion is defined as implicit or explicit demands for sexual favors through the threat of negative job-related consequences or the promise of job-related rewards. Re-
respondents indicated on a 5-point scale whether they experienced any of the 18 behaviors at their organization within the past 24 months; the words sexual harassment did not appear until the end of the scale, at which point respondents were asked if they had ever been sexually harassed.

After completion of the SEQ, the private-sector respondents who had endorsed any of the target behaviors were instructed to describe their specific experience of sexual harassment. Of the 300 women who endorsed at least one SEQ item, 138 (46%) completed this portion of the survey. Because the university participants completed a computerized survey, they were automatically presented with the relevant follow-up section; 173 of the 189 women (92%) who had experienced harassment in the university sample completed items within this section.

Instructions for the specific-incident section directed respondents to choose the experience that had made the greatest impression on them and answer the questions with that incident in mind; this procedure was pioneered by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1981, 1987). Respondents were asked to describe how they responded to the situation by means of an abbreviated version of the Coping With Harassment Questionnaire (Fitzgerald, 1990), which assessed both emotion-focused (i.e., internal) and problem-focused (i.e., external) strategies for responding to sexual harassment (Folkman & Lazarus, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The five external strategies are problem solving in nature and include forming a formal complaint, telling the harasser to stop, talking with someone they trust, talking with a supervisor, and avoiding the harasser. The internal strategies, on the other hand, involve attempts to manage the cognitions and emotions associated with the harassment, including trying to forget about it, telling oneself that it is not important, assuming the harasser meant well, blaming oneself, and simply enduring the harassment. Respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale the extent to which each response was descriptive of their actions and reactions. A series of studies has shown the Coping With Harassment Questionnaire to have internal consistencies above .80 (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995).

Work attitudes. The respondents' satisfaction with work, co-workers, and supervision and intrinsic commitment to the organization were assessed. In Sample 1, participants were administered the Satisfaction With Work, Co-Workers, and Supervision scales of the Job Descriptive Index (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), as revised by Roznowski (1989). The complete Job Descriptive Index contains a series of 18-item scales in an adjective checklist format and uses a 3-point response scale. Based on item response theory estimates from a pilot sample, the Satisfaction With Work and Co-Workers scales were shortened to 9 and 12 items, respectively, to accommodate the organizational time constraints of survey administration. Reliability estimates of these shortened scales were only slightly lower than those obtained using the full scales (α for Satisfaction With Work scale = .88; α for Satisfaction With Co-Worker scale = .86). In Sample 2, participants completed the full 18-item versions of the Satisfaction With Co-Workers and Supervision scales. The Satisfaction With Work scale was not administered to Sample 2, in part because of time constraints and also because it appeared that it would be the job attitude least affected by harassment experiences because the content of the items dealt with evaluations of work tasks (e.g., fascinating or dull).

In Sample 1, we assessed intrinsic commitment to the organization by means of a revision of O'Reilly and Chatman's (1986) scale. Respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements that assessed the similarity of their work-related values and those endorsed by the organization. Factor analytic results based on O'Reilly and Chatman's original scale support the structure of the measure, which is related in expected ways to theoretically important variables (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). To lessen time demands in Sample 2, the revised organizational commitment scale was not administered.

Work behaviors. Work withdrawal behaviors and job withdrawal intentions were assessed by means of scales developed by Hanisch and Hulin (1991). Work withdrawal is defined as employees' attempts to remove themselves from the immediate work situation while still maintaining organizational membership. The construct includes absenteeism, tardiness, and unfavorable job behaviors (i.e., behaviors generally viewed as negative by management). The seven-item absenteeism scale and the five-item tardiness scale required respondents to indicate the desirability, frequency, likelihood, and ease of engaging in these behaviors; the nine-item unfavorable job behavior scale required respondents to indicate the frequency with which they engaged in each behavior (e.g., making excuses to get out of work, neglecting tasks not evaluated on performance appraisals, and using equipment for personal use without permission).

Job withdrawal is defined by employees' intentions to leave their jobs and the organization itself and is usually manifested through turnover or retirement. In Sample 1, job withdrawal was assessed by items measuring respondents' intentions to quit. Participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of resigning in the next few months, the desirability of resigning, the frequency of thoughts about resigning, and the ease or difficulty of resigning on the basis of financial and family considerations and the probability of finding other employment. Hanisch and Hulin (1991) reported longitudinal data establishing the causal links among earlier job attitudes and reported stresses and subsequent work and job withdrawal 2 years later. Owing to time constraints, as well as the somewhat unique nature of academic employment, participants in Sample 2 were not administered this scale.

Psychological outcomes. The psychological outcomes assessed in both samples included psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress. We estimated psychological well-being by means of a 35-item version of the Mental Health Index (Ware, 1984), designed to assess anxiety and depression in the general population; reliability indexes for the Mental Health Index are excellent in the general population (α = .96; Ware, 1984) as well as in groups stratified by socioeconomic status. In Sample 2, this index was shortened

2 This figure is typical of the number of women who skipped this section regarding their specific experience of sexual harassment in other samples using a paper-and-pencil survey methodology (cf. Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 1996).
This index lists neutral objects (e.g., the color of stop signs or each statement on a 7-point scale. Items mainly addressed be-

between women's harassment experiences and job-related the scale. The original scale lists entertainment objects, essential Hulin (1993) reported good reliability and validity evidence for

the size of refrigerators), and respondents indicate if they feel harassment in the workplace and view it as a serious issue. Higher scores indicate that respondents are sensitive to harassment in the workplace.

harmless. Because all data were obtained from a single source, it was important to examine the possibility that any relationships between sexual harassment and outcomes might be due to method bias. We measured general job stress to determine if sexual harassment has effects on job-related outcomes and psychological well-being beyond those of general job stress. We also measured harassment attitudes to determine if the relationships between harassment and outcomes could be explained by a sensitivity to the issue of harassment. Finally, we assessed respondents' affective disposition to determine if relationships between sexual harassment and outcomes could be explained by a predisposition to respond negatively to innocuous events in the workplace.

Both samples completed the 18-item Stress in General Scale (Smith, Sademan, & McCrery, 1992), a global measure of general job stress using the adjective checklist format of the Job Descriptive Index and its yes, no, or ? response scale. Results from four separate samples indicate stability in means, standard deviations, item—total correlations, and factor structure. Smith et al. (1992) reported good evidence of convergent and discriminant validity.

Both samples completed a 12-item scale assessing their attitudes toward sexual harassment, which was based on the Toler-

ance of Sexual Harassment Inventory, originally developed by Lott, Reilly, and Howard (1982). The harassment attitudes scale assessed respondents' beliefs about sexual harassment in work settings. Respondents indicated the extent of agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale. Items mainly addressed beliefs concerning victim provocation, as well as the perspective that sexual behavior in the workplace is normal, natural, and harmless. Higher scores indicate that respondents are sensitive to harassment in the workplace and view it as a serious issue.

Sample 2 also completed Weitz's (1952) Neutral Objects Satisfaction Questionnaire as a measure of affective disposition. This index lists neutral objects (e.g., the color of stop signs or the size of refrigerators), and respondents indicate if they feel satisfied, neutral, or dissatisfied with each object. Judge and Hulin (1993) reported good reliability and validity evidence for the scale. The original scale lists entertainment objects, essential objects, and Neutral Objects; for the university sample, only the 13-item Neutral Objects subscale was used (α = .76).

Results

Analyses included an assessment of the relationship between women's harassment experiences and job-related and psychological outcomes, as well as the nature of their attempts to cope with the harassment. In this section, we report correlational data, as well as multiple-group discriminant function analyses that relate the frequency of women's harassment experiences to their job attitudes, job behaviors, and psychological well-being.

Correlations among all scales appear in Table 1, with figures for Sample 1 below the diagonal, figures for Sample 2 above the diagonal, and coefficient alpha reliability estimates on the diagonal. Alphas for all scales were satisfactory with the exception of the six-item Sexual Coercion subscale of the SEQ, which averaged .45 across the two groups; the low base rate of sexual coercion in both samples had the effect of restricting the variance in these items and deflating the coefficient alpha.

Characteristics of the Harassment Experience

In Sample 1, 300 of the 447 respondents (68%) endorsed at least one SEQ item, indicating that they had experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior at that organization during the previous 24 months. In Sample 2, 189 of the 300 female university employees surveyed (63%) endorsed at least one SEQ item, indicating that they had experienced at least one sexually harassing behavior during the past 24 months at that university.

Characteristics of the "worst" harassment experience (i.e., the one that had the greatest impact on participants) included frequency, duration, and subjective appraisal of the event. In Sample 1, 74% of the women who completed this section indicated that they had experienced the harassment on a repeated basis, between once a month and almost every day, with the majority (64%) indicating that it had lasted between 1 week and 6 months. Of these women, 66% rated the incident as offensive or extremely offensive, and an additional 26% described the incident as slightly offensive; 56% of the women rated the incident as upsetting or extremely upsetting, and an additional 29% found it slightly upsetting. Also, 83% indicated that the nature of their work role required them to continue to interact with the person who bothered them. Using the criterion item of the SEQ ("Have you been sexually harra-

sed by a male supervisor or co-worker at this organization within the past 24 months?") , 40.9% of those who had endorsed at least one harassing behavior and who completed this section of the questionnaire labeled their experience as sexual harassment by answering yes to this question.

Table 2 shows the percentage of women using each coping strategy in response to their harassment experi-

ence. Approximately three fourths of the Sample 1 women indicated that they stayed away from the person who bothered them or told themselves it was not important, and a
majority of women indicated that they just put up with the harassment. Approximately 33% of the women had talked with a supervisor about the problem, but only 14% had made a formal complaint. As in previous research, many of these women chose to deal with the situation themselves and were less likely to talk with a supervisor about the problem or formally contact the organization (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995).

In Sample 2, the computerized survey automatically presented the “eligible” women with questions regarding a specific harassing incident. This procedure yielded relatively more women who completed this section than in Sample 1, and perhaps as a result, the experiences reported were somewhat less intense than those reported by the private-sector women. Although a similar percentage of women had experienced at least one harassing behavior (63%), only 39% of those who provided information about their experience indicated that the behaviors occurred more than once; 35% indicated that the situation had lasted anywhere between 1 week and 6 months. Of the university “targets,” 48% rated their experiences as offensive or extremely offensive, and an additional 36% found it at least slightly offensive; 44% indicated that the situation had lasted anywhere between 1 week and 6 months. Of the university women labeled their experiences as sexual harassment, as opposed to 41% of the Sample 1 women. As with the participants in Sample 1, the majority of these women (78%) indicated that the nature of their work roles required them to continue to interact with the person who bothered them.

The percentage of Sample 2 who indicated each particular coping strategy appears in Table 2; as with the private-sector women, the majority chose to deal with the situation themselves, by avoiding the person who bothered them, telling themselves it was not important, or just putting up with it. Very few chose to talk with a supervisor or union representative (17.4%), and even fewer chose to make a formal complaint (6%). We do not have data to indicate why such a low percentage of women in Sample 2 filed a formal complaint; however, these percentages of reporting in both samples are high relative to other studies of the frequency of women’s use of formal organizational complaint systems (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995).

Outcomes of Sexual Harassment

The effects of sexual harassment on victims’ job-related and psychological outcomes were estimated through multiple-group discriminant function analyses. Groups

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We would like to thank Charles Hulin for his guidance and advice regarding this portion of the analysis.
of women were formed on the basis of the frequency of their sexual harassment experiences. This approach was preferable to classifying women into a category on the basis of the type of harassment they had experienced because the three types of harassment typically co-occur. Thus, it is not possible to discuss the effect of, for example, sexual coercion; all of the women who had experienced sexual coercion had also experienced unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment, or both. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of the types of sexual harassment in the two samples, demonstrating the high degree of overlap between the three types. Given this pattern of co-occurrence, we did not compare outcomes among different types of behavior; rather, we examined the impact of different frequency levels, collapsed across types of harassment, on victims' job-related and psychological outcomes, using discriminant function analyses.

**Groupings by frequency of harassment.** In each sample, women were classified into one of four groups on the basis of their score on the SEQ. The first group consisted of women who reported no harassment. For harassed women, the overall SEQ mean and standard deviation were used to form groups of women who experienced low-frequency (1 standard deviation or more below the mean SEQ score of harassed women), moderate-frequency (around the mean SEQ score), and high-frequency sexual harassment (more than 1 standard deviation above the mean SEQ score). In Sample 1, 431 women had complete data on all scales; the classification procedure yielded 32.2% of the sample who were not harassed, 42.5% who experienced low frequency, 15.8% who experienced moderate frequency, and 9.5% who experienced a high frequency of sexual harassment. In Sample 2, 296 women had complete data on all scales; the parallel figures were 37.5%, 38.5%, 13.2%, and 10.8%.

An examination of the relationship between frequency and types of harassment reveals a confound between frequency and type of harassment; as can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of women in the low-frequency groups experienced gender harassment only, whereas the majority of women in the moderate- and high-frequency groups experienced both gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. Sexual coercion always co-occurred with other types of harassment, and women who experienced all three types were overrepresented in the high-frequency group. Thus, the experiences of women who fell into the low-frequency group consisted primarily of sexist put-downs and insulting sexual remarks. As frequency of harassment increased, unwanted sexual attention occurred in addition to gender harassment. Only at high-frequency levels did we observe a small number of women who had experienced sexual coercion in addition to gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention.

**Sample 1: Private-sector sample.** Discriminant function analyses were conducted using six job-related attitudinal and behavioral variables as predictors of membership in the four groups: satisfaction with co-workers, supervision, and work itself; intrinsic organizational commitment; work withdrawal; and job withdrawal.

One discriminant function was significant, $\chi^2(18, N = 402) = 83.78, p < .001$, accounting for 88% of the between-group variance. Table 3 contains the group means for the four groups on the discriminant function. These means indicate that the discriminant function maximally separated women who had experienced high frequencies of harassment from those who had experienced no or low frequencies of harassment; those who had experienced moderate and low levels of harassment were also separated from those who had not been harassed. The structure matrix, shown in Table 4, indicates that satisfaction with co-workers, satisfaction with supervision, and work withdrawal were the best predictors of who had been sexually harassed.

The procedure classified 50.3% of the cases correctly, compared with the 31.9% that would be expected by chance, given prior probabilities of groups of unequal sizes. A disproportionate number of women who had experienced moderate and high frequencies of harassment were misclassified into the low-frequency group; thus, both moderate and high frequencies of harassment sometimes yielded job-related outcomes similar to the low-frequency group.

Examination of psychological outcomes was performed using three well-being variables as predictors of group membership: life satisfaction, mental health (psychologi-
EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sample 1

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<td>37.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Percentage of types of sexual harassment in Sample 1 (top) and Sample 2 (bottom).

cal well-being), and symptoms of posttraumatic stress. One discriminant function was significant, \( \chi^2(9, N = 431) = 34.08, p < .001 \), accounting for 85% of the between-group variance. As shown in Table 3, the discriminant function maximally separated the three groups of women who were harassed from those who were not; correlations between the predictors and the discriminant function, shown in Table 4, indicate that psychological well-being scores and symptoms of posttraumatic stress are most closely related to group membership. This analysis resulted in a correct classification rate of 44.6%, compared with the 31.9% that would be expected by chance. In this analysis, many of the women who had experienced moderate and high frequencies of harassment were mis-
Table 4

Structure Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Private-sector sample</th>
<th>University sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Co-Workers scale</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Supervision scale</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Work scale</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic organizational commitment</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work withdrawal</td>
<td>-.65</td>
<td>-.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job withdrawal</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Life scale</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Index</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms of PTSD</td>
<td>-.86</td>
<td>-.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Satisfaction With Work, intrinsic organizational commitment, and job withdrawal were not measured in the academic sample. PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder.
harassment from the group of women who were not harassed; women who had experienced high frequencies of harassment also were separated from those who had experienced low frequencies of harassment. The structure matrix, shown in Table 4, indicates that satisfaction with supervision and co-workers are the best predictors of group membership. The classification resulted in 51.5% of the cases in the sample being correctly classified, compared with a chance expectation of 31.7% calculated from base rates; misclassifications mainly occurred when women who had experienced either moderate or high frequencies of harassment were misclassified into the low-frequency group.

For the psychological well-being variables, one discriminant function was significant, \( \chi^2(9, N = 296) = 19.91, p < .05 \), accounting for 78% of the between-group variance. As shown in Table 3, the discriminant function maximally separated women who had experienced high frequencies of harassment from those who had experienced low or no harassment; those who had experienced moderate and low levels of harassment were also separated from those who had not been harassed at all. The structure matrix, shown in Table 4, indicates that all three psychological well-being variables are good predictors of group membership in this sample. This procedure correctly classified 42.9% of the respondents, compared with the 31.7% that would be expected by chance; misclassified cases resulted mainly from women who had experienced harassment and were classified into the group of women who had not experienced harassment. As in the private-sector sample, the psychological well-being variables did not predict group membership as well as the job-outcome variables.

Response Bias and Discriminant Validity

To examine the possibility that these negative job-related and psychological outcomes may have been due to a general predisposition to complain about relatively minor experiences, to sensitivity to the issue of sexual harassment, or to high levels of general job stress, we studied the discriminant validity of the harassment measure and tested for response bias. First, in both samples, partial correlations of sexual harassment experiences with job-related and psychological outcomes were obtained after controlling for the effects of general job stress. In the university sample, partial correlations of sexual harassment experiences and outcomes were also computed after controlling for respondents' affective disposition, as assessed by Weitz's (1952) scale. Table 5 provides a comparison of the zero-order correlations and the partial correlations in both samples, indicating that the results of the sexual harassment outcome analyses cannot be accounted for by respondents' levels of general job stress or negative disposition; harassment experiences appear to have detrimental effects that cannot be explained by these variables.

In addition, we performed hierarchical regressions, using general job stress, attitudes toward harassment, affective disposition (Sample 2 only), and harassment experiences as independent variables and the job-related and psychological outcomes as dependent variables. In the first analysis, general job stress was entered into the regression equation first. Because all measures were self-report, the first variable entered into the equation should account for any variance in responses due to method bias as well as the variable's substantive variance. Harassment experiences were entered into the regression in hierarchical fashion; the unique variance of women's harassment experiences contributed significantly to the prediction of all dependent variables in Sample 2 at \( p < .01 \), and six of nine dependent variables in Sample 1, as evidenced by the significant increase at \( p < .001 \) in \( R^2 \) following the second step.

Additionally, a harassment attitudes scale was used as a measure of respondents' attitudes regarding the seriousness of the issue of sexual harassment. The same procedure as described above was used to examine the possible influence of attitudes toward sexual harassment on self-reported outcomes. Higher scores on the attitude scale indicate that respondents view sexual harassment as a serious issue and perceive it as intolerable in the workplace. If self-reported harassment experiences do not predict outcomes when harassment attitudes are taken into account, this would suggest that the relations between harassment and outcomes may be partly due to women's sensitivity to the issue of harassment. However, the addition of sexual harassment experiences to the regression equation that already included attitudes toward harassment resulted in significant increases in \( R^2 \) at \( p < .05 \) for seven of the nine dependent measures in Sample 1 and for all six of the dependent measures in Sample 2 \( (p < .01) \). Because a measure of affective disposition was obtained in Sample 2, hierarchical regressions were performed, entering disposition into the regression first and then entering harassment experiences in a hierarchical fashion for that sample. Again, the addition of the harassment variable significantly increased the \( R^2 \) values for all six of the dependent measures, providing further evidence that the obtained relationships between harassment experiences and outcomes were not due to negative disposition. Overall, these results indicate that the effects of harassment on outcomes were not due to various indexes of bias, including general job stress, sensitivity to harassment, or affective disposition; the unique variance of harassment experiences added significantly to the prediction of respondents' job-related and psychological well-being.
Table 5

Partial Correlations of Sexual Harassment and Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Zero-order correlations of sexual harassment and outcomes</th>
<th>Controlling for job stress</th>
<th>Controlling for disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Work scale</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Co-Workers scale</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Supervision scale</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work withdrawal</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job withdrawal</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic organizational commitment</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Life scale</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Index</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms of PTSD</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| University sample                      |                                                          |                             |                             |
| Satisfaction With Co-Workers scale     | -.26**                                                   | -.21**                      | -.25**                      |
| Satisfaction With Supervision scale   | -.36**                                                   | -.32**                      | -.34**                      |
| Work withdrawal                        | .19**                                                    | .18**                       | .19**                       |
| Satisfaction With Life scale           | -.20**                                                   | -.16**                      | -.17**                      |
| Mental Health Index                    | -.18**                                                   | -.13**                      | -.15**                      |
| Symptoms of PTSD                       | .19**                                                    | .15**                       | .17**                       |

Note. PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder.
* p < .05. ** p < .01.

Finally, to provide evidence of discriminant validity, we examined the correlation between harassment experiences and satisfaction with work itself, which should not have been theoretically related to harassment experiences. The Satisfaction With Work scale assessed respondents' satisfaction with the tasks required by their jobs (e.g., interesting or dull); thus, scores on the scale should not have been meaningfully affected by women's experiences of harassment. The correlation between these two measures was nonsignificant in Sample 1 (the scale was not administered in Sample 2), thus providing further evidence that the harassment experiences scale was related to theoretically meaningful constructs but not related to outcomes that should not have been influenced by harassment experiences.

Discussion

This study presents evidence that sexual harassment, even at relatively low frequencies, exerts a significant negative impact on women's psychological well-being and, particularly, job attitudes and work behaviors. The multiple-group discriminant function analyses indicated that women who had not been harassed and those who had experienced low, moderate, and high frequencies of harassment could be ordered on the basis of their job-related and psychological-outcome variates. In both samples, women who had experienced high levels of harassment reported the worst job-related and psychological outcomes, whereas those who had not been harassed reported the least negative outcomes. Note that it was not necessary to be exposed to a high frequency level of sexual harassment to experience negative outcomes; women who had experienced a moderate level of harassment (i.e., around the mean SEQ score) also reported significantly worse outcomes than those women who had not been harassed. In the academic sample, in particular, much of the behavior described by the women could be characterized as low-level, relatively mild, hostile environment harassment, consisting primarily of sexist put-downs and offensive sexual remarks; the women exposed to these behaviors could be distinguished from those who were not on the basis of their job-related attitudes and behaviors and psychological well-being.

Despite differences in mean frequency and length of experience, harassed women in both samples had similar levels of outcomes, and the ordering of the frequency groups was similar, as shown in Table 3. Thus, although the women in Sample 2 experienced lower intensity harassment, they still experienced negative job-related and psychological outcomes; harassment apparently does not have to be particularly egregious to result in negative consequences.

The correlation matrix relating harassment experiences to outcomes appears to suggest relatively small effect sizes. Our obtained correlations in the range of .1 to .3 are similar to other empirical studies (cf. Morrow et al.,
1994), and although relatively small, these effect sizes are theoretically meaningful (Cohen, 1977). Most of the harassment described by the women in the two samples was of a relatively low-level nature, and despite this, women reported experiencing negative outcomes. It is important for managers to realize that employees who make complaints about harassment on the job are not necessarily being oversensitive to innocuous events; even after controlling for respondents' affective disposition and general job stress, the negative relationships between sexual harassment experiences and outcomes remained significant, and with the exception of job withdrawal and life satisfaction in Sample 1, the correlations did not change significantly. Hierarchical regression analyses also indicated that self-reported sexual harassment experiences explained additional significant amounts of variance in outcomes beyond the effects of attitudes toward harassment and general job stress. In our samples, there is substantial evidence against the argument that the relationship between harassment and outcomes is based on response bias, and there does appear to be evidence of discriminant validity.

Note also that the majority of women in both samples who had experienced harassing behaviors answered no to the question, “Have you been sexually harassed in the past 24 months while at this organization?” Although these women did not see themselves as victims of harassment, they still experienced negative outcomes attributable to the situations to which they were exposed. Magley (1995) also reported no differences in outcomes between women who labeled their experiences as sexual harassment and those who did not. Thus, experiencing harassment appears to be more important in determining outcomes than labeling oneself as a victim of harassment.

Most respondents indicated that they coped with their experience by trying to avoid the person who bothered them; however, at the same time, most noted that the nature of their work role required ongoing interaction with this person. This has important implications for day-to-day organizational functioning; if women who experience sexual harassment are required to interact with the offender to carry out their work, not only are the chances for further incidents increased, but their avoidance strategies are likely to have a negative impact on their (and the organization’s) functioning.

This study gives an indication of the extent of the effects of sexual harassment on women’s job attitudes, behaviors, and well-being. It avoids the problems that arise from using self-selected samples and survey data. Respondents did not self-select into our samples on the basis of an inherent interest in the subject of harassment in the workplace; the study was described to participants at both organizations as an assessment of work experiences.

This study also goes beyond obtaining prevalence estimates to provide an overview of the wide range of negative consequences of sexual harassment. The findings presented in this study have implications for the management of work groups in which tension exists because of sexual harassment. Managers should not dismiss claims of sexual harassment; even women who have experienced relatively infrequent levels of harassment may be experiencing negative effects compared with those women who have not experienced harassment. This study provides important evidence that the women who experience sexual harassment are not oversensitive to benign compliments or comments. As Stockdale (1991) explained, “organizations must be made aware of the scale and severity of the problem and its implications both for individuals and their work performance, and the long-term organizational benefits of combating sexual harassment” (p. 60).

References


Magley, V. J. (1995, March). Labeling sexually harassing behaviors as sexual harassment. In L. F. Fitzgerald (Chair), Emerging issues in sexual harassment research. Symposium conducted at the Association for Women in Psychology, Indianapolis, IN.


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