Ambient Sexual Harassment: An Integrated Model of Antecedents and Consequences

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Research on sexual harassment as a prevalent job stressor has focused primarily on outcomes for the direct targets of harassment; the antecedents and consequences of indirect exposure to sexual harassment have not been explored. Ambient Sexual Harassment is proposed as an assessment of indirect exposure to sexual harassment. Ambient Sexual Harassment is defined as the general or ambient level of sexual harassment in a work group as measured by the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors experienced by others in a woman’s work group. The integration of Ambient Sexual Harassment into the model of sexual harassment developed by Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, and Magley (1997) proposes that indirect exposure to sexual harassment will have similar antecedents and job-related, psychological, and health outcomes as direct exposure. An empirical test of the model, using samples of female employees from a public utility company (N = 455) and a food processing plant (N = 194), generally supports predictions.

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Research on sexual harassment indicates that between 40% (United States Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981; 1987) and 68% (Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997) of female employees report experiencing sexually harassing behaviors in their workplaces. Given that these incidents occur within an organizational context with such a high frequency, it is not surprising that researchers have begun to examine sexual harassment as one of several potential job-related stressors within comprehensive models of organizational behavior (Hulin, 1993). For example, Fitzgerald, Hulin, and Drasgow (1995) have developed an integrated model of sexual harassment that explores the organizational antecedents of sexual harassment, as well as its consequences within the context of other job-related stressors.

Although the conceptualization of sexual harassment as a stressor and attention to organizational factors has advanced our understanding of sexual harassment, this research has focused solely on outcomes for the direct (i.e., individual) target of sexual harassment; the possible effects of sexual harassment that may reach beyond the target (i.e., co-workers and others in the organization) have not been examined. Given the interdependence of employees in a work group, however, co-workers who witness, hear about, or are cognizant of the sexual harassment of others may experience negative outcomes similar to those of the victim. This study proposes that the negative job-related, health, and psychological outcomes associated with sexual harassment will affect other women in the targets' work groups. Discussion of this proposition draws on literature regarding general workplace stressors, research on co-victimization, and concepts from group research.

Direct and Indirect Exposure to Sexual Harassment as a Workplace Stressor

Attempts to place sexual harassment into a framework comparable to that of general job stress have focused attention on the organizational antecedents and job-related outcomes of sexual harassment as a stressor (Fitzgerald, Hulin, & Drasgow, 1995). The majority of research on work stress focuses on stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, environmental stress, and qualitative or quantitative work role overload. Research demonstrates that work stress experienced as a result of these traditional job stressors has negative effects on employees’ job attitudes and behaviors, psychological well-being, and physical health (Tetrick & LaRocco, 1987). Characterizing sexual harassment experiences as stressors seems appropriate given Kahn and Byosiere’s (1992) definition of job stressors as “stimuli generated on the job and having negative consequences, physical or psychological, for significant proportions of people exposed to them” (p. 598). These stimuli are characteristics of a work environment that may be conceived of as either discretionary stimuli that are transmitted to individuals differentially or ambient stimuli that pervade the group setting and are potentially available to all group members (Hackman, 1992). Both discretionary and ambient stimuli can have informational, affective and behavioral impacts on group members (Hackman, 1992). Similarly, sexual
harassment can operate as either a discretionary or an ambient stimuli; sexual harassment experienced directly by a women as a target (discretionary stimuli) or indirectly as a member of a work group pervading a work environment (ambient stimuli) may have similar negative effects.

By conceptualizing sexual harassment as one potential job stressor, we may infer that exposure to this stressor, be it direct or indirect, will result in outcomes similar to those from other work stressors (e.g., negative effects on job attitudes, psychological outcomes, and physical health). Support for the conceptualization of direct exposure to sexual harassment as a job stressor has been discussed elsewhere (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). The conceptualization of indirect exposure as a stressor that is similar to, but distinct from, direct exposure requires some extrapolation from related research.

A modest amount of research evidence demonstrates that employees are often aware of the sexual harassment of their co-workers. Bond (1990) and Salisbury (in press) report that the co-workers of a sexual harassment victim may witness the harassment or hear about the harassment experience from the victim or other co-workers. Using a sample of American Psychological Association members, Bond (1990) found that women who were aware of colleagues’ experiences with sexual harassment in their graduate program rated the environment as less supportive of women than those who had personally experienced harassment. However, no outcome measures were used in this study so it is impossible to determine whether awareness of the sexual harassment of colleagues led to negative consequences for the respondents. Related evidence suggests that women are aware of which male co-workers harass other women (Gutek, 1985), suggesting that communication regarding sexual harassment incidents among co-workers is probable.

Evidence such as this indicates that it is not unusual for individuals to be aware of the sexual harassment of co-workers, either directly or indirectly. Similarly, employees are frequently aware of organizational complaints and investigations and are sometimes questioned or interviewed concerning their awareness and knowledge of these situations. These findings prompt consideration of the effects of such indirect exposure, that is, watching, hearing, or knowing about individuals in one’s work group who are sexually harassed.

In addition to conceptualizing direct exposure to sexual harassment as a potential job stressor, it seems reasonable to conceive of indirect exposure to sexual harassment as a related job stressor with similar antecedents and consequences. Over and above the stress experienced by an individual target of sexual harassment, an incident of sexual harassment may create a generally stressful environment that is experienced by others in the work group. For example, women who are aware of the harassment of their co-workers may experience stress from being worried that they will become a target of sexual harassment, from observing a negative or unsupportive response from the victim’s co-workers or the organization, or from feeling powerless in curbing the harassment of a co-worker. Just as sexual harassment is a stressor with negative job, health, and psychological outcomes, being in an environment in
which sexual harassment is prevalent may also have negative outcomes that spillover or diffuse to individuals who are indirectly exposed to the harassment.

Indirect Exposure to Sexual Harassment as Co-victimization

The diffusion of negative outcomes to individuals other than the target has been investigated with respect to various forms of violence and harassment. Research suggests that, in addition to victims, witnesses or bystanders of violence may experience a number of severe psychological outcomes (North, Smith, McCool, & Shea, 1989; Warner & Weist, 1996). The concept of "co-victimization" (Jacobson, Koehler, & Jones-Brown, 1987) defined as "the experience of directly observing the violent assault of another person" (Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991, p. 233) extends the sphere of influence of a traumatic experience to witnesses of the trauma. The witness also becomes a victim on the assumption that indirect exposure to violence is traumatic in and of itself. Although it is a less direct form of exposure to violence, co-victimization still has detrimental effects on mental health, interpersonal relations, and academic performance (Pynoos & Nader, 1990; Warner & Weist, 1996).

Although much of the above research has been limited to investigations of three primary sources of co-victimization (domestic violence, sexual assault, and community violence), the process underlying the negative experiences of co-victimization may extend to witnesses of sexual harassment. If we maintain that sexual harassment is a form of violence, then witnesses to this type of violence may experience co-victimization and the resultant negative effects. Thus, experiencing sexual harassment directly, as a victim, or experiencing sexual harassment indirectly, as a co-victim, may have comparable negative outcomes.

Several organizational stressors have been related to negative outcomes for individuals who are not the direct targets of the stressor. For example, the perception of racial harassment within a work group affects employees who are not themselves the targets of the harassment; both minority and non-minority employees experience heightened stress when they perceive racial discrimination against minorities in their work group (Gutierres, Saenz, & Green, 1994). Organizational politics, conceptualized as a potential job stressor, has also been linked to dysfunctional job outcomes. Employees who perceive the work environment as highly politicized experience greater stress on the job, even when they are not directly involved in political influence attempts (Ferris, Frink, Gilmore, & Kacmar, 1994). Such evidence suggests that the effects of job stressors are quite diffuse and extend beyond the focal target; thus, it seems reasonable to propose that the impact of the stressor of sexual harassment may be more extensive than previously thought.

Extending the Research on Indirect Exposure to Sexual Harassment

A small body of experimental and field research indicates that indirect exposure to sexual harassment may have negative outcomes similar to those of
experiencing it directly (e.g., Schneider, 1996; Sorenson, Luzio, & Mangione-Lambie, 1994). Laboratory research has demonstrated that assuming the role of a witness to a hypothetical sexual harassment incident can lead to negative affect, increased depression, and decreased motivation (Sorenson et al., 1994). However, the Sorenson et al. scenarios depicted only sexual coercion or unwanted sexual attention situations, and did not explore the reactions of observers to hypothetical situations involving gender harassment, an important dimension of a hostile work environment. In addition, evidence from other analogue studies has shown that the reactions of observers to the scenarios often do not represent how employees actually react given the rich organizational contexts and the possibility of retaliation from other organizational members (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995).

Field research has begun to examine the consequences of bystander stress, conceptualized as the stress workers experience when observing or hearing about co-workers being sexually harassed (Schneider, 1995; 1996). Defined in this manner, bystander stress is an individual level variable, a psychological measure of perceived stress. Schneider’s (1996) research indicates that women who experience bystander stress report lower satisfaction with their co-workers and supervision, decreased life satisfaction, and lower levels of psychological well-being compared to others in their organization. This small body of research supports the general proposition that indirect exposure to sexual harassment may have negative psychological and attitudinal outcomes.

Preliminary evidence of the effects of harassment on work groups. In addition to investigating the effects of self-reported bystander stress, Schneider (1995) provided initial evidence of the job-related and psychological effects of the level of harassment present in a work group. Using a sample of 300 female and 209 male university faculty and staff members, it was possible to identify departmental units and estimate work group harassment levels. A woman’s work group harassment level was estimated using the reports of sexual harassment behaviors experienced by her co-workers. Investigations of direct exposure to sexual harassment have commonly used the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, & Gelfand, 1993) which asks women to report whether they have experienced offensive, sex-related behaviors. Schneider (1995) determined any individual’s degree of indirect exposure by computing the average SEQ score for all female employees in the work group, excluding the focal individual’s score. Unlike individual level measures of bystander stress (e.g., Schneider, 1996) and behaviorally based self-report assessments of direct exposure to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1993), indirect exposure to sexual harassment is conceptualized as a work group level variable. This procedure provides an estimate of the general (ambient) level of sexual harassment in a work group, uncontaminated by the common problem of method variance inherent in using self-report, single source data.

Schneider (1995) found that work group harassment level was significantly correlated with female respondents’ satisfaction with co-workers, control over work, levels of bystander stress, and direct experiences of sexual harassment.
These correlations indicate that women in departments with higher work group harassment levels had lower co-worker satisfaction \( (r = -0.15; p < 0.01) \), reported having significantly less control over their work \( (r = -0.14; p < 0.05) \), and experienced higher levels of bystander stress \( (r = 0.22; p < 0.01) \). Additionally, women's direct experiences of harassment were correlated with work group harassment level \( (r = 0.15; p < 0.01) \) such that in work groups where other women reported higher levels of harassment, the respondent also reported experiencing more harassing behaviors.

Although the results from the university sample are intriguing and provide preliminary evidence of the far-reaching effects of sexual harassment, the nature of the university work environment created difficulties in determining appropriate work groups. The work group referent used in the analysis was the respondent's department; all individuals who worked within the same department were considered co-workers and their harassment experiences were used to create other departmental employees' work group harassment scores. However, some departments were housed in two or more buildings, and departmental members may have interacted rarely with other department members who worked in other locations, yet their experiences were used to create work group harassment scores.

Despite the problems with defining work groups in the Schneider (1995) study, there are conceptual and methodological advantages of calculating indirect exposure as a work group level variable. Using two samples with well-defined work groups, the present study extends the research on Schneider's (1995) group level measure of indirect exposure to sexual harassment, a phenomena we refer to as ambient sexual harassment. We use the procedure introduced by Schneider (1995) to define ambient sexual harassment as the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors perpetrated against others in a woman's work group. We incorporate this work group variable as an additional workplace stressor into the comprehensive framework developed by Fitzgerald and her colleagues (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; see Fig. 1), postulating that it will have the same exogenous antecedents as direct sexual harassment (i.e., organizational tolerance toward sexual harassment and masculinized job context) as well as similar negative job-related, psychological, and health outcomes (see Fig. 2).

**FIG. 1.** Integrated model of antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment.
FIG. 2  Integrated model of antecedents and consequences of ambient sexual harassment and sexual harassment.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Questionnaires were completed by 1156 individuals (455 women, 687 men, 14 participants did not provide gender information) employed at a large utility company and 594 individuals (295 women, 299 men) from a food processing company. Six-hundred-forty-nine women provided a sufficient number of responses to a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to be included in the proposed analyses (we discarded questionnaires with more than 50% missing data). The ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 80% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, 5% Asian American, 2% African-American, 1% Native American, 1% other, and 1% did not provide ethnicity information. After creation of the work group level variable (see below) and listwise deletion of cases with missing values, the resulting sample size for the analysis was 300.

Questionnaires were administered to participants in group sessions ranging in size from 1 to 78. The study was conducted as part of the organization’s efforts to create a harassment-free workplace and was described as a survey of the quality of organizational life. Participation in these sessions was voluntary, but was strongly encouraged by the human resource departments.

Measures

Organizational antecedents. The organizational antecedents of sexual harassment were assessed via two scales: organizational tolerance of sexual harassment and job gender context. The Organizational Tolerance of Sexual Harassment Inventory (OTSHI; Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996; Zickar, Matt, & Hulin, 1997) measures organizational climate for sexual harassment conceptualized as shared perceptions of contingencies between behaviors and organizational outcomes (Naylor, Pritchard, & Ilgen, 1980). Participants report their perceptions of organizational sanctions that would be incurred for various forms of harassing behavior. The OTSHI presents vignettes in which the organizational role of a male harasser (supervisor or co-worker) is crossed with a
type of harassing behavior (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, or sexual coercion) resulting in six vignettes. Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants respond to three questions for each vignette. The questions assess (1) the perceived risk to a female victim of reporting the harasser, (2) the likelihood that her allegations would be taken seriously by the organization, and (3) the likelihood that the harasser would be punished. Individuals’ responses to all 18 items are summed to create an individual level assessment of climate. For a discussion of climate as a group level variable see Zickar et al. (1997).

The degree to which a participant’s job context is considered masculine or feminine, job gender context, was determined by three items; each item was treated as a separate indicator of the job gender context construct in the LISREL measurement model. Participants were asked whether or not they were one of the first of their sex to do their job and whether their immediate supervisor was male or female. In addition, they estimated the gender ratio of their work group on a 5-point scale, ranging from “almost all men” to “almost all women.” A woman who has a male supervisor, who has a work group numerically dominated by men, and who was one of the first women in her job position would be considered to have a masculine job context.

Sexual harassment. Sexual harassment was assessed via the behaviorally based, self-report Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) developed by Fitzgerald et al. (1993; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995). The SEQ assesses the frequency with which women are exposed to three categories of offensive sex-related behaviors: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment comprises offensive, misogynist, degrading remarks and behavior not intended to elicit sexual cooperation. Unwanted sexual attention is characterized by unwelcome sexual behaviors that are unwanted and unreciprocated by the target; these behaviors are not tied to any job-related outcomes. Behaviors in the sexual coercion category, however, consist of implicit or explicit efforts to make job-related outcomes conditional on sexual cooperation. Using a 5-point scale ranging from “never” to “most of the time,” participants report whether they have experienced offensive sex-related behaviors from male co-workers or supervisors in the previous 2 years. The words sexual harassment do not appear until the last item in the scale. To avoid biasing participants’ responses to the outcome measures (described below), participants responded to the SEQ after completing assessments of the job and psychological outcome variables. For an account of the theoretical and empirical development of the SEQ, see Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow (1995).

Ambient sexual harassment. Ambient Sexual Harassment (ASH) is an estimate of the general (ambient) level of sexual harassment in a work group. An individual’s ASH score was determined by computing the mean SEQ score for all female employees in the work group, excluding the focal individual’s score. Individuals were classified into work groups based on common job information, specifically, work location, department, area, job title, and shift. Participants who did not provide this information could not be placed into work groups.
and therefore were eliminated from all analyses. Those work groups identified as having fewer than four female employees were also eliminated from the analyses due to unreliability in computing a mean work group SEQ score for small work groups. The above elimination of participants accounts for a considerable amount of the reduction in sample size. From the resulting 300 women included in the analysis, a total of 39 work groups ranging in size from 4 to 31 were created.

**Job outcomes.** Job outcomes were assessed via measures of job satisfaction and organizational withdrawal. Job satisfaction was measured using shortened versions of the Work, Supervisor, and Coworker scales of the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), as revised by Roznowski (1989). Participants respond Yes, No, or ? to a series of adjectives describing relevant characteristics of their work tasks, supervisor, and co-workers.

Organizational withdrawal was assessed using measures of work withdrawal, defined as attempts to avoid the tasks of one's work role, and job withdrawal, defined as partial or complete withdrawal from one's job in an organization (Hanisch, 1990; Hanisch & Hulin, 1990; 1991). The work withdrawal scale assesses the frequency with which employees engage in withdrawal behaviors (i.e., taking long breaks, leaving work early, and missing meetings) on a 8-point scale ranging from “never” to “more than once a week.” The job withdrawal scale assesses the extent to which employees engage in job withdrawal behaviors (i.e., intentions to quit, perceived difficulty in securing alternative employment, and thinking about quitting).

**Psychological outcomes.** The Mental Health Index (MHI; Veit & Ware, 1983), Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, 1984; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and Faces Scale (Kunin, 1955) were used to assess the psychological outcomes of harassment. The MHI was constructed specifically to assess differences in mental health status in the general population and focuses on the more prevalent symptoms of psychological distress (e.g., anxiety and depression). Participants respond to items describing these symptoms using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “none of the time” to “all of the time.” The SWLS is a global assessment of well-being with respect to all aspects of a person's life. Using a 7-point response scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” the SWLS asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they are satisfied with their life. Kunin's (1955) one-item Faces Scale presents respondents with seven faces depicting various levels of happiness. Respondents select the face which best represents their general life satisfaction. All psychological outcome measures described were coded so that higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological distress.

**Health outcomes.** Health outcomes were assessed via measures of health conditions and health satisfaction. The Health Conditions Index (HCI) is a yes/no checklist of health and physical symptoms adapted from the Cornell Medical Checklist (Brodman, Erdman, Lorge, & Wolff, 1949). Participants are asked to indicate the presence or absence of specific health symptoms such as severe
headaches, shortness of breath upon exertion, and difficulty falling asleep. Lower scores on the HCl indicate poorer physical health. Health satisfaction is assessed via a subscale of the Retirement Descriptive Index (RDI; Smith, et al., 1969) in which participants respond Yes, No, or ? to short descriptive phrases reflecting feelings and perceptions of one's health.

Control variable. The Stress In General scale (SIG; Smith, Sademan, & McCrary, 1992) assesses global occupational stress using the Yes, No, ? format of the JDI. The SIG provides a baseline measure against which sexual harassment can be evaluated and was included in the structural equation model to ensure that the effects due to ordinary job stress were not erroneously attributed to sexual harassment.

Additional measures. Since this study was conducted as part of a larger academic research project, there were additional scales completed by participants that were not included in the present analyses. These measures assessed participants' attitudes toward sexual harassment, characteristics of a specific harassing incident, and potential coping responses to sexual harassment.

Analyses

To test the model shown in Fig. 2, we used LISREL VIII (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993) structural equation modeling software. Tests of the measurement model were performed to determine the factor loadings of the observed indicators on each of the latent constructs. Analysis of the structural model assessed the proposed relationships among the latent constructs.

As described in Fitzgerald et al. (1997), three manifest indicators were created for each latent construct. Items were distributed among the indicators in an attempt to balance them with respect to classical test theory item statistics and item content; this procedure "maximizes the extent to which the indicators of each construct share variance" (Fitzgerald et al., 1997, p. 13).

To determine the extent to which the data conformed to our predictions, we examined a variety of goodness-of-fit indices, such as the $\chi^2$ to degrees of freedom ratio, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), the root mean square residual (RMSR), and the non-normed fit index (NNFI). Standardized path coefficients were examined to determine the degree of relatedness among the constructs in our model.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the scale means divided by the number of items in the scale, standard deviations, scale reliabilities and intercorrelations for the variables in the study. Examination of the .30 correlation between ASH and SEQ demonstrates that although the two measures are related, ambient sexual harassment is not redundant with sexual harassment. As would be expected, ASH is negatively correlated with measures of job and health satisfaction and positively correlated with measures of psychological distress.
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Note. OTSHI, Organizational Tolerance of Sexual Harassment Inventory; ASH, Ambient Sexual Harassment; SEQ, Sexual Experiences Questionnaire; WKSAT, JDI Satisfaction with Work; COWSAT, JDI Satisfaction with Co-workers; SUPSAT, JDI Satisfaction with Supervision; JWITH, Job Withdrawal; WWITH, Work Withdrawal; HELCOND, Health Conditions Index; LIFESAT, Satisfaction With Life Scale; MHI, MHI Distress and Well-Being; HELSAT, RDI Health Satisfaction; JOBSTRESS, Stress in General.

*a* Means shown are the scale means divided by the number of items in the scale.

*b* Dash indicates that this particular statistic is not applicable.

*p < .05, **p < .01.
As evident from the goodness-of-fit indices in Table 2, the measurement model provided a satisfactory fit to the data. The $\chi^2$ to degrees of freedom ratio was 1.66, the GFI was 0.89, the AGFI was 0.86, the RMSR was 0.046 and the NNFI was 0.94. The factor loadings from the measurement model for each set of three manifest indicators on their latent variable (Table 3) were large and significant at the .001 level. Together, these results suggest a good fit to the data.

The second stage of analysis involved estimating the relationships among the latent constructs shown in Fig. 2. As shown in Table 2, the fit indices for the structural model included a $\chi^2$ to degrees of freedom ratio of 2.19, a GFI of 0.84, an AGFI of 0.81, a RMSR of 0.096 and a NNFI of 0.89. These statistics suggest a reasonable fit to the data. Exploratory analyses using work groups of 5 or more women and 6 or more women revealed that the standardized path coefficients and fit indices were stable. However, increasing the requirement for work group size results in a decrease in the number of usable cases, making the use of very large groups prohibitive in structural equation modeling.

The estimated paths and their standard errors are shown in Fig. 3. Inspection of these coefficients indicates that 16 of the 19 predicted relationships were in the hypothesized direction and 13 of the 16 were statistically significant; the three remaining paths were close to zero. The paths from organizational climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational tolerance of sexual harassment</td>
<td>.88 .90 .96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job context</td>
<td>.34 .38 .72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job stress</td>
<td>.88 .90 .79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambient sexual harassment</td>
<td>1.00 -a -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment</td>
<td>.91 .83 .88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>.88 .94 .92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health conditions</td>
<td>.61 .62 .69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological conditions</td>
<td>.90 .93 .92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health satisfaction</td>
<td>.70 .30 .81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work withdrawal</td>
<td>.75 .63 .68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job withdrawal</td>
<td>.57 .51 .89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a A dash indicates that this particular statistic is not applicable.*

**TABLE 2**

Goodness-of-fit Indices for Measurement and Structural Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$/df</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>RMSR</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measurement</td>
<td>629.92</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>902.26</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment were .31 and .14 respectively. This suggests that employees’ perceptions that the organization is tolerant of sexual harassment are positively related to their experiences of sexual harassment as well as to the ambient level of sexual harassment in their work group.

Although the paths from job gender context to both sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment were not significant, the path from job context to sexual harassment was in the expected direction; women in a masculinized job gender context report slightly more experiences of sexual harassing behavior. With respect to ambient sexual harassment, the relationship is in the opposite direction. Interpretation of these results is problematic because of a possible restriction of range problem created by the requirement that a work group have at least four women for computation of an ASH score. A woman who works in a work group with no or few female co-workers would be working in a masculinized job gender context, but she would be excluded from these analyses, thus restricting the range of the job gender context variable.

The relationships between sexual harassment and the job and psychological outcomes were in the hypothesized direction. The path from sexual harassment to job satisfaction was -.18, indicating that women who report experiencing sexually harassing behaviors are less satisfied with their jobs. Although the path from sexual harassment to health conditions was not significant, Fitzgerald et al. (1997) suggest that sexual harassment affects health conditions through its influence on psychological conditions; this effect was also demonstrated in our model. As illustrated by our results, there was a significant positive relationship (a standardized path coefficient of .13) between sexual harassment and psychological conditions indicating that women who report experiencing sexually harassing behaviors have higher psychological distress.

Of particular interest are the job and psychological outcomes of ambient sexual harassment. The paths from ambient sexual harassment to the various outcomes mirror those of sexual harassment. The path from ambient sexual harassment to job satisfaction was -.35; this indicates that the greater the
ambient level of sexual harassment in a woman's work group, the lower her job satisfaction. The path from ambient sexual harassment to psychological conditions was .26, which suggests that women who are in a work group where there is a high level of ambient sexual harassment experience greater psychological distress. Although the direct path from ambient sexual harassment to health conditions was not significant, there is an indirect effect through psychological conditions, as found previously in Fitzgerald et al. (1997). In sum, incorporating the work group level variable into the structural equation model demonstrates that there are severe negative outcomes of indirect exposure to sexual harassment even after accounting for direct exposure to sexually harassing behaviors.

The paths from job stress to job satisfaction, health conditions, and psychological conditions were −.23, −.21, and .21 respectively. Thus, women who report higher levels of job stress also report being less satisfied with their jobs and having more health and psychological problems. It is important to note that after accounting for the effects due to ordinary job stress, both sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment have separate and independent effects on job, health, and psychological outcomes.

As suggested previously, various job stressors are believed to affect health conditions through their effects on psychological conditions (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). In our model, there was a significant negative path of −.60 between psychological conditions and health conditions, indicating that women who experience psychological distress report more health problems. As expected, experiencing health conditions was significantly related to health satisfaction; the path coefficient was estimated as .94 which demonstrates that women who have more health problems are less satisfied with their health.

The significant negative paths from health satisfaction to work withdrawal and job withdrawal were −.34 and −.15 respectively. These results illustrate that women who are less satisfied with their health are more likely to engage in organizational withdrawal behaviors.

The paths from job satisfaction to both work withdrawal and job withdrawal were .01 and −.39 respectively. The lack of relation between job satisfaction and work withdrawal is surprising given that previous research has traditionally supported this link (i.e., Hanisch & Hulin, 1990; 1991). The significant path from job satisfaction to job withdrawal illustrates that the less satisfied a woman is with her job, the more likely she is to engage in job withdrawal behaviors (e.g., thinking about quitting).

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the present study suggest that the effects of sexual harassment are more pervasive than previously thought. Even after accounting for an individual's personal experience of harassment and general job stress, our data suggest that indirect exposure within the context of the work group exerts a detrimental influence on job satisfaction and psychological conditions. In addition, organizational tolerance of sexually harassing behaviors is related
to the incidence of both direct and indirect (i.e., ambient) sexual harassment. These findings indicate that both forms of harassment have similar antecedents and consequences, thus supporting the usefulness of incorporating ambient sexual harassment into theoretical models of sexual harassment.

As predicted, women who perceive their organizations to be tolerant of sexually harassing behaviors (i.e., complaints are not taken seriously, it is risky to complain, and perpetrators are unlikely to be punished) are not only more likely to experience sexual harassment, but also are more likely to have a work group that is permeated with ambient sexual harassment. As discussed in Fitzgerald et al. (1997), one could argue that those women who endorse items on the SEQ are also more likely to respond negatively to items on the OTSHI and other scales measuring unfavorable job-related and psychological outcomes. This phenomena is sometimes referred to as the “whiner” effect; it is an example of the common method bias problem that results from using single-source, self-report data. However, as illustrated in Fig. 3, a focal individual’s assessment of organizational climate predicts not only her report of direct sexual harassment, as measured by the SEQ, but also the level of ambient sexual harassment in her work group, as measured by the mean SEQ of others in her work group—a measure which does not include the focal individual’s SEQ score. Thus, organizational climate as reported by one woman is related to the sexual harassment reported by other women in her work group.

The individual level and work group level measures of sexual harassment have similar effects on job and psychological outcomes, further abnegating the common method bias argument. Women who directly experience sexually harassing behaviors, or are members of work groups with high levels of ambient sexual harassment, report lower job satisfaction and greater psychological distress. Thus, ambient sexual harassment is related to psychological and job outcomes even after accounting for a woman’s direct exposure to sexual harassment. For those women who themselves were never targets of direct sexual harassment, this model suggests that just being exposed to ambient sexual harassment in their work group results in negative outcomes.

Both sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment affect the extent to which women engage in job and work withdrawal behaviors; these effects occur through their influence on job satisfaction, psychological conditions, and health problems. Women who experience sexually harassing behaviors, or are members of work groups where ambient sexual harassment is prevalent, report higher levels of absenteeism, intentions to quit, and are more likely to leave work early, take long breaks, and miss meetings.

It is also important to note that the negative effects of sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment occurred even after accounting for general job stress. As discussed earlier, general job stress was included in the model to ensure that the effects due to ordinary job stress were not erroneously attributed to sexual harassment or ambient sexual harassment. The significant paths from job stress to the outcome measures, as well as from both sexual harassment and ambient sexual harassment to the outcome measures, indicate
that direct and indirect exposure to sexually harassing behaviors have substantial negative effects on female employees over and above that accounted for by traditional job stressors.

Implications

Incorporating the phenomena of ambient sexual harassment into existing models of organizational behavior has a number of theoretical, organizational, and legal implications. From a theoretical perspective, the primary contribution concerns the finding that negative outcomes may extend beyond the target of sexual harassment. Although a small body of research has begun to explore the detrimental effects of indirect exposure to sexual harassment (i.e., Schneider, 1996; Sorenson et al., 1994), this study uses a behaviorally based assessment of such exposure. The work group measure of ambient sexual harassment does not depend on whether work group members self-report witnessing, hearing about, or being cognizant of the sexual harassment of others. Rather, we assess the ambient level of harassment via independent reports of sexually harassing behaviors in the work group; this defines (and assumes) indirect exposure.

As discussed previously, our findings aid in the refutation of the "whiner" hypothesis. The significant relationships between our work group level variable of ambient sexual harassment and both organizational antecedents and consequences illustrates that such effects are not due to simple self-consistency or negative affectivity on the part of the respondents. The organizational antecedents and consequences, as measured from a single source, are highly related to ASH as measured from an alternative source; thus arguing against the possibility of common method variance or response bias.

In addition to such theoretical and methodological advantages, the concept of ambient sexual harassment has important implications for organizations. The incorporation of ambient sexual harassment into organizational behavior models that evaluate the effects of various job stressors (i.e., sexual harassment and general job stress) confirms that this phenomena is an organizational rather than an individual problem. Sexual harassment and its potent effects on individuals other than the target cannot be disembedded from their organizational context; the negative outcomes of sexual harassment diffuse well beyond the focal individual to others in the organization.

Finally, the concept of ambient sexual harassment may have substantial legal implications. The behaviorally based work group level variable created in this study may aid in the operationalization of a hostile work environment as defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines (1980, pp. 74,676–74,677). Female members of work groups in which ambient sexual harassment is prevalent appear to experience many of the same effects as focal targets, and thus may have a claim to legal relief.

Although current case law in class action suits (e.g., Jenson et al. vs. Eveleth Taconite Mines, 1996) requires each class member to demonstrate the degree to which she personally was damaged by the actions of the company, data such
as these provide strong inference that sexual harassment is damaging per se, not only to targets themselves but also to co-workers. This provides empirical support to those who argue that all women in an affected group should have access to legal relief. Just as the Environmental Protection Agency advocates legal action against second hand smoke, our data suggest that women should be able to take legal action if exposed to ambient sexual harassment.

Limitations

Exploration of ambient sexual harassment using the procedures discussed in this paper is limited by the accuracy with which one can define and create work groups. Because of the fluid nature of many informal organizational relationships, defining work groups by such variables as work location, department, area, job title, and shift may not capture the fuzzily defined groups and interpersonal networks that exist in organizational reality. A woman may be indirectly exposed to the harassment of women who are not in her work group as defined by the structured organizational categories, but may still experience negative effects. Conversely, a woman may be a member of a work group in which ambient sexual harassment is prevalent, but if she is in some way isolated or buffered from this indirect exposure she may not experience the same negative outcomes. Utilization of group level data requires substantial efforts to define work groups that are meaningful to the participants to ensure an accurate depiction of the operation of the phenomena.

In addition to the problems inherent in defining work groups, there is a methodological question concerning the appropriate work group size: How does work group size influence the effects of ambient sexual harassment? Although one would expect stronger effects of ambient sexual harassment in small, highly networked work groups, our measure of ambient sexual harassment is less reliable in small work groups; with fewer women in a work group, a smaller number of SEQ scores are used in the computation of ASH. Consequently, it should not be surprising to find larger effects for the ambient sexual harassment variable when larger work groups are used in the analysis. Exploratory analyses not reported in this study revealed that increasing the minimum work group size from four to five and six resulted in path coefficients that were consistently larger in magnitude. This methodological question needs to be addressed in future research seeking to compare the effects of ambient sexual harassment in large and small work groups.

Although this paper investigated the phenomena of ambient sexual harassment as experienced by women, it is possible that men will also be affected by the sexual harassment of women in their work group. The experience of ambient sexual harassment is likely to be quite different for men and women and thus, they were excluded from the analyses reported in this paper. For example, a man who is indirectly exposed to the sexual harassment of one of his female co-workers is unlikely to experience stress because he is worried about it happening to him, unlike women. However, he may experience stress from feeling unable to do anything about it or from fear of being perceived as similar
to the harasser and a contributor to the sexually harassing environment. Future research will explore the influence of indirect exposure to sexual harassment on men and may provide an additional indication of the pervasive effects of sexual harassment on all members of the organization. Such a possibility may provide a stimulus to organizations to initiate sustained and meaningful efforts at prevention.

REFERENCES


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