

COMMENTARY

## #I-Os matter—extending I-O research and theory even further into the design and implementation of sexual assault and harassment training: A STEM-based example

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Training designed to prevent sexual assault and harassment should absolutely rely on core industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology principles as Medeiros and Griffith (2019) describe in the focal article. However, I-O psychology is fundamentally a context-centered discipline, and I-O psychologists have made substantial contributions in studying gender dynamics in the context of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professions (Major, 2017). Moreover, I-O psychologists have long understood gender dynamics in the workplace (Roberson, Ryan, & Ragins, 2017). Thus, we suggest that I-O psychologists' expertise in understanding gender dynamics should be combined with their unique understanding of organizational and career contexts (e.g., STEM) in addressing this important societal phenomenon currently taking center stage in the United States and around the world.

To successfully design and implement a sexual harassment training program, it is imperative that not only the organizational climate but also the *job gender context*; that is, the gendered nature of the workgroup (e.g., group gender ratio) and whether job duties are considered to be in line with gender norms should be taken into account (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997). In male-dominated workplaces with a traditionally male-oriented task load, as in STEM fields, high levels of sexual harassment are coupled with women's reluctance to report sexual assault incidences due to concerns that it will affect their career standing.

Consider the challenging position of women pursuing academic career paths in most STEM disciplines. In a study of women faculty in US medical schools, half of female faculty members experienced some form of sexual harassment compared to only a few of their male peers, independent of region and institution (Carr et al., 2000). Though student experiences of sexual assault and related interventions have received widespread attention, there is a major gap in the literature between student-focused and faculty- or employee-focused trainings.

In the case of students, it is straightforward for those at all organizational levels of a university to at least nominally support training efforts to prevent sexual assault and harassment. Students are “the customers,” and their satisfaction is paramount. In addition, the power differential between students and those tasked with supporting, encouraging, and mentoring them is clear (NASEM, 2018).

In contrast, implementing training aimed at the prevention of sexual harassment and assault among colleagues in a university context is far more complex, especially in STEM units where

women are likely to be underrepresented, especially in leadership positions such as department chair and dean. Though power differentials among academic ranks can be great, especially pre-tenure versus post-tenure, faculty members are encouraged to view themselves as *colleagues*. This may make it inherently difficult to garner support from higher ups to promote the success of workplace trainings aimed at reducing rates of sexual assault experienced by female faculty members. It becomes particularly important to implement sexual harassment trainings for faculty led by credible and seasoned professional facilitators, outside of university leadership, rather than less effective peer-led trainings (Anderson & Whiston, 2005).

If the goal is to reduce assault and harassment of women faculty in STEM, it is important to consider that the mere admittance of a problem is risky for these women. Men and women in STEM are reluctant to admit that a gender-based power differential exists, men in an effort to maintain their dominant standing and women in an effort to prove their competency and value, which often comes into question in STEM professions (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010). Many women in STEM progress in their field by attempting to fit in with their male peers as “one of the boys” (Rhoton, 2011). The conceptualization of sexual harassment as an act committed by powerful men against vulnerable and powerless women may threaten the standing of female faculty in STEM, as it perpetuates the idea that women in these fields are less competent and capable (Dasgupta & Stout, 2014). Ineffective implementation of sexual assault trainings could jeopardize women’s participation in the “boy’s club” that often characterizes the STEM environment by making these issues more salient to male coworkers. Therefore, it is essential that sexual harassment trainings within this context be implemented with great care to avoid undermining the strength and capabilities of the women who work so hard to make a place for themselves in a male-dominated workplace.

Furthermore, women in male-dominated STEM professions develop resilience to common barriers they face in the workplace (Myers & Major, 2017), and this may extend to their perceived experiences of sexual harassment. For example, women administrators have been found to receive a great deal of unwanted propositions from male coworkers, although a relatively small proportion of these women report having been sexually harassed (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). It is essential that training programs are designed thoughtfully and that needs analyses are implemented to determine a way to reduce incidence of workplace sexual assault while considering the gender-related culture of the organization to avoid unintentionally exacerbating the barrier of workplace sexual harassment that women in STEM face.

If the implementation of workplace sexual harassment training is not well thought out in relation to the broader career and social contexts present, it may further threaten perceptions of women in STEM. Due to perceived biases in professional advancement (Carr et al., 2000), women in STEM may be reluctant to report experiences of sexual harassment. Further, as women constitute a minority in these fields, they may be under increased risk of the phenomena in which “high-risk” men develop a hostility reactance to typical sexual assault interventions, leading to adverse, rather than intended, effects (Malamuth, Huppig, & Linz, 2018). Women in male-traditional occupations often experience hostility due to their infringement on male power and privilege (Gruber, 1998). Therefore, trainings that result in acquisition of knowledge without an accompanying shift in behavior (Gibson & Humphrey, 1993; Lonsway & Kothari, 2000), or with adverse effects on behavior, may be particularly harmful in the case of women in STEM and other male-dominated occupations.

If workplace sexual harassment and assault trainings are treated with a “check the box” mentality, they have the potential to undermine women’s efforts to prove their competence in fields that are traditionally male dominated, such as STEM. Although we advocate a systematic approach to implementing sexual harassment interventions, it is imperative that I-O psychologists proceed with caution and consider the broader social and more proximal job gender context before implementing workplace training techniques, especially in the context of male-dominated workplaces. Women in STEM have a lot to gain from interventions designed to prevent workplace

sexual assault, considering the prevalence of sexual assault in male-dominated careers. However, while considering traditional training issues (e.g., training readiness, supervisor support, organizational culture), I-O psychologists must keep in mind that the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the workplace is inherently gendered to avoid the unintended exacerbation of sexual harassment barriers for women in male-dominated fields.

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