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COMMENTARY

Expanding the discourse surrounding sexual harassment: The case for considering experienced and observed hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and gendered incivility

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> *I think sexual harassment is the sharp ugly tip of the spear . . . . Microaggressions, all those things that happen to women on a daily basis that are undermining and disorienting. Being mistaken for someone more junior than you are, being spoken over in a meeting . . .*
>
> —Rachel Thomas, co-founder of LeanIn.org

Medeiros and Griffith (2019) rightfully highlight the tense public discourse when it comes to discussions of sexual harassment. However, although the focal article alludes to sexual harassment as overtly aggressive behaviors that occur sporadically, harassment in the workplace often has subtle forms that take shape day to day. Ignoring more covert, nuanced experiences of harassment at work can be dangerous; although hostile forms of harassment are more likely to be condemned (Cortina, 2008), subtle forms may go unnoticed (e.g., gendered or gender-targeted incivility; Cortina et al., 2002; Gabriel, Butts, Yuan, Rosen, & Sliter, 2018) or even be lauded (e.g., benevolent sexism; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Because of the subtler nature of certain indiscretions, these behaviors can perpetuate sexism at work, and this perpetuation may not "fall on the radar" for organizations. Further, it is likely that overt and covert sexist behaviors are detrimental regardless of whether they are directly experienced (i.e., one is the target) or merely observed. In light of these issues, our commentary elucidates three behaviors occurring within organizations that deserve greater attention: (a) hostile sexism, (b) benevolent sexism, and (c) gendered incivility. We urge practitioners to assess the prevalence and consequences of these behaviors when conducting needs analyses that Medeiros and Griffith note are crucial to combating sexual harassment. Additionally, we make the case for practitioners and organizations alike to consider the impact that witnessing sexual harassment has on observers (i.e., ambient sexism; Glomb et al., 1997).

Hostile and benevolent sexism

Ambivalent attitudes toward women originate in beliefs surrounding men's historical domination over women (i.e., patriarchal control) and their simultaneous dependency on women for survival (i.e., female dyadic power; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). Thus, ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001) holds that sexism encompasses hostile *and* benevolent feelings and/or attitudes toward women. Perhaps aligning with typical perceptions surrounding harassment, *hostile sexism* refers to overtly antagonistic attitudes toward women (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007) that

justify male superiority by characterizing women in derogatory ways (e.g., incompetent; Glick & Fiske, 1997). In the workplace, hostile sexism can range from negative evaluations of women who violate traditional gender roles to fewer recommendations for leadership positions. In line with this, decades of work (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007) and popular press articles (e.g., Hsu, 2018; Levin, 2017) have attested to the fact that hostile sexism is alive and (unfortunately) thriving at work. Indeed, women are punished for engaging in behaviors contradicting female stereotypic prescriptions (e.g., self-promoting; Rudman & Glick, 2001) and succeeding in traditionally male roles (e.g., Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), ultimately reinforcing the glass ceiling in organizations (Masser & Abrams, 2004).

Conversely, *benevolent sexism*—albeit accompanied by positive views of women—hinges on the belief that women are warm but incompetent and/or weak, necessitating protection by men. Benevolent sexism is more subtle, taking the form of seemingly "benign" behaviors, such as suggesting that certain tasks are too "tough" for women, calling women "sweetheart," noting how "cute" a female coworker looks, or complimenting a woman on her caring abilities (e.g., Dardenne et al., 2007; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Good & Rudman, 2010). Because "benevolent sexism is often disguised as chivalrous or even well-mannered behavior" (Good & Rudman, 2010, p. 482), it often goes unrecognized as sexism (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005a, 2005b), making its role in contributing to discrimination and prejudice against women pernicious. Nevertheless, such patronizing interactions undermine women's intelligence (Dardenne et al., 2007; Good & Rudman, 2010), providing rationale for confining women to traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Indeed, benevolent sexism can hinder women's careers, as such benevolent views can result in women being assigned fewer challenging experiences and receiving less developmental feedback (King et al., 2012).

Importantly, a typical needs analysis as described by Medeiros and Griffith (2019) *may* capture hostile sexism but may not necessarily capture benevolent sexism due to its covert nature. However, capturing both forms is essential because they have different implications for women's workplace experiences. For example, Dardenne et al. (2007) found that exposure to benevolent sexism, but not hostile sexism, relates to increased self-doubt in women, resulting in lower cognitive performance. Subsequent studies report similar findings (e.g., Dumont, Sarlet, & Dardenne, 2010; Jones et al., 2014), noting that benevolent sexism decreases self-efficacy and increases perceptions of incompetence, negatively impacting performance. Given these findings, it is possible that the well-being implications associated with these different forms of sexism may also differ and warrant careful attention.

Gendered incivility

With greater scrutiny of and reprimands for overt sexism, discrimination and prejudice against women often manifests in low-level mistreatment through selective or gendered incivility (Cortina, 2008; Cortina et al., 2002; Gabriel et al., 2018). Although similar in terms of its low intensity and ambiguous nature surrounding intent to harm, gendered incivility differs from more generalized forms of incivility as the former is linked to the target's gender. Specifically, gendered incivility encompasses behaviors such as interrupting, being condescending toward, and/or doubting the judgments of a female employee. The inconspicuous nature of these behaviors alongside the ambiguous intent allows perpetrators of gendered incivility to rationalize these behaviors as unrelated to inherent prejudice against women (Cortina, 2008). To this end, gendered incivility is largely overlooked when considering workplace harassment.

Yet, despite it being "low level," gendered incivility has harmful effects. Indeed, research has demonstrated that gendered incivility exposure impacts employees' psychological well-being and work withdrawal (e.g., Miner, Pesonen, Smittick, Seigel, & Clark, 2014). Given the negative ramifications associated with gendered incivility, organizations should not dismiss such acts as

innocuous; rather, organizations should begin capturing this form of mistreatment as well when conducting a thorough needs analysis. Doing so also presents an opportunity for organizations to design more targeted interventions aimed at preventing behaviors that fall in the "gray" zone surrounding misconduct at work. For instance, organizations can implement interventions about civility in the workplace and can explicitly address issues surrounding incivility that is targeted toward women but not necessarily men (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011).

Ambient sexism

In addition to including an examination of the prevalence of subtle forms of harassment, organizations should also assess *observed* harassment when conducting a needs analysis. In contrast to direct sexism experienced by the target, ambient sexism is experienced indirectly through observing harassment of others. Increasing awareness regarding experiences of ambient sexism is crucial in light of the fact that the negative impact of ambient sexism parallels that inflicted through direct acts of sexual harassment (Glomb et al., 1997). Indeed, seeing or hearing about sexual harassment relates to increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and decreased productivity (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Schneider, 1996). Observing hostile sexism can also reduce performance-based self-esteem and career aspirations among women (Bradley-Geist, Rivera, & Geringer, 2015). As with direct experiences of harassment, the negative consequences associated with observing sexism toward others extend beyond the workplace, as prior work has found that ambient sexism relates to lower health satisfaction (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004).

Aside from its direct experiences on the observer, experiences of ambient sexism may also have negative implications for future interactions. Indeed, similar to work on the contagion effect of incivility (Rosen, Koopman, Gabriel, & Johnson, 2016), experiencing ambient sexism may result in increases in instigated sexism (either hostile or benevolent) toward other women. Thus, assessing the prevalence of ambient sexism at work may provide insights surrounding why, and how, a culture of harassment is perpetuated within a particular organization.

Conclusion

In today's organizations, harassment is a far too common occurrence. However, gender-based harassment is a broad term that encompasses both egregious overt acts and inconspicuous subtle behaviors. Although organizations typically capture overtly hostile behaviors in their needs analyses, we emphasize the need to assess more covert types of harassment—namely, benevolent sexism and gendered incivility. We also make the case for organizations to consider employees' experiences of ambient sexism given that the effects of indirect exposure to harassment parallel direct experiences. As a final point, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) note that needs analyses on harassment in organizations are reactive and infrequent rather than proactive and regular. Thus, we encourage both scholars and practitioners alike to be proactive, capturing repeated snapshots of women's exposure to sexual harassment and related experiences noted here via experience sampling methods (e.g., Gabriel et al., in press). This will ultimately provide a more realistic picture surrounding the day-to-day incidence of harassment at work, helping better craft organizational interventions and support.

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