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COMMENTARY

Expanding the footprint of sexual harassment prevention training: A power, credit, and leadership perspective

Jennifer A. Griffith[1,*] and Kelsey E. Medeiros[2]

[1]University of New Hampshire and [2]University of Nebraska at Omaha
*Corresponding author. Email: Jennifer.griffith@unh.edu

Current approaches to sexual harassment and discrimination training remain limited in their effectiveness due to a series of issues highlighted by Hayes et al. (2020), including poorly designed training programs, a failure to understand the issue, and the misapplication of psychological principles. Additionally, other issues with sexual harassment training have been highlighted in previous volumes of this journal, including inappropriate measurement and a limited lens on short-term outcomes (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019a) as well as the potential for backlash (Steele & Vandello, 2019). The stakes involved with both sexual harassment and discrimination warrant attention to these issues and a concentrated effort on improving these programs in order to make a real impact. As such, we agree with the perspective presented by Hayes and colleagues, and wish to extend their conversation on the application of psychological principles in sexual harassment interventions by discussing the role of idiosyncrasy credits and the impact of power dynamics in the perpetuation of harassment in the workplace.

As per Williams et al. (1999), holding those who engage in sexual harassment accountable is a critical factor in the reduction of workplace sexual harassment. Hayes et al. (2020) note this finding as well, and we believe it warrants additional consideration in the conversation given recent workplace sexual harassment statistics in which HR professionals and employees disagreed significantly regarding the extent to which incidents go unreported (SHRM, 2018). HR professionals endorsed the opinion that unreported incidents are *not* a major problem nearly *twice* as often as employees, suggesting that policy makers and enactors are out of step with the experiences of their employees. Available evidence suggests that sexual misconduct goes unreported for reasons ranging from fear of retaliation to a belief that nothing will change (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 2017). Even experimental studies have explored practical workplace implications associated with sexual harassment. For instance, Hart (2019) found that those who evaluated candidates who reported their own sexual harassment were far less likely to recommend them for promotion compared to those who did not mention harassment or had a colleague report on their behalf. Sexual harassment also directly impacts the career choices of women, as those who are sexually harassed are 6.5 times more likely to leave an organization (McLaughlin et al., 2017). These results are mirrored in over 20 years of research on the relationship between sexual harassment and turnover. It would seem, then, that failing to develop and impose consequences on those who *engage* in sexual harassment results in consequences for those who *experience* workplace harassment. In light of this, here, we consider two possible barriers to accountability.

Credit and power as barriers to accountability

Idiosyncrasy credits

Idiosyncrasy credits refer to one's allowances for deviating from a group norm (Hollander, 1958). The accumulation and spending of these credits can be analogized as a bank account, in which someone earns credits for certain behaviors or characteristics, including good performance and high status. The more credits one has, the more likely their "idiosyncratic" behavior will be allowed. If the individual behaving differently from the group has no credits left in their bank, others will likely view their behavior as unacceptable, and there may be repercussions for their deviation. This theory, although rarely directly empirically tested, has been used to explain different phenomena, including failure to whistleblow (Miceli & Near, 1988) and forgiving a leader's mistakes (Schyns & Hansbrough, 2008).

An idiosyncrasy lens also provides an explanation for why sexual harassment may continue after even the most well-designed training efforts. As Susan Fowler now famously described from her time at Uber, her report of harassment to HR was dismissed because the manager was a "high performer" (Scheiber & Creswell, 2017). In other words, the manager's performance had filled his bank with credits, which could then be used in this instance to avoid repercussions for his actions. Medeiros and Griffith (2019b) also noted this effect in surgery, finding that allegations against high-performing doctors who created a toxic operating room culture were ignored due to their status or reputation.

The use of credits to excuse sexual harassment aids in perpetuating attitudes that sexual harassment is acceptable, regardless of the stance communicated in training. As previous reviews have noted (e.g., Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Medeiros & Griffith, 2019a), the post-training environment has a significant impact on whether the attitudes, skills, and behaviors communicated during training are reinforced on the job. Allowing high performers, and others, to spend their idiosyncrasy credits on sexual harassment contradicts sexual harassment training messages, degrading any progress made during training and enforcing a belief that sexual harassment is acceptable in this organization. These actions likely significantly contribute to the underreporting of sexual harassment in organizations (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Power dynamics

The ability to hold perpetrators accountable is also constrained by uneven power structures. Sexual harassment is most likely to occur in organizations with lopsided gender and power differentials, including male-dominated fields such as construction (Hegewisch & O'Farrell, 2015) and surgery (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019b); in service work (Rodriguez & Reyes, 2014); and in low-wage, shift work (ROC United, 2012; Sepler, 2015). Undocumented workers or those on temporary work visas are also more likely to be targets of sexual harassment (Bauer & Ramirez, 2010). This is not to say that sexual harassment does not occur in office jobs, but rather, that we are functionally ignoring the impact of potentially extreme power and opportunity asymmetries in favor of convenient sampling. Without expressly including those who are most likely to experience sexual harassment and assault in our work, we are likely to be undercounting incidence rates and perhaps providing unhelpful interventions to those most likely to face sexual harassment.

For example, bystander intervention is one of the most widely recommended evidence-based responses to workplace sexual harassment (Banyard et al., 2004; Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). However, this intervention requires both others to be present to intervene and those present to have the capability to intervene. In the case of agricultural workers, they may be isolated from fellow workers when they are harassed or assaulted (Yeung & Rubenstein 2013). Further, when there are bystanders, if the perpetrator is a supervisor, others may forgo intervening due

to fear of becoming a target themselves, being fired from a job in an area with limited employment opportunities (Feldblum & Lipnic 2016), losing their immigration status, or being deported (Rodriguez & Reyes, 2014).

Clearly, the intersection of power and physical workplace location and facilities play a role that we have, as of yet, failed to fully examine in our consideration of reporting behavior and effective intervention strategies. We must commit to be more mindful of our scope in order to best aid those who are most commonly subjected to it.

A leader development perspective

In addition to targeted, short-term fixes for these issues, solutions crafted with long-term change in mind are much needed for transforming the culture. Regardless of the training design, sexual harassment training efforts will likely fail if attention is not paid to the structural and cultural elements perpetuating sexual harassment. As such, both researchers and practitioners must consider how HR policies, performance management systems, and power structures converge to create an environment in which idiosyncrasy credits may be the primary currency used to navigate sexual harassment allegations. Further, given the impact idiosyncrasy credits may have on decision makers, we must explore viable mechanisms for reducing their influence. Given the evidence regarding training effectiveness in sexual harassment discussed by Hayes et al. (2020), we argue that sexual harassment training needs to be reconceptualized and rebuilt if it is to impactfully address complex issues such as power dynamics and idiosyncrasy credits, and create actual organizational change.

The US military has already adopted this perspective and has begun pilot testing a new leadership-development program that reframes sexual-harassment prevention and reduction as a necessary leadership skill (Schulte, 2018). In addition to this framing that avoids the evocation of the same defensiveness, negative attitudes, or gender identity threats that occur with sexual harassment training, the booming leadership-development business (Westfall, 2019) suggests that there is a keen interest in the topic that sexual harassment prevention training has always lacked. Presenting sexual harassment as an issue that creates unwelcome conflict, distrust, and, ultimately, low performance in teams promotes the expectations that leaders must develop skills for resolving these conflicts. Relatedly, fostering an organizational climate that encourages respectful interactions among employees and, thus, discourages sexual harassment can stake out the issue as one about talent retention, in which creating a healthy environment retains talent that may have otherwise voluntarily turned over due to harassment. However, care must be taken to avoid presenting sexual harassment strictly as a financial liability for the organization. Lessons from the messaging of the business case for diversity suggest that such framing may have negative unintended consequences (Akinola et al., 2018). For instance, organizational leaders may conclude that it is financially more expedient to pay out a relatively small settlement and require a victim to sign a nondisclosure agreement rather than fire an employee and earnestly redouble sexual harassment prevention efforts.

On the whole, this approach departs from traditional, existing trainings that focus on how victims can respond to sexual harassment by focusing on training leaders to create environments that foster civility, which is particularly critical in fields and organizations in which those in positions of authority hold considerable sway over the experience and behavior of their direct reports. It is our hope that reconsidering the approach we take to training can spark an evolution in sexual harassment training from reactionary to truly preventative.

As clearly noted by Hayes et al. (2020), sexual harassment remains misunderstood by many, leading to ineffective interventions and, often, failed practices. In line with this thinking, we

highlighted two issues, idiosyncrasy credits and power dynamics, which contribute to the complexities of sexual harassment and the difficulty in eliminating it from the workplace. Taking this into account, the proposed training innovation complements Hayes et al.'s discussion by providing a fresh perspective and workable solution to address the problems noted and to, ultimately, reduce sexual harassment in the workplace.

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