

COMMENTARY

## Observer intervention training—filling an important gap

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When it comes to measures to alter or minimize harassing or discriminatory behavior at work, those that focus on organizational culture and climate as well as integrate efforts with existing organizational approaches offer advantages, as Hayes et al. (2020) point out in their focal article. Our own work over the last year or so has shown the importance of moving beyond the focus on targets (victims) reporting harassment and at the same time, operationalizing (the otherwise vague) organizational commitment to anti-sexual harassment efforts, by focusing on the role of observers in sexual harassment (SH) at work. This commentary expands on the focal article's suggestions, with specific emphasis on the role of bystander (observer<sup>1</sup>) intervention training in efforts to mitigate or prevent sexual harassment at work. We recognize that the ideas we present have potential applications beyond this—into approaches to tackle racial discrimination, for instance—but focus our discussion on sexual harassment as a topic familiar to us as well as critically important around the world.

Our work was encouraged by two pivotal catalysts that have pushed organizations and the general public in India (where we live and work) to take more serious notice of workplace sexual harassment issues. The first is the passing of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (Ministry of Law and Justice) in 2013, providing, for the first time, legal definitions and consequences for workplace SH in India. The second factor was the #MeToo movement, which reached its peak in India in October 2018. The movement in India had a unique distinction: unlike their global counterparts, India's sexual harassment victims, preferring anonymity, took to approaching intermediaries (journalists, social media activists, and lawyers, who used social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook) to reveal alleged abusers (Shrivastava et al., 2018).

Noting that legal provisions and the cover of anonymous “reporting” has been insufficient to fully encourage targets of sexual harassment to open up about it, our research team (Shyamsunder et al., *in press*) turned our attention to the role of others—notably, “observers” or bystanders who have immense action potential to speak up and/or intervene during SH at work. We developed a tool that could function as both a diagnostic as well as a coaching aide to encourage observers to expand their repertoire of behaviors and intervene during or after SH that they have directly witnessed or indirectly heard of. This tool—the Observer Intervention in Sexual Harassment (OISH) tool—uses the single-response situational judgment test item format (Motowidlo et al., 2009), as the topic is laden with *situational* nuance as well as the need for observers to exercise appropriate *judgment*. The OISH tool reports on likely behaviors for each potential observer across four key strategies they can use, which we term the ABCDs of observer intervention in sexual harassment. These are A—Appeal to Authority, B—Buffer/Break, C—Call Out/Confront, and D—Defuse. Our development and preliminary validation studies found statistically significant

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<sup>1</sup>We chose to use the term “observer” in the OISH study to demonstrate more proactive involvement than that may be understood by “bystander.” However, for convenience, here we have used both terms interchangeably to represent managers, friends, and coworkers—all the individuals apart from the target, who might have witnessed the sexual harassment directly, first hand (as a literal bystander), or even indirectly, having just heard or read about it.

relationships to key constructs such as empathy and third-party reactions to injustice at work, as well as relationships based on previous experience of respondents as targets or observers of sexual harassment.

Although the OISH is but one attempt to provide coaching/training tools that are evidence-based and focused on observer/bystander intervention, there are other approaches as well, which we find are underleveraged in organizational approaches to sexual harassment. In the following paragraphs, we address some of the research questions Hayes et al. (2020) raise in the focal article, with specific ideas on how observer/bystander intervention approaches are critical and complement their suggestions.

In Research Question #1 Hayes et al. (2020) ask whether training that is oriented toward development (e.g., learning or mastering a new skill), as opposed to being oriented toward compliance, can be more effective in changing behavior. We believe that observer intervention efforts focus on collaboration/social responsibility and embed the idea of *collective responsibility* versus a narrow or stifling loss-prevention focus on compliance. In India, our experience with practitioners indicates that observer or culture-building efforts can complement compliance/legal efforts—and in fact, can fill in some gaps that the latter leave behind (e.g., fear of retaliation, bureaucratic or sluggish execution, lack of sufficient evidence, etc.).

Similarly, with Hayes et al.'s (2020) “Topic 2: Increasing Training Impact,” we agree with the authors' conclusion that leadership behavior and the organizational culture can help create an environment that does not tolerate sexual harassment. Bystander intervention efforts, such as the OISH, are founded on exactly this premise—that observers of sexual harassment in organizations recognize that they are part of the culture of the organization and that they, through their own actions as well as leadership support, can change it. Managers or influential coworkers (including those in positions of privilege by way of their role, job level, gender, socioeconomic status, access to influential networks, etc.) have arguably greater responsibility to intervene, and behavior-focused training for observers might unleash their power to do so.

A powerful approach to how individuals can exercise influence and act on their values when faced with ethical conflicts—relevant to combating sexual harassment and other discrimination—is Giving Voice to Values (GVV). GVV is an action-oriented perspective that originated in business ethics education and is now a curriculum used in several universities and businesses (Gentile, 2010). It is based on the assumption that people know what the right thing is and want to do it (as in many cases in the #MeToo movement), but do not know how. The GVV philosophy and approach focus on helping individuals overcome rationalizations and excuses to *not* intervene in response to wrongdoing by providing performative and practice-based ways to express their beliefs and values, and thus using their voice (often literally, through dialogue and conversation) to intervene in real-time situations. GVV operates through seven “pillars,” which provide a practical set of ideas for observers looking for ways to intervene in SH. Using these pillars, individuals can come to believe they have a choice to voice their values, prepare for value conflicts, define their purpose, align their decision to voice their values with their purpose, practice using their voice authentically and appropriately, and expect and prepare counter arguments to justifications for ethically unsound behavior. In an attempt to extend the GVV pillars to the idea of observer intervention in SH, we have suggested ideas for practitioners training potential observers under each of the seven pillars. (To emphasize the message that everyone is responsible for intervening, we use the second person “you” as a more immediate and urgent pronoun than the third person “they.”)

- Values: What values—such as honesty, fairness, compassion—do you, as a potential observer in the organization, share with others that can influence your (and their) likelihood of intervening; that is, can you identify such values?
- Choice: Do you know and exercise your own and others' capacity for choice in voicing your values; that is, can you identify what has enabled or disabled your choice to intervene in SH in the past?

- Normalization: Do you understand that witnessing or hearing about SH involves value conflicts, and that this is natural?
- Purpose: Are you encouraged to articulate your personal and professional purpose broadly and explicitly, including your responsibility to help coworkers, such as in cases of SH?
- Self-knowledge, self-image, and alignment: Can you create a personal narrative that aligns your unique preferences and styles with your decision to voice your values; that is, can you prepare observer intervention behaviors that are consistent with your idea of yourself and that feel natural to who you are?
- Voice: Do you have opportunities to pre-script and practice voicing your values in ways that match your skill and the situation; that is, can you try out and practice different intervention methods, such as OISH behaviors, in advance?
- Reasons and rationalizations: Can you anticipate typical rationalizations for ethically questionable behavior and prepare counterarguments for them; that is, can you, as a potential observer, arm yourself against typical societal or cultural “excuses” or rationalizations?

GVV is thus a way to develop the muscle of giving voice and provide observers with steps to move beyond the desire to intervene through a rehearsed means to do so. Chappell and Bowes-Sperry (2015) have demonstrated how this perspective can be applied to complement traditional SH training to empower both targets as well as observers and positively impact the organizational environment.

GVV and other bystander approaches also address Hayes et al.’s (2020) Research Question #3, on how training content might need to address the needs of both the organization as well as individuals who may have been targets of harassment. Such approaches to training focus on positive behaviors (“what individuals can do”) and can be incorporated into—and reinforced by—broader organizational culture-building interventions.

In their “Topic 3: Training Content,” Hayes et al. (2020, p. 126) assert that, generally, it is understood that “trainees know how to be trained and transfer the training to work.” However, observer approaches to training on sexual harassment do not make this assumption. As the #MeToo movement has shown, individuals often have trouble correctly categorizing sexual harassment behaviors, and even if sexual harassment has been identified, observers and targets are unsure how to respond.

We propose that training content be more granular, to include recognition of and practice in the internal stages of information processing and decision making for a target or observer. This can move from labeling the feeling of discomfort to articulating the factors in decision making, and then to action. Further, training content should include specific cognitive scripts or “play-books” to help targets and observers ask themselves and others questions that help them respond appropriately and better transfer training to real-life situations.

We also propose that sexual harassment training programs include an explanation of the *bystander effect* to demonstrate the gap between the dissonance that observers experience at an individual level and the apparent placidity that observers demonstrate at a collective level during incidents of sexual harassment. Knowledge of this phenomenon would enable future observers to recognize similar incidents of dissonance and enable them to act at a critical time.

We agree with Hayes et al.’s (2020) emphasis, in their “Topic 4: Bystander Programs,” on the efficacy of indirect training, such as bystander intervention. Research has shown bystander intervention training to be effective in reducing sexual harassment in a variety of situations (e.g., Banyard et al., 2007). In some situations, observers of sexual harassment are twice as likely to act, in comparison to targets (McDonald, 2012). We recommend that traditional training programs expand their scope to include modules on bystander intervention. Although research on bystander intervention in sexual harassment is primarily based on Caucasian populations, the OISH study extends the research to Asia and, specifically, to India. This approach (and others) can also be adapted to and replicated in different cultures.

In response to Hayes et al.'s (2020) Research Question #5, which asks how training programs can be made both more engaging and more effectively aligned with program goals, we suggest replacing traditional, one-way, instructor-led training with approaches that are more *experiential* and have *high fidelity*. Experiential and practice-based methods for addressing and preventing SH have been shown to have greater transfer of training into the workplace (Burke et al., 2009). Approaches such as theater-based methods, role plays, vignettes/case study-based methods, or the situational judgment approach allow participants to envision actual events and experience the decision-making process that observers go through. Such methods are engaging, focus on skill development, and can be designed to incorporate elements of practice, allowing participants the opportunity to receive feedback and reflect on the appropriateness of their likely intervention behavior. Using a situational judgment tool like the OISH, for instance, can enhance engagement through realistic, relatable situations and build awareness by providing feedback on participants' likely patterns of intervention behavior.

In the same vein, with respect to Hayes et al.'s (2020) Research Question #6, about how practitioners can develop the skill sets to work with managers to coordinate monitoring, policy, and mitigation regarding harassment, practitioners who are industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists may need to take a holistic perspective and look to learn from other disciplines. Within I-O psychology, those on the traditionally "O" side of the I-O spectrum, in particular, can bring to bear their expertise in having difficult conversations, talking about values, and dealing with more ambiguous macro phenomena. Those who work more on the "I" side might do well to give appropriate recognition to "abstract" concepts such as psychological safety climate (e.g., Edmondson, 2018) and to experienced or triggered emotions such as anxiety or fear, as valuable information that can guide intervention design and prompt action.

Our own research and lived experience have taught us that encouraging observers to intervene is critical and that they have a crucial role, for several reasons: The target may be compromised (physically and/or emotionally) compared to observers. Observers' third-party testimony can make or break the credibility of the target's complaint. The onus and burden of reporting can be shared between the target and observer, providing support and, often, much-needed moral courage to the target. Especially in cases where the observer exerts influence or positional power relative to the harasser, their intervening could change the course of the harassment itself or its consequences. Finally, in support of our argument through this commentary, that observer intervention facilitates collective responsibility and builds a culture of safety and inclusion, we are reminded of what Elizabeth Broderick expressed in a report by the Australian Human Rights Commission: "If we don't support and encourage the targets of sexual harassment and any bystanders to take action, we run the risk of creating cultures of tolerance" (McDonald, 2012, p.8).

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