

COMMENTARY

Sexual harassment training: A need to consider cultural differences

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The focal article by Hayes et al. (2020) provides a detailed critique of the effectiveness of harassment and discrimination training. The article's authors conclude that such training generally has little effect on behavior, and they identify ways in which training interventions can be improved to change behaviors (and not just attitudes or knowledge). Here we extend the discussion in the focal article by focusing on how sexual harassment training might be improved by considering the role of cultural factors.

A great deal of research in the area of sexual harassment has focused on gender differences in perceptions of what behaviors are considered harassing (e.g., Rotundo et al., 2001). In contrast, limited research has focused on the role of cultural factors in influencing perceptions of sexual harassment in the workplace. Although cultural factors may include a variety of different aspects, we suggest examining the role of *national culture* in sexual harassment and sexual harassment training. Much of the research on cultural factors as influences on sexual harassment has been done at the country level and focused on Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of cultural values, including power distance, collectivism, and masculinity.

Several studies have compared perceptions of sexual harassment for individuals from high power distance countries (e.g., Brazil) to low power distance countries (e.g., the U.S.). For example, Pryor et al. (1997) found that North American, Australian, and German students perceived hostile work environment scenarios more in terms of power abuse and gender discrimination, whereas Brazilian students perceived the same scenarios as innocuous sexual behavior but not sexual harassment. DeSouza and Hutz (1996) compared the responses of Brazilian and American undergraduates to scenarios in which a woman was consistent or inconsistent in her refusals of sexual advances by men. Results indicated that while Americans viewed these scenarios as date rape, Brazilians judged them as consensual sex. Findings such as these suggest that national culture dimensions are important factors that need to be considered in the development and design of sexual harassment training, especially for organizations that operate internationally or have workforces from different cultural backgrounds.

Studies in collectivistic cultures similarly indicate that they are more tolerant of sexual harassment. For example, in a study of students from Asian (i.e., China, Korea, Japan, or Hong Kong) versus non-Asian (primarily Canadian) descent, Asian students were found to be significantly more tolerant of actions deemed to constitute sexual harassment than were non-Asian respondents (Kennedy & Gonzalka, 2002). They also found that Asian (as compared to Non-Asian) men and women had significantly more conservative sexual attitudes, including being more tolerant of rape myths and sexually harassing behavior. In addition, surveys have consistently indicated that women in Japan and China report significantly lower rates of sexual harassment than in more individualistic cultures (Chan et al., 1999; Matsui et al., 1995). In a study of another collectivist culture, Turkey, it was found that sexism-related behaviors were not generally viewed as sexual

harassment (e.g., Toker, 2003; Toker & Sümer, 2010; Ulusoy et al., 2011). Additionally, Sigal et al. (2005) found that students in individualistic cultures (i.e., the U.S., Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands) judged a man in a sexual harassment scenario guilty significantly more often than did students from collectivistic cultures (i.e., Ecuador, Pakistan, Philippines, Taiwan, and Turkey).

Last, traditional masculinity has been found to be associated with supportive attitudes toward sexually harassing behaviors (Sinn, 1997). Similarly, research has indicated that in masculine cultures, there are larger differences in stereotypically gendered sex roles (Hofstede, 2001), whereas in more feminine cultures, preservation of relationships and human dignity is emphasized. Fiedler and Blanco (2006) found differences in perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors in a comparative study of MBA students from the U.S., Mexico, and Jamaica, and attributed these differences to the varying perceptions of masculinity in these countries. More recently, Merkin (2012) found that incidences of reporting sexual harassment were higher in Argentina, which is a more masculine culture, as opposed to Brazil and Chile, which are characterized as more feminine cultures.

In addition to the above studies that compare perceptions of sexual harassment across countries with different cultures, some research has also examined the effects of individual differences in Hofstede's cultural value dimensions on perceptions of sexual harassment. For example, Mishra et al. (2016) found that individuals who were higher on the cultural values of power distance and masculinity tended to be more tolerant of sexual harassment. Additionally, individuals with collectivistic and masculine values perceived sexual harassment as being less severe. In a related study, Mishra and Stair (2019) found that when individuals were primed with a high power distance manipulation, they viewed sexual harassment behaviors as less severe and were more tolerant of harassment in comparison to individuals primed with low power distance. Taken together with the results on national culture, it is clear that the cultural differences of power distance, collectivism, and masculinity can lead to differing levels of acceptance or tolerance of sexually harassing behaviors. The above findings have implications for designing training programs for the prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace. Specifically, cultural factors are potentially important to sexual harassment training in two of the topics identified in the focal article: Topic 2 (Increasing Training Impact) and Topic 3 (Training Content).

National culture and training impact

One reason for the lack of effectiveness of sexual harassment training might be due to problems within the organizational climate and leadership. As Pina et al. (2009, p. 134) noted, sexual harassment training does not deal with "the essential issues that surround the occurrence of the phenomenon, such as sexism at work, power misuse and abuse, hierarchical issues, gendered environments, and individual perpetrator characteristics." Such characteristics within an organization (as well as in society at large) are likely associated with cultural factors, including power distance and masculinity. Thus, in order to reduce sexual harassment in organizations, changes on the part of leadership and climate with respect to cultural factors may be needed. For example, an organization might consider changing the organizational structure as a way to reduce power distance. Organizations may also consider fostering open communication between subordinates and managers, thereby encouraging the freedom of expression and discussion of decisions made by superior managers, which may reduce perceptions of power distance. Utilizing more participative, relational forms of leadership might also be useful for reducing power distance and masculinity in organizations.

Hayes et al. (2020) also note that certain individual trainees or business units might be given targeted training to attempt to prevent escalation of harassment. Surveying individuals' cultural values might be a more subtle way to identify potential targets for intervention rather than directly asking individuals about their attitudes toward sexual harassment and discrimination, which could be subject to socially desirable responding (Mishra et al., 2016). For example, if a particular

team has been identified as having members who hold more strongly collectivist cultural beliefs, training might be provided to that team as a way to proactively address the potential for tolerance of sexual harassment.

National culture and training content

As Hayes et al. (2020) discuss, sexual harassment training seems to have limited effects on various outcomes, including cognitive, attitudinal, and skill-based outcomes (see Goldberg, 2011). Here again we believe that a focus on cultural factors can help to design training that will have greater effects on behavior change. For example, it is likely that culture plays a significant role in cognitive outcomes of training, defined as “understanding that someone has done something wrong” (Hayes et al., 2020). As discussed earlier, high power distance, masculinity, and collectivism are all associated with tolerance of sexual harassment or perceptions of such behaviors as being less severe. Thus, in order to facilitate long-term changes in attitudes and behaviors toward sexual harassment, employers should align the goals of sexual harassment prevention training programs with the values of the organization (Sullivan et al., 2002) so that the goals of training are consistent with organizational policies and practices related to prevention of harassment. For example, some of the most common values found in organizations are integrity, respect, accountability, fairness, and so forth (Sullivan et al., 2002). Thus, if an organizationally espoused value is respect, then one of the goals of the sexual harassment training program should be to promote respect for all individuals regardless of gender, culture, ethnicity, age, and national origin. Specifically, the training program content could focus on highlighting sexual harassment scenarios across all groups rather than just a selected few (e.g., interactions between male supervisor and female subordinate employees), as has traditionally been the case with sexual harassment prevention training programs.

Buchanan et al. (2014) note that most of the sexual harassment training programs assume that educating people on the definitions of sexual harassment and its negative effects on well-being will reduce individuals’ propensity to harass. However, such training is not always sufficient, as seen in the U.S. military, where sexual harassment remains a critical problem. To address these issues, Buchanan et al. (2014) suggest that researchers increase their focus on factors that motivate individuals to sexually harass others (e.g., to exert power, to enforce gender conformity, etc.). From a cultural perspective, this could be addressed by including a component within the training program where trainees are educated on subtle differences in behaviors that are identified as sexual harassment in different cultures and why that may be the case based on underlying cultural values.

Additionally, we suggest that organizations should carefully balance an organization’s diversity goals and initiatives (e.g., inclusion and tolerance) against the need to protect individuals from sexual harassment. Furthermore, educating employees about what to expect when working with individuals who may have a different cultural framework may help to raise awareness about cultural differences in perceptions of sexual behavior at work. In this respect, an organization must walk a fine line between showing respect for different cultural attitudes and perceptions versus conveying the message that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. For example, suppose diversity training emphasizes that individuals from a different culture tend to stand close to others or engage in physical contact when conversing. If the training appears to encourage tolerance of such behaviors, it might unfortunately also be promoting a tolerance for sexual harassment, insofar as such close contact might be experienced as “unwelcome.”

Our recommendations with respect to incorporating a cultural perspective into sexual harassment training have other potential downsides. Indeed, if the training incorporates overly broad generalizations about cultural differences in attitudes and perceptions of harassment, it is possible that increased stereotyping based on national origin or culture would be an unintended consequence. For example, suppose the training emphasizes that masculine cultures tend to tolerate

harassing behaviors. A male trainee from Argentina (a more masculine culture) might feel singled out as a potential harasser by female trainees. Further, these female trainees might then generalize this knowledge of cultural differences to others in the organization, with the result that female employees are avoiding contact or requesting transfers to avoid other employees from masculine cultures. Managers then might be reluctant to assign female employees to career-enhancing opportunities in masculine cultures for fear of sexual harassment claims. Thus, unless carefully managed, culture-based sexual harassment training has the potential to increase stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, and sex. Throughout such training, it will be important to remind trainees that although cultural values may differ *across nations*, there will still be considerable variability among individuals *within nations* with respect to their cultural values.

We should also note that our recommendations here are focused on U.S. employers, whether operating in the U.S. or abroad. Thus, we suggest that sexual harassment prevention training should place more emphasis on how behaviors that might be accepted or tolerated in other cultures and countries are unacceptable or illegal in the U.S. Of particular importance here may be emphasizing the difference between “unwelcome” and “voluntary.” An employee may “voluntarily” engage in sexual acts to avoid losing a job, but such acts may still be “unwelcome,” which is a core component of sexual harassment. In all of these training situations, we encourage organizations to create frame-of-reference sexual harassment training programs (Roch et al., 2012) that emphasize the development of a common “frame of reference” when it comes to behaviors that are defined as sexual harassment. In the context of sexual harassment training, employees could be trained to share and use common conceptualizations of what is and what is not identified as sexual harassment. This may include not only providing examples of behaviors that are *legally* considered to be harassment but also providing examples of behaviors that may not be unlawful but are nonetheless *unacceptable* at work. Furthermore, sexual harassment training programs should focus on addressing the root causes of harassment, some of which may lie in cultural differences and cultural misunderstandings, so that employees can identify and report such behaviors early and before they rise to the level of unlawful harassment. For example, video presentations of interpersonal interactions could be used to generate discussion of whether the behaviors displayed are culturally based behaviors that should be tolerated, culturally based behaviors that need to be corrected, or unlawful sexual harassment. In delivering this type of training we recommend that employers focus on creating a global mindset among their employees, which encourages openness to and awareness of diversity across cultures (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002), thus facilitating the goals of the training to create a common frame of reference regarding behaviors that are perceived as sexually offensive at work.

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