

The Psychology of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) occurs when people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, sexual gestures, or sexual actions because of their actual or perceived gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Due to its frequency and harmful effects on people and organizations, and because it is often a symptom of social inequalities, SH is of concern to psychologists. Using psychological theory and research as well as intersectional and contextual lenses, this article describes how SH is varied in its forms, targets, and origins. I explore explanations for SH with a focus on sociocultural gender and power perspectives. I also employ a person-by-situation perspective to show how contextual factors interact with individual factors to influence incidence. Because reducing SH is important for safe and inclusive schools, organizations, and public settings, I identify possible solutions to this common social problem. Finally, I discuss how and why teaching about the psychology of SH can promote positive individual, group, organizational, and social change. In sum, I illustrate interesting and important psychological concepts and methods and show how psychology can be used to understand and treat social problems and inequalities.

Keywords

sexual harassment, gender and sexual harassment, power and sexual harassment, intersectionality and sexual harassment, solutions to sexual harassment

Sexual harassment (SH) occurs when people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, gestures, or actions because of their actual or perceived gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Although workplace SH has received the most attention from psychology researchers, SH also occurs on public transportation and in other public places, in educational and athletic settings, in homes, at social gatherings, and in online groups. It may be conveyed in many ways including face-to-face interactions; via phone, text, social media, or e-mail; through the display of materials or objects; or by tampering with personal territories and belongings.

Why SH Matters

From a psychological perspective, SH matters because it frequently causes pain and suffering. Victims (targets) perceive SH as annoying, offensive, upsetting, humiliating, intimidating, embarrassing, stressful, and frightening (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997; Langer, 2017). When SH diminishes, dehumanizes, and disempowers its targets, emotional and physical stress and stress-related mental and physical illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder, may result (Buchanan, Settles, Wu, & Hayashino, 2018; Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Friborg et al., 2017; Larsen & Fitzgerald, 2011; Nielson & Einarsen, 2012; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). SH is also a risk factor for weight/shape concerns, negative body image, and disordered eating (Buchanan, Bluestein, Nappa, Woods, & Depatie, 2013) and can reduce targets' sense of safety (Donnelly & Calogero, 2018).

SH can also deliberately or unintentionally interfere with performance and career aspirations by creating an intimidating, hostile, abusive, or offensive environment that erodes targets' confidence and makes it harder to achieve (Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Jagsi et al., 2016; McLaughlin, Ugger, & Blackston, 2017). For example, in American middle and high school students, SH adversely affects school engagement and academic achievement (Gruber & Fineran, 2016). When SH leads targets to leave jobs, it may negatively affect career progression due to the loss of seniority and organization-specific work skills, difficult-to-explain gaps in employment, and trouble obtaining references from managers and coworkers (McLaughlin et al., 2017). As a counterproductive work behavior, SH has legal and financial organizational costs and may also negatively impact company and industry reputations. Other organizational impacts include job and career dissatisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, increased absenteeism, job turnover, job burnout, requests for transfers, and decreases in work motivation and productivity (Chan et al., 2008; Holland & Cortina, 2016; Rabelo & Cortina, 2014; Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016; Willness et al., 2007).

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Concern about SH is consistent with the social justice goals of psychology, as it is often a symptom and a cause of gender and other social inequalities (McLaughlin et al., 2017). SH sometimes has sexist, classist, heterosexist, transphobic, and racist elements. Ethnic minorities and migrants are at increased risk for a combination of racial and SH and SH infused by racial stereotypes (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008; Clancy, Lee, Rodgers, & Richey, 2017). Likewise, the SH experienced by LGBT people is frequently infused with heterosexism and transphobia (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011; Hill & Silva, 2005; Kearl, 2014). When SH reflects multiple oppressions and minority statuses or adds to them so that multiple forms of harassment occur, psychological distress may increase (Buchanan, Settles, & Woods, 2008; Buchanan et al., 2018; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014).

Sexually Harassing Behaviors: The Tripartite Model of SH

The widely accepted tripartite model of SH (Fitzgerald et al., 1997) identifies three behavioral dimensions: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion.¹ These three subtypes show stability across time, culture, and occupational sector (Holland & Cortina, 2016).

Gender harassment refers to crude sexual verbal and non-verbal behaviors conveying insulting, hostile, and degrading attitudes about one's gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Obscene sexual gestures, flashing, displaying sexual images or objects at work, and e-mailing or texting sexual images to a peer or coworker are all forms of gender harassment. Sexist or heterosexist language, jokes, or comments also fall under this heading.

Unwanted sexual attention includes making suggestive or positive and negative comments about a person's body, leering and catcalling, spreading sexual rumors about a person, and electronically sharing sexualized images of a person. Unwanted sexual touching, such as grabbing, pinching, groping, intentionally brushing up against another in a sexual way, is also considered unwanted sexual attention. This is also true of blocking another's path or following a person in a sexual way; unsolicited, unwelcome, and unreciprocated sexual advances such as repeated requests for a kiss, a date, or sex; and attempted or completed rape.

Sexual coercion—known legally as *quid pro quo SH*—refers to requiring sexual contact or sexual favors as a condition of receiving rewards or benefits such as employment, a promotion, favorable work conditions, assistance, or a good performance evaluation or grade. Although sexual coercion appears to be the most serious and least common form of SH, less intense but more frequent forms of SH may create ongoing stress and trauma detrimental to well-being (Sojo et al., 2016; Thurston et al., 2017).

The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ), developed by Fitzgerald et al. (1988; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995) and based on the tripartite model, is the instrument psychologists most commonly used to measure SH. Consisting of 20

items, the SEQ includes 5 gender harassment items, 7 unwanted sexual attention items, and 5 sexual coercion items. Importantly, none of the items includes the word “sexual harassment.” (One criterion item, “Have you ever been sexually harassed?” appears after the other items.) Psychometrically validated by Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow (1995), the SEQ showed acceptable internal reliability, test–retest reliability, and construct validity. But in practice, its psychometric properties are uncertain. Originally intended to measure workplace SH, the SEQ is frequently modified for specific settings and time frames; it is also used to measure newer SH mediums such as cyber harassment. These modifications frequently occur without additional psychometric evaluation.

SH Prevalence

Prevalence estimates of SH vary depending on the sample, setting, or industry sector and how it is measured. Nevertheless, SH is believed to be common (McDonald, 2012). Studies that provide a comprehensive list of sexually harassing behaviors and that ask participants to note which behaviors they have experienced typically find higher rates of SH than studies including more general questions (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwuchau, & Stibal, 2003; Sojo et al., 2016). For example, nationally representative samples using general questions (direct queries) have found that 25% of American women report experiencing workplace SH. The number rises to 40%, however, when respondents report on specific harassing behaviors. In convenience samples, these numbers are 50% and 70%, respectively (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016). The use of different time frames also explains some rate discrepancies (Espelage, Hong, Rinehart, & Doshi, 2016).

SH rates also vary by gender. The majority of SH targets are girls and women, and the majority of perpetrators are boys and men (Espelage et al., 2016; Gruber & Fineran, 2016). To illustrate, a nationally representative American study using direct query found that 65% of women and 25% of men had experienced street harassment (Kearl, 2014). A 2017 Pew Research Center study employing direct query with a nationally representative American sample found that 22% of women and 7% of men reported personally experiencing workplace SH (Parker & Funk, 2017). Duggan (2017) also found that 21% of women ages 18–29 reported being sexually harassed online, compared to 9% of men in the same age-group. Hill and Kearl (2011) used a list of SH behaviors with a representative sample of American middle and high school students and found that 48% had experienced some form of SH; girls (52%) reported higher rates than boys (40%). Notably, the SH of boys and men is most often perpetrated by males who target other males deviating from traditional heterosexual gender roles or who harass lower status men to establish dominance in male groups (Fox & Tang, 2014; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Holland, Rabelo, Gustafson, Seabrook, & Cortina, 2016).

Minority status may also influence SH rates. Minorities may experience higher rates of SH from majority group members because minority group status denotes marginality and lack of

power, conditions associated with higher SH prevalence. Prejudice toward ethnic and sexual minorities may also occur in the form of sexual aggression and harassment (Collins, 1990). Unfortunately, sample sizes are usually too small to examine group and intersectional differences in the experience of SH. For example, LGBT persons generally experience much higher rates of SH than heterosexuals (Grant et al., 2011; Hill & Silva, 2005; Kearl, 2014), but little is known about differences in SH prevalence and how the experiences of different LGBT groups compare (e.g., LGBT people of color, lesbians in comparison to gay men, male-to-female transgender people in comparison to female-to-male transgender people).

Explanations for Why SH Occurs

Evolutionary (biological) perspectives propose that males' biological predisposition to mate and widely reproduce drives their SH of females. SH is intended to signal males' sexual interest but is misunderstood by women uninterested in a sexual encounter (Diehl, Rees, & Bohner, 2018). Meanwhile, males' harassment of other males is intended to derogate competitors to reduce their perceived mate value (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017). The evolutionary perspective lacks research support and is conceptually problematic (Page & Pina, 2015). For example, unwanted sexual attention may sometimes arise out of sexual interest, but this is likely true of some women who sexually harass. Also, the evolutionary perspective explains unwanted sexual attention but overlooks other forms of SH (like sexual coercion and gender harassment) and also men's harassment of gender-nonconforming men and women (McLaughlin, Uggem, & Blackstone, 2012).

From a sociocultural gender perspective, SH is a consequence of gender role socialization processes that promote male dominance, the sexual objectification of women (the reduction of women to heterosexualized bodies), and the cultural approval of violence against women (Cleveland & McNamara, 1996; Galdi, Maas, & Cadinu, 2014). Men's beliefs and expectations about masculinity are powerful and consistent predictors of sexual violence supporting beliefs and behaviors (Locke & Mahalik, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity norms, including power over women, dominance, disdain for homosexuals, and sexual conquest, may drive SH. The influence of these norms intensifies in male groups where men may sexually harass to demonstrate their masculinity (Fox & Tang, 2017; Mikorski & Syzanski, 2017; Quinn, 2002). The sociocultural perspective also suggests that SH is sometimes used to police appropriate ways of "doing gender" by punishing those who stray from traditional gender roles and norms. For example, gender-nonconforming men and women are frequent SH targets (Leskinen, Rabelo, & Cortina, 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2012).

Power perspectives are a type of sociocultural perspective that see SH as a tactic for gaining or maintaining power or as arising from a sense of entitlement felt by powerful people (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). Feminist psychology perspectives root SH in traditional gender norms and roles and explain that

SH often arises from and reinforces the existing gender hierarchy where heterosexual men have more power and privilege (Holland & Cortina, 2016). Because power and gender perspectives pervade the literature on SH, they are a focus here.

The *vulnerable victim hypothesis* suggests that people low in sociocultural power and status (like women and racial and sexual minorities) and those with low organizational power (like those in precarious employment or low in an organizational hierarchy) are more susceptible to SH by those with greater power (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998). The vulnerable victim hypothesis is one explanation for why boys and men are more likely to be harassers and girls and women are more likely to be harassed. Occupational gender role segregation and the glass ceiling often give men greater organizational power (in organizations, high-prestige, high-status positions are more likely to be occupied by men). Traditional gender roles also give males greater sociocultural power relative to females such that males may harass female peers and females with equal or greater formal power than themselves (the latter is known as *contrapower SH*). Organizational and societal tolerance of SH reflect male power and privilege and mean that SH is minimized; perpetrators are excused and rarely punished; victims are often blamed; victims hesitate to report; and complaints may be met with indifference, stigmatization, or retaliation.

The *power threat model* proposes that by intimidating and discouraging girls, women, and sexual minorities, SH assures heterosexual male dominance; those who threaten heterosexual male dominance and traditional hierarchies of power are more likely to be targets of SH (Berndahl, 2007; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; MacKinnon, 1979; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Russell & Oswald, 2016). For example, women in authority positions, feminists (both female and male), sexual minorities, and women in traditionally masculinized spaces and industries are sometimes targets of SH by heterosexual male subordinates and peers (Berndahl, 2007; Clancy et al., 2017; Holland & Cortina, 2013; Holland et al., 2016; Jagsi et al., 2016; Lonsway, Paynich, & Hall, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2012). SH is frequently used to discourage women from running for office and reelection and to create obstacles to their effectiveness as legislators (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). Men sometimes use online SH to discourage women's online discussion and multiplayer online gaming (Fox & Tang, 2017; Megarry, 2014).

From the perspective of *social power theory* (French & Raven, 1959), sexual harassers often draw on several bases of power. Based on their social or organizational position or on social roles like client or customer, a person may have the "right" to make demands of another; some harassers abuse this "legitimate power" to get away with harassment or believe their higher status gives them the right to sexually harass (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Popovich & Warren, 2010). For example, migrant women workers, hotel room attendants (maids), women restaurant workers, and homecare and domestic workers experience high rates of SH from supervisors, peers, clients, and customers (Kim, Vásquez, Torres, Nicola, & Karr, 2016; Nguyen, 2016). Because the harasser is seen as having the right

to make demands of the subordinate, the target may feel obligated to comply with the harassment (Popvich & Warren, 2010).

Some harassers have the power to provide desired rewards (reward power) to targets or to punish them (coercive power) and use that power to insure compliance from SH targets. In quid pro quo harassment, for example, sexual contact is a condition for desired rewards. Servers or salespeople may put up with SH because customers and clients have the power to reward them with tips or sales. Coercive power also affects targets' resistance to SH. Most victims of SH respond passively (e.g., avoid the perpetrator, laugh it off) because they expect negative consequences such as retaliation or loss of status in a group (Berdahl & Raver, 2011; Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). SH may also convey an implicit or explicit threat of further harassment or assault (Donnelly & Calogero, 2018) that serves as coercive power.

Although males are the most common SH perpetrators, men vary in their proclivity to sexually harass. Many are disinclined to sexually harass even when they are powerful or the context supports or permits it. A *person-by-situation perspective* explains these differences by noting that personal predisposing factors combine with situational factors to determine whether harassment occurs (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993). Situational factors include organizational tolerance, male dominant cultures, sexually objectifying environments, and masculine group norms where harassment serves male bonding (Holland & Cortina, 2016; Stillman, Yamawaki, Ridge, White, & Copley, 2009; Szymanski & Mikorski, 2016; Thomae & Pina, 2015). Personal SH proclivity factors include hostile sexist attitudes and a short-term mating orientation (Diehl, Rees, & Bohner, 2018), acceptance of rape and SH myths, endorsement of traditional masculine ideology, conformity to traditional masculine norms, and low empathy (Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014; Fox & Tang, 2017; Pryor, 1987). The "Dark Triad" personality traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism are also associated with SH proclivity (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Morag, & Campbell, 2016).

Solutions

Changing the organizational climates and contexts that allow SH is essential for reducing SH. Adopting clear anti-harassment policies and procedures is part of changing the normative contexts that support SH. SH policies can serve as a check on those inclined to sexually harass and can empower victims with avenues for rectification. Organizations that proactively develop, disseminate, and enforce SH policies and procedures have the lowest rates of workplace SH (Holland & Cortina, 2016). SH training can increase reporting, increase knowledge of organizational policies and sensitivity to what constitutes SH, and reduce victim blaming and the minimization of SH (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Magley, Fitzgerald, Salisbury, Drasgow, & Zickar, 2013; Roehling & Huang, 2018). Effective organizational SH training includes

education about SH behaviors, procedures for reporting, the responsibilities of managers and supervisors, promoting respect for people from all groups, and prohibitions against retaliation (Holland & Cortina, 2016). To be effective, however, strong support from leaders and managers must accompany policies and training (Buchanan, Settles, Hall, & O'Connor, 2014; Cheung Goldberg, King, & Magley, 2017).

Sexual violence prevention programs for boys and men often target traditional masculinity norms and empower men to change the masculine normative contexts supporting sexual violence (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011); similar strategies may be used to reduce SH. Learning about SH from the target's perspective (empathy training) also reduces men's likelihood of SH (Diehl et al., 2014). Because media are a powerful vehicle for the sexualized norms that contribute to harassment, Galdi, Maas, and Cadinu (2014) recommend critical media education (media literacy) to reduce the effects of objectifying media content.

Programs promoting bystander intervention (BI) are also important for SH reduction. SH sometimes occurs in the presence of witnesses (bystanders) who can potentially confront and halt harassers, report incidents, and support victims (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014). Many victims respond passively due to the perceived risks of speaking up; they may need others to act on their behalf (Berdahl & Raver, 2011). By communicating norms at odds with harassment, BI plays a role in changing the group, organizational, and cultural contexts that support SH (Ryan & Wessel, 2012), especially when BI is a group effort.

Unfortunately, there is little research on BI and SH, but BI training models have successfully promoted BI for rape prevention (Nickerson et al., 2014). Theory and research indicate that BI is often a multistage process that begins with diagnosing a situation as intervention appropriate (Burn, 2018). Because uncertainty poses a barrier to interpretation, BI may be more likely if we reduce ambiguity around people's understandings and definitions of SH. This type of education may be especially important for men because they are less likely than women to identify sexually harassing behaviors as SH (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). To increase diagnostic accuracy, education and training should also debunk myths that minimize and deny SH and excuse perpetrators (see Lonsway et al., 2008, for an extensive discussion of SH myths). Potential bystanders also should learn about pluralistic ignorance (the mistaken assumption of multiple bystanders that others' inaction means they should not act; see Burn, 2018) and victims' tendencies to underreact due to perceived costs (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005).

Identifying SH is not enough to motivate intervention; bystanders must assume responsibility for action (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). But multiple witnesses may lead bystanders to assume their help is unneeded and make bystanders feel less individual responsibility (diffusion of responsibility; Latané & Darley, 1970). Bystanders may also assign responsibility for intervention to the victim's friends, or

fellow in-group members, or to those “in charge” of the setting (Burn, 2009). As such, framing BI as a role responsibility is advised (e.g., it is the employee’s job to report incidents, SH BI is consistent with aspects of the masculine role like honor and protection).

Latané and Darley (1970) hypothesized that the degree of personal responsibility taken by bystanders depends on their judgments of the victim, in particular, whether the victim “deserves” help. SH witnesses may be more likely to take intervention responsibility if trainings counter SH myths that blame victims (e.g., women ask for it by looking sexy, women are hypersensitive, it is women’s responsibility to stop it). For example, data and discussion are used in some BI programs to counter victim-blaming stereotypes associated with rape (Gidycz et al., 2011). Empathy for victims is also positively associated with SH BI responsibility (Nickerson et al., 2014). Information from credible, trustworthy experts and vivid yet believable anecdotes and filmed victim stories about the short- and long-term effects on victims may increase intervention likelihood by increasing empathy, the perception of danger, and the costs of nonintervention (Burn, 2018).

Bystanders may feel responsible and realize they need to help but may not act if they do not know how or if they lack confidence in their ability to do it successfully. Education and training can increase bystander action by focusing on specific things bystanders can say or do to intervene effectively. Bowes-Sperry and O’Leary-Kelley (2005) offered a typology of SH BI behaviors that could be useful for such training. The typology classifies possible bystander actions along two dimensions: immediacy (immediate action vs. later action) and involvement (direct involvement vs. indirect involvement). For example, high immediacy, high involvement actions require an active and identifiable bystander action such as telling the harasser to stop. In contrast, low immediacy, low involvement actions occur when bystanders later support the harassed person, for example, by privately encouraging them to avoid the harasser or report the incident.

Audience inhibition—that is, bystander worry about what others will think of them if they act—is another BI barrier (Latané & Darley, 1970). For example, male bystanders may believe that action will result in a loss of social status if SH is a norm in their male group and if norms of loyalty to in-group members contradict BI. Increasing empathy and the salience of personal norms supportive of intervention may override perceived social norms contributing to audience inhibition. When intervention requires “calling out” or acting to stop an aggressive in-group member, bystanders may be persuaded to intervene by framing in-group aggressors’ actions as running counter to group norms and harming the group’s reputation (Burn, 2018; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). For example, SH BI education can portray offenders as harming the reputation of the in-group (e.g., sexual harassers give all men a “bad name”; allowing SH harms the reputation of our team, company, or industry).

Teaching About SH

Teachers can easily integrate the psychology of SH into many psychology courses. For example, teachers can use the psychology of SH to demonstrate intersectionality (how people’s experiences vary widely depending on the interplay of different social categories and identities) and the idea of person-by-situation interaction. It can stimulate critical thinking about the social construction of gender and conformity to traditional gender roles. Teachers can also use the topic of SH in teaching research methods courses. When teaching Latané and Darley’s (1970) situational model of helping, SH BI can provide a topical and stimulating example of the BI process that can be a source of student projects (e.g., students can use the material to create context-specific BI programs). Students can practice using psychological theory to explain behavior by applying SH psychological perspectives to explain SH by women (an understudied topic) or to particular groups, contexts, industries, jobs, or publicized cases.

Conclusion

SH is of concern to psychologists because it is common and associated with stress-related mental and physical conditions. SH creates unequal, intimidating, hostile, abusive, and offensive environments that erode victims’ confidence and sense of safety and interfere with people’s performance and aspirations. Psychological theory and research point to sociocultural causes and solutions. The psychology of SH can promote positive individual, group, organizational, and social change and can help teachers illustrate psychology’s role in understanding and treating social problems and inequalities.

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Note

1. It should be noted that Fitzgerald et al. (1997) focused on the workplace harassment of women. My description builds on that to include other targets and additional SH behaviors and SH settings.

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