Sexual Harassment Towards Young People Who Deal With the Public in the Province of Quebec

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Several young Canadians have jobs that involve interaction with customers, placing them at risk for public-initiated sexual harassment. To date, research on sexual harassment has focused on outcomes of insider-initiated sexual harassment neglecting public-initiated harassment. Research on the former has shown that sexual harassment has negative outcomes for victims. In this study, I examined the relationship between public-initiated sexual harassment and mental health, physical health, and job satisfaction using hierarchical multiple regression. Participants were female, full-time university students. Results showed that sexual harassment initiated by members of the public was negatively related to employee mental health and physical well-being.

Keywords: sexual harassment, young people, public-initiated harassment, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Many women are victims of sexual harassment in the workplace. Some estimates suggest that as many as 50% of women will experience sexually harassing behaviour directed towards them at some point during their working lives (Fitzgerald, 1993). Research suggests that individuals who are sexually harassed by colleagues and/or supervisors experience negative personal consequences such as decrements in physical and mental health and organizational consequences such as thoughts of leaving the organization. However, few rigorous examinations of the consequences of sexual harassment initiated by members of the public have been undertaken. In particular, there seems to be a dearth of attention on outcomes of sexual harassment initiated by the public towards young female workers (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). Hence, the purpose of this study is to identify the consequences of public-initiated sexual harassment on young female workers during their summer employment.

Courts in Canada and the United States have defined two types of sexual harassment. The first is quid pro quo sexual harassment where individuals in positions of authority may provide benefits or impose sanctions dependent on whether their targets comply with sexual demands (Rotundo, Nguyen & Sackett, 2001). According to the Canadian Labour Code, this type of sexual harassment "... might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by that employee as placing a condition of a sexual nature on employment or on any opportunity for training or promotion" (Johnson, 1994). The second type of sexual harassment is one that leads to a "hostile environment" (Johnson, 1994). For example, an employee could display pictures of a sexual nature or tell sexual jokes to employees, causing discomfort in particular others (Kopels & Dupper, 1999).

The Canadian Labour Code defines conduct as work-related sexual harassment if it is "likely to cause offence or humiliation to any employee" (Johnson, 1994). However, it is worth noting that incidents may be difficult to define as they can vary both in the minds of people and in the policies developed by businesses, corporations, and governments (Johnson, 1994). Therefore, there is considerable controversy about what constitutes work-related sexual harassment (Johnson, 1994).

In the research literature, Fitzgerald and her colleagues (1993) describe three related components of sexual harassment: (a) gender harassment, which refers to crude, verbal, and symbolic behaviours that convey hostile attitudes; (b) unwanted sexual attention that is unreciprocated by the target; and (c) sexual coercion, which captures subtle or explicit efforts to make job rewards contingent upon sexual cooperation (Lapierre, Spector, & Leck, 2005). Gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention are alterior forms of the second type of sexual harassment (i.e., hostile environment) defined by courts in both Canada and the United States, while sexual coercion is akin to quid pro quo sexual harassment.

Research in the domain of sexual harassment has focused primarily on intra-organizational insider-initiated sexual harassment, disregarding the potentially important effects of the harassment perpetrated by members of the public, known as public-initiated sexual harassment (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). The findings from insider-initiated sexual harassment have resulted in the recognition of stress and serious consequences for employees and organizations alike (Schneider & Swan, 2004).

Literature on the subject of the consequences of insider-initiated sexual harassment on the physical and psychological well-being of victims describes that they are more likely than non-victims to report physical health problems. Such psychosomatic disorders include respiratory, stomach, and sleep problems, headaches, migraines, and weight loss or gain (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001). Sexual harassment has also been associated with a variety of detrimental emotional consequences and victims are likely to report dissatisfaction with life in general (Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

Insider-initiated sexual harassment is also found to have negative job-related consequences (Schneider & Swan, 2004). Research has documented several negative effects of harassment experiences, including decreased morale at work and increased absenteeism (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1987). Moreover, other studies show that being a victim of insider-initiated sexual harassment is associated with job dissatisfaction, decreased loyalty to the organization, and intent to leave the organization (Barling et al., 2001). In a recent study, female employees who were victims of one or more sexually harassing behaviours perpetrated by members within the organization reported less satisfaction with work, supervisors, coworkers, and promotions, as well as less organizational commitment and greater role ambiguity, role conflict, and stress compared to non-victims (Schneider & Swan, 2004). The degree of influence insider-initiated sexual harassment has on a victim will vary depending on the perpetrator. In one study, insider-initiated sexual harassment committed by a colleague resulted in consequences only two-thirds the magnitude of insider-initiated sexual harassment committed by a supervisor (Laband & Lentz, 1998).

While the literature on insider-initiated sexual harassment is now quite clear, there are comparably few studies on sexual harassment of women by members of the public (Lenton et al., 1999). This neglect is partially due to the fact that some men and women dismiss sexually harassing behaviour from the public as trivial or even consider it to be flattering (Lenton et al., 1999). In addition, public places are viewed as incidental routes that people use on their way to someplace else. Therefore, rules of conduct in public places as well as semipublic places have not received the same attention as "intra-organizational harassment" in private places (Lenton et al., 1999).

The literature on sexual harassment initiated by members of the public is rather limited since most research has focused on harassment within the organization. However, it is worth stressing the fact that more people are working in the service industry today, than in the early twentieth century, more specifically, more women are working in the service industry today than in the 20th century. This alone can give rise to an increased potential for such employees to encounter or experience public-initiated sexual harassment. Therefore, it makes sense to examine the outcomes of public-initiated sexual harassment.

There are differences between insider-initiated sexual harassment and public-initiated sexual harassment, most significantly, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. In insider-initiated

sexual harassment, the victim may be repeatedly harassed by the harasser(s) for the reason of proximity – sharing a workplace. In contrast, in public-initiated sexual harassment, the perpetrator may be a frequent visitor to the establishment or perhaps frequency of harassment is job-type related – meaning that if the employee is subject more than once to harassment, it is likely to be from different individuals. Regardless of perpetrator, public-initiated sexual harassment may not force daily confrontations like the aforementioned insider-initiated sexual harassment.

Of the few studies that have examined public-initiated sexual harassment, one study found that professional women harassed by their clients report lower job and health satisfaction, and experience more psychological stress than non-victims (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). Moreover, this study also showed that professional women feel less attached to their organization, and spend more time thinking about quitting (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). Results from the same study also showed that public-initiated sexual harassment is not only a phenomenon occurring with professional women, but that it occurs with frequency in the non-professional service industry as well (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). There was also evidence that public-initiated sexual harassment has negative effects on job satisfaction beyond those accounted for by "intra-organizational harassment" (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

Due to this wide range of psychological and physical consequences, and the negative impact on job satisfaction, public-initiated sexual harassment is an area that desperately needs to be explored. In this study, I will address the lack of information on sexual harassment by examining the outcomes of sexual harassment perpetrated by members of the public as they may differ from insider-initiated sexual harassment. In particular, I will focus on the experience of young workers, arguably the most vulnerable in an organization because of their lower status in many respects. Before examining the consequences of sexual harassment towards young female workers in particular, it is crucial to understand who qualifies as a young worker.

Young Workers

The term young worker usually refers to an individual between the ages of 15 and 24 years old who is employed, either full-or part-time (Barling & Kelloway, 1999). In 2002, 67% of Canadian youth participated in the workforce (Tucker & Loughlin, 2006). Of that 67%, 82% were working in the service industry (Statistics Canada, 2006). Hence, young workers have regular contact with the public, fuelling evidence that young workers are at a higher risk than adult workers of being targets of certain forms of aggression (Tucker & Loughlin, 2006). Results from the British Crime Survey (BCS) show that young workers are at a higher risk of aggression from their clients or customers than other working age groups (Budd, 2001). In addition, a survey of employees in European Union (EU) countries found that 5% of young workers reported sexual harassment initiated by members of the public compared with 2% of all EU workers (Chappel & Di Martino, 2000). Young female workers have also been found to be at a higher risk of sexual harassment than young male workers (Tucker & Loughlin, 2006). Not to mention that a study of young Australian fast-food workers found that 48% of employees reported being verbally abused, 8% reported being threatened, and 1% reported being assaulted during a 12-month employment period. It is interesting to see that in virtually all cases, the harasser had been identified as someone other than a co-worker (Mayhem & Quinlan, 2002).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The purpose of this research is thus to identify whether sexual harassment from members of the public predicts a reduction in psychological and physical well-being and lower job satisfaction in young female workers, while controlling for average number of hours per day of face-to-face contact with the public, number of weeks employed, and experience of psychological aggression. Face-to-face contact was controlled because it is an essential criterion for public-initiated sexual harassment. Number of weeks employed was also a factor as it determines for how long the subject was working with the public. Lastly, studies have revealed that certain groups of young workers are more likely to encounter aggression in the workplace (Tucker & Loughlin, 2006), therefore, psychological aggression was also controlled for.

This study aims to extend existing research by looking at public-initiated sexual harassment in young female workers as this type of sexual harassment is in need of more attention from researchers. Moreover, I am also looking at young workers, which is an age group that has also been largely ignored.

Based on previous research examining the consequences of insider-initiated sexual harassment, I hypothesize that experiencing sexual harassment will predict low psychological well-being. More particularly, higher levels of exposure to sexual harassment will be associated with lower reported psychological well-being. I further suggest that experiencing sexual harassment will predict low physical well-being. Also, higher levels of exposure to sexual harassment will be associated with lower physical well-being. I also hypothesize that higher levels of exposure to sexual harassment will be associated with lower job satisfaction.

METHOD

Participants

In order to participate in my study, potential participants had to have worked during the summer of 2017, and their job had to involve interacting with the public (i.e., customers or clients) a minimum of one hour per day. They also had to be between the ages of 18-24. Potential participants were recruited at Bishop's University, a small university located in Quebec, Canada. The participants (N = 70) were female, undergraduate students who were registered in either Business Administration or Psychology courses. I distributed two hundred questionnaires to Bishop's University students in order to attain a sample that was characterized by variability in experience of sexual harassment. One hundred and sixty-six students, representing 96 different jobs, returned their questionnaire, for a response rate of 83%. For the purposes of my thesis, all males were taken out of the study, leaving 77 females participants. Four female participants had to be removed from the sample because they were above 24 years of age. In addition, three female participants were taken out of the study because they had less than one hour per day of face-to-face interaction with the public. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 24 years ($M = 20.37$ $SD = 1.58$). On average, participants had been employed for a period of 12.31 weeks ($M = 12.30$ $SD = 4.25$) and worked on average 38.79 hours per week ($M = 38.79$, $SD = 9.93$).

Materials

Each potential respondent was given a questionnaire package containing (a) a cover letter, (b) a consent form, (c) a return envelope, and (d) a questionnaire containing the 10 measures (see Appendices A and B for a copy of the cover letter and consent form). The cover letter informed potential participants that the purpose of the study was to understand how workplace experiences impact personal and organizational outcomes. Moreover, the cover letter also informed students that they would be asked to complete a survey asking about their 2017 summer work experiences. Also, the survey cover letter informed students that to answer some of the questions contained in the survey, they would need to recall potentially negative workplace experiences. Students were free to stop their participation at any time. In addition, they were told that they did not have to answer any question in the survey that could potentially upset them or make them feel uncomfortable. Finally, participants were told that only Professor LeBlanc and I would have access to their data and that the data would remain completely anonymous and confidential. The survey contained the following scales.

Sexual Harassment was assessed with the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ), a 16-item scale that consists of examples of sexual harassment (e.g., "Have you ever been treated differently because of your sex?"). The SEQ was developed by Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow (1995) to measure sexual harassment from organizational insiders (e.g., peers, supervisors). However, Gettman and Gelfand (2007) modified the instructions so that the scale could be used to measure public-initiated sexual harassment. The SEQ, the most common measure of sexual harassment, has been shown to be both valid and reliable (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). All items were rated using a 5-point scale, with responses ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). A higher score would reveal more harassment from a customer or a client whereas a lower score would reveal less harassment. The averaged scores in this study ranged from 0 to 2.50 ($M = 0.63$, *SD*

= 0.08). Internal reliability was α = .92 (see Appendix C for the items that were used to measure sexual harassment).

Mental health was evaluated with the shortened version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), a 12-item scale that measures sub-clinical levels of psychiatric disturbance in the general population (e.g., "Were you able to concentrate on whatever you were doing?") (Banks, Clegg, Jackson, & Kemp 1980). All twelve items were rated using a 7-point scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*All of the time*). Higher scores reflected better mental health of participants, whereas lower scores reflected poorer mental health. The averaged scores in this study ranged from 2.50 to 6.83 ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 0.11$). Internal reliability was α = .84 (see Appendix D for the items that were used to measure mental health).

Physical well-being was measured using the modified version of Spence, Helmreich, and Pred's (1987) Health Scale, which consisted of examples of physical well-being (e.g., "Did you get a headache when you were frustrated because things were not going the way they should have or when you were annoyed at someone?"). All five items were rated using a 5-point scale, with responses ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*4 or more times*). The averaged scores in this study ranged from .79 to 5.07 ($M = 2.31$, $SD = .86$). Internal reliability was α = .83 (see Appendix E for the items that were used to measure physical well-being).

Job satisfaction was measured with a 5-item scale developed by Brayfield-Rothe (1951), which consisted of examples of satisfaction at work (e.g., "I feel fairly satisfied with my present job"). All five items were rated using a 7-point scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). The averaged scores in this study ranged from 1 to 7 ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.18$). The reliability of the scale in this sample was .90 (see Appendix F for the items that were used to measure satisfaction at work).

This study controlled for three variables. Psychological aggression was assessed with a 3-item scale that measured the frequency of psychological aggression (e.g., "During your summer employment, how often were you in a situation where a customer or client shouted or yelled at you?"). The items were used by LeBlanc and Kelloway (2002) who modified it from the original scale developed by Barling, Rogers, and Kelloway (2001). All three items were rated using a 5-point scale, with responses ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*4 or more times*), with low scores indicating low psychological aggression. The averaged scores in this study ranged from 0 to 4 ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.23$). Internal reliability was α = .84 (see Appendix G for the items that were used to measure psychological aggression).

Number of weeks employed was determined by the amount of time the participant was employed. Face-to-face contact with the public was assessed by the number of hours a day the participant spent working face-to-face with the public, with a minimum of one hour per day for inclusion in the results. These regulations were assessed by questions such as "Please estimate how many hours a day you had face-to-face contact with customers or clients" (see Appendix H). The questions were answered based on participants own evaluation of how much they had worked.

Procedure

I distributed questionnaires to Bishop's University students who were registered in a Business Administration or Psychology course. I sent e-mails to professors and asked for their permission to talk about my project in their classes. When a professor agreed to let me come to class, I would arrive 15 minutes before the end of the class to present my project and to recruit students. I would thoroughly explain to the students the eligibility criteria. Students who agreed to participate were provided with an envelope containing a survey cover letter, consent form, and a questionnaire. Some professors would allow students to receive a bonus mark for participating in this study. However, this bonus mark could only be used towards either a psychology or human resource management class.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Prior to conducting the analyses, I examined all univariate and multivariate assumptions. Linearity, homoskedasticity, multicolinearity, and normality were all found to be satisfactory, and neither multivariate nor univariate outliers were found. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all study variables. Three hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the unique contribution of

sexual harassment to the different personal (i.e., mental health, physical health) and organizational (job satisfaction) outcomes. The regression results are given in Table 2.

Psychological Well-being

In the first analysis, 23% of the variance in mental health was accounted for by the overall model (R^2). Face-to-face contact with the public and weeks employed were entered in step 1. Psychological aggression was entered in the second step. In the third step, sexual harassment was entered and the results were significant ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .11$), suggesting that experiencing sexual harassment predicts mental health.

Physical Health

In the second analysis, 16% of the variance was accounted for in physical health by the overall model (R^2). After covarying face-to-face contact and weeks employed in the first step, psychological aggression was entered in step 2. Sexual harassment was entered in step 3. Results showed that sexual harassment predicted physical well-being ($\beta = .29$, $p < .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .05$).

Job Satisfaction

In this analysis, 13% of the variance in job satisfaction was accounted for by the overall model (R^2). Face-to-face contact and weeks employed were entered in the first step, and psychological aggression was entered in step 2. Sexual harassment was entered in step 3 and the results were not significant ($\beta = -.26$, $p = .08$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$), though it showed marginal significance in the direction expected.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether public-initiated sexual harassment predicts psychological and physical well-being and job satisfaction. Some of the results coincided with Gelfand and Gettman (2007) whose results showed that public-initiated sexual harassment does affect the psychological and physical well-being of young female workers. However, contrary to Gelfand and Gettman (2007), the results of this study showed that public-initiated sexual harassment does not predict the job satisfaction of young female workers. This may be due to the following factors:

Firstly, the variation between the ages of women in the study done by Gelfand and Gettman (2007) has potential to cause many discrepancies between their results and the results of this study. The main argument being that the women in Gelfand and Gettman's (2007) study ranged from under 18 to over 40 years of age (46% of which were above the age of 40), compared to this study of women 18 to 24 years of age. Accordingly, the results pertaining to job satisfaction cannot be compared effectively, as there may be evidence pertaining to age and job satisfaction that can potentially taint the results.

Secondly, the sample size of the population used were too widely separated for comparison, as the Gelfand and Gettman (2007) study had a sample size of 28% women (706 women), while this study included only 70 female participants. The size discrepancy indicated that a larger statistical value would yield a greater statistical significance (Keller & Warrack, 2004).

Thirdly, the results were dependant on the type of job held by the participant. Gelfand and Gettman's (2007) participants held jobs solely in an Atlantic Grocery store, with unspecified part- and full-time employment, differing from the participants in this study who were assumed to hold jobs as mainly summer employment, where satisfaction may not be as important of an issue.

In summation, because of these discrepancies, comparison with the Gelfand and Gettman (2007) regarding job satisfaction is extraneous. The reasons remain that the participants of this study were not locked into their employment, and are students whose current employment is considered secondary to their education. Finally, the public-initiated sexual harassment they may have experienced could not be a major factor of job satisfaction, as they were conscious of an inevitable end to their employment at the particular organization.

Practical Implications

These results have several implications for both organizations and young female workers. The findings in this study are a significant step towards raising awareness of public-initiated sexual harassment. Given the important percentage of young workers working in the service industry, the negative consequences on physical and psychological well-being of public-initiated sexual harassment found in this research should be of concern to organizations. Furthermore, young workers need to be made aware of the consequences of public-initiated sexual harassment, and the likelihood of it to occur, especially if they should chose to work in the service industry, where they may be required to interact with customers or clients.

In this study, I have demonstrated that there are some consequences of public-initiated sexual harassment that are similar to those found with "intra-organizational harassment." Furthermore, it is important to stress the fact that public-initiated sexual harassment occurs with comparable frequency to "intra-organizational harassment" (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). Thus, these findings should have important policy implications for organizations.

Managers should adopt policies and procedures towards public-initiated sexual harassment. These policies and procedures would lead to a safer work environment for their employees. It is essential to relay on a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment, for the sanctity of their employees' physical and psychological well-being. However, to do so, is a two-fold process:

Firstly, outside-in prevention could be the key method of deterring public-initiated sexual harassment by directly targeting the public. This can be done in two ways: overtly and covertly. Overt-outside-in prevention targets the public via visual representation of zero-tolerance policy. This can be done using signage or pictorial methods, regarding regulation of use of service. Covert-outside-in prevention manipulates the employee to deter invitation of public-initiated sexual harassment. This method encourages a dress-code.

Inside-out prevention method could also be used. This method is highly procedural and will provide for employees ways to be prepared for, handle and cope with on-coming public-initiated sexual harassment, thereby enhancing protection of their physical and psychological well-being. This procedural technique must be taught during employee training, as well as upheld during employment. Employees should be made ready for the possibility that they may be sexually-harassed on the job by the public, and that this occurrence is unacceptable. The employees should be given guidelines as to appropriate and inappropriate behavior from clientele, as well as initiatives they can take should they encounter such inappropriate behavior. Finally, employees should be provided to deal with appropriate services to deal with the harassment. This coping mechanism, along with managerial support, will provide confidence to continue following anti-sexual harassment procedures.

Though the negative repercussions of sexual harassment cannot be generalized from the age group studied in this research, namely between the ages of 15 and 24, to females of all ages, the training may be beneficial to women of all ages.

Some managers may not take the above recommendations into consideration because the organization cannot be held responsible for the actions of members of the public. This is true in the sense that the organization cannot control the public. However, the detrimental effects on employees' psychological and physical well-being, when subjected to public-initiated sexual harassment, should be sufficient motivation to coax managers into taking the above necessary steps because an unhappy worker does not work very well.

Future Research

This study leaves some interesting questions unanswered. To the extent of my knowledge, no studies on public-initiated sexual harassment in males have been conducted to date. As well, research is also lacking in the domain dealing with other female age groups. Gelfand and Gettman (2007) studied this phenomenon but a replication study is needed to add validity to their research. Also, it would be interesting to conduct a study on public-initiated sexual harassment to determine the effects, if any, that public-initiated sexual harassment has on peers and supervisors in the company. Lastly, it would be important to distinguish between individuals with part-time and full-time employment status as sexual harassment may affect them differently.

Limitations

The first limitation is that this study has limited external validity. It is important to remember that the point of this research was not be able to make generalizations but rather to add to the limited bank of knowledge on the subject. The first limitation is that the study's sample size was too small (N = 70) to make an overall generalization to all young female workers in all Canadian provinces. Moreover, our sample was limited to Bishop's University students enrolled in specific classes, thus it may not be representative of all young female workers (e.g., young female workers who work full time and do not attend school). Additionally, the results of this study cannot be generalized to young male workers as this was not the focus of this research.

Secondly, internal validity, though quite high is not impregnable. This study did not control for the job domain, nor did it control for whether the employment was full- or part-time, regardless of amount of time spent face-to-face with the public, both of which could be confounding variables. As a situational factor, participants' personality is an important factor, as certain females will interpret sexual harassment as flattery and thus have less negative side effects.

Conclusion

This study has shown that while there is very little research and literature on public-initiated sexual harassment, it is just as crucial a focus as insider-initiated sexual harassment. The consequences of public-initiated sexual harassment on the physical and psychological well-being of employees should be a target for managers in their efforts to protect employees. There is hope that this study and these findings will cause a domino effect on the industry and promote research into all aspects of public-initiated sexual harassment and the procedures to deter it.

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