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Workplace harassment: A test of definitional criteria derived from an analysis of research definitions and Canadian social definitions

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ABSTRACT

Public awareness of the occurrence and effects of workplace harassment continues to grow. However, despite increasing awareness, ambiguity remains about how harassment is defined and, consequently, how to determine whether a questionable situation should be judged as harassment. For this research we reviewed definitions of workplace harassment and identified four elements that were frequently included as criteria for making judgments of whether harassment had occurred (i.e., repetition, intent, perceived intent, consequences). In two separate studies, fictional scenarios were used to evaluate the extent to which participants' judgments about harassment were affected by the presence or absence of the four elements. Ratings of the scenarios provided by student participants (study one; $N = 160$) and a convenience sample of community participants (study two; $N = 292$) with varying levels of work experience and diverse professional backgrounds were analysed. According to our results the four elements significantly influenced participants' judgments of harassment. The intent of the harasser had the strongest and most consistent effect on harassment judgements and whether the behaviour was repeated had the weakest and least consistent effect. In addition to the unique effects of the individual elements, significant interactions between the elements emerged and suggest that harassment judgements depend on the interplay of a variety of factors. Though the results of these studies add to the growing body of research that focuses on defining workplace harassment, they also highlight the need for additional research in the area.

1. Introduction

As long as there have been groups of employees working together there have been, arguably, problematic interpersonal experiences at these workplaces (e.g., personality conflicts, disagreements, violence). Such experiences often result in negative consequences for the people and organizations involved. Excessive absenteeism (Ayoko, Callan, & Hartel, 2003; Giebels & Janssen, 2005), lowered productivity (Chen, Tjosvold, & Su Fang, 2005), and toxic work environments (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012) are some such negative consequences for organizations. For individuals, negative consequences include loss of income and employment (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; World Health Organization, 2002; Zapf & Gross, 2001), health difficulties (Hyde, Jappinen, Theorell, & Oxenstierna, 2006; Spector, Chen, & O'Connell, 2000) and psychological distress (Ayoko et al., 2003; Brenninkmeijer, Demerouti, le Blanc, & van Emmerik, 2010; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2011; Spector et al., 2000). Some experiences that lead to negative organizational and individual effects have been clearly defined and exhaustively studied. Though the existence and implications of workplace harassment have been recognized, it has not been as clearly defined. The purpose of the present research was to examine existing definitions of workplace harassment and to empirically test how the most common components of these definitions affect individuals' judgements of workplace harassment.

1.1. Definitions of workplace harassment

Understanding and preventing workplace harassment arguably are important, current concerns among workers (Liefooghe & Olafsson, 1999), policy makers (Briere, 1999; Sheehan, Barker, & Rayner, 1999) and researchers (Agervold, 2007; Einarsen, 2000; Rayner, 1999a, 1999b; Saunders, Huynh, & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007). However, to prevent the occurrence of harassment or to intervene effectively when it has occurred, it is necessary for researchers and practitioners to be able to identify harassment in a reliable manner. From a research perspective, a definition of workplace harassment is essential for theory development. A definition of workplace harassment should identify relevant concepts and suggest how these concepts relate to each other

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(Fawcett & Downs, 1992). A gap in harassment research recognized by researchers and theorists on the topic (e.g., Keashly, 1998; Sheehan et al., 1999), and highlighted by this review, is that few studies have empirically investigated the characteristics of situations and behaviours that influence whether they are judged as harassment. Reliable identification of harassment situations requires a clear and consistent definition of the phenomenon. In order to develop a common definition of workplace harassment, it is important to examine how it is currently defined by policy-makers and researchers.

1.1.1. Empirical examinations of definitions

A number of different terms have been used by policy-makers and researchers to label problematic interpersonal workplace situations. Einarsen (2000) provides an excellent summary of several such terms including harassment, petty tyranny, bullying, psychological terror, mobbing and workplace trauma. Similar to inconsistencies in which terms that are used, there are also no established or agreed-on criteria for deciding which actions or events should be categorized as workplace harassment (Rayner & Keashly, 2004). In research that has examined this type of workplace behaviour, either past definitions were used or newly-developed definitions were offered. In only a few cases (i.e., Agervold, 2007; Liefooghe & Olafsson, 1999; Saunders et al., 2007) have the definitions of workplace harassment themselves been investigated. Research that has specifically focused on the defining characteristics of workplace harassment, has yielded some empirical support for the importance of negative behaviour, harmful consequences (Saunders et al., 2007), intentionality and perceived intentionality (Agervold, 2007) as criteria in a definition of workplace harassment.

In an early study specifically focused on defining workplace bullying, Liefooghe and Olafsson (1999) used the Critical Incident Technique with focus groups ($N = 40$; focus groups of 3–6 university staff and students) to gain a detailed understanding of how bullying tends to be understood by non-researchers. Though the researchers did not evaluate definitional criteria nor offer a common definition of workplace bullying, their research illustrated that there exists substantial variability in the frameworks used by laypersons to understand and explain bullying. Their research findings led them to hypothesize that bullying tends to be conceptualized "…in ways which are less conducive to constructive action and often lead to (self) destructive scenarios for workers and/or employers" (p. 46) — a hypothesis which highlights the practical importance of developing a clear, common definition of workplace bullying.

Using an empirical approach, Agervold (2007) undertook to help clarify and overcome the challenges in defining workplace bullying by studying how prevalence rates of bullying differed depending on how it was defined. According to Agervold, bullying tends to be defined as aggressive behaviour directed at a target, to involve a target/bully power difference and to result in negative consequences for the target. Agervold indicated that a key challenge in defining bullying was distinguishing behaviour that may be, by its nature, bullying (i.e., defined objectively) from behaviour that is determined to be bullying based on subjective experience (i.e., as perceived by a target or an observer). In his study he examined whether the prevalence of bullying differed depending on whether rates were derived using a subjective definition (participants were asked if they felt they had been subjected to bullying within the previous six months) or "quasi-objective reports" (participants were considered to have been bullied if they had been exposed within the previous six months, on a daily or more frequent basis, to at least one of ten possible negative acts from a checklist). According to Agervold's results, rates of bullying based on the subjective definition (1%; $N = 3024$) were lower than those based on objective measurement (4.7%). Agervold concluded that negative behaviour, the subjective experience of being bullied and the perceived intentionality of bullying behaviour are essential components for defining bullying and obtaining accurate estimates of bullying prevalence.

From their 2007 review of workplace bullying definitions, Saunders et al. (2007) identified five elements that are most frequently used to define negative workplace experiences as bullying (negative behaviour; persistent experience of behaviours; experience of harm; perception by target of having less power than the bully; targets' self-identification as being bullied). According to Saunders and colleagues, these five criteria tend to be central in many current social and research definitions of bullying but researchers and policy-makers differ in how much importance they assign to each of the five criteria. In particular, of central importance in bullying definitions is the occurrence of some negative behaviour (Saunders et al., 2007). However, whether a target must self-identify as being bullied, a behaviour must be persistent (i.e., repeated) or whether there is a target/bully power difference (i.e., in favour of the bully) continues to be debated (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Saunders et al., 2007). Saunders and colleagues empirically evaluated the relative importance of the definitional criteria they identified by comparing the criteria included in current research and practice definitions with definitional criteria used by laypersons in their definitions of workplace bullying. According to their results, lay definitions of workplace bullying tended to include the negativity of behaviour and harmful consequences for the target but not persistence/frequency, target/bully power differences or targets' self-identification as targets of bullying.

1.1.2. Legal definitions

The legal definitions discussed are not meant to be an exhaustive listing but merely a sample of the definitions that have been used in Canada. For illustrative purposes, Appendix A presents the legal definitions of workplace harassment that are discussed in this paper. Two key sources of guidance for legal consideration of harassment are the Canadian Criminal Code and the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC; Appendix A). According to the Canadian Criminal Code (1985), criminal harassment, which applies to situations beyond the workplace, involves engaging in any of four types of conduct that causes another person to fear for their safety or the safety of others known to them. The four types of behaviour include (1) repeatedly following a person from place to place, (2) repeated communication with a person, (3) "besetting or watching the dwelling-house, or place where the other person, or anyone known to them, resides, works, carries on business or happens to be," or, (4) engaging in (such) threatening conduct. According to the CHRC (1998, 2013), harassment is defined as unwanted conduct that offends or humiliates. The full definition of workplace harassment from the CHRC includes several elements that further specify the defining characteristics of workplace harassment. These features qualify the nature and consequences of harassing behaviour.

Harassing behaviour is qualified in three ways in the CHRC definition. First, the harassing behaviour must be "physical or verbal." Specifying that harassing behaviour must be physical or verbal limits the sorts of behaviours that can be harassment to those that are observable. As a result, it is unclear whether such behavioural omissions as singling out one person with whom not to speak or socialize (i.e., ostracism) or not to communicate important work information, would qualify as harassment — situations that appear consistently in research examining workplace harassment (e.g., Agervold, 2009; Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Lewis & Orford, 2005). Second, the frequency of a behaviour is not specifically considered in determining whether behaviour is considered as harassing; whether there is "a single incident or several incidents" is irrelevant for defining a situation as being harassment according to the CHRC definition. The third quality is that harassing behaviour must be "unwanted." This qualification indicates that behaviour that is unwanted by a person is harassing behaviour; therefore, if one feels harassed then one is harassed. These qualifiers collectively imply that any behaviour can be considered to be harassment if it is observable and the recipient viewed it as unwanted, offensive or humiliating.