



Moral disengagement as a self-regulatory process in sexual harassment perpetration at work: A preliminary conceptualization



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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is recognized as a widespread form of aggressive behavior with severe consequences for victims and organizations. Yet, contemporary research and theory focusing on the motives and cognition of sexual harassment perpetrators continues to be sparse and underdeveloped. This review examines the motivations that underlie sexual harassment and the self-exonerating cognitions and behavioral techniques employed by perpetrators of sexual harassment. In this paper, we emphasize the need to understand the cognitive processes that disinhibit motivated individuals to sexually harass. Utilizing social cognitive theory as a foundation, we propose that cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement are likely to have an important etiological role in the facilitation and reinforcement of sexually harassing behavior. A preliminary conceptual framework is presented, suggesting novel ways in which each of the various moral disengagement mechanisms may contribute to sexual harassment perpetration.

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1. Introduction

Sexual harassment continues to be a widespread social phenomenon (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003; see McDonald, 2012 for a review) prevalent in both employment (e.g., Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996) and educational settings (e.g., Paludi, 1990). The negative and severe consequences of sexual harassment for victims and organizations are well documented and include poor physical and mental health, decreased job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (e.g., Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Nielsen, Bjorkelo, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2010; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

Moreover, there is a widely held consensus that sexual harassment represents an array of behaviors that lie within three distinct categories. As presented within the tripartite classification model (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995), sexually harassing behaviors can be classified into the domains of gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. In short, gender harassment is the most prevalent form of sexual harassment (Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003; USMSPB, 1995) and has the purpose of creating an intimidating, offensive or hostile environment (Berdahl, 2007). This category of sexual harassment is composed of verbal and non-verbal acts, such as sexist jokes and display of pornographic material, which intends to insult and derogate women rather than being an expression of sexual attraction. Sexual coercion refers to an individual's attempts to exercise his or her social power over a subordinate in order to obtain sexual cooperation. Unwanted sexual attention, by comparison, consists of verbal and non-verbal behaviors (e.g., sexual comments) that are perceived by the target as unwelcome, unreciprocated, and offensive acts of sexual interest (for a review see Pina & Gannon, 2012).

It is apparent, therefore, that sexually harassing acts may convey hostility rather than being innocent expressions of sexual interest. Sexual harassers constitute a heterogeneous population (Lucero, Allen, & Middleton, 2006; Lucero, Middleton, Finch, & Valentine, 2003) and, therefore, differ in their motivations, characteristics, cognition, and behavioral repertoires. Although researchers have endeavored to identify the characteristics of male sexual harassers (e.g., Begany & Milburn, 2002; Krings & Facchin, 2009; Luthar & Luthar, 2008; Pryor, 1987; Stillman, White, Yamawaki, Ridge, & Copley, 2009), less research has examined the motives driving sexual harassment. And almost no research has focused on the *cognition* of the sexual harassment perpetrator and the self-regulatory processes which inhibit and facilitate harassing behavior. These shortcomings pose some interesting questions that require further theoretical and empirical investigation. How can people engage in sexually harassing acts despite recognizing that their behavior is likely to be socially unacceptable, offensive and counter-normative? What are the cognitive strategies that harassers employ to neutralize and justify their actions?

At the heart of this article is our argument that sexual harassment may be facilitated and reinforced through the self-regulatory process of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990, 1999). Moral disengagement has previously been revealed to facilitate aggression and delinquency (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004) and, as a theoretical framework, has seen an upsurge of popularity and research interest in recent years. Mechanisms of moral disengagement acting as self-serving cognitions may thus assist in the exonerated of harassing acts that conflict with the perpetrator's moral beliefs and self-concept of being a generally decent and rule abiding individual.

We begin our review by examining available research on motives for sexual harassment, and present the theoretical perspective of sexual harassment as goal motivated behavior. Then, we provide an overview of cognitive and behavioral techniques employed by sexual harassers to rationalize and neutralize their actions. This leads us to present a *preliminary conceptualization* of how mechanisms of moral disengagement may contribute to sexual harassment perpetration. Although we

appreciate that sexual harassment is multidimensional in nature (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Gelfand et al., 1995), our ideas are informed by a broad body of literature that is not restricted to any specific category of sexual harassment. Also, we recognize that sexual harassment may be enacted by female perpetrators and members of the victim's own sex (Berdahl, 2007; Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996; Stockdale, Visio, & Batra, 1999). However, our paper is situated within the context of male-perpetrated sexual harassment of women as this is statistically the most frequent type of harassment and has received the greatest research attention to date (Gutek, 1985; McDonald, 2012; O'Donohue, Downs, & Yeater, 1998; Pina, Gannon, & Saunders, 2009).

2. Motivation for sexual harassment

2.1. Sexual motives

Traditionally, sexual harassment was conceived to be predominantly motivated by sexual interest and attraction (Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982; Tangri & Hayes, 1997). Thus, proponents of evolutionary and natural-biological theories of sexual harassment (Browne, 2006; Studd & Gattiker, 1991; Tangri et al., 1982) proposed such behavior to be a natural expression of male sexual desire and the need for sexual gratification. Men are, therefore, argued to engage in sexual harassment because they are biologically predisposed to be promiscuous and sexually aggressive toward women (Studd & Gattiker, 1991). From these perspectives, harassing acts are simply a natural by-product of heterosexual interaction that seeks to enhance mate-seeking and male reproductive success.

Indirect support for evolutionary and natural-biological theories of sexual harassment has been offered through research on sexual misperception biases (Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, 2012; Stockdale, 1993). An array of studies found that some men possess tendencies to overperceive sexual interest from women during ambiguous heterosexual interaction (Perilloux et al., 2012). For example, after observing videotaped scenarios displaying heterosexual interaction across work-related settings, males were found to misperceive women's friendly and outgoing behaviors as conveying sexual interest (e.g., Abbey, 1982, 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Johnson, Stockdale, & Saal, 1991; Shotland & Craig, 1988). Despite these findings, however, the empirical link between sexual over-perception biases and sexual harassment perpetration remains unclear and in need of further research attention.

2.2. Hostile motives

It has been widely postulated that many acts of sexual harassment may be motivated by sexist antipathy rather than sexual attraction (e.g., Berdahl, 2007; Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Farley, 1978; Galdi, Maass, & Cadinu, 2013; Gutek, 1985; Kelly, 1988; Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003; MacKinnon, 1979). Sociocultural theorists maintain that sexual harassment serves to perpetuate patriarchal gender relations through the sexual exploitation and oppression of women (Farley, 1978; Gutek, 1985; MacKinnon, 1979). Similarly, it is widely documented that sexually harassing behaviors (in particular, gender harassment) are often targeted at women who are perceived to violate traditional gender stereotypes and threaten male social identity (Berdahl, 2007; Galdi et al., 2013; Maass & Cadinu, 2006).

Indeed, it has been proposed that gender harassment is an expression of male hostility toward women as an outgroup (Pryor & Whalen, 1997) and its greater prevalence within traditionally masculine occupations, such as the military (e.g., Bastian, Lancaster, & Reyst, 1996) and police (e.g., Martin, 1990), may be due to the desire of certain men to assert their authority and keep women in subordinate positions (Gruber, 1992; Gruber & Bjorn, 1982). In fact, experimental research employing the computer harassment paradigm (Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Galdi et al., 2013; Maass et al., 2003; Siebler, Sabelus, & Bohner, 2008) has consistently found that gender harassment appears to be motivated by masculinity threat. These studies demonstrate that men will engage

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