

Female Bystander Intervention in Incidents of Workplace Sexual Harassment

Though sexual harassment can occur in almost any setting, it is important to note the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace. These behaviors, along with the belief of maintaining traditional gender roles (e.g., men holding powerful positions, women remaining in the home), sexism, and the acceptance of violence has perpetuated a “rape culture” within the United States (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; 1995), which often excuses and sustains these behaviors. The present study uses focus groups to address issues of sexual harassment in the workplace and what it means to be a female bystander in such an event. The present study, when all data are collected, will describe women’s perceptions of their role in instances of workplace sexual harassment.

Though sexual harassment usually directly affects a single victim, witnesses of these encounters can indirectly play a role in its manifestation in the workplace. Such organizational members who witness these events are considered bystanders or vicarious victims (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007). Vicarious victims seem to cope differently from harassment depending on how they responded to the incident (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005). Essentially, in situations of workplace sexual harassment, bystanders are given a choice: to intervene or to ignore, all while considering several influential factors.

Feelings and thoughts of others can largely influence the implicit associations many individuals make toward the victim (e.g. Neuberg et al., 1994) and thus can affect perceptions of the situation. For instance, blaming the victim for the harassment could lead a bystander not to intervene. Victims of sexual harassment are often stigmatized by the incident and thus often face constant antisocial, defamatory behavior (Mulder et al., 2014) which makes them appear in a negative light. Such negative stigmas may prevent fellow colleagues from intervening in an instance of sexual harassment.

The current study qualitatively investigated how perceptions of organizational sexual harassment situations influence bystander intervention. It placed particular focus on female bystanders’ impressions of female victims. It also considered the idea of victim stigmatization and explored the repercussions of associating with a stigmatized victim and how the ramifications of a female getting involved in a situation of workplace sexual harassment can prevent a bystander from intervening. It closely examined the role that gender plays in workplace power dynamics, and ultimately, in an individual’s likelihood to intervene.

To explore perceptions of sexual harassment in the workplace, a focus group was conducted. Participants within the initial pilot interview were females who worked over 30 hours a week and were over the age of 18. Participants provided consent to the use of a recording device during the focus group. The interview process was explained: one question was asked at a time, and discussion was encouraged as well as the sharing of personal experiences and thoughts. Each person gave her initial reaction to the question, and each of the participants had the opportunity to discuss these questions and reactions with the other participants. Of note, the results presented here are preliminary as we will be collecting data from approximately 20 more focus group participants throughout the fall 2017 semester.

The current study found that ramifications of intervention, particularly threats to job security, was related to female bystanders’ likelihood to intervene in instances of sexual harassment in the workplace. The study also found that workplace power dynamics, especially perceptions of male leaders in power, influenced female bystanders’ empowerment to intervene. Additionally, this study found that social relationships played a role in the likelihood of

intervention as well as the likelihood to serve as support for victims. These findings are important in knowing and understanding the range of implications that intervention can have on employees.

References

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