

Organisational Responses to Workplace Harassment: An Exploratory Study

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Short biographical note:

Dr Denise Salin is a Researcher and Lecturer in Management and Organization at the Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland. She teaches organizational behaviour and leadership and her main area of research is the dark side of organizational behaviour, in particular workplace bullying and harassment. She has previously published her work in, for example, *Human Relations* and *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*.

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Purpose of the paper

To explore what kind of measures personnel managers have taken to intervene in workplace harassment and to explore how organisational characteristics and the characteristics of the personnel manager affect the choice of response strategies.

Design/methodology

The study was exploratory and used a survey design. A web-based questionnaire was sent to the personnel managers of all Finnish municipalities and data on organisational responses and organisational characteristics were collected.

Findings

The study showed that the organisations surveyed relied heavily on reconciliatory measures for responding to workplace harassment and that punitive measures were seldom used. Findings indicated that personnel manager gender, size of municipality, use of 'sophisticated' human resource management practices and having provided information and training to increase awareness about harassment all influence the organisational responses chosen.

Research limitations

Only the effects of organisational and personnel manager characteristics on organisational responses were analysed. Future studies need to include perpetrator characteristics and harassment severity.

Practical implications

The study informs both practitioners and policy-makers about the measures that have been taken and that can be taken in order to stop harassment. It also questions the effectiveness of written anti-harassment policies for influencing organisational responses to harassment and draws attention to the role of gendered perceptions of harassment for choice of response strategy.

Originality/value

This paper fills a gap in harassment research by reporting on the use of different response strategies and by providing initial insights into factors affecting choice of responses.

Key words: bullying; discipline; gender; harassment; human resource management; public sector

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Introduction

Studying harassment in the workplace is important because of the many negative consequences associated with it. For example, different forms of harassment have been shown to result in stress reactions, health complaints and lower job satisfaction (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). This means that organisational profitability may be negatively affected through higher absenteeism, a higher turnover of personnel and lower productivity (Di Martino et al., 2003; Faley et al., 1999; Hoel et al., 2003). Despite this, we know relatively little about what organisations actually do when harassment is reported or otherwise discovered (cf. Brown & Sumner, 2006 on workplace aggression). Thus, this study aims to explore organisational responses to harassment. More precisely, it aims to describe and explain forms of organisational responses to harassment in Finnish municipalities.

Workplace harassment can take many different forms. Although sexual harassment has received much attention in US literature, some studies have indicated that other forms of generalized workplace harassment are even more common (Richman et al., 1999). What is more, in European studies, the reported prevalence rates of non-sexual forms of harassing behaviours have been much higher than the prevalence of ‘unwanted sexual attention’ (e.g. Hoel & Cooper, 2000). In several Western European countries, broader anti-harassment legislation, which explicitly addresses also psychological non-sexual harassment, has been introduced lately (e.g. Di Martino et al., 2003). As the first region in Northern American jurisdiction, Quebec enacted similar legislation in 2004 (Harvey & Keashly, 2006).

In Finland, since 2003, employers have been required to ‘by available means take measures to remedy the situation’ if harassment or other inappropriate treatment occurs (Occupational Safety and Health Act 738/2002). The term ‘harassment or other inappropriate treatment’ refers to both psychological harassment, or ‘bullying’, and sexual harassment, although separate legislation on sexual harassment has been enacted previously. In line with Finnish legislation, in this study, the term ‘harassment’ has been used as an umbrella term for both psychological harassment/bullying and sexual

harassment; however, emphasis is placed on the former. Empirical studies have also confirmed that when Finnish personnel managers are asked to define and describe workplace harassment they mention both sexual and psychological forms of harassment, but report the latter form as considerably more common (Salin, 2006a).

Although a number of studies have been conducted concerning the prevalence of sexual and psychological workplace harassment (see e.g. Ilies et al., 2003 and Zapf et al., 2003 for reviews) and factors increasing the risk for different forms of harassment (see e.g. Hoel & Salin, 2003; Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003 for reviews), we know little about organisational responses to these problems. Even in countries where employers are explicitly required by law to intervene in harassment, employers are typically themselves required to decide the nature of the response or responses needed to end the harassment. For instance, in Finland there is still no general consensus on what or how much an employer is expected to do, and both in Finland and other countries there is a paucity of research on how organisations actually are responding.

What is more, the vast majority of studies on harassment have been conducted by collecting data from self-reported targets, while the perspective of organisational representatives, such as senior managers, line managers or human resource management (HRM) professionals, is largely missing. While individual responses to harassment (e.g. Zapf & Gross, 2001) and employee perceptions of organisations' capabilities to take action (Salin, 2006b) have been studied, organisational responses have been consistently ignored in research. Some researchers have addressed the effectiveness of preventative measures, such as training programmes (e.g. Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). Still, there is little research on what the organisational responses towards reported harassers are and how harassment is dealt with from a disciplinary perspective. This study is thus an attempt to more systematically explore organisational responses to workplace harassment.

Organisational responses to workplace harassment

Workplace harassment and recommended responses

Workplace harassment can take many different forms. Sexual harassment has generally been defined as unwelcome sex- or gender-related behaviour that creates a hostile work environment or quid pro quo behaviours, where the unwelcome behaviour becomes a term

or condition of employment or advancement (Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003; p.79). Psychological harassment, on the other hand, has been studied under many different names, including 'bullying' (e.g. Einarsen et al., 2003), 'mobbing' (Zapf & Gross, 2001), 'victimization' (Aquino, 2000), and 'generalized workplace abuse' (Richman et al., 1999). Despite differences in terminology, researchers agree that these concepts refer to repeated and systematic hostile acts, which are primarily of a verbal or non-verbal, rather than physical, nature.

It is also important to note that psychological harassment may take different forms in different national contexts. Whereas psychological harassment in the UK typically is perpetrated by an abusive superior, in Scandinavia and Finland targets are often harassed by groups of colleagues (Zapf et al., 2003). National prevalence levels may also differ. In Finland, studies have found that 8-10% of employees responding to surveys report being subjected to psychological harassment (Salin, 2001 on business professionals and Vartia, 1996 on municipal employees), which is lower than many UK studies, but higher than results in other Scandinavian countries (cf. Zapf et al., 2003).

Given the high costs associated with harassment (Hoel et al., 2003) and the existence of anti-harassment legislation in many countries (e.g. Di Martino et al., 2003), harassment can be seen as a transgression that (senior) management needs to react to. Responding to harassment is thus a matter of organisational discipline, with the aim of modifying harasser behaviour, protecting the target and deterring other organisational members from engaging in similar conduct. Consequently, practitioners involved in harassment intervention have provided recommendations on how harassment can and should be dealt with.

Hubert (2003) notes that interventions in psychological harassment can be either informal or formal. Informal intervention may involve, for example, *arbitration* or *mediation* by a third party. In some countries, *occupational health services* (Vartia et al., 2003) may also provide assistance in mediation. However, researchers and practitioners stress that mediation is typically possible only when the conflict is at an early stage (Vartia et al., 2003). Hubert (2003) suggests that *formal complaint* procedures may be appropriate when informal strategies have failed or if the behaviour is too serious to be suitable for informal intervention. When such a formal complaint is evaluated as plausible by the grievance committee, the advice may be to *transfer or dismiss the accused*.

Both in order to modify future behaviour and in order to facilitate rehabilitation, it may also be important to provide *counselling* and *training*. Research has shown that harassment can have severe consequences for the targets and lead to, for example, different psychosomatic stress symptoms, burnout and depression (e.g. Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), which makes rehabilitation crucial. Based on clinical work, Tehrani (2003) stresses that the harasser is also likely to be in need of counselling in order to be able to change his or her behaviour.

Although practitioners have presented recommendations on how to respond to harassment, little empirical research so far has addressed what organisations actually do. Based on her clinical experience, Ferris (2004) classified organisational responses into three categories: organisations that directly or indirectly accept negative behaviours, organisations that on the surface emphasise respect and employee dignity, but in practice treat negative behaviour as ‘merely’ personality conflicts and therefore do not implement existing harassment/bullying policies, and organisations that consider all harassing behaviour inappropriate and harmful for the organisation and therefore actively take measures. This typology showed that the degree to which organisations take action varies significantly. However, this typology did not provide a detailed insight into the actual forms of intervention or the underlying principles and mechanisms relied upon.

A classification of organisational responses to harassment

As shown in the previous section, many different forms of organisational responses may be taken in cases of workplace harassment. This also reflects the existence of different discipline philosophies in the workplace on a more general level. For instance, Rollinson et al. (1997) describe different forms of employee discipline on a continuum from *rehabilitation* to *retribution*, with *deterrence* in the middle.

The responses to workplace harassment vary in particular with respect to both the extent to which they seek to modify perpetrator behaviour and the extent to which they seek to protect the target from future victimisation by the same perpetrator. Given that both the focus on modification of perpetrator behaviour and the focus on target protection can be either high or low we can create a 2x2 matrix as shown in Figure 1.

- Take in Figure 1 -

Measures that simultaneously aim both to modify perpetrator behaviour and to protect the target include discussions with the parties involved, potentially with a neutral mediator present, and counselling or training for either or both parties. These forms of responses are thus closely linked to what Hubert (2003) describes as informal mechanisms and have some resemblance to the rehabilitative view of discipline (cf. Rollinson et al, 1997) in the sense that modification of perpetrator behaviour is sought, rather than punishment or deterrence per se. Given the high focus on both target and perpetrator and the 'soft' and integrative nature of these measures, these measures will be labelled 'reconciliatory' in this paper. Although such measures may be useful in the early stages of conflicts, they are of limited use in highly escalated conflicts (cf. Zapf & Gross, 2001).

Another category of measures that have a strong focus on the perpetrator are punitive measures (cf Rollinson et al, 1997 on retributive discipline). For example, successful formal harassment complaints often lead to disciplinary actions of a punitive nature (cf. Hubert, 2003). At the extreme end, workplace harassment may be seen as grounds for termination of a work contract. However, even if no actual dismissal decision is made, 'bullying and harassment tendencies' may also be a reason for more senior managers to decide not to promote a certain employee or not to prolong his or her contract if he or she is on a fixed-term contract (Storgårds, 2006). Punitive measures primarily send a clear signal to the perpetrator about the unacceptability of his or her behaviour. In addition, as punishment has strong social effects (Trevino, 1992), such actions may also deter others from engaging in similar behaviour. However, although punitive responses may be important to restore the target's belief in justice, these responses primarily focus on the perpetrator rather than on the target.

A third method for responding to workplace harassment is through the physical, permanent separation of target and the perpetrator, i.e. by transferring either the perpetrator or the target. Here the main focus is on protecting the target from further victimisation by the same perpetrator in the future, though without necessarily addressing any of the (other) root causes. Even though it from a disciplinary point of view might seem more natural to transfer the person who has engaged in unacceptable behaviour, evidence indicates that it is often the target that tends to be transferred, in particular in cases where the perpetrator is in a superior managerial role (Rayner et al., 2002).

However, as noted by Ferris (2004) not all organisations choose to take any measures at all in cases of harassment. It is thus possible that the organisation does not take any active measures to protect the targeted employee, to change perpetrator behaviour or to deter other employees from engaging in similar behaviour. Some managers may believe that targets are weak and need to ‘toughen up’, that responding will merely worsen the situation, that intervening in an interpersonal conflict is not part of the managerial role, or that given time the problem will ‘disappear’. However, this kind of laissez-faire approach, where managers abdicate responsibility, risks leading to conflict escalation over time rather than de-escalation, given that research has shown that harassment typically is an escalating process (cf. Zapf & Gross, 2001).

The four different types of responses described above, i.e. reconciliatory measures, punitive measures, transfer and avoidance, are summarized in Figure 1 with examples provided for each category.

Factors affecting response strategies

Different strategies for responding to harassment and other employee transgressions have been identified above. Still, it is not known what factors affect the kind of response an organisation will adopt. In this section, factors that may affect response strategy are identified and discussed.

As the person in charge of personnel matters is likely to exercise a considerable influence on responses to harassment, socio-demographic information about this person is important. Gender is a socio-demographic factor that has received attention both for conceptualising harassment and for reacting to employee transgressions in general. For example, experimental research has suggested that perceiver gender may affect sanctions recommended when punishing workplace aggression, with men sanctioning initiators of aggression more severely than women (Brown & Sumner, 2006). This may indicate a higher tendency for men to resort to punitive action for resolving harassment. On the other hand, a study comparing how men and women perceive and explain bullying behaviour showed a higher tendency among women than among men to see workplace bullying as an organisational issue, with organisational antecedents and organisational consequences, rather than merely as a personal issue (Salin, 2007). Sexual harassment studies have further revealed that women tend to see subtle forms of sexual harassment as more severe than

men do (Rotundo et al., 2001), while men have been reported to blame the victim in sexual harassment cases to a higher extent than women do (Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Smirles, 2004). Seeing harassment as a (severe) organisational issue, rather than merely a personality issue, may thus make female personnel managers more prone to believe that organisational measures should and can be used to intervene in bullying.

What is more, both academic research on and media attention surrounding harassment in the workplace has increased considerably over the past decades: sexual harassment since the 1980's (e.g. Jensen & Gutek, 1982; see Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003) and psychological harassment/bullying since the 1990's (see e.g. Einarsen et al, 2003). As the contents of business education and management textbooks reflect current trends in research, it is also more likely that younger managers have received training about sexual harassment and bullying types of behaviour in their academic curriculum (cf. Greenberg & Baron, 2008). Studies on bystander interventions have shown that perceived competence increases the likelihood of intervention (cf. Cramer et al., 1988). It can thus be assumed that younger managers will have greater awareness of the problem and a larger repertoire of techniques for dealing with it and therefore show a lower tendency to avoid dealing with the problem. If we believe that education is essential for raising awareness and spreading information about possible response strategies, we may along the same lines hypothesise that level of education will have an effect on how personnel managers respond to harassment.

In addition, we may also expect that there is a relationship between organisational measures taken to prevent harassment and measures taken to respond to actual cases of harassment. For instance, Ferris (2004) reported that organisations that actively investigated bullying complaints and took action with bullies typically also provided training and information to increase general awareness. In addition, as discussed above, we know that when bystanders feel competent, they are more likely to act, for example, in emergencies (e.g. Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Cramer et al., 1988). We may thus assume that in organisations where information and training has been provided, organisational representatives are more likely to react to harassment, both through reconciliatory and punitive action, and less likely to avoid responding to harassment.

Another measure typically recommended for preventing harassment is having a written anti-harassment policy (Richards & Daley, 2003). As written policies typically include recommendations both to targets and managers on appropriate procedures, we can expect

written policies to positively affect people's perceived competence and thus the likelihood of action. Furthermore, role expectations and their clarity are important for whether or not observers and other third parties take action in harassment cases (cf. Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; O'Leary-Kelly et al, 2004). As written policies typically communicate a clear 'no-tolerance' policy and require managers to take action (cf. Richards & Daley, 2003), we may expect that having written policies will decrease the likelihood of avoiding taking action.

We may also find a relationship between general HRM practices and organisational responses to harassment, as employee dignity and well-being can be seen as aspects of HRM. Recent research has focused on the effects of what has been labelled 'high performance work practices' or 'sophisticated human resource practices' and studies have analysed links to employee and organisational outcomes (Guest, 1997; Heffernan & Flood, 2000; Huselid, 1997). Such practices typically include employee attitude surveys, extensive training, performance-based pay systems and formal appraisal systems. As these practices are often seen as representing 'best practices' for managing employees, it is thus interesting to see if the existence of such practices is also related to active organisational responses to harassment.

Finally, we may expect the size of the organisation to affect the way it responds to allegations of harassment. In terms of prevention, it has been shown that larger organisations are more likely to have written harassment policies because they are more formal in nature and have more sophisticated human resource experts to help (e.g. Greenberg & Baron, 2008). Beyond having a written policy, we may also expect them to have better resources for responding to harassment complaints and taking action. What is more, given the higher number of positions with similar skills requirements within larger organisations we may in particular expect them to rely on transfer of either party more often than small organisations.

The aim of the empirical study is thus to explore which types of measures personnel managers have taken to intervene in workplace harassment and to explore how the organisational characteristics and characteristics of the personnel manager affect choice of response strategy. The analysis will focus on the variables identified above as possibly affecting organisational responses to harassment.

Method

The aim of this study was to explore organisational responses to workplace harassment. A link to an on-line questionnaire was sent to the person in charge of personnel issues in all (431) municipalities in Finland. The development of the questionnaire was informed by a pre-study consisting of in-depth interviews with personnel professionals in five public sector organisations, undertaken by a Master's student under the supervision of the author of this paper (Storgårds, 2006).

Overall, municipalities are a significant employer in Finland, employing approximately 1/5 of all Finnish employees. Municipalities have responsibilities mainly in the fields of health care, social welfare services and education, but also responsibility for necessary infrastructure (e.g. waste handling, street maintenance) and fire and rescue services. A large proportion of municipal employees work in traditionally female professions and a high proportion (78% in 2007) of all municipal employees are women. Approximately 3/4 have permanent work contracts and 1/4 fixed-term contracts. Labour union membership among Finnish municipal employees is very high (88% in 2007) and collective bargaining processes play an important role; however, this is typical for the Finnish economy as a whole (Commission for local authority employees, 2007).

The questionnaire was sent to the personnel manager in the municipality or, if the municipality had no separate personnel manager, to the person formally in charge of personnel matters. In small municipalities, this would typically be the head of administration. The extensive contact information made available on the Internet by most municipalities made it easy to obtain the e-mail address of the person in charge of personnel matters; only in a few exceptional cases did the municipality need to be contacted to clarify this. Hereafter, this person will be referred to as the personnel manager, regardless of the title used in the various municipalities.

Of the 431 municipalities, 205 responded, giving a response rate of 47.6%. All different regions and all size categories were represented among those responding. The median for number of employees was 400, with 8.7% of the responding municipalities having less than 100 employees and 20.5% having 1000 employees or more. As for the characteristics of the personnel managers in the sample, 81.8% had a university/polytechnic degree and 54% of the personnel managers were female. A rather high number of female personnel managers is typical for Finnish organisations in general, as personnel management is an area where

women have successfully made careers both in the public and the private sector. Nine percent of the respondents were younger than 35 years, 31 % were between 35 and 50 years and 60 % over 50 years of age.

Research instrument

The questionnaire used consisted of questions related to organisational responses taken, information about the human resource function in the municipality (characteristics of the personnel manager and HRM practices), size of the municipality and measures taken to prevent harassment.

Organisational responses. In the questionnaire, 10 different organisational responses to harassment were listed, including having decided not to take action (see Table 1). Respondents were asked to indicate which measures had been taken in the past three years in response to harassment and to rate the likelihood of different measures being taken in future cases. The future likelihood was rated on a scale from 1 (highly unlikely) to 5 (highly likely). Separate indexes for the likelihood to take reconciliatory, punitive and transfer measures were created by adding the separate items and dividing by the number of items. Cronbach's alpha for these were 0.79, 0.84 and 0.71 respectively. Avoidance was measured with a single item 'not taking action'. When asking which measures had been taken in the past, two additional items that were related to employee responses were added: 'the victim resigned' or 'the perpetrator resigned'. As for the forms of harassment, no distinctions were made for different forms of harassment. In the questionnaire, harassment was not explicitly defined. However, in the study references were made to national legislation on harassment and inappropriate treatment. In practice, this Act has been generally interpreted as primarily an 'anti-bullying' law, which in addition to bullying also covers sexual harassment.

Characteristics of personnel manager. As for the characteristics of the personnel manager, the respondents were asked about gender, age and education. The characteristics of personnel managers were coded as dummy variables (female vs. male; older vs. younger than 50 years; with vs. without university education).

Use of 'sophisticated' human resource practices. The use of what can be seen as 'sophisticated' human resource practices or 'high performance work practices' was

measured by asking respondents to indicate how large a percentage of the personnel were covered by certain practices typically seen as ‘sophisticated’ forms of HRM (e.g. Heffernan & Flood, 2000; Huselid, 1995). The four aspects chosen in this study were the use of employee attitude surveys, formal appraisal systems or development discussions, performance-based pay, and formal training (within the past two years). Cronbach’s alpha for this measure of use of ‘sophisticated’ HRM practices was 0.50. The relatively low internal consistency can be explained by the fact that is an example of a composite scale where the indicators define and form the construct rather than the indicators being the reflection of a common construct, i.e. the items are not interchangeable indicators of a single underlying construct (cf. MacKenzie et al., 2005).

Size of municipality. Size of municipality was measured by asking respondents to report on the number of employees employed by the municipality.

Awareness initiatives. The extent of awareness initiatives was measured by asking respondents whether information had been provided and whether training had been provided on psychological harassment/bullying and/or on sexual harassment. Thus an awareness initiatives index was calculated for each municipality, ranging from 0 (neither information nor training on neither psychological harassment/bullying nor sexual harassment) to 4 (both information and training on both psychological harassment/bullying and sexual harassment).

Anti-harassment policies. Respondents were asked whether the municipality had a written policy against psychological harassment/bullying and whether they had a written policy against sexual harassment, resulting in an index ranging from 0 to 2.

Results

As for organisational responses, respondents were asked both which measures had actually been taken in cases of harassment and how likely they considered it that a particular measure would be taken in the future. As can be seen in Table 1, the most common measures taken were having discussions with the parties involved (77.9%) and consulting occupational health care services (72.1%), both of which may be labelled ‘reconciliatory’ responses. These were also the measures that respondents reported they were most likely to take in possible future cases.

- Take in Table 1 -

Transfer of either the target or the perpetrator was also a relatively common strategy, with 23.5% of the respondents reporting that in at least one case of harassment the perpetrator had been transferred and 21.6% of the respondents reporting that in at least one case of harassment the target had been transferred. Punitive measures had also been used, although to a much lesser extent: 4.4% reported that harassment had resulted in not prolonging the work contract for a perpetrator on a temporary contract. In 2% of the municipalities harassment had been grounds for not promoting a perpetrator, and 2.9% reported that harassment had been the grounds for dismissing an employee.

It is worth noting that 12.3% of the respondents reported that there had been reported/known cases of harassment where no measures had been taken by the organisation. In line with this, 6.9% of the respondents revealed that targets themselves had chosen to resign. Despite the high reported levels of having taken no action in cases of harassment, this alternative was clearly the least favoured when asked about the likelihood of choosing this strategy in the future.

When looking at the different forms of organisational responses, high intercorrelations can be seen between them (see Table 2). For instance, the likelihood of taking reconciliatory measures, punitive measures and transfer measures were all positively correlated ($p < 0.01$). Taking no action was negatively correlated with taking reconciliatory measures ($r = -0.239$, $p < 0.01$).

- Take in Table 2 -

As for the relationship between organisational factors and organisational responses, we can see that use of 'sophisticated' HRM practices ($r = 0.254$, $p < 0.01$) and having taken measures to increase awareness ($r = 0.257$, $p < 0.01$) were positively related to a higher reported willingness to take reconciliatory measures for dealing with harassment. Transfer strategies were used primarily in larger municipalities ($r = 0.174$, $p < 0.05$) and municipalities using more 'sophisticated' HRM practices ($r = 0.216$, $p < 0.01$). The likelihood of avoiding dealing with harassment was positively correlated with the size of municipality ($r = 0.178$, $p < 0.05$). Having written anti-harassment policies was not significantly correlated with any of the response strategies.

As for characteristics of the personnel manager, in municipalities with a female personnel manager, a higher likelihood of utilising reconciliatory measures was reported than in municipalities with a male personnel manager ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.63$ compared to $M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.67$), $t(189) = 2.11$, $p = 0.036$). Similarly, women were more likely than men to use a transfer strategy ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.83$ compared to $M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.84$), $t(189) = 2.20$, $p = 0.029$). On the other hand, male personnel managers reported a higher likelihood of taking no action ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.04$ compared to $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(189) = -2.63$, $p = 0.009$). No significant differences were found for punitive action ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.05$ compared to $M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(187) = 0.71$, $p = 0.482$). Similar analyses were repeated for age (older or younger than 50 years) and educational level (with or without university degree) of the personnel manager, but these analyses did not yield any significant results.

To analyse for the simultaneous effects of different variables, multiple regression analyses were undertaken. Size of municipality, use of ‘sophisticated’ HRM practices, existence of written anti-harassment policies and measures taken to increase awareness (i.e. training and information initiatives), and gender, education (with or without university education), and age (older or younger than 50 years) of personnel manager were used as independent variables.

In the multiple regression analysis, the extent of measures taken to increase awareness, having a female personnel manager and using ‘sophisticated’ HRM practices were all significantly ($p < 0.05$) related to taking reconciliatory measures (see Table 3a). As for transfer, a high number of employees and extensive use of ‘sophisticated’ HRM practices were the most significant predictors (see Figure IVb). None of the variables studied significantly predicted taking punitive measures, but punitive measures seemed to be somewhat more common in large municipalities ($p < 0.10$) (see Table 3c). As for taking no measures, number of employees and having a male personnel manager were the strongest predictors ($p < 0.05$) (see Table 3d).

- Take in Table 3 -

Discussion and a research agenda for the future

The main contributions of this study were to provide descriptive data on the mechanisms used to respond to workplace harassment and to provide tentative analyses of factors affecting choice of organisational response.

This study indicated that municipalities primarily used reconciliatory approaches to respond to harassment. The fact that harassment in Finland often takes place between colleagues (cf. Zapf et al, 2003) may partly explain this preference, as reconciliatory measures may be seen as more useful when power differentials between the target and perpetrator are small. If the organisation responds at a very early stage, reconciliatory approaches may be highly useful. However, if the harassment situations have been allowed to escalate into processes where severe stigmatisation has taken place, such approaches may no longer be of any benefit (cf. Glasl, 1982; Zapf & Gross, 2001). In addition, focusing too much on a reconciliatory or 'soft' approach may even be risky, as the victim may be perceived as an 'easy target' of exploitation or mistreatment (Aquino, 2000).

The results showed that the likelihood of taking reconciliatory measures, taking punitive measures and transferring either party were all positively correlated. This indicates that these measures do not exclude each other, but rather are used in combination, or possibly in a sequence. This is also in line with the findings presented by Ferris (2004) in her typology of responses to allegations of workplace bullying. She found that the organisations that responded efficiently, as measured by target's need for counselling, used both coaching and counselling and performance management, including terminations, to resolve the issues, thus combining both reconciliatory and punitive elements as needed.

The results from this exploratory study indicated that use of 'sophisticated' HRM practices, measures taken to increase awareness of workplace harassment, gender of personnel manager, and size of municipality have significant relationships with the different forms of responses. Both the likelihood of taking reconciliatory measures and utilising a transfer strategy were related to a general emphasis on 'sophisticated' or 'high-performance' work and HRM practices (cf. Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1997 on these concepts). In addition, the use of 'sophisticated' HRM practices, taking measures to increase awareness and taking reconciliatory measures to respond to harassment were all positively correlated, indicating that these municipalities were taking a systematic approach to ensure employee well-being and dignity, in terms of both active prevention of harassment and active interventions.

Somewhat surprisingly, having written anti-harassment policies, typically explicitly outlining recommended procedures for dealing with harassment, did not affect the reported likelihood among personnel managers of taking either reconciliatory, transfer or punitive measures, nor did it decrease the reported likelihood of avoiding taking action. This is important to note, since having written policies may well increase expectations among employees that action will be taken. In fact, Ferris (2004) argued that raising employee expectations about respectful treatment, but failing to live up to this is particularly detrimental for target health. She found that, due to their sense of betrayal, such targets needed even more professional counselling than targets from organisations that openly accepted negative behaviours. An important managerial implication of this study is thus that it questions the effectiveness of written anti-harassment policies unless these are part of more extensive efforts that also seek to increase awareness through information and training. However, this study did not analyse whether having an anti-bullying policy affected line managers' willingness to take measures against bullying, and this issue should be addressed in future studies.

As for the gender of the personnel manager, female personnel managers reported a higher likelihood than men of taking reconciliatory measures or transferring either party. In contrast, men were significantly more likely to avoid taking any measures. As some studies have indicated a higher tendency among women to emphasise organisational antecedents and among men to emphasise target characteristics for explaining workplace bullying (Salin, 2007), this may affect the extent to which female and male managers consider harassment to be an 'organisational' problem that requires measures by organisational representatives. Other characteristics of the personnel manager, such as age and education, did not seem to influence choice of responses.

Nevertheless, the study design did have a number of limitations that should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings. First of all, the questionnaire was sent to only one respondent per municipality and all replies are thus based on this person's views. As this questionnaire was only sent to the person in charge of personnel issues, cases that had exclusively been handled by line managers without the involvement of the personnel manager or the personnel department were not included.

In addition, this study was based on personnel managers' view of harassment cases that had been reported to them. Thus, this builds on the assumption that people somehow voice

their grievance when mistreated, either informally or formally. However, in a UK study, Rayner (1997) found that 38% of those who felt they had been mistreated had 'done nothing' about it, neither confronted the perpetrator nor contacted others. In line with this, Firestone and Harris (2003) found that among military personnel only a small proportion of individuals subjected to sexual harassment responded through formal channels and that the most frequent response was trying to ignore the behaviour. An important challenge for managers thus lies not only in dealing with reported cases of harassment, but also spotting and identifying such cases early, in order to minimise negative effects and further escalation.

This study was limited to studying the effects of characteristics related to the organisation and to the personnel manager. However, an important venue for further research is to further study how perpetrator characteristics and forms of harassment may affect organisational responses. This sample was limited to the municipal sector, where a very large proportion of employees, i.e. the potential targets and perpetrators, are female. This may have affected the results, as there are indications that male and female harassers may be treated differently. Experimental designs have indicated that aggression conducted by females is more frowned upon and that student respondents recommend harsher punishments for female than male offenders for the same offences of workplace aggression (Brown & Sumner, 2006). In addition, studies have shown that in terms of workplace discipline female perpetrators are more often 'talked at', rather than invited to take part in joint problem-solving, as compared to male offenders (Rollinson et al., 1996). It is thus possible that similar gender differences can be found when punishing perpetrators of harassment, and future studies should explicitly address this question.

Future research also ought to address how forms of harassment affect organisational responses and discipline. This refers both to the actual content of the harassing behaviour (i.e. the negative acts involved) and the frequency with which they have been carried out. For example, in their experimental study with student participants, Brown and Sumner (2006) showed that the harshest punishments were recommended for 'overt acts of aggression', such as physical assaults or damaging the target's property, with less harsh punishments for 'acts of hostility', such as spreading rumours and belittling, and the least severe punishments for 'obstructionism', such as interfering with or blocking someone's work.

In addition to analysing the effects of perpetrator characteristics and type of harassment on organisational responses taken, another important avenue for further research consists of analysing the perceived effectiveness of different response strategies. Future studies should thus address to what extent different organisational responses have actually succeeded in terms of reforming perpetrator behaviour, restoring the target's and co-workers' work ability and job satisfaction, and reducing harassment behaviours in general in the organisation.

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Figure 1. Different forms of organisational responses to workplace harassment

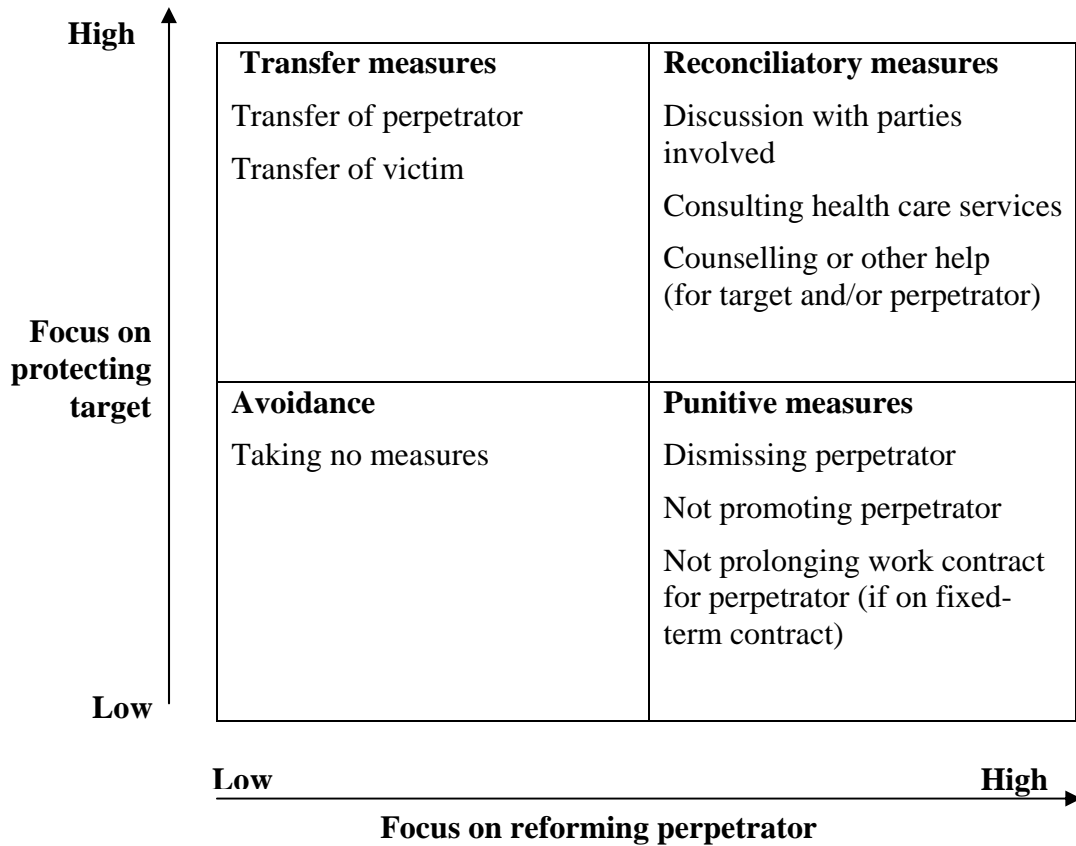


Table 1. Organisational responses to harassment.

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSE	Yes, has been used	Likelihood of being taken in the future 1-5 (1=highly unlikely, 5=highly likely)
Discussions with parties involved	77.9%	4.69
Consulting health care services	72.1%	4.29
Transfer of target	21.6%	2.71
Transfer of perpetrator	23.5%	2.93
Training/counselling for target	41.7%	3.56
Training/counselling for perpetrator.	30.9%	3.39
Not prolonging perpetrator's contract	4.4%	3.20
Not promoting perpetrator	2.0%	3.14
Dismissing perpetrator	2.9%	2.50
No measures	12.3%	1.98
Target resigned	6.9%	
Perpetrator resigned	5.9%	

Please note that each municipality may have taken several measures, either in the same or in different cases of harassment.

Table 2. Correlation matrix

	N	Min-max (Possible range)	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Reconciliatory measures	198	1-5 (1-5)	3.99	0.69		.429(**)	.284(**)	-.239(**)	.088	.254(**)	.036	.257(**)
2. Transfer	198	1-5 (1-5)	2.81	0.84			.410(**)	-.081	.174(*)	.216(**)	.075	.037
3. Punitive measures	196	1-5 (1-5)	2.95	1.02				-.035	.124(†)	.046	-.059	-.061
4. Avoidance	198	1-5 (1.5)	1.97	1.18					.178(*)	-.021	-.053	-.081
5. Size (number of employees)	195	25-38000	1010	3166						.170(*)	.214(**)	.185(**)
6. Use of sophisticated HRM practices	161	0-97.5 (0-100)	51.13	18.97							.312(**)	.193(*)
7. Anti-harassment policies	205	0-2 (0-2)	0.95	0.90								.461(**)
8. Awareness measures (training & information)	205	0-4 (0-4)	1.53	1.02								

** p< 0.01 (2-tailed), * p< 0.05 (2-tailed), † p<0.10 (2-tailed)

Table 3. Regression analyses for reconciliatory measures, punitive measures, transfer measures and avoidance

	a) Reconciliatory measures			b) Punitive measures			c) Transfer			d) Avoidance		
	B	T	Sign.	B	T	Sign	B	T	Sign	B	T	Sign
(Constant)		16.850	.000		9.703	.000		8.275	.000		4.589	.000
Number of employees	.057	.686	.494	.168	1.934	.055 †	.208	2.464	.015 *	.258	3.074	.003 **
Use of sophisticated HRM practices	.193	2.281	.024 *	.070	.783	.435	.189	2.163	.032 *	-.005	-.062	.951
Gender of personnel manager (male)	-.173	-2.129	.035 *	-.064	-.750	.454	-.143	-1.708	.090 †	.179	2.158	.033 *
Age of personnel manager (>50)	-.019	-.229	.819	-.046	-.532	.596	.043	.506	.614	.029	.347	.729
University education of personnel manager	-.017	-.211	.833	-.067	-.778	.438	.060	.725	.469	.073	.883	.379
Anti-harassment policies	-.101	-1.090	.278	-.064	-.658	.512	-.011	-.119	.905	-.070	-.746	.457
Awareness measures	.273	3.045	.003 **	-.143	-1.524	.130	-.057	-.622	.535	-.100	-1.099	.274

** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, † p < 0.10