

COURSE:

Foundations of Communication

INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Wendy Robinson

COURSE COMPLETED:

Spring 2009

ASSIGNMENT TITLE:

Literature Review

ASSIGNMENT PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

This assignment was a reflection of various pieces of academic research articles and literature. The paper needed to have a minimum of three sources, and it was to be dedicated to a specific theme. The paper was meant to showcase the academic sources we found and reflect on others' findings in our literature review.

REFLECTIONS:

I was dreading this paper the entire semester. Foundations of Communication was the type of class that spent the entire semester working towards one goal: the literature review. However, once I chose my topic and I began to find articles to piece together, my paper seemed to just fall into place. I was intrigued by my topic, because I felt that it was a different form of sexual harassment that is not always looked at. At the time, this was the longest paper I had to write in my academic life. I definitely felt a great sense of accomplishment once it was complete.

The Power of Touch:

Gender Differences and Perceptions of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Literature Review

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Communication 20000: Foundations of Communication

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Sexual harassment has been used in the professional workplace as a way to abuse power. Those who fall victim to sexual harassment are left with psychological repercussions, most of those victims being women. Although sexual harassment has become more prevalent in recent decades, it has become more difficult to prove that harassment did take place and to take legal action against the harasser. Because of the difficulty to prove, it can create a work environment where the victim becomes increasingly uncomfortable and it may become difficult for them to carry on with their daily job tasks. There are also different levels of touch and different variants of sexual harassment that are used in the workplace. The different levels of touch can give off various meanings and some may exert more power over others. Seeing that women are more likely to be sexually harassed than men, the men seem to be more accepting of sexual harassment and may even turn a blind eye on a harassing situation. This proves that sexual harassment is perceived differently between men and women, and various forms of contact and interactions can vary in intensity in sexual harassment cases and that sexual harassment is more about power rather than sexual attraction.

Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, and Strack (1995) stated that on a national average, one in every two women in the workplace will experience some form of sexual harassment (p. 768), and that sexual harassment will most likely be to gain power in the office environment. Because of the extremely high rate of sexual harassment, this means that almost all organizations in our country will have numerous cases of sexual harassment, most likely against women. Dougherty and

Smythe (2004) noted that there are some organizations that are more prone to sexual harassment cases and that sexual harassment has become a part of an organization's context and culture (p. 293). One of the companies that Dougherty and Smythe cited was the Dial Soap Co. Their organization has had a recent class action law suit that has been filed and is being pursued by the EEOC, which stands for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (p.293-294). The EEOC, however, does not control any inner-office dating, which is inevitable. It is when the line between appropriate and inappropriate touching becomes crossed is when the EEOC becomes involved. The EEOC is required to investigate all claims made to them involving sexual harassment cases, although sexual harassment cases are extremely difficult to prove. (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004, p. 293). Before sexual harassment ever takes place in a work environment, studies have shown that there are certain ways in predicting men who are more likely to sexually harass women to abuse power.

The Likelihood to Sexually Harass (LSH)

Pryor and Stoller have used the LSH (likelihood to sexually harass) method to link social dominance and sexually abusive situations to men who score with high levels in these areas (p. 163). Although there are many cases of sexual harassment filed each year, there are only two basic forms of sexual harassment: quid pro quo and hostile work environment (Bargh et al 1995). Quid pro quo is the act of sexual exchange, or a this-for-that situation. A hostile work environment can be viewed as an ultimatum, meaning that if the victim does not do what the victimizer wishes, he or she will provide a more difficult work environment. The LSH scale was used by Pryor and Stoller and found that men with high levels of LSH were more accepting of harassing situations and dominant work relationships.

“Men who are high in LSH tend to: (a) hold adversarial sexual beliefs, (b) find it difficult to assume others’ perspectives, (c) endorse traditional male sex role stereotypes, (d) be high in authoritarianism, and (e) report a higher likelihood of rape... Thus, high LSH men may see male/female sexual interaction as implying a dominant role for the male, and they may see situations in which men have social power over women as implying a sexual relationship” (Pryor & Stoller, 2004, p.164).

This study showed that men do have a relation between power and sex. Berdahl, Magley, and Waldo (1996) stated that men do have cases where they are the victims of sexual harassment, but it only takes place when they feel their dominance is being put into question in the workplace, again, showing that, for men, sexual harassment is all about power. Although Berdahl et al. (1996) discovered that there are cases reported of men who felt they experienced some form of sexual harassment in the organization, the unsolicited sexual attention had less psychological effects and repercussions (p. 532). Now that it has been shown that men are more likely to sexually harass than women, and the traits of those men who are more likely to abuse their power has been defined, it is important to clearly identify what constitute sexual harassment in an organizational environment.

Defining Sexual Harassment

Lee and Guerrero (2001) conducted a study on the various types of touch and their impact in a professional environment. They noted the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication and that touching a coworker is a powerful intimate form of nonverbal

communication (p. 197). Touch is most likely where victims feel that their harasser has officially crossed the professional line. Because a large majority of the victims are women, it seems that they are more accepting of men who use verbal communication to show dominance, but have little tolerance for physical contact. In their study, Lee and Guerrero (2001) identified nine different types of touch and their impact on women who experienced that nonverbal contact.

“The main purpose of this study is to examine people’s perceptions of nine different types of touch occurring between coworkers. These touches include: shaking hands with a coworker, clasping a coworker’s hands, touching a coworker’s forearm, placing an arm around a coworker’s shoulder, putting an arm around a coworkers waist, touching a coworker’s face, patting a coworker on the shoulder, pushing against a coworker’s shoulder, and not touching...” (p. 196).

Through their findings, Lee and Guerrero (2001) rated the levels of touch and discovered which seemed to have more impact. They found that shaking hands and touching a coworker’s forearm seemed to carry little negative connotation and may even encourage office formality. Clasping hands and face touching seemed to have the most intimate and uncomfortable feelings for the office setting and that pushing against a coworkers shoulder showed violence and dominance in the organization (p. 196). Lee and Guerrero (2001) also stated that when any of these forms of touch were initiated and not returned was when sexual dominance took place and that men are more likely to pursue a female coworker by inappropriate touching (p. 201). After any of these instances happen for women, it is then that they need to start documenting the time, place, and what was said or done so they can file an appropriate claim with the EEOC and, because of their documentation, it will be much easier to prove that the sexual harassment did

take place and order can then be restored in the organization. It is often difficult for women to have other coworkers support their claims of sexual harassment, especially men. Men have a less likely awareness that sexual harassment is taking place or has already happened in the workplace because men in general are more likely to share those same behaviors to sexually harass women themselves (Lee & Guerrero, 2004, p. 770). Because sexual harassment is such a serious case that happens in the workplace, it also has serious after effects that cause the victim psychological damage and insecurities in the organization.

Dealing with the After Effects of Sexual Harassment

Sensemaking is one of the tools that Dougherty and Smythe (2004) focus on in the after effects of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is often a complicated situation that can involve one or multiple instances to gain power in the office. Women seem to participate in sensemaking after the violation has already occurred. Sensemaking, according to Dougherty and Smythe (2004) provides the women who have been victimized to interpret what happened and establish how they feel about the situation and what actions need to be taken to prevent any further misconduct (p. 295). Dougherty and Smythe (2004) also reported that sensemaking has three phases which include: discovery that sexual harassment did take place, the debriefing phase which allows victims to discuss what happened, where, why, and the dispersal phase that allows action to take place against the male harasser (p. 293). Another issue that arises in sexual harassment cases is the fear to report any misconduct. Women tend to be fearful that no one will believe that sexual harassment took place, especially when it involves a male who is high up in the company. That is why documenting is extremely important.

Sexual Harassment Case Study

Dougherty and Smythe (2004) did a situational study where they sent a wealthy alumnus back to his university to make a large donation to a less popular college of the university. During the alumnus' stay, he sexually harassed four different women, all from the same department. None of the women documented their experience with him; however, they all shared an unwelcomed and uncomfortable feeling in the man's presence. The men in the department took no note to what was going on between the male alumnus and the four female faculty members, even though some of the cases of sexual harassment were done in a crowded ballroom at a fundraising event.

After the study was conducted and the male left the campus, the women were interviewed about their experience and expressed that they felt uncomfortable but that they thought no one would believe what was going on between them and the alumnus donor and they were not going to report the sexual harassment (p. 298-303). This case study allowed me to look at a sexual harassment case from beginning to end and to see and hear both sides of the equation. It showed me how easy it is for sexual harassment to take place in an organization and how little is usually done about it.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research did mainly focus on the women being victimized in sexual harassment cases. I feel that it is important for more research and studies to be done about men who experience sexual harassment. The main theme throughout this research is the use of sexual harassment to evoke power in the workplace. The articles written by Dougherty and Smythe

(2004) and Lee and Guerrero (2001) both highlight that sexual harassment is ultimately always going to be a factor in the workplace because of the increasing amount of inner-office dating. Although all of the articles noted that the EEOC is an organization dedicated to making claims, none of the articles provided examples of help that victims can be guided towards for the psychological damages that took place from sexual harassment cases. It is important to recognize the severity of sexual harassment, how to define it, and what to do if someone becomes a victim.

Bargh et al. (1995) points out that sexual harassment makes for a hostile work environment and it may become difficult for staff members to continue to do their daily tasks for fear that another sexual harassing incident may occur (p. 768). With the ratio of women who get sexually harassed in an organization to be on such a high level, it is extremely important for victims to be informed on sexual harassment and the steps to take to ensure their safety at work. Sexual harassment carries large costs for all involved. It is clear that it is perceived differently among men and women and that the various forms of contact and touch play an important role in defining sexual harassment in an organization. The EEOC provides protection and security to both men and women in the workforce, and it allows for serious consequences to be brought into sexual harassment cases.

References

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