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PERCEIVED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AS A FUNCTION OF LOCUS OF CONTROL AND OTHER PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS.

BY

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Abstract

The perception of sexual harassment as a function of Locus of control and personality characteristics was investigated using 200 female and male respondents who were randomly selected among university students, secondary school teachers and bank workers, with a mean age of 22.97 years. They were administered the self esteem scale, locus of control scale and perceived sexual harassment scale that was purposely developed for this research. It was observed that age, locus of control and sex have an interactional influence in the perception of sexual harassment ($R^2 = 0.14$, $p < .001$), married people have a higher perception of sexual harassment than single people ($t = 4.59$, $p < .05$), but no significant difference between students and workers in their perception of sexual harassment. The findings were discussed in line with the Riger's (1991) theory of attribution. The implication of the findings for legal interpretation of sexual harassment and psychological dynamics involved were highlighted.

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a social problem that is presently generating a lot of controversy the world over, although research into this phenomenon is recent yet the prevalence and dimensions of its occurrence are quite alarming. As at 1988, 42% of all the women sampled in the United States had experienced one form of sexual harassment or the other in the last 24 months (US Merit Protection Board, 1988). Fitzgerald (1993), defines sexual harassment as any deliberate or repeated sexual behaviour that is unwelcome to its recipient, as well as other sex related behaviours that are hostile, offensive, or degrading.

However, sexual harassment in some cases may be just a misinterpretation of intention and friendliness to be an indication of sexual harassment (Abbey, 1982; Abbey and Melby, 1986; Shotland and Craig, 1988). In fact, the assertion of Tangri, Burt, and Johnson (1982) is that some sexual harassment may indeed be clumsy or insensitive expression of attraction. The dimensions of sexual harassment as identified by Fitzgerald, Gelfand and Drasgow (1995) are: Gender harassment, Unwanted attention and sexual coercion.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that there is abundance of definitions on sexual harassment. Yet there is little agreement as to the causes of the problem.

However, definitions and research on this phenomenon make it clear that sexual harassment is judged based on the conduct and its effects on the recipient and *not on the intention of the harasser. In essence, perception of harassment may be dependent on some attributes of the victims, the self esteem of an individual may greatly influence the behaviours and actions that such an individual will perceive as sexual harassment.* As stated by Riger (1991), sexual harassment is socially constructed and it varies with the characteristics of the perceiver. The influence of self esteem on perception of sexual harassment can be seen in the patterns of reports of harassment, women professionals believed to have higher self-esteem are likely to report subtle behaviours as harassment than those women in the secretarial-clerical positions believed to have lower self-esteem (McIntyre and Benick, 1982).

Personal vulnerability function of the self esteem as well as affects the perception of what is harassing, an individual who sees him or herself as capable, independent and up to the task is more likely to perceive and as such is dependent on others, the latter becomes more tolerating and insensitive to behaviours that can be described as sexual harassment, all because of the low self esteem. Another factor that affects the perception of sexual harassment is attribution, of the individual, in this sense attribution means how a person sees and explains events that happen to him or her, whether it is a result of his own ability or inability (internal); or on the other hand, whether it is a result of environmental/situational factors (external). Whichever side an individual falls into (external/internal) will determine his or perception of harassment. For instance, Riger (1991), says that some women consider sexual harassment to be normative, in other words it is a normal way of life, routine behaviours that cannot be challenged, by implication people in this category will not perceive subtle behaviours and even some strong suggestive gestures as sexual harassment.

Age and sex are as well implicated in sexual harassment, younger women who are more likely to be victims of harassment are more tolerant than older women (Fan and Anderton, 1987), this is a result of the acceptance by younger women that providing men are "a fact of life" that must be accepted, and this influences what they perceive as sexually harassing. This kind of disposition is not peculiar to females. Males are also affected by normative beliefs in that they are expected to be flattered and happy if a female makes sexual advances. Rejection would be considered an insult to womanhood. Ultimately, this belief affects males' perception and interpretations of sexual harassment. They tend not to see most subtle behaviours as harassing and they have generally low perception of sexual harassment compared to females.

Sexual harassment is now a phenomenon that cuts across all strata of the society. This involves dynamics of power and domination, as well as sexuality. The status of the recipient may influence his or perception of harassment, which may be in terms of position power, marriage or education. For example, just as women with less position power are more likely to be harassed, they are as well more likely

not to perceive behaviours as harassing, especially when cooperation or acceptance of the behaviour is perceived to be rewarding such as in better grades in examinations, promotion, a raise in pay and other forms of reinforcement. Whereas people with position power are more likely to perceive subtle behaviours as harassment.

Educational status can also influence what an individual perceives to be sexual harassment. A person that is well educated would know all about sexual harassment and as such will interpret more behaviours and gestures as harassing than people that are not educated. For example, a university graduate may perceive subtle gestures as sexually harassing while a secondary school student may see the same gestures as a show of affection or a normal way of life.

The effects and consequences of sexual harassment is such that it can leave a permanent scar on the psychic of the victims, it introduces dissonance into their cognition and can greatly impair their functioning and interaction throughout their life time. Sexual harassment is degrading, frightening, and can result in profound job related, psychological, and health related consequences (Fitzgerald, 1993), it can lead to lowered self-esteem, decreased feelings of competence and confidence, increased feelings of anger, frustration, depression and anxiety.

The following hypotheses were tested in this study: (1) Locus of Control, Age and Sex will have significant positive main and joint influences on the perception of sexual harassment. (2) Perception of sexual harassment will be a function of marital status and occupation (students vs. workers).

METHOD

Subjects

The setting for this study was Ibadan, and the sample chosen for the study was randomly selected (purposive and stratified) from the postgraduate, undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan, secondary school teachers and bank workers. Altogether, 200 participants were used, comprising 96 males 104 and females whose ages ranged between 17 and 59, with a mean age of 22.97 and a standard deviation of 7.44. Altogether, there were 114 students and 86 workers participants, 70 of them were married while 130 of them were singles.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in the data collection: Adanijo-Oyefeso (1986) self-esteem scale, to measure self-esteem of subjects. This is a 15-item scale in the Likert format with a reliability coefficient of 0.79 among Bank workers and 0.92 among undergraduate and high school students.

Craig, Franklin and Andrews (1984), Locus of Control Scale measuring the attribution disposition (locus of control) of people. It is a 17-item Likert format scale to measure whether participants derive their attributions from internal or external sources. It has a reliability coefficient of 0.75.

Olapegba (1999). Perceived Sexual Harassment Scale (PSHS). This is a 14-item Likert format scale measuring the perception of subjects' sexual harassment, it has a reliability coefficient of 0.63 and a standardised item alpha of 0.62. All the scales were pilot study validated.

Procedure

These three instruments were attached together and administered to the 200 randomly selected subjects (males and females), with a standard instructions that there were no right or wrong answers. Respondents were to try and be as honest as possible in their responses. They were also assured of confidentiality. Because all the independent variables were intervally measured except for sex of the participants, and because the relationship between the independent and dependent variables were investigated on a single measure, multiple regression analysis was used on the data (Andrews, Klem, Davidson, O'Malley and Rodgers, 1975). T-test for independent means was also used especially for the second hypothesis.

RESULTS

The results of the multiple regression analysis shows that Locus of Control, Age and Sex have a joint influence of 14% on perception of sexual harassment ($R^2 = 0.14$) $<.001$, while Locus of Control and Age contributed 11% ($R^2 = 0.11$) $<.01$. Observation of the Beta weight shows that locus of control contributed 27.79% in the joint prediction, Age 18.93% and sex 17.52%. These are shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1:

Multiple Regression Analysis showing the main and joint influences of Age, Sex and Locus of Control on Perceived Sexual Harassment (Step-wise Regression Model).

Step	Variables entered	Multiple R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	FP	Beta weight
1	Locus	0.28	0.8	0.07	16.57	-2779
2	Age	0.34	0.11	0.10	12.54	-1893
3	Sex	0.38	0.14	0.13	10.82	-1752

The second hypothesis that implied that married people will have a higher perception of sexual harassment than single people was confirmed, $t = -4.59$; $df = 198$, $P < .05$. However, there was no significant difference between perception of students and workers $t = -0.990$; $df = 198$, $P > .05$, even though students perceived some behaviours as sexual harassment slightly higher than workers. These results are displayed in Table II below.

TABLE II

Summary of t-test on perceived sexual harassment between married and singles, as well students and workers.

Group	N	X	S.D	T	Df	P
Married	70	32.37	7.91	-4.50	198	<.05
Singles	130	34.64	7.98			
Students	114	34.39	7.87	-9.90	198	>.05
Workers	86	33.12	8.18			

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has examined the influence of personality attributes and personal characteristics on the perception of sexual harassment. Interestingly, the study revealed that locus of control does influence what individuals perceive to be sexual harassment.

This is consistent with Riger's (1991) that sometimes people's attribution is determined by their disposition on locus of control scale. For example, he asserted that those who see their behaviour as situationally determined attribute those behaviours to external factors. These people do not perceive behaviours to be sexually harassing, they see harassment through the eye of an actor. People with internal locus of control on the other hand, see harassment through the eye of victims, they attribute harassing behaviours to people's dispositions and personality traits, a case of clear intention to harass and as such they have higher perception of harassment. This is in line with attribution theory which implies that individuals with internal attribution will be analytical and independent, more stable in attributing causes of behaviour than individuals with external attribution.

This present study has also confirmed that literature that sex has an influence on the perception of sexual harassment, and that females see subtle behaviours as sexual harassment than males, as a matter of fact males expect females to appreciate and enjoy teasing, looks and some other forms of sexual attention, whereas, females are likely to consider all these as insulting. Earlier research are in line with this finding. Kenig & Ryan (1986), Konrad & Gutek (1986), Powell (1986), all stated that men label fewer behaviours at work as sexual harassment, they tend to perceive sexual overtures as flattering while women see similar overtures to be embarrassing and insulting. Differences in the perception of males and females could be as a result of several factors, one is the traditional dominant role of men and the passive role of women in the society. Men are socialized to have their way where women are concerned. They see women as objects of sex that they can have anytime. In some cultures, women are not to be heard, they are servile to the men and this has differential implications for what they perceive as sexual harassment.

Because men see sexual advances and gestures as their right, they perceive less harassment, but women who are coming out of their traditional passive roles perceive the behaviour as uncalled for, indecent and a violation of their right. This may result in their having a higher perception of sexual harassment. Another factor in sex differences in the perception of sexual harassment especially in work places is what Becker (1967) refers to as hierarchy of credibility in organizations. This is a situation whereby members of the highest group within an organization define the way things really are, and because typically men occupy the highest positions in organizations, their definition of sexual harassment dominates. This definition influence what males perceive as harassment and what females perceive as harassment.

Age was as well found to have a significant positive influence on the perception of sexual harassment, and that younger people will have lower perception of sexual harassment than older people, again this is supported by the findings of Forin & Aderton (1987), and Lott et. Al (1982), the latter argued that younger women have accepted that prowling men are a fact of life, and this has made them to be more tolerant of social harassment. There was found to be a significant difference between the perception of sexual harassment of married people and that of the singles, such that the married have higher perception. The factors that could be responsible for this finding include age differences which make the young to be more tolerant of harassment, another factor is the sanctity and value attached to the institution of marriage in this part of world, married people, especially women are expected to be accorded a particular degree of respect. Interaction and behaviours toward them should be guided, where there are lacking tendency to feel violated is very high. Moreover, suggestive sexual behaviour toward married people are not frequent, they are hardly in compromising situations and the desire to protect their homes make them to be careful of the kind of things they get into and company they keep. People should "steer clear" of them, especially in this culture where men are said to cast "magun" spell on their wives which results in the death of anybody that sleeps with the woman. All these factors make married people less exposed to harassing behaviour from other people, consequently, they have lower perception of sexual harassment. The singles on the other hand, may see harassment as part of life, fun that makes life go on, this is more so when the harassed is someone probably in need of a suitor, or when he or she feels so important because the harasser is highly placed and an important figure in the society. (Just like the case of a president and an intern), the victim may feel important instead of feeling aggrieved. No significant difference was however found between workers and students, and this can be attributed to the universal nature of sexual harassment.

Thus, it is suggested that cases of sexual harassment allegation should not only be legally investigated, rather psychological dynamics underlining the perception should be examined in order to be able to identify harassment that is just a figment of the perceiver's imagination. Organisations should also be encouraged to

include sexual harassment save-guard and resolution procedure in their policies in order to prevent harassment. This is to insulate employees and prospective employees against sexual harassment. Serious attempts should be made at educating individuals and corporate bodies on the definitions of sexual harassment, and recommend appropriate punitive measures for offenders.

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