

**An International Journal
of Psychology in Africa**

Vol. 12 No. 2, 2004

IFE

PSYCHOLOGIA

**Published by the Ife Centre
for Psychological Studies**

UNIVERSITY OF BADAN LIBRARY

PERCEIVED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AS A CONSEQUENCE OF PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS.

PETER. O. OLAPEGBA

Department of Psychology,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

Abstract

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual violence that has become a social problem in our society, in the world, over there are accusations and counter accusations of one form of sexual harassment or the other in the work place. The academic environment is not left out of this problem, in fact, the prevalence and dimensions of the problem in the academic world is rather alarming and its effects on the psychological well-being of victims cannot be overemphasized.

This study investigated the influence of personality traits (extraversion/introversion, self-esteem) and some demographic variables (sex, age, work status, and marital status) on the perception of sexual harassment in 250 subjects from two academic communities (The University and Polytechnic of Ibadan). The result showed a significant effect of age, self-esteem and extraversion on perceived sexual harassment, $R^2 = .083$, $F = 5.37$, $P < .01$. Married women were also found to have higher perception of sexual harassment than single women $t = 2.95$, $df = 89$, $P < .05$ while work status has significant effect on perception of sexual harassment $F(2, 236) = 10.4$; $P < .05$.

Riger's (1991), theory of attribution was used as a springboard in the discussion of the findings, psychological dynamics as well as implication of the findings for organization handling of harassment issues were highlighted.

Introduction

Sexual harassment has become a serious problem in the work place and in the school; there is hardly any organization that does not experience the adverse effect of this social phenomenon. However, as common as sexual harassment is, there is still the problem of agreement as to what really constitute harassment. A number of people and authority have attempted to define it yet, it is glaring that the

background of the one defining will always colour the definition. As a result there exist an array of definitions from various authorities ranging from legal, academics, traditional, victims and perpetrators point of view.

But there seems to be some agreements on some of the elements that constitute sexual harassment in these definitions. 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. In a similar definition The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission-EEOC (1980) sees sexual harassment as a form of sexual discrimination, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or create an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. A third definition given by U. S. Office of Personnel Management-OPM (1979) says sexual harassment is deliberate or repeated unsolicited verbal comments, gestures, or physical contact of a sexual nature, which are unwelcome.

These definitions agree on most aspect of sexual harassment but these aspects raise a number of questions that no one seems to be giving answer to. For instance, who determines whether a behaviour is welcome or not? Deliberate acts may as well be ambiguous while the determination of hostile and intimidating may not be as clear-cut as we may want to believe. Yet these parameters are used to determine cases of sexual harassment as well as establish standard behaviour in work place.

The EEOC (1980), distinguishes between two types of sexual harassment; quid pro quo sexual harassment and hostile environment sexual harassment. Quid pro quo involves unwanted sexual advances, request for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, or (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual. While a hostile environment on the other hand, involves unwelcome

sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. The question here again is the determination of unreasonable interference and intimidating situation since there are bound to be individual differences in perception of interference and intimidation.

It thus becomes obvious that sexual harassment holds different meanings for different people, in fact whether certain behaviour constitutes harassment depends on the intention (which may be difficult to determine) behind the behaviour as well as on the perception of those affected in which case one may say that sexual harassment is in the mind of the "victim". According to Shotland and Craig (1988), sexual harassment in some cases may be just a misinterpretation of intention and friendliness to be an indication of sexual harassment. In other words, harassment may be more of a function of the perception of the supposed victim than of the intention of the supposed perpetrator.

However, sexual harassment may also be a function of some personality characteristics of the victims like self-esteem, locus of control, extraversion etc. This statement is supported by the assertion of Riger (1991) that sexual harassment is socially construed and it varies with the characteristics of the perceiver. According to Olapegba (1999), personal vulnerability function of the self-esteem 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 sexual harassment while one with low self-esteem will be more tolerating and insensitive to behaviours that can be described as sexual harassment.

There is enough research evidence to suggest that demographic variables like age, sex, position etc also influence the perception of sexual harassment (Fain and Anderton, 1987; Balogun & Olapegba, 1999). Sexual harassment can have debilitating psychological and physical effects on the victims, and it has been implicated in job performance and turnover. In the word of Fitzgerald (1993), it can lead to lowered self-esteem, decreased feelings of competence and confidence, increased feelings of anger, frustration, depression and anxiety.

In view of the problems emanating from sexual harassment, and the interplay of personality and social variables involved, the following were examined:

*The influence of extraversion, age, and self-esteem on perceived sexual harassment.

*Marital status on sexual harassment.

*Work status on sexual harassment.

Method

Design

The ex-post facto design was used in this study. The dependent variable is perceived sexual harassment while the independent variables are age, self-esteem, extraversion, marital status, and work status.

Subjects

Subjects in this study were made up of 250 randomly selected staff and students of the University and The polytechnic, Ibadan. There were 155 (62%) males and 95 (38%) females, with ages ranging from 16-59 and a mean age of 27.64 with standard deviation of 7.83. 192 (76.8%) were singles, 57 (22.8%) married while 1 (0.4%) was widowed. Of the 250 subjects 183 (73.2%) were students, 29 (11.6%) academic staff, and 37 (14.8%) non-academic staff.

Instruments

A questionnaire consisting of different sections was used to collect data on demographic variables, self-esteem, extraversion, and perceived sexual harassment.

- Olapegba (1999) Perceived Sexual Harassment Scale-PSHS: this is a 14-item Likert format scale measuring perception of sexual harassment. It has a reliability coefficient of 0.63 and standardized item alpha of 0.62.
- Adanijo-Oyefeso Self-Esteem scale: this is a 15-item Likert format scale with a reliability coefficient of 0.79 among Bank workers and 0.92 among undergraduates and high school students.
- Extraversion scale: this is a subscale in the Eysenck (1975) personality scale; it is a 21-item scale with Yes/No response format. It has an original coefficient of 0.99 while revalidation through a pilot study yielded reliability coefficient of 0.76.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to the subjects in their respective offices and faculties. Subjects were encouraged to be as honest as possible in their responses and were also assured of absolute confidentiality. They were as well allowed to take their time in filling the questionnaires, as there were no right or wrong answers.

Statistical Analysis

Multiple regression analysis, t-test of independent means and one-way analysis of variance were used to analyse the hypotheses.

Result

The result of hypothesis one which predicted an influence of extraversion, self-esteem and Age on perceived sexual harassment is presented in table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0: Multiple Regression Analysis showing the influence of Extraversion, Self-Esteem, Age on Perceived Sexual Harassment.

Variable	Beta	t	P	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	P
Age	.212	2.83	<.01					
Esteem	.144	1.91	<.01	.287	.083	.067	5.37	<.01
Extraversion	-.009	-.122	>.05					

The result in table 1.0 above indicates that age, self-esteem and extraversion have a joint influence on perceived sexual harassment $R^2=.083$, $F=5.37$, $P<.01$ they jointly accounted for about 8.3% influence. The table also reveals that age independently predicted perception of sexual harassment, $t=2.83<.01$, self-esteem also independently predicted sexual harassment $t=1.91<.01$, while extraversion did not predict perception of sexual harassment $t=-.12$.

Table 1.1 below contains the results of the second hypothesis testing if there exists significant difference in the perception of married and single females on sexual harassment.

Table 1.1: Summary table of independent t-test showing the difference in the perception of married and single females on sexual harassment.

Variable	N	X	SD	df	t	P
Singles	67	27.07	3.86	89	-2.95	<.05
Married	24	22.67	3.19			

Result in table 1.2. confirms the hypothesis that married females will have higher perception of sexual harassment than single females $t=2.95$, $df. 89$ $p<0.05$, the hypothesis thus was accepted.

Hypothesis 3 which stated that there would be a significant effect of work status on perceived sexual harassment was tested using a one-way analysis of variance, the result is presented in table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2: Summary table of one-way analysis of variance showing the effect of work status on perceived sexual harassment.

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	340.15	2	170.1	10.4	<.05
Within groups	3868.8	236	16.14		
Total	4208.99	238			

Table 1.2. above confirms that work status has a significant effect on perception of sexual harassment $F(2,236)= 10.4$; $P<.05$. A post hoc test using LSD to determine the direction of the effects reveals that academic staff has the highest perception of sexual harassment followed by non-academic staff with students bringing up the rear.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of some psychosocial variables on perceived sexual harassment, generally, the results indicate that sexual harassment depends not only on the intention of the supposed harasser but also on the perceptions and attributes of the supposed victims.

Specifically, the results show that self-esteem has a significant main influence on peoples' perception of sexual harassment, this is in line with the assertion of Balogun and Olapegba (1999), they argued that the self-esteem of an individual may greatly influence the behaviours that such an individual will consider to be sexually harassing. This is

as well supported by the findings of McItyre and Benick (1982) who reported that women professionals with high self-esteem have higher perception of harassment than women with low self-esteem. The implication of this is that an individual who sees him/herself as competent and independent will be more sensitive and less tolerating of subtle behaviours considered harassing.

Age of victims was also found to independently influence what and how people perceive sexual harassment; the direction of this find tends toward the older people having a higher perception of harassment than the younger ones. According to Fain and Anderton (1987), younger women are more likely to be victims of harassment and are more tolerant. This may be as a result of youthful innocence, adventurous nature and an acceptance that prowling men are "a fact of life".

Meanwhile, extraversion was found not to have a main influence on perceived sexual harassment, meaning that whether one is introverted or extraverted has no bearing on behaviours one considers harassing. However, it was found that self-esteem, age, and extraversion co-jointly influence perception of sexual harassment.

The study also revealed that there is a difference between the perception of people that are married and singles on sexual harassment, with the married perceiving more sexual harassment than singles. This may be due to the fact that married women are very sensitive of their marital status, and as such make themselves unavailable to flirting while at the same time avoiding compromising situations. Potential harassers on their own part are mindful of the sanctity of matrimony and thus careful of their behaviours toward the married. Singles on the other hand may see harassment as one of those things they have to live with, one of the hazards of growing up.

It was also found that work status has significant effect on perception of sexual harassment, academic staff were found to perceive more harassment followed by non-academic staff and followed by students. This findings reveal a form of position power-play; people with less position power are more likely to be harassed and as well more likely not to perceive behaviour as harassing, especially when cooperation or acceptance of the behaviour is perceived to be rewarding e.g. better grades, promotion, pay raise etc. Whereas, people with position power are more likely to perceive subtle behaviours as harassment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it becomes obvious that there is need to exercise caution in approaching and prosecuting allegation of sexual harassment. The perception and perceptual biases of supposed victims may be misleading, the psychological dynamics and situational factors inherent should not be underestimated. As can be seen, some individuals are more likely than others to be victims of harassment, personality influences how and what people see while situation rather than disposition may explain the actor's action, in the word of Riger (1991), sexual harassment is socially construed and it varies with the characteristics of perceiver.

Recommendations.

The importance of perceptions and personality factors in sexual harassment does not however negate the existence and prevalence of sexual harassment in our society; emphasis is that all likely factors should be taken into consideration in handling cases. Thus it is recommended that:

- Intention of the harasser should be ascertained.
- The personality of the victim should be considered.
- Every organization should evolve an objective sexual harassment policy.
- Every allegation of harassment should be promptly investigated and each case be treated on its merit.
- Where guilt is established, harasser should be prosecuted and accordingly sanctioned.
- Employers should educate employees on what constitute harassment and appropriate code of conduct.

References

- Adanijo, I. B., and Oyefeso, O. A. (1986). Developing a self report scale of self-esteem. *Paper presented at the 3rd Nigerian Psychological Association National convention.*
- Balogun, S. K., and Olapegba, P. O. (1999). Perceived sexual harassment as a function of locus of control and other personal characteristics. *Nigerian Journal of Psychology*, 16(2), 55-62.
- Craig, A. R., Franklin, J. A., and Andrews, G. G. (1984). Locus of control behaviour. *British Journal. Of Medical Psychology*, 57, 180-183.
- U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1980). *EEOC Guidelines on Sexual Harassment*. Washington D. C: Government Printing Press.
- Fain, T. C., and Anderton, D. L. (1987). Sexual harassment: Organizational context and diffuse status. *Sex Roles*, 516, 219-311.
- Fitzgerald, L. F. (1993). *Sexual harassment in Organizations*. Washington. D. C. America Society of Association Executives.
- McIntyre, D. I., and Benick, J. C. (1982). Protecting public employees and employers from sexual harassment. *Public Personnel Management Journal*, 11, 282-292.
- Office of Personnel Management (1979). *Sexual harassment Policy*. <http://www.gsa.gov/eo/Default.htm>.
- Olapegba, P. O. (1999). Personality attributes and personal characteristics as functions of perceived sexual harassment. *Unpublished manuscripts, University of Ibadan.*
- Powell, G. N. (1986). Effects of sex role identity and sex on definition of sexual harassment. *Sex roles*, 14, 9-19.
- Riger, S. (1991). Gender dilemmas in sexual harassment policies and procedures. *American Psychologists*, 46, 497-505.
- Shotland, R. L., and Craig, J. M. (1988). Can men and women differentiate between friendly and sexually interested behaviour? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 51, 66-73.