

3.3 Appraisal and coping with sexual harassment

Existing and needed research

*Vicki J. Magley, Taylor D. Barr, Ragan E. Decker,
and Courtney J. Pfeifer*

Violence in organizations can take many forms, as evidenced by this entire collection of chapters addressing the broad issue. Clearly, experiencing workplace violence is stressful for the victim of that violence, as well as others in the surrounding environment. This present chapter considers how sexual harassment fits within this class of stressors and, particularly, provides an overview of the existing research on how victims appraise and cope with their experiences. When reviewing this literature, we point to the publication dates of the research, much of which was done in the early 2000s. We believe that the ebb and flow of the empirical research on sexual harassment stems from high-profile cases: the Tailhook Scandal in the early 1990s and, more recently, a resurgence of interest in the topic with the recent allegations against Fox anchor Bill O'Reilly, as well as the upheaval in administrators and faculty at the University of California at Berkeley campus. This is not to say that sexual harassment rates, overall, have changed in those interim years. Rather, the media seems to have picked back up on the fact that sexual harassment still exists. As the 2016 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), *Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace* opens:

With legal liability long ago established, with reputational harm from harassment well known, with an entire cottage industry of workplace compliance and training adopted and encouraged for 30 years, why does so much harassment persist and take place in so many of our workplaces?
(Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. ii)

We struggle with this question, as well. Although there is clear empirical evidence that sexual harassment, even at fairly low levels, exacts a negative impact on its targets (c.f., Cortina & Berdahl, 2008) and that it is more likely to occur under three conditions: in male-dominated workplaces, with tolerant supervisors, and in overall tolerant climates (c.f., Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997), this research does not seem to have permeated much beyond the academic realm into a broader societal understanding. We argue that this is, at least, one possible explanation for the continued presence

of sexual harassment in organizations. Another possible explanation, however, is that there is still poor empirical understanding of how victims appraise and cope with their experiences – which translates into person-by-person confusion on defining harassing situations and little direction in, for example, organizational training on advising how to manage a situation effectively. Ultimately, it is possible that this results in not preventing harassment situations as best as could be done.

This body of research on appraising and coping with sexual harassment is sparse and we review it here in its entirety. Before doing so, though, we first provide a brief introduction to the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) Transactional Stress Theory, which is the primary theoretical foundation utilized in studying this topic. We then review the existing literature on both appraisal and coping with sexual harassment, followed by possible directions for future research.

Stress and coping framework overview

The concept of workplace stress can be a nebulous construct for employees; indicating to others that one is “stressed” is often difficult to convey precisely. Early theorizing on what constitutes stress began with the psychological researchers Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in which they suggested that stress entails a cognitive process, not just the emotional response that is often thought of as “stress.” Specifically, individuals constantly assess what is happening to them with consideration toward how the situation may influence their well-being. This framework for stress and coping has been termed *Transactional Stress Theory* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To understand how stress occurs and what emotional responses arise from stress, three features of stress are recognized: *stressors*, the demands that an individual faces; *stress*, the perceptions of such stressors; and *strain*, which are the resulting emotional, physiological, and behavioral outcomes of unfavorable stress perceptions (Osipow & Spokane, 1980).

The evaluation process of stress is influenced by the frequency, intensity, and duration of stressors (often described as demands) that people face on a daily basis, and the resources available to specifically counteract these demands. Stressors can arise in many ways that can be either acute or chronic such as daily hassles, significant life changes, or more traumatic events. In organizational settings, these stressors can present themselves as physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of a job that require attention and effort or else negative outcomes may arise.

At the heart of Transactional Stress Theory is the cognitive appraisal process. The term “Transactional Stress” was originally coined from the dynamic interplay of the individual and their environment, first identified in a broader context of person-environment fit (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982). Lazarus and Folkman (1987) argued that the consideration for how people react to events in their lives do not depend solely on environmental influences.

Although the balance of resources to match demands is important, psychological reactions of people vary depending on the individual perceptions of both factors. It is this cognitive appraisal that is essential in dictating how we cope with demands and how intense the resulting emotions are that we experience. Environmental conditions are not a strong source of negative influence for persons who are high in motivational and cognitive characteristics that make them resilient to such influences, such that they do not perceive the negative influence to prevent their progression to whatever goals or commitments that they have.

Two forms of appraisal exist that contain distinct functions. The first form is considered *primary appraisal*. It is the initial assessment of the environmental influence to be positive, negative, or irrelevant. Should the perception of the demand be negative, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) indicate that the individual in question will perceive the negative influence as one of two main types: *challenge*, which is a motivational appraisal that mastery or potential gain is provided through completion of the demand; or *threat*, the anticipated harm that the demand may cause. Later research in Industrial/Organizational Psychology has also indicated *hindrance* as a third variable that is also considered when assessing negative influences (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). Hindrance is considered to be a less extreme form of threat perception as the appraisal of the stressor to hinder the attainment of goals. Yet, the interchanging use of the two constructs within the literature indicates that they are both leading to the same measurement of threat appraisal to varying extents (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The primary consideration for the challenge-hindrance occupational stress model is that specific stressors are generally perceived as being either a challenge or a hindrance (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). For example, Webster, Beehr, and Love (2011) indicate that job workload and responsibility are frequently appraised as challenges, whereas stressors such as role conflict and role ambiguity are often appraised as hindrances. Altogether, primary appraisal is the interpretation of stressors in terms of its significance. It is an assessment of whether the stressor has the potential to lead to positive outcomes or simply acts to threaten the achievement of such outcome.

Once the stressors have been appraised, the *secondary appraisal* process begins. This begins by analyzing what resources are available to combat these stressors. Should the cognitive evaluation lead to a perception of insufficient resources, then stress ensues (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Secondary appraisal is framed by pinpointing what an individual can do about the situation in which he finds himself. The resources available can be either cognitive or external coping options that an individual perceives as able to combat the perceived stressor. It is through both primary and secondary appraisal that stress ensues. Stress is the combined perception that a stressor is important and negative, and that the individual does not have the resources to cope with the situation effectively.

Coping then acts as the line of defense from which the individual attempts to react to the stressor. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) identified that coping is broken into several sub-factors, however, two major components arise: *problem-focused coping*, which prioritizes altering the troubled person-environment relationship, and *emotion-focused coping*, which prioritizes the reduction of the resulting emotional distress. Coping plays a major part in reducing stress by addressing both primary and secondary appraisal processes (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986) and continually changes as these appraisals also change. With primary appraisal, when the importance of the encounter is considered to be high, emotion-coping strategies are increased as a result of the increased emotional response. Coping options are also adjusted based on the secondary appraisal process such that the appraisal of a given stressor as unmanageable and unchangeable requires more emotion-based coping, whereas perceptions of ability to implement resources to manage the stressor provide incentive for more problem-focused coping.

Stress and coping are not static constructs. They work together as a process that is ever changing based on the person-environment fit. The process is also not rigidly set to play out in a predestined way. That is, *reappraisal* exists throughout the entire process. Although primary appraisal is generally believed to be first in the process, the non-recursive reality of this process is apparent. Changes in perceptions of one's resources to manage the stressors can reduce and alter the primary appraisal perception of the stressors. Further, changes in emotional and behavioral coping ability will also influence future primary appraisals of the stressors, as well as the secondary appraisal perceptions of coping resources available to combat those stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Altogether, the Transactional Stress Theory suggests a complex process model of cognitive appraisal and coping. It provides a comprehensive understanding for the general ordering of effects from stressors to strain with cognitive appraisal as an important mediating factor. By prioritizing this appraisal process, researchers are better able to identify key individual differences for improving workplace stress.

Appraisals of sexual harassment

We now turn to an examination of the empirical literature on appraisals of sexual harassment. Appraisals can come in several forms, as suggested with the Transactional Stress Theory. Again, the primary threat appraisal of the situation should then affect the secondary response appraisal, where one determines how to cope and respond to the sexual harassment (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Settles, Buchanan, Yap, & Harrell, 2014). Therefore, the response that a person has to a sexual harassment should even be heavily influenced by this primary threat appraisal (Bergman et al., 2002). Additionally, according to Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley (1997),

subjective appraisals of sexual harassment are affected by individual factors (attitudes and previous victimization; Wright & Fitzgerald, 2007), situational factors (frequency, duration, and severity of the harassment), as well as contextual factors (climate for sexual harassment).

Before turning to a greater explication of these factors – and this literature, just in general – it is of value to step back and consider how appraisal has most often been defined in the sexual harassment literature. Despite much of the sexual harassment literature stating that it is grounded in the Transactional Stress Theory, very little of it has assessed the extent to which sexual harassment is a threat, challenge, or a benign experience. Rather, it is almost always assumed that such experiences will be threatening and the research attempts to assess the degree of this threat. We will return to this issue later in the chapter; for now, it is probably more accurate to state that appraisal has really been equated with *severity* in the sexual harassment literature. That is, to what extent did the victim appraise her experience as severe, frightening, and so forth.

Along these lines, Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley (1997) point to some individual and situational factors that might influence this appraisal of sexual harassment as severe. Frequency of the experience, sexual harassment history with the organization, and attitudes towards sexual harassment in general should affect how one evaluates their sexual harassment situation. Bergman and colleagues (2002) also state that infrequent occurrences of a less severe behavior may be seen as innocuous or an aberration; however, perceived severity increases as frequency increases. The hierarchy of the organization will also influence the severity of the sexual harassment appraisal. If the perpetrator is a more powerful member of the organization, the sexual harassment is often perceived as more offensive and negative, given that these more powerful members have more resources with which to retaliate or coerce (Cortina, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 2002).

One interesting area of research that is certainly connected to the appraisal process is whether an individual names (“labels”) their experience “sexual harassment.” Labeling is viewed as particularly important in that it is highly unlikely that a victim will report her experiences if they are not labeled as sexual harassment (Bergman et al., 2002; Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999). Attitudes towards sexual harassment have been proposed to affect how one labels their unwanted sex-related experience (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 2002) such that if victims have more negative views of sexual harassment as a social problem, they may be more likely to label their own experience as harassment. The gender composition of the individual's work-group and organization was also proposed to affect the frequency of unwanted sexual attention, which would then affect the labeling of the event as sexual harassment (Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997). Empirically, Magley and Shupe (2005) studied predictors of self-labeling utilizing a stratified random sample from the military to examine personal, event, and organizational predictors. Personal factors, such as gender, distress associated with

the event, negative attitudes towards sexual harassment, and sexual harassment knowledge predicted self-labeling an unwanted sexual event as sexual harassment. The type of sexual experience, such as sexual hostility or unwanted sexual attention, and frequency, also affected if one labeled an event as sexual harassment. Additionally, Magley and colleagues (1999) conducted a study utilizing three samples of women from intact organizations and found that self-labeling was generally unrelated to important negative outcomes suggesting that the harassment event – and not the label of the experience as sexual harassment – leads to negative outcomes.

Even if self-labeling does not seem to alter the negative outcomes associated with experiences of sexual harassment, does the appraisal of the experience as severe affect these outcomes? In other words, do appraisals matter in terms of victims' experiences? To answer this, Langhout colleagues (2005) tested a model in which cognitive appraisals of sexual harassment mediated the relationship between experiences and outcomes. Utilizing a stratified random sample from the military to test their model, they found that sexual harassment pervasiveness and type of harassment had a significant effect on appraisals of distress; victims' experiences of sexual harassment were also appraised as more severe when the perpetrator was of a higher status. Although pervasiveness of sexual harassment was also associated with declines in job satisfaction and well-being, the authors also found that appraisals mediated the relationship between harassment and outcomes, above and beyond individual harassment history. As such, appraisals do matter – when experiences are appraised as more severe, they are increasingly harmful to victims.

Explicitly following the Transactional Stress Theory, Malamut and Offermann (2001) found that military personnel's cognitive appraisals mediated the relationship between harassment events and coping strategies, such that arousal and emotional reactions influenced victims' choice of coping strategy. This cognitive appraisal process mediated across levels of occupational status and mediated gender differences in using social coping, confrontation, and advocacy seeking coping styles. Cognitive appraisal also mediated organizational tolerance for harassment and choice of coping strategy, as well as both frequency and duration of the harassment incident and coping strategy. In other words, experiences needed to be appraised as severe before, for example, victims' perceptions of how tolerant their organization would influence coping choices. Importantly, all of this speaks to the role that victims' cognitive and emotional processing of their experiences plays in understanding how they will manage their experiences.

Coping with sexual harassment

As alluded to previously, but not elaborated upon, women do utilize various tactics when responding to experiences of sexual harassment, often combating sexual harassment with multifaceted, personal, and complex strategies. Researchers have proposed numerous multidimensional frameworks when

studying sexual harassment and coping, largely focusing on the behaviors women use when responding to sexual harassment as well as the frequency of such behaviors (Magley, 2002). Unfortunately – as mentioned previously – over the past 15 years, the field has seen little empirical work conducted to extend our knowledge of sexual harassment coping. We next review what data do exist.

Two primary descriptive models of women's coping with sexual harassment have been proposed. Magley (2002) found empirical support that coping with sexual harassment was two-dimensional, crossing behavioral-cognitive coping with approach-avoidance coping. As such, the four coping styles that she found evidence for, across seven samples of working women, were: cognitive avoidance (detachment, denial, endurance), cognitive approach (relabel, self-blame), behavioral avoidance (avoidance, seeking social support), and behavioral approach (assertion, filing a report). Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, and DuBois (1997) had also previously proposed a four-response strategy determined by the focus of response (self-focused or initiator-focused) and the mode of response (self-response or supported-response). The first coping response is avoidance/denial (self-focused and self-response, e.g., avoiding the harasser or ignoring the behavior). The next coping response is social coping (self-focused and supported-response, e.g., seeking social support and using medical or emotional counseling). The third coping response is confrontation/negotiation (initiator focus and self-response, e.g., asking or telling the harasser to stop). The last coping response is advocacy seeking (initiator focus and supported response, e.g., reporting the behavior to a supervisor or filing a complaint).

Wasti and Cortina (2002) found support for Knapp et al.'s (1997) typology such that they found avoidance, denial, negotiation, advocacy seeking, and social coping as responses to sexual harassment in four cross-cultural samples. Upon further investigation of coping responses across these four samples, they also discovered that advocacy seeking was an uncommon response for all cultural and occupational groups, highlighting that regardless of context, sexually harassed women tend not to report their experiences to organizations. Additionally, Turkish women utilized negotiation more than their Anglo-American counterparts. Consistent with the belief that collectivistic cultures are averse to conflict and confrontation, the Turks and Hispanics avoided harassers more than Anglos, and Hispanics engaged in more denial strategies. Lastly, regardless of the level of power distance found in one's culture, women across the four samples tended to use more avoidance and negotiation as the frequency of sexual harassment increased.

Cortina and Wasti (2005) extended their past research by examining coping responses cross-culturally. In this later study, the authors were primarily interested in how women's strategies vary within the same sexually harassing situation, such that women may engage in a trial and error approach to determine the most effective way to cope with the chronic stressor of sexual harassment. In other words, they acknowledged that coping is multidimensional

and examined coping profiles to understand how targets use multiple strategies when responding to sexual harassment. Results revealed that professional and non-professional women across three distinct cultures utilized three coping profiles: avoidant-negotiation, support-seeking, and detaching. The avoidant-negotiators exhibited high levels of denial and avoidance to avoid the stressor both behaviorally and cognitively. However, these women also engaged in negotiations with the harasser. The support-seekers attempted to avoid the situation, negotiate with the harasser, and utilized social and organizational support. Lastly, the detached group detached from the harassment and did not appear to utilize any coping responses. These coping profiles highlight how one sexual harassment incident can lead to various responses.

Moving beyond exclusively describing women's responses to sexual harassment to examining predictors of these responses, Cortina and Wasti (2005) also proposed that an individual's coping response could be determined by explanatory variables categorized as four levels. At the individual level (harassed employee) older women tended to detach or disengage from harassing situations, suggesting that more experienced women avoid negotiating and confrontation to avoid retaliation or risk losing their job. At the microcontext level (immediate harassing situation), women who experienced severe and frequent sexual harassment fell into the two broadest coping profiles, which is consistent with prior research suggesting that individuals use more varied coping responses when they experience severe and persistent sexual harassment. At the mesocontext level (organization), social support and the perception of leaders' tolerance for sexual harassment influenced coping profiles. Detached women perceived their leaders as tolerating less sexual harassment, which may suggest that in an intolerant climate sexual harassment is kept to a minimum, reducing a woman's need to engage in sexual harassment coping. Lastly, at the macrocontext level (larger society), women from patriarchal backgrounds were over-represented in the avoidant-negotiator cluster and women from less-patriarchal backgrounds were underrepresented in the detached coping cluster (Cortina & Wasti, 2005).

It is evident that regardless of culture, women who have experienced sexual harassment tend to use a variety of coping responses other than formal advocacy seeking (Cortina & Wasti, 2005). Interest in the generalizability of coping styles across diverse samples continued with Buchanan, Settles, and Langhout's (2007) research examining the coping patterns of sexually harassed black women in the U.S. military. They distinguished six coping profiles; avoiders, supported confronters, approachers, contemplators, asserters, and talkers. The approaching and contemplating clusters exhibited striking differences compared to the others, which had relatively moderate levels of sexual harassment with little outcome variability. The approachers experienced a higher frequency of sexual harassment whereas contemplators reported less. The approachers used all types of engagement coping strategies such as directly confronting the harasser, reporting within and outside the chain of command, and seeking social support. However, the approachers

reported less satisfaction with all aspects of work. The contemplators spent time thinking about the harassment, but only confronted the harasser and opted not to use other channels for reporting. Confronters reported the highest levels of psychological well-being (except for supported confronters; Buchanan et al., 2007). Similar to Cortina and Wasti (2005), the approachers engaged in various coping strategies to combat frequent sexual harassment experiences.

Additional research examined sexual harassment coping in a specialized sample. Chaiyavej and Morash (2009) examined policewomen's reactions to sexual harassment, specifically the reasons for assertive or passive reactions. Although assertive reactions such as reporting were uncommon, some assertive reactions such as protesting to the harasser and hinting dissatisfaction were utilized more often than some passive reactions such as avoiding and ignoring. Therefore, some assertive responses are not uncommon for policewomen.

Next, Chaiyavej and Morash (2009) investigated why policewomen react assertively or passively. They found that if a woman perceives the sexual harassment to be violating organizational policy, she is more likely to perceive the behavior as severe, which in turn predicts assertive reactions. In contrast, if a woman de-emphasizes individuality and does not participate in organizational decision making, she is more likely to have a high concern about social reaction, which in turn predicts utilizing passive responses to sexual harassment.

Not surprisingly, several researchers have specifically focused on problem-focused coping strategies such as reporting and confrontation. Butler and Chung-Yan (2011) examined the impact of sexual harassment frequency and organizational justice on reporting and confrontation. Results revealed that "women who had experienced more frequent sexual harassment were more likely to report their harasser as their perceptions of distributive, procedural, and informational justice increased" (Butler & Chung-Yan, 2011, p. 747). The results were parallel for women who chose to confront the harasser, except only distributive and informational justice were significant.

Some researchers narrowed the scope even further and investigated determinants of reporting sexual harassment. Reporting was more likely when there was multiple harassers and increased frequency and length of harassment. Reporting was also negatively associated with the organizational level of the harasser (Lee, Heilmann, & Near, 2004). Additionally, when women perceived their leaders to be making a sincere effort to end sexual harassment they felt more freedom to report the harassment compared to women who perceived their leaders to be tolerant of sexual harassment (Offerman & Malamut, 2002).

Finally, Shannon, Rospenda, and Richman (2007) also narrowly focused on one type of response by investigating the utilization of professional services after experiences of sexual harassment, which can be categorized as a social coping under Knapp et al.'s (1997) typology. Sexual harassment was

associated with legal, spiritual, and work-related program services, however there was low overall use (except health services) which suggest that individuals are still hesitant to utilize such services. Women who experience chronic sexual harassment were more likely to utilize sources that could help them act against the harasser or assist in emotionally coping with the harassment. However, women experiencing sexual harassment remission also reported increased service use, suggesting that the need for services does not end when the sexual harassment stops.

Call for research

Indeed, it is surprising to us – and hopefully the readers – that this is a fairly exhaustive review of the literature to date. Further, as noted initially, the fact that the vast majority of this research is 15 years old (more or less) is also rather surprising. The reality is that conducting this research is extremely difficult. Not only do researchers have to gain access to working adult samples, but in these days of job insecurity, the research participants must be made to feel that their data are strictly confidential. Additionally, all data collections have participant attrition as many do not complete the specific questions assessing appraisal and coping, particularly when they believe that their experiences are not severe enough to justify taking the time to answer the questions. Despite its difficulty, there clearly is considerably more than can be done in examining both victims' appraisals and coping with sexual harassment. We present a handful of ideas next.

First, as we also noted previously, the departure of the sexual harassment appraisal literature from the general Transactional Stress Theory deserves additional attention. The assumption that all sexual harassment experiences are threats as opposed to challenges does not really map into the broad range of experiences that constitute sexual harassment – gender harassment, in particular. We need to demonstrate this empirically and not make this assumption. Although not completely filling this void, Wright and Fitzgerald (2007) have suggested that sexual harassment appraisals should be studied in a much more complex manner than simply as “severe.” In particular, they suggest that sexual harassment can evoke fear, demoralization, anxious arousal and/or self-blame, and that the specific appraisal meaningfully affects how victims respond. More research is needed along these lines, as well.

Notably, there is literally no empirical research on victims' secondary appraisal – that is, on their perceptions of the availability of resources from which they can manage their experiences. Certainly, one difficulty in conducting such research is that resources vary widely from situation to situation, company to company. However, it does seem like we, researchers, can do better in this regard.

Pushing beyond the Transactional Stress Theory perspective, Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, and Dubois (1997) suggest that victims carefully examine the likely outcomes of the possible response strategies in choosing how they respond to

their experiences. To examine these possible outcomes, the individual must evaluate the event and the resources available to cope with the event. The authors also state that this process reduces uncertainty regarding outcomes. For events of sexual harassment, the individual must be concerned with both the efficacy of their response strategy and retaliation. Upon examination, if a coping strategy is deemed ineffective, or will provoke unacceptable retaliation, the individual may look for alternative coping strategies. This is simply an area that is ripe for empirical attention. We know a fair bit about coping – particularly, assertive coping and reporting – but really need to understand more about factors that inhibit such behaviors, such as perceived coping efficacy and possible retaliation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that with the continued occurrence of sexual harassment in organizations, despite considerable efforts on the part of organizations to suppress it, researchers have an obligation to provide empirical guidance on how and why sexual harassment damages its targets. Such information needs to connect, explicitly, to organizational intervention efforts, and, as such, needs to be shared broadly, not only within academic circles.

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Violence and Abuse In and Around Organisations

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