

The Effects of Anticipated Future Interaction on Employees' Responses Following Sexual Harassment Experiences

Those with whom we work often “make or break” the work environment, especially when considering workplace mistreatment; yet, research has not examined how employees react when colleagues with whom they must frequently interact have sexually harassed them. Although sexual harassment can be a one-time occurrence, research shows that these experiences and their consequences are often ongoing (Glomb et al., 1999). Thus, we propose that it is important to distinguish between victims who anticipate interacting with the perpetrator again and those who do not to better understand victims’ responses. We address this gap by exploring how this anticipation affects victims’ appraisals and coping using uncertainty reduction and transactional stress theory frameworks.

According to uncertainty reduction theory, people are motivated to reduce uncertainty when deviant behavior has occurred, they anticipate future interaction, and there is incentive to act (Berger, 1979). Thus, this theory seems to suggest that sexual harassment victims anticipating future interaction with a perpetrator might be more motivated to reduce uncertainty than those who do not. However, whereas the anticipated future

interaction literature focuses on initial interactions, workplace relationships often have some level of familiarity. Therefore, anticipated future interaction in workplace relationships may be perceived differently, especially for sexual harassment, and these differences may influence appraisals and coping.

In the current research, we operationalize appraisal and coping by drawing on transactional stress theory. Previous research has shown that victims of sexual harassment cope in various ways. Whereas some victims utilize indirect methods (e.g., avoidance), others use direct methods (e.g., assertion: Magley, 2002). Notably, victims utilize direct methods less often because of higher perceived risk (Gutek & Koss, 1993). The current study examines two strategies, assertion and formal relief, to better understand anticipated future interaction’s impact on direct coping. However, according to theory, coping cannot be fully understood without first considering appraisal as an important mechanism influencing coping choice (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). We operationalize appraisal as victims’ perceptions that their situation is changeable and examine it as a mediator between experiences and coping.



Kerri Nelson, MS
University of Connecticut



Vicki Magley, PhD
University of Connecticut

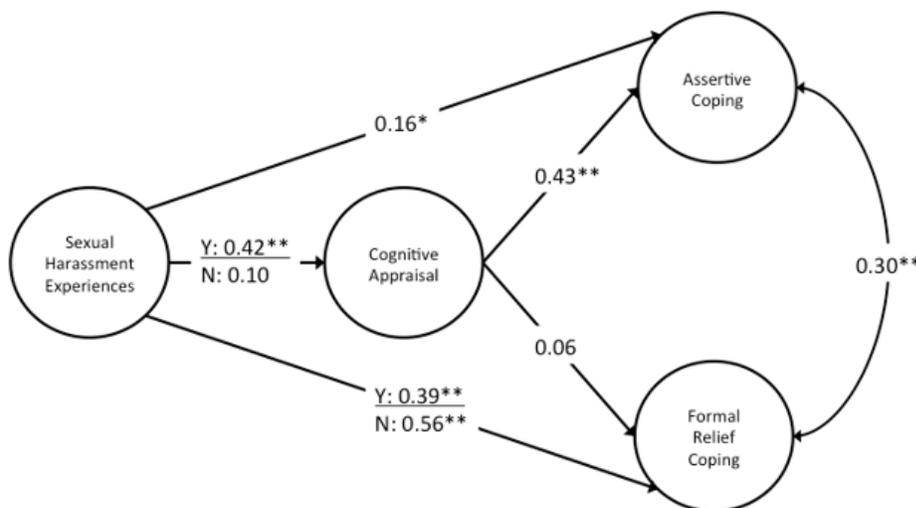


Figure 1. Anticipated future interaction multi-group model with standardized regression coefficients. Paths denoted by a single coefficient did not significantly differ between groups. When paths significantly differed by group: Y = yes, anticipated future interaction, N = no, no anticipated future interaction. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Previous research has shown that people experience stress and feel less comfortable when anticipating future interaction (Shaffer et al., 1987). Therefore, victims anticipating interaction may feel particularly distressed because direct responses can come at a high cost (e.g., retaliation). Thus, we hypothesized that these victims would be less likely to perceive experiences as changeable than those not anticipating interaction. In turn, theory suggests that people will be less likely to use direct, problem-focused coping when stressors are perceived as unchangeable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) and will avoid direct coping methods because they fear backlash (Vijayasiri, 2008). Therefore, we also hypothesized that those anticipating interaction would be less likely to act on their appraisals directly by asserting or reporting than those not anticipating interaction.

Data were collected via an online survey about sexual harassment from 556 employees, of whom 260 reported at least one harassment experience (Mage=40.12, 71% female). Participants were divided into two groups: “Did your work role require you to continue to interact with the person who bothered you?” 119 anticipated future interaction and 141 did not. These two groups were used to test an overall model connecting harassment, appraisal, and coping with the understanding that these relationships may differ between groups. Sexual harassment experiences were measured using 12 items adapted from the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ-DoD: Fitzgerald et al., 1999). Appraisal was measured using four items related to problem-focused and emotion-focused coping potential and positive and negative future expectancy (e.g., “Did you think you would be able to make things better?”: Bunk & Magley, 2013). All coping items were drawn from the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ: Fitzgerald, 1990). Assertive coping was measured using four items capturing behavior directed towards the perpetrator (e.g., “I stood up to the person [asked the person to leave me alone]”). Formal relief coping was measured using seven items capturing behavior related to making a formal

complaint to management or a union, filing a grievance, or requesting an investigation (e.g., “I made a formal complaint to my company”).

We tested this multi-group SEM model (Figure 1) using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2015), following standard procedures for multi-group analyses. The final model had an acceptable fit (CFI=0.94; RMSEA=0.08). Contrary to hypotheses, there was a positive direct effect of experiences on assertive coping, regardless of group. Further, appraisals partially mediated this relationship for only those anticipating interaction ($c'=.18$, 95% CI: [.106, .255]). There was also a positive direct effect of experiences on formal relief coping for both groups, though this effect was stronger for those not anticipating interaction. Contrary to hypotheses, appraisals did not mediate this relationship.

The results demonstrate that employees anticipating future interaction with perpetrators may appraise and cope with experiences somewhat differently than those who do not. Notably, appraisals were important for those who anticipated interaction and chose to confront the perpetrator. In fact, when considering the total effect, those anticipating interaction were more likely to assert than those who did not. Because these victims must see the offender again, they may be particularly sensitive to the consequences of remaining silent. Thus, they may be motivated to reduce uncertainty regarding future mistreatment by telling perpetrators that their actions are unwanted. In contrast, appraisals did not play a role in formal relief coping. Rather, reporting was more likely as experiences increased. However, those not anticipating interaction were slightly more likely to use this method, implying that they may perceive less risk.

Notably, our findings have implications for future sexual harassment research as well as sexual harassment interventions. Future research could benefit from extending this study to also consider the role of perceived coping effectiveness in un-



derstanding the trajectory of victims' responses when they do and do not anticipate future interaction with the perpetrator. Although it is promising that victims who anticipated interacting with the perpetrator again were willing to assertively respond when they felt that they could improve the situation, it is unclear whether this assertive behavior actually served to end future harassment. Given that victims of sexual harassment may choose to engage in a variety of coping behaviors, understanding not only how coping patterns might differ but also how the perceived effectiveness of those behaviors might change depending on whether future interaction is anticipated would be valuable.

Practically, our findings also suggest a potential need to account for anticipated future interaction in the design of sexual harassment interventions and support systems. For example, if victims who anticipate interacting with the perpetrator in the future are more likely to assert and are somewhat less likely to formally report than those who do not anticipate future interaction, it may be the case that current support systems designed to encourage formal reporting, which can often be a long process, might stop short of meeting the immediate needs of those who have to interact with the perpetrator on a regular basis after the harassment occurs. Overall, our study suggests that anticipation of future interaction may be an important, yet overlooked, contextual factor influencing how victims respond to workplace mistreatment.

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Welcome to the Society for Occupational Health Psychology Newsletter!

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Welcome to the Fall/Winter Edition of the Newsletter for the Society for Occupational Health Psychology

This edition begins with an update from our society's President, Tammy Allen, PhD, who will be announcing some very exciting things happening within SOHP. Also, Chris Cunningham, PhD introduces SOHP's New Practitioner Committee and the committee objectives.

We have featured a selection of columns from the 2017 Work, Stress, and Health conference, including a study by Kerri Nelson, MS and Vicki Magley, PhD on the effects of anticipated future interaction on employees' responses following sexual harassment experiences. Also, Kristi Lavigne, MS, Matthew Grawitch, PhD, and Sarah Palmer, MS share some findings from their research on the nature of workplace telepressure.

Alyssa McGonagle, PhD and William Shaw, PhD talk about some of the interventions they have been working on to support workers with chronic health conditions and chronic pain in the workplace. We also share an insider's perspective from practitioner, Nancy Larson, PhD, on strategies she created to address ergonomic (human factors) issues in the workplace.

We also include past conference reports by Peter Kelly, MSc on The European Academy of Occupational Health (EAOHP), and an update from L. Casey Chosewood, MD, MPH on the 2nd International Symposium to Ad-

vance *Total Worker Health*[®] conference, which took place earlier in 2018.

Be sure to mark your calendars for the 13th International Conference on Occupational Stress and Health, "Work, Stress and Health 2019: What Does the Future Hold?" This conference will be held at the Sheraton Philadelphia Downtown, Nov. 6-9, 2019.

We are also happy to share an announcement about a recently published book, *Educator Stress: An Occupational Health Perspective*, edited by Teresa Mendonça McIntyre, Scott E. McIntyre, and David J. Francis. This book presents an international perspective on key challenges facing educators and contributing to stress.

Last, but certainly not least, we are excited to welcome our new production editor, Katrina Burch, PhD, who has marvelously worked on bringing a new design to our society's newsletter. A special thank you to the contributors and the editorial team for your work and dedication; this newsletter would not be here without you!

We hope you enjoy this issue of the newsletter and wish you a very Happy and Healthy Holiday Season! If you have any comments or would like to write an article for a future issue, please reach out and let us know:

tsidawiosto@ccny.cuny.edu or
gary.giumetti@quinnipiac.edu



Tanya Sidawi-Ostojic



Gary Giumetti



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