

Putting People Down and Pushing Them Out: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

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This article contains references to sexual violence,
including rape, as well as strong language that some
readers may find offensive

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Abstract

Sexual harassment was once conceptualized solely as a sexual problem: coercive sexual advances that spring from natural feelings of sexual desire or romance. Research has since shown that by far the most common manifestation of sexual harassment is gender harassment, which has contempt at its core; this conduct aims to put people down and push them out, not pull them into sexual activity. With findings such as these, we have made many strides in the scientific study of sexual harassment. That body of scholarship is the focus of this article, which is organized around the following questions: What is sexual harassment, both behaviorally and legally? How common is this conduct in work organizations, and what are its consequences? What features of the social/organizational context raise the risk for sexual harassment? What are some promising (and not-so-promising) solutions to this pervasive problem? And finally, what are important directions for this area of research moving forward?

INTRODUCTION

The #MeToo and Time's Up movements have launched sexual harassment (back) to the forefront of public consciousness. Still, myths and misconceptions abound. People commonly think that sexual harassment is mostly about sex or romance gone awry, although nothing could be farther from the truth: More often than not, sexual harassment is a put-down not a come-on. It typically has contempt at its core, not sexual conquest (and certainly not romance). And contrary to popular claims, frivolous charges of sexual harassment are vanishingly rare. Conclusions such as these fly in the face of conventional wisdom, but they are well-supported in the research record. We review that record here.

Before beginning, let us outline the parameters of this article. Our focus is sexual harassment in the workplace, including consideration of work settings outside of the traditional brick-and-mortar organization (e.g., agriculture, domestic work). We primarily cover sexual harassment research conducted from 2000 and beyond. This scholarship has its roots in the late 1970s, and it soared in the 1980s and 1990s. But much has happened since then: The workforce has become more aware, organizations more vigilant, and scientists more sophisticated as they seek to understand sexual harassment. We concentrate on the most recent and rigorous scholarship within industrial/organizational psychology (IO) and organizational behavior (OB). The bulk of this work has addressed white women's harassment experiences, but where possible we bring in the perspectives of women of color, men (as victims¹), and people of other genders. Readers should note that this article contains references to sexual violence, including rape. There is also strong language that may be offensive to some.

We organize our article around the following questions: What is sexual harassment, how common is it, and what are its consequences? What features of the social/organizational context elevate risk for sexual harassment? What are some promising (and not-so-promising) solutions to this pervasive problem? And finally, what populations and paradigms have been left out of this area of inquiry, and how can we correct that moving forward?

WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Over the years, various scholars have tackled the problem of defining sexual harassment and delineating its facets. Here we present the most widely accepted social science definitions. We also review legal perspectives, given that sexual harassment is both a behavioral experience and a legal concept. For further details, we refer readers to a major report on sexual harassment published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM 2018).

Sexual Harassment According to Science

In conceptualizing sexual harassment, social scientists have emphasized specific behaviors and the subjective experiences of those who face them first-hand (or, in some studies, witness them). This

¹ Scholarly and lay writings use various terms to refer to sexually harassed persons, including victims, targets, and survivors. The term victim is problematic owing to connotations of helplessness and passivity. The notion of target fails to capture nontargeted harassment in the ambient environment (e.g., sexualized cartoons, porn, antifemale comments overheard in a public work space). Another option is survivor, but this seems excessive for the most common forms of sexual harassment—for instance, it seems overly dramatic to say that one survived being the butt of a sexist joke. For the sake of clarity, we rely on the term victim throughout this article, although we recognize its shortcomings.

emphasis comes out clearly in the following definition of sexual harassment: “unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her resources, or threatening her well-being” (Fitzgerald et al. 1997b, p. 15). A more recent definition, applicable to any gender, conceptualizes sexual or “sex-based” harassment as a broad domain of “behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual’s sex” (Berdahl 2007a, p. 644). Berdahl (2007a) theorized sexual harassment to be an expression of power and dominance and a mechanism for protecting or enhancing one’s own sex-based social status. This conduct reinforces the existing gender hierarchy, a hierarchy that privileges men (explaining why men are more likely than women to sexually harass).

More concretely, social scientists use sexual harassment as an umbrella term, referring to several specific facets of behavior. Fitzgerald’s Tripartite Model of Sexual Harassment is a well-validated and widely accepted classification system (Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 1997b; Gelfand et al. 1995). Along with its corresponding measurement instrument, the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ), the Tripartite Model has held up across studies that vary by gender, ethnicity, nation, and occupation (e.g., Cortina 2001, Fitzgerald et al. 1988, Gelfand et al. 1995, Stark et al. 2002, Waldo et al. 1998). This model recognizes three broad categories of conduct: sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment.

Sexual coercion refers to attempts, both explicit and implicit, to make the conditions of employment contingent on sexual cooperation. This includes promises of professional rewards in exchange for sexual favors (e.g., making a job offer contingent on a sex act), as well as threats of professional harms (e.g., demotion, termination) if sexual demands are not met. Sexual coercion—such as a boss telling an employee “sleep with me or you’re fired”—is often the first thing that comes to people’s minds when they hear the term sexual harassment. However, as we explain in subsequent sections, this is by far the rarest form of sexual harassment.

A second type of sexual harassment is unwanted sexual attention, involving expressions of sexual interest that are unwelcomed, unreciprocated, unpleasant, and sometimes terrifying and traumatizing to the target. Examples include unwanted sex talk, nonconsensual touching, forcible kissing, relentless pressure for dates or sex, and sexual assault. People often assume sexual harassment and sexual assault to be distinct phenomena, but the latter is actually a subtype of the former, falling into the category of unwanted sexual attention (Fitzgerald 2019, Fitzgerald et al. 1988). For instance, when a hotel manager rapes a housekeeping employee, this is both sexual assault (a crime) and sexual harassment (a civil rights violation in employment).

The third dimension of sexual harassment, gender harassment, does not have sexual cooperation as a goal; instead, it communicates denigrating, demeaning, or hostile attitudes based on gender or sex (Leskinen & Cortina 2014, Leskinen et al. 2011). Examples include insults to the abilities of women (e.g., remarks that “women don’t belong in science”) or men (“men suck as nurses”). There are also sexually degrading images and words in the surrounding environment (lewd graffiti, graphic cartoons, sexual slurs scrawled on white boards). In addition, gender harassment can involve obscene gestures (mimicking masturbation or oral sex) and vulgar terms of address (for instance, calling a woman supervisor a “dumb bitch” or maligning a male coworker as a “pussy”).² Although some of these examples are sexualized, they differ from unwanted sexual attention in aiming to put people down and push them out, rather than pull them into sexual activity (Fitzgerald et al. 1995). These behaviors constitute sexual harassment not because they involve sexuality, but because they are based on a person’s sex (Berdahl 2007a).

²Pardon our profanity, but this helps convey the contempt often contained within gender harassing acts.

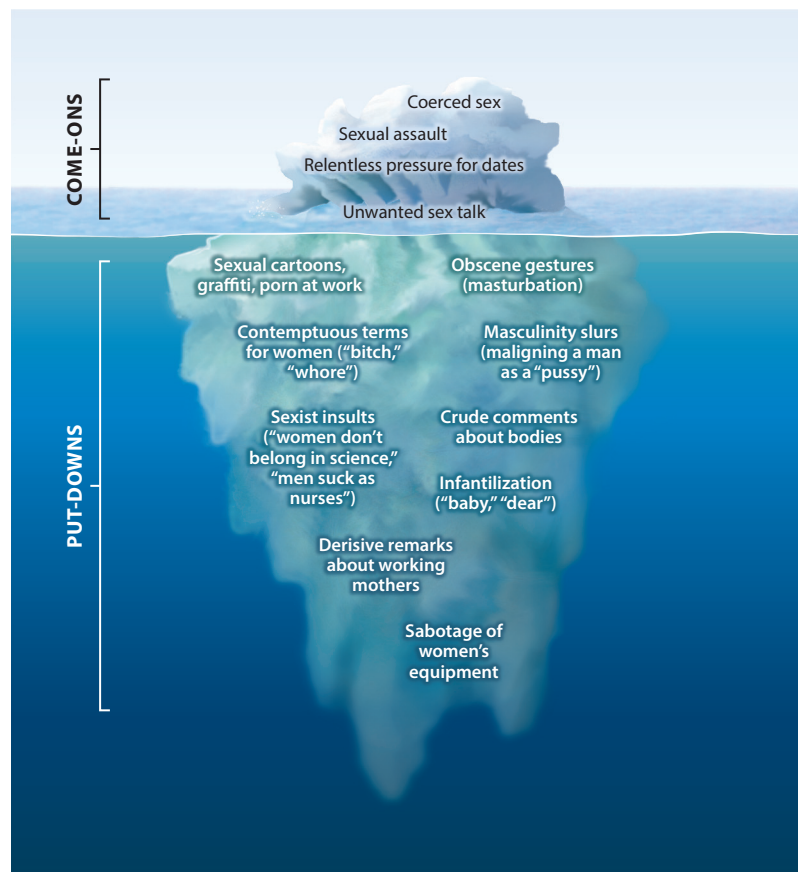


Figure 1

Cortina's Iceberg of Sexual Harassment, illustrating that most sexually harassing acts are put-downs (gender harassment) not come-ons (unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion), but rarely break through to public awareness.

The first author, Lilia Cortina, developed an iceberg metaphor to capture Fitzgerald's Tripartite Model of Sexual Harassment.³ Recreated in **Figure 1**, Cortina's Iceberg of Sexual Harassment illustrates how sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention (come-ons) represent only a small slice of the sexual harassment that transpires in organizations. As explained below, gender harassment is far more prevalent, so gender harassing examples (put-downs) constitute the bulk of the image. Gender harassment is depicted below the water line, because it seldom breaks through to public awareness; it rarely finds its ways into media headlines or high-profile court cases. Many organizational policies remain weak on gender harassment, if they cover it at all. But as the iceberg illustrates, gender harassment provides a base for more sexually threatening acts of abuse; that is, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion rarely take place without a firm foundation of gendered contempt.

³Another version of this iceberg appears in the NASEM (2018) report.

Sexual Harassment Under the Law

In the United States, workplace sexual harassment is most often litigated as a civil rights violation in employment, not a crime. Feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon is the principal architect of modern sexual harassment law. She famously wrote that sexual harassment constitutes sex discrimination in employment, because it adversely alters working conditions for many women but few men, in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (MacKinnon 1979). This construal catalyzed a major shift in American legal thought, offering a legal remedy for women who lost jobs for resisting their employers' sexual demands. Quid pro quo ("this for that") sexual harassment—analogueous to sexual coercion—became illegal.

US law evolved further in the 1980s to recognize hostile environment sexual harassment as illegal. This refers to sexist, misogynistic, vulgar, or sexually objectifying conduct that is "severe or pervasive" enough to create a hostile work environment (*Meritor Savings Bank, FSB v. Vinson* 1986). Included here are gender harassing acts, such as telling sexually insulting jokes, referring to coworkers in sexist terms, or sabotaging women's equipment. Hostile environment harassment also encompasses unwanted sexual pursuit—unwanted groping, grabbing, kissing, relentless sexual advances, etc.—when there are no professional bribes or threats to force sexual cooperation (i.e., no quid pro quo). Hostile environment sexual harassment can have multiple perpetrators and victims (unlike quid pro quo harassment, typically perpetrated one-on-one). It also includes displays in the ambient environment that have no individual target (e.g., sexual cartoons on bulletin boards, sexist graffiti on walls, pornographic screen savers on computers).

Over time, legal scholars drew increasing attention to the role played by gender, with less emphasis on sex acts. For example, Schultz (1998) wrote that "much of the time, harassment assumes a form that has little or nothing to do with sexuality but everything to do with gender" (p. 1687). She pointed to many cases in which women were harassed on the job in ways that were nonsexual but discriminatory. Her explanation for this is that "sexual harassment has always been more about sexism than it is about sex" (Schultz 2018, p. 22). Likewise, Franke (1997, p. 693) maintained that sexual harassment is

a kind of sex discrimination not because the conduct would not have been undertaken if the victim had been a different sex, not because it is sexual, and not because men do it to women, but precisely because it is a technology of sexism. That is, it perpetuates, enforces, and polices a set of gender norms at work that seek to feminize women and masculinize men.

With this logic, Franke (1997) emphasized that sexual harassment encompasses negative treatment of men and women who violate masculine and feminine ideals, respectively.

Two Supreme Court cases in the late 1990s—*Burlington Industries, Inc. v. Ellerth* (1998) and *Faragher v. City of Boca Raton* (1998)—clarified the nature of legal liability under Title VII. An employer is automatically liable for a supervisor's quid pro quo sexual harassment if the harassment culminated in a tangible employment action, such as termination, demotion, or failure to hire or promote. When there is no such tangible action (i.e., hostile environment harassment has occurred, with no quid pro quo), employers can avoid liability if they can prove two things: (a) They took steps to prevent and correct sexual harassment—for example, by publicizing a written policy and complaint procedure, and (b) the victim failed to pursue corrective opportunities, e.g., failed to file a formal complaint. The *Faragher* and *Ellerth* cases thus provided a generous affirmative defense for organizations, shielding them from legal liability even when there is proof of a hostile work environment (NASEM 2018).

Legal scholars have been deeply critical of the *Faragher/Ellerth* defense. For instance, Lawton (2004) analyzed 200 legal cases that featured this defense, concluding that many courts only require

employers to demonstrate “file cabinet compliance” (i.e., paper policies and reporting procedures) to satisfy the first prong of the defense. In other words, an organization need only show that it had a written policy against sexual harassment and a process for reporting it. The law has not mandated that organizations evaluate their policies or procedures for efficacy (e.g., does reporting actually reduce rates of sexual harassment?) or safety (are reporters protected from retaliation?). Fears of legal liability may even deter such evaluations; should an organization turn up evidence that its policies fail to deter harassing conduct, the courts may hold it liable for any sexual harassment that ensues (NASEM 2018). In other words, “the law rewards employers for making cosmetic efforts to prevent and correct harassment, but does not, by and large, consider whether they work” (Grossman 2019). Moreover, courts have provided no incentives for organizations to undertake more meaningful change, such as reshaping the climate that sets the stage for sexual harassment (more on climate below). This legal situation has spawned a “misguided culture of compliance” in American organizations (Grossman 2003, p. 3), where resources are channeled not into the prevention of sexual harassment, but rather into the promulgation of untested and possibly unsafe policies, reporting procedures, and trainings (Lawton 2004, NASEM 2018).

Another problem with the laws surrounding sexual harassment in the United States is that many assume male harassers and female victims (a notable exception being *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.* 1998, discussed below). Legal remedies for people who identify outside the sex/gender binary have been more elusive, until very recently. In a landmark case, *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2019), the US Supreme Court held that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects employees against discrimination because of their gender identity (or sexual orientation). This supports Catharine MacKinnon’s argument that “to be discriminated against based on being a trans woman or trans man is sex-based discrimination. It’s either based on sex per se or it’s based on what is perceived as the lack of fit between gender and sex, and both of those are discrimination” (MacKinnon & Mitra 2019, p. 1036). With that ruling, sexual harassment against transgender employees became illegal throughout the United States.

In no way meant to be comprehensive, the preceding paragraphs give a glimpse into the legal landscape surrounding sexual harassment in the United States (for a review of legal frameworks elsewhere in the world, see Holland & Cortina 2016). Popular wisdom might suggest that legal definitions of sexual harassment are fixed, but in reality legal frameworks shift as legislative bodies enact new laws, courts interpret and refine precedent, and (most relevant to this article) social science surfaces new insights.

The disparities among scientific and legal conceptualizations of sexual harassment raise intriguing questions about measurement. In studies of incidence and impact, should we assess sexual harassment using definitions derived from social science (e.g., Berdahl 2007a; Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 1997b), or should our tools be closely aligned with the law (as advocated by Gutek et al. 2004)? With scientific definitions being broader than legal ones, measurement instruments grounded in science (such as Fitzgerald’s SEQ) yield higher prevalence estimates; this is entirely appropriate when the goal is to understand sexual harassment as an occupational experience and a source of distress and dysfunction. As noted above, legal definitions have varied across time and nation, some of which to this day have no laws against sexual harassment (Holland & Cortina 2016). If we limited studies of sexual harassment to legal definitions, the implication would be that sexual harassment should not have been studied in the United States prior to the 1970s, and should not be studied in many other countries today (Cortina & Berdahl 2008). Throughout the remainder of this article, we therefore use the term sexual harassment to refer to a behavioral experience rather than a legal finding of fact.

HOW COMMON IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE?

Many studies of sexual harassment prevalence have focused on the experiences of women employees, estimating that at least one out of every two working women encounters some form of sexual harassment (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and/or sexual coercion) at some point over the course of her career. Sexual harassment rates are lower in the work lives of men, and little is known about the sexual harassment of gender-nonbinary individuals. In this section, we review the most rigorous scholarship available on sexual harassment prevalence.

One meta-analysis from the early 2000s summarized the findings of 55 probability samples, with data from 86,578 working women. The overarching conclusion was that 58% of women report sexually harassing conduct on the job (Ilies et al. 2003). When the analysis stratified findings by organizational context, sexual harassment rates varied from a low of 43% (for women in government work) to a high of 69% (in the military); rates for women working in the private sector (46%) and academia (58%) fell in the middle. We note, however, that the studies underlying this meta-analysis were all conducted prior to the year 2000, some as early as 1980.

A more recent meta-analysis focused on the specific context of military work; pooling the findings of 69 studies, this study reported that 52.5% of women (and 8.9% of men) had faced some form of sexual harassment during their time in the military (Wilson 2018). However, among the studies included in this analysis, the tools used to assess sexual harassment varied widely. Many lacked evidence of reliability and validity, and most missed gender harassment entirely. Some were based on single-item measures. Due to these measurement inconsistencies, the prevalence of military sexual harassment—especially gender harassment—almost certainly exceeds what this study reported.

The omission of gender harassment from sexual harassment measures is a serious flaw, as gender harassment is far more common than unwanted sexual attention or coercion. Over two decades ago Schneider et al. (1997) surveyed women employed in private industry and academia; among those sexually harassed in some way, an average of 88% had faced gender harassment. A minority of harassed women (12% on average) had encountered unwanted sexual attention or coercion, but rarely without concurrent gender harassment. Leskinen et al. (2011) found a parallel pattern: Among working women who had been sexually harassed, approximately 90% of victims had encountered gender harassment, with little or no unwanted sexual attention or coercion. Their results generalized across two male-dominated domains of work—the military and the law. Just over half of the military sample identified as white women, who were disproportionately represented among gender harassment victims; women of color, on the other hand, were overrepresented in the group facing the highest victimization rates, involving a combination of gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and/or sexual coercion.

As noted above, studies of men as sexual harassment victims have been less common (and studies of gender-nonbinary victims virtually nonexistent). Reported prevalence rates have varied widely across context, from 8.7% of men in the federal workforce (USMSPB 2018) to 42% of men in the reserve forces of the US military (Street et al. 2007) to 82.6% of men in policing (Lonsway et al. 2013). Dividing sexual harassment into its subtypes, Konik & Cortina (2008) found 47.5% of male university employees reporting gender harassment, some of whom also reported unwanted sexual attention or coercion (21.7%; note that these subsamples overlap, as unwanted sexual attention/coercion seldom occurs without gender harassment). Likewise, Kabat-Farr & Cortina (2014) found that 37% of male university staff and 46% of male court employees had been gender harassed, and an overlapping 10% and 27% (respectively) had encountered unwanted sexual attention/coercion.

Science further finds gender differences in the subjective experience of sexual conduct in employment. In one study of manufacturing, social service, and university employees, more men than women described encounters with workplace sexual behavior (e.g., sexual jokes or propositions); more women than men, however, appraised these encounters as negative (Berdahl & Aquino 2009). Men commonly report that uninvited sexual attention is not anxiety provoking, bothersome, stressful, or upsetting (e.g., Berdahl 2007a, Berdahl et al. 1996, de Haas et al. 2009). Some men even evaluate these situations as “very positive” (Berdahl & Aquino 2009, p. 37). In such instances, the sexual conduct in question does not qualify as harassment, as that term is generally reserved for “treatment that pressures, provokes, frightens, intimidates, humiliates, or demeans a person” (Berdahl 2007a, p. 641). These findings raise the possibility that some studies have overestimated the prevalence of the sexual harassment of men, including experiences that are not, in fact, harassing.

In terms of who engages in sexual harassment, research finds that harassers are more often men than women. For instance, according to a recent large-scale study of federal workers, the harasser was male in 82% of the incidents that had had the greatest impact on victims (USMSPB 2018). Likewise, among sexually harassed former reservists, 78% of men and 88% of women reported that their worst harassment experience involved a male perpetrator (Street et al. 2007). In other words, even when men are the victims of sexual harassment, the person harassing them is commonly another man. Men’s sexual harassment of other men tends to involve a unique form of gender harassment, humiliating those who deviate from heterosexual male gender roles (e.g., Berdahl et al. 1996, *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc.* 1998, Stockdale et al. 1999, Waldo et al. 1998). As Cortina et al. (2020) note, “this male-on-male harassment is often about enforcing a heteronormative view of masculinity that is hostile to anyone who doesn’t conform, whether it is someone who is young, inexperienced, gay, or in some other way viewed as ‘not man enough.’”

Looking beyond the experiences of cisgender⁴ individuals, Schilt (2006) found transgender men describing less sexual harassment following their transition from female to male. Schilt & Wiswall (2008), however, reported male-to-female transgender employees facing more harassment (often for the first time) after transition. In other words, transwomen appear to be at higher risk for sexual harassment than transmen. This parallels research on cisgender populations, which finds many more ciswomen sexually harassed than cismen.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Beyond the study of prevalence, psychologists have documented myriad ways in which sexual harassment harms individuals, workgroups and teams, and their organizations. This body of work has been the subject of several meta-analyses: Chan et al. (2008), Hershcovis & Barling (2010), Lapierre et al. (2005), Sojo et al. (2016), and Willness et al. (2007). We summarize that literature here.

Harms to Women

Dozens of studies have established that sexual harassment takes a toll on women’s work lives. Across a wide range of industries, researchers find that encounters with workplace sexual harassment link with reductions in women’s job satisfaction (e.g., Lim & Cortina 2005, Lonsway et al.

⁴The term cisgender began appearing in academic journals in the 1990s, referring to people whose gender identity matches the biological sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a ciswoman is someone who identifies as a woman and received a female sex assignment at birth. Cisgender is the linguistic counterpart to transgender, a term used to indicate persons whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth.

2013, Vargas et al. 2020). This finding applies not only to white women in the United States, but also US women of color (e.g., Buchanan et al. 2008, Cho 1997, Cortina et al. 2002a, Shupe et al. 2002) as well as women in other nations (e.g., O'Connell & Korabik 2000, Wasti et al. 2000).

Another common consequence of sexual harassment is organizational withdrawal, which can take different forms. Sexually harassed women often engage in some form of work withdrawal, staying with their employer but disengaging from their work (via absenteeism, tardiness, neglect of assignments, etc.). Others contemplate job withdrawal, or leaving their jobs altogether (e.g., O'Connell & Korabik 2000, Shupe et al. 2002, Vargas et al. 2020). Sims et al. (2005) followed military women over a four-year time span and linked their experiences with administrative records; their results showed that sexually harassed women had left the military at higher rates over time than other women. Likewise, McLaughlin et al. (2017) found that women targeted with sexual harassment were 6.5 times more likely to change their jobs than their nontargeted counterparts.

The sexual harassment of women also detracts from performance, including individual interview performance (Woodzicka & LaFrance 2005), unit financial performance (Raver & Gelfand 2005), and interpersonal job performance (Barling et al. 2001). In addition, with increases in sexual harassment come increases in job stress and decreases in organizational commitment (e.g., Lim & Cortina 2005, Schneider et al. 1997). Other job-related correlates are increased team conflict, lowered justice perceptions, and cognitive interference [e.g., distraction, concentration difficulty (Barling et al. 2001, Raver & Gelfand 2005)].

Beyond job-related outcomes, many studies have documented ways in which sexual harassment undermines mental health. For instance, Schneider et al. (1997) surveyed women employed in two different organizations; they found that those who had been sexually harassed (even at low frequencies) had significantly lower levels of general psychological well-being and elevated symptoms of posttraumatic stress. The impact of harassment remained significant even when controlling for other potential explanations, such as negative affectivity and job stress. In a second example, Richman, Rospenda, and colleagues conducted a longitudinal survey of university employees; they documented associations between earlier sexual harassment and later use and misuse of alcohol (e.g., Richman et al. 2002, Rospenda et al. 2006). These are just two illustrations from what is now a large body of research. Other psychological and emotional harms documented in this literature are decrements in life satisfaction (e.g., Fitzgerald et al. 1997a, Wasti et al. 2000); symptoms of depression, anxiety, and disordered eating (Harned & Fitzgerald 2002, Ho et al. 2012, Reed et al. 2016); and a decreased sense of safety on the job (Clancy et al. 2017, Vargas et al. 2020).

Compared to the study of professional and psychological outcomes, less research has investigated relationships between sexual harassment and physical health. One outcome, however, has emerged consistently in this work: decline in overall health perceptions and health satisfaction (e.g., Bergman & Drasgow 2003, Fitzgerald et al. 1997a, Lim & Cortina 2005). Other studies have identified specific somatic symptoms associated with sexually harassing experiences; these include headaches, exhaustion, sleep problems, gastrointestinal problems, nausea, respiratory complaints, musculoskeletal pain, and weight loss or gain (for reviews, see Cortina & Berdahl 2008, Fitzgerald & Cortina 2018). In the only study of its kind, Schneider et al. (2001) conducted an experiment showing that the experience of gender harassment (i.e., hearing a man insult women's competence) causes increased cardiovascular reactivity in women, and both self-blame and confrontation (i.e., making clear to the man that he was out of line) exacerbated this effect.

Harms to Men

The prior section specifically focused on links between sexual harassment and the work and well-being of women. This leaves open the question of whether men also suffer when sexually harassed

and whether their harms parallel those of women. Some studies say yes: When harassed at similar levels, women and men describe similar job outcomes; psychological and physical health impairments; and longitudinal links to depression, anxiety, hostility, and alcohol misuse (e.g., Bergman & Henning 2008, de Haas et al. 2009, Magley et al. 1999). Other research finds that sexually harassed women report worse outcomes than harassed men, such as negative mood and turnover intentions (Barling et al. 1996), disordered eating (Harned & Fitzgerald 2002), and overtime increases in problem drinking (Freels et al. 2005). A few investigations describe worse outcomes for men compared to women. For instance Vogt et al. (2005) found sexual harassment to be a significantly stronger risk factor for depression and anxiety among men than women. Likewise, Street et al. (2007) concluded that, although female former reservists reported more sexual harassment than their male counterparts, the men described greater depression and worse overall mental health when harassed at high levels.

Taken as a whole, the research record presents a mixed picture of how men's sexual harassment outcomes compare to those of women. The disparities across studies may stem from disparities across industries studied (e.g., military versus academia versus nursing), measurement and sampling techniques used, or outcomes considered. It may be inappropriate to compare women's and men's outcomes, given that they tend to face different forms of sexual harassment, fueled by different factors (e.g., Berdahl et al. 1996, Stockdale et al. 1999, Waldo et al. 1998). What is clear, however, is that both women and men are harmed when sexually harassed on the job. By and large, this literature has been silent on outcomes experienced by victims who identify outside the sex/gender binary.

Issues of Severity, Labeling, and Targeting

Importantly, professional and personal harms arise from sexual harassment regardless of the specific subtype of harassment involved. Popular wisdom might suggest that gender harassment is less severe than unwanted sexual attention or coercion, because gender harassment is devoid of sexual threat (as noted above, gender harassment is a put-down, not a come-on). This assumption, however, has not held up to scientific scrutiny.

When analyzing data from 13,743 women serving in the armed forces, Langhout et al. (2005) found that frequent and pervasive gender harassment triggers a comparable level of distress as infrequent sexual coercion. In another study, women faced with gender harassment in the absence of unwanted sexual attention or coercion showed significant decrements in professional and psychological well-being (Leskinen et al. 2011). Moreover, in their meta-analysis of data from 73,877 working women, Sojo et al. (2016) reported stronger effects for high-frequency, low-intensity experiences (e.g., sexist organizational climates and gender harassment) than for low-frequency, high-intensity experiences (e.g., unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion); this pattern held when predicting women's job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and general health. On the basis of these findings, Sojo and colleagues argued that gender harassment, sexist discrimination, and the like "should not be considered lesser forms of sexism" (Sojo et al. 2016, p. 31). Taken together, this collection of studies refute assumptions that gender harassment is, by definition, a less serious or less egregious form of sexual harassment.

Looking beyond behavior type to behavior labeling, research has shown that victims need not label a behavior as sexual harassment for it to harm them. Labeling is relatively rare: Among women targeted with sexually harassing conduct at work, less than one-quarter actually identify their experience as sexual harassment per se (Ilies et al. 2003, Magley et al. 1999, Magley & Shupe 2005). Labeling rates are even lower among sexually harassed men (Munson et al. 2001). Victims of gender harassment are especially unlikely to attach the sexual harassment label to their experiences

(Holland & Cortina 2013, Magley & Shupe 2005). For instance, Holland & Cortina (2013) found that gender harassed women were 7.5 times less likely to identify as having been sexually harassed, compared to women victims of unwanted sexual pursuit. Regardless, the detrimental impact of sexual harassment does not depend on it being labeled as such; victims who do and do not label describe comparable levels of harm (Magley et al. 1999, Woodzicka & LaFrance 2005).

Finally, the effects of sexual harassment can reach beyond victims to include witnesses, workgroups, and others within the organization. For instance, Schneider (1996) coined the term bystander stress to refer to observations and knowledge of the sexual harassment of coworkers and found that bystander stress predicts lower job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and mental health. In a similar vein, research has reported that employees experiencing ambient sexual harassment (i.e., targeted at others within their workgroup) report negative outcomes that parallel those of direct victims; these ambient effects emerge for both women and men who work with female victims (Glomb et al. 1997; Miner-Rubino & Cortina 2004, 2007; Richman-Hirsch & Glomb 2002). Likewise, ambient sexual harassment within teams predicts greater team conflict, lower team cohesion, and reductions in team financial performance (Raver & Gelfand 2005). In all of these studies, second-hand experiences of sexual harassment predicted outcomes even after controlling for first-hand, personally targeted experiences. This body of scholarship demonstrates that the circle of harm surrounding sexual harassment stretches beyond the victim-perpetrator dyad. All employees, regardless of whether they themselves are targets, suffer from spending time in sexist and degrading work environments.

WHAT RAISES RISK FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Various studies have sought to understand what increases the likelihood of sexual harassment in organizations. Looking at the research record, we find the strongest risk factors at the level of the situation. To be clear, person-level factors (e.g., hostile sexism, beliefs about proper roles for men and women) can motivate an individual to sexually harass others. However, people with propensities to sexually harass are less likely to do so when in certain kinds of environments, such as those in which leaders model professional (as opposed to harassing) behavior and those where there are clear consequences for misbehavior (Pryor et al. 1993). In short, it is organizational rather than individual characteristics that most powerfully predict whether sexual harassment happens in a particular setting (Hulin et al. 1996, Ilies et al. 2003, Pryor et al. 1993).

One organizational characteristic linked with sexual harassment, according to extensive research, involves men being numerically, structurally, or stereotypically dominant. That is, organizations in which men outnumber women, leaders are mostly men, or jobs and duties are stereotypically associated with men (e.g., construction, finance) tend to have more problems with sexual harassment [e.g., Berdahl 2007b; Fitzgerald et al. 1997a; Kabat-Farr & Cortina 2014; McLaughlin et al. 2012; Schultz 2003, 2018; see also Willness et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis]. To describe just one example, Kabat-Farr & Cortina (2014) analyzed data from multiple samples. When comparing those who work in gender-balanced groups (i.e., similar numbers of men and women) with those who work in mostly male groups, they found employees in the latter to report significantly more gender harassment. This was true for both women and men: The more they worked in male-dominated settings, the more gender harassment they encountered.

Having an organizational climate of “tolerance” (permissiveness) for sexual harassment is another potent predictor of the behavior, according to many studies (also meta-analyzed by Willness et al. 2007). Researchers often operationalize tolerance according to three features of the harassment reporting system: shared perceptions that sexual harassment reporting is risky, reports are not taken seriously, and reports rarely trigger penalties against harassers (e.g., Hulin et al. 1996,

Fitzgerald et al. 1997a). Illustrating what happens in tolerant climates, a nationally representative survey of 615 men found them to admit engaging in more sexually harassing behavior when they thought their organization had no guidelines against harassment, no hotlines for reporting harassment, no punishment for harassers and—more broadly—managers who cared little about the issue (Patel et al. 2017). This echoes Dekker & Barling’s (1998) findings that men who perceive weak sanctions against sexual harassment in their organization report more perpetration of harassing conduct.

Beyond climates for sexual harassment, scholars have argued that organizations could better prevent harassment if they cultivated broader climates for respect, where all employees are treated with dignity and fairness (Cortina 2008, Cortina et al. 2002b, Feldblum & Lipnic 2016, NASEM 2018). Indeed, Robotham & Cortina (2019) found in two samples that leadership efforts to promote a respect climate added to the reduction of sexual (and racial) harassment, over and above effects of a sexual harassment intolerance climate. In a similar vein, Rubino et al. (2018) found in two large military samples that rates of sexual harassment were lower in unit climates perceived as just and fair. They further reported that a climate for organizational justice can lessen the link between sexual harassment climate and sexual harassment occurrence.

Moving from climate to culture, recent research shows that sexual harassment risk increases in organizational cultures defined by dysfunctional dominance contests (Berdahl et al. 2018a, Glick et al. 2018, Matos et al. 2018). In these environments, social norms, rituals, and belief systems prize ruthless competition, disdain for personal relationships, boasts of strength and stamina, and swaggering displays of extreme confidence. Scholars refer to these environments as masculinity contest cultures, as they embody masculine ideals taken to the dysfunctional extreme. To be clear, however, these cultures pressure all workers (regardless of gender) to embrace these ideals (Berdahl et al. 2018b). Masculinity contest cultures “pull for” hostility, viewed as a marker of dominance and excellence. This combination of factors creates conditions that breed sexual harassment. Indeed, the more that organizations espouse these norms, the more their members report being bullied and harassed (Glick et al. 2018) and the more they describe their leaders as abusive (Matos et al. 2018). Those who deviate from conventional heterosexual masculinity (e.g., women, gay men, anyone perceived as feminine) receive the worst treatment.

In summary, research has identified several organizational characteristics that make sexual harassment more likely, most notably male dominance, harassment tolerance, uncivil and unjust climate, and masculinity contest culture. It is therefore surprising how few sexual harassment “solutions” intervene at the level of the organization rather than the individual. We turn to these interventions next.

ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Given the alarming incidence and impact of sexual harassment, there is a pressing need for effective solutions. The past few decades have seen organizations bolster their antiharassment policies, build out their harassment reporting systems, and bring in all manner of training to address sexual harassment. Despite these sweeping initiatives, there is no evidence that rates of sexual harassment have undergone any radical decline (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev 2017, Grossman 2019, NASEM 2018). Why might that be, and what might we do differently?

Reporting

Organizations tend to rely on individual victims filing formal complaints (i.e., reporting) as a primary avenue to corrective action around sexual harassment. The reasoning here is that formal reports will drive harassment to the surface, and leaders can then intervene to right the

wrongdoing. Despite this intuitive logic, sexual harassment reporting systems rarely achieve such goals. These systems frequently fail to end the harassment and, in many cases, make matters worse by triggering retaliation (Bergman et al. 2002, Cortina & Magley 2003). A typical reporting procedure requires the victim to relive and recount (sometimes multiple times to multiple people) what may have been a humiliating, frightening, or traumatizing experience. It is not uncommon for victim identities to be divulged during investigations and for victims to lose all sense of agency or control over the situation. One employee explained in the NASEM (2018, p. 106) report why she “hated” reporting sexual harassment to her organization:

You are feeling bullied into revealing things, then you have no choice but to go through this process. It makes you feel even more powerless. For me, I felt worse every time I went to HR . . . I was bullied into [giving] coworkers’ names that I may have even talked to about the situation and if I don’t then I would be in violation of the rules and therefore my job could be in jeopardy. It was a horrible experience. . . .

It therefore comes as no surprise that few sexually harassed women—and even fewer harassed men—ever file formal complaints (e.g., Ilies et al. 2003, NASEM 2018). For instance, Lonsway et al. (2013) investigated sexual harassment in law enforcement, finding that only 15% of harassed women and 11% of harassed men had formally complained about the wrongdoing. In another study, focusing on graduate student experiences of sexual harassment from faculty or staff, only 6.4% of victims had filed a complaint (Rosenthal et al. 2016). Reporting is typically the response of last resort, attempted only after all other efforts at ending the harassment have failed. This reluctance to file a formal complaint is not unique to sexual harassment: The vast majority of people who feel they have been wronged in some way never mobilize their legal rights (NASEM 2018).

Fear often prevents people from formally reporting sexual harassment: fear of blame, disbelief, inaction, humiliation, ostracism, and damage to careers or reputations (e.g., Cortina 2004, NASEM 2018). These fears are well-founded, with sexual harassment complaints frequently followed by indifference, trivialization, and retaliation (Bergman et al. 2002, Cortina & Magley 2003, Dobbin & Kalev 2017, Lonsway et al. 2013, NASEM 2018). For instance, among employees who spoke out in some way against workplace mistreatment, retaliation rates ranged from 47.8% of complainants in one study (Lonsway et al. 2013) to 66% in another (Cortina & Magley 2003). Retaliation is more likely when the harasser holds a position of power (Cortina & Magley 2003) and/or the job context is male-dominated (Bergman et al. 2002). As MacKinnon (2019) notes, “many survivors realistically [judge] reporting to be pointless or worse, predictably producing retaliation.”

Another factor deterring complaints is a cultural mythology surrounding sexual harassment. The concept of myth comes from sociology, referring to ideas that are widely and persistently believed despite being patently false (Fitzgerald 2017). Pervasive in our society, myths specific to sexual harassment serve two aims: denial and justification (Lonsway et al. 2008). That is, some myths deny that any wrongdoing has transpired, often by questioning the veracity of victim reports (e.g., myths that women routinely lie about sexual harassment, file false charges, exaggerate what is essentially “no big deal”). When denial becomes impossible, myths justify sexual harassment, in many cases by blaming the victim [e.g., myths that the victim must have done something to “precipitate” the abuse (Cortina et al. 2018)]. These are falsehoods, as demonstrated by abundant empirical evidence to the contrary (Lonsway et al. 2008, NASEM 2018). Rather than file frivolous charges, for instance, women are far more likely to endure sexual victimization and never report it (as noted above; see also Fielding 2018). Myths surrounding sexual violence make it exceedingly difficult for victims, witnesses, or allies to speak out (MacKinnon 2019). Why take the risky step of reporting a harasser, if widespread fallacies will derail the report and degrade the reporter?

An overemphasis on reporting as a solution to sexual harassment comes with costs. Formal, legalistic complaint systems tend to filter who reports—those who have the most dramatic and stereotypical cases, which tend to be the rare instances of physical harassment and assault (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018). Because the more common form of sexual harassment (gender harassment) rarely gets reported, it continues, unchallenged and unchecked. Moreover, when an organization funnels the bulk of its antiharassment resources into a complaint apparatus, it often neglects the more difficult task of overhauling the climate that sets the stage for sexual harassment. Finally, an overreliance on reporting means that, even when leaders are aware of bad actors, they feel incapable of taking action without a victim coming forward with a complaint. With this passive institutional pose, leaders abdicate responsibility for workplace culture (Clancy et al. 2020).

Training

With the proliferation of sexual harassment complaint systems have come trainings of all kinds. Consultants (often with limited expertise in sexual harassment) are now peddling a variety of anti-harassment toolkits, videos, presentations, apps, and online educational programs. Some of these trainings succeed at providing basic knowledge of harassment definitions and laws. Some tell you where to go to start the unpleasant process of filing a formal complaint. But many such trainings are exceedingly brief, off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all, and delivered only via online modalities. This can create an image of low institutional commitment to preventing or remedying sexual harassment. Moreover, these trainings often dwell on the sexual side of harassment, perpetuating the myth that most harassment is about sex or romance gone awry.

Roehling & Huang (2018) reviewed studies of sexual harassment training effectiveness, finding that this training often increases knowledge about what sexual harassment is and how to report it. Although improvements in knowledge may seem a laudable goal, knowledge change often fails to translate into behavior change. Indeed, there is little evidence that conventional approaches to sexual harassment training actually decrease sexually harassing conduct (Kalinowski et al. 2013, Magley et al. 2013, NASEM 2018). Even worse, some antiharassment trainings increase harmful attitudes—activating regressive gender stereotypes, victim blame, and backlash against women (e.g., Bingham & Scherer 2001, Dobbin & Kalev 2017, Magley et al. 2013, Perry et al. 1998, Tinkler 2012).

Most antiharassment trainings, however, are never evaluated using rigorous methods (Magley et al. 2013). Many organizations simply adopt an intuitively appealing training product and then turn to training completion (i.e., proportion of employees trained) as a primary metric of success. Case in point: In 2019 the University of Michigan developed a mandatory sexual harassment training program for its faculty and staff and then took pride in high training completion rates (Stein 2019). Although well intentioned, the “training” in question was a 15-minute, online-only module that had never undergone scientific evaluation. Mandating this training was analogous to mandating a drug that has no proven track record, and then using widespread uptake of the drug as a cause for celebration. Most would agree that such celebration is premature; before taking pride in any drug, and certainly before requiring it, we should have some kind of evidence of efficacy (e.g., reduction in disease). Likewise, widespread participation in training (of unknown quality) should not be an organization’s ultimate goal; it should be a reduction in sexual harassment. Michigan’s approach to sexual harassment training is not unique, with many organizations nationwide following similar models (NASEM 2018).

Not all trainings fail, however. As the NASEM (2018) report summarizes, research suggests potential for sexual harassment training to be effective, in terms of yielding measurable improvement in knowledge, beliefs, and (most importantly) behaviors. Trainings shown to make

meaningful change have particular qualities: They are delivered by a human (not just computer) instructor, include active modes of instruction (e.g., interactive exercises) rather than solely relying on passive lectures or videos, last four or more hours, and are tailored to the particular audience (Kalinowski et al. 2013, NASEM 2018, Roehling & Huang 2018). Such trainings do not come cheap, but if they are effective in reducing sexual harassment (and related employment litigation and employee distress, dysfunction, turnover, etc.), the expense would be well worth it.

In sum, conventional reporting and training programs do little to prevent sexual harassment (NASEM 2018). These interventions are backed up by little evidence of efficacy (or even safety, with retaliation jeopardizing the careers of those who complain). In putting these systems in place, organizations comply with the letter of the law but accomplish little else. Indeed, an overly legal handling of sexual harassment can dis-incentivize organizations from pursuing more profound cultural change (Clancy et al. 2020). To turn the tide on this problem, we need nothing short of a radical redesign of harassment prevention and response systems in organizations. The focus should be development and dissemination of bold, organization-level solutions, even when the formal law would be satisfied with less. We say more on this below.

THE FUTURE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT RESEARCH: WHERE TO NOW?

The #MeToo and Time's Up movements have sparked a renaissance of sexual harassment research. To date, thousands of scholarly articles and books have addressed this topic (Stockdale et al. 2019). Most studies of sexual harassment, however, have appeared outside of the IO and OB literatures. To illustrate, when searching on the keyword “sexual harassment” in all titles and abstracts of five top IO/OB journals, we find only 48 articles as of this writing: *Journal of Applied Psychology* (24 articles), *Personnel Psychology* (9), *Academy of Management Journal* (7), *Academy of Management Review* (4), and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (4). None of these outlets has ever hosted a special issue on sexual harassment. Because sexual harassment is so common, with so many costs to individuals and institutions, it merits more attention from organizational science. We propose three broad topics that are ripe for further inquiry: intervention, intersectionality, and precarity. We also note methods that could potentially bring new advances to this body of scholarship.

Intervention

Given the limited knowledge on how organizations can combat sexual harassment—with safety and efficacy—this topic cries out for further study. Reliance on reporting systems to root out those who harass amounts to hunting for “bad apples,” one at a time. Organizational and legal scholars tell us those efforts are doomed to fail (e.g., Bergman et al. 2002, Dobbin & Kalev 2017, NASEM 2018, Schultz 2018). The most powerful predictors of sexual harassment, according to the empirical record reviewed above, reside in the context surrounding it: Sexual harassment thrives in organizations that have a preponderance of men, turn a blind eye to bad behavior, neglect respect and fairness, and/or promote dysfunctional masculinity contests. This is primarily a context problem then—one of “bad barrels” rather than bad apples (Clancy et al. 2020). The most effective solutions to sexual harassment lie not in individual victims complaining or individual workers retraining. Instead, we should look to organization-level solutions: Prevent sexual harassment by reshaping the contexts and cultures supporting it.

Research linking gender imbalance to sexual harassment points to an important starting place: Integrate jobs, departments, and industries currently dominated by men (e.g., Schultz 2003, 2018). That is, there should be more focus on recruiting women (and gender-nonbinary persons) into

all levels of organizations, especially the most powerful positions traditionally reserved for men. In short, “we already know how to reduce sexual harassment at work, and the answer is actually pretty simple: hire and promote more women” (Dobbin & Kalev 2017, p. 2). We should eliminate the horizontal and vertical sex segregation that paves the way for workplace harassment. A related step would be to integrate the built environment—the photographs, portraits, statues, and other iconography that celebrate important figures in the history of the organization. Such images often skew heavily toward wealthy white men, sending powerful signals about who belongs and who is most valued (and, tacitly, who is not). Bringing gender balance to the structural and visual context might not eradicate sexual harassment, but it would be a fantastic first step.

A second step would be curbing the masculinity contest cultures known to breed abuse (Glick et al. 2018, Matos et al. 2018). To combat these cultures, Berdahl et al. (2018a,b) recommend that leaders publicly reject norms, rituals, and belief systems valorizing “win or die” dominance. They add that interventions ought to connect clearly with core organizational values and goals. In other words, employees must recognize changes as mission-relevant, not solely for the benefit of marginalized groups. It is also critical that organizations modify reward and penalty systems to discourage destructive displays of dominance (Berdahl et al. 2018a,b).

A third solution focuses on promoting the positive rather than prohibiting the negative. That is, sexual harassment interventions can be embedded within broader initiatives to boost respect and civility (Cortina 2008, Cortina et al. 2002b, Feldblum & Lipnic 2016, NASEM 2018, Robotham & Cortina 2019). To promote civility, researchers (e.g., Pearson & Porath 2009) recommend that organizations clearly state expectations for respectful behavior in mission statements, codes of conduct, or policy manuals, educate all members of the organization on those expectations, and hold people accountable for failing to meet those expectations. Organizations can also cultivate kindness by rewarding exceptional acts of altruism and humanity (Cortina et al. 2019). This integrated strategy—combining harassment-prevention efforts with respect-promotion programs—may attract broader audiences, being relevant to all employees (regardless of gender) and avoiding the resistance met by interventions that exclusively target sexual harassment (Cortina 2008, Cortina et al. 2002b). Indeed, promising results have begun to emerge in studies of this integrated approach to sexual harassment prevention (Robotham & Cortina 2019, Rubino et al. 2018).

The organization-level solutions noted here require more research to determine whether they work, in what kinds of contexts, and for whom. These practices appear far more promising, however, than the individual-level interventions that organizations have historically embraced, which have failed to turn the dial on sexual harassment (NASEM 2018).

Intersectionality

Sexual harassment research has traditionally focused on one social identity—gender—paying particular attention to the experiences of straight, white, cisgender women. To move forward, scientific studies of sexual harassment should address additional social identities and their interplay. Theories of intersectionality and double-jeopardy can guide this work. The basic premise of intersectionality is that everyone simultaneously holds multiple social identities, and those identities vary in the levels of privilege and power they afford (e.g., Cole 2009; see also Crenshaw 1991). Relatedly, the double-jeopardy hypothesis maintains that individuals occupying multiple categories of disadvantage—such as women of color—face a “double whammy of discrimination” (Berdahl & Moore 2006, p. 427). These perspectives can bring needed nuance to scientific understandings of sexual harassment.

To illustrate, consider specific intersections of gender and race. Researchers have theorized that women of color face racially motivated forms of sexual harassment, termed sexual racism (Cortina

2001) and racialized sexual harassment (Buchanan et al. 2008). This refers to harassment tied to both gender and race, such as inappropriate comments on the bodies of women of color (e.g., complimenting an African American employee on her “fine Black ass”). Other examples involve inappropriate pet names (“mami” or “mi hija” for Latina employees) and gendered racial epithets [such as in the infamous case of Texaco managers referring to a Black female employee as a “smart-mouthed little colored girl” (Collins 1998, p. 12)]. This conduct has its roots in sociohistorical stereotypes, which paint African American women as sexually insatiable and promiscuous, Latinas as “loose” and “hot-blooded,” and Asian women as sexually submissive (e.g., Buchanan et al. 2008, Cho 1997, Cortina 2001). Sexual harassment, it appears, often has much to do with race (as well as class and other markers of social status). Intersectionality theory can help us understand how social constructions of race and gender penetrate organizational settings and, as such, inform the sexual harassment experiences of women of color (Richardson & Taylor 2009).

In a similar vein, the interplay of gender and sexuality deserves more attention within harassment research. Studies of sexual orientation harassment typically focus on conduct that explicitly references minority sexualities (e.g., disparagement of LBGTQ folk, distribution of antigay cartoons); gender receives limited attention. Likewise, it is common for sexual harassment researchers to ignore the role of sexual orientation—often neglecting, for example, to assess the sexual orientations of research participants. This happens even though abuses based on sex and sexual orientation are intimately linked, pressuring all employees to conform to narrow, rigid, heterogender ideals (Rabelo & Cortina 2014). To gain a comprehensive understanding of sexual harassment, we must push beyond paradigms focused exclusively on gender.

Another advantage of intersectional frameworks is that they call attention to dimensions of difference rarely studied in organizational science, such as fatness.⁵ Weight stigma, paired with devaluation tied to gender, can create unique harms in the lives of fat women. Previous research has concluded that sexual harassment is primarily a punishment for people who deviate from traditional gender ideals, rather than an expression of sexual desire for those who conform (Berdahl 2007b, Berdahl et al. 1996). Given that idealized femininity places a premium on thinness, fat women may be more susceptible to sexual harassment as a penalty for flouting feminine ideals. No research to date has tested this possibility, although King and colleagues did find that “obese” women encountered more interpersonal discrimination from salespeople (e.g., less friendliness, less smiling, less eye contact), compared to average-weight women (King et al. 2006).

Intersectional understandings of workplace harassment are, by definition, messy and complicated. At the same time, they mirror reality and are vital for moving the field forward.

Precurity

Context plays a critical role in predicting sexual harassment, and one stands out for having high harassment risk but little research to date: precarious employment. Precarious employees are those in contract, temporary, or part-time jobs who lack permanent employee rights (Benach et al. 2014). Precarious work is often unstable and unpredictable, with low wages, limited legal protections, and few (if any) benefits. Many precarious workers face further marginalization based on race, class, language, and immigration status. Examples include farmworkers, day laborers, street vendors, and domestic workers who labor in private homes. Women working in these contexts face frequent

⁵We use the term “fat” as a descriptor (like short/tall or young/old) to align with the terminology and ethics of fat studies. Fat studies is a relatively new interdisciplinary field, focused on the recognition and respect of weight diversity (Rothblum & Solovay 2009).

sexual harassment, as chronicled by Bernice Yeung (2018) in her award-winning book, *In a Day's Work: The Fight to End Sexual Violence Among America's Most Vulnerable Workers*.

Risk for sexual harassment is high in farmwork, for instance. One reason for this is that agriculture, like many industries, is dominated by men in managerial and leadership roles. Farmworkers often depend on a foreman, who wields considerable power over their work (and sometimes home) lives; if this person is a predator, "it is the ideal situation for sexual harassment to occur—unfettered, unpunished, and unstopped" (Fitzgerald 2019, p. 8). In addition, farmworking women labor alongside farmworking men in the United States [unlike in Mexico, where many farming worksites are sex segregated (Waugh 2010)]. The often solitary and isolated nature of farmwork makes it possible for abuse to take place outside of the watchful eyes of others (Kim et al. 2016, Murphy et al. 2015, Waugh 2010). Studying Mexican farmworking women in California, Waugh (2010) found that virtually all had encountered some form of sexual harassment; most commonly this entailed gender harassment (97%), but many women also faced unwanted sexual attention (53%) or sexual coercion (24%). Likewise, research conducted in Washington (Kim et al. 2016) and Oregon (Murphy et al. 2015) concluded that Mexican farmworking women experienced frequent sexual harassment, faced employment and health problems as a consequence, and felt that both individual- and industry-level changes could prevent the harassment (Kim et al. 2016).

Another type of precarious employment, typically performed by women, is domestic labor (i.e., cooking, cleaning, and caring for families in private residences). Domestic workers are especially vulnerable due to the location of their employment (in the home of the harasser, isolated from other workers) and the disadvantages inherent in their social positions (often poor, immigrant, of color). Some immigrant domestic workers are undocumented, with their own families depending on them for financial survival but few employment alternatives. Fear of deportation, combined with poverty, effectively holds these women hostage in jobs where they are routinely and sometimes violently sexually harassed (Fitzgerald 2019, Yeung 2018). For them, reporting abuse to law enforcement or other authorities is not an option: "because there is no assurance that speaking out will be met with protection from future or collateral harm, the only rational thing to do is to say nothing" (Yeung 2018, p. 3).

Social movements against sexual harassment, including #MeToo, have largely neglected the plight of the precarious worker—the poor women who are subordinated and violated while working at the edges of the economy. Fitzgerald (2019) explains that these are "women whom science, the movement and sometimes the law have forgotten: farmworkers raped in the fields and packing sheds of the agricultural industry; subminimum wage restaurant workers groped by the customers upon whose tips they depend to survive. . . janitorial workers, harassed and assaulted by supervisors, contractors and customers" (p. 5). Precarious workers' experiences with sexual harassment have also escaped the attention of IO and OB researchers, an oversight we can correct moving forward.

Methods

To date, most IO/OB studies of sexual harassment have involved quantitative self-report surveys, asking employees to retrospectively recall recent encounters with sexually harassing conduct, usually from a victim's perspective; Chapter 2 of the 2018 NASEM report provides a detailed overview of these methods. There are many advantages to this approach. For instance, with assurances of anonymity or confidentiality, self-administered surveys make it possible for workers to feel comfortable detailing experiences of workplace wrongdoing (including criminal conduct, such as rape), without fearing reprisals. The quantitative nature of these surveys can yield generalizable conclusions about sexual harassment incidence and impact. Self-report methodology, more generally, allows researchers to capture employee experiences more authentically, without being

filtered through the eyes of their supervisors, coworkers, or others who might never have faced harassment first-hand. Still, the science of sexual harassment would benefit from greater diversity in method.

Thus far, qualitative methods have been uncommon in psychological studies of sexual harassment. Qualitative data—revolving around words and images rather than numbers—can be collected using various techniques, from focus groups to observations to archival document coding to social media analytics. Moving beyond constraints imposed by close-ended quantitative measures, qualitative methods allow research participants to offer insights and solutions informed by their own lived experiences. For example, Tinkler (2012) conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews to investigate why employees support sexual harassment laws but resist their enforcement, a paradox observed in training settings. She traced this resistance to sexual harassment training content; with a focus on sexual harassment laws, trainings tend to stoke gender stereotypes and provoke resistance to changes that may threaten the gender status quo.⁶

We also encourage more experimental studies of sexual harassment. However, we do not advocate experimental analog methods, which ask participants to read vignettes of sexually harassing situations and predict how they might respond. How people imagine they would feel or react if sexually harassed bears little resemblance to how real victims respond in real life. Illustrating this, Woodzicka & LaFrance (2001) found a majority of women predicting an angry and defiant response if posed sexually harassing questions in interview settings. When asked such questions during an actual job interview, however, women instead became fearful and compliant. In short, experimental analog methods provide limited utility in the study of sexual harassment response. More fruitful possibilities lie in simulation or provocation of harassing behavior in the laboratory. There are ethical limits to such experiments, but they are possible (for examples, see Maass et al. 2003, Pryor et al. 1993, Schneider et al. 2001, Siebler et al. 2008). Experimental designs can also be useful in the evaluation of antiharassment trainings (Perry et al. 1998, Tinkler 2013). As noted above, such evaluations should become the norm rather than the exception, before any training is rolled out on a large scale.

Finally, we note that new insights would emerge if more data were gathered from people other than victims: perpetrators, observers, supervisors, human resources personnel, and union representatives (to name a few). Empirical studies of perpetrators are relatively rare in this domain, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Maass et al. 2003, Patel et al. 2017, Pryor et al. 1993). This leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, what motivates people to engage in the most common form of sexual harassment—gender harassment? Which witnesses intervene when they see or hear an expression of sexism, under what circumstances, and why? Are there organizational interventions that increase the chance that managers will step in to correct harassing conduct? And how do union bosses approach sexual harassment claims by some (mostly female) members against other (mostly male) members? Questions such as these foreground perspectives beyond the individual victim. Not only does this provide a more complete picture of sexual harassment, but it might also help dispel misguided notions that it is the responsibility of the victim to manage sexual harassment in organizations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Recent years have witnessed incredible strides in the scientific study of sexual harassment. We have learned a great deal about the forms it takes (primarily gender harassment) and the harms

⁶For practical advice on implementing qualitative research methods, we refer readers to Braun & Clarke's (2013) acclaimed text, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*.

that follow (undermining many domains of work and well-being). We also have a sense of what elevates or attenuates the risk that sexual harassment will transpire (organizational climate and culture being especially powerful). Where we are falling short is in attention to marginalized populations (such as precarious workers) and in translation from science to practice (moving from comprehending the problem to combatting it).

In contemporary organizations, the antiharassment machinery (e.g., sexual harassment training, policy, penalty for policy violation) typically focuses on the most sexually and physically violent acts of abuse. This focus is absolutely necessary, but altogether insufficient. It misses most of the iceberg portrayed in **Figure 1**. Although following the letter of the law, these interventions frequently fail to address climate or culture—the most potent predictors of sexual harassment. We know from research that, more often than not, sexual harassment is a put-down not a come-on. What remains unknown is how to prevent those put-downs. How do we combat the many slights and indignities that combine to relegate women (especially women of color) to the margins of organizational life? How can we transform our institutional cultures to be more respectful, to be more hospitable, and to treat all workers with dignity, no matter their gender, race, sexuality, weight, immigration status, or other dimension of difference? If we can figure out answers to questions such as these, we might begin to move the needle on sexual harassment in the workplace.

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Errata

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* articles may be found at <http://www.annualreviews.org/errata/orgpsych>