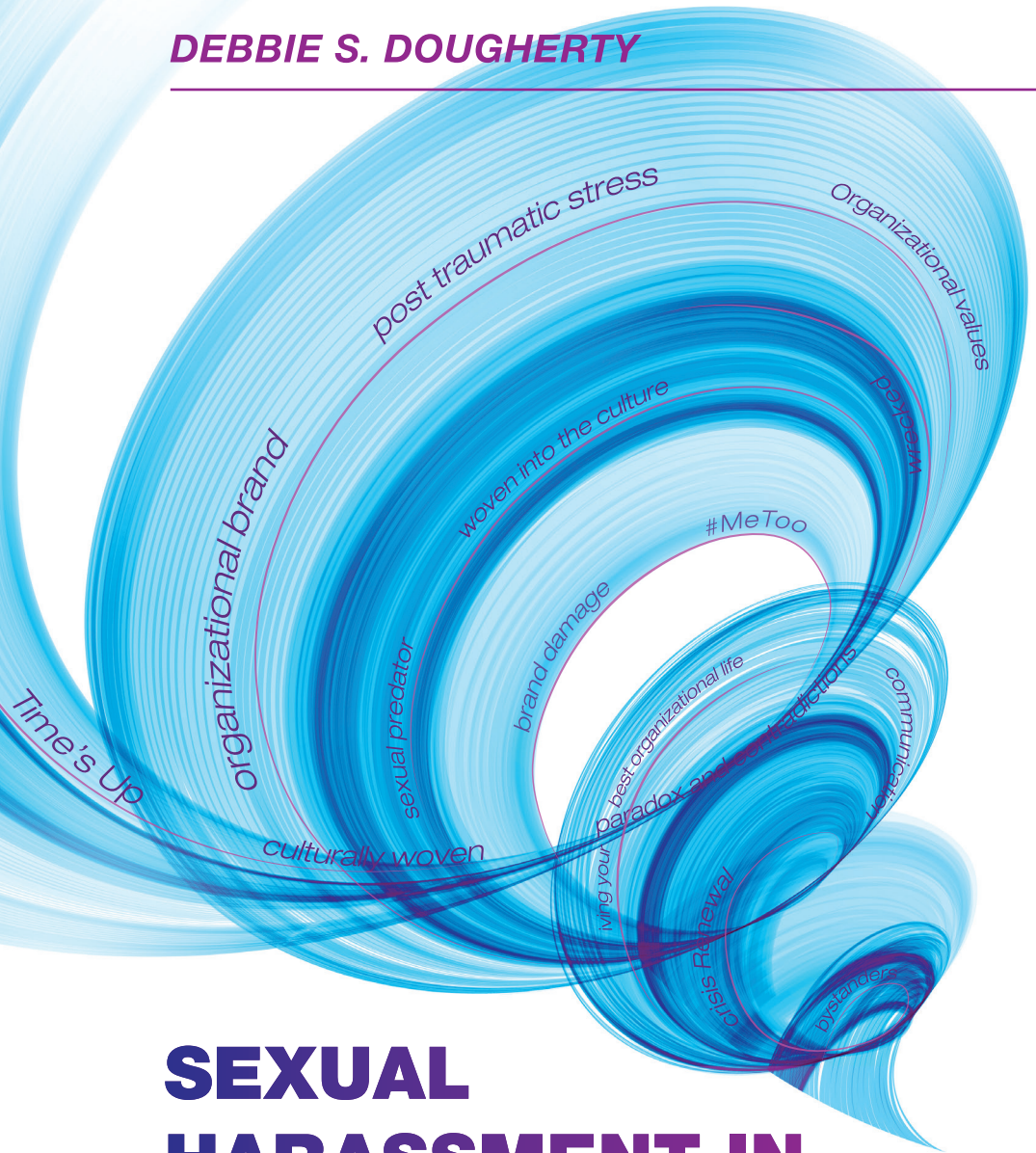


DEBBIE S. DOUGHERTY



SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

*A Transformative
Approach*

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

A Transformative Approach

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Debbie S. Dougherty (PhD, University of Nebraska, 2000) is a professor of communication at the University of Missouri. For more than 20 years, she has been one of the premier scholars studying sexual harassment, with publications in places such as *Harvard Business Review*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Communication*, *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, and *Sex Roles*. She has also provided training and development

on sexual harassment and culture in a number of organizations, including the National Park Service, the U.S. Army, and the University of Southern California, among others. She has been extensively utilized as a resource for news sources, such as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, and *The Oprah Magazine*. Dougherty's work as a scholar and consultant has earned her a number of awards, including the NCA Applied Communication Scholar Award, The Jack Kay Award for Engaged Research, the *Management Communication Quarterly* Article of the Year Award, the Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award, the Excellence in Education Award, and the Gold Chalk Award for graduate student mentoring.

In addition to her work as a scholar and consultant, Dougherty lives on a sheep farm with her family and enjoys reading science fiction and doing home renovations.

INTRODUCTION

This book is centered on a long-running problem that has vexed organizations across time: Why can't we prevent sexual harassment that has damaged individuals, organizational teams, organizations, and their larger constituents? Millions of dollars have been poured into solving this problem, yet, as the #MeToo movement made clear, sexual harassment continues to be a destructive force in organizational settings. Why is this? I have spent my career as a scholar, educator, and organizational consultant trying to address this problem. This book is the outcome of that work.

Current solutions to sexual harassment tend to be overly simplistic and overly optimistic. We all want a fast and easy solution to this problem, right? A cursory understanding of the problem does suggest easy, linear solutions: Create a policy. Create training. Create clear reporting structures. If sexual harassment was simply a structural problem, these solutions would have solved it by now. Sexual harassment is not simple. It is not simply structural. It is not just a misunderstanding. Instead, it is complicated. It is woven into the very fabric of many organizational cultures, making it difficult to recognize and even more difficult to manage.

To effectively address sexual harassment, you need to have a complex understanding of organizations. In this book, I not only describe what sexual harassment is, I also walk you through a transformational model of organizational culture (Trans-MOC) that will help you understand how sexual harassment is woven into organizational culture through communication. This model is unique in that it focuses not only on how organizational cultures are created, but also on how those cultures can be transformed through careful and thoughtful communication. I am well aware that this perspective goes against much of the prevailing dogma about organizational culture as fixed and unchangeable. My work suggests otherwise, and I will walk you through how cultural evolution can occur.

This book was written for organizational change agents and aspiring change agents who are serious about addressing sexual harassment. As such, this book will be useful in a variety of contexts, including as a classroom textbook, as a coaching guide, or as a leadership toolkit for

understanding and addressing problems that are woven into an organizational culture. In particular, this book is for those people who care deeply about creating a better, more just, and humane organization.

Unique Features

I was asked to write this book because of my experience combining research, teaching, training, and consulting. There are several unique features that make this book special. First, this book takes an interdisciplinary approach to addressing sexual harassment. Although I am an organizational communication scholar, I draw in theories and research from an array of fields, such as communication, sociology, psychology, gender studies, management, nursing, and health. As such, this is truly an interdisciplinary project that both draws from and contributes to a number of different fields.

Second, I was asked to write a textbook, and I have taken that charge seriously. As a result, you will find a succinct discussion of topics that can help build knowledge beyond simply understanding sexual harassment. For example, in Chapter 2, I articulate the various functions of communication. I also provide an overview of organizational communication. In Chapter 3, I describe three foundational theories of organizational culture. From there, in Chapter 4, I show how the transformational model of organizational culture was formed from this historical base. While this material focuses on culturally woven sexual harassment, it can serve as the foundation for managing other wicked problems in organizations.

The third and maybe most unique feature of this book is that I center an organizational problem and then present theories and research that will help the reader understand that problem. In my experience, textbooks are usually focused on a scholarly area instead of an organizational problem. For example, an organizational communication textbook will provide theories of organizational communication. A gender studies textbook will provide theories of gender and maybe theories of sexuality. This book is different because I start with a problem and then carefully select material that sheds light on that problem.

Finally, this book has a practical application. Regardless of what domain I am working in, people want solutions. My undergraduate students constantly ask how they can use academic knowledge in their daily lives. My graduate students want to know how they can use knowledge to not only build their own research, but to help organizations solve problems. My clients want to know how to prevent or stop sexual harassment from

occurring in their organizations. This book shows how to apply knowledge to address a big social problem.

Pedagogical Highlights

The overarching pedagogical structure of this book builds on a three-tiered learning process of discovery, skill development, and organizational engagement. Discovery is the way we actively engage with knowledge to learn about and understand our world. Skill building is developing capacity to intervene in an organizational culture. Engagement is planning and executing organizational interventions. These three processes are most effective when they are intertwined. I use three pedagogical strategies to make this happen.

Think About It Boxes

Think About It boxes ask readers to absorb information in a physically engaged way. Most of these boxes are composed of activities I have done either in my classroom or during training, speaking engagements, or consulting activities. The goal is to have the reader interact with the information in each chapter. Each Think About It box includes three to five discussion questions that are designed to help the reader in discovery, skill development, and/or organizational engagement. For example, in Think About It 9.1, I present one of the training documents that I use to help organizational members discover, build skills around, and engage with their organization's espoused, enacted, and aspirational values.

Visual Features

Because learning happens best when multiple senses are engaged, I provide numerous visual representations of important concepts and ideas. Some visual representations are pictures, such as the picture of weeds in my garden in Chapter 4 (Think About It 4.3). These images help readers create mental connections, which should both enhance learning and increase connections between ideas. Other visual representations include graphs and figures that are designed to help readers mentally map the processes being discussed. These graphs and figures can be for smaller processes, such as the linear model of sexual harassment in Chapter 1 (Figure 1.1). The figures can also be larger process models, with

the most important process model being the transformational model of organizational culture (Trans-MOC), which is used to visually represent cultural transformation, starting in Chapter 4 (Figure 4.2) and continuing all the way through Chapter 9 (Figure 9.2).

Real-World Examples

I use copious real-world stories and examples throughout the book to help the reader understand how sexual harassment is created through communication and woven into organizational cultures. Some of these examples are very personal, such as the story I tell in Chapter 5 about a perplexing interaction my oldest daughter and I had with stranger in a shopping mall, to illustrate the power of binary logics underlying culture. Some examples are from the media, such as the stories from a number of media outlets that describe Larry Nassar’s “God-like” status in gymnastics. Many examples come from my research, such as the story in Chapter 8 from a study participant who told me about her boss, who came up behind her at a party, pushed her against a wall, and grabbed her butt. Despite the clear-cut sexual harassment of this experience, this woman insisted that her boss was flirting because “it happens all the time.” These stories are featured throughout the book and provide a visceral connection between the information presented and its real-world impact.

Ancillary Materials

Instructor resources are available to adopting instructors. For more information on these materials and about adopting this textbook for your classroom, please contact adopt@cognella.com. In the meantime, feel free to take a look at my website, <https://www.debbiedougherty.com/>

Acknowledgments

I need to acknowledge the contributions of a number of people. First, Todd Armstrong, my editor at Cognella, has been an essential source of support. This book was written during a pandemic. Through all of the trauma and challenges that come with doing academic work while caring for both an elderly parent and minor children, my editor has cheered me on, understood my delays, welcomed my changes, and been understanding

of my forgetfulness. I am grateful to him for not giving up on me when my 1-year deadline to complete the book became 18 months, then 2 years, and finally, 2.5 years. He is an excellent editor and I recommend him to others seeking to write a book.

I also want to acknowledge the unflagging support from my family. They remain supportive of me, despite all of the talking I have done the last few years about sexual harassment, equity in the workplace, writing books, and the challenges of growing a garden (a metaphor that becomes important later in this book!). My youngest child, Freya, has informed all of her friends that I am “the best Mom ever,” which is a ringing endorsement from a 10-year-old. My husband has encouraged me to go on a number of writing retreats over the last several months so that I can focus just on my writing. I am blessed, no question about it.

My students, both graduate and undergraduate, also need to be recognized. They have listened to me talk about the Trans-MOC model and provided delicate wisdoms that have made this book better. They have read and loved various early chapters of this book, giving me confidence in the work that I am doing. A special shout out to Tyler Sorg for putting his confidence in the Trans-MOC model as a grounding theory for his dissertation project.

I cannot tell you how much I appreciate my colleagues for their absolute confidence in my ability to finish this project. I am surrounded by really smart, good people who push me to think and write with both care and joy.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my clients, who have entrusted me with their organizations’ well-being. My clients’ willingness to reach beyond the obvious, to trust me, and yet to also push me to do better, has enriched my lifeworld and has helped me be a better teacher, scholar, and organizational change agent.

WEB-BASED RESOURCES: ACCESSING QR CODES AND LINKS

The author has selected some supporting web-based content for further engagement with the learning material that appears in this text, which can be accessed through QR codes or web links. These codes are intended for use by those who have purchased print copies of the book. You may scan them using a QR code reading app on your cell phone, which will take you to each website. You can also search for the link using a web browser search engine. Readers who have purchased a digital copy of the book can simply click on the hyperlinks beneath each QR code.

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Please check with your professor to confirm whether your class will access this content independently or collectively.



Chapter 1

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

An Overview of the Problem

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Understand sexual harassment as an important problem.
2. Distinguish between acute sexual harassment and predatory sexual harassment.
3. Understand how sexual harassment has traditionally been addressed and how that approach has failed.

- Google
- The National Park Service
- University of Southern California
- Fox News
- National Public Radio
- European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)
- The Weinstein Corporation
- The Iowa State Senate
- Penn State
- Michigan State

- Uber
- Presentation High School
- McDonalds
- The U.S. Army
- The U.S. Navy
- The German Military
- U.S. Congress
- The United Nations
- The Catholic Church
- A Madrassa (Islamic School) in Bangladesh
- United Kingdom Parliament
- European Parliament
- So many more...

These organizations are diverse, representing different sectors, different functions, different nationalities, and different goals. What do these organizations have in common? They have all been in the news in recent years due to reported problems with *predatory sexual harassment* that appears to have become woven into their organizational culture. All organizations are likely subject to the occasional incident of sexual harassment. This behavior is disruptive and painful and, if addressed quickly, can be stopped. For many organizations, however, predatory sexual harassment is not an occasional behavior. Instead, it is hidden and nourished within an organizational culture that has gone rogue, at least when it comes to unwanted sexual attention. It has become predatory and has singular destructive capacity. It is this entrenched problem that this book addresses.

Predatory sexual harassment is nurtured in an organizational culture that has gone rogue.

I first felt compelled to study sexual harassment in 1991 as I watched the televised inquisition of Anita Hill, a woman who accused then–Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment. I was both angry and perplexed as I watched U.S. senators attempt to shred

this woman's reputation. What would cause these highly respected men to treat this woman as if she were weak, immoral, a liar, and emotionally unstable? Listening to conversations around me, I realized that others viewed Anita Hill through a similar lens. Yet, as I watched Anita Hill, it was clear to me that she was, in fact, strong, honest, ethical, and emotionally stable. These conversations about Dr. Hill, by people with no real knowledge about the event or the people involved, were given an extraordinary amount of social power. It was the people who were not present during the harassment, but who had much to say about the behavior—the people in the background—who drew my attention. It was clear that they had uncharted power that I needed to better understand.

As a result, my research over the last 20 years has focused not just on targets and harassers, but also on those who are in the background of the organization—the bystanders and coworkers who use their words and other symbols to create the meaning of sexual harassment. Communication scholars have long articulated the clear relationship between sexual harassment and organizational culture (e.g., Dougherty, 2001a; Dougherty & Sorg, 2020; Keyton et al., 2001, 2018). I have built on this body of work to create a cultural approach to managing sexual harassment, which I have presented through consulting, training, workshops, and speeches around the world. I have been repeatedly told by my clients that my unique approach to entrenched organizational problems gives them hope that they can finally create productive change in their organizations. It is this body of work that I present for you in this book.

I begin by introducing sexual harassment and its more insidious offspring, predatory sexual harassment. I describe the destructive capacity of predatory sexual harassment. I then share how the problem has been conceptualized over time, as well as why this conceptualization has failed to produce useful outcomes.

Sexual Harassment—A Big Problem

Sexual harassment is not a new problem, nor is it a Western problem. It is a global problem that causes widespread damages. In his book *The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace, 1600 to 1993*, historian Kerry Segrave (1994) documents sexual harassment in the workplace worldwide. Segrave reports, for example, that women serfs, indentured servants, and slaves were regularly raped by their “masters,” impregnated, and then punished with extra servitude to the masters who raped them.

Segrave identifies similar practices in the United States, England, France, Australia, Russia, and India. During the industrial revolution, Segrave provides evidence of sexual harassment as an historical problem in Pakistan, Venezuela, Peru, Malaysia, South Africa, El Salvador, Canada, Mexico, and so on. In this meticulously researched book, Segrave both identifies specific instances and provides evidence that these instances represent a much larger problem with sexual harassment. In my own research undertaken to write this book, I discovered reports of sexual harassment in six continents and numerous countries that have been documented in the last 10 years. The Catalyst organization's (2018) international research on sexual harassment illustrates the intercontinental nature of sexual harassment, finding that in Canada, 43% of women and 12% of men have experienced sexual harassment. In the European Union, 40% to 50% of women reported being targeted with sexual harassment. In India, although the overall numbers are not available, there were 444 complaints filed against the 79 largest companies. In the United States, where sexual harassment has been illegal since the 1960s, only 25% of people who are targeted report sexual harassment due to the fear of backlash and retaliation (Catalyst, 2018). In some countries, women who report sexual harassment are killed or jailed. In most countries, women who are targeted are labeled as immoral by both the legal system and by society at large (Segrave, 1994).

"Nusrat Jahan Rafi was doused with kerosene and set on fire at her school in Bangladesh. Less than two weeks earlier, she had filed a sexual harassment complaint against her headmaster." (Mir Sabbir, BBC Bengali, 2019)

Sexual Harassment Defined

Sexual harassment is defined differently in different countries, with different legal implications. In England, for example, sexual harassment is illegal because it is a threat to human dignity. As a result, all harassment, from street harassment to workplace harassment, could be treated as illegal behavior. In the United States, workplace sexual harassment is treated differently under the law because it places an economic burden on the targets of the behavior (Hogler et al., 2002). For example, people who are harassed are more likely to lose their employment, be unable to

secure promotion, have their wages threatened, and experience high levels of physical and psychological health issues that make it difficult for them to continue to work. As a result, the United States defines sexual harassment as follows: “Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual’s employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment” (EEOC Fact Sheet, 2009).

The U.S. courts have recognized two types of sexual harassment. According to Catherine MacKinnon (1979), the first type, **quid pro quo**, translates to “this for that” and represents a direct exchange of sex for rewards, or the withholding of rewards (e.g., promotions, raises, etc.) when sex is withheld. The second type, **hostile environment sexual harassment**, is by far the most common form and is a key means through which sexual harassment becomes woven into an organizational culture. An organization is considered to have a hostile environment if the sexual harassment is pervasive or intense. A third type of sexual harassment is not routinely recognized by the courts, but is very real, nonetheless. **Third-party sexual harassment** occurs when a person who is not the target is negatively impacted by the behavior—such as by not getting a promotion that was given to a target due to compliance with quid pro quo harassment.

Because of laws and litigation, corporations and other organizations “became suddenly attentive when court rulings established their legal and financial liability” (Wood, 1992, p. 351). As a result, our society has gone from a time when predatory sexual harassment was viewed as normal, and even as romantic (Wood, 1992), to a time when the #MeToo movement rocked not only U.S. cultures, but also had an important international impact. These outcomes are consistent with Justine Tinkler’s (2008) argument that laws change how we think about behaviors over time. Yet, despite the ongoing legal efforts to stop sexual harassment, the behavior continues to be a destructive process in contemporary organizations.

Researchers, lawyers, and practitioners owe much of our knowledge to research and theorizing by Catherine MacKinnon. I can only imagine the loneliness and isolation that must have accompanied her work in the 1970s, when most people did not want to acknowledge that sexual harassment was a problem.

Predatory Sexual Harassment

Not only am I a scholar and a consultant, I am also a farmer. My family raises sheep. One of the things you learn quickly as a sheep farmer is that sheep get sick. A lot. As the designated sheep medical practitioner in the family, I have learned a lot about different types of illnesses. None of them are good, but the infections I dread the most are from *anaerobic bacteria*. Unlike most bacteria, which need oxygen to grow and develop, anaerobic bacteria thrives in dark spaces without oxygen. **Predatory sexual harassment** is the anaerobic bacteria of organizational life: It is persistent and normalized in the organization; it is diffused across the workplace with multiple targets; it is organizationally supported; and it operates in a field of carefully crafted silence.

Predatory sexual harassment is the anaerobic bacteria of organizational life.

Not all sexual harassment rises to the level of predatory sexual harassment. For example, some years back, my aunt, who was a schoolteacher, told me about a man who called her “honey” in a meeting. She felt that this was sexual harassment and that it was inappropriate. Although I am not sure if it rises to the level of sexual harassment, it is clearly gendered language that is disdainful in content and intent. I called her back a few months later to see how this situation had evolved after she confronted her colleague. She told me that he had not repeated the behavior. This is the ideal outcome of a sexual harassment complaint. Person A acts. Person B complains. Person A stops the behavior. This is what one would expect from a healthy organizational culture. I call this type of incident **acute harassment**. It is not predatory and it is not the type of behavior I will discuss in this book. What makes this different from predatory sexual harassment? First, it is neither persistent nor normal in this organization. Second, it did not escalate over time. Third, the behavior was not supported by the organization. For example, my aunt did not feel compelled to remain silent in the face of this behavior. As a result, the behavior by this man was irritating, but it was not destructive. In contrast, predatory sexual harassment *persists, escalates, is normalized, silences the targets, and is incredibly destructive*, not only to the targets, but to the team and to the organization as well.

Destructive Outcomes of Predatory Sexual Harassment

There are thousands of studies that have confirmed the disastrous outcomes from sexual harassment. These outcomes include negative impacts on the target of sexual harassment, on team members and colleagues, on organizational stakeholders, and on the organization. This destruction crosses generations and organizational forms. Researchers describe negative consequences beginning in elementary school (Hlavka, 2014) and continuing as workers age (Ohse & Stockdale, 2008). In short, sexual harassment is really bad on every level and for every person it touches.

The reality is that the research is so overwhelming, that it was psychologically challenging for me to comb through it to find the studies that will help you understand the depth and breadth of the problem. To illustrate the destruction wrought by sexual harassment, I focus on harms experienced by the targets of harassment, organizational teams, the organization, and on external organizational stakeholders.

Individuals Who Are Targeted

The most well-documented damage from sexual harassment is at the level of the target. The negative outcomes include chronic mental health conditions, lowered life satisfaction, damaged identity, feelings of isolation, lowered job performance and commitment, and physical illness that occurs with prolonged stress (Chan et al., 2008). Perhaps the most clearly documented outcome to the target of sexual harassment is **post-traumatic stress disorder** (PTSD) (Lawson et al., 2013; Palmieri & Fitzgerald, 2005; Stockdale et al., 2009). Although PTSD is most commonly associated with soldiers who have been to war and with victims of violent crimes, unwanted sexual attention not only amplifies trauma among military veterans (Roberge et al., 2019), but is a distinct cause of PTSD (Stockdale et al., 2009). The American Psychiatric Association defines PTSD as “a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault” (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). This condition is not only produced through a single traumatic event, but can also come from repeated exposure to a trauma over time. The common outcomes of PTSD include lower life expectancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and physical symptoms such as increased blood pressure and chronic pain. You might ask, how is it possible that a target of sexual harassment can experience the same symptoms and outcomes as a soldier who has been to war? I believe that most people think of sexual harassment as a one-time action that is relatively harmless, like my aunt who was called “honey” by

a male coworker. Instead, it is more realistic to think of predatory sexual harassment as small behaviors that escalate over time (Knapp et al., 2019), leaving targets in constant fear for their safety and wellbeing. Take, for example, Anna's experience with sexual harassment. Anna, a participant in one of my studies, was a surgical technician at a large hospital in the Midwest:

I had a [medical colleague] here. He was a very nice man. I always thought of him as a big teddy bear. And he was always nice and friendly to everybody. And one day I started working evenings, and there are very few people in surgery in the evening. And so you find yourself alone in hallways. He was very large man. And um, he started getting touchy-feely with me. And I thought, "I don't like this. I don't like this." I was terrified and I didn't say anything to him. I was scrubbing for a case and I couldn't do anything. You know, your hands are supposed to be sterile and you can't do anything. And he came up behind me, put his arms around me, and I was just, "oh my gosh." And he started kissing my neck. I turned and looked at the desk, and there were people sitting at the desk. I mean, they didn't think anything of it. And I'm going [to the people at the desk] "excuse me," you know, "hello." Trying to do everything I could to get out of that situation, because I was terrified. And I ended up just going into the room where he was going to be coming anyway. I went in there and did the surgery and later went to my sister-in-law and said, "What do I do?" I mean, this guy scared the piss out of me. And I'm going to be working evenings. He's going to be there. What if he catches me down the hall where nobody's at? He's a large man, he could take me in a heartbeat.

Anna, like most women I have spoken to over the years, viewed herself as strong and tough. She was confident that, if she was targeted, she would respond swiftly and strongly to the behavior. When it happened to her, she was caught by surprise, perhaps because the behavior had escalated over time and because she had made a decision to trust this "teddy bear" coworker. When her trust was violated, she experienced immediate and long-term fear that this man would hurt her and there was nothing she could do to stop him. Note her language. Anna was not just afraid. She was "terrified." Researchers would label Anna's reaction as *psychological distress* (Chan et al., 2008). This label may be clinically accurate, but I believe it obscures the intensity of Anna's lived experience as a target of sexual harassment.

The destructive impact of sexual harassment is *cumulative and circular*. What I mean by this is that the more frequent and intense the sexual harassment, the more damage experienced by the target (Roberge et al.,

2019). In addition, the outcomes of sexual harassment make targets more vulnerable to being targeted (Ford & Ivancic, 2020). For example, in college students, sexual harassment produces depression. Depression is a risk factor for sexual harassment, making these students at higher risk for future incidents of sexual harassment (Wolff et al., 2017). In addition, sexual harassment tends to isolate those who are targeted from their coworkers. Isolation is a risk factor for sexual harassment, meaning targets who experience isolation in their workplace are more vulnerable to being targeted, once again, with sexual harassment. Sexual harassment that is woven into the cultural fabric of the organization, such as that listed above, will produce more long-term negative impacts than sexual harassment that is occasional and incidental.

Organizational Teams and Third Parties

There is less written about the destruction done to a team or other colleague groups. However, the work that has been done is convincing. Theresa Glomb and colleagues (1997) call this type of harm **ambient sexual harassment**, predicting that the impact goes beyond the targeted employee. For example, women observers of gender aggression toward men, such as when colleagues challenge a man's heterosexuality by calling him "gay," experienced increased levels of anger and fear. Increased levels of anger led to a host of negative psychological, physical, and organizational outcomes (Dionisi & Barling, 2018).

Destructive outcomes occur to colleagues in general (Glomb et al., 1997), but also to teams. Raver and Gelfand (2005) discovered that ambient sexual harassment was associated with increased team conflict and decreased team cohesion. This relationship between ambient sexual harassment and team conflict and cohesions ultimately led to decreased financial capacity. In other words, sexual harassment is associated with the decreased fiscal viability of an organization. When one person is targeted, research suggests that the productivity of the entire team is reduced by as much as \$22,500 per person, per team (Willness et al., 2007).

Organizations

There are also documented impacts at the organizational level. Targets experience lower job satisfaction and commitment, reduced productivity, job withdrawal/stress, and an increased likelihood that they will leave the workplace (Chan et al., 2008). Many of these impacts are hidden costs that organizations may recognize as a problem, but do not recognize as direct damage from sexual harassment. One quantifiable outcome of sexual harassment is in employee turnover. Targets of harassment are nearly

seven times as likely to change jobs as employees who have not been targeted (McLaughlin et al., 2017). The cost of hiring and training new workers is 16% to 20% of their annual salary. The cost rises to 213% if it is a manager being replaced (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). In case you are wondering, these negative impacts are far larger for sexual harassment than for other forms of workplace aggression (Dionisi et al., 2012).

If the harassment escalates to the level of a lawsuit, there are a number of fiscal impacts for the organization, even if the organization ultimately wins. Interestingly, it is this scenario that most organizations seem to worry about the most. Sexual harassment policies and training are typically geared toward protecting the organization from this type of damage. However, as this chapter demonstrates, given the extensive destructive impact of sexual harassment, the legal consequences may be the most unlikely and least problematic outcome of sexual harassment. The most destructive components tend to be less quantifiable.

At the organizational level, the least quantifiable but likely the most destructive outcome is to the organizational brand. An **organizational brand** represents the texture of how an organization is recognized by its stakeholders. An organizational brand includes emotional, moral, and product factors that constitute how we think, feel, and talk about an organization. For organizational stakeholders, a brand IS the organization. When a brand becomes tainted, for stakeholders, the entire organization is tainted. Sexual harassment emotionally, morally, and physically taints an entire organization. In one study exploring brand damage due to sexual harassment, it was discovered that not only does sexual harassment negatively impact brand attitude and image, but it also impacts people's willingness to work for an organization tainted by it (Sierra et al., 2008). The significant and direct negative effects found for each of these relationships offers preliminary evidence that sexual harassment undermines brand development and recruiting. Hence, firms seeking to grow their brand's value and hire effective employees must be equipped to prevent and solve their sexual harassment quandaries (Sierra et al., 2008, p. 186).

Probably the most well-known illustration of brand damage is the Weinstein Corporation, whose founder, Harvey Weinstein, targeted numerous aspiring women actors. Prior to the public exposure of his behavior, the Weinstein Corporation was a very successful production company. Due to the harassment, it no longer exists. The Weinstein brand is now closely tied to predatory sexual behavior.

Organizational Stakeholders

It should be clear by now that the ramifications of sexual harassment extend far beyond the target person. At the larger stakeholder level, ever since the advent of the #MeToo movement, shareholders have been actively filing lawsuits against corporations for things like “breach of fiduciary duties” and violation of “federal securities law.” In short, these stakeholders recognize that organizations have a responsibility to their shareholders and that sexual harassment violates that responsibility (Hemel & Lund, 2018). Beyond this sort of impact, however, is a deeper and more personal level of damage that can occur as a risk of sexual harassment.

Think About It 1.1 The U.S. Army, Trust, and Recruitment

In April of 2020, SPC Vanessa Guillén, an Army soldier at Fort Hood, a beloved daughter and sister, was abducted and murdered by a male coworker. She disappeared in the middle of a workday, never to be seen alive again. To understand her abduction and murder, you need to consider the larger context within which this event occurred.

In 2019, Vanessa was targeted twice by her supervisor with what seems to me to be clear violations of sexual harassment policy. First, she was asked to engage in a three-person sexual encounter by her then-supervisor. Later that same year, the same supervisor watched her as she went to the bathroom. Both times SPC Guillén reported the supervisor up the chain of command. Another woman soldier also reported the same supervisor. Leadership did not pursue an investigation of the sexual harassment, allowing a “toxic leader” to remain in a position of authority (Fort Hood AR 15-6 Investigation Executive Summary, 2021).

In 2020, Army SPC Aaron Robinson reportedly kidnapped and killed SPC Guillén. What do we know about this predator? We know that he was previously reported for sexually harassing another woman soldier. We know he kidnapped and murdered SPC Guillén. We know that she never reported him for sexual harassment. Why would she? More specifically, why would Guillén trust the Army to protect her after its failure to follow its own policies and procedures?

The Army leadership think a lot about their values and goals. Their ultimate goal is to be ready for war at all times. They have identified trust as the key to readiness. For example, then–Army Chief of Staff, General Mark A. Miley, publicly stated,

[Readiness] is the very essence of Mission command and it’s all built upon that single word that’s in the doctrine, the bedrock of the Army Ethic, which is trust. I trust that you will achieve the purpose and you will do it ethically and legally and morally ... and that takes an immense off-the-charts level of character.

“Trust” is such a core component of the Army’s training that it appears numerous times in multiple outlets. For example, the word “trust” is listed 198 times in the

ADRP 1: The Army Profession (2015), which is one of the Army's foundational reference manuals. For the Army, trust is a big deal.

How might sexual harassment impact trust in the U.S. Army?

Discussion Questions

1. We know that brand damage due to sexual harassment can cause people to avoid working for an organization. What happens to readiness when well-suited individuals avoid the military because of the taint associated with the Army brand?
2. We know that sexual harassment damages teams. What happens to readiness when Army teams do not trust each other due to predatory sexual harassment?
3. We know that sexual harassment causes PTSD. What happens to readiness when soldiers who already have PTSD due to predatory sexual harassment are sent to war?
4. We know that sexual harassment infects the atmosphere of the organization. How does this atmosphere impact the trust of those people the Army is supposed to protect?

Take health care, for example. One common emotional response to sexual harassment is fear, not just by the target of the behavior (Dougherty, 1999), but among the larger group (Dionisi & Barling, 2018). Sexual harassment is very common in health care, especially as directed toward women nurses (Vargas et al., 2020). Harassment in this context comes from both coworkers and patients. This harassment leads to reduced patient care (McGuire et al., 2006) and to increased destructive stereotyping of patients by nurses (Dougherty et al., 2011). For example, nurses labeled patients who harassed them as *biker guys* and *little old men*. To me, the little old men stereotype is perhaps the most useful example of potential harm. The nurses in this study explained to me that men who harassed them were usually older men who were not fully mentally present, kind of like children. In this version of reality, these “little old men” could not help themselves from grabbing a breast or pinching a rear end. I asked these nurses to describe these little old men and found that the age range varied dramatically, with the youngest “little old man” being about 17 years old. What are the implications of the “little old man” stereotype? If nurses believe a patient is mentally incapacitated then they will be unlikely to treat them as mature adults who are able to make good decisions for themselves. They are likely to treat them as children, which can negatively reduce the dignity of patients who are already in a vulnerable position.

Think About It 1.2 Impact on Patient Care

Let's return to Anna's example (earlier). Anna was a surgical technician who was scrubbing for a case when a large male coworker came up from behind, grabbed her, and started kissing her neck. She tried to get the attention of workplace bystanders, but they acted like this was acceptable behavior.

Now imagine that this is you. Raise your hands in the air and touch nothing. After all, you have just scrubbed in for surgery, which means that you are sterile and ready to work. Keep your hands up, no matter what happens. There is a vulnerability to being in this position. In fact, I suspect that most readers did not put their hands up, or only put them up part way. Why do you think that is?

So your hands are in the air and a large male assaults you and will not stop. He is grabbing your breasts, kissing your neck. Your heart starts beating faster. The physiological need for fight or flight sets in. You flee into the surgical room. You are terrified. What happens to your body when you are terrified? For most people, the aftermath of terror is physical shaking. Let's assume for a moment that this surgical technician is shaking. She is about to assist with surgery.

Discussion Questions

1. What could go wrong?
2. Would you want to be the patient in that room, at that moment, with that surgical team?
3. How might this type of impact translate to other forms of organization, such as schools or the military?

Traditional Approaches to Managing Sexual Harassment

So far in this chapter I have provided the definition of sexual harassment, discussed the extent of the problem, and outlined the extensive damage done by sexual harassment at the individual, team, organization, and external stakeholder level. I now turn to a discussion of the traditional ways in which sexual harassment has been addressed in organizations. I think it is fair, however, to premise this section with the recognition that these traditional approaches have been a categorical failure. They do not stop, prevent, or provide a particularly effective intervention for sexual harassment. As you read the next section, you should be able to identify at least two reasons for this failure. First, traditional approaches treat sexual harassment as a simple problem that occurs between two people. However, although sexual

Traditional approaches to managing sexual harassment fail due to practitioners' tendency to oversimplify both sexual harassment and communication.

harassment may be enacted by two people, the problem itself exists at the cultural level of the organization.

Second, the traditional approach treats communication in simplistic ways. Although there are at least four forms of communication (provision of information, message production, communication as performance, and the construction of meaning—all of which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2), the traditional approach reduces communication to the **provision of information**, the sharing of knowledge, facts, or details. In the case of predatory sexual harassment, the provision of information involves sharing what constitutes sexual harassment, how it should be reported, and the consequences of the behavior. Sharing this type of information is critically important.

The problem occurs when communication is treated ONLY as sharing information. I will discuss the multiple forms of communication in more detail in the next chapter, but for now, understand that communication as information provision is the most simplistic way of thinking about communication. As a result, an information-centric approach to managing sexual harassment oversimplifies a complex communication problem. These problems are most apparent in the traditional **linear model** of sexual harassment.

Linear Model of Sexual Harassment

Most scholars and human resource personnel view sexual harassment as an interpersonal problem that has a relatively linear trajectory. The assumption is that a perpetrator enacts unwanted sexual behavior toward a target. In this model, if things work well, then the target reports the behavior to an appropriate representative of the organization, who then investigates, and an outcome occurs. The model looks something like this (Figure 1.1):

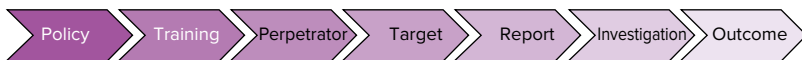


FIGURE 1.1: Linear Model of Sexual Harassment

The linear model is based on three highly simplistic assumptions about the nature of sexual harassment:

- **Assumption One:** Sexual harassment is an interpersonal problem—something that occurs between two people—a perpetrator and a target. In this model, the perpetrator is usually, but not always, male. The target is usually, but not always, female.
- **Assumption Two:** Since most organizations have sexual harassment policies, the model assumes the perpetrator/target interaction is enacted in a rule-governed space. The policy dictates how the target should report the behavior, how the reporting authority should proceed with an investigation, and the eventual consequences of the investigation.
- **Assumption Three:** Organizational training will provide the information necessary to prevent sexual harassment from occurring and provide direction for reporting and stopping the behavior when it does occur.

Communication is an unacknowledged assumption undergirding this model. Specifically, communication in this linear model is assumed to be the simple provision of information. Some experts make the language of communication explicit in their remediation models of sexual harassment, such as *the five informational domains* (Hobson et al., 2015) that can be used to evaluate organizations' sexual harassment policies and practices. Other adherents to the traditional or linear model articulate the solution to sexual harassment as simple awareness of the consequences of sexual harassment: "To prevent devastating physical and psychological injuries from occurring, employees need a legally compliant workplace sexual harassment policy to ensure that potential harassers are aware of the consequences of misbehavior and to encourage complaints if harassment does occur" (Penrod & Fusilier, 2010). These notions of "information" and making harassers "aware" are hallmarks of the assumption of communication as the provision of information. The limited assumptions about communication represent a limitation with the scholarship more broadly. The unfortunate assumption that communication is simply the provision of information is key to understanding why the linear model of addressing sexual harassment has failed to adequately manage the problem. I will now discuss each component of the linear model and

The five informational domains include having a sexual harassment policy, a complaint filing procedure, training, complaint investigation, and corrective action, which are remarkably similar to the model I present in Figure 1.1.

describe how communication as the provision of information undergirds it.

Policy

The provision of information assumption of communication can be seen in the recommendations regarding policy. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) explains that policies can help employees understand and comply with sexual harassment rules and expectations, providing a checklist of information that should be included in such policies (EEOC Checklist, n.d.). Researchers echo this expectation, arguing that sexual harassment policies

- need to be clear as to what constitutes wrongdoing,
- need to be highly visible,
- must have adequate support from management,
- must include a statement that violations will be treated seriously and promptly enforced, and
- support broader goals of gender equality (McDonald et al., 2015).

Of course, it is important for policies to specify all these things. Yet research demonstrates that having a clear policy is not adequate to stopping sexual harassment, especially if sexual harassment is woven into the fabric of the culture (Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016). Erica Kirby and Kathleen Krone's (2002) award-winning study demonstrates how organizational policies designed to create gender equity are circumvented by organizational members. Sexual harassment policies themselves tend to be reinterpreted in such a way as to reinforce organizational culture. My colleague, Marlo Goldstein Hode, and I asked organizational members at one large governmental organization to read and then talk about the sexual harassment policy (Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016). Although the policy was intended to be a clear directive as to what constitutes sexual harassment and how it should be reported, we discovered that organizational members reshaped it

during conversations such that it reinforced the culture of harassment that characterized this organization. For example, the policy clearly stated that sexual harassment was *unwanted behavior*, placing the focus on the perpetrator's behavior. Yet, organizational members reinterpreted the policy as *perceptions of behavior*. This shift in language shifted the focus away from the perpetrator of the behavior and onto the perceivers of the behavior. In addition, although the policy was written in neutral and emotion-free language, the organizational members interpreted the policy through a highly emotion-laden lens, blaming targets for perceiving behavior as sexual harassment and thereby poisoning the atmosphere of the organization. This interpretation of the policy was not the goal of the policy framers. Clearly, communication about the policy went beyond the simple provision of information.

Training

The next step in the linear model is to train organizational members about the policy. Sexual harassment training is mandated by many states. Further, although not mandated by the federal government, legal precedent is that, for organizations to protect themselves from litigation, each organization must require training about the policy (Buckner et al., 2014). Specifically, it is recommended that training indicates what constitutes sexual harassment and how it should be reported, as per the organizational policy.

Despite the reality that most organizations have implemented training, research is mixed regarding the effectiveness of that training. On one hand, the research suggests that training can be effective, such as by increasing sensitivity to sexual harassment (Buckner et al., 2014; Hunt et al., 2010). Learning outcomes appear to be similar for both online and in-person training in higher education settings (Preusser et al., 2011). In contrast, there is also evidence that sexual harassment training may actually decrease a supervisor's ability to identify sexual harassment when it occurs and has no impact on their ability to make judgments about appropriate actions to take (Buckner et al., 2014). Although sexual harassment training does provide information about the contents of sexual harassment policy, current iterations fail to address the complex communication environment within which sexual harassment occurs.

Perpetrator

Most perpetrators of sexual harassment are men. I get a lot of pushback from this statement, so I wanted to address it early in this book and with a certain firmness. Why is the perpetrator usually male? Because sexual

harassment is not about sex. It is about power. Historically, men have gained power through **aggressive heterosexuality**, the forceful demonstration by men that they are heterosexual by aggressively sexualizing women (Dougherty, 2006; Rich et al., 2012). Women do not historically gain power through similar enactments (Dougherty, 2006). I am not making a claim that women are somehow superior to men, nor am I making a claim that all men are perpetrators. However, in the context of sexual harassment and predatory sexual behavior, men are usually the perpetrators (McDonald, 2012).

When utilizing an information definition of communication, it is assumed that providing the perpetrator with information will stop the behavior from occurring. This informational perspective assumes that the perpetrator is simply confused and made a mistake. The belief is that a consistent policy with training should fix this problem. In my research I have discovered that the “good guy made a mistake” assumption about perpetrators is a common interpretation by other organizational members. Note how this interpretation plays out in these quotes from my previously unpublished data:

Study Participant 1: I mean, sexual harassment; it could be a lot of things. There are numerous things that I’ve seen people describe as sexual harassment. I’ve been around sexual people. ... So, you don’t know what it is until someone tells you that “you’ve sexually harassed me.”

Study Participant 2: You need to let the individual know that was taken like that and correct your behavior. I mean, if you tell me that I’m wearing my hair color green and it’s affecting your ability to work, I can change my hair color. I can do things to change myself to not affect you and your job and stuff. But if somebody doesn’t tell you, you don’t know.

These organizational members are confident that perpetrators are good people who unknowingly made a mistake, stipulating targets must directly confront the harasser so perpetrators can change their behavior. The linear model of sexual harassment provides information to organizational members that is designed to prevent “good people” from inadvertently committing acts of sexual harassment. A few years ago, during training for one large government organization, one of my savvier women participants interrupted me and said, “Why don’t these people already know this behavior is wrong? I mean, we know it is wrong without being told. Why don’t they know? Are they just not as smart? Or do they do it because they know it is wrong?” I agree with her. Why don’t they know? Most of

the behavior is egregious, including comments about coworkers' body parts, sex acts they would like to perform on coworkers, objectifying symbols like pictures of naked women, or domination-style sex jokes. How is it possible that these perpetrators do not know that this behavior is inappropriate in a workplace?

Although there is an assumption that most perpetrators are good people who made a mistake, there is also a recognition that harassers may be predators inadvertently hired by the organization. Within the linear model, appropriate policy, followed by training targets how to report the behavior, should allow for the elimination of this person from the organization.

Target

I made a decision to use the word “target” instead of “victim” some years ago, when I realized that the victim label was laden with stigmas and stereotypes that further victimize those who have been harassed. Victim language is loaded language that makes it difficult for targets to move forward in the workplace (Dougherty, 2017). By using the word “target,” I attempt to remove the stigma.

Targets of harassment are more diverse than perpetrators. Although targets are mostly women, gay men and other vulnerable people are also likely targets (McDonald, 2012). These people are targeted in such a way as to emphasize their femininity and related low social power (Clair, 1994; Scarduzio et al., 2018). For example, their body parts are described in sexualized ways, they are grabbed and touched, they are threatened with sexual aggression. This is called **objectification**, meaning that the behavior strips them of their humanity by treating them as objects. When men who identify as heterosexual are targeted, they are typically exposed to different types of behaviors. They are often shown pornographic images that make them uncomfortable, or they are called names that call into question their heterosexuality (Chiodo et al., 2009).

When communication is treated as the transmission of information, it is assumed that if targets are given the right information and training, they will report the behavior to the appropriate authorities. However, despite the fact that sexual harassment policies and training are ubiquitous in organizations, targets are unlikely to report the behavior (Bergman et al., 2002). Why? Because sexual harassment is not just a factual and informational experience. It is laden with power, emotions, stigmas, stereotypes, and judgments of people who have been targeted (Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016). As a result, reporting the behavior is highly risky and unlikely to produce a positive outcome.

Reporting

Based on the linear model, if a person is targeted with sexual harassment, they need information on how to report it. There has been a considerable amount of effort by human resource departments to find the right process to get targets to report (McDonald et al., 2015). Despite this effort, studies consistently show that reporting rarely occurs. When it does occur, reporting rarely results in helpful outcomes for the reporter, and in fact, reporting is often destructive to the reporter (Bergman et al., 2002). The destructive capacity of reporting is not a product of the reporting itself. Instead, it comes from how the reporter and the report are treated by investigators (Bergman et al., 2002). Trust is a particularly important factor in reporting. Although most targets do not report sexual harassment, those who do often have lower trust in organizational reporting mechanisms due to unsatisfactory outcomes (Vijayasiri, 2008). To combat this problem, researchers suggest that policies provide clear reporting protocols and that multiple reporting agents are identified (Buchanan et al., 2014). What fascinates me about these suggestions is that they are often also accompanied by the recognition that the main problem is not a lack of clear information, or even that the reporting mechanisms are too narrow. Instead, these scholars recognize that reporting is stymied by the culture or climate of the organization. For example, Bergman et al. (2002) note that “fostering a climate that does not tolerate sexual harassment should alleviate many of the problems faced by organizations. First and foremost, climates that do not tolerate sexual harassment are associated with lower levels of sexual harassment” (p. 238). The authors note that research across time supports the conclusion that climate is the difference between success and failure in sexual harassment remediation. Vijayasiri (2008) similarly notes that reporting outcomes is a product of organizational cultures of trust. Although not addressing culture or climate specifically, McDonald et al. (2015) identify as a limitation of the linear model research that it fails to adequately account for gendered organizational practices “that allow sexual harassment to persist” (p. 52). Clearly, something beyond communication as the provision of information is impacting the reporting process. Something bigger and more profound is happening here.

Investigation

Based on the linear model, a report should lead immediately to an investigation. Research suggests that sexual harassment complaints should have time limits, be confidential, engage in due process, and prevent victimization (McDonald et al., 2011). McDonald and colleagues (2015) identify

complaint handling as “a deficit in organizational practice” (p. 51). These authors identify two reasons for these problems. First, managers tend to treat sexual harassment complaints as an interpersonal issue that is based on personality. As a result, the power differences and injustices that accompany sexual harassment are not attended to. In addition, because of the legal component of complaints, they are typically treated as disconnected from context, which fails to account for the systemic and cultural factors that almost always contribute to sexual harassment. This can lead to unfortunate outcomes.

Outcome

The ultimate goal of the linear model is for sexual harassment policies, training, and procedures to lead to outcomes that are just and fair. The most useful model I have seen (Figure 1.2) suggests that positive outcomes lead to more trust, which increases willingness to report (Vijayasiri, 2008).

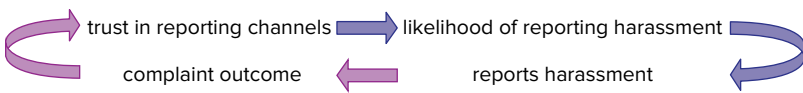


FIGURE 1.2: Vijayasiri’s (2008) Possible Causal Cycle Relating Reporting and Trust

However, even in the military, which has long-established processes for dealing with sexual harassment, formal complaints, on the rare occasion when they are filed, only result in consequences for the harasser or in a positive change to the organization about half of the time (McDonald et al., 2011). Equally likely are consequences to the targets for filing a complaint (McDonald et al., 2011). Other study findings are less positive. Bergman et al. (2002) discovered that reporting “often triggers retaliation” and can increase the destructive impacts of sexual harassment on the individual (p. 237). These authors conclude that, given these findings, the most reasonable response to sexual harassment is to not report the behavior. Scholars recognize the destructive outcomes of reporting sexual harassment, arguing that negative outcomes need to be addressed by supporting the targets of the behavior (McDonald et al., 2015). Clearly, creating positive outcomes is not a simple matter of providing the right information in the right order, as suggested by the linear model of managing sexual harassment. Although this information is important and should be provided to organizational members, it is insufficient. Organizational change agents need to think in more complex ways if they are to evolve their culture in more productive directions.

Recap and Looking Forward

Predatory sexual harassment is irrational and nonsensical behavior. It is damaging at every level of the workplace, leading to destructive ends for the target, teams, organizations, and stakeholders. How, then, given the vast amount of research, legal, and organizational remediation activity, is it possible that sexual harassment continues to be a persistent and significant problem in contemporary workplaces? In my experience as both a scholar and as a consultant, there are three reasons why the linear model has failed to solve sexual harassment. **First**, the model oversimplifies a complex problem. The issues are neither linear nor straight. **Second**, predatory sexual behavior is laden with various forms of communication that go far beyond the simple provision of information. **Finally**, as many scholars have mentioned, sexual harassment is not a product of interpersonal conflict. It is interwoven into organizational cultures through communication.

Variants of the linear model have become increasingly sophisticated, with internal feedback loops and a recognition that sexual harassment represents a cultural and systemic problem (McDonald et al., 2015; Vijayasiri, 2008). Although these models represent a clear improvement from the linear assumptions that guide most work, they are still built on a primarily *information provision assumption of communication*. As such, the models focus on how managers can inject change into the organizations by providing and managing information about and around sexual harassment. Although these models may be useful to human resource personnel who are creating a framework for managing sexual harassment, they are less useful for addressing the larger cultural and systemic issues that produce and reproduce sexual harassment over time. Specifically, these models do not recognize that sexual harassment is entangled with communication in complex and interwoven ways. As I will describe in Chapter 2, not only is communication the key means of prevention and remediation, *sexual harassment IS communication*. Beyond communication as information, the very act of sexual harassment inserts meanings as to what is good, right, valuable, and appropriate in an organization. In the next chapter, I define communication and organizational communication so that you can begin to absorb the complexity of predatory sexual harassment in the workplace.

Credit

Fig. 1.2: Source: <https://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/teen-sexual-harassment/pdf-articles/vijayasiri-underreporting-sh-the-importance-of-organizational-culture-and-trust-2008.pdf>.