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Applying Power-Approach and Moral Licensing Theory to Sex Harassment Intervention

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Applying Power-Approach and Moral Licensing Theory to Sex Harassment Intervention

Power, which operates at societal, organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels of analysis, has been at the center of most discussions, theories, and definitions of sex harassment (SH) (MacKinnon, 1979). Power has been defined as “the ability to provide or withhold valued resources or administer punishments”(Anderson & Berdahl, 2002) (p.1362), which is grounded in reward and coercive bases of power as well as legitimate - role-based power - and information control. Power may also arise from softer bases of power including expertise and referent power (e.g., charisma) (French & Raven, 1959; Popovich & Warren, 2010; Raven et al., 1998).

At interpersonal and intrapersonal levels of analysis, power arises from disinhibiting forces allowing powerholders freedom to engage in goal directed behavior. According to Approach/Inhibition theory, (Keltner et al., 2003) possessing power or feeling powerful activates the behavioral approach system (BAS) (Gray, 1990). People who feel powerful seek rewards, such as sexual gratification, often experience positive emotions, such as pleasure, and seek trait-consistent goal fulfillment, such as dominating (Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2017; Guinote et al., 2012; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). A hallmark of power is being able to increase psychological distance from others and to enhance one’s own self perceptions (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Kipnis et al., 1976). Furthermore, because feelings of power are automatically associated with sex (Bargh et al., 1995), the inclination to sexually harass may be heightened. The approach/inhibition theory of power, therefore, provides a compelling basis for the discussion of how powerful feelings may induce SH intentions and behaviors.

In a series of online experiments, my colleagues and I have demonstrated causal links between power priming and intentions to engage in sex harassment. Priming men and women to

experienced self-focused power (strong, efficacious, self-centered), compared to a control condition, increased state sexy and powerful feelings, which increased self-reported intentions to engage in sexual harassment (Stockdale et al., 2019). Priming responsibility-focused power (efficacious for others, mentoring-focused) was also associated with intentions to engage in SH (Stockdale et al., 2019). We hypothesized that embodying “good” power may create a moral license to sexually harass (Effron & Monin, 2010), which was demonstrated in a series of follow up studies (Dinh et al., 2021). We also replicated these findings in a sample of LGBTQ individuals (Dinh & Stockdale, 2021).

This new theory of power on sexual harassment conduct and perceptions provides fruitful recommendations for enhanced interventions to address a root cause of SH – power – at multiple levels of analysis. Training can address intra- and interpersonal levels. Common SH training involves cartoonish examples of SH which trainees can easily dismiss, and allyship training may inadvertently cause moral licensing (Lizzio-Wilson, 2019). I propose that SH training should incorporate evidence-based empathy training which has been shown to be effective in other forms of sexual misconduct training (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Hypocrisy, for example, disrupts moral licensing, especially if the transgressive behavior is concrete and linked to the preceding morally laudable behavior (Effron & Monin, 2010). In my lab, we are creating videos of real victims of SH telling their stories to a trained counselor and will be testing these videos to see if they increase empathy and curtail harassing proclivities.

Organizational development (OD) activities that address the trappings of power should be the second prong of an effective, comprehensive SH intervention. Institutionalists (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017) noted that organizations tend to blindly adopt popular interventions that have little to no scientific backing, simplistic SH training programs and compliance-focused complaint

resolution systems being prime examples. However, evidence-based OD interventions addressing similar issues, e.g., incivility, show that when led by expert facilitators, organizational leaders can engage in self-examination and develop customized interventions to which they are deeply committed (Osatuke et al., 2009). The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine provide many examples of evidence-based SH interventions that could be considered for adoption (Committee on the Impacts of Sexual Harassment in et al., 2018). A necessary component for dismantling the abusive effects of power, however, is accountability mechanisms that cannot be “gamed.” Diversity score cards were once touted as an effective accountability mechanism, but in practice the metrics that were counted could easily be manipulated (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). Instead, I proposed that leaders’ performance and rewards be conditioned on the effective institutionalization of effective strategies and practices that improve the climate SH intolerance, increase responsible allyship and bystander intervention and curtail proclivities to engage in SH. Such interventions need to be comprehensive to address the multiple levels of analysis of power-based structures.

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