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Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jur/vol2019/iss2019/53
A Comparison of Gender Ratio, Military Culture, and Organizational Climate as Determinants of the Sexual Harassment of Women and of Men in Eight Government Organizations

JUNE 20, 2019 BY ADMIN

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Introduction

The United States government spends millions of dollars each year in relation to incidences of sexual harassment. Far more important, however, is the psychological toll on individuals who experiences sexual harassment. Organizations function most effectively when people of all levels of the organization feel physically and emotionally safe. Unfortunately, sexual harassment occurs more frequently in the military as compared to other government agencies. Previous research has left clues about why this may be. Some have suggested that the military necessarily breeds an aggressive culture, which in turn could lead to more aggressive misdeeds. Elsewhere, researchers have demonstrated that organizational climate is the single strongest predictor of sexual harassment. Organizational climate refers to the formal organizational characteristics and perceptions regarding the tolerance, condoning, and acceptability of negative behaviors. In other words, if a person reports experiencing sexual harassment, does the organization take the report seriously? Do they investigate, and follow up with disciplinary action, if necessary? Do they take measures to ensure the future safety of the offended party? In another research project, our team discovered that sexual harassment could occur more frequently in military organizations because of the skewed gender ratio – the ratio of men to women in the military far exceeds that of other government agencies. However, though sexual harassment occurs more frequently in the military, it occurs less frequently than is expected based on the gender ratio within those organizations. We hypothesized that the organizational climate of military organizations acts as a buffer to lessen the frequency and severity of sexual harassment.

Methodology

We retrieved the data from this study from the United States Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB). These data are the survey responses of government employees in various agencies both within and without the Department of Defense. Designed by the USMSPB, these surveys address the question of sexual harassment in government agencies; the data are available upon request. Based on these data, we created our measure of the variables we considered as predictors of sexual harassment: gender ratio, military culture, and organizational climate. Using multivariate statistical analysis (logistic regression), we compared these predictive factors to the incidence of sexual harassment of differing severities.

Results

Due to the complex nature of the statistics used, we confronted challenges in analyzing the data using the Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) package. We are in an ongoing conversation with SAS customer service to identify the best way to proceed with our final analyses. Even so, we have been able to identify promising trends in the data that indicate the confirmation of our hypothesis. Our analyses showed that the organizational climate of military organizations was rated highly by personnel, even by those who had
experienced sexual harassment. In other words, the formal structure of the military facilitated a low tolerance and high responsiveness to reported instances of sexual harassment. This is the first clue to interpret the data in relation to our hypothesis. When we took account of the aggressive culture in the military and the high ratio of men to women, we found that sexual harassment should have occurred more frequently than it actually did. As we hypothesized, we found that the disparity between the actual frequency of sexual harassment and the expected occurrence of the same was accounted for when we incorporated the positive climate of military organizations into our analysis. We expect that our findings will be further confirmed as we formalize and finalize our analyses.

Discussion

While research in the last 30 years has viewed organizational climate as a predictor (cause) of sexual harassment, our research is beginning to show that climate moderates or is an intermediary between causes and outcomes of sexual harassment. The implications of this finding are profound, and extend far beyond the present study. Further questions arise, such as: Exactly how and in what way does climate moderate sexual harassment? Is the moderating effect of climate limited to the relationship of military culture and gender ratios to sexual harassment, or is the effect broader and more universal? Does organizational climate buffer more than the occurrence of sexual harassment, such as the resultant psychological effects? Our findings open the door for myriad future studies that could change the intellectual landscape of the conversation surrounding this important issue.

Conclusion

One conclusion we can draw from these findings is that military organizational climate protects its personnel from sexual harassment. However, it is possible that the aggressive culture in the military is limited to specific contexts and leads to less harassment than previously thought. It could be that the aggressive nature of the training and the job are experienced primarily in the intended context (deployment) and not across other contexts (home life, work after the military, etc.). Regardless, the stigma against military culture in relation to sexual harassment is unfounded. In fact, the military should be praised and studied for their effectiveness in establishing and maintaining a remarkably safe climate for their employees. Future studies would do well to use qualitative or mixed methods analyses of people who experienced harassment to further investigate the questions that have arisen from the present study.

FILED UNDER: ORCA-2018, PSYCHOLOGY