

Toward a Definition of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

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Introduction

Reports of sexual harassment on the job are on the rise nationwide. Employers are seeking strategies to decrease and prevent sexual harassment. This report is based on: 1) training work sessions intended to increase participants' self-awareness and appreciation of others, and 2) assessment of shifts in participants' attitudes and awareness with respect to potential sexual harassment behaviors. The unique work sessions consisted of:

- 1) presentation and discussion of information about what constitutes sexual harassment,
- 2) group activities intended to raise awareness of self and others, and
- 3) presentation of scenarios portraying common work situations using live actors and volunteers from among the participants to build skills for managing human interactions in the workplace.

Methodology

Participants were asked to complete a survey assessing sexual issues/harassment before and after the work sessions. After a review of the literature and legal cases relating to sexual issues/harassment, the authors developed a theory about how sexual issues/harassment might be manifested in the workplace. Table 1 illustrates the spectrum of potentially problematic behavior in the area of sexual issues/harassment.

Table 1. Spectrum of Behavior

Visual	Verbal	Written	Touching	Power	Force
Staring	Requests for dates	Love letters	Violating space	Using position to insist on	Rape
Posters	Lewd comments	Obscene letters	Patting	dates and other things	Physical
Magazines assault	Sex jokes	Cards	Grabbing	Promising	
Calendars	Questions about personal life	E-mail Fax	Caressing Kissing Fondling	Threatening with negative impact on job	

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Suzy Vance

Over the years Suzy, with her common sense and sensitivity to diverse perspectives, engaged in an extensive and successful law practice focusing on human relationships at work - including the presentation of a prevailing argument to the United States Supreme Court.

Today Human Interaction is her business. Her work with groups and organizations is based on her fundamental belief that: "People make the difference in all we do."

Suzy offers services in three areas: Interfocus® building strategies for human interaction in the workplace while addressing specific concerns. Partnership Connection® - bridging the gap from school to community through inter-generational programs in elementary, middle and secondary schools. Team-building - Bonding and strengthening groups and rewarding people for jobs well done - including Life Mask®.

Instrument Development

A survey intended to illicit honest responses from participants regarding sexual issues/harassment was developed. Participants were asked to respond to statements using a likert-type scale in the following areas: jokes, flirting, dress and attraction, touching, patting, hugging, and backrubs.

The survey began with "easy-to-agree with" statements that are playful and engaging. The statements become "harder-to-agree with" and more risky and dangerous for workplace behavior. For example, it is "safe" and "easy-to-agree with" the statement "I laugh at good jokes." It is "riskier" and "harder-to-agree with" the statement "I like to tell sex jokes." Similarly, it is logical that it is "safe" and "easy-to-agree with" the statements "I like back rubs" and "I like getting back rubs." It is "more risky" and "harder-to-agree with" the statement "Backrubs at work are ok."

An example of how the statements were formatted in the survey is as follows:

- | | | | | | |
|----|--|----|---|---|----|
| 1. | I enjoy sex jokes. | SA | A | D | SD |
| 2. | I tell sex jokes. | SA | A | D | SD |
| 3. | Sex jokes are ok, as long as they don't stop work. | SA | A | D | SD |

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Data Collection

For reasons peculiar to the project, demographic information was not collected. There is no information as to the differences in response, if any, between men and women, various levels within the department, or racial or ethnic distinctions. There also is no information as to the movement on the spectrum or shift in responses for individual participants because responses were not tracked individually. Without demographic information, the results reported here represent only a beginning definition of the variable "Sexual Issues/Harassment."

Surveys were distributed to 216 participants before training. One hundred and eighty five of the 216 employees attended the first work session. One hundred one (55%) of the 185 participants turned in the "before" survey. One hundred sixty seven of the 216 employees attended the second work session. One hundred eleven (66%) of the 167 completed the "after" survey. Twenty six (12%) surveys were determined to be invalid. One hundred eighty six surveys were analyzed to determine the definition of the variable.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Rasch partial credit model with WINSTEPS. Data which did not fit the model were not used as part of the definition of the Sex Issues Construct.

Results

The responses to the before-and-after surveys were pooled to create the Sex Issues Construct shown in Table 2. Analysis of the data shows that responses fell into three categories - statements that were

1. **SAFE** - Easiest to agree with - more than 50% agreed
2. **RISKY** - Easier to disagree with - more than 50% disagreed
3. **DANGEROUS** - Very Much Easier to disagree with - more than 67% disagreed

Table 2. Sex Issues Construct

SAFE - Easiest to AGREE with

- I laugh at good jokes.
- Jokes at work are ok.
- How much I enjoy being hugged, depends on the circumstances.
- When I kid around, I might pat someone on the back.
- I like to tell jokes.
- When I congratulate someone, I pat them on the back.
- It's ok to hug a co-worker.
- I like back rubs.
- I like getting back rubs.
- I like to hug.
- Sometimes I touch people without knowing it.
- When I'm excited, I might hug.

RISKY - Easier to DISAGREE with

- When someone wears an outfit, I may stare at them.
- When someone dresses in an appealing way, I like to tell them.
- I like to touch people.
- It's ok to hug the boss.
- Whether I enjoy a sex joke, depends on who tells it.
- I enjoy sex jokes.
- Touching at work is ok.
- When I see something I want, I go after it.
- I like giving back rubs.
- I enjoy flirting.

DANGEROUS: Much Easier to DISAGREE with

- Worrying about "not touching" is silly.
- Flirting at work is ok.
- Sex jokes are ok at office parties.
- When I think someone is good-looking, I let them know.
- Sex jokes are ok, as long as they don't stop work.
- When I'm attracted to someone, I'm not afraid to tell them.
- Flirting is ok as long as it doesn't stop work.
- When I want to go out with someone, I ask them.
- Flirting is harmless.
- Flirting never makes me uncomfortable.
- I tell sex jokes.
- I like to flirt at work.
- Back rubs are ok at work.
- When someone is good looking, I can't stop looking at them.
- When I kid around, I might pat someone on the rear.



For example, statements about flirting were "harder-to-agree with" and thought to be risky and dangerous. It was "hardest-to-agree" that patting someone on the rear is ok. "Patting on the rear" is the most dangerous of all identified interactions and borders on the more overt end of the behavior spectrum constituting potential sexual harassment.

(Note: This does not mean there should be a rule against getting or giving back rubs or hugs at work, flirting at work, or even patting someone on the rear. What the Sex Issues Construct does show is attitudes toward certain behavior fall in a logical or common-sense progression from most "safe" to most "dangerous." This information can be used to measure shifts in awareness and appreciation or attitude. It also can be used to raise awareness of the progression of behavior and teach skills to avoid or stop the progression when it becomes important to prevent behavior from crossing the line from "safe" into "risky" and "dangerous" areas.)

As can be seen in Table 2, the goal of the authors of determining the Sex Issues Construct was achieved. Those statements on attitudes and behaviors which were

intended to be "easy-to-agree with," such as "I laugh at good jokes," have indeed calibrated to be safe and "easy-to-agree with." Those statements which were intended to be "harder-to-agree with" such as "I tell sex jokes" and "Backrubs at work are ok" have indeed calibrated to be "dangerous" and "more difficult to agree with."

Conclusions

The initial definition of the Sexual Issues Construct essentially has been realized.

There were several statements on the survey that did not fit the Rasch measurement model. They were not used in the definition of the Sex Issues Construct. These statements will need to be revised as the definition of the Sex Issues Construct is refined. Some statements also did not fit within the Sex Issues Construct as the authors of the survey anticipated. For example, "Flirting never makes me uncomfortable" was not thought to be one of the statements most "hard-to-agree with." The use of the modifying word "never" in the statement may have contributed to this unanticipated result. Additional statements also need to be created to fill in gaps and expand the continuum of the Sex Issues Construct.



Anne Wendt

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Anne Wendt has a unique perspective of nursing licensure exams because she comes to her position as a nurse, a psychometrician, and as an educator. She was instrumental in the National Council's transition from a paper-and-pencil NCLEX examination to its current computerized adaptive testing (CAT) form. She has co-authored the NCLEX test plans and detailed test plans since March 1993. She has also been influential in the publication of such documents as *The NCLEX™ Process*, *The NCLEX™ Manual and Assessment Strategies for Nursing Educators*.

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