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COMMENTARY

When training backfires and what can be done about it

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The past year has seen an online movement to highlight sexual harassment and assault spread quickly around the globe. In October 2017, actress Alyssa Milano encouraged Twitter followers who were victims to use the hashtag #MeToo (social activist Tarana Burke began using the phrase "Me Too" as early as 2006). In the year following, tens of millions of women and men publicly proclaimed their own stories of abuse with the hashtag. But what started as a way to highlight the ubiquity and underreporting of sexual harassment and assault has led to a backlash. A counter hashtag, #NotAllMen, arose in response. In the year since the #MeToo movement went viral, survey evidence suggests Americans are becoming more skeptical about sexual harassment claims (Bulgarella, 2018; "Measuring the #MeToo Backlash," 2018). The #MeToo movement provides a cautionary tale of how interventions to raise awareness about and prevent sexual harassment and sexual assault can have unintended consequences. In this commentary, we address some of the negative, unintended consequences that have been observed in previous research, then we suggest some strategies that may be useful for circumventing them.

Evidence of unintended consequences

Because no social action takes place in a vacuum, there will always be repercussions that were unanticipated. These unanticipated outcomes can be desirable or undesirable, but here we concern ourselves only with the latter. Specifically, a number of studies have documented how sexual harassment prevention training (SHPT) can *backfire*, which refers to when an intervention affects the intended outcome in an undesirable direction (Leslie, in press). For example, in Bingham and Scherer's (2001) study of 530 university employees (faculty and staff), half of the sample was randomly assigned to attend a 30-minute SHPT, then they responded to a survey one week later. As expected, employees who attended the training were significantly more knowledgeable compared to those who did not attend. However, counter to expectations, male trainees were more likely than male nontrainees and female trainees to blame the victim in hypothetical scenarios portraying sexual behavior at work, less likely to view sexual coercion of a subordinate as harassment, and less likely to report sexual harassment. In a survey of employees, Dobbin and Kalev (2017) found similar results. Although most people who participated in SHPT could better define and identify sexual harassment, a subset of their sample—men who scored more highly on a measure of likelihood to harass women—became more dismissive in their attitudes about harassment, believing that the severity of the problem was exaggerated.

In a third study, Tinkler, Li, and Mollborn (2007) sampled 66 undergraduate male students to examine the effects of reading a university's sexual harassment policy on one's explicit and implicit beliefs about status differences across genders. Reading the policy had no effect on one's explicit

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beliefs, relative to a control group that did not read the policy, but it did change men's implicit beliefs in the opposite of the intended direction. That is, in an implicit associations test, participants who read the sexual harassment policy more closely linked "male" with "high status" and "female" with "low status" than did participants in the control group. In a related study by Tinkler (2013), she found that after undergraduate students watched a video on preventing sexual harassment, participants—men and women—who strongly adhered to gender norms only strengthened their implicit attitudes about gender stereotypes following the intervention.

Explaining unintended consequences

One problem with SHPT programs is that they can inadvertently threaten important identities (Petriglieri, 2011). Evidence for this was found in a qualitative study involving observation of multiple SHPT sessions at a university and interviews with students and the training facilitators (Tinkler, 2012). The author noted that SHPT often polarizes men and women by making gender the most salient component of people's identity. As a result, when dissecting case studies and role play activities, conversations between participants tended to rely upon gender stereotypes to interpret ambiguous situations (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999), such as women as passive and men as aggressive.

In addition to observing that one's gender identity became highly salient, Tinkler (2012) found that both men and women reported feeling threatened in two senses. First, participants expressed concern that "normal" interactions between men and women were becoming prohibited. For example, some men perceived that behaviors that they had considered "friendly" were being discussed in the SHPT as potentially unwelcome attention. Thus, training exercises intended to increase awareness of the breadth and pervasiveness of sexual harassment can have the unintended consequence of increasing men's sense of threat and vulnerability. Second, men and women reported feeling worried that their relative status might be at stake. Women, for instance, were reluctant to report incidences of sexual harassment as such because they feared being labeled a victim or as oversensitive.

A recent quantitative study corroborated the findings of Tinkler (2012) using a sample of 154 university employees (Rawski, 2016). Rawski (2016) found that trainees who felt more threatened before and during the SHPT were more likely to have negative attitudes about the training, to avoid "oversensitive" employees, to engage in sex-based interactions (e.g., flirt with a coworker, tell a sexual joke). Trainees who felt more threatened also had decreased intentions to share what they learned about sexual harassment policies with others and were less motivated to attend a future SHPT. In short, SHPT may have polarizing effects: It may be least effective for the people who could benefit from it the most, while those that are most receptive to it may be the least likely to need it in the first place (Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018).

Preventing unintended consequences

So, what can be done to prevent these unintended consequences from occurring? If we begin from the premise that these unintended consequences emerge from a threat to one's identity and the consequent defensiveness, a set of promising solutions can be found in work on self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). The theory of self-affirmation suggests that the overarching goal of the self is to protect its integrity or coherence (see also Dweck, 2017). When this sense of integrity is threatened, people may protect the self through defensiveness (e.g., denial, distancing), which diminishes the threat. However, an alternative approach to managing threats is affirming parts of the self that do not feel threatened.

Bystander interventions of workplace harassment (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005), for instance, do just that. Rawski (2016) pointed out that in a two-person interaction, "if one party 'takes' the role of 'victim,' she simultaneously 'makes' the role of 'harasser' for her interactional partner" (p. 53). However, bystander interventions offer a third

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option for an identity to assume. Bystander interventions call upon observers of sexual harassment to intervene and report incidences of sexual harassment. Early indications show that bystander intervention training is a promising approach (e.g., Cares et al., 2015; Potter & Moynihan, 2011). Seen through the lens of self-affirmation theory, bystander interventions allow people to cope with the threats to their identity brought about by, for example, considering how one might have made a coworker uncomfortable with a sexual joke he told. Being given an opportunity to enact one's values in a socially valued and constructive way (i.e., as a diligent bystander) provides self-affirmation and, as a result, allows him to address the threatening stimuli (i.e., "Did I make my coworker uncomfortable?") with less defensiveness. Further, it frames men as not simply potential harassers but as allies to women (and other men) and guardians of honorable behavior.

A second example of a self-affirmation intervention is asking people to write a short essay about their core values. In these essays, participants write about when their highest-ranked value was especially important to them (e.g., Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000, Study 1) or how living out that value made them feel good about themselves (e.g., Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000, Study 2). Such exercises then allow the writers to challenge their own questionable attitudes or behaviors with less defensiveness. In the context of SHPT, this intervention might take the form of having trainees take a few minutes to write about their highest values before the training even begins. This enables trainees to come into the training more open to new points of view (Cohen et al., 2007), and their focus is not just on defending oneself on the issue at hand (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Hartson, 2011). Critically, these interventions should occur before a threatening stimulus is presented or shortly after. Once a person begins to engage in defensive rationalizations, self-affirmation interventions tend to be ineffective (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010).

Conclusion

We were excited to see Medeiros and Griffith's (2019) call for industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists to address one of the most pressing issues in today's workplaces. We hope our commentary advances this conversation by (a) highlighting the foreseeable but unintended consequences of SHPT, (b) providing a theoretical rationale for when and why SHPT backfires, and (c) most importantly, suggesting how SHPT can be modified to avoid this backfire effect and help ensure maximal impact for this very worthwhile intervention.

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