Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2019), **12**, 42–47
doi:10.1017/iop.2019.6

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Ending harassment is about changing power structures more than providing training

Mindy E. Bergman*

Texas A & M University
*Corresponding author. Email: mindybergman@tamu.edu

Despite Medeiros and Griffith's (2019) focal article being a sound review of how training principles apply to sexual harassment and assault training, there is little in their article that will lead to significant improvements in workplace harassment (sexual or otherwise). This does not mean that we should abandon these training efforts. Of course organizations should have good antiharassment training that makes clear to employees what is and is not acceptable behavior in the workplace, how to intervene when unacceptable behavior occurs, and where to report this behavior. Industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists should be key players in the development and deployment of such training. But the problem with training about sexual harassment and assault is that it treats these as problems of individual prejudice and action, with the underlying idea being that if only people knew how to behave better, sexual harassment would disappear.

Here, I take a different perspective that focuses on how sexual harassment, as well as other forms of workplace harassment, such as racial harassment, are societal-level problems that are produced and reproduced in organizations. Then I will provide some suggestions on how to combat harassment in organizations.

Harassment from the social psychological perspective: The common I-O paradigm

Most I-O psychology research on workplace harassment frames the problem in social psychological terms (see Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010, for a review). Generally, this perspective focuses on harassment as an individual's prejudiced acts within the context of an organization that permits it. This research asks questions such as these: What target characteristics do perpetrators most target for harassment? (Bergman & Drasgow, 2003; Bergman & Henning, 2008; Bergman, Palmieri, Drasgow, & Ormerod, 2012; Settles, Buchanan, & Colar, 2012); what kind of climate tolerates the occurrence of harassment? (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996; Rubino et al., 2018); and what perpetrator characteristics make people more prone to harass? (Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993).

Whereas this framing explains why individual people engage in individual acts of harassment, it fails to examine why harassment happens at all—inside organizations or beyond. The social psychological approach acknowledges that some people, based on their group memberships, are more likely to be harassed than others, appealing to concepts such as stereotypes or power. Some I-O psychology research on harassment goes farther, appealing to individual maintenance of sociological-level social status (Berdahl, 2007).

To stop harassment, however, we need to acknowledge the sociological aspects of organizations and of harassment, and how the two intersect. To do so, I will briefly review social status hierarchies and hegemonic masculinity, organizations as small societies within the larger society, and the role of harassment in protecting these structures.

© Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Social status hierarchies and hegemonic masculinity

An individual's social status derives from a number of sources, but one of the most powerful is the underlying society-level social status hierarchy. There are numerous societal-level hierarchies—and numerous oppressions that arise from them (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995)—that intersect, so there is no simple calculus to indicate which people have it better than others in which situations, beyond those whose demography matches the hegemonic ideal. The hegemonic ideal is embedded in history and culture (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), but in Western societies, the hegemonic ideal is currently hegemonic masculinity: male, masculine, cis, white, heterosexual, Christian, and strong (Connell, 1995). Note that hegemonic masculinity is normative even though it is not common.

Hegemonic masculinity is not merely a description of persons who are idealized and who are not; if it were, it would be a social psychological concept only. Instead, hegemonic masculinity is a goal that people strive to achieve because of the benefits that accrue to people who match it. It also describes a system of oppressions, such as how men hold power over women and over other men (i.e., subordinated masculinities; Connell, 1995), and how that power is reified through social construction of systems and institutions (Acker, 1990, 2012). One consequence of the normativity of hegemonic masculinity is that is so well integrated into society and social actions that it is rarely questioned or even noticed. It is merely how things are.

Hegemonic masculinity benefits people who best match its characteristics, but it also benefits those who do not wholly align with the ideal. For example, although hegemonic masculinity means that white women generally have less privilege than white men, white women also benefit from hegemonic masculinity when race is at issue because of their whiteness. Thus, even those who are subordinated in the social structure at times benefit from it. Privilege arises from this structure (McIntosh, 2004, 2007; Rothenberg, 2008). Within intersectional oppressions, there are some benefits and many costs to subordinated groups. Subordinated groups often cannot identify these benefits because (a) the benefits are generally invisible to members of subordinated groups because they are typical to their experience and normative in society due to the experiences of the hegemonic group and (b) subordinated groups are often focused on how they are being mistreated.

Note that even though the term "hegemonic masculinity" is used here, it does not mean that if problems based in gendered power are resolved then all problems are solved. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995) is clear: Oppressions intersect, as do identities, and freedom and justice cannot be gained for all unless oppression is dismantled across all forms. Gender parity does not create racial parity, nor vice versa, nor with any other oppression. As spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Organizations reproduce broader societal social structures

Acker (1990, 2006, 2012) describes organizations as masculine institutions that are designed around ideal workers who have masculine traits, both in terms of their own embodied selves (e.g., size, strength, socialized communication styles) as well as their needs and expectations for the workplace (e.g., hours worked, childcare needs). That is, they reproduce hegemonic masculinity from the broader society. Additionally, Acker (1996, 2012) notes that the organization is not just gendered and sexist in structure, but also racialized and racist in structure, and classist, and so on as well (see also Britton & Logan, 2008; Crenshaw, 1995; Nkomo, 1992). In her foundational work on sexual harassment in the workplace, MacKinnon (1979) indicated that because organizations are society writ small, domination of women is a *product* (not even a byproduct) of organizational activity, just as it is in society overall. It is in the marrow of organizational bones. Even as work and the economy have evolved, this hegemonic masculinity still appears

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a fundamental descriptor of how work and organizations are structured (Williams, Muller, & Kilanski, 2012).

This is critical for I-O psychologists to recognize, because organizations are created within culture, and they reinforce and reproduce it. It is not as though members of organizations leave their cultural learnings at the door and are blank slates within the workplace. This leads to both (a) individual prejudices that produce unjust action against others and (b) creations of social structures of organizations that seem right because they are normative but in fact privilege some people over others. As Schneider (1987) eloquently stated: The people make the place. What should be added is that the people make the place using the materials they have, with the ideas that they know, and the knowledge and the biases that they have developed over a lifetime *from the societies in which they were raised*. Organizations are not utopian fair places that are untouched by the problems of society writ large; organizations replicate the problems of society.

Harassment protects social hierarchies

Berdahl (2007) argued that sexual harassment should be reframed as sex-based harassment because it functions to protect the sex-based social hierarchy. Her work pushes back against the notion that sexual harassment is "romance gone wrong" or "misunderstandings between people." Instead, her argument is that harassment is functional to some people, and they deploy it to maintain social status. In her view, this is why some forms of sexual harassment (e.g., male perpetrators and female targets) are more common than other forms (e.g., women harassing men or women), because some people have more to protect. Thus, her view is that sexual harassment is about power and the desire to retain it. Even when such harassment occurs between minority group members, it ultimately serves the maintenance of power structures in society (Berdahl, 2007; Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996).

Here, I argue a step further: Not only is harassment (sexual or otherwise) designed to protect status, but the harassment system (e.g., reporting, organizational responses, HR contracts with arbitration clauses, HR secrecy) is also designed to do so. As gendered, racialized, intersectional spaces, organizations are utile in the protection of broader social status hierarchies. Organizations are designed to mimic the broader social status hierarchies and their self-protecting functions. A variety of organizational actions related to harassment behavior also serve to maintain power structures. For example, arbitration clauses in employment contracts prevent people who have experienced harassment from seeking civil relief in courts, which would expose the organization to negative reputational effects (Campbell & Chang, 2018; Singh, 2018). Arbitration clauses also maintain power in organizations because less powerful people (e.g., line workers) must use more powerful people (i.e., HR professionals) to address the actions of even more powerful people (e.g., supervisors); this maintains power structures in organizations and is likely to ultimately reduce reports of harassment. Similarly, organizational responses to harassment reports are critical to individual well-being, yet it is clear that organizations often respond poorly to reports of mistreatment (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Cortina & Magley, 2003).

In the context of the #MeToo movement, there was considerable media attention on the "superstar" harasser: powerful and important organizational members who could create systems and spaces that allowed their harassing behaviors to occur unobserved and/or unchecked; when they were observed or reported, those reports were minimized or the reporter was retaliated against (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016; McGregor, 2017). This is entirely consistent with the view that organizations are small replications of larger society. First, organizational systems are designed to protect and extend power for the powerful. Second, organizations themselves strive for power, and the presence of superstar performers allow organizations to do so.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What can we do?

From this analysis, it is clear that antiharassment training will have little significant and lasting effect on workplace harassment. Undoubtedly, it will provide some relief by providing information to targets about what harassment is and how to report it, and by socializing new workers (especially early career workers) into appropriate behavior models. But considering that organizations are fundamentally unequal, just as society is, there is no way forward where reducing mistreatment at the individual-level solves societal-level inequalities. Organizations cannot undo the societal problems that they have reproduced by simply training it away. Despite that, I-O psychologists should continue to do it. But we should not stop there.

Transforming organizational climates

In their most important passage, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) wrote:

> [H]ow an organization responds to instances of sexual harassment may provide feedback to employees. . . . [A]ppropriately punishing perpetrators, following through with investigations, and praising those who come forward may signal desired post-training behavior. Sweeping instances of sexual harassment under the rug undermines training efforts by indicating that this climate supports perpetrators and places a higher value on outcomes such as profit and performance. (p. 13)

This passage highlights the critical component of any effort to stop workplace harassment within a single workplace: organizational-level contingencies regarding harassment events. Focusing more on organizational climate is critical to changing any specific organization. Here is a simple solution for ending harassment in individual organizations: firing people who engage in it.

Organizations that routinely fire harassers should find harassment rates plummeting. Employees would quickly learn behavioral contingencies regarding harassment (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammed, 2013). If employees value their employment at the organization, they will not engage in behavior that leads to firing. This would especially be the case if HR secrecy around employee discipline were ended for harassment perpetrators, because it would clearly identify the behavioral contingency rather than leaving the learning to rumor and guessing.

Some I-O psychologists will push back at this recommendation, questioning the cost of such a plan. Certainly the short-term costs will be high as organizations root out harassers. But in the longer run, as organizations gain the reputation of having no tolerance for harassment, organizations will attract new talent that might have been unwilling to work there before. Additionally, organizations are likely to gain productivity because of the productivity costs associated with harassment (Bergman & Drasgow, 2003; Faley, Knapp, Kustis, & Dubois, 1999; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

Transforming culture into a more just organization

But firing harassers will only go so far in organizations, as they are small versions of our broader and unequal society. Beyond reacting strongly to harassers, I-O psychologists should advocate for more just policies in organizations and in society that create fairer work organizations and stronger safety nets. When there are stronger safety nets in society, no harassment targets will have to choose between not reporting their harassment experiences or reporting, experiencing retaliation, and losing health insurance. Fairer organizations end practices that hide inequalities, such as pay secrecy or arbitration clauses. Fairer organizations actively work to end salary and other inequities. Fairer organizations operate with both a profit motive and a well-being motive for both workers and society (Sawyer, 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Even further, I-O psychologists should work to dismantle the hegemonic masculinity in organizations. This is no small feat and cannot be fully accomplished because these organizations operate within the broader societal context. But certainly some action toward reducing hegemonic masculinity reproduction in organizations is better than none if the goal is to make the workplace fairer and free from harassment. It begins with redesigning work and work processes to accommodate persons who do not fit the ideal worker (Acker, 1990; Williams et al., 2012). It also means rewarding and supporting other ways of being and delegitimizing hegemonic masculinity (especially hypermasculinity) in workplaces (Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Kelan, 2018).

For I-O psychologists, specifically, it means engaging less with our management scholar colleagues and more with our sociology, women's and gender studies, Black studies, and so forth scholar colleagues. As a field, we have focused on diversity management for far too long (Zanoni et al., 2010) and not nearly enough on the broad social structures that produce inequality. If we are serious about ending harassment, then we need to engage with serious scholarship about it. Antiharassment training scholarship is necessary, because antiharassment training is necessary. But it is not sufficient, not even close. If we are going to get serious about ending this cancer in the lives of marginalized and minoritized employees specifically and people in general, we should stop applying bandages and start conducting tumorectomies.

References

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, **4**, 139–158.

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society*, **20**(4), 441–464.

Acker, J. (2012). Gendered organizations and intersectionality: Problems and possibilities. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, **31**(3), 214–224.

Berdahl, J. L. (2007). Harassment based on sex: Protecting social status in the context of gender hierarchy. *Academy of Management Review*, **32**(2), 641–658.

Berdahl, J. L., Magley, V. J., & Waldo, C. R. (1996). The sexual harassment of men? Exploring the concept with theory and data. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, **20**(4), 527–547.

Bergman, M. E., & Drasgow, F. (2003). Race as a moderator in a model of sexual harassment: An empirical test. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, **8**(2), 131–145.

Bergman, M. E., & Henning, J. B. (2008). Sex and ethnicity as moderators in the sexual harassment phenomenon: A revision and test of Fitzgerald et al. (1994). *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, **13**(2), 152–167.

Bergman, M. E., Langhout, R. D., Palmieri, P. A., Cortina, L. M., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (2002). The (un)reasonableness of reporting: Antecedents and consequences of reporting sexual harassment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **87**(2), 230–242.

Bergman, M. E., Palmieri, P. A., Drasgow, F., & Ormerod, A. J. (2012). Racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination, its antecedents, and its effect on job-related outcomes. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, **17**(1), 65–78.

Britton, D. M., & Logan, L. (2008). Gendered organizations: Progress and prospects. *Sociology Compass*, **2**(1), 107–121.

Campbell, A.F., & Chang, A. (2018, September 7). There's a good chance you've waived the right to sue your boss. Vox. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/2018/8/1/16992362/sexual-harassment-mandatory-arbitration

Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, **19**(6), 829–859.

Cortina, L. M., & Magley, V. J. (2003). Raising voice, risking retaliation: Events following interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, **8**(4), 247–265.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, **140**, 139–167.

Crenshaw, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York, NY: New Press.

Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2010). An organizational approach to undoing gender: The unlikely case of offshore oil platforms. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, **30**, 3–34.

Faley, R. H., Knapp, D. E., Kustis, G. A., & Dubois, C. L. (1999). Estimating the organizational costs of sexual harassment: The case of the US Army. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, **13**(4), 461–484.

Feldblum, C. R., & Lipnic, V. A. (2016, June). *Select task force on the study of harassment in the workplace: Report of co-chairs Chai R. Feldblum & Victoria A. Lipnic*. Washington, DC: Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Retrieved from https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report.cfm#_ftnref113.

Fitzgerald, L. F., Drasgow, F., Hulin, C. L., Gelfand, M. J., & Magley, V. J. (1997). Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment in organizations: A test of an integrated model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **82**(4), 578–589.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hulin, C. L., Fitzgerald, L. F., & Drasgow, F. (1996). Organizational influences on sexual harassment. In M. Stockdale (Ed.), *Sexual harassment in the workplace* (Vol. **5**, pp. 127–150). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kelan, E. K. (2018). Men doing and undoing gender at work: A review and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, **20**(2), 544–558.

MacKinnon, C. A. (1979). *Sexual harassment of working women: A case of sex discrimination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

McGregor, J. (2017, December 19). How too much focus on "superstar" workers enables harassment. Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/12/19/the-metoo-movement-is-a-warning-sign-about-the-star-system-at-many-companies/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.fce025faaee2.

McIntosh, P. (2004). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, **6**, 188–192.

McIntosh, P. (2007). White privilege and male privilege. In J. F. Healey & E. O'Brien (Eds.), *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Selected Readings* (pp. 377–385). Los Angeles, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Medeiros, K., & Griffith, J. (2019). #Ustoo: How I-O psychologists can extend the conversation on sexual harassment and sexual assault through workplace training. Industrial and Organizational Psychology. *Perspectives on Science and Practice*, **12**(1), 1–19.

Nkomo, S. M. (1992). The emperor has no clothes: Rewriting "race in organizations." *Academy of Management Review*, **17**(3), 487–513.

Ostroff, C., Kinicki, A. J., & Muhammed, R S. (2013). Organizational culture and climate. In I. B. Weiner, N. Schmitt, and S. W. Highhouse (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology: Industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. **12**, pp. 643–676). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Pryor, J. B., LaVite, C. M., & Stoller, L. M. (1993). A social psychological analysis of sexual harassment: The person/situation interaction. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **42**(1), 68–83.

Rothenberg, P. S. (2008). *White privilege*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Rubino, C., Avery, D. R., McKay, P. F., Moore, B. L., Wilson, D. C., Van Driel, M. S., ... **McDonald, D. P.** (2018). And justice for all: How organizational justice climate deters sexual harassment. *Personnel Psychology*, **71**(4), 519–544.

Sawyer, K. (2017, April). (Invited Presentation). What if social innovators were on the cover of Forbes magazine? In M. Chakrabarti (Chair), SIOP Shaken and Stirred Symposium. *Presented at the 32nd Annual Conference for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Orlando, FL.

Schneider, B. (1987). The people make the place. *Personnel Psychology*, **40**(3), 437–453.

Settles, I. H., Buchanan, N. T., & Colar, B. K. (2012). The impact of race and rank on the sexual harassment of Black and White men in the US military. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, **13**(3), 256–263.

Singh, S. (2018, May 17). Your contract at work might prevent you from suing over sexual harassment. Vice. Retrieved from https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/vbqekm/mandatory-arbitration-clauses-sexual-harassment

Williams, C. L., Muller, C., & Kilanski, K. (2012). Gendered organizations in the new economy. *Gender & Society*, **26**(4), 549–573.

Willness, C. R., Steel, P., & Lee, K. (2007). A meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of workplace sexual harassment. *Personnel Psychology*, **60**(1), 127–162.

Zanoni, P., Janssens, M., Benschop, Y., & Nkomo, S. (2010). Guest editorial: Unpacking diversity, grasping inequality: Rethinking difference through critical perspectives. *Organization*, **17**(1), 9–29.

Cite this article: Bergman M.E. (2019). Ending harassment is about changing power structures more than providing training. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **12**, 42–47. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press