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Sexual Harassment Reporting and Whistle-blowing:  
A Proposed Model of Predictors and Outcomes

By

Janet P. Near  
[near@indiana.edu](mailto:near@indiana.edu)

Sharon Gibson, Captain, USAF  
[shgibson@indiana.edu](mailto:shgibson@indiana.edu)

Jeong-Yeon (Jay) Lee  
[jeylee@indiana.edu](mailto:jeylee@indiana.edu)

Kelley School of Business  
1309 E. 10<sup>th</sup> Street  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47405-1701  
Voicemail: (812) 855-3368  
FAX: (812) 855-8679

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Sexual Harassment Reporting and Whistle-blowing:  
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Research literatures on the process of reporting sexual harassment and the process of blowing the whistle on organizational wrongdoing has been largely separate from one another. While there may be clear differences in the two processes there are also obvious similarities that might be better appreciated if findings and theory from the two literatures were integrated and compared. In this paper we argue that such cross-fertilization between the two fields may benefit both areas. To this end we propose a model of the process of reporting sexual harassment, based on earlier models of whistle-blowing, and suggest a set of propositions to support empirical testing of the model.

## **SEXUAL HARASSMENT REPORTING AND WHISTLE-BLOWING: A PROPOSED MODEL OF PREDICTORS AND OUTCOMES**

Research concerning whistle-blowing in organizations and sexual harassment in organizations has remained largely separate, despite clear similarities in the processes. Despite this separation between the two bodies of research, Dandekar (1990) noted that the two cases resemble one another a great deal. As she noted, there seemed to be two primary differences. Whistle-blowers did not always themselves suffer from the consequences of the wrongdoing they reported, while those who were victims of harassment always experienced it personally. Second, she argued that there was (at that time) a stronger body of law and also greater public support to help complainants in sexual harassment cases, whereas in whistle-blowing cases the public might feel somewhat queasier about offering its support. At this point, given recent advances in legal support for whistle-blowers (Dworkin & Callahan, 2000), it is not clear that the second difference remains. Further, empirical evidence suggests that most whistle-blowers have been victims of the wrongdoing they reported, contrary to public opinion on this point (Miceli & Near, 1992). It seems, then, that the great gulf dividing research on sexual harassment from research on whistle-blowing, must be based on reasons other than the two cited by Dandekar. In this paper we argue that these two great bodies of research have remained largely independent because they have tended to focus on different points in the process, but that conversation between the two literatures might benefit both.

Previous research concerning sexual harassment has focused primarily on perceptions and attributions (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993) as antecedents of harassment, with much less attention paid to consequences of harassment (Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997). Further, many of the

empirical examinations of consequences have concerned the psychological responses of the victim alone, rather than focusing on the organizational responses as part of an integrated model (Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997). The emphasis has been on predicting how the victim determines that the event experienced constituted sexual harassment and how she (less frequently he) reacts to it. We propose a more fully developed model of the overall harassment process, based partly on models of whistle-blowing as a related situation. Use of an overall theoretical framework for considering the process by which harassment occurs, the victim responds, the organization and the harasser respond to the response and so on, provides a more comprehensive view of the steps involved in what is clearly a dynamic process.

Models of the whistle-blowing process provide a process-oriented view of the steps involved when an organizational member commits wrongdoing, the observer (often the victim as well) of the wrongdoing reports it within or outside the organization, and the wrongdoer and the organization respond to the report. There appears to be no clear difference in the whistle-blowing process and the process followed when sexual harassment is reported, although this is obviously a question that needs to be considered. Thus, the whistle-blowing process model may be a useful analogue for better understanding the sexual harassment report process. Unfortunately, much whistle-blowing research has relied on surveys of whistle-blowers who have observed a wide range of organizational wrongdoings (Miceli & Near, 1992). As a result, variance in the whistle-blowing process associated with variation in the type of wrongdoing may not be fully accounted for. Thus, it is possible that the more general whistle-blowing process model would not apply to the more specific case of sexual harassment. In this paper we will examine this question more concretely, by reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature from both fields, in an attempt to develop an overall model of the process of reporting of sexual harassment.

## CLASSIFYING WHISTLE-BLOWING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The most widely used definition of whistle-blowers in research literature today was proposed some time ago. Whistle-blowers are "organization members (including former members and job applicants) who disclose illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices (including omissions) under the control of their employers, to persons or organization who may be able to effect action" (Near & Miceli, 1985: 4). This definition has proved sufficiently inclusive to allow empirical investigations of widely varying types of whistle-blowers, ranging from nurses (King, 1997) to internal auditors (Miceli & Near, 1994) to federal employees (Miceli, Rehg, Near & Ryan, 1999) to employees of different types of for-profit firms (Miethe, 1999). Wrongdoing of various types has been explored, but few studies have focused on a particular type of wrongdoing; an exception might be King's study of nurses' reactions to scenarios in which patients were harmed by medical practice of a nurse (however, even these scenarios varied somewhat in terms of the severity of the wrongdoing and exact type).

Defining sexual harassment has been the subject of great controversy (Fitzgerald, Swan & Magley, 1997). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has defined sexual harassment as "Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors [as well as] other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature...when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct...is used as the basis for employment decisions...or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment" (EEOC, 1980: 74676-74677).