Personality and the Likelihood to Sexually Harass

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To identify personality traits associated with sexual harassment proclivities, scales that measure the Likelihood to Sexually Harass (LSH) and personality traits were administered to 150 respondents. Peer reports of personality were also obtained from respondents’ acquaintances. The Big Five factors and a newly suggested major dimension of personality, named Honesty–Humility, were measured to represent respondents’ personalities. Two major findings were obtained. First, as predicted, Honesty–Humility was more strongly associated with sexual harassment proclivities than were any of the Big Five, within both self- and peer reports. Second, among the Big Five, only peer-reported Intellect/Imagination (i.e., Openness to Experience) contributed to the prediction of LSH independently of Honesty–Humility. The importance of using an optimal framework of personality structure was discussed.

KEY WORDS: personality; Big Five; sexual harassment; LSH scale; Honesty–Humility.

It is widely recognized that sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of aggressive behavior at work. Reported sexual harassment incidents have increased in the United States (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 1999), and sexual harassment remains the primary ground of complaint under the Sex Discrimination Act in Australia. In fact, almost half of the total complaints filed by female employees in Australia between 1999 and 2000 involved an allegation of sexual harassment (Equal Opportunity Commission of Australia, 2000). It is not surprising, therefore, that organizational psychologists have paid consistent attention to various aspects of sexual harassment within the last 20 years.

Past research on sexual harassment has demonstrated that the experience of sexual harassment has significant effects on employee health and well-being as well as on organizational variables such as job satisfaction and organizational/work withdrawal (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Pryor, 1995). In addition, there have been some improvements in understanding what causes sexual harassment at work. For example, some group-level variables such as organizational climate for sexual harassment, job gender context (i.e., gendered nature of a job; Fitzgerald et al., 1997), and local social norms about sexual harassment (Pryor, Lavelle, & Stoller, 1993) have often been hypothesized, and found, to be associated with the prevalence of sexual harassment incidents.

Although the past 20 years of research on sexual harassment have greatly improved our understanding of the consequences of sexual harassment victimization, and of the contextual variables that increase sexual harassment, relatively little has been learned as to individual characteristics of sexual harassment perpetrators other than some demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, and education (Terpstra & Cook, 1985). This probably reflects the difficulty of obtaining participant samples that consist of actual sexual harassment offenders. In this study, we attempted to fill this apparent gap by examining personality characteristics that are associated with...
men’s sexual harassment proclivities, as measured by the Likelihood to Sexually Harass (LSH) scale developed by Pryor (1987). Instead of examining actual offenders, we measured nonoffenders’ proclivity toward sexual harassment and correlated that propensity with the major personality traits. In this way, we could avoid the difficulties of obtaining a sexual harassment perpetrator sample and yet still identify potentially relevant personality characteristics of likely perpetrators.

Validity Evidence for the Likelihood to Sexually Harass (LSH) Scale

The LSH scale contains 10 hypothetical scenarios that depict situations in which the male respondent has power over an attractive female subordinate. Male respondents are asked to rate the probability that they would engage in acts of sexual harassment (e.g., granting the female subordinate’s request in exchange for a sexual favor). A similar methodology has previously been used successfully in the study of rape proclivities (Malamuth, 1986).

The psychometric properties of the LSH scale have been widely documented. The internal consistency reliability of the LSH scale typically exceeds .90 for most samples (Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995; Pryor & Meyers, 2000). As for validity evidence, the LSH scale has been found to correlate with other questionnaire measures related to sexual aggression such as Malamuth’s Likelihood to Rape Scale (Malamuth, 1986), Burt’s Adversarial Sexual Beliefs and Rape Myth Acceptance scales (Burt, 1980; see Pryor, 1987), and Barling et al.’s Sexual Harassment Questionnaire (Barling et al., 1996; see Larrimer-Scherbaum & Popovich, 2001).

The validity evidence for the LSH scale is not limited to its relation to questionnaire measures. The LSH scale has been found to correlate with actual behavioral measures of sexual harassment. Dall’Ara and Maass (1999) found in a laboratory study that higher scorers on the LSH scale were more likely than lower scorers to send pornographic materials to a female confederate when they were given the opportunity. In laboratory studies, Pryor and colleagues (e.g., Pryor, 1987; Pryor et al., 1993) have demonstrated that the LSH scale is related to a man’s tendency to take sexual advantage of women, as operationalized by actual sexual behaviors. For example, Pryor et al. (1993) found that high scorers on the LSH scale engaged more often than lower scorers in sexual touching of female confederates when they observed another man who openly harassed the woman.

Furthermore, high LSH men behave differently from low LSH men when interacting with women. It has been found that people are able to distinguish those who are high in LSH scale scores from those who are low simply by viewing sound-stripped video clips in which a man is interviewing female subordinates (Driscoll, Kelly, & Henderson, 1998; Murphy, Driscoll, & Kelly, 1999). In addition, Barak and Kaplan (1996, cited in Pryor & Meyers, 2000) found that self-reported sexual harassment proclivity was, in fact, correlated with actual reports of sexual harassment behaviors.

Finally, the LSH scale appears to differentiate men in terms of their social cognition processes. In Pryor and Stoller’s study (Pryor & Stoller, 1994), male participants were presented with pairs of words that are related to sexuality or social dominance, or that are neutral. When they were asked to memorize the pairs of words, high scorers on the LSH scale tended to overestimate the number of pairs between sexuality terms and dominance terms, whereas low scorers did not. Similar findings were reported in a study by Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, and Strack (1995), in which the authors found that high LSH men had an automatic cognitive link between sexuality and power, whereas no such link was apparent for low LSH men. Given the validity evidence of the LSH scale provided above, the identification of personality traits that correlate with the LSH scale score may well be the first step toward understanding the personality characteristics of actual sexual harassment perpetrators.

Personality Dimensions and the LSH

Although the reliability and validity of the LSH scale have been well established, the transparency of its item content is a potential problem for the use of that scale in organizational settings. However, if there are some personality traits that are strongly associated with LSH, then measures of those traits could be used to identify men who are at high risk for committing acts of sexual harassment. Thus, finding the relations between personality and LSH is likely to be of some practical importance. An understanding of personality—LSH relations is also of potential theoretical importance, as these relations may illuminate some of the psychological processes that underlie sexual harassment behavior, and they might even help us to comprehend the function of personality traits themselves.