The Influence of Sexual Harassment in School on Later Perceptions of the Behavior

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Sexual harassment (SH) affects workers around the world directly or indirectly. Research reports incidents in Canada (Crocker & Kalemba, 1999), Latin America (Benavides-Espinoza & Daehnke, 2010; www.dt.gob.cl; www.mujerydeporte.org), and the United States (Pedersen, Lim, Osborne, & Whisenant, 2009). In some cases the harassment is very obvious, with the victims being threatened or bribed with job related consequences if they do not accept the sexual advances of their superiors. This type of harassment is denominated quid pro quo, which translates to English as “this for that”. In other cases, the harassment is more subtle, such as when the victim’s work environment is so sexually charged that it becomes a hostile place where the targets of this behavior are prevented from performing their job as they would otherwise. This is called hostile environment harassment (www.eeoc.gov).

Weather the harassment is hostile environment or quid pro quo the consequences for the victims of this behavior have the potential to interfere with their job and even their lives. For example, some direct and vicarious victims have reported job related consequences, such as changes in attitudes and performance; and detriments in their psychological and physical health (O’Leary-Kelly, Bowes-Sperry, Bates, & Lean, 2009). Furthermore, the way that the organization deals with the harassment has an effect on its employees’ perceptions of justice and cultural consistency, and emotions towards the organization (Benavides-Espinoza & Cunningham, 2010). Thus, SH affects the target of the behavior, bystanders, and the organization as a whole. Research on SH in academia indicates that students in different contexts get harassed (see Benavides-Espinoza & Daehnke, 2010; Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, & Yael Gold, 1988). Students in the sport management field are not the exemption. In a qualitative study conducted in a Mexican university Benavides-Espinoza & Daehnke (2010) found that the students in their sample had experienced behaviors that represent textbook examples of SH as defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), such as peers and even teachers staring at them, harassing comments and language, and even inappropriate touching. Then, the question arises: Do these experiences affect the way these individuals perceive harassing experiences in other settings, namely at work? And if so, would eradicating SH at schools be the first step for eradicating SH in the workplace?

The literature on the influence of school experiences on students indicates that teachers are seen as role models (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). The primary education teachers in Carrington and McPhee’s (2008) study saw themselves as important role models on their students’ lives. Some authors would argue that the interactions that undergraduate students have with their teachers influence future perceptions and reactions to problems (Kuh et al., 2005), providing the ethical foundations of their adult lives (Allen, 1995). If this is the case, when faculty commits and tolerates SH in the presence of their students they may influence their future perceptions and reactions to this societal problem. Under this rationale, it is possible that those sport management workers that experienced or witnessed SH from their role models during their college career have been desensitized to the magnitude of this problem even before they join the workforce; dismissing it as normal social sexual interaction, and ultimately perpetuating the behavior. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether exposure to SH during undergraduate students’ school years has an effect on how harassing events at work are interpreted.

Previous research indicates that the amount of exposure to SH influences reactions to subsequent incidents (Maeder, Wiener, & Winter, 2007). If we consider the literature indicating that teachers are seen as role models by undergraduate students discussed previously, SH that occurs in the school setting has the potential to greatly influence our future sport managers’ perceptions of and reactions to SH. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis was advanced.

Hypothesis: Those participants that were exposed to more SH during their undergraduate studies will rate their work experiences as less severe than those who were exposed to less SH in the school environment.

Approximately 50 undergraduate students enrolled at a large University in Northeast Mexico will participate in this study. Their participation will be voluntary and they will not receive extra-credit for their collaboration with this research project. Current employment in the sport management field will be required for participation in the study. They will complete consent forms and respond to a hand-delivered pencil-and-paper instrument in their school's facilities at a time that is convenient for them. The questionnaire will include items regarding their demographic information and their SH experiences at the school and at work by means of Fitzgerald and colleagues’ (1997) sexual experiences questionnaire (SEQ). Finally, they will indicate their reactions to the SH occurring at their place of employment in terms of the severity of the harassment and the effects it had on their emotions. This research is currently ongoing. Upon its completion, its results will yield insight into some of the factors that ultimately affect perceptions and reactions to SH. Finally, the results may produce important practical implications for the
understanding of SH in sport management schools and workplaces in North America, ultimately sharing insight into how to reduce its incidence.