Sexual Harassment Training: Promises, Pitfalls, and Future Directions

Justine E. Tinkler, University of Georgia

Policy training is a popular tool for sexual harassment prevention because it is a simple and relatively affordable way to demonstrate symbolic compliance with antidiscrimination law. With the rise in national attention to sexual harassment, it's important to review what we know about the effectiveness of training. On the positive side, training can broaden people's knowledge and definitions of sexual harassment (Antecol and Cobb-Clark 2003), and communicate the seriousness with which an organization takes the issue. However, my research shows that anti-harassment policy training can have the unintended consequence of activating traditional gender stereotypes and reinforcing negative attitudes about women. This is problematic for two reasons: First sexual harassment is illegal because the courts consider it gender discrimination. If policy trainings lead people to think about men and women in unequal ways, then we should be crafting workplace policies that reduce this effect. Second, sexually harassing behaviors are often manifestations of power differences between individuals (Uggen and Blackstone 2004). To the extent that policy training reinforces traditional notions of women as weak and men as powerful, it is reinforcing the beliefs that are at the root of most sexual harassment. How does policy training affect gender beliefs? In an experiment, we randomly assigned subjects who were purportedly participating in a team decision-making task to either: 1) a condition in which they received a brief sexual harassment policy training before the task or 2) a control condition in which they did not receive sexual harassment training. After the task, we measured participants' unconscious gender bias and self-reported perceptions of men and women on a variety of scales. We found that male subjects exhibited more unconscious gender bias and rated women as less likable after policy training (Tinkler, Li, and Mollborn 2007). In a follow-up experiment (Tinkler 2013), I collected data ahead of time on subjects' adherence to traditional gender norms (e.g., expect men to open the car door for women, etc.). This allowed me to compare reactions to a policy training across those who subscribe to more traditional gender norms and those who subscribe to more egalitarian gender norms. I found that policy training triggered more unconscious gender bias among those most committed to traditional gender norms. In addition, male subjects with traditional gender norms rated women as less likable after policy training. This was not true for traditional women or egalitarian men. However, female subjects who subscribed to more egalitarian gender norms also rated women as less likable after policy training. Based on my qualitative research and that of others (e.g., Nielsen 2000), I suspect this is because policy training reminded egalitarian women of the negative stereotypes that are associated with sexual harassment complainants (i.e., weak, overly sensitive, vindictive). Some of the women I interviewed who cared a lot about gender equality distanced themselves from negative stereotypes about women by harshly judging those who make "too big of a deal" about unwanted sexual attention (Tinkler 2012). Does the gender of the policy trainer matter? In another experiment, we found that the gender of the policy trainer affects the level of backlash against women (Tinkler, Gremillion, and Arthurs 2015). When a female led the training, male subjects' unconscious gender bias was higher after policy training. However, male policy trainers did not increase male subjects' unconscious bias, and they actually increased ratings of women's likability. In other words, there was no backlash against women when a man led the policy
training. While this does not mean that policy trainings should only be taught by men, the results do suggest that, tasking men—particularly men in powerful positions—with proactively promoting gender-equitable policies may lead to more buy-in by men. Should training emphasize punishments? In a recent study (Tinkler, Clay-Warner, and Alinor forthcoming), we conducted an experiment randomly assigning undergraduate participants to one of three conditions where they read an excerpt of: 1) a sexual misconduct policy that emphasized the threat of punishment, 2) a sexual misconduct policy that emphasized a normative/moral message, or 3) an ergonomic workstation policy that served as our control condition. We found that the threat of punishment increased support for the sexual misconduct policy, but also male subjects’ perception that "most people" hold men to be more powerful than women. In addition, we found that female subjects who received the normative/moral message were less likely to report or encourage a friend to report. Thus, when policies do not include information about punishment, victim reporting may go down. Punishment appears better than normative messaging at moral persuasion but increases gender stereotyping. Where do we go from here? Ironically, organizations that use training programs to merely "check the box" on preventing sexual harassment may be doing so at a cost to gender equality. Crafting policy training that does not activate unconscious gender bias will be a challenging task. My research suggests that training could be improved by focusing on strategies that encourage behavioral change rather than attitudinal change and that avoid polarizing men and women. In this regard, I am encouraged by recent research on the bystander intervention programs being used on college campuses to reduce sexual violence (e.g., Coker et al., 2016). Because bystander intervention training encourages men and women bystanders to change their behavior, emphasizes accountability (like the threat of punishment does), and focuses on norm change through behavioral change (rather than simply paying lip service), it may have more promise for legitimating sexual harassment as a social problem while avoiding the reinforcement of stereotypes about gender difference. Still, good policy training that includes bystander approaches can serve important purposes, but only if accompanied by structural changes in the organization of work. Research shows that having routine experiences that disconfirm gender stereotypes can undermine the effect of cultural stereotypes on behavior. Since women and men are often segregated within organizations, with men disproportionately in higher-level and women dis-proportionately in lower-level positions, many workplaces remain organized in ways that promote hierarchical interactions between men and women. As a result, workplace interactions between men and women are often stereotype activating rather than stereotype attenuating. Research has shown that gender inequality declines in organizations where employees work on collaborative teams that cross job boundaries because it reduces the sex segregation of work tasks within the organization (for a review, see Green and Kalev 2008). This research has implications not only for how workplaces are organized, but also for how professional associations like the ASA are organized and conduct their annual meetings. Better policy training should be coupled with practices that provide opportunities for more gender-stereotype disconfirming experiences. Such structural changes would unify rather than polarize men and women and help them recognize that they have an equal stake in promoting a gender-equitable workplace.
References


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