In their focal article, Medeiros and Griffith (2019) propose a framework for designing sexual harassment (SH) trainings for the workplace. Following best practices, they discuss the use of a needs analysis prior to training development to gather information about what critical pieces should be included in SH training for a given organization. We agree that a needs analysis is valuable in training development; however, there are unique challenges to SH reporting and acknowledgment that may dilute the value otherwise provided by a needs analysis. Previous research reveals that individuals are reluctant to report their experiences of SH (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Foster & Fullagar, 2018). As a result of such underreporting, organizations will not have the most valid and reliable data for determining what, how, and with whom they may need to develop SH training.

Thus, we posit that broader steps should be taken in order to gather relevant information that can be used to develop useful SH training. It is important for organizations to take strides to ensure that individuals feel like they can report problematic workplace experiences that may involve experiences of SH, discrimination, and other forms of unethical behavior. In this commentary, we discuss how increased perceptions of safety in disclosing SH are critical for organizations to begin taking strides to improve SH climates and develop useful training to reduce and prevent SH and abuse in the workplace.

Whistleblowing

The whistleblowing literature provides a useful lens to understand reporting of SH in organizations. Whistleblowing is the disclosure of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices in organizations (Near & Miceli, 1985) with the disclosure being made by internal (e.g., incumbents) or external actors (e.g., external auditors). Researchers have identified various individual differences (e.g., job satisfaction, job performance, and propensity to whistle blow; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Tavakoli, Keenan & Cranjak-Karanovic, 2003) and organizational factors (e.g., supervisor support, ethical and authentic leadership; Bhal & Dadhich, 2011; Liu, Liao, & Wei, 2015; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005) that influence reporting of unethical and/or problematic behavior.

Compared to individual factors, organizational factors have been found to hold more explanatory power and consistency in whistleblowing (Vadera, Aguilera, & Caza, 2009). Notably, research has found the organizational climate (i.e., perceptions of procedural justice) for reporting to be a key determinant in reporting sexual harassment in the workplace (Bergman et al., 2002). In line with past research, we argue that the organizational climates within organizations may be influential for individuals when determining whether they will report experiences of SH.
Organizational climate

In order to increase disclosure of SH events and complement a needs analysis, organizations can perform a “climate analysis” (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019), where the organization considers employees’ level of comfort in reporting SH when it occurs. This analysis becomes crucial, particularly in the case of SH, because organizational climate captures the shared perceptions that are a “critical determinant of individual behaviors in organizations” (Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003, p. 605). Schneider, White, and Paul (1998) differentiated between specific climates and foundation climates, with specific climates being climates “for something” (e.g., customer service, voice, SH). Foundation climates, on the other hand, refer to the shared perceptions about broader foundational issues that sustain work (Wallace, Popp, & Mondore, 2006). The difference is primarily an issue of bandwidth (Carr et al., 2003), with foundation climates being broader in nature and specific climates being narrower in scope and focus. We argue that a foundation climate construct may be influential for both deterring and reporting SH: psychological safety climate.

Psychological safety

A primary reason that people do not report SH and other forms of unethical behavior is because they fear retaliation from their organization, or they believe that nothing will be done as a result of the reporting (Lee, Heilmann, & Near, 2004). One way to increase SH reporting is to increase an organization’s psychological safety climate. Psychological safety refers to the belief that one is safe at work to express him/herself without fear of negative consequences (Kahn, 1990). Psychological safety has been shown to be positively related to numerous job attitudes and behaviors including employee engagement, task performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017). Psychological safety provides employees with a feeling of security that allows them to operate at work without fear of repercussions (Edmondson, 1999).

We position psychological safety climate as a foundation climate that can set the stage for greater reporting of SH. We feel psychological safety is uniquely placed within the climate literature to capture shared perceptions of being able to report unethical behaviors, including SH, because it helps remove one of the larger barriers identified that prevents people from reporting. Specifically, the fear of negative consequences against one’s self for reporting the behavior may hinder reporting of SH. Thus, creating a climate of psychological safety is an important step in ensuring that there is transfer of SH training related to reporting because this climate provides employees with a sense of security that is important when filing a claim of unethical behavior against another employee.

Organizations wanting to increase the reporting, and decrease the prevalence, of SH may find that psychological safety climate has far reaching effects to this end. Psychological safety climate represents a work context within which more specific climates that affect SH can develop. Indeed, there is some evidence that suggests that foundation climates enable the development of more specific climates (e.g., Schneider et al., 1998; Wallace et al., 2006). There are other specific climates that may relate to SH, however. Next, we discuss two specific climates that may emerge from strong psychological safety climates: voice climate and sexual harassment climate. Voice climate represents shared perceptions that speaking up in the workplace is encouraged (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011). Prohibitive voice, which is focused on expressions of concern about issues that might harm the organization (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012), may be raised to address issues around SH. In addition to voice climate, SH climate, which captures shared perceptions of intolerance for sexual harassment (Rubino et al., 2018), may develop under the foundational roots of climate for psychological safety. Thus, for each of these specific climates (i.e., voice and SH), the foundational climate of psychological safety may enable these more specific climates to emerge.
In addition to studying the current psychological safety climate, organizations can work to increase the psychological safety for employees by improving contextual factors that have been shown to be related to psychological safety. As with whistleblowing behavior, research shows that leaders and others play a role in feelings of psychological safety. Within a team context, leader inclusiveness (the extent to which leaders create a welcoming and inclusive environment) has been shown to be positively related to team member psychological safety (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Additionally, meta-analytic findings have shown that positive leader relations was positively related to psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). Leaders can help establish a climate that is inclusive and safe by setting the standard and leading by example. When leaders model behavior that is supportive, caring, and not tolerant of mistreatment, employees will be more likely to feel comfortable discussing issues that arise with organizational leadership. As a way to increase psychological safety, organizations can train leaders and managers to engage in inclusive practices that help employees feel comfortable disclosing mistreatment.

Additionally, coworker support has been shown to be positively related to psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017).Coworker support has also been shown to be negatively related to perceptions of unethical behavior such as perceived discrimination (Ruggs, Martinez, Hebl, & Law, 2015). Further, coworker support explains the positive relationship between disclosure of a stigmatized identity and job attitudes (Law, Martinez, Ruggs, Hebl, & Akers, 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that coworkers can help set the stage for creating a climate that would allow individuals to feel safe disclosing SH. Specifically, coworkers can help to create social norms that foster psychological safety because they establish a level of behavior expectations that are not tolerant of mistreatment and are welcoming of reporting and sanctioning mistreatment. Thus, climate analysis should examine the levels of coworker support that are expressed and seek ways to incorporate training on supportive behaviors that can be beneficial in helping create psychological safety and encouraging people to report SH when it occurs.

Conclusion

Best practices for the design and implementation of more effective SH training is a paramount concern in today’s organizations. We argue, however, that it is important for organizations to consider organizational climate, and psychological safety climate in particular, for creating a context where individuals feel comfortable disclosing experiences of SH and other problematic behaviors. Fostering a strong psychological safety climate encourages reporting of a broad range of unethical behaviors by indicating to employees that they will not be punished or penalized for speaking up about SH more specifically. When individuals report experiences of SH, that information can be used to develop training that addresses the issues that are emerging in a specific organization. To this end, organizational training should extend to creating a safe context in which employees feel safe reporting behaviors beyond sexual harassment. This means that organizational leaders should illustrate concern and care, and they should clearly communicate organizational policies not only around SH and violations of harassment but also around unethical behaviors outside of SH.

References


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.


