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THE "CUSTOMER" IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT: THIRD-PARTY SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN LIBRARIES (Paper)

Abstract

Third party sexual harassment is often experienced by frontline library workers and is perpetuated by the very patrons they endeavour to support. This paper reports on the results of an environmental scan designed to delineate the interdisciplinary scope of third-party sexual harassment, to describe methods and methodologies used to understand this issue from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and to inform future research in Library and Information Studies on this understudied, but critically important topic.

1. Introduction

The #MeToo movement has recently brought to popular consciousness the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in the workplace (Drexler, 2017; Lublin, 2017). Indeed, workplace sexual harassment is an ongoing issue particularly for women working in feminized and service-oriented labour (Good & Cooper, 2016; Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008). While workplace sexual harassment discourse tends to focus on harassment between employees and employers, in libraries third party sexual harassment is often experienced by frontline library workers and is perpetuated by the very patrons they endeavour to support (Manley, 1993; McLain & Civitello, 2017). Furthermore, library workers may receive little to no training about how to deal with sexual harassment by patrons, or how to protect and take care of themselves on the service desk, despite the fact that employees may experience significant and long-term stress, anxiety, depression, a feeling of loss of control at work, and fear for one's personal safety as a consequence of being sexually harassed (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Good & Cooper, 2016; Morganson & Major, 2014).

Because sexual harassment is a pervasive societal issue with reverberating consequences that extend into library and information studies (LIS), this paper reports on the results of a deep environmental scan which sought to delineate the scope and facets of third-party sexual harassment and to describe some of the methods and methodologies used to understand this issue. Sexual harassment is an important issue for LIS educators, researchers, and practitioners to consider as it intersects with ongoing LIS and feminist scholarship and praxis that opposes and undermines gendered power structures that endanger women workers and make them vulnerable to gender-based violence (Baker, 2008; Martin, 2015, MacKinnon, 1979). This work has important implications for LIS education programs, public libraries, and other publicly funded institutions who educate, prepare, or train frontline library workers to engage with the public.

2. Methods

Through an environmental scan of the extant literature across various academic and professional disciplines, we sought to understand the disciplinary scope of third-party sexual harassment in

order to discuss its implications on theory, practice, and education in LIS. Research identified via a comprehensive and systematic review of the academic literature from across disciplines such as management, women's and gender studies, nursing, and tourism and hospitality were analyzed, along with scholarly and professional LIS literature pertinent to the topic. In addition, we analyzed the various methods and methodologies used to examine this issue across disciplines. Digital sources, including commercial databases, open access repositories, and search engines were used to conduct this review. A total of 87 articles were reviewed.

3. Findings outside of LIS

Sexual harassment is a systemic societal problem that intersects with public libraries as institutions, library workers (including library technicians, librarians, management, library boards, etc.), and the general public who use the library. This problem, however, is not isolated to library work. The sexual harassment of retail workers, waitresses, hotel workers, and nurses, amongst other occupations, have long been acknowledged and examined in the extant literature. Predominantly through interviews and surveys, sexual harassment experienced by frontline service-oriented workers has been well-documented and thoroughly discussed in various academic disciplines including women's and gender studies, healthcare, retail and hospitality studies, organizational studies, and social psychology. Although studies on this topic share common goals of raising awareness and inciting change, some studies centre on the prevalence and nature of third-party sexual harassment, while others focus on the conditions and consequences of its manifestation in the workplace. Highlights of our findings are presented below.

Research from the lens of **organizational studies** including labour, management, and employment relations, often seek to examine the conditions and consequences of third-party sexual harassment, particularly as it relates to the organization or industry in question (e.g., Fine, Shepherd, & Josephs, 1999; Poulston, 2008). Gendered job roles are often considered in the context of food services, retail, hospitality, and accommodation; hotel workers and waitresses are frequently sexualized and subjected to sexual harassment by guests due to the perceived low status of their work, job-specific pressures such as tips, and gendered organizational expectations including dress codes (e.g., Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Wijesinghe, 2017). Research in organizational studies are also concerned with the liability and responsibility of employers to protect employees from third-party sexual harassment. Organizational culture, as well as the relationships and power dynamics between customers, employees, and employers are important areas of focus in organizational studies that extend to library spaces and contexts.

Studies in the fields of **nursing and healthcare** – including physicians, psychologists, and chiropractors – have found that sexual harassment and workplace violence against practitioners is more often perpetrated by patients and their families than by coworkers or supervisors (e.g., Cheung & Yip, 2017). Using large scale surveys, many of these studies examine the prevalence of third-party sexual harassment, and suggest that its occurrence has adverse impacts on patient care and employee well-being (e.g., Hibino, Ogino, & Inagaki, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2017). The intimate and confidential nature of healthcare work often makes experiences of sexual harassment difficult for employees to label and address.

Research in **women's and gender studies** often approach this issue from a critical feminist perspective. Predominantly through in-depth interviews, this work links socially constructed gender norms and expectations with systemic inequalities and highlight the power imbalances that manifest in service and care work – such as nursing and library work – where frontline employees are predominantly women (e.g. Hall, 1993; Kensbock, Bailey, Jennings, & Patiar, 2015; Williams, 2003). These gendered power differentials are further exacerbated by customer-employee power relations, where customers, patrons, clients, and patients hold power over frontline employees. Work in women's and gender studies, as well as social psychology, also explore employees' perceptions of and responses to sexual harassment (e.g., Morganson & Major, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016).

Across all disciplines examined, it is noted that women tend to ignore and tolerate experiences of third-party sexual harassment – typically reacting with personal coping strategies rather than engaging with formal or institutional responses such as reporting incidents to a supervisor. These coping strategies – including dismissing or laughing off the interaction – are often misconstrued for consent, further perpetuating the inappropriate comments and behaviours. The role of gender in experiences of third-party sexual harassment as well as the reluctance of employees to report these incidents are noted by scholars of all disciplines in the examined literature. Taken together, the literature identifies service culture and workplace attitudes of "the customer is always right" or "it's your job to be friendly" as significant factors that perpetuate third-party sexual harassment of frontline workers. Third-party sexual harassment is predominantly perpetrated against female workers by male patrons. Although a majority of the literature examined addresses gender as an important factor in how third-party sexual harassment manifests and is experienced, relatively few acknowledge how other social factors – such as race and class – as well as their intersections contribute to ways that harassment is perpetrated and experienced. Sexual harassment is an abuse of power and an act of dominance and oppression; race and ethnicity and they ways that they are perceived by individuals, as well as society more broadly, must be acknowledged in this conversation.

4. Findings within LIS

The various facets of third-party sexual harassment identified in other public-facing professions are transferrable to libraries. In addition to being pink-collar, feminized work, library work is, in many ways, service and care work. Library workers – like nurses and servers for example, often put the needs and comfort of patrons over their own, making it difficult to address issues like sexual harassment. Several scholars argue that the broad structural conditions (e.g. patriarchy, feminized and service-oriented labour) of library work make women workers especially vulnerable to patron perpetuated sexual harassment (Bird, 2007; Gaines, 2014; Garrison, 1977; Higgins, 2017), while service expectations, as well as library values of inclusion and universal access, contribute to the reluctance of staff to address this issue with patrons. Furthermore, there is significant variation in how sexual harassment is reported and handled by different library organizations. Despite growing calls within LIS for further examination of the issue (Carlton, 2017; Dewitt, 2017; Jensen, 2017; McLain & Civitello, 2017), third-party sexual harassment against library workers is largely ignored and research on this topic is noticeably lacking. Studies in other fields demonstrate that most instances of third-party sexual harassment go unreported, and that employees often feel obligated to react to these occurrences independently, with

informal responses and coping strategies (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Morganson & Major; 2014; Vaughn, 2002). The under-reporting and normalcy of this issue in LIS has likely contributed to its lack of acknowledgement in academic and professional scholarship.

5. Implications for further research

The results of this environmental scan indicate broadly that there are many important conversations about third party sexual harassment taking place across disciplinary fields that will inform our way forward within LIS. A majority of the literature examined identifies the development and implementation of policies as key to addressing third-party sexual harassment in workplaces. Many researchers also emphasize the need for training and education, in the workplace as well as in pre-professional programs (such as MLIS and LIT programs), that prepare current and prospective workers to handle incidents of third-party sexual harassment and respond accordingly. This training should be both theoretical – to examine the sociocultural contexts of sexual harassment – as well as practical – to provide tangible strategies to address this problem.

These results serve as the foundation for the next stages of our research project on this topic: 1) to collect qualitative data about library workers' experiences of sexual harassment; and 2) to develop related LIS education programs and library training workshops based on best practices found in the literature. More broadly we wish to initiate conversation amongst LIS students, educators, library workers, and patrons to raise awareness about the prevalence of third party sexual harassment in libraries and to destigmatize what we argue is a harmful yet "everyday" form of gender based violence.

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