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## TO ACT OR NOT TO ACT: THE DILEMMA FACED BY SEXUAL HARASSMENT OBSERVERS

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Efforts to end sexual harassment that rely primarily on target reporting are unlikely to be successful because most targets do not report their experiences. Thus, we explore an alternative mechanism for controlling sexual harassment—observer intervention. We examine observer intervention in sexual harassment using the literature on bystander intervention for guidance. We describe the concept of observer intervention, develop a taxonomy of intervention types, and discuss factors promoting and inhibiting its occurrence.

One of the most interesting aspects of sexual harassment (SH) phenomena is that victimized employees often respond passively—for example, by denying the harassment, avoiding the harasser, or treating the harassment as a joke—rather than directly—for example, by confronting the harasser or reporting the behavior (Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995). On the surface, passive coping strategies seem odd, given the very negative consequences targets of harassment often suffer, including physical violation, psychological harm, lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and deterioration of work relationships (Gutek & Koss, 1993). Recent research, however, identifies plausible explanations for this seeming preference for passive rather than direct coping. Targets juggle competing goals following a harassment incident, with their desire to end the harassment weighed against such objectives as avoiding reprisal by the harasser and maintaining their reputation and status in the workgroup (Bingham, 1991; Knapp et al., 1997; Gutek, 1985; O'Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 2000; Ragins & Scandura, 1995). This implies that organizational efforts to end SH that rely primarily or exclusively on target reporting are unlikely to be successful.

Given this, it is useful to explore other prevention or control mechanisms, such as observer

intervention. Observers are individuals who see harassment occurring but are not directly involved in the incident. Of course, SH is not always witnessed. Some incidents, particularly *quid pro quo harassment* (which requires sexual compliance in exchange for the retention or attainment of some employment opportunity), may unfold with only the harasser and target having knowledge of its occurrence. However, especially in the case of *hostile environment harassment*, in which the work climate itself becomes poisoned, there often are individuals present who observe the harassment and who might take action to stop it or prevent future incidents (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000). Specifically, observers may intervene in varied ways, such as reporting cases of witnessed harassment, stopping an unfolding event, or providing negative feedback to harassers regarding their behavior (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1996, 1999).

Although bystanders often have the power to change a situation (Clarkson, 1996), their influence largely has been overlooked in SH research (Cleveland, 1994; Kulik, Perry, & Schmidtke, 1997). We address this gap by developing a theoretical framework that identifies (1) the types of intervention behaviors initiated by SH observers and (2) the conditions under which SH observers are likely to choose intervention over nonintervention. In the following sections we describe the concept of observer intervention, develop a typology of intervention strategies, and propose a model that describes how the decision to intervene might occur. Finally,

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we present a research agenda based on our theory and discuss some of the challenges it poses.

### OBSERVER INTERVENTION: EXPLAINING OUR TERMS

Before we discuss specific forms of observer intervention, it is necessary to clarify the terms *observer* and *intervention*. Depending on how broadly it is defined, *observer* could include both individuals who hear about an incident of harassment and those who actually witness it. Witnessing an incident of SH generally will be a more compelling experience compared to acquiring second-hand knowledge of it, suggesting that witnesses may experience stronger and more complex reactions. In addition, individuals who witness SH have a broader range of actions available to them, because they can intervene not only to prevent future incidents of harassment but also in the unfolding event itself. Therefore, we focus our discussion around observers who have *witnessed* SH behavior. This conceptualization of observers is consistent with the notion of "bystanders" in the bystander intervention (BI) literature (e.g., Latané & Darley, 1970).

*Intervention* generally may be conceptualized as *helping* behavior. That is, intervention often will reflect a desire by the observer to provide assistance. Although helping is not the only motivation for observer intervention in SH (we discuss situations in which the observer is acting in a more self-interested mode later), it is likely to be a dominant motive. Given this, it is important to place observer intervention within the domain of this other, related concept.

Research categorizes helping behavior along several underlying dimensions, including *role characteristics* and *intended beneficiary*. In regard to the former, helping behavior can be either inrole or extrarole. For example, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Organ, 1988) is, by definition, extrarole (Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1996). Alternatively, other helping (e.g., prosocial behavior; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986) can include both inrole and extrarole actions (Van Dyne et al., 1995). Similarly, we expect that observer intervention in SH can occur when a person's work role necessitates action or when the individual chooses to act even when no role requirement exists. Es-

entially, then, SH observers sometimes help because they have to and sometimes because they want to.

In regard to the latter dimension—intended beneficiary—we also expect observer intervention in SH to reflect the breadth evident in the more general helping literature. Some helping behaviors are intended to benefit the organization (e.g., OCBs), but others (e.g., prosocial behaviors) may be intended to benefit an individual, a group, or the organization (Van Dyne et al., 1995). Similarly, the BI literature distinguishes multiple motives for intervention. Although observer action often is attributed to "pure" motives such as altruism (where the intended beneficiary is the target of the negative event that is witnessed), this literature also offers hedonistic motives such as a desire to relieve one's own empathic suffering or to look good in front of others (Latané & Darley, 1970). Taken together, this literature suggests that observers of SH may intervene with varying beneficiaries in mind. At times their actions may be intended to assist the harassment target, at times to build a stronger organization, at times to alleviate a guilty conscience, and even at times to help the harasser. It is our supposition, then, that a variety of beneficiaries and role expectations can influence observer action.

### A TYPOLOGY OF OBSERVER INTERVENTION IN SH

Given this introduction to observer intervention, we now specifically define the forms that this behavior might take in SH incidents. As shown in Figure 1, observer intervention is categorized along two dimensions: (1) immediacy of intervention and (2) level of involvement.

The first dimension (*immediacy of intervention*) distinguishes cases in which intervention occurs in a current situation (high immediacy) from interventions that take place at a later point in time (low immediacy). In some instances observers' actions are instantaneous and incident focused—that is, they attempt to manage the unfolding SH event. In other cases the observer's involvement may be delayed (it occurs after the harassing episode has ended). For example, the observer may not take action during the incident but may later intervene by advising the target or by reporting the incident (i.e., whistle-blowing). In general, high-immedi-

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Typology of Observer Intervention Behaviors in Sexual Harassment**

		Immediacy of intervention	
		Low	High
Level of involvement	Low	<p>Low-immediacy-low-involvement behaviors</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Observer privately advises target to avoid the harasser</li> <li>● Observer covertly tries to keep harasser away from target</li> <li>● Observer advises target to report the incident but does not get involved personally</li> </ul>	<p>High-immediacy-low-involvement behaviors</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Observer redirects harasser away from unfolding harassing conduct</li> <li>● Observer removes target from the situation</li> <li>● Observer interrupts the incident</li> </ul>
	High	<p>Low-immediacy-high-involvement behaviors</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Observer later reports the harasser to management</li> <li>● Observer accompanies the target when she/he reports the incident</li> <li>● Observer confronts the harasser after the incident</li> </ul>	<p>High-immediacy-high-involvement behaviors</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Observer tells harasser to stop the harassing conduct</li> <li>● Observer publicly encourages target to report the conduct</li> <li>● Observer tries to get other observers to denounce the conduct</li> </ul>

acy interventions focus on interruption of a specific ongoing harassment incident, whereas low-immediacy interventions might be thought of as efforts to prevent future harassment from occurring. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive; a particular observer may intervene in an unfolding SH incident *and then* follow up with postincident intervention.

The second dimension (*level of involvement*) reflects the degree to which individuals immerse themselves in the SH incident. The lowest level of involvement is noninvolvement. However, assuming that some intervention occurs, it can vary based on how much observers publicly embroil themselves. In high-involvement intervention, observers insert themselves into the SH episode or issue, increasing the potential for resultant personal risks and benefits. Alternatively, in low-involvement intervention strategies (e.g., private support for the target), observer assistance does not involve a strong public connection to the incident or issue. As evident in our examples, we define involvement in a public, social sense. It is the willingness to take action on the "social stage" of the organization (Gardner & Martinko, 1998: 69)—not ob-

servers' readiness to be involved emotionally or cognitively—that defines "involvement."

Taken together, these dimensions indicate the range of different behavioral options available to harassment observers. First, observers may choose "strong" intervention actions, such as *high-immediacy-high-involvement* behaviors, which publicly immerse them in the unfolding SH episode. In such situations observers may opt for actions such as challenging the harasser (telling him/her to stop the harassment), publicly naming the conduct as SH, or publicly encouraging the target to report the incident. The common denominator is that observers take an active and identifiable role in the SH episode. Similar high-involvement actions taken after the incident (*low-immediacy-high-involvement* behaviors) might include whistle-blowing (i.e., reporting the SH) or offering to accompany the target as reporting occurs.

Alternatively, lower-profile interventions in the unfolding situation (*high-immediacy-low-involvement* behaviors) might include actions like redirecting the harasser's attention away from the harassing conduct or removing the target from the situation. In both cases observers

will want to achieve these goals without naming the conduct as harassing (because they do not want to be embroiled in the harassment matter). Essentially, they want to make the SH incident end, but not via any confrontational stand that pulls them into the conflict. Similarly, after the incident, observers may undertake low-involvement efforts such as covert efforts to keep the target and harasser apart (e.g., ensuring they are not in the same workgroup or ensuring they do not travel together), privately sharing advice with the target, or providing social support behind the scenes. The key characteristics of these low-immediacy-low-involvement behaviors are that observers do not become party to the harassment incident and they occur after the SH incident.

This typology is useful for conceptualizing the types of behaviors SH observers might enact, thereby providing the reader a clearer conceptualization of observer intervention. The typology itself, however, does not provide insight into *when* (if at all) observers will intervene or *what*

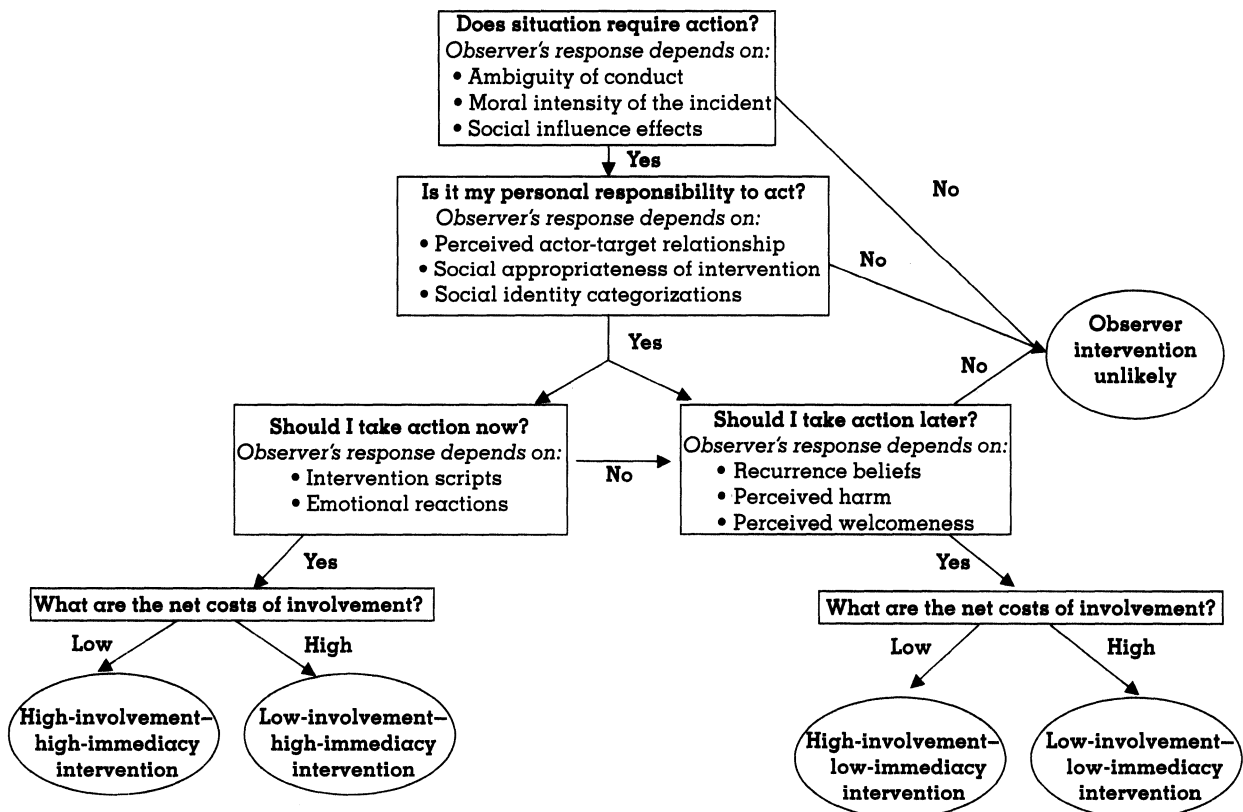
forms of intervention will occur. We address these issues in the remainder of the article.

### OBSERVER INTERVENTION IN SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Latané and Darley (1970) introduced what has become a widely cited framework for conceptualizing BI. This framework presents intervention as the last step in a decision-making process where observers intervene if they notice an unfolding event, and then (1) interpret the situation as one requiring action, (2) decide that it is their personal responsibility to act, and (3) decide on a specific form of assistance to provide. We use this framework for our discussion of observer intervention in SH. Specifically, and as shown in Figure 2, we identify conditions likely to promote or inhibit intervention at each of these decision stages.

Prior to explaining Figure 2, we should note that this model explains intervention in SH specifically; it is not intended to explain interven-

**FIGURE 2**  
Potential Routes to Observer Intervention in Sexual Harassment



tion in other negative work conduct. We expect the factors that influence intervention will depend on the nature of the conduct itself. For example, SH is an *interpersonal* form of harm, indicating that dyadic relationship and social identity issues may become central in ways they do not for other negative actions (e.g., vandalism of company property). In addition, there is significant ambiguity around people's understandings and definitions of SH, suggesting that observer sensemaking may be a more challenging task than with other negative conduct (e.g., reckless use of company equipment). Other forms of intervention, then, may require quite different theoretical explanations.

### General Nature of the Intervention Model

Figure 2 illustrates a decision tree model that depicts the stages inherent in observers' decision making regarding SH intervention. Specifically, we pose several decision-making stages and behavioral outcomes. Consistent with previous BI research (Latané & Darley, 1970), the decision-making stages (illustrated by boxes in Figure 2) include a determination of whether the situation requires action, the degree of personal responsibility for action, and the form of intervention that will be undertaken. Two general outcomes of the decision-making process (illustrated by circles in Figure 2) also are included in the model: (1) observer intervention (which can take the four different forms identified in Figure 1) and (2) observer nonintervention. Observers are expected to choose between these behavioral alternatives based on their determinations (depicted as yes/no assessments) at each of the decision-making stages.

An important aspect of the model is that unless observers develop affirmative answers to the questions posed at each decision-making stage, their intervention is unlikely. Also included in the model are factors expected to be especially relevant to observers' assessments at each decision stage. These factors (presented in bullet-point format in Figure 2), therefore, are fundamental to whether or not intervention occurs. It is important to note that each of these factors is expected to have an independent and significant influence on the relevant decision-making stage—that is, there is no expectation that *all* of the factors identified at each decision

stage are necessary to an observer's assessment at that stage.

This model implies a rational, controlled decision-making process. However, it seems inevitable that, at times, this process will be more automatic than depicted in the model. For example, when individuals witness a very egregious form of harassing conduct or when they have witnessed multiple similar incidents in the past, their reactions to the event may proceed more immediately and with less conscious cognitive processing. Although it will be important for researchers to classify conditions that prompt controlled versus automatic decision making at some point, the more fundamental research issue now is the identification of factors that will influence observers' perceptions regarding intervention. It is worth noting, however, that our emphasis on the latter issue does not imply an assumption that all intervention decisions will involve this high level of cognitive processing.

### Does This Situation Require Action?

Witnesses are unlikely to interpret a situation as one requiring intervention unless they regard the witnessed conduct as harmful behavior. This, then, is the first assessment faced by SH observers. Research on BI and ethical decision making implies that SH often will not be perceived as harmful because of (1) the ambiguous nature of some SH conduct, (2) the low moral intensity of this conduct, and (3) social influence effects. These factors, therefore, are predicted to lead subjects to a "No" response to the question "Does this situation require action?"

**Ambiguous nature of some sexual harassment.** Witnesses will be more likely to intervene in an observed event they regard as harassment than in an interpersonal exchange they perceive as benign. If the exchange is perceived as harassment, it becomes an event for which behavioral norms or codes of conduct exist. Using the language of accountability theory (Cummings & Anton, 1990; Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994), the incident becomes one that is governed by "behavioral prescriptions" to which individuals are accountable. This initial framing of an event, then, determines which prescriptions are activated, thereby affecting the type of behavioral response likely.

SH is a phenomenon, particularly in its less severe forms, that can be ambiguous in that individuals define it quite differently. For example, there is evidence that men perceive fewer actions as harassing than do women (e.g., Blumenthal, 1998), that the degree of work experience influences harassment perceptions (e.g., Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990), and that personal experiences with harassment can influence awareness (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1996). Even the legal standards that define hostile environment harassment are open to subjective interpretation (Gutek et al., 1999; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000; Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1994), with varied perspectives on such questions as what constitutes "severe or pervasive" harassment, when conduct is "unwelcome," and what a "reasonable woman" or "reasonable victim" would do. This contrasts with some other forms of negative work behavior (e.g., unsafe use of company equipment, on-premise drug abuse) in which most observers would have similar interpretations of the situation as problematic. However, given the differential interpretations around SH, observers may not be confident that their own definition of the situation is accurate, and this lack of confidence associated with ambiguous incidents has been found to work against general bystander intervention (Clark & Word, 1972, 1974). Therefore, we offer the following proposition.

*Proposition 1: Observer intervention in SH is more likely when observers perceive the witnessed incident as low (versus high) in ambiguity.*

An interesting question, then, is what characteristics of interpersonal exchanges at work lead them to be clearly interpreted as SH? A few characteristics seem particularly important in regard to SH (in the interest of brevity, we do not share research propositions related to each). Perhaps most obvious, situations in which the target directly appeals to observers for help are likely to be interpreted as necessitating intervention. Because SH is an interpersonal form of aggressive work behavior (as opposed to actions like vandalism or sabotage), there is a person who can seek help from the observer. When a target directly asks for help, much ambiguity is removed from the incident, because the target has labeled it as one that requires action. The BI literature provides support for this

in that direct verbal appeals and eye contact from targets appear to facilitate intervention (Fehr, Dybsky, Wacker, Kerr, & Kerr, 1979; Shotland & Johnson, 1978).

In the absence of a direct appeal for help from the target, the existence of *power differentials between harassers and targets* seems important in observer interpretations. Research on SH shows that behavior initiated by a higher-level employee toward a lower-level employee (as opposed to SH between peers) is more likely to be interpreted as SH (e.g., Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Cochran, Frazier, & Olson, 1997; Kenig & Ryan, 1986). This finding may be attributed to the ability of high-level harassers to impact the job-related conditions of targets. For example, there is little doubt that conduct such as requiring women to engage in sexual activity with supervisors to obtain promotions, as occurred in the District of Columbia prison system (*Neal v. Director, District of Columbia Dept. of Corrections*, 1995), constitutes SH.

Social identity perceptions also may influence the interpretation of SH conduct. Although both men and women likely perceive egregious behavior as SH, men appear less likely to regard ambiguous social sexual behavior as harassing (e.g., Blumenthal, 1998; Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, 1983; Hartnett, Robinson, & Singh, 1989). Social categorization theory, which explains why individuals behave on behalf of groups, provides an explanation. Proponents of this perspective argue that individuals organize their social worlds into ingroup and outgroup categories; that they regard themselves in terms characteristic of the ingroup (prototypes); and that these prototypes influence self-concept, cognitions, and behavior (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Since many SH situations involve a male aggressor acting on a female target (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995),<sup>1</sup> sex-based identities are likely to be salient (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Social categorization principles (Hogg & Terry, 2000), then, suggest that male observers are motivated to interpret the situation in ways that facilitate positive attitudes about their ingroup member (i.e., the male ha-

<sup>1</sup> Although other types of harassment certainly occur (e.g., females as harassers, same-sex harassment), popular wisdom about SH, as well as social science knowledge (Lengnick-Hall, 1995) and legal theory (MacKinnon, 1979), has developed primarily based on a male-on-female model.

rasser). In other words, they are motivated to interpret ambiguous social sexual behavior as something other than SH, which, in turn, influences their decision regarding intervention. This argument is evidenced in recent reports concerning the U.S. Air Force Academy, where it appears that scores of female cadets who complained to male academy officials of sexual assault by male cadets received no assistance from these officials (*Denver Post*, 2003). Although this is not a case of direct observer intervention (in that officials did not witness the incidents), it suggests that even official, premediated responses to severe forms of harassment may be influenced by efforts to protect members of salient identity groups.

**Moral intensity of sexual harassment.** Witnesses also are unlikely to believe that an event is harmful, and therefore necessitating intervention, when they do not regard the event as involving a moral issue. *Moral intensity* captures the degree to which a decision maker perceives a moral imperative in an event. This moral imperative stems from characteristics of the event itself—that is, the immediacy and seriousness of consequences and degree of social consensus on the issue (Jones, 1991). Individuals who do not regard an event as having a moral imperative are less likely to engage ethics schemata and to behave ethically around this event (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1996, 1999; Jones, 1991; O’Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Therefore, individuals who do not regard SH as a high moral intensity issue are unlikely to intervene.

Although the moral imperative inherent in many forms of negative work conduct (e.g., physical assault of a coworker, abusive supervision) is not open to debate, this may not be true of all SH. Previous research suggests that there are numerous aspects of SH scenarios that discourage individuals from perceiving them as high in moral intensity (see O’Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001, for a review). The tendency for targets to respond passively (Knapp et al., 1997) may create the misperception that SH has few serious or immediate consequences—a condition associated with low moral intensity (Jones, 1991). Further, differing perceptions about what constitutes SH may result in divergent assessments of its harm, again leading to low moral intensity perceptions. In other words, many forms of SH are not perceived as morally intense. Indeed, it appears SH may be viewed as a

“normal” occurrence in organizations such as Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing of America, where hundreds of female employees repeatedly were groped and exposed to sexually explicit pictures and gestures. In such environments SH may no longer be regarded as “morally wrong” but, in fact, may become normative.

*Proposition 2: Observer intervention in SH is more likely when observers perceive the witnessed incident as high (versus low) in moral intensity.*

**Social influence effects.** A final condition that may lead witnesses to perceive a SH event as harmless, and therefore not requiring intervention, is based in social influence effects. Research on BI suggests that the reactions of other bystanders (especially to ambiguous events) can determine an observer’s beliefs regarding the necessity of intervention (Clark & Word, 1974; Latané & Darley, 1970). Specifically, observers seek cues regarding intervention from other bystanders and are less likely to intervene if these individuals do not appear anxious about the situation (Clark & Word, 1972; Darley, Teger, & Lewis, 1973; Harrison & Wells, 1991; Latané & Nida, 1981). This effect is particularly pronounced when other observers are perceived as similar to oneself (Smith, Smythe, & Lien, 1972).

Therefore, observers of a SH situation seem likely to scrutinize the reactions of other observers in order to determine the appropriate perceptual framing of the situation. If other witnesses appear anxious or uncomfortable, the observer is more likely to perceive the situation as one requiring action. Alternatively, if other witnesses do not appear anxious, this signals to the observer that nothing is amiss, resulting in a low probability of intercession. This effect, referred to as *pluralistic ignorance* in the BI literature (Latané & Darley, 1970), may be quite similar to social influence effects found in groupthink situations (Janis, 1982).

*Proposition 3: The intervention decisions of SH observers are influenced by the behavior of other observers such that intervention by any one individual is more likely when other observers display stronger (versus weaker) concern regarding the incident.*



### Is It My Personal Responsibility to Act?

If observers believe that a witnessed situation requires action, their next decision (as shown in Figure 2) involves beliefs regarding intervention as a personal responsibility (Latané & Darley, 1970). It is quite possible for bystanders witnessing a harmful event to believe that someone should take action but also to assume that *someone* means *someone else*. The determination of personal responsibility to act is a complex issue and one that requires consideration of numerous factors in the social environment within which the event is unfolding. We begin with a discussion of a well-established effect in the BI literature and then discuss how this effect is complicated by social environment factors.

The most common finding in the BI literature is that "the presence of other people serves to inhibit the impulse to help" (Latané & Darley, 1970: 38). A review of dozens of studies across thousands of subjects suggests the robustness of this general finding (Latané & Nida, 1981). There are several theoretical explanations for this effect, perhaps the most common of which is *diffusion of responsibility*—an explanation positing that as the number of bystanders increases, individual observers feel less personally responsible to act and less concerned that they will be blamed for their inaction (Gottlieb & Carver, 1980; Latané & Nida, 1981). The number of other observers, then, distributes responsibility across a wider range of individuals, thereby decreasing perceptions both of individual liability and of the risks of inaction for a given individual.

Based on this widespread finding, it would be reasonable to predict that as the size of the observer group increased, the likelihood of a particular observer intervening in SH would diminish. However, recent criticisms of the BI literature suggest that belief in an automatic inverse relationship between observer group size and helping is "overly reductionist" (Levine, 1999) in explanation and ignores the impact of social factors on intervention decisions. This criticism raises the possibility that "failure to intervene can be seen not as the product of degradation of feelings of individual responsibility brought on by the presence of others, but as a socially meaningful act in its own right" (Levine, 1999: 1151). In particular, Levine (1999) predicts that the perceived relationship between actor

and victim, the social appropriateness of intervention, and the social identity categorizations of the observer influence intervention decisions (Levine, 1999).

**Relationship between actor and target.** From a social categorization perspective, individuals' decisions regarding personal responsibility will be influenced by the social categories they invoke when making sense of the witnessed event (Levine, 1999). We find evidence for this in the tragic episode of nonintervention illustrated by the famous James Bulger case, in which two-year-old James was abducted, beaten, and killed by two ten-year-old boys who first walked the injured and crying toddler through the streets of Liverpool, England, for over two hours. In this case some witnesses' self-reports indicate that these individuals chose inaction not because of diffusion of responsibility (as the traditional BI literature suggests) but because they categorized James' attackers as family members and were reluctant to intervene in domestic matters, which are accorded a strong right to privacy in Western societies (Levine, 1999). This suggests that observers' perceptions of personal responsibility depend, in part, on the social categorizations used to define the relationship between the actor and victim.

Some early findings in the BI literature are consistent with this explanation. This research demonstrates that when bystanders perceive a personal relationship between two parties in a witnessed exchange, the bystanders are less likely to become involved (Levine, 1999; Moriarty, 1975; Shotland & Straw, 1976). For example, when witnessing a violent argument between a man and a woman, bystanders are much less likely to intervene if they believe the individuals are married—and the default assumption appears to be that they are married (Shotland & Straw, 1976). Thus, it seems that an inferred intimate relationship somehow legitimates violence, causing it to be perceived as less harmful and as "none of my business" (Levine, 1999: 1136).

In SH situations we expect that witnesses often will assume a preexisting relationship between the harasser and target. The target and harasser typically are coworkers (e.g., U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995), which implies at least some level of interaction and involvement. At times, this relationship may be closer, such as when individuals belong to the same

workgroup or when the exchange involves a supervisor-subordinate dyad. In addition, BI research (Levine, 1999) suggests that witnesses tend to interpret exchanges between male aggressors and female targets, which is the most common SH scenario (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995), as private or personal matters. Observers, then, may rationalize their inaction in a SH event with several social category-based justifications. For example, they may dismiss harassing actions as "horsing around between friends" or as a private matter between a man and a woman who have some previous history that is unknown to the observer.

Regardless of the perceived form of relationship, observers who suspect a preexisting relationship between two parties in a SH event are more likely to assume they do not have the contextual information to determine what the witnessed conduct represents, and less likely to intervene. In addition, the BI literature suggests that observers often perceive male aggressor-female victim aggression as less damaging in cases of a personal relationship (Shotland & Straw, 1976), again reducing the likelihood of intervention. Finally, shrewd harassers may actually work to create the impression that there is some legitimate personal relationship that justifies the behavior and that suggests the inappropriateness of observer intervention. These messages, regardless of their truth, create ambiguity for observers, who then are less likely to intervene.

*Proposition 4: Observer intervention in SH is more likely when the observer perceives no personal relationship between the harasser and target.*

**Social appropriateness of intervention.** Traditional BI literature suggests that the presence of multiple observers leads not only to diffusion of responsibility but also to *audience inhibition*, in which bystanders fear embarrassment if they intervene inappropriately (Clark & Word, 1972, 1974; Latané & Nida, 1981). Determination of the appropriateness of personal intervention is partly a function of the perceived relationship between the actor and target (as discussed previously) but also partly of other social factors, such as the observer's role requirements.

In many organizational settings, certain individuals are formally assigned—through role expectations—the task of preventing SH (e.g., su-

pervisors, human resource professionals). Similarly, legal theory (e.g., *Andrews v. City of Philadelphia*, 1990; *Burlington Industries v. Ellerth*, 1998; Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1994) establishes role expectations for "agents of the organization"—that is, people with supervisory authority or who exercise significant control over hiring, firing, or conditions of employment (*Paroline v. Unisys Corporation*, 1990; Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1994). Given this, it seems likely that these agents, on observing an incident of harassment, will be more likely than other observers (those without role responsibilities) to intervene. Because of both legal and organizational expectations, nonintervention has greater costs for these individuals (e.g., potential legal liability, potential disciplinary action by the employer).

Using the language of accountability theory, the SH incident is governed by "behavioral prescriptions" to which these individuals are accountable (Cummings & Anton, 1990; Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Schlenker et al., 1994). Research on BI supports this expectation, in that when subjects are asked to accept "focused responsibility" (i.e., asked to provide assistance in the event of a particular type of emergency situation), they are more likely to act (Shaffer, Rogel, & Hendrick, 1975). Similarly, research on peer reporting of unethical behavior and whistleblowing indicates that observers are more likely to intervene if such behavior is formally established as a responsibility of their work role (e.g., Miceli, Near, & Schwenk, 1991; Treviño & Victor, 1992).

*Proposition 5: Observer intervention in SH is more likely when observers' organizational role expectations include SH prevention than when they do not.*

The existence of these harassment-related role expectations influences not only the behavior of the role holder but also that of other observers. Some BI research suggests that responsibility for helping may not be perceived as uniform among all bystanders (Cramer, McMaster, Bartell, & Dragna, 1988; Schwartz & Clausen, 1970). Specifically, observers appear to be less likely to act when they believe there are others in the bystander group who are more competent to intervene (Cramer et al., 1988; Pantin & Carver, 1982; Ross & Braband, 1973; Schwartz &

Clausen, 1970). If the group of witnesses to a harassing event includes an individual whose organizational role expectations include SH prevention (e.g., a supervisor, a human resources professional), other observers are less likely to intervene. The presence of an observer with such role expectations both enhances the audience inhibition effect (in which the embarrassment associated with inappropriate intervention is heightened) and minimizes felt responsibility (given the formal role expectations attached to the other observer).

*Proposition 6: Observers for whom intervention is extrarole will be more likely to intervene when the observer group does not include an individual for whom such behavior is considered inrole.*

**Social identity categorizations.** Earlier, we mentioned social identity effects on the observer's interpretation of the sexual harassment situation. Identity issues are also relevant in determining one's personal responsibility to act. Social identity involves an awareness of the self as belonging to a unique social unit that shares a common identity—for example, "I am a female professor" or "I am a black American" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This awareness is associated with a depersonalization of the self—a recognition of the self as a representative of this social unit (Turner, 1985). These social connections lead individuals to develop "an empathic altruism" (Turner, 1985: 111), in which they feel obliged to support the needs and goals of other ingroup members. Given this, observers who share a salient identity grouping with the SH target will experience greater felt responsibility to provide assistance than will individuals who do not regard the target as a member of their identity group. Of course, the specific nature of the identity-based connection could vary in that individuals may share a grouping with the target based on many factors, such as gender or race, work position or role, or even friendship. It seems likely, though, that gender may be an especially salient identity grouping in SH situations.

*Proposition 7: Observer intervention in SH is more likely when an observer and target are (versus are not) mem-*

*bers of the same salient identity group.*

### **What Type of Intervention Should I Undertake?**

If observers have determined that the SH incident requires intervention and that it is their personal responsibility to take action, then they are primed to act. The remaining question concerns what form their action will take. As shown in Figure 2, observers may choose to act immediately and/or to act later, after the current SH event has unfolded. Further, they must determine their level of involvement. We now examine conditions that influence the *immediacy* of intervention and the *level of involvement* that observers choose (i.e., the two dimensions used in Figure 1 to identify types of intervention behaviors).

Simon argues that if rationality in decision making is even to be approached, "a period of hesitation must precede choice" such that decision makers can consider a broader range of behavioral alternatives and their consequences (1997: 101). Alternatively (and more likely, according to Simon) is the case in which decisions involve relatively limited information processing (such as habitual responses). This suggests that SH observers who intervene immediately in an unfolding event will be more limited in their information processing than will those who delay intervention. Different factors, then, are likely to influence immediate versus delayed SH intervention.

**Should I take action now?** Immediate intervention involves rapid decision making, which seems most likely when observers (1) hold pre-existing cognitive scripts for action and (2) are driven by emotions rather than controlled cognitive processing.

**Intervention scripts.** Scripts are cognitive representations of sequences of events learned from direct or vicarious experience (Abelson, 1976). If an observer personally has intervened in the past, intervention in the present seems more likely, given this precedent. More interesting, however, is the case where individuals recall intervention modeled by others. Having witnessed a role model, individuals may face fewer significant cognitive hurdles in determining whether and how to intervene, which will influence their ability to respond quickly. This role modeling might occur in formal venues (e.g.,

organization-sponsored training programs) or more informally (e.g., an individual witnessing a coworker intervention).

Modeling influences observers in multiple ways (Bandura, 1986). First, it teaches new behavioral patterns, as well as "generative rules" that determine when behavior should be initiated (Bandura, 1986). Second, it minimizes an individual's inhibitions toward performing previously learned actions (Bandura, 1986). Modeling can occur through physical demonstration, such as witnessing another observer intervening in a SH incident, through pictorial representation, such as witnessing intervention in a training video, or through verbal description, such as hearing a colleague's account of observer intervention (Bandura, 1986).

This suggests that individuals who have had role models for intervention are more likely to intervene themselves, both because they have learned how and when to take such actions and because their inhibitions toward intervention have been lowered by the role model's previous behavior. For example, inhibitions toward intervention are likely to be lower for observers who have been provided with formal role models through training programs. We take this point one step further, to predict that the influence of role models on the *immediacy* of intervention will be profound, because individuals who have observed role models are better able to quickly assess generative rules and access knowledge of intervention behavior.

*Proposition 8: Observers who have experienced role modeling around SH intervention (versus those who have not) are more likely to intervene in the unfolding SH incident (i.e., display high-immediacy intervention behavior).*

**Emotional reactions.** We also expect that individuals who have strong emotional reactions to harassing incidents (compared to those who do not) are more likely to take immediate intervention action. Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) depicts emotions as event-driven phenomena—that is, their proximal cause is some "happening" (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Most theories of emotion (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991) associate an "action readiness" with emotions. Because emotions are intense affective experiences, individuals become

controlled by the emotional state and are predisposed to act in ways that help them cope with the emotions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This coping can take varied forms, including "problem-focused coping," which involves dealing with the emotion-eliciting situation (Lazarus, 1991). Further, Frijda (1986) argues that *action tendencies* (which can be driven by emotions) and *intentions* are different reactions, with the former involving efforts to change a given current situation and the latter involving efforts to achieve a future state.

This suggests, then, that individuals who have strong emotional reactions to a SH incident may be more prone to intervene in the unfolding incident than those who do not. Because these individuals are experiencing strong affective states, their emotions have "control precedence" (Frijda, 1986; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and will predispose them to action. It seems logical to assume that because these individuals already have characterized the situation as problematic and requiring action (as depicted in Figure 2), their emotional reactions to the episode will tend to be negative (e.g., anger, exasperation, anxiety) rather than positive (e.g., affection, contentment, pride). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all relevant factors, it should be noted that numerous factors may lead individuals to experience strong emotions on witnessing a SH incident—for example, previous experience with SH, feminist orientation, gender, relationship with the target, direct target appeals, shared social identity with the target, and perceptions regarding harm experienced by the target.

*Proposition 9: Observers who have strong negative emotional reactions to the SH incident (versus those who do not) are more likely to intervene in the unfolding SH incident (i.e., display high-immediacy intervention behavior).*

**Should I take action later?** As shown in Figure 2, it is possible a SH observer who feels personal responsibility to intervene will choose inaction during the event (e.g., if the event unfolds quickly or if he or she does not have time to think through an appropriate response). This person may choose to act after the incident, but he or she now has the opportunity to consider more carefully the advantages and disadvan-

tages of intervention. As suggested by Simon, this "period of hesitation" (1997: 101) allows for more careful consideration of alternatives. Several considerations seem especially critical to subsequent decision making: (1) beliefs about SH recurrence, (2) perceived harm of the SH, and (3) perceived welcomeness of intervention.

*Recurrence beliefs.* If SH observers regard the witnessed harassment as a "one-time only" episode, it is less likely they will intervene after the event if they remained inactive during the event (unless their motive is to punish the harasser). Low expectations of recurrence may exist, for example, when the precipitating incident occurs outside of typical work conditions or relationships (e.g., away from the work site, with a visiting client). However, if observers expect similar SH to recur (e.g., if it involves two co-workers who see each other daily, if it is inherent in the work environment), they will more likely take subsequent action. Given that the observer has identified the event as harmful and as involving personal responsibility (as in Figure 2), he or she is likely to feel *accountable* for future incidents. Accountability theory suggests that expectations about accountability are a fundamental constraint on human behavior and that individuals strive to act in ways they can justify to themselves and others (Tetlock, 1992). It is likely, then, that substantial dissonance will be caused by continued inaction if the observer continues to witness (or expects to witness) SH.

*Proposition 10: Observers who believe that SH will recur (versus those who do not) are more likely to intervene after the SH incident (i.e., display low-immediacy intervention behavior).*

*Perceived harm from SH.* Both the BI (e.g., Dozier & Miceli, 1985) and the whistle-blowing (e.g., Near & Miceli, 1987) literature suggest that serious harmful acts are more likely to lead to observer action. Observers who are deciding whether to intervene after a witnessed event will assess the harm caused by the SH they observed, as well as the harm that might result from future incidents. Earlier, we predicted that when SH is viewed as an issue high in moral intensity, intervention is more likely. This argument resurfaces here, in that when individuals regard SH as causing significant harm, moral standards become relevant and individuals

more motivated to take action (Bandura, 1999; Jones, 1991). It should be noted that the assessment of harm may involve a broad range of objects. For example, observers may consider harm to the target or to other observers from the witnessed incident, potential harm to others who might be future targets (including the self), and harm to the organization (its reputation and its functioning) that occurs as a result of past or future SH.

*Proposition 11: Observers who believe that SH has caused or will cause significant harm (versus those who do not) are more likely to intervene after the SH incident (i.e., display low-immediacy intervention behavior).*

*Perceived welcomeness.* We have argued that observers not intervening in the unfolding SH incident but considering delayed intervention have time to ponder the wisdom of subsequent intervention. Another factor they seem likely to consider is the welcomeness of their intervention actions. Observers contemplating delayed intervention that involves the target (e.g., encouraging the target to report the harassment) probably will assess whether the target welcomes such actions. If the observer believes that a target will respond negatively (e.g., questioning why the observer did not provide assistance during the incident, telling the observer to mind his or her own business), delayed intervention seems unlikely.

Similarly, observers contemplating a delayed intervention that involves the organization (e.g., reporting the incident to management) will also consider how their actions will be received. Organizations that take SH seriously—for example, Deluxe Specialty Manufacturing Company, which discusses SH during orientation and in periodic meetings throughout the year, posts its SH policy in full view of all employees, allows complaints to be brought directly to the firm's owner, and encourages reporting of even minor complaints (Cole, 1999)—have a low *organizational tolerance for sexual harassment* (OTSH; Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996). In such organizations the perceived risk for employees who report SH is low and the likelihood that claims of SH will be taken seriously and that harassers will be punished is high (Hulin et al., 1996). Therefore, observers who are contemplating delayed intervention and who work in low

OTSH organizations seem more likely to intervene.

*Proposition 12: Observers who believe that their intervention is welcomed by the target and/or the organization (versus those who do not) are more likely to intervene after the SH incident (i.e., display low-immediacy intervention behavior).*

### How Involved Should I Get?

Research on whistle-blowing and BI indicates that individuals engage in cost-benefit analyses when making decisions about involvement in a situation they witness (e.g., Clark & Word, 1974; Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Miceli & Near, 1988; Piliavan, Piliavan, & Rodin, 1975). In other words, observers choose the response that is most effective in dealing with the problem while minimizing net costs (Piliavan et al., 1975; Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969).

Not surprisingly, high-involvement strategies have greater potential costs for observers than low-involvement strategies. The most obvious resistance to public involvement by the observer will come from the harasser. When an observer becomes involved in a situation in which the harasser's conduct is criticized, strained work relationships and even retaliation from the harasser and other employees who support him or her become possible (Loy & Stewart, 1984). Particularly in the case of powerful harassers, the costs of high involvement by the observer may be quite severe (e.g., in terms of pay raises, assignments, termination). For example, even though many managers at Astra AB's U.S. pharmaceutical subsidiary were appalled by the SH they witnessed in their organization, they chose not to intervene because the harasser was the president of the company (Maremont, 1996).

The whistle-blowing literature supports the notion that power issues are important, in that employees who blow the whistle on wrongdoing tend to have more power or credibility than those who choose not to intervene (e.g., Miceli & Near, 1988; Miceli et al., 1991). Costs could potentially originate from the employer itself. In firms with high OTSH (Hulin et al., 1996), intervention may be regarded as "meddling" or "causing trouble," rather than as a positive act that serves the organization.

However, there may be costs associated with noninvolvement as well. These costs are most likely to originate from the target and/or the self. Specifically, observers who choose nonintervention may find that targets resent their inaction. This reaction is especially likely when the target and observer share a salient social identity. For example, a female employee who reports SH may be more angry over dismissal of these concerns by a supervisor if the supervisor shares the employee's gender identity, racial identity, or religious identity. This lack of "empathic altruism" (Turner, 1985) by ingroup members may cause especially strong negative reactions.

Further, individuals who choose inaction may experience self-initiated costs, such as guilt or shame. Individuals maintain moral standards that regulate their behavior, and when these standards are violated, they experience strong dissonance (Bandura, 1999). Given that observers who have progressed to this stage of the decision-making process have recognized SH as harmful and have accepted personal responsibility to take corrective action (as shown in Figure 2), this dissonance is likely to exist for observers who choose nonintervention.

The reverse side of this argument deals with the benefits associated with public involvement. In general, the benefits of becoming involved are likely to accrue from the target, from the self, and perhaps from the organization. With the first, when an observer becomes publicly involved, the target now has an ally. Certainly, observers with significant organizational power are the most ideal allies, but even in cases where the observer has power equal to or less than the target, observer support is likely to be appreciated and rewarded by the target. Similarly, when an individual takes action to correct a situation he or she has defined as harmful, there are likely to be positive internal benefits, in that internal moral standards have been respected and cognitive dissonance is thereby minimized (Bandura, 1999). Finally, in organizations with low OTSH (Hulin et al., 1996), we expect that organization-initiated benefits will accrue from public involvement. Such organizations are likely to view SH intervention as a positive action on behalf of the organization, rather than as an act of dissent.

*Proposition 13a: Observers are more likely to choose high-involvement in-*

intervention strategies when the perceived costs associated with involvement are low (versus high).

*Proposition 13b: Observers are more likely to choose high-involvement intervention strategies when the perceived benefits associated with involvement are high (versus low).*

Before concluding our discussion of Figure 2, it is important to emphasize an aspect of the model that may get lost in the detailed discussion we have presented to this point. The outcome of this decision tree model is a prediction about the specific type of observer intervention (or nonintervention) that will occur. That is, the pattern of observer assessments that result from multiple decision stages is expected to determine the type of action taken by the observer. For example, the model predicts that low-involvement/high-immediacy intervention is most likely for observers who believe that the situation requires action, they have personal responsibility, action should be taken now, and the costs of involvement are high. We reiterate this point here to ensure that our detailed discussion of factors influencing judgments at each decision stage does not overshadow this point.

## DISCUSSION

Observer intervention to minimize or prevent SH is a largely unexplored topic. In this article we raise the issue as one worthy of research attention, provide a typology of specific types of intervention behaviors, and develop a process model of how the decision to intervene might occur. As depicted in Figure 1, intervention can be characterized in terms of its immediacy and level of involvement, resulting in four primary types of intervention. Furthermore, Figure 2 illustrates our predictions regarding the process and factors leading to each type of intervention described in Figure 1. In this final section we discuss the research questions made salient by our model and the challenges to conducting empirical research on this topic.

### Research Questions

The framework presented here raises numerous research questions. Most obvious, the thir-

teen propositions indicate specific opportunities for beneficial research. Indeed, there are numerous ways to operationalize constructs inherent in these propositions, suggesting a broad future research agenda.

For example, the first proposition suggests that observer intervention is unlikely when witnessed conduct appears ambiguous. There are likely to be multiple factors that can make an individual's conduct appear ambiguous to the observer. For instance, ambiguity can be created by a lack of social information regarding whether the situation is an emergency (e.g., the target does not ask for help, other observers do not seem to be distressed), by nonconformity of the situation to stereotypical SH situations (e.g., the harasser is not a supervisor but, rather, a coworker), or even by more self-generated forms of ambiguity (e.g., observers do not really try to minimize ambiguity if the harasser is a member of their own identity group, because the ambiguity allows them to excuse the negative behavior of ingroup members).

Essentially, then, this one proposition allows for numerous research questions, depending on how "ambiguity of conduct" is operationalized and explored. This is true of many propositions in the model, leading all thirteen to generate a significant research agenda.

Beyond the direct research implications of the model in Figure 2, several additional research issues seem particularly interesting and timely. First, we are intrigued by the role that social identity may play in reactions to SH. We argued here that observers will interpret misconduct in ways most beneficial to members of their ingroup and that they will feel the greatest personal responsibility to act when members of their ingroup are threatened. The nagging question, however, concerns which identity groups are salient in sexual harassment situations. It seems likely that groupings such as gender and organizational role will be highly relevant, but this opens the possibility for multiple identities to be in play.

How, then, does an observer decide which identity will drive reaction to SH? For example, in the case of *Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.* (1992), a high-ranking executive frequently tossed objects on the floor so he could watch women pick them up. On the one hand, another male executive who witnesses such behavior may feel a responsibility, based on his identity

as a company official, to end it, yet, on the other hand, he may be overly generous in his interpretation of this situation if he wishes to protect a member of his gender identity group (e.g., "He's a good guy underneath it all," "He just doesn't understand that times have changed"). How the executive resolves this identity conflict and what factors influence his decision making are very interesting issues. These types of questions are particularly timely, given recent theoretical advances in social identity theories (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tyler, 1999).

Second, we suggest research on role modeling effects in SH. Here, we suggested that role modeling plays an important part in the observer's ability to quickly intervene, a prediction that requires empirical verification. More broadly, there is little research that explores role modeling effects in SH generally—that is, how it influences a target's likelihood of reporting harassment and how it influences a harasser's likelihood of harassing (see Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993, for an exception). These are important omissions in current research knowledge, but they are quite easily explored, given the well-established theory around role modeling (Bandura, 1986).

Third, we suggest research on the emotions that surface around SH. We suggested here that emotional reactions may determine whether and when observers will intervene. Again, a broader issue is how emotions influence targets of harassment generally. Although there is a great deal of research addressing target interpretations of SH and a growing body of research addressing the types of coping behaviors that targets undertake, there is little research on how SH makes targets *feel* and how these emotions influence subsequent coping. Again, this strikes us as a particularly timely topic, given recent interest in emotions in work organizations (e.g., Ashkanasy & Davis, 2002; Huy, 1999; Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Hartel, 2002; Pugh, 2001).

Fourth, we encourage research on observer intervention in other forms of aggressive work behavior—for example, abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), retaliatory behaviors (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and theft (Greenberg, 1998). Although all of these (and SH) are forms of aggressive work behavior, the frameworks that explain observer intervention in each may differ.

As mentioned earlier, SH differs from other types of work-related misconduct in ways that may limit the generalizability of our framework. First, SH is interpersonal and intended to harm an individual, whereas other types of deviance (such as sabotaging equipment or stealing from the organization) involve an organizational target (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). This suggests that factors in our model (e.g., the relationship between the actor and target) may have little relevance. Second, there is more definitional ambiguity and controversy surrounding SH than many other forms of workplace misconduct (O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000), such as theft or supervisor bullying. Again, this suggests that issues raised here—ambiguity of conduct, for example—may not be generalizable. Finally, targets of SH often adopt passive coping strategies, rather than the more active coping (such as reporting the incident to management) likely when individuals are targets of other forms of workplace misconduct (e.g., nonsexual physical assault). Again, factors central to our model (e.g., emotional reactions, perceived welcomeness) may therefore be less relevant. Taken together, these differences suggest that although research on observer intervention in other forms of workplace aggression is important, different frameworks may be needed to drive this research.

Finally, we suggest research exploring observer intervention from a legal perspective (as opposed to the social psychological perspective adopted here). Inherent in our discussion is the assumption that observer intervention is beneficial to organizations; however, we recognize that this assumption is open to debate. Observers may at times intervene in ways that create difficulties within the organization (e.g., unjustified accusations, severely damaged work relationships, creation of divisions between workgroups or individuals) and even may create legal liabilities for themselves or for their employers. Research that untangles functional observer intervention (from an organizational perspective) from dysfunctional observer intervention would be beneficial. In addition, given the ambiguity surrounding the definition of SH, observer involvement creates the possibility for targets to have one interpretation of the incident and observers to have another. From a legal standpoint, this creates interesting complications concerning whose testimony the courts will



value and concerning whether organizations are responsible should an observer (e.g., a supervisor) label an incident as SH when a target does not.

### Research Challenges

As with most research related to human behavior, there are challenges inherent in research on observer intervention in SH. Perhaps most obvious is the tradeoff between assessment of observer intervention in actual incidents of SH (which generally necessitates field research) and examination of the social and psychological mechanisms through which observer intervention occurs (which generally is easier in laboratory settings). In regard to the latter, many of the constructs mentioned in our propositions involve individual perceptions—for example, whether conduct is regarded as ambiguous, whether other observers are perceived to be alarmed by the behavior, and whether emotional reactions occur, along with recurrence beliefs and perceived costs of action, among others. Given this, the most direct tests of our propositions will involve assessment of observer perceptions. This assessment is most easily obtained in controlled settings where observers' beliefs can be probed immediately after an incident has occurred. This type of controlled setting, however, typically involves a "manufactured" SH incident (e.g., observers witnessing a scripted harassment episode, watching a videotaped episode, or reading about a SH incident). Eventually, researchers will want to test the propositions around actual incidents of harassment.

This challenge, of course, is nothing new in social science research, and the solution involves careful triangulation around research questions using multiple data collection methods. For example, we might begin with research examining observers' recollections of SH incidents in which intervention either occurred or did not occur. Observers might report on those factors (from Figure 2) that are most easily measured retrospectively. For example, witnesses might recount the organizational roles (a proxy for perceived power differentials) of harassers and targets, the gender and organizational position matches of observers with targets and harassers (proxies for social identity groupings), or the organizational roles of other observers (a

proxy for social appropriateness). These variables, which are relatively objective and, thus, likely to be valid (despite the fact that they are collected retrospectively), allow for direct tests of propositions in our framework (Figure 2). Because this research involves "real" incidents of SH and intervention, if findings are supportive of Figure 2, this suggests that research into underlying cognitive mechanisms would be beneficial.

Research into these underlying cognitive mechanisms, then, might occur in more controlled settings where researchers can manipulate constructs that either are difficult to evaluate in the field or should be assessed at a more perceptual level. As an example of the former, it might be difficult to assess emotional reactions retrospectively in the field. Observers may not accurately recall their emotional reactions, and/or their recall may be biased toward subsequent experiences (e.g., the observer whose intervention was punished by management may have an overall impression of being angry, even if the anger did not occur around the incident itself).

As an example of the latter (assessing constructs at a perceptual level), factors like *moral intensity* or *perceived welcomeness* can be created through experimenter manipulations (e.g., manipulate moral intensity by varying the seriousness or immediacy of consequences; Jones, 1991), these manipulations can be verified by assessing subject perceptions (e.g., asking subjects how serious or immediate the consequences of SH were for the target), and then the effects of this manipulated variable can be assessed. This approach allows for greater understanding about how observers are processing information around their intervention decisions (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999). An understanding of these factors important to intervention decision making is difficult to achieve in field settings, yet it is essential for establishing support for the theoretical predictions in Figure 2.

### Conclusion

It is important to note that if observer nonintervention in SH represents the status quo in an organization, as we suspect it does in many organizations, this can be a perilous condition. When observers are excused from responsibility for SH prevention, this enhances the ambiguity

around defining SH and diminishes the moral intensity of the issue. Indeed, over time, nonintervention actually may create an environment that encourages SH. Careful attention to SH observers and to the management of their intervention, therefore, is critical.

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