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## **The Ecology of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Exploitation: A Systems Perspective**

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Efforts to address sexual harassment in the workplace have often been initiated with a microscopic definition of the problem and required remediation strategies. The problem is investigated and defined within the "accused perpetrator" and "alleged victim" dyad. The etiology of harassing behavior is seen as springing exclusively from the character of the individual perpetrator(s) and internal redress seeks to correct the problem by re-education, punishment or expulsion of the offending member. Defense of the accused perpetrator often involves an attack on the veracity or character of the alleged victim, a process that poses risks of further emotional violation. Organizational responses all too often involve isolated elements of action—a policy is written, a speech is made, a group of supervisors is trained—that could be part of an effective response but prove ineffectual in their lack of comprehensiveness.

A systems perspective on sexual harassment can provide a framework to integrate divergent perspectives into a coherent and coordinated framework for understanding and correcting sexual harassment and broader abuses of power within the organization. Beginning premises to illustrate this perspective might include the following.

- Sexual harassment can be more aptly described as a process rather than an event. Sexually harassing behaviors often exist on a continuum of disrespectful, demeaning, exploitive and/or discriminatory behaviors. Harassment is often the breaking into light of what has been a progressive violation of intimacy barriers in the worker-to-worker relationship. Remediation strategies will be ineffective if they attempt to address the sexually harassing behavior in isolation from this broader continuum.
- Sexual harassment, while exhibited by individuals, is ecologically nested within organizational, community and cultural environments that can either elicit or suppress the presentation of such behavior. Prevention and

remediation strategies must target multiple sites within this person-environment ecosystem.

- While usually defined in perpetrator-victim perspectives, acts of sexual harassment can be elicited from (for example, as part of a broader scapegoating process) and be symptomatic of disruptions in group process and organizational health.
- A strong organizational culture can promote sexual harassment if aberrant values have been incorporated into the culture that legitimize disrespect and abuse towards a targeted group of workers. Weak organizational cultures can promote sexual harassment by failing to socialize members with values, attitudes, standards and taboos that would inhibit harassing and exploiting behavior.
- As organizational systems grow in size, their units become more independent, creating the danger of renegade cultures which violate values of the parent organization. Repeated incidence of sexual harassment from a particular work unit involving multiple perpetrators may reflect such a renegade process and may require interventions targeted at group culture as well as interventions targeted at individual perpetrators.
- Harassing behavior while environmentally influenced, in turn, feeds back into the process of the work group. The strong emotion generated by the perception or knowledge of harassing events emotionally galvanizes the work group leaving little energy left for productivity and system maintenance. The organizational response to harassing events is experienced by other organizational members in ways that will increase or decrease worker fear/security related to physical and psychological safety and will increase or decrease worker feelings of identification and loyalty to the organization. The organizational response is experienced by other organizational members in ways that will either increase or decrease the likelihood of future incidents of sexual harassment and exploitation.
- Isms—sexism, racism, ageism, classism, homophobia—constitute powerful forces that can influence many aspects of sexual harassment—its incidence, how it is perceived, its effect on the work group, the outcome of legal or administrative redress. Isms constitute powerful undercurrents of emotion, the consequences of which must be actively managed to protect individuals and assure system health and vitality.
- A change in one part of a system produces accommodating changes in all other parts of the system. Implementing change (strategies to address sexual harassment) in dynamic systems must anticipate the emergence of unforeseen problems created by corrective action.

Principles and observations like the above can assist in understanding the complexity of the defined problem as well as in helping avoid the development of simplistic, ineffectual or problem-generating remediation strategies.

System perspectives can aid in strategy development by helping identify the multiple etiological roots of a problem, by targeting desirable targets of intervention, and by elucidating the potential interaction of strategies simultaneously or sequentially implemented at multiple levels within a dynamic system. The problem of sexual harassment and exploitation can, for example, be placed within an ecological model. A harassment incident involving a single harasser and person being harassed, is viewed as occurring within an environment that is itself nested within a large environment and so forth. This model places the interaction of these two individuals at the center of this ecological onion. There may be things at each layer that contributed to the unfolding of this event and resources and strategies at each layer which may contribute to problem resolution.

The center of this model is ontogeny—the unique developmental histories of the harasser(s) and the person(s) being harassed that brought them to this exact point in time. The systems model seeks to identify any characteristics or circumstances that contribute to either role. The purpose of such inquiry is not to psychologically excuse the harasser or blame the victim for his or her own victimization. Knowledge of the characteristics of the harasser and situational cues related to when, where and how the harassment occurred may help develop policies and structures that decrease the likelihood of such behavior. By better understanding persons targeted for harassment, we may discover strategies to reduce vulnerability. If the lack of knowledge of sexual harassment policies and procedures for grievance and redress increases vulnerability, then more effective employee orientation to such issues become a preferred strategy. If it is discovered that passivity increases risk of victimization, then employee access to assertion training, empowerment training, and related mediums become strategies to reduce worker vulnerability. If it is discovered that persons in certain roles, certain shifts, certain sites are being targeted, special systems of intervention, protection, and support can be designed and implemented.

The harassing event occurs within a physical, professional and social environment. This second layer of our ecological onion is the microsystem—the smallest unit of the organization that surrounds each worker. The microsystem is a shift, a physical plant, a work team, a supervisor, a job description. The point of inquiry in the microsystem is an examination of forces or conditions in this

environment that influence positively or negatively the incidence of sexual harassment. By conducting this kind of force field analysis, we are able to generate a series of microsystem intervention strategies. The strategies seek to reduce those promoting forces identified and strengthen the identified inhibiting forces. Microsystem strategies include such areas as unit-level employee orientation programs, supervisory training programs, supervisory access to technical consultation, immediate accessibility to harassment reporting, accessibility of internal support resources (employee assistance program), and linkage to external resources (personal/legal consultation, counseling, support groups).

Each microsystem is ecologically nested with the mesosystem—the total organization that embraces and links all of the organizational unit and defines their relationships with one another and the outside world. At the mesosystem level, one can examine how broad organizational processes and structures either enhance or inhibit sexual harassment and exploitation of workers. Mesosystem issues include things ranging from the existence, clarity, accessibility and enforcement of sexual harassment policies to the attitudes, values and behaviors modeled by organizational leaders. Mesosystem strategies to address sexual harassment are encompassed within quality of work-life committees, joint labor management committees, and planning processes that seek to consciously shape the culture of the organization. In a moment, two particular mesosystem issues will be explored in detail—the sexual culture of the organization and the propensity for abuse within closed organizational systems. The examination of microsystem and mesosystem influences on sexual harassment recognizes that there is a dynamic relationship between what the individual worker brings to the organization and what the organization brings to the worker. In the chemistry of this interaction, the propensity to harass/exploit and the vulnerability to be harassed/exploited can be either decreased or increased. This step neither blames the organization nor exculpates the harasser from responsibility for his or her actions. It does acknowledge that organizations can play a contributing role by promoting or tolerating conditions that nurture harassment or by failing to serve as an active restraining agent to workplace harassment.

Each organization (its microsystems and its workers) are nested within a broader geographical, social, political and economic environment (exosystem). There is a complex and continuing relationship between the organization and this immediate environment that influences the internal values and behavior within the organization. It is important for an organization to have some understanding of the degree to which the values, attitudes and entrenched behaviors within this exosystem will serve to enhance or inhibit sexual harassment within the workplace. Where enhancing factors

exist in great strength, the organization may choose to link itself with other organizations in a campaign of community education designed to weaken such forces, or, having an awareness of such external factors, intensify their internal programs to prevent sexual harassment. Through its political voice and through its trade associations, the organization may also contribute to weakening such enhancing factors in the broader culture (macrosystem).

In these two days you will hear detailed strategies targeted at various layers of this ecosystem. The issue is not which one of these strategies is preferable. The issue is how can these strategies be integrated with existing resources into a coordinated program that targets these multiple levels of intervention.

In many organizations the struggle is to bring the implicit and real culture into compliance with the culture defined aspirationally in policy. Incongruencies between aspirational and real values within the organizational culture provide a breeding ground for abuse. Well written sexual harassment policies and procedures are rendered meaningless in an environment where organizational leaders are practicing or openly condoning the exact behaviors tabooed in the policy statement.

What many of the recommended strategies you will hear about over these two days do is define and transmit organizational values and standards that define appropriate and inappropriate behavior. These strategies define the organizational etiquette governing relationships between workers. They define the behaviors and values to which we are to aspire and they define behaviors which are tabooed within the organizational family. By consciously examining our organizational cultures we can seek to remove abuse-condoning elements and replace them with elements more conducive to worker and organizational health.

## **Incest in the Organizational Family**

I have often been asked whether there are any types of organizations or particular stages in the life of an organization that generate a greater incidence of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation problems. There are two such circumstances that I have noted from my consulting experience. The first is an increased incidence of harassment and exploitation in organizations going through periods of turbulence and rapid change. The second is the great potential for the abuse of power—including sexual harassment and sexual exploitation—in what I have described as closed incestuous systems.

Rapid change within an organization disrupts the psychological homeostasis of all workers. Workers at all levels who have lost their sense of personal and professional value may seek a variety of channels through which to reassert and affirm their value and potency. The increased incidence of sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and voluntary sexual intimacy between workers during such periods probably has little to do with sex, but is a means of seeking fulfillment for other needs. Attempted sexual contact between workers during such turbulent periods may have more to do with aggression and violence or desperate needs for self-affirmation than what Joseph Campbell has referred to as the "zeal of the organs for one another."

In the mid-1970s I began publishing articles and monographs on the propensity for abuse within a particular kind of organizational setting and process. Applying family systems theory to organizations, I described the extreme disruption of personal and organizational health associated with sustained organizational "closure." The concept of organizational incest was used to describe a stage in the life of an organization marked by increasing numbers of staff meeting most, if not all, of their personal, professional, social and sexual needs inside the boundary of the organization. The progressive (spanning years) closure of such organizations was marked by such predictable elements as the following:

- the emergence of organizational dogma—a rigid, and unchallengeable belief system,
- the centralization of power and preference for charismatic styles of leadership,
- the progressive isolation of the organization and its members from the outside professional and social world,
- the homogenization of the workforce by age, race, sex, religion or values via a tendency to isolate and expel that which was different,
- excessive demands for time and emotional energy of workers,
- the development of a work-dominated social network by organizational members,
- the intense focusing on the personal and interpersonal problems of staff,
- the disruption of team functioning from problems arising in worker-worker social and sexual relationships,
- the projection of organizational problems on an outside enemy or scapegoating and extrusion of individual workers,
- the escalation of interpersonal and inter-group conflict to include staff plots, conspiracies, or coups against organizational leadership,
- the emergence of a punitive, abusive organizational culture, and

- the fall of the "high priest/priestess" and a contagion of staff turnover (break-up of the system).

Sustained closure of organizational systems disrupts both the health of workers and undermines the health and survivability of the organization. It is my experience that closed organizational systems have a high incidence of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and that the intensity and duration of abuse incidents tends to be greater and more debilitating to victims than incidents in more open systems. The potential and intensity for abuse in closed systems is intensified through:

- the violation of the boundary and balance between one's work life and one's personal life,
- the loss of outside sources of personal, professional and social replenishment,
- the progressive depletion (physical and emotional exhaustion) of personal and group health resulting from excessive demands on worker time and emotional energy, and
- the distortion of organizational values resulting from the loss of external feedback and mechanisms for reality-testing with the outside social and professional community.

At its worst, sexual harassment and exploitation can be institutionalized as an element of the culture of a closed system. In such circumstances the abusive episodes are large in number, occur over extended periods of time, and involve large numbers of perpetrators and harassed/exploited workers. In service organizations, harassing and exploitive behaviors may be extended beyond the workers to encompass the organizations service consumers. I have found, for example, human service organizations experiencing numbers of sexual harassment episodes are also likely to be experiencing a concurrent problem of sexual exploitation of clients seeking services at the agency. The high level of unmet needs within the closed system makes anyone interacting with this system high risk for exploitation.

The vulnerability of workers in closed systems to sexual harassment, exploitation and other forms of abuse is so great and yet potentially more subtle in its manifestations that the traditional definitions of sexual harassment may need to be expanded for these settings, a final point that will be discussed below.