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## Categories of Sexual Harassment: A Preliminary Analysis

### ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is a pervasive and costly problem for businesses, government, and educational institutions. Throughout the past 20 years, researchers have used a 5 group system to classify “sexual harassment” behaviors. The purpose of this study is to explore the relevance of these categories. Preliminary factor analysis of data from 276 female college students indicates potential support for three, rather than five categories of sexual harassing behaviors. Ongoing interdisciplinary research will help Family and Consumer Sciences professionals to understand how sexual harassment is perceived by individuals, families, and communities and address it accordingly.

Note: This research was approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to use human research participants (Protocol Number 03-441).

## Categories of Sexual Harassment: A Preliminary Analysis

Sexual harassment is a pervasive and costly problem for businesses, government, and educational institutions with over 10,000 formal complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) per year. In its broadest definition, sexual harassment is any form of unwanted sexual attention (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995). Claims are often based on Title VII and Title IX of the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, as Amended (Till, 1980). Since the passage of this legislation, researchers and institutions have attempted to identify behaviors and group them into operational categories that can be communicated to employees and management.

The process of defining what constitutes illegal sexual harassment began in the mid-1970s when the EEOC published official guidelines (Till, 1980). According to the EEOC (1980), sexual harassment includes unwanted behavior that is either physical or verbal in nature. The EEOC also outlined criteria for determining whether or not an action constituted unlawful behavior.

The EEOC guidelines set the stage; but, the process of identifying specific sexual harassing behaviors and grouping them according to severity began with the passage of Title IX, the primary statute which prohibits sex discrimination in Federally assisted education programs and activities (Till, 1980). Under the direction of the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, Till (1980) collected descriptive anecdotes from 166 college aged victims and others who were aware of sexual harassment incidents. Data were used to identify five major types of behaviors within the meaning of "sexual harassment." The five distinguishable types of behaviors identified by Till (1980) were:

1. Generalized sexist remarks or behavior
2. Inappropriate and offensive, but essentially sanction-free, sexual advances
3. Solicitation of sexual activity or other sex-linked behavior by promise of rewards
4. Coercion of sexual activity by threat of punishments
5. Sexual assaults

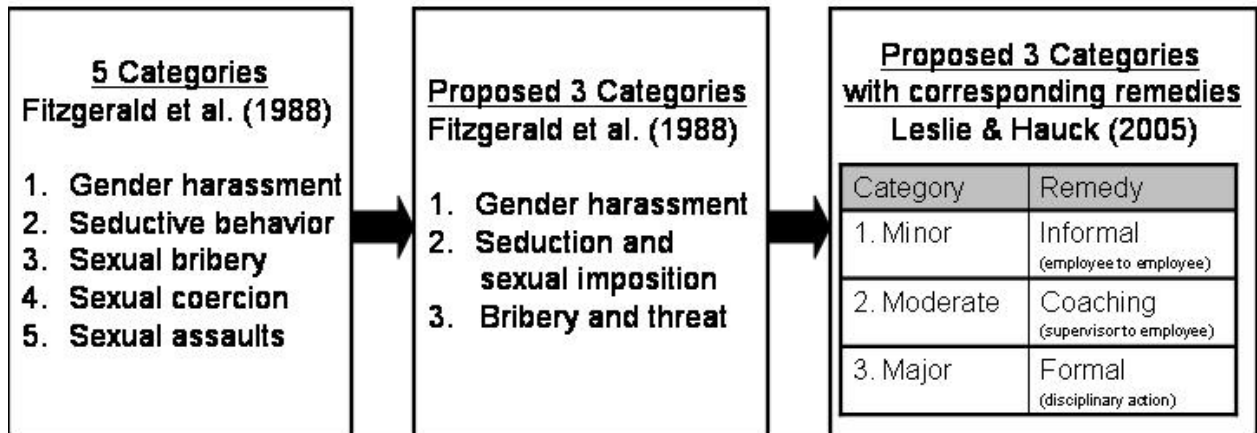
As part of an ongoing research project, Louise F. Fitzgerald and several colleagues named the five categories of sexual harassment previously identified by Till (1980). These were, in order of severity: Gender harassment, Seductive behavior, Sexual bribery, Sexual coercion, and Sexual assault (Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, Ormerod, & Weitzman, 1988). Using these categories as a foundation, Fitzgerald et al. (1988) developed the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) that delineated 23 specific sexual harassing behaviors.

As a result of a series of focus groups, Fitzgerald et al. (1988) modified the SEQ and added five new items. The revised instrument, named the SEQ2, had a total of 28 items which were grouped into the same five categories as Till (1980). After administering the SEQ2 to 307 female university employees, Fitzgerald et al. (1988) found the instrument to be reliable. Since then, the SEQ2 has been used to measure sexual harassing behaviors in various populations, including female college students employed in the fashion retail workplace (Leslie & Hauck, 2005; Workman, 1993).

In their discussion, Fitzgerald, et al. (1988) suggested that factor analysis of the SEQ2 indicated that a three-factor solution appeared to be a more accurate grouping of sexual harassing behaviors than the five proposed by Till (1980). The proposed groupings were: Bribery and threat, Seduction and sexual imposition, and Gender harassment. The three-category structure was further supported in subsequent studies (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999).

This study examined the three-category structure for sexually harassing behaviors among college-aged women, those most vulnerable to be victimized. Two hundred seventy-six female college students with work experience in the fashion retail industry provided data on their experiences through the SEQ2 (Leslie & Hauck, 2005; Workman, 1993). The data were analyzed with factor analysis to examine sexual harassing behaviors and categories. After six iterations, three factors emerged indicating potential support for the three-category structure proposed by Fitzgerald et al. (1988).

A practical application of a simplified grouping and labeling structure can lead victims to identify, understand, and select an appropriate remedy when faced with sexual harassment in the workplace. For example, the three categories may be labeled as minimum, moderate, and major, each with a corresponding set of potential remedies (see Figure 1). Using a less-complicated grouping system may lead to better recognition of sexual harassment in the workplace. To this end, ongoing research will seek to explore categories of sexual harassment. By better understanding sexual harassment in the workplace, Family and Consumer Sciences scholars and practitioners can contribute to reducing this costly and pervasive problem.



**Figure 1: Categorical Model of Sexual Harassment**

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