Racialized Sexual Harassment in the Lives of African American Women

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SUMMARY. To date, scholars who investigate sexual harassment have been disturbingly silent about issues facing women of color. The current study describes results of a qualitative study of sexual and racial harassment conducted with 37 African American women. These data indicate that African American women cannot easily separate issues of race and gender when considering their personal accounts of victimization, which creates a form of racialized sexual harassment. Implications for practice and therapeutic interventions are presented. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Sexual harassment is perhaps the most common occupational hazard for working women, with one of every two experiencing unwanted sex-related behavior over the course of their working lives (Morgan, 2001; Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000). Although it is likely that women have experienced sexual harassment since first entering the work force, serious investigation of this topic has emerged only within the last two decades. In 1979, Catherine MacKinnon argued that sexual harassment violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a form of employment discrimination and has a disparate impact on women. Shortly thereafter, the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) (1980) established a legal standard that defined sexual harassment for the first time in U. S. history. Under this standard, sexual harassment was categorized as *quid pro quo*, which refers to exchange of sexual favors for special employment treatment, and *hostile environment*, which refers to conduct that creates an intimidating or offensive work atmosphere.

Sexual harassment has also been defined psychologically and behaviorally. As a psychological process, sexual harassment has been conceptualized as a traumatic psychological stressor (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995). Within this context, the individual must appraise the situation as stressful and initiate a complex coping process, which can vary considerably based on individual factors, contextual factors of the organization, and the nature of the harassment, such as its frequency or severity (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997).

Current behavioral definitions (Fitzgerald, Shullman et al., 1988; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995) describe sexual harassment as having three distinct but related dimensions. First, *gender harassment* refers to behaviors and comments that serve to insult and degrade women as a group without the goal of gaining sexual cooperation. This can be further divided into two sub-types: *sexist hostility* (misogynistic behaviors that degrade women without explicit sexual content) and *sexual hostility* (explicitly sexual comments, gestures, and jokes). Second, *unwanted sexual attention* includes unwanted touching, stroking, or repeated requests for dates or sexual interactions. Third, *sexual coercion*, which is similar to *quid pro quo* harassment, refers to unwanted sexual attention with direct or implied bribes or threats to one's work or job. These forms of sexual harassment can occur in varying degrees of severity (Langhout et al., 1999).

APPLICATION OF CONCEPTS TO AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Despite extensive research on sexual harassment, relatively little has focused on the experience of ethnic minority women. This is surprising given that African American women have a long history of victimization. Perhaps the most egregious examples were the wanton rape and sexual abuse of female slaves by slave owners and their relatives, overseers, and even guests. After slavery was dismantled, and well into the 1960s, African American women were relegated to domestic employment. Black women continued to be at risk for sexual mistreatment because they worked in the homes of White families. Having few options and few financial resources increased their vulnerability and decreased their likelihood of complaining about sexual harassment (Neville & Hamer, 2001).

Despite these challenges, many contemporary Black women have been vocal about abuse in the workplace. For example, an African American woman, who was a victim of both racial and sexual harassment, brought forth the first legal cases used to define case law on sexual harassment (*Meritor Savings Bank FSB v. Vinson*, 1986; *Vinson v. Taylor*, 1985). Furthermore, in 1991, the country witnessed the most public sexual harassment hearing in history, brought forth by professor Anita Hill against [now Supreme Court Judge] Clarence Thomas, both prominent African Americans (McKay, 1992).

The Jezebel and Sapphire images depict Black women as sexually promiscuous, hot-blooded, and hypersexual. These images began during slavery and continue today (Donovan & Williams, 2002 [This volume]). Researchers speculated that Black women are reluctant to label their experiences sexual harassment because, ". . . in their struggle against the image of sexual promiscuity, Black women may not want to draw attention to themselves as targets of sexual attention" (Kalof, Eby, Matheson, & Kroska, 2001, p. 297-298).

Sexual Harassment

Estimates of sexual harassment in the lives of African American women have varied widely. For instance, in one study, Black and White women reported similar rates of gender harassment (Piotrkowski, 1998). Conversely, in another study, White women reported higher rates of sexual harassment when compared to their Black counterparts (53% vs. 34%) (Wyatt & Riederle, 1995). Researchers speculate that Black women in their samples may have underreported their victimization (Wyatt & Riederle, 1994). However, in most studies, when compared to Caucasian women, women of color reported higher rates of sexual harassment, ranging from 60% to 85% (Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 1998; Mansfield, Koch, Henderson, & Vicary, 1991; Paludi, 1996).

Black women who worked in low status, blue-collar jobs reported the greatest frequency of sexual harassment, which suggests an interaction between race and employment status (Mansfield et al., 1991). Based on the literature, various factors have been linked to increased vulnerability to sexual harassment. They include economic inequalities, stereotypes about sexual availability, being single or divorced, and being youthful, for example, between the ages of 20 and 44. In addition, women are at increased risk for sexual harassment if they are dependent on their jobs, work in low-status or traditionally male jobs, or have a male supervisor (MacKinnon, 1979; Wyatt & Riederle, 1995). Black women's overrepresentation in these categories makes them more vulnerable to workplace abuse (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1995, 1996, 1997).

Racial Harassment

Racial discrimination often has an impact upon an employment decision, job advancement, or some form of work-related opportunity, whereas racial harassment typically involves differential treatment based on race and the maintenance of a hostile or offensive work environment (Harrick & Sullivan, 1995). Racial harassment can have several dimensions, including verbal racial harassment, such as slurs and derogatory comments about the victim's racial or ethnic group, exclusion from work-related or social interactions because of ethnicity (Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000), and physical forms of harassment directed at an ethnic group (Ormerod, Bergman, Palmieri, Drasgow, & Juraska, 2001).

Although the research is limited, racial harassment appears to be a frequent occurrence. In a multiracial sample, between 40% and 76% of respondents experienced one or more incidents of racial harassment within a one-year period (Scarville, Button, Edwards, Lancaster, & Elig, 1999; Schneider et al., 2000). This form of harassment has been associated with deleterious effects for victims. More specifically, it is negatively related to stress, life satisfaction, perceptions of good health, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and positive organizational climate (Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, 1996; Valentine, Silver, & Twigg, 1999) and positively related to symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Schneider et al., 2000).

Racialized Sexual Harassment

Sexual and racial harassment may be combined in unique ways for African American women. Specifically, the cultural and historical contexts of slavery and sexualized stereotypes of African American women result in sexual ha-

rassment that is perceived as racially motivated (Collins, 1998, 2000; Murrell, 1996; Winston, 1991). Moreover, the harassment is likely to take different forms in the lives of Black women than in the lives of White women. For example, although a coworker may refer to a White woman as a whore or a slut, an African American woman may be called a *Black* whore, which creates an experience that combines aspects of both race and gender oppression (Buchanan, 1999). Another example are the infamous tapes from a Texaco board meeting where an African American woman, Bari-Ellen Roberts, was dismissed as a "smart-mouthed little colored girl" (Collins, 1998, p. 12).

There is anecdotal support (Mansfield et al., 1991; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1996) and empirical evidence (Mecca & Rubin, 1999) that "for many African American women, the issue of sexual harassment seems inextricably intertwined with racism" (p. 817). In particular, Black college women described a category of harassment based on racial stereotypes of African American women's sexuality or physical features (e.g., that Black women have large buttocks). Although many respondents were angered by these race-based stereotypes, little research has addressed the emotional outcomes of experiencing racialized sexual harassment. However, victims often perceive multiple forms of harassment to be more severe (Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

According to Murrell (1996), future research should address three primary concerns. First, research should examine whether women of color are differentially exposed to and affected by sexual harassment in the workplace. Second, research must examine whether sexual and racial harassment are inextricably linked for Black victims. Third, research should examine whether the range and severity of outcomes for women of color are different from that of Caucasian women. Additionally, researchers have questioned the cross-cultural meaning of the construct sexual harassment by asking whether the term is an *etic*, that is, a universal construct that does not require cultural adaptations, or an *emic* construct that thus should be examined from the perspective of the specific cultural group being studied (Adams, J. H., 1997; Buchanan, 1999; Mecca & Rubin, 1999).

GOALS OF THE STUDY

Toward these goals, in the current study we will investigate the sexual and racial harassment experiences of African American women. This necessitates an understanding of each construct and how the unique history and experiences of African American women are likely to result in a combined form of harassment. Therefore, in this study we took an *emic*, within-group, qualitative approach. Qualitative methods allow participants to be co-creators in the

meaning-making process by voicing their understanding of the harassing experience. Such methods are effective in addressing sensitive topics with women of color (Jarrett, 1993; Madriz, 2000) and in helping to define a phenomenon of interest (Wilkinson, 1999). In addition, we used a focus group interview, which allowed participants to express their points of view. Focus groups are also valuable when studying a phenomenon when little quantitative research is available, such as the relatively new construct proposed here, racialized sexual harassment.

The focus group protocol asked the participants broad questions about the nature of their experience with unwanted sex-related and race-based harassment. We expected that women would describe experiences that combined both forms of harassment (e.g., being called a name combining race and gender, such as *Black whore* versus being called a *whore* without the other qualifier). In addition, we expected that the participants would report being targeted because they were both Black and female. No formal hypotheses were proposed for testing, which is consistent with a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Instead, theory was allowed to emerge from the experiences voiced by participants.

METHODS

Participants

Thirty-seven African American women were recruited via flyers, e-mail listserves for Black women, and referrals from respondents (snowballing) to participate in focus group interviews. The participants were residents in a large or mid-size city in the Midwest. The mean age of the sample was 39 years old, with a range from 23 to 56 years old. They were highly educated, with most holding a bachelor's or master's degree. Only one participant ended her formal education with a high school diploma. The women in the sample were employed in a wide range of professions, including nursing, mental health, teaching, accounting, librarianship, secretarial, college administration, academic advising, and research assistantships.

Procedure

Six focus group interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. According to feminist and qualitative researchers, focus group moderators should closely match the demographics of the participants (Jarrett, 1993; Krueger, 1994; Madriz, 2000). Accordingly, the first author and two

assistant moderators, all African American women, were present during the interviews.

Focus groups began with an overview of the general topics to be discussed and an explanation of the moderator's role. The women were also reminded that participation was voluntary and confidential and that they should honor the privacy of other group members. The focus group protocol included questions about unwanted race-based and sex-based behaviors experienced personally or described to them by other African American women. This protocol was used as a loose framework to guide separate conversations on racial harassment and sexual harassment, while allowing considerable freedom of discussion among the participants. Topic introduction was counter-balanced (half began with racial harassment and half with sexual harassment) to ensure adequate coverage of each across focus groups.

Focus group interviews continued (for a total of six) until reaching a point of theoretical saturation (Krueger, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), that is, when no new information emerged from additional interviews. At this point, audiotapes of the focus groups were transcribed, reviewed by the moderator, and corrected for accuracy. In compensation for their time, the women received lunch, were paid $25, and were entered in a raffle for $125.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to identify themes emerging from the focus group interviews. Initially, the transcripts were subjected to a line-by-line microanalysis in order to discover salient categories and to uncover relationships between concepts. Based on the salient categories, a conceptual ordering analysis was used to generate well-developed themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In particular, information was coded about their experiences with harassment (e.g., sexual harassment, racial harassment alone, or a combination in the form of racialized sexual harassment).

RESULTS

Although the focus group protocol divided the conversation into race-based and sex-based harassing behaviors, themes of racial harassment or sexual harassment alone were not found. Instead, participants often interwove topics (e.g., describing sex-related behaviors during the designated time for a discussion on race).

Racialized Sexual Harassment

There was considerable evidence of racialized sexual harassment as a distinct construct from either racial harassment or sexual harassment. For example, the women reported that White coworkers and supervisors often felt free to be sexually explicit or request information about the participants' sex lives (e.g., asking about sexual positions participants have tried or telling participants of their own sexual exploits). These discussions occurred without sufficient opportunity to build rapport or a relationship with the participants. Consequently, the women asserted that this behavior reflected an underlying assumption that African American women's sexual boundaries, both the behaviors they will engage in and their comfort in discussing sex, are looser than those of Caucasians.

A second interesting and unexpected finding was that many women reported comments that sexualized their dress and appearance. For example, in preparation for a dinner date with her husband, a participant changed into a red dress. A White colleague told her, "You look like you're getting ready to go stand on the corner," implying that she looked like a prostitute. Several women also reported comments about their shoes. For instance, a coworker told a participant that the color of her shoes made them "too exotic and offensive."

Dimensions of Sexual Harassment

According to previous research, sexual harassment can vary in dimension, such as severity (Langhout et al., 1999). Participants in this sample also identified varying degrees of harassment, categorized here as covert, subtly overt, and overt.

Covert. Although ambiguous in nature, covert events were the most frequently reported and reflected a general bias against African American women. For example, several participants reported conflicts with their White secretaries. More specifically, upon entering their current positions, subordinate White female employees often refused to make coffee, a duty they had performed in the past for a White supervisor. Participants perceived this as a refusal by White employees, both men and women, to engage in behaviors that may be constructed as "serving" a Black woman.

Subtly overt. The second category, subtly overt, included behaviors that were described as sexually harassing, but were not directly racist. Instead, these experiences reflected assumptions and stereotypes about African American women's sexuality, such as their availability for sex. For example, one woman was told by a White male coworker, "I bet you are a slave to sex."

Overt. The final category, labeled as overt, combined obvious racist and sexist intentions. This was the least common experience, but powerful when it occurred. For example, one woman was subjected to repeated unwanted comments from a White male coworker concerning her "sexy black ass," and another was repeatedly asked to pose for pictures because he "loved big, sexy, Black women."

DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated various forms of harassment in the lives of 37 professional African American women. Qualitative methods and focus group interviews were used. In addition, we employed an emic framework to further develop sexual harassment as a construct that applies to the experience of Black women. These methodologies are a contribution to the literature because they revealed racialized sexual harassment, which is distinct from either racial or sexual harassment alone. This reflects the women's inability or unwillingness to separate their experiences as either racial or sexual. Instead, they perceived them as simultaneously sex- and race-based.

Similar to previous researchers (Fitzgerald et al., 1988), we discovered varying levels of sexual harassment and behaviors that could be categorized as sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment. As expected, our participants reported racial variations of these forms of harassment, some of which incorporated direct reference to the legacy of African American enslavement and stereotypes that emerged from that time period (e.g., Black women as insatiable Jezebels) (Buchanan, 1999; Collins, 2000). Although some events were overt, for example, being touched or asked to perform sexual acts, many other behaviors were covert, such as refusing to comply with requests or assignments from a Black woman. These behaviors did not refer to race or gender; however, they were a subtle reminder that Black women should not be in positions of authority. In extreme cases, this behavior can take the form of *contrapower* sexual harassment (e.g., a female professor being harassed by a male student). Black women may be more vulnerable to harassment from male or White subordinates because their achieved status or formal organizational power does not mitigate their lower ascribed status as members of a marginalized group (Rospenda, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998).

Our participants also reported subtly overt harassment, which took the form of inappropriate sexual questions or comments that sexualized the participants' attire. Separately, such events may be easily dismissed. However, taken together, a theme emerges where the color and style of clothing, even if

it is neutral, becomes sexualized when worn by African American women. Moreover, although such comments may appear insignificant, they can have implications for how Black women present themselves. For example, in order to protect themselves from the Jezebel stereotype, some African American women feel that they have to be especially conservative and conscientious about their wardrobes (Wilson & Russell, 1996) or avoid initiating professional mentoring relationships with White men (Murrell, 1996). However, it should be noted that White women perpetrated many of these sexualized racist acts. Therefore, some of the safeguards against harassment, such as working in an all-women environment, may not offer protection for African American women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Sexual and racial harassments are significant psychological stressors in the lives of many women (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Mays et al., 1996). However, many mental health professionals are not adequately trained to recognize and treat these forms of victimization (Campbell, Raja, & Grining, 1999). This is unfortunate because many female psychologists will be sexually harassed while providing services (deMayo, 1997), clinical supervisors must assist supervisees after they are sexually harassed by clients (deMayo, 2000), and psychology educators will be faced with sexual harassment in the academy (Rubin, Hampton, & McManus, 1997). In addition, mental health providers may be asked to render an expert opinion regarding the psychological effects of sexual harassment on a litigant (Fitzgerald, Buchanan, Collinsworth, Magley, & Ramos, 1999; Jorgenson & Wahl, 2000).

Although mental health professionals have an integral role in victims' recovery from sexual harassment, there is little information on specific therapeutic interventions (Koedam, 2000; Sherer, 1996; Shrier & Hamilton, 1996), particularly with African American women (Daniel, 1995). However, using the limited literature and our findings, we offer suggestions for how to modify assessment and interventions to address racialized sexual harassment.

Assessment

Sherer (1996) suggested that mental health providers conduct a thorough assessment with survivors of sexual harassment. It should include the following:

Record keeping. Keep in mind that records can be subpoenaed (Benedek, 1996; Jorgenson & Wahl, 2000; Koedam, 2000; Schafran, 1996). Service providers should maintain careful, comprehensive, factually based records that avoid speculation. When appropriate, it may be helpful to include specific quotations from the client. If present, the provider should note the nature, duration, intensity, and chronology of current and past physical or psychological symptoms. In cases of ongoing harassment, the client should be encouraged to maintain her own set of written documentation.

Documenting the harassment. Ask the client to tell her story about the harassment. She should be encouraged to speak freely, including how she felt and reacted to the trauma. Some African American women may respond better when asked to give a testimony (Taylor, 2002) [This volume]). In order to obtain a detailed history, the mental health provider should periodically repeat back or paraphrase the client's information. It is especially important to obtain the story in chronological order, including where and when the harassment occurred, who witnessed the act, and whom the client told, if anyone.

Black women's reactions to sexual harassment may differ based on the ethnicity of the perpetrator (Shelton & Chavous, 1999). Therefore, it is important to inquire about the ethnicity of all the participants. One psychiatrist realized this when she interviewed a middle-aged African American victim of workplace harassment:

> I found that I needed her to tell me who was black and who was white, who was accusing whom of sexual misconduct, and who was committing it . . . Had I not first developed the ability to simply ask . . . I might never have succeeded in teasing out the salient issues of the actual sexual harassment. (Sherer, 1996, p. 84-86)

Interviewers should also ask about the ethnic makeup of the workplace. The dynamics of the harassment may be more acute if a Black woman is a *token* or numerical minority in her work environment (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1995, 1996, 1997) or if she is a victim of contrapower harassment perpetrated by a White or male subordinate (Rospenda et al., 1998).

History of victimization. It is especially important for those clients involved in litigation to receive a thorough evaluation of past victimization and its related effects. This will avoid misuse of this history in court (Fitzgerald, Buchanan et al., 1999). Ask about previous experiences, either as a child or an adult, with harassment and victimization. Has the client experienced incest, rape, partner violence, or other forms of harassment in the workplace? In addition, Black women should be asked about racial harassment (e.g., not being allowed to live in certain neighborhoods because of race, being followed by

the police, being called racial slurs). Note details, such as numbers of times, ages, and duration of each experience. Discuss the client's coping mechanisms and reaction to these victimizations.

Therapeutic Interventions

Little research has focused specifically on the treatment of sexual harassment survivors (Daniel, 1995; Koedam, 2000; Shrier & Hamilton, 1996). However, therapists can use many of the same interventions that they would use for survivors of other forms of victimization.

Therapeutic stance. It is imperative that therapists avoid causing secondary injury by implying such questions as: What were you saying or doing? What were you wearing? How did you let this happen? Until there is evidence to the contrary, the therapist should assume that the client is not fabricating the event and that her work performance was adequate prior to the harassment. If the client's behavior is exacerbating her problems, these concerns can be addressed after rapport is established. In general, the therapist should create an atmosphere of trust and support (Shrier & Hamilton, 1996).

Addressing reactions to the harassment. Although it is possible for clients to recover and heal, many clients report symptoms that are consistent with posttraumatic stress disorder, and adjustment, mood, or anxiety disorders. Race-based discrimination may exacerbate the stress for African American women. One obvious goal of therapy is to help the client deal effectively with her reactions to the abuse. For some clients, medication may be an effective method for managing symptoms. Others may benefit from learning about the extent and dynamics of sexual harassment, which help to normalize the experience. Family therapy or group therapy can be used to enhance the victim's support system (Mays et al., 1996; Shrier & Hamilton, 1996).

It is common for a survivor to experience a range of feelings, such as confusion, disillusionment, and anger. In addition, she may be grieving numerous losses, including her job, career advancement, and her senses of trust and self-esteem (Shrier & Hamilton, 1996). It is especially important to help the woman develop strategies for coping with these feelings in the work environment. This can be even more challenging for Black women, particularly if they are one of a few ethnic minority women in their work environment. Being a token creates performance pressure, stress, and social isolation (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997).

Racialized sexual harassment often occurs in the context of other forms of violence. For example, when compared to their nonabused counterparts, Black women with a history of childhood sexual abuse reported higher incidences of sexual harassment (Wyatt & Riederle, 1994). In addi-

tion, Black survivors of childhood sexual abuse are at increased risk for physical and sexual violence in their adult intimate relationships (West, Williams, & Siegel, 2000). When appropriate, therapists should help clients make connections between their personal histories of abuse and their current harassment experiences. Ask if the harassment reminds her of any other relationship or experience in her life. This is not to blame the victim; however, understanding these connections can help shed light on the client's coping strategies and reactions to the current victimization (Adams, K. M., 1999). Therapists should also be aware of historical traumas, such as a family history of sexual assaults or lynchings. These stories, which are often passed down through the generations, can exacerbate the current trauma or increase feelings of vulnerability (Daniel, 2000).

Effective therapy with Black survivors of sexual trauma requires counselors to explore the impact of oppressive images. Daniel (1995) contends that "Black women need to be in therapeutic settings in which negative stereotypes and injurious reconstructions are not dominant" (p. 116). For example, the fear of reinforcing the Jezebel stereotype or being labeled as aggressive Sapphires can silence Black women. In addition, Black women may be considered racially disloyal if they reveal sexual harassment committed by Black men.

CONCLUSION

The women in this study gave testimony to the existence of an often ignored form of harassment, labeled here as racialized sexual harassment. This form of harassment was found to have many forms, those that were overtly racist and sexist, such as calling someone a Black whore, and those that were much more subtle or covert, such as making reference to sexualized stereotypes of African American women. Perhaps most striking are the findings that White women were also perpetrators, creating a threatening atmosphere for Black women, even when they were employed in all-women environments. Their stories demonstrate that the harassment experiences of African American women are complex. Moreover, they illustrate the importance of acknowledging and understanding the intertwined experiences of both racial and sexual harassment in the lives of Black women.

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