

# Hostile Campuses: The Impact of Sexual Harassment and Incivility on the Psychological Well-Being of College Students

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## INTRODUCTION

Research shows that women are more likely than men to be sexually harassed. Also, women have been found to be at a greater risk of developing depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Breslau, Chilcoat, Kessler, Peterson & Lucia, 1999).

Multiple and repeated trauma literature suggests that women exposed to repeated traumas or multiple forms of trauma will experience greater detriment to their psychological well-being than women with a single incident or a single form of trauma (Green et al, 2000; Krupnick et al, 2004).

Women exposed to both incivility (INCV) and sexual harassment (SH) experience worse outcomes across assessments of work, mental and physical health than women who experience either alone (Lim & Cortina, 2005), which increases their risk of developing post-traumatic stress or depression (Fitzgerald et al, 1997).

SH has been estimated to effect between 40-70% of undergraduate women (Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald & Waldo, 1998; Paludi & Paludi, 2003), but INCV has not been studied among college populations, therefore its prevalence is unknown.

## OBJECTIVE

To investigate the effects of SH and INCV on post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression among undergraduate women.

## PROCEDURE

Undergraduates completed the College Experiences Survey (CES) assessing experiences of SH and INCV within the last 12 months that occurred at college and current symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress. Outcome measures were presented before SH and INCV questions to avoid measurement bias.

## METHODS

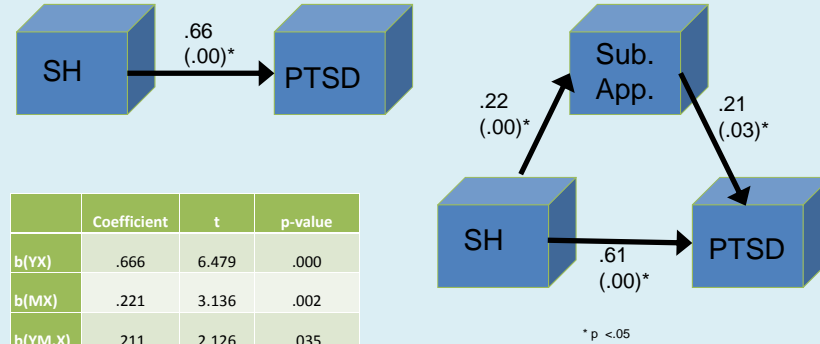
**Participants:** 336 female undergraduate students (Age:  $M = 20.81$ ,  $SD = 3.14$ )

**Measures:** Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the construct.

*Sexual Experiences Questionnaire* (SEQ; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Fitzgerald et al., 1995) : The 16 item SEQ was used to assess the frequency of behaviors constituting sexual harassment within the past 12 months (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion).

*Workplace Incivility Scale* (WIS; Cortina et al., 2001): The 7 item WIS examined overall incivility experienced in the past 12 months. The scale was used to measure experiences of disrespectful, offensive, or condescending behaviors.

**Figure 1. Mediation model and regression analysis for SH and PTSD, Subjective Appraisal**



**Figure 2. Correlation Matrix**

	SH	Appraisal (SH)	PTSD Checklist	Depression	Incivility	Appraisal (INCV)
SH	1					
Appraisal (SH)	.363**	1				
PTSD Checklist	.611**	.260**	1			
Depression	.306**	.177**	.521**	1		
Incivility	.598**	.245**	.511**	.319**	1	
Appraisal (INCV)	.393**	.523**	.398**	.217**	.574**	1

\*\* p < .000

**Measures (continued):** Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the construct.

*Subjective Appraisal* (Swan, 1997) Participants responded to 7 items indicating how negatively they perceived their SH and INCV experiences (e.g., “annoying,” “upsetting,” or “threatening.”).

*Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist* (PCL; Weathers et al., 1993) : The 17 item scale was used as a self-reporting measure to indicate the severity of post-traumatic symptoms.

*Beck Depression Inventory* (BDI; Beck, Steer & Brown, 1996) : The 21 item scale was used to measure the severity of unipolar depression symptoms.

## RESULTS

• INCV was correlated with depression (.32) and PTSD (.51).

• SH was correlated with depression (.31) and PTSD (.61).

• Subjective Appraisal did not mediate the relationship between INCV and depression, INCV and PTSD, nor SH and depression.

• Subjective Appraisal fully mediated the relationship between SH and PTSD.

## CONCLUSION

• Experiencing SH is associated with greater post-traumatic stress symptoms when the individual appraises the harassment as upsetting, offensive, embarrassing, or threatening.

• Results are consistent with previous findings that there is a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression following SH (Avina & O’Donohue, 2002).

• Incivility has not been studied among college students, but these findings indicate that not only is incivility associated with depression and PTSD, but also that these effects hold true for college students.

## IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• SH and INCV can have similar effects on psychological outcomes, but the mediating factors may not operate similarly for both experiences.

• Additional research is also needed to look at the additive and interactive effects of these, and other, negative experiences.