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Sexual Harassment in Academia: Ethical Climates and Bounded Ethicality

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sexual harassment, ethical climate, bounded ethicality, ethical fading,
motivated blindness, slippery slope

Abstract

This article reviews research on sexual harassment, particularly that pertaining to academia, to understand its underlying causes. Arguing that sexual harassment is an ethical issue, we draw on the field of behavioral ethics to structure our review. We first review ethical climate antecedents at the individual, leader, organizational, and environmental levels and examine their effects on both the occurrence of and responses to sexually harassing behaviors. This discussion is followed by an exploration of research that speaks to the cognitive processes of bounded ethicality—including ethical fading, motivated blindness, and the slippery slope—and their role in facilitating and perpetuating sexual harassment. We conclude by highlighting the value to be gained from integrating research on sexual harassment with research on behavioral ethics and identifying several practical steps that can be taken to curb sexual harassment in academia.

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In the past year alone, sexual harassment perpetrated by a U.S. professor, dean, or university president has been documented at least once a week.

—Libarkin (2017)

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment has recently dominated the headlines, with high-profile cases in entertainment, journalism, politics, and the corporate world. Academia has not been spared (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018). Sexual harassment in academia has been described in the news media as an “epidemic” (Batty et al. 2017) and by academic scholars as “the single most widespread educational hazard” (Rudman et al. 1995, p. 519). Stories of sexual harassment by professors appeared in the media as early as 1980 (Libarkin 2016), and recent surveys in academia reveal that harassment persists. For example, the Association of American Universities (AAU) found in a recent survey of university students that 62% of female undergraduate and 44% of female graduate students (Cantor et al. 2015) indicate that they have experienced sexual harassment.¹ Additional empirical research has found that 70% of female field researchers (Clancy et al. 2014) and 30% of female medical faculty (Jagst et al. 2016) disclose having encountered sexual harassment. Accounts of sexual harassment detailed in social media (Kelsy 2017) further reveal its prevalence in academia (see sidebar titled *Breaking the Silence*). Research on the effects of such harassment exposes its staggering psychological and physical costs, including psychological distress (e.g., depression, anxiety) and reduced physical well-being, satisfaction, and engagement, as well as negative educational and workplace outcomes (see Fitzgerald et al. 1997, Huerta et al. 2006, Rosenthal et al. 2016).

There is a movement underway to address this issue. For instance, in 2015, the aforementioned AAU conducted a survey with over 150,000 student respondents nationwide to understand the

Sexual harassment: unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature, or offensive remarks about a person’s sex

¹This research also shows that men face sexual harassment, but at much lower rates than do women.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

In December 2017, an anonymous online survey and accompanying #MeTooPhD hashtag were initiated to provide a place to share stories of sexual harassment in academia. A month later, there were almost 2,000 entries. The numbers continue to grow. Stories range from rape to more subtle forms of harassment (e.g., sexual jokes, lewd comments, staring at a woman's breasts during conversation) and reveal profound negative consequences for academic women, including being driven out of the profession (Kelsky 2017).

experience of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment, on campus (Cantor et al. 2015). In 2017, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine formed a committee to study the impact of sexual harassment in academia (Comm. Women Sci. Eng. Med. 2017),² and the American Political Science Association conducted a survey about sexual harassment experienced during its annual conference (Sapiro & Campbell 2018). The US Congress has also taken note, introducing legislation in 2016 that could require colleges and universities that receive federal funding to report findings of sexual harassment to the government agencies granting those funds.

Despite such initiatives, universities have thus far been ineffective in stopping sexual harassment, especially when tenured and prestigious faculty are involved. Furthermore, when action is taken against the harasser, it is often minimal or weak and seen as nothing more than a slap on the wrist (for an example, see Doucleff 2015). Indeed, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) released a report in 2016 that revealed the ineffectiveness of employers' efforts to prevent sexual harassment (see Feldblum & Lipnic 2016). Sexual harassment, including that found in academia, thus remains a significant problem (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018).

We argue that sexual harassment continues, despite efforts to eliminate it, in part because of the important but narrowly focused attention paid to identifying and weeding out the malicious perpetrators who sexually harass. As Zimbardo (2004) argues, people find comfort in the notion that there is a chasm that separates good from evil, a belief that manifests itself in these concentrated efforts to identify and sanction the obvious monster. We certainly agree that sexual harassment can be purposeful, calculative, and goal driven (O'Leary-Kelly et al. 2000) and believe that efforts to weed out malicious perpetrators are critical. However, such efforts also constrain the ability to fully address sexual harassment, limiting understanding of (a) the multifaceted aspects of the context that may facilitate perpetrators and (b) the psychological processes that may influence not only perpetrators' engagement in sexual harassment, but also victims', bystanders', and organizations' insufficient action against such behavior.

A similar observation was made several decades ago in the literature on unethical decision making. Unethical behavior was argued to be the result not only of so-called bad apples, as had traditionally been assumed, but also of both bad barrels (Treviño & Youngblood 1990) and underlying psychological processes that could lead good apples to deviate from their ethical values (Messick & Tenbrunsel 1996). The field of behavioral ethics arose to address these multifaceted influences on unethical behavior and has produced an ever-growing literature. In full agreement with those who have argued that sexual harassment is an ethical issue (e.g., Bowes-Sperry & Powell 1999, O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry 2001, Pierce et al. 2004), we believe that our understanding of sexual harassment can be enhanced by turning to the field of behavioral ethics.

Tenure: an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances

²This committee released its report in June 2018, after this review was completed.

Ethical climate: employees' shared meaning associated with the ethical policies, practices, and procedures within an organizational environment

Bounded ethicality: systematic and predictable ways in which individuals engage in unethical behavior without their awareness

Ethical fading: the inability to see the ethics of one's decision; as a result, one's ethical values are not considered in the decision-making process

Motivated blindness: the tendency for people not to see the unethical behavior of others when it is not in their best interest to do so

Slippery slope: indiscretions occur in small, gradual increases that are indiscernible in isolation but accumulate to represent a large deviation from one's values

Gender harassment: behaviors that express insulting, hostile, or degrading attitudes about one's gender or gender identity, often termed hostile environment harassment in legal contexts

More specifically, we draw on a framework of ethical climates to investigate the contextual influences surrounding sexual harassment and on the bounded ethicality literature to illuminate the underlying psychological processes that contribute to the problem.

We begin our review by arguing that sexual harassment is an ethical issue. Drawing on research on ethical climate antecedents, we then examine contextual influences—including individual, leader, organizational, and environmental factors (Mayer 2014)—that affect the engagement in and response to sexual harassment. Because our focus is on sexual harassment in academia, we identify aspects within that context that are particularly significant in their influence. We then extend concepts central to bounded ethicality—ethical fading, motivated blindness, and the slippery slope—to sexual harassment, offering new insight into the psychological processes that may be unknowingly contributing to its initial incidence and continued prevalence. We conclude by identifying scholarly and organizational initiatives that may better address sexual harassment in academia in the future.

Our review is broad but not exhaustive. We used a multistep approach to identify published studies for our review. We began by searching for the term sexual harassment and related terms (including gender harassment; see Kabat-Farr & Cortina 2014) in relevant databases (e.g., PsycINFO, ProQuest, EBSCO), focusing primarily on sexual harassment by faculty and staff.³ The limited academic research on sexual harassment in academia prompted a broader search that drew on the more general sexual harassment literature, including reviews on this topic (e.g., Berdahl & Raver 2011, Cortina & Berdahl 2008, McDonald 2012, Welsh 1999). Our search revealed a relatively small set of original empirical articles in the top psychology and management journals, so we expanded our search to a variety of relevant publications. We also relied on literature that addressed related constructs that were central to our focus, including incivility, microaggression, abusive supervision, workplace harassment, ostracism, and bullying. As a final step in our search, we identified additional relevant articles, including articles cited in the initial articles that we reviewed.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AS AN ETHICAL ISSUE

Before examining sexual harassment from a behavioral ethics perspective, it is important to make the case that sexual harassment is an ethical issue. Boves-Sperry & Powell (1999) argue that sexual harassment is a moral issue, as it poses a potential harm to others (see also O'Leary-Kelly & Boves-Sperry 2001). Moral foundations theory (Graham et al. 2011) offers further support for the idea that sexual harassment is an ethical issue; similar to other forms of sexual offense (see Harper & Harris 2017), sexual harassment violates all five moral foundations. Specifically, sexual harassment is a violation of (*a*) care, given that sexual harassment violates motivations to nurture, care, and protect victims; (*b*) fairness, given that it causes unfair disadvantage to the victims; (*c*) loyalty, given that it violates a bond to a member of one's community or organization; (*d*) authority, given that it violates rules of society and the law; and (*e*) purity, given that it involves physical and spiritual uncleanness.

Firmly establishing sexual harassment as an ethical issue is critical, as doing so increases the likelihood that individuals and organizations will recognize the harm done as a result of such behavior (Boves-Sperry & Powell 1999, O'Leary-Kelly & Boves-Sperry 2001, Pierce et al. 2004). The positioning of sexual harassment as an ethical issue also offers new perspectives through which to

³We did not focus on student-on-student sexual assault, as we viewed it as a separate but equally important phenomenon that warrants its own focused review.

understand sexual harassment. We thus add to the theoretical foundations that have been advanced to understand sexual harassment—including biological, sociocultural, power, organizational, and legal consciousness theories (see McDonald 2012)—by offering a behavioral ethics perspective that builds off of and extends these theories. More specifically, we draw on two central tenets in the behavioral ethics literature, ethical climates and bounded ethicality, to provide an organizing framework that illuminates how context and psychological processes may encourage and perpetuate sexual harassment.

Organizational climate: the shared meanings that organizational members experience and the behaviors that they observe to be rewarded, supported, and expected

ETHICAL CLIMATES AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT: AN ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW

Organizational climates⁴ have a significant influence on employee behavior (Schneider et al. 2013). Sexual harassment researchers have recognized the usefulness of examining organizational climates with regard to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al. 1997). As Knapp and associates (1997, p. 709) state, “sexual harassment does not occur in a vacuum but, rather, in an organizational environment that affects the way people behave.” Previous scholars have identified one aspect of climate—organizational climate for sexual harassment, i.e., characteristics of an organization that communicate tolerance of sexual harassment to its members—as one of the most significant predictors of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al. 1997, Willness et al. 2007). Grounded in the belief that sexual harassment is an ethical issue, we assert that drawing on the ethical climate literature, which is more encompassing than research focused on climates specific to sexual harassment, can enhance our understanding of sexual harassment.

Antecedents of Ethical Climates and Engagement in Sexual Harassment

Research has shown that weak ethical climates promote unethical behavior in organizations (for a review, see Mayer 2014) and thus, by definition, can also promote sexual harassment. We draw on Mayer’s (2014) framework, which identifies four antecedents of ethical climates—individual, leader, organization, and the larger environment—to structure our review, examining each of these factors and their impact on sexual harassment. Given that sexual harassment scholars have not yet fully examined the effect of these four antecedents of ethical climate on sexual harassment in academia per se, we discuss the research that has been conducted across organizations more generally.

Individual antecedents. Much of the literature on individual antecedents of sexual harassment has focused on the demographic characteristics of harassers and victims. Men are typically the perpetrators of sexual harassment, while women are more frequently the victims (Cortina & Berdahl 2008, O’Leary-Kelly et al. 2009), a pattern that has also been found in academia (Cantor et al. 2015, Jagst et al. 2016). Indeed, Cortina and associates (1998, p. 420) argue that the greatest risk factor for being a victim of sexual harassment in academia is being a woman and that “misogynist comments, displays of pornographic pictures, unwanted pressure for dates, sexual coercion and sexual assault reflect the sexism and victimization women encounter at universities nationwide.”

Personality characteristics also appear to play a role in who harasses (see O’Leary-Kelly et al. 2009). Recent research suggests that narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are associated

⁴While we primarily focus on organizational climates, at times we draw on organizational culture research to understand more fully the forces behind sexual harassment, an approach that is in line with others who have called for an integration of research on these two constructs (Schneider et al. 2013).

Hostile sexism:
outright prejudice
toward a particular
gender (typically
women)

with greater likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment (Zeigler-Hill et al. 2016). In contrast, honesty–humility (e.g., sincerity and trustworthiness versus deceit, greed, and conceit) has been shown to be strongly and negatively related to the likelihood to sexually harass (Lee et al. 2003).

For victims, demographic characteristics other than gender can also play a part in the likelihood of being harassed. The recent AAU campus climate survey revealed lower reported rates of sexual harassment for Asians than for their White counterparts; moreover, individuals who identify as a sexual minority indicate experiencing substantially more sexual harassment than their heterosexual peers (Cantor et al. 2015). Those who are financially vulnerable are also more frequent targets of sexual harassment (Uggen & Blackstone 2004). Making matters worse, research has suggested that certain demographic characteristics combine to increase the likelihood that a person will be a victim of harassment: For instance, female minorities often face double jeopardy, experiencing the most overall (sexual and ethnic) harassment (Berdahl & Moore 2006).

Sexual harassment also depends on the relationship between the victim and the harasser. Sexual harassment may be more likely, for example, when the victim and the harasser were in a previous romantic relationship (see Pierce et al. 2000, 2004). The type of relationship in which harassment occurs is also associated with the gender of the victim: In field research, sexual harassment experienced by women primarily originates from superiors, while that experienced by men originates more often from peers (Clancy et al. 2014).

A significant focus in the sexual harassment literature is the influence of power (MacKinnon 1979, McDonald 2012). The powerful person is argued to exert control over those who are powerless in the form of sexual harassment (Gruber 1998), with power derived from many sources, including the organization, social relationships, economics, and physical dominance (Berdahl 2007a, Cortina & Berdahl 2008, Harned et al. 2002). Power makes individuals less inhibited (Keltner et al. 2003) and more goal directed (Guinote 2017) and thus makes it more likely that powerful individuals will engage in behaviors that align with their desires.

Relatedly, an individual's status, as well as threats to that status or to the individual's gender identity, may influence engagement in sexual harassment (Berdahl 2007a, Halper & Rios 2018, Maass et al. 2003). In line with discussions on contrapower harassment, societal status from one's gender, race, and class positions, for example, can imbue the harasser with informal power and lead to harassment of those who may have more organizational power but are inferior from a societal status perspective (McLaughlin et al. 2012). Furthermore, when an individual's social status is threatened, they may attempt to minimize the threat and realign the broader social hierarchy by sexually harassing those who threaten that status (Berdahl 2007a, Maass et al. 2003). Recent research by Halper & Rios (2018) found support for this threat argument for men only—they found that concerns about being perceived as incompetent positively predicted men's sexual harassment of female subordinates even when controlling for narcissism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Violations of stereotypes can also serve as a similar threat. Women who act masculine, for example, do not fulfill the prescriptive stereotype that they are caretakers and are thus more likely to be the targets of gender harassment than are women who follow the stereotypes typically associated with women (see Berdahl 2007b). Such perceptions of stereotype violations may be more prevalent for men, especially those high in hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske 1996) or those in traditional marriages (married to women who are not employed; Desai et al. 2014), who view women in the workplace less favorably than they view men.

Leadership antecedents. Sexual harassment is often perceived as permissible because of the behaviors of the leader. As Mayer and associates (2009) argue, the ethical and unethical behavior of a leader can have a trickle-down effect, influencing more than just the subordinates who report to the leader. Leaders serve as role models for others in the organization and lead by example

to discourage sexual harassment (see Pryor et al. 1993); however, when leaders do not engage in moral behavior (e.g., when they engage in sexual harassment themselves), their behaviors may be especially damaging because leaders' behavior is observed by a broader audience than that of a subordinate who engages in such harassment.

Furthermore, the leader's reaction to harassment, including appropriate punishment of the harasser, influences future sexual harassment (Berdahl & Raver 2011, Offermann & Malamut 2002). For instance, research has demonstrated that lower levels of sexual harassment are associated with leaders who are intolerant of sexual harassment, while higher levels are associated with leaders who ignore the sexually harassing behavior of others (see Bell et al. 2002); indeed, lack of corrective action by a leader against subordinates who engage in sexual harassment allows the behavior to perpetuate (see Pryor et al. 1993). The importance of leader behavior is demonstrated in the US Armed Forces, where it was found that women experienced less harassment when commanders supported antiharassment initiatives and modeled respectful behavior (Buchanan et al. 2014).

While leaders set the tone regarding sexual harassment through their behaviors and reactions, they can also be targets of sexual harassment themselves. Like employees who violate stereotypes, leaders who do not fit a certain prescriptive stereotype of a leader are particularly vulnerable to harassment (McLaughlin et al. 2012) and often end up experiencing harassment from those who disagree with their leadership position or style (Berdahl 2007b).

Organizational antecedents. One of the most influential antecedents of ethical climate that affects sexual harassment is the organizational context (Fitzgerald et al. 1997, Hulin et al. 1996). In some cases, the organizational antecedents of ethical climate and employees' engagement in sexual harassment are aggregations of individual antecedents. Research shows, for example, that male-dominated organizations and those with masculine and patriarchal identities are associated with increased sexual harassment of women (Berdahl 2007b, Fitzgerald et al. 1997), particularly gender harassment (Kabat-Farr & Cortina 2014). One study, for instance, found that, in comparison to women who worked in gender-balanced contexts, women who worked with a majority of men were 1.68 times more likely to encounter gender harassment (Kabat-Farr & Cortina 2014). Women are particularly subjected to sexual harassment when men hold dominant positions, as a preponderance of men in powerful positions "may signal to potential harassers that women are not viewed as valuable members of the organization" (Bell et al. 2002, p. 70). The shortage of women in some academic fields, such as STEM, and in authority positions across universities (Settles et al. 2006) thus makes sexual harassment particularly likely in academia.

The noted higher rate of sexual harassment in organizations with large power differences (McLaughlin et al. 2012) is also more likely in academia given that universities are typified by significant power differences (Settles et al. 2006), such as that between students and faculty (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018). In academia, the privileges and power afforded to tenured faculty, who are more likely to be men (Curtis 2014), may further increase sexual harassment. Faculty members, especially those with tenure, are gatekeepers to jobs and to research and funding opportunities and have the power to provide or withhold academic rewards, such as grades and recommendations for students and promotion recommendations for junior faculty. This power difference is particularly prevalent in graduate education, where faculty can often make or break a student's career (Aguinis et al. 1996); indeed, the AAU's campus climate survey found that graduate students are more likely than undergraduate students to identify those in power—faculty members, bosses, and supervisors—as sexual harassers (Cantor et al. 2015).

Formal and informal systems of an organization have also been argued to constitute an important aspect of an organization's ethical climate (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe 2008, Treviño & Brown 2004). Formal policies intended to educate organizational members about behaviors

Academic freedom: right of faculty to full freedom in research and publication of results, in the classroom, and when writing or speaking as citizens

Shared governance: governance in which oversight of and responsibility for the university (e.g., personnel decisions, budget, policies) are shared by faculty, administrators, and trustees

Due process: formal procedures followed in accordance with established policy

that constitute sexual harassment and the corresponding disciplinary actions are more effective if they are followed up with well-communicated procedures (Thomas 2004). The 2015 AAU survey reveals that universities are not effective in the communication of such procedures: Fewer than 11% of students indicated that they were very or extremely knowledgeable about how the university defines sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment (Cantor et al. 2015). Moreover, reward systems that are competitive, lack transparency, or are seen as inequitable are more likely to encourage sexual harassment because they may lead to a competitive, rather than cooperative, culture (see Berdahl & Raver 2011); thus, such behaviors may be especially likely in universities where faculty promotions can be inequitable and occur with little to no transparency.

Informal processes are often more powerful than formal systems in influencing unethical behavior (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe 2008) and engagement in sexual harassment. Independent of the formal systems, if employees believe that the organization is tolerant of sexual harassment, then sexual harassment is more likely (Hulin et al. 1996, Pryor et al. 1993). Perceptions of organizational justice are also important, with men's likelihood to sexually harass increasing when interactional justice is low, an effect that is compounded when the male harasser is low in agreeableness and high in hostile sexism (Krings & Facchin 2009). Group norms also play a critical role in engagement in sexual harassment, with norms that promote sexual harassment being seen as critical for harassment to occur (see Fitzgerald et al. 1995a, Pryor et al. 1993). Conversely, work groups that exhibit solidarity and supportiveness experience less sexual harassment (De Coster et al. 1999).

How the organization structures jobs matters as well. Women whose employment contracts are fragile, including contingent workers, are at greater risk for sexual harassment (Rogers & Henson 1997). In academia, employees with nonprotected status (e.g., graduate students, nontenured faculty, and staff), because of the precarious nature of their employment (Aguinis et al. 1996), may be more susceptible to being sexually harassed. Women, according to an employment status report by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), are under-represented in full-time faculty ranks (44%) in general and full-time tenured faculty ranks (36%) specifically (Curtis 2014); they may thus be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment from full-time and tenured faculty.

Environmental antecedents. The academic environment itself has several characteristics that uniquely affect ethical climate and sexual harassment. Unlike most other organizations, academic institutions' adherence and commitment to the principles of academic freedom, shared governance, and due process make it particularly difficult to address sexual harassment allegations, and consequently, sexual harassing behaviors often continue.

The principle of academic freedom provides faculty in higher education full freedom in research and teaching and is argued to be "the indispensable requisite for unfettered teaching and research in institutions of higher education" (<https://www.aaup.org/our-work/protecting-academic-freedom>). As noted by the AAUP (Am. Assoc. Univ. Prof. 2016), institutional policies established to address sexual harassment are often perceived to come into conflict with the principles of academic freedom, with some faculty pushing back, claiming such policies go too far and have a chilling effect on academic freedom and faculty rights (Hartcollis 2016). Furthermore, the principle of shared governance results in diffused authority within universities, making oversight of behavior difficult (see Settles et al. 2006) and creation and enactment of sexual harassment policies potentially more complex and less agile. Moreover, leadership roles taken on by faculty (e.g., department chair, associate dean) are often not aspired to but rather seen as an obligation (Rowley & Sherman 2003); as such, they are often temporary and not accompanied by sufficient training. Many faculty in leadership roles may therefore be unprepared, less inclined, and less able to deal with issues such as sexual harassment. The tenure system and the due process protections of

tenure also make it difficult to fire tenured faculty who engage in sexual harassment. Consequently, as argued in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Spahr & Young 2018), such faculty often receive minimal sanctions (e.g., warnings, training requirements, or temporary administrative leaves), if any, which may in turn encourage harassing behaviors.

The legal environment surrounding sexual harassment is another important environmental factor, one that often informs the policies that universities implement. Title IX of the Education Amendments to Title VII, passed in the United States in 1972, makes discriminatory behavior illegal in any educational program or activity that receives federal funding; similar legislation has appeared in other countries. Such laws are meant to prevent discriminatory behaviors such as sexual harassment in educational institutions; however, as discussed below, this focus can also lead to a legal framing that can actually increase the prevalence of sexual harassment. Finally, national culture appears to play a role in sexual harassment, with masculine cultures being more likely to promote sex-role differences (Hofstede 1984), which can in turn increase the prevalence of sexual harassment (Wasti et al. 2000).

Antecedents of Ethical Climate and Response to Sexually Harassing Behavior

As with the initial occurrence of sexual harassment, there is evidence that the antecedents of ethical climate also affect how individuals and organizations respond to incidents of sexual harassment. While reporting is essential to halting sexual harassment, the most common response to sexual harassment is to remain silent (Knapp et al. 1997). In the 2015 AAU campus climate survey, less than 8% of those who experienced sexual harassment reported it to a university agency (Cantor et al. 2015). Thus, it is important to understand factors that influence victims' and observers' responses to sexual harassment. Research has distinguished different types of victim responses—including filing formal complaints, confronting the harasser, talking with and seeking support from others, avoiding the harasser, and ignoring or denying the situation (Knapp et al. 1997)—and the different responses of bystanders and organizations who observe harassment (Pierce et al. 2000); therefore, our review includes research related to any of these responses.

Individual antecedents. Demographic characteristics have been shown to affect a victim's response to sexual harassment (see Knapp et al. 1997). Despite overall low reporting rates, women tend to be more willing to make formal reports regarding sexual harassment than men (see Cortina & Berdahl 2008), as are victims who are younger (Barak et al. 1992, Cortina & Wasti 2005), lower in occupational status, or White or European American (see Cortina & Berdahl 2008). Personality characteristics have also been found to affect a person's likelihood of formally reporting sexual harassment. Those who have assertive personalities, strong self-identity, or high self-esteem, for example, are more likely to file formal reports of harassment (Adams-Roy & Barling 1998). Victims who wish to avoid conflict with their harassers, however, are less likely to respond to sexual harassment (Cortina & Wasti 2005). Similarly, potential responders often fear that the harasser, coworkers, or organizational leaders will retaliate against them if they speak up, which may similarly lead to a lack of reporting (Berdahl & Raver 2011, Bergman et al. 2002, Vijayasiri 2008).

Leadership antecedents. Leaders are often the parties who respond to sexual harassment reports and thus play an important role in affecting employees' decisions to report (Knapp et al. 1997). As Offermann & Malamut (2002, p. 892) argue, "it is not enough to rely on the existence of formal policy to deter harassment; rather, it is the job of every leader, at every level, to demonstrate publicly an unwavering commitment to eliminating sexual harassment." Leader responsiveness is thus, not surprisingly, one of the most powerful factors in changing the acceptability of sexual

Title IX: part of the Education Amendments to Title VII; prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs or activities receiving federal funding

Title VII: part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin

harassment (Offermann & Malamut 2002). When victims do not feel that their supervisor will respond and try to stop the harassment, it is less likely that they will report the incident (Offermann & Malamut 2002).

Organizational antecedents. The organization influences how victims and observers respond to instances of sexual harassment. Perhaps the first and most obvious organizational antecedent affecting responses to sexual harassment is the presence, dissemination, and enforcement of a sexual harassment policy, with action-oriented policies argued to be the most effective for encouraging reporting (Gruber 1998). Formal aspects of the organization, such as human resources and legal departments, are also important, as they are responsible for outlining the policies and procedures necessary to report or discipline cases of sexual harassment. However, such sexual harassment policies are often unclear on how sexual harassment should be reported, making it difficult for victims and observers to know the best way to respond (Knapp et al. 1997). In a study of sexual harassment in field research, it was found that few people were aware of the mechanisms that were available for reporting sexual harassment (Clancy et al. 2014); similarly, in the 2015 AAU campus climate survey, only approximately a quarter of respondents were very knowledgeable about where to report sexual misconduct at their university (Cantor et al. 2015). The dispersion of responsibility in academia, as noted above, likely contributes to the lack of clarity surrounding reporting channels.

Informal systems are at least equally important, with the established norms and expectations surrounding sexual harassment having a profound effect on responses to it (see Knapp et al. 1997). Even if an organization does have an understandable policy on sexual harassment, individuals can still be discouraged to report when the perceived expectation is that such reports will not be taken seriously (Hulin et al. 1996). Individuals also fail to report when they want to avoid a formal solution (e.g., punishment of perpetrator, court battle, or having the complaint put into their official employment record) (Fitzgerald et al. 1995b) or if they believe that the organization and its employees will respond to the complaint with backlash, retaliation, or additional harassment (Riger 1991).

Environmental antecedents. As discussed above, Title IX is one factor that should motivate universities to follow up on accusations of sexual harassment or risk losing federal funding if accusations are not appropriately addressed; however, it has been argued that the common framing of sexual harassment as a legal issue often results in a focus on limiting legal liability rather than on effectively reducing the harassing behavior (see Chappell & Bowes-Sperry 2015, Dobbin & Kelly 2007). This can be seen in the case of Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics Team's doctor and a faculty member at Michigan State University (MSU), who pled guilty to sexually assaulting more than 130 women and girls between 1998 and 2015. The statement issued by the president of MSU before resigning in 2018 underscores how a legal focus shifts the response away from the act of harassment and toward protection of the university:

MSU is entitled to, and its insurers require, that we will mount an appropriate defense. . .the defenses raised on MSU's behalf are in no way a reflection of our view of the survivors, for whom we have the utmost respect and sympathy, but rather represent. . .our desire "to protect MSU's educational and research missions" (Simon 2018).⁵

⁵Four months later, MSU reached a settlement with 332 victims of Nassar's abuse for \$500 million to pay those victims and cover future claims of sexual abuse.

Such a legal focus concentrates efforts, including those of senior officials, on protecting the university and thereby likely discourages victims and observers from reporting sexual harassment. Victims' and observers' lack of awareness and understanding of the law and their legal rights can also affect how they respond to the sexual harassment, including whether they file formal complaints against the harasser (Blackstone et al. 2009).

National culture matters as well. While women across cultures tend not to report sexual harassment, cultural differences on collectivism, power distance, and patriarchy further influence how victims respond (Wasti & Cortina 2002): Turkish and Hispanic American women tend to avoid the harasser more than do Anglo American women, and Hispanic American women use more denial and less advocacy seeking (e.g., reporting to the organization). The collectivist–individualist dimension of culture also affects attribution of guilt and responsibility in academic settings, with students from more individualistic countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, Netherlands, and Germany) attributing greater guilt and responsibility to a professor who engaged in unwanted sexual attention to a female graduate student than do students from collectivistic countries (e.g., Turkey, Philippines, Taiwan, Pakistan, and Ecuador) (Sigal et al. 2005).

In addition, the broader societal environment plays an important role in whether victims and observers speak up. In 2017, almost daily news reports of sexual harassment allegations against powerful men revealed by the #MeToo movement empowered victims and observers to speak up against sexual harassment (Bever & Ohlheiser 2017), and this movement spread to other countries, with related hashtags such as #BalanceTonPorc, #QuellaVoltaChe, and #YoTambien (Powell 2017). In academia, the hashtag #MeTooPhD is argued to be having similar effects (Kelsy 2017).

A BOUNDED ETHICALITY PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In the investigation of what drives unethical behavior, a behavioral ethics perspective focuses not only on ethical climates but also on bounded ethicality. We believe that integrating this perspective with the literature on sexual harassment can offer additional insight into why individuals and universities (and other organizations) who want to address sexual harassment have a difficult time doing so. Far from offering an excuse, gaining insight into the cognitive processes that encourage sexual harassment can help increase accountability for perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.

Bounded ethicality can manifest itself in several processes, including ethical fading, motivated blindness, and the slippery slope (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011). In the case of sexual harassment, harassers who experience ethical fading may be blind to the ethical dimensions of their actions, leading to behavior that they consider benign but that is in fact sexual harassment. Victims and observers of sexual harassment may experience motivated blindness by not seeing sexual harassment committed by others for what it is. Moreover, harassers, victims, and observers may all experience the slippery slope, discounting progressively more egregious sexually harassing acts over time. As we detail below, each of these processes facilitates the perpetuation and intensification of sexual harassment.

Factors Affecting Ethical Fading

If harassers do not see the ethical implications of their behavior, then they are more likely to harass (O'Leary-Kelly et al. 2000). Through our review of the literature below, we discuss several factors that are likely to affect the ethical fading of sexual harassment.

Harassers are argued to be influenced by moral intensity perceptions, with harassment often seen as a low-intensity issue given the low social consensus concerning the act, the lack of

proximity in job level and lack of concordance in gender between the victim and the harasser, and the perception that the consequences are low, especially given the fact that victims often remain silent (O’Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry 2001). Research also reveals that men and women differ in their perceptions of what behaviors constitute sexual harassment and thus may be differentially susceptible to ethical fading. In a meta-analysis of gender differences in sexual harassment perceptions, Rotundo and associates (2001) reported that women perceive many more social-sexual behaviors as harassing than do men. Thus, perpetrators, because they do not see the behavior as sexual harassment or because they perceive it to be low in intensity, may be more likely to fall prey to ethical fading, increasing the likelihood that they will engage in that behavior.

As discussed above, power plays an important role in sexual harassment (MacKinnon 1979), and we argue that ethical fading may help explain that relationship. Power can lead to an inability to take the perspective of others (Galinsky et al. 2006) and diminished concern and empathy for others (van Kleef et al. 2008). Power can also lead to difficulty in perceiving ethical problems (Kennedy & Anderson 2017). Moreover, powerful individuals are at greater social distance from others (Magee & Smith 2013), making it less likely that they will recognize the harm that they are inflicting upon their victims. This, coupled with findings that powerful individuals overestimate the sexual interests that others have in them (Kunstman & Maner 2010), suggests a dangerous combination: Powerful people, who are more likely to be men, are not only more likely to engage in sexual harassment, as discussed above, but are also less likely to see it as problematic, or to see it at all. As noted above, it is for these reasons that the hierarchy and power asymmetries characteristic of academia may make ethical fading and sexual harassment especially likely.

A core tenet of ethical fading is that, if ethical considerations are not part of the evoked decision frame through which decision makers view their decisions, then they will not consider the ethical implications of their actions, even if ethical values are important to them (Tenbrunsel & Messick 2004). One reason why sexual harassment persists despite the presence of sexual harassment policies in almost all US organizations (Dougherty 2017) may be the legal frame through which sexual harassment is typically viewed (Chappell & Bowes-Sperry 2015). As noted above, due to Title VII and Title IX, academic institutions are highly sensitive to the legal implications of sexual harassment, and the corresponding compliance-based approach may be inadvertently encouraging ethical fading. Such a legal frame encourages compliance-based training (Dobbin & Kelly 2007) and often results in decreased recognition of behavior as sexually coercive (see Chappell & Bowes-Sperry 2015). Indeed, the EEOC’s select task force on sexual harassment reported in 2016 that sexual harassment training over the previous 30 years had failed in preventing sexual harassment, in part because it had been focused too much on avoiding legal liability (Feldblum & Lipnic 2016). Furthermore, this type of traditional training does not identify sexual harassment as ethically problematic (O’Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry 2001), which facilitates ethical fading and allows sexual harassment to continue.

Language euphemisms may also lead to ethical fading because they sanitize the behavior, making it appear more acceptable (Tenbrunsel & Messick 2004). Describing harassment as flirting, banter, or joking, for example, makes sexually harassing behavior seem more innocent (see Page & Pina 2015), thus reducing the perceived severity of the behavior and making it more prone to ethical fading; terms such as these also introduce uncertainty, which has been linked to ethical fading (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011). Other euphemisms, such as characterizing women who wear heels as asking for rape (Fitzgerald 1993), may induce ethical fading by shifting responsibility for the ensuing behavior away from the harasser. These types of language euphemisms may be particularly problematic in organizations in which men hold many of the powerful positions because men are argued to have the prerogative to “name the world” (Wood 1992, p. 352) and thus influence how others in the organization perceive sexually harassing behaviors.

Factors Affecting Motivated Blindness

Labeling sexual harassment is seen as critical to preventing it (Stockdale et al. 1995), yet victims and third parties often fall prey to motivated blindness, not seeing the harassment for what it is, in turn decreasing the likelihood that it will be reported and increasing the probability that harassment will be perpetuated. Victims often employ disengagement coping—including denial, avoidance, and wishful thinking (Connor-Smith et al. 2000)—to distance themselves from the sexual harassment (Knapp et al. 1997), which can act as a catalyst for motivated blindness. Third parties such as bystanders, peers, and leaders can also fall prey to motivated blindness. We review several factors below that may affect victims' and bystanders' ability to see sexual harassment.

Victim and observer characteristics influence whether behavior is recognized as sexual harassment (see O'Leary-Kelly et al. 2009). Research suggests that female faculty have broader definitions of sexual harassment than do male faculty (McKinney 1990) and thus may be less likely to fall prey to motivated blindness, although these effects have been found to be context dependent (see O'Leary-Kelly et al. 2009). The gender differences that do exist may be explained in part by hostile sexism, whether the self was used as a reference point, and the credibility of the complainant (O'Connor et al. 2004). Nevertheless, while women may be more likely to label sexual harassment than men, the majority of women do not (Magley et al. 1999), suggesting that most women may still fall prey to motivated blindness. This phenomenon is a common occurrence in academia: In a meta-analysis of sexual harassment studies, for example, Ilies and associates (2003) revealed that, although women in academia indicated experiencing behaviors that constitute sexual harassment more than did women in the private sector or government, they were the least likely to consider themselves to have experienced sexual harassment. Research has also found that women from traditional cultures that are patriarchal and collectivist in nature (e.g., Hispanic women) are more likely to experience denial in relation to sexual harassment (Wasti & Cortina 2002) and may thus be unlikely to label the behavior as harassment. Not labeling the behavior as harassment, however, does not make victims immune to the negative psychological and physical outcomes experienced as a result of the behavior (Magley et al. 1999).

Characteristics of the harasser can also mitigate or encourage motivated blindness. If the harasser is of higher status than the victim, then the conduct is more likely to be identified as sexual harassment (see O'Leary-Kelly et al. 2009). Furthermore, the harasser's use of remedial accounts—such as denials, excuses, justifications, and concessions—can influence whether observers perceive sexual harassment, with denials being the most likely to encourage motivated blindness, especially for male observers (Tata 2000).

Motivated blindness is also influenced by the relationship that the victim has with the harasser. It can be particularly difficult for victims to acknowledge that they are being sexually harassed by someone that they trust and upon whom they depend, as is the case for a graduate student being harassed by a faculty member. Similar to the abuse of spouses or children, which can cause betrayal blindness (Delker et al. 2018), such harassment is a violation of trust in the context of dependence (Rosenthal et al. 2016). In these situations, when the need to maintain the relationship takes precedence, the victim may experience motivated blindness and may not be consciously aware of the harassing nature of the behavior.

The relationship between the harasser and the observer may also affect the ability of observers to see the harassment (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011), in part because they struggle with the concept that people can be both good and bad (Zimbardo 2004). As Savannah Guthrie of the *Today* show stated when reporting that her colleague Matt Lauer had been fired for sexual harassment, "We are grappling with a dilemma that so many people have faced these past few weeks. How do you reconcile your love for someone with the revelation that they have behaved badly?" (Perrigo

2017). In the stories of sexual harassment that proliferated in the news and social media following revelations against Harvey Weinstein in 2017, there was significant finger pointing toward previous friends or close colleagues of the harasser, with allegations that they had to have known. While these allegations may be true, it may also be the case that their close relationship with the harasser did not allow them to see the harassment for what it was.

Group membership may likewise influence whether observers see harassment. Cocultural theory suggests that individuals who are privileged by a dominant group positioning (e.g., men in university settings) do not fully understand the realities of the experiences of individuals in marginalized groups and thus have a partial view of reality (Orbe 1998). This is consistent with research discussed above that shows that powerful individuals are less able to take the perspectives of others (Galinsky et al. 2006). Thus, male colleagues in universities who observe another male's harassing behavior may be blind to the harassing nature of that behavior.

As with ethical fading, moral intensity can affect motivated blindness. Observers are more likely to intervene in sexual harassment when the behavior is identified as high in moral intensity (Bowes-Sperry & Powell 1999; see also Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly 2005), a finding that we argue occurs because observers are more likely to code such behavior as wrong. Three factors that signify intensity were found to account for 75% of judgments of whether an act was sexual harassment: the victim's reaction (was the act welcomed or not), the existence of coercion, and the job consequences for the victim (York 1989). The emphasis on sexual forms of harassment, in comparison to more subtle but potentially more systemic gender harassment (see Berdahl 2007a), may mean that harassing behaviors that fall in the latter category fly under the radar. Harassment that includes threats or violence is perceived to be more severe (Fitzgerald et al. 1995b) and thus more likely to be labeled as sexual harassment; conversely, subtle forms of sexual harassment (e.g., sexual jokes or stories) may be less likely to be labeled as such and may therefore facilitate motivated blindness. Indeed, in recent campus surveys, the dominant reason why victims of sexual harassment did not report the incident was that they did not consider it a sufficiently serious offense (Cantor et al. 2015). As we argue in the next section, however, ignoring low-intensity harassment facilitates the slippery slope and can lead to future sexual harassment that is more severe.

Observers who perceive a lack of reaction to sexual harassment by others, which may be reflective of an organization's tolerance of sexual harassment, are also less likely to label it as such (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly 2005); academia may be especially prone to this perception and consequent motivated blindness given its adherence to principles of academic freedom, shared governance, and due process, as discussed above. In addition, not only does the legal environment lead to ethical fading for the harasser, but the resulting narrow interpretation of sexual harassment also creates motivated blindness for the organization and its members, with any behavior falling outside that narrow definition not being recognized as sexual harassment (Marshall 2005). Such a perspective may align the interests of administrators with those of the harassers (Kihnley 2000) and perpetuate a hear no evil, see no evil mentality (Dobbin & Kelly 2007); the resulting ignorance not only protects the university from liability, but also makes it more likely that motivated blindness ensues throughout the organization. This is seen in the case involving Larry Nassar: According to news articles about his repeated sexual abuse, MSU's Title IX coordinator, a full-time MSU employee at the time, concluded that Nassar's behavior was "medically appropriate" after interviewing three medical specialists and a team physician, all of whom were employed full time by MSU (Kitchener 2018). We argue that these MSU employees' need to protect the university from harm may have contributed to their motivated blindness, making it unlikely that sexually harassing and abusive behavior that would negatively affect the university would be identified.

Factors Affecting the Slippery Slope

The above discussion of ethical fading and motivated blindness identifies how individuals can be blind to their own or others' harassment in a single point in time; the notion of the slippery slope extends these concepts to explain why this type of behavior perpetuates over time. Tenbrunsel & Messick (2004) argued that past practices serve as benchmarks for evaluating new practices; when small deviations from past behavior occur and are viewed as acceptable, they become the new benchmark, allowing additional deviations to be viewed as acceptable. Indeed, research has shown that individuals are more likely to engage in unethical behavior (Welsh et al. 2015) and more likely to accept the unethical behavior of others (Gino & Bazerman 2009) if the process is gradual rather than abrupt. The slippery slope thus perhaps explains why it is that documented cases of sexual harassment of students by faculty reveal that such harassment is often perpetuated by serial harassers (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018).

Terry (2012, p. 71), in a description of the "cycle of sexual offending," argues that a perpetrator's thoughts after the offense facilitate future offenses. If these thoughts lead to a diminishing of the act for the harasser, as may occur through ethical fading, it is more likely that the slippery slope will be set in motion. We can see these mechanisms at play in the case of Sujit Choudhry, then dean of the University of California, Berkeley Law School, who admitted to "touching, hugging, and kissing" his assistant, often several times a day, but said he did this to "give thanks" and "calm down" the victim (LaCampagne 2015).

From the victims' and observers' perspectives, even if they see the sexual harassment for what it is and choose to report it, moral disengagement mechanisms (including devaluation of the victims and their claims or recharacterization of the harassment as socially acceptable) may reduce the perceived severity of the initial act (Page & Pina 2015), thus facilitating the slippery slope. For example, severity is reduced by refocusing attention away from the perpetrator and toward the victim; focusing on the victim has been shown to result in greater victim blaming (Niemi & Young 2016). Victim blaming is particularly likely in instances where victims have experienced sexual harassment and have remained silent (Diekmann et al. 2013). This tendency to blame the victim is evident in a study of a university's sexual harassment policy, where it was found that victims were often labeled as "troublemakers" (Kihnley 2000), a language euphemism that places fault on the victim rather than the harasser. Forecasting biases may also contribute to the slippery slope of sexual harassment, with observers believing that they would be more likely to stand up to harassment than, on average, people actually are (Diekmann et al. 2013). This forecasting error in turn leaves them unprepared to respond to any future harassment when they either experience it as a victim or see it as an observer, potentially setting into motion an escalatory pattern of harassment.

Leaders and organizations also play a large role in the slippery slope, as they give or deny a harasser the opportunity to harass again in the future (Offermann & Malamut 2002, Willness et al. 2007). When these leaders and organizations receive reports of harassment but issue weak or nonexistent sanctions, they act as a catalyst for the slippery slope. As noted above, weak responses by universities are often driven by the principles of academic freedom, shared governance, and due process, which can create obstacles for organizational authorities in their response to sexual harassment. This type of weak response is found in the case of Sujit Choudhry, described above. Despite being found guilty of sexual harassment in a university with a zero tolerance policy, he was kept on the payroll, allowed to remain on the Law School faculty, and eventually sent on a 2-year sabbatical while retaining his travel funding and research grants (Fredrickson 2017).

Moreover, many institutions require that investigations of sexual harassment go through a private and confidential process with claims settled out of court, often with a nondisclosure

Ethical leadership: demonstrating normatively appropriate behavior and promoting such behavior to followers through communication, decision making, and responses

agreement that is not publicly documented, resulting in uncertainty regarding whether the incident was addressed. In these cases, even if a faculty member is subject to severe sanctions, other faculty, students, and staff may be unaware that any action was taken. Furthermore, when a faculty member is found guilty and disciplined, that person can often move to another university without that university knowing about any sexual harassment allegations and sanctions, resulting in a pattern known as pass the harasser (see Cantalupo & Kidder 2018).

The focus on avoiding legal implications leads to a check-the-box mentality and overemphasis on compliance rather than effective measures to address sexual harassment. This emphasis on being in compliance can in turn lead to an illusion of fairness (Kaiser et al. 2013) on the part of the university, which can dampen the response to such claims, encouraging future harassment. The repeated sexual assault by Larry Nassar at MSU and USA Gymnastics, as discussed above, and repeated sexual harassment by Harvard Professor Jorge Domínguez that spanned almost four decades, as documented in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Bartlett & Gluckman 2018), are other examples that underscore the role that the organization's weak response plays in contributing to the slippery slope. In these cases, because little or nothing was done despite numerous allegations, the harassment continued over years and even decades.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We started researching and writing this article in the spring of 2016, when several high-profile cases of sexual harassment in academia had been exposed. Since then, there have been tidal waves of reports of sexual harassment in entertainment, journalism, politics, and the corporate world; reports in academia, on which we focus our review, have also continued (for ongoing documented cases, see Libarkin 2016). Many victims of sexual harassment have come forward, but there are still additional steps that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of sexual harassment in the first place and encourage timelier reporting when it does occur. Efforts can be made on many fronts, including the incorporation of research on ethical climates and bounded ethicality into the sexual harassment literature, as well as into organizational policies on sexual harassment.

Future Research: Integrating Behavioral Ethics and Sexual Harassment Research

We argue above that sexual harassment is an ethical issue and that scholarly progress can be made by connecting sexual harassment to the burgeoning field of behavioral ethics. Doing so will allow the sexual harassment literature to draw on the theoretical and empirical foundations of behavioral ethics and, reciprocally, allow the behavioral ethics field to respond to the call to expand beyond the limited scope of dependent variables that it currently investigates (Smith-Crowe & Zhang 2016). Below, we highlight some of the opportunities that may come from integrating these fields.

Ethical climates. One opportunity lies in further integrating the work on ethical climates with sexual harassment. Prominent in this area is the work on ethical leadership (Brown et al. 2005). Given the noted importance of the leader, exploring the usefulness of this construct for sexual harassment would allow for a more comprehensive and informed examination of the antecedents of ethical leadership that promote or mitigate sexual harassment.

Additional research on the ethical infrastructure, including both formal and informal systems, may also provide insight into sexual harassment. Future research might focus on further understanding why and when observers of sexual harassment intervene or fail to take action (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly 2005) and whether and how organizations can create a culture of speaking

up for victims and bystanders. One powerful force may be found in the stories that are told within the organization. Over 25 years ago, scholars noted the importance of storytelling in understanding sexual harassment (Wood 1992). One could argue that the #MeToo movement provides a new space for storytelling about sexual harassment. Given the connection between storytelling and ethical behavior in organizations (Martin 2016), we believe that the power of stories can be further leveraged in the sexual harassment context. Investigating which stories are most effective in mitigating sexual harassment and who should tell them may help further harness the potential impact for changing behavior.

Bounded ethicality. As we argue throughout this review, we believe that the approach taken by the bounded ethicality literature, namely considering cognitive processes and situational aspects to be important drivers of unethical behavior, may also be fruitful in addressing sexual harassment. One opportunity for integration is in the examination of the impact that language euphemisms have in sexual harassment policies and training. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, Dougherty (2017) opines that organizations need to realize that sexual harassment policies are not just legal documents but also meaning-making documents. Given the central role of language euphemisms in ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick 2004), research that examines the specific language that encourages and mitigates the ethical fading of sexual harassment could prove helpful in developing effective policies and training.

Research on the connection between implicit attitudes and sexual harassment (Rudman & Mescher 2012), coupled with that on how implicit biases may be attenuated (Kang & Banaji 2006), suggests that it may be useful to draw on the literature on ethical interventions that reduce bounded ethicality (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011, Tenbrunsel et al. 2010). Findings by Diekmann and associates (2013) reveal that observers' often inaccurate belief that they would stand up to sexual harassment can lead them to condemn victims who remain silent; however, this double victimization of victims can be reduced by asking observers to think about motivations that they likely would experience if they were in the same situation. Future research that investigates whether anticipating one's motivations, coupled with role modeling and scripting the behaviors in which one can engage (see Gentile 2010) to address the harassment, might be useful for encouraging victims and observers to take action and help reduce sexual harassment (Diekmann et al. 2013). Research also demonstrates that subordinates' use of moral symbols (e.g., ethical taglines at the end of emails, moral symbols in office décor) discourages supervisors from engaging in unethical behavior themselves and from asking their subordinates to engage in unethical behavior (Desai & Kouchaki 2017); thus, future research could focus on which strategies and symbols are most effective in overcoming implicit attitudes that encourage sexual harassment.

Moreover, research on the potential role that construal plays in awareness of the ethical aspects of a situation and consequent behavior may also be a worthwhile avenue to pursue. Higher construals have been associated with greater influence of moral values on behavior (Eyal & Liberman 2012), greater propensity to voice dissent (Packer et al. 2013), greater discipline of moral transgressors by leaders (van Houwelingen et al. 2015), and greater self-control (Fujita et al. 2006). These findings suggest that high construal, whether dispositional or enacted, may be helpful in reducing engagement in, and increasing reporting of, sexual harassment.

Practical Suggestions for Reducing Sexual Harassment in Academia

The flood of sexual harassment cases that have recently come to light, both in academia and in other fields, increases the urgency of addressing the epidemic of sexual harassment in academia. We argue above that additional research needs to be conducted. However, even before that research

is completed, several steps can be taken by organizations who want to more effectively reduce sexual harassment. While this is not an exhaustive list, we draw on the research reviewed above to identify those actions that may be most effective.

Develop mechanisms to ensure gender equality across levels in academia. If there is one theme that is clear in the literature, it is that men, who are typically in positions of power in academia, are more likely to commit sexual harassment. We are not the first to argue that increasing the number of women in higher organizational levels is one of the first steps to be taken to reduce sexual harassment; in fact, this strategy has been advocated for decades (see, e.g., Bell et al. 2002, Megaree 1969). Such steps have been formally taken by countries and local governments to try to address gender inequities. Dismayed by the low number of women on corporate boards of directors, many countries (e.g., France, Norway, Germany) have implemented mandatory quotas for the number of women directors, with accompanying sanctions for failure to comply with the quotas. Local governments in India have also implemented similar quotas mandating political representation of women in elected office, and research shows that such mandates significantly increase willingness and ability to report crimes against women, including rape, and induce greater responsiveness of law enforcement officials to such crimes (Iyer et al. 2012). Now may be an opportune time for universities to commit to finding ways to increase the number of women in powerful positions; however, as others have argued, achieving greater equality in numbers must be coupled with additional steps to ensure gender equality by integrating equality in processes, policies, and practices (Rees 2002) and incorporating other efforts to reduce the subordination of women and other minorities (McLaughlin et al. 2012).

Reframe sexual harassment from a legal issue to an ethical issue. The use of legal grievances as a way to resolve sexual harassment has defined the ways in which we think about and respond to it (Chappell & Bowes-Sperry 2015, Dobbin & Kelly 2007). As we discuss above, this has created a host of problems, including erroneous beliefs about the efficacy of one's policies and programs, alignment between the university and the harasser, the silencing of victims and potential witnesses, and settlements that further perpetuate sexual harassment. Making sexual harassment an ethical issue might lead to harassment being viewed in the same way that fraudulent activity such as cooking the books is considered: a costly unethical activity that harms the organization and its employees. Reframing sexual harassment as an ethical issue might also pave the way for less formal and legalistic resolution methods, which are argued to be more effective in encouraging the reporting of sexual harassment (Riger 1991).

Reduce ethical fading through training. Another dominant theme identified in the sexual harassment literature is the differences in perceptions that exist between certain groups. Men are less likely to see harassment in comparison to women (Rotundo et al. 2001), as are dominant group members in comparison to members of marginal or minority groups (Orbe 1998). Given these noted differences in perceptions, it is vital to identify where illusions are rampant. Once these perceptions are understood, effective training could be adapted to move beyond compliance-based training and address the situational and cognitive processes that lead to these illusions, including identifying factors that encourage ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick 2004). For example, training could frame sexual harassment as an ethical issue (Pierce et al. 2004). Furthermore, because the standard of the reasonable woman, in comparison to that of the reasonable person—i.e., instructions given to jurors to analyze a potential hostile work environment from the viewpoint of a reasonable woman versus from the viewpoint of a reasonable person—can be more effective in increasing identification of sexual harassment (Weiner & Hurt 2000), developing training

programs that focus on using this standard may be helpful. Training that reduces ethical fading could also include developing and practicing empathy, which may be particularly important for powerful people, who, as noted above, are less likely to take others' perspectives (Galinsky et al. 2006) and show compassion for them (van Kleef et al. 2008).

Reduce motivated blindness by encouraging bystander intervention. Bystander intervention is argued to be one of the most promising sexual harassment interventions (Berdahl & Raver 2011), yet most policies are viewed as placing responsibility on the victim to report harassment (Dougherty 2017), which, as we argue above, is unlikely to occur for a variety of reasons. Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly (2005) propose that intervention by observers of sexual harassment will increase when there exist organizational role expectations for taking action. Mandating intervention (e.g., designating all faculty and staff as mandatory reporters of sexual harassment), a policy that many universities have already implemented, may clarify those role expectations and thereby increase reporting. When encouraging intervention, it is important to emphasize that the status quo of doing nothing by staying silent actually facilitates harassment (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly 2005). Moreover, intervention training that focuses on raising awareness that those perceived to be good people—friends, star performers, one's supporters—are likewise capable of engaging in bad behavior (see Tenbrunsel & Messick 2004, Zimbardo 2004) could also be argued to be an effective tool against sexual harassment. However, we believe that such efforts to increase intervention are more likely to be successful if coupled with effective training and communication to students, staff, and faculty so that the reporting process is clearly understood by all (Knapp et al. 1997) and so that lack of knowledge of the process does not serve as a deterrent to reporting.

Furthermore, sexual harassment programs that shift from simple awareness of sexual harassment to action in response, as advocated in the Giving Voice to Values paradigm (Gentile 2010), can be effective in increasing the likelihood that observers will take action against the harassment (Chappell & Bowes-Sperry 2015). This approach involves preparation and practice for action, including thinking through the question, "If I were to voice and act on my values, what would I do and say?"; developing scripts on what, specifically, one would do or say to stop the unethical behavior; and practicing those scripts (Chappell & Bowes-Sperry 2015, Gentile 2010).

Prevent the slippery slope by paying attention to "minor" acts of sexual harassment. The slippery slope of ethical fading and motivated blindness is clear: Small unethical acts beget bigger unethical acts (Tenbrunsel & Messick 2004), and ignoring small unethical acts leads to the ignorance of bigger unethical acts (Gino & Bazerman 2009). It is thus important to recognize the power of the slippery slope and stop sexual harassment before it escalates. Traditional sexual harassment training may be contributing to the problem of the slippery slope: Research has found that, while such training increased the identification of the more obvious behaviors related to sexual coercion, it had no effect on the identification of the more subtle verbal behaviors (Wilkerson 1999). Our recommendation for future training extends the recommendation previously made by other scholars to focus on the more passive forms of sexual harassment in research (Berdahl 2007b). Training, surveys, policies, and sanctions for sexual harassment that address these subtle forms may help prevent the escalating spiral of sexual harassment.

CONCLUSION

Nearly 50 years after Title IX, which prohibits discrimination in educational programs on the basis of sex, was passed, sexual harassment in academia is still widespread despite efforts to address it. Arguing that sexual harassment is an ethical issue, we use a behavioral ethics lens to better

understand why sexual harassment occurs. More specifically, we examine both the ethical climate antecedents—individual, leadership, organizational, and environmental factors—that contribute to the engagement in and lack of effective response against sexual harassment and the processes of bounded ethicality—including ethical fading, motivated blindness, and the slippery slope—that allow it to perpetuate. In doing so, we hope to shed new light on sexual harassment and identify future opportunities for research, policy, and practice.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Sexual harassment is an ethical issue, violating the moral foundations of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity.
2. Gender and power are two of the most significant individual-level influences on sexual harassment in academia, with males and high-powered individuals (who are typically men in academia) being more likely to engage in sexual harassment.
3. Leader behavior is a significant determinant of the engagement in and reporting of sexual harassment, with lack of ethical leadership contributing to the problem.
4. At the organizational level, opaque promotion policies, vague and unclear sexual harassment policies and procedures, large power differences, and fragile employment contracts—all of which are common in academia—can lead to increased harassment and reduced reporting.
5. The fundamental principles of academia (academic freedom, shared governance, and due process) are environmental factors that contribute to the perpetuation of sexual harassment.
6. The legal frame through which sexual harassment is perceived and claims are addressed is a catalyst for sexual harassment, encouraging an alignment between the organization and the harasser and blind spots in policies and responses.
7. Ethical fading and motivated blindness may contribute to harassers', victims', and observers' inability to recognize sexual harassment.
8. The slippery slope of sexual harassment is set in motion when harassment is subtle or low intensity or when the organization fails to effectively respond to sexual harassment complaints.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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