Cross-Cultural Differences in Perceiving Sexual Harassment: 
Demographic Incidence Rates of Sexual Harassment/Sexual Aggression in Latin America

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This descriptive study reports on perceptions of sexual harassment and sexual aggression incidences in Latin America using data from the People’s Security Surveys (PSS) conducted with 8108 employees (approximately 48% male and 52% female) from three Latin American countries -- Argentina, Brazil, and Chile – who were chosen by the International Labour Organization to answer questions using the same methodology on both a quota sample and questionnaire data. Significant chi-square results show that (1) Latin American sexual harassment incidences vary by country in that (2) employees are most likely to be harassed in Chile (8.7%), followed by Brazil (4.8%), followed by Argentina (3.5%); that (3) Latin American sexual aggression incidences vary by country in that (4) of those employees who reported experiencing sexual aggression, 57.7% were from Brazil, followed by 32.1% from Argentina, followed by 10.3% in Chile. In addition, marital status, age and education impact on sexual harassment and aggression in that (5) those who are not married are more likely to be sexually harassed than those who are married (65.7%;34.3%) but (6) those who are married are slightly more likely to experience sexual aggression than those who are not married (51.5:48.5) (7) Those between 16-34 are most likely to experience both sexual harassment (64.9%) and sexual aggression (73.6%). Finally, those with more education are more likely to be targets of sexual harassment than those with less education (56.2%: 43.5%).

Researchers have shown a lot of interest in studying sexual harassment in the workplace (Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 1998; Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Gutek, 1985; Huerta, Cortina, Pang, Torges, & Magley, 2006). This is due in part to the massive number of negative outcomes found to result from sexual harassment. For example, findings show that workplace sexual harassment is responsible for psychological conditions such as stress, depression, and anxiety that result in declines in organizational performance and productivity (Adams, 1988; Baba, Jamal, & Tourigny, 1998; Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger 1999). Studies also show that employees’ well-being are diminished when they are working in an
organizational context perceived as hostile toward women, even in the absence of personal hostility experiences (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004).

What is more, incidences of sexual harassment have steadily climbed throughout the global marketplace, partly due to different cultural values and perceptions (DeSouza & Hutz, 1996; DeSouza, Pryor, & Hutz, 1998; Pryor, Desouza, Fitness, Hutz, Kumpf, Lubbert, et al., 1997; Sigal, Gibbs, Goodrich, Rashid, Anjum, Hsu, et al., 2005). Given that sexual harassment incidents in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile are, for the most part, previously unexplored, it is the purpose of this study to report on demographic status groupings and associated incidences of sexual harassment and sexual aggression in Latin American countries and to compare these results to extant findings in the US.

Sexual harassment is defined as behavior that is unwelcome and of a sexual nature (Welsh, Carr, Maquarrie, & Huntley, 2006). Perceptions of sexual harassment, however, can vary. Cultural perceptions, for example, vary because people differ in how they encode and decode messages (Hofstede, 2001). There are a number of studies that discuss how general perceptions and judgments are related to sexual harassment (Gutek & Done, 2001). In fact, numerous studies address harassment from the US point of view (e.g., Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Rospenda, Richman, Ehmke, & Zlatoper, 2005). Unfortunately, the number of cross-cultural studies on sexual harassment is limited (Matsui, Kakuyama, Onglatco, & Ogutu, 1995). Therefore, calls have been made for studies on sexual harassment as culturally rooted (Cortina & Wasti, 2005; DeSouza, Solberg, & Elder, 2007).

Narodowski (1999) and Stoga (2002), among others, advocate the importance of conducting research particularly in Latin America. Latin America has experienced growing economic, financial, political and social unrest following its transition from military rule to democracy (Smith & Korzeniewicz, 1997; Stark, 2001; Stoga, 2002). These political and subsequent financial changes have also changed the role of women in the Latin American workplace in that they have become more independent and assertive (Diekman, Eagly, Mlandinic, & Ferreira, 2005). Hence, it is important to develop an updated description of workplace sexual harassment reported in Latin America.

Gruber (2003) proposes that perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment are also universal. According to this assertion, the same relationships shown in US studies are likely to exist in other countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Alternatively, other researchers point out that various behaviors that are considered normal and acceptable in Latin America (DeSouza & Hutz, 1996; Shupe, Cortina, Ramos, Fitzgerald, & Salisbury, 2002) are considered sexually offensive
in other countries such as the US. This is why some researchers believe that sexual harassment extends beyond individual nations to include cross-cultural workgroups and whole multicultural organizations (Barak, 1997; DeSouza & Solberg, 2003; Sigal & Jacobsen, 1999; Timmerman & Bajema, 1999).

Sexual harassment and workplace aggression, behavior performed by an individual that harms another individual (Jenkins, 1996), are conceptually similar and tend to co-occur (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001). As a result, testing perceptions of perceived sexual harassment together with perceived sexual aggression in Latin America employees is a logical endeavor to help explain overall harassment experienced in Latin America. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

R1: Are there national differences in Latin American sexual harassment incidences?
R2: To what degree do Latin American employees experience sexual harassment in Latin America?
R3: To what extent do Latin American employees experience sexual aggression in Latin America?
R4: Are there national differences in employees not experiencing sexual aggression incidences?

Fain and Anderton (1987) suggested that macrolevel social stratification variables may influence sexual harassment, causing “vulnerable” employees to be more likely to experience sexual harassment (e.g., Fitzgerald, Drasgow, & Magley, 1999; Gutek, 1985; MacKinnon, 1979). Status characteristics relevant to being harassed include marital status, age, and education (Fain & Anderton, 1987), as well as gender (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; West, 1982). Extant research on these characteristics will be reviewed below. Although much of the existing research reflects studies carried out in the United States, the conclusions enlighten the present description of status characteristics relevant to being sexually harassed in the Latin American workplace.

In terms of marital status, reports of actual sexually-harassing experiences were greater among single than among married women in the US (Lafontaine & Tredeau, 1986; Terpstra & Cook, 1985). Similarly, Lee, Gibson, & Near (2004) found that married respondents were less likely to experience sexual harassment than persons in other marital categories. In order to investigate how marital status impacts sexual harassment and sexual aggression in Latin America, the following question is posed:
R5: Are single women more likely to be sexually harassed or experience sexual aggression than women in other marital categories in Latin America?

Lee, Gibson, and Near (2004) found that the younger the respondents, the more vulnerable and, consequently, more likely they were to experience sexual harassment. According to the Merit Systems Protection Board (1981) and Terpstra & Cook (1985), sexual harassment was reported most by persons between 25 and 35. Similarly, Fain and Anderton (1987) found that women in the 16-34 range were most likely to be harassed, the likelihood decreasing with age.

In contrast, Hendrix (2000) found that older women reported significantly more sexually harassing incidences than younger women. Coles (1986) found the most incidences of sexual harassment to be concentrated in the 20-24 range.

Given the conflicting findings above, the following research question is asked:

R6: How does age impact incidences of sexual harassment and sexual aggression in Latin America?

Lee, Gibson, and Near (2004) and others (Coles, 1986; Dougherty, Turban, Olson, Dwyer, & Laprese, 1996; Fain & Anderton, 1987; Hesson-McInnish & Fitzgerald, 1997; Lafontaine & Treda, 1986; Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982) found that sexual harassment decreased with education level because those with greater education are older. Conversely, the younger the respondents were, the more vulnerable they were and the more likely they were to experience sexual harassment. The assumption they make is that youth would be reflected in a lower level of education.

In contrast, some findings show that the more education one has the greater the number of incidences of sexual harassment that are reported (Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981; Terpstra & Cook, 1985). On the other hand, Fain and Anderton (1987) found that harassment was most likely to occur in the technical training/some college range, less likely for those in the college education/graduate degree or more range, and least likely among individuals with a high-school education or less. Given the conflicting results above, the following research question is asked:

R7: How does education impact incidences of sexual harassment in Latin America?

Sexual harassment and its consequential outcomes largely impact women, financially vulnerable men, and men pursuing more egalitarian gender relationships (Terpstra & Cook, 1985; Uggen & Blackstone,
In fact, sexual harassment is the most widespread form of violence against women in the US (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1993; Gutek, 1985). Although increasingly more men are victims of sexual harassment, nevertheless, adult women remain the most frequent targets of typical sexual harassment behaviors such as unwanted touching and invasion of personal space (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). Results indicate that behaviors were perceived as more sexually harassing if the perpetrator was a male and older (Hendrix, 2000). Hendrix also found that females perceived both male and female initiators as sexually harassing and males perceived other male initiators as sexually harassing but female initiators as less sexually harassing for the same behaviors. Given the existing research, the following research question is asked:

R8: How does gender impact incidences of sexual harassment and or sexual aggression in Latin America?

METHOD

Participants
This study stemmed from a secondary analysis on a sample data set from a larger study conducted by the International Labour Office’s (ILO) InFocus Programme on Socio-Economic Security. Data were collected for the purpose of knowing more about work security and safety in the workplace. In the larger study each survey was conducted using a national collaborating team under the responsibility of ILO’s staff. For additional information, see Anker (2002), who coordinated the people’s social survey (PSS) for cross-cultural comparability. The total sample \( n = 8198 \) included 4240 females and 3868 males. The urban households sampled had respondents between ages 15 and 64 years. In Argentina, the number of cases was 2800, Brazil, 4000, and in Chile, 1180. Although these samples are not representative of the national populations they are very large. Anker (2002) points out that previous empirical analysis carried out in Chile and Brazil indicate that the efficiency of the sampling procedure tends to be quite similar to that based on pure probabilistic sampling (see Mercedes & Caceres, 2002).

Instrumentation
The ILO PSS data used a global measure similar to that used by the Navy Equal Opportunity/Sexual Harassment Survey (NEOSH), “one of the most widely distributed surveys that has not been modified with each administration” (Culbertson & Rodgers, 1997, p. 1958) and by others (Adams-Roy & Barling, 1998; Cortina, et al., 1998; Magley, Hulin, & Fitzgerald, 1999). For the present study, the samples used were exclusively individuals who were employed. The exact questions administered in this survey can be found in the Appendix.
The three surveys analyzed for this study were in Spanish for Argentina and Chile and Portuguese for Brazil. The data were collected between January and April 2001 in the three largest metropolitan areas of each of these countries. In Argentina, the three areas sampled were Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Cordoba; in Brazil, they were Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Recife; and in Chile, the metropolitan area of Greater Gran Santiago.

RESULTS

To test R1 and R2 combined, a chi-square was computed which was significant ($\chi^2 (2, n = 7268) = 46.30, p < .0001$). A significant chi-square calculations for R3 and R4 combined was ($\chi^2 (2, n = 2429) = 494.44, p < .0001$). Cross tabulations between Argentina, Brazil, and Chile and sexual harassment and sexual aggression showed that (1) Latin American sexual harassment incidences vary by country in that (2) employees are most likely to be harassed in Chile (8.7%), followed by Brazil (4.8%), followed by Argentina (3.5%); that (3) Latin American sexual aggression incidences vary by country in that (4) of those employees who reported experiencing sexual aggression, 57.7% were from Brazil, followed by 32.1% from Argentina, followed by 10.3% in Chile.

R5 asks whether single women are more likely to be sexually harassed or experience sexual aggression than women in other marital categories in Latin America. Given the significant differences in sexual harassment between those who did and did not have partners ($\chi^2 (2, n = 7249 = 18.12, p < .0001$), results showed that 65.7% of the total interviewed who reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace were also single (without a partner) while only 34.3% of married respondents reported sexual harassment experiences in the workplace. Surprisingly, results showing significant differences in aggression between those who did and did not have partners ($\chi^2 (2, n = 2424 = 8.67, p = .01$), indicated that 48.5% of the total interviewed who reported experiencing sexual aggression in the workplace were also single (without a partner) while 51.5% of married respondents reported sexual aggression experiences in the workplace.

R6 asked how age impacts incidences of sexual harassment and sexual aggression in Latin America. Results showed that there were significant differences between age groups ($\chi^2 (5, n = 7264 = 42.91, p < .0001$) in sexual harassment frequency, and in the frequency of sexual aggression, $\chi^2 (5, N = 7254) = 41.29, p < .0001$. In particular, Latin American results showed that among those who reported being targets of sexual harassment, 2.2% were between the ages of 1-15. US findings showed that women in the 16-34 range were most likely to be harassed, the likelihood decreasing with age (Fain & Anderton, 1987). Similar to reports in the US, the highest rates of reported sexual harassment in Latin
American major cities were also in the age groups between 16-34 (64.9%), decreasing in age. Specifically, sexual harassment targets in Latin America between 35-45 (20.2%), then 46-56 (11.0%), then, finally, 57-67 had incidences of 1.7%. There were significant differences between sexual aggression and age as well ($\chi^2 (5, n = 2429 = 18.36$, $p = .001$). Between the ages of 1-15 there was a 4% of being sexually harassed. Again, similar to Fain and Anderton’s (1987) findings those in the 16-34 range were most likely to experience sexual aggression (44.5%) with the likelihood decreasing with age in that those between 35-45 (30.1%), then, 46-56 (17.6%), then, finally, 57-67 had incidences of 7.3%.

R7 asked whether education impacts incidences of sexual harassment in Latin America. Latin American results showed that the education level of reported sexual harassment targets was significant $\chi^2 (1, n = 7218) = 5.01$, $p < .02$. These results indicated that greater sexual harassment is observed in the Latin American sample for those with a high school education or more (56.2%) than for those with less than a high school education (43.5%). Latin American employees experiencing sexual aggression in Latin America were not significantly differentiated on the basis of their education. Results also showed no significant gender differences in reporting sexual harassment rates in the workplace.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to report on demographic status groupings and associated incidences of sexual harassment and sexual aggression in Latin American countries and to compare these results to extant findings in the United States in order to help identify existing issues to be addressed. Results from R1-R4 indicated that there are differences between Latin American countries in terms of where people are more at risk for experiencing sexual harassment, with Chile being the riskiest, followed by Brazil then Argentina. The surprising finding was that sexual aggression results varied from sexual harassment results, in that the country where individuals are most at risk for sexual aggression, which sexual harassment is considered to be a subset of, is Brazil, Argentina, then Chile. Future qualitative research would be helpful to clarify the nature of Latin American perceptions behind the self-report ratings of this study.

Results from R5-R7 show that macrolevel social stratification variables may influence sexual harassment and aggression. This present study’s findings indicate that Fain and Anderton’s (1987) explanation that “vulnerable” employees are more likely to experience sexual harassment provides an important explanation of such incidences in the workplace. Specifically, results of this study concurred with US findings
in that individuals who are unmarried and younger are most likely to be sexually harassed because they are less powerful in Latin America as well. Alternatively, they may simply be perceived as more physically attractive and better candidates for a long-term relationship. With regard to sexual aggression, those who were married and young adults, regardless of their gender and education, which weren’t significant, were more likely to experience sexual aggression or harmful sexual behaviors. Perhaps these findings indicate that unlike US findings, in Latin America, those in their most attractive years are most sought-after because they are vulnerable with no spouse to defend them and in order to approach a more protected married employee the stronger aggression tactic is used by perpetrators of sexual aggression. This Latin American finding seems to indicate that marital status does not act as a protection from being targeted sexually. Thus, marital status appears to be viewed differently in Latin American than in the US.

US findings on the impact of education on sexual harassment are mixed. On the one hand, education seems to increase a person’s power. More jobs are open and the person has more choices. On the other hand, in Latin America, the majority of the inhabitants are poor and have little education, which is why the ILO was collecting data on job conditions in Latin America in the first place. Being part of a minority that completed high school and college apparently puts individuals more at risk for experiencing sexual harassment. There are US reports that the numbers of incidences of sexual harassment that are reported are greater the more education one has (Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981; Terpstra & Cook, 1985). Thus, Latin American data appears to concur with some US findings.

Limitations of this research include the use of a convenience sample and a closed-ended questionnaire. Although the sample is very large, the items measuring sexual harassment and sexual aggression were only one measure, without the advantage of follow-up questions. Thus, this preliminary analysis is limited to what was measured, necessary nonetheless, given the dearth of information on sexual harassment in Latin America. Greater clarity in conceptualization and refinement of measurement is suggested by using more complex sexual harassment measures. A further limitation is that other competing explanations have not been investigated.

Qualitative follow-up investigations would help to clarify the nuances of Latin American thinking about their unique perceptions of sexual harassment. This analysis is a beginning to understanding more fully the situation in Latin America with regard to sexual harassment and sexual aggression. Future investigations can now follow up with more in-depth
questions to investigate other aspects of sexual harassment in Latin America as needed.

REFERENCES

and workplace sexual harassment: A handbook of cultural, social science, management, and legal perspectives (pp. 3-30). Westport, Conn: Praeger.


Note: The author wishes to thank the International Labour Office’s InFocus Programme on Socio-Economic Security, especially Jose Burle Figueredo and Hilary Silver, for making these data available. Thanks also to Maria Jeria and Richard Anker for details about the sampling for these data sets. This work was supported (in part) by a grant from The City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program.

**APPENDIX 1**

Independent and Dependent Variables Tested w/ Employed Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Variable Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X1 Marital Status</td>
<td>Marital status? 1 = single, 2 = Married, 3 = separated, 4 = divorced, 5 = widowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X3 Age</td>
<td>What is your age? ______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X4 Education</td>
<td>What is your highest degree of schooling? (1 = none, 2 = elementary incomplete, 3 = elementary completed, 4 = high school incomplete, 5 = high school completed, 6 = college incomplete, 7 = college completed, 8 = Master or Doctoral degree completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X5 Sex</td>
<td>Are you Male___ or Female ___?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y1 Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>During the past two years, have you experienced sexual harassment at work or school? 1.Yes 2.No.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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