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Women in Law Enforcement: Subverting Sexual Harassment through Social Bonds

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Citation

WOMEN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT:

SUBVERTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

WITH SOCIAL BONDS

By

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ABSTRACT

Female law enforcement officers who have strong social bonds with their colleagues can reduce the effect that sexual harassment has on job satisfaction. We test social bond theory to examine the relationship between sexual harassment and job satisfaction from a sample of n=109 active duty male and female police and correctional officers. Law enforcement personnel are thought to be particularly vulnerable to stressors on the job, like sexual harassment, but they can significantly benefit from strong departmental and colleague support. With some progress toward gender equity, this study shows that female officers still face barriers that are linked to this predominantly male dominated career.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents data from a larger study that examines perceptions around barriers to recruitment, retention, and promotion of correctional and police officers by using a representative sample of 60 female officers and 49 male officers.[1] In this paper, we introduce a different theoretical approach to argue that strong workplace bonds can mediate gender differences and improve job satisfaction that are not gender dependent. The hypotheses explored in this paper are two-fold: 1) Female officers have lower job satisfaction scores than their male colleagues. 2) If true, sexual harassment perceived by officers to be current in their workplace explains this gender difference. 3) Strong social bonds in the workplace mediate the gender-job satisfaction relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women in law enforcement have been historically underrepresented in law enforcement, which has long been considered a male-dominated profession (Greene 2000). However, women have increased their representation in law enforcement from just 2% in 1972 to 13% in 2000 (Greene 2000). One of the reasons for such limited

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[1] We recognize the limitation of the small sample size and wish to explore these preliminary findings with a larger sample.

female employment is that the career is often associated with an authoritarian male image, and gaining entry into this elite network is difficult (Lonsway 2006). Until recently the role of women in policing and corrections was restricted to assignments in social welfare (juvenile and family matters); jail matron; store detectives who catch shoplifters; sexual assault investigators; clerks, and correctional officers who guarded only female inmates (Kakar 2002; Kurtz 2008; Rathbone 2005; Martin 1989). Reasons posited for low representation, including those that examine the prevalence of sexual harassment and limited coworker support, focus on the notion that women 1) may be physically or mentally less able to handle the demands of the job; 2) may face gender discrimination at the institutional level; and 3) may experience job-related stress that causes female officers to drop out and seek alternate employment.

Work settings that have a higher ratio of men to women and are considered predominately male occupations led by male supervisors may also have higher tolerance for sexual harassment and create a situation where coworker support is more about a male network that a place of equal opportunity (Vogt and Bruce et al 2003; Bostock and Daley 2007; Lonsway 2006; Kakar 2002; Bergman and Hallberg 2002; Harrison and Kanoff 2010; Griffen and Armstrong et al 2005; Brough and Frame 2004). Examples of these work environments include military service, law enforcement, firefighting, and construction in which traditional characteristics such as power, toughness, dominance, aggressiveness, and competitiveness are bonding elements that reinforce group cohesion, often at the female or other minority group's expense. Women may be seen as disrupting this culture of masculinity (Vogt et al 2003).

No doubt this comes from an historical time line wherein policewomen in the 1970's were told that because they were one of only a few women among a group of men, they may be "pinched, patted, or played with" (Vogt and Bruce et al 2003; Bostock and Daley 2007). At the turn of the 20th century, women were concentrated in the profession of law enforcement as jail "matrons," where they wore skirts and given a handbag in which to carry their gun (Rathbone 2005; Harrison and Kanoff 2010). Along with these differences, women were told they should not wear excessive makeup, dress in suggestive clothing, or use abrasive language. In short, they should not act or appear like men; yet, at the same time, they were told that maintaining their femininity would help them gain respect in their department and become more accepted (Rathbone, 2005). With such conflicting roles, it was clear that women did not enter as equals in policing or corrections, and if hired, held unequal positions while often having to portray both masculine and feminine traits simultaneously to fit in and to advance their career. Garcia (2003, 2007) argues that women even "allowed" themselves to be sexually harassed in an attempt to fit in. Other early studies indicate that this harassment and resistance to women in law enforcement stems from male officers who feared that women might violate departmental secrets about corruption and violence, so in order to maintain the "old boy" network, they intentionally kept the female officers out of the inner circle (Kakar 2002).

Slonaker, Wendt and Kemper (2001) report three explanations for the reasons why female officers fail to report difficulties at work, particularly as it pertains to sexual harassment. First, women become embarrassed and may feel that they have somehow contributed to their treatment. Second, they are concerned that the allegations will result

in their word against the harasser's word. Lastly, they are concerned about committing "professional suicide" (Slonaker et al, 2001; Belknap 1991). In the two latter examples, the process of bonding with colleagues is severely reduced and may effectively isolate the officer in an environment that relies on teamwork and communication in a disproportionately male environment. As a result, elements of sexual banter that routinely passes between officers is often not thought of as sexual harassment but rather as part of a social bonding process to gain coworker support. It can be argued that sexual comments and innuendos exchanged between male and female officers can promote some social cohesion and camaraderie rather than unlawful behavior, which some female officers acknowledge that "it can go both ways." As Slonaker, Wednt and Kemper (2001) point out, females may not even be aware that they experience discrimination, and therefore, it is thought to be widely underreported. Yet the consequences of sexual harassment have several negative work outcomes: decreased morale and lower overall job satisfaction, a decline in relationships with coworkers, increased absenteeism, and job loss (Volanti 1994; Stephens 2000; Brough 2004; Rabe-Hemp 2008). Other documented health effects can include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other physical health problems (Vogt and Bruce et al 2003; Griffin 2006; Kurtz 2008). Although studies show that women are equally capable of working in law enforcement as men, bias in hiring, selection practices, and recruitment policies keep the numbers in of women in law enforcement disproportionately low (Kurtz 2008; Kakar 2002).

An early study by Galinsky et al (1993) shows that in general, 27% of Americans believe that they have experienced some type of discrimination while at work and 15% feel that the discrimination occurred at the job they currently hold (Slonaker, Wendt and

Kemper 2001). Their research showed that 34% of male officers who file discrimination claims use race as the rationale while 65% of female officers use sex as their basis for their discrimination complaint. However, 28% of the claims in general are filed by women and men of color filed 72% of all complaints. Since nationally the police force consists between 10% and 14% female, women are filing claims 2 to 3 times more than would be expected (Slonaker et al 2001). When looking at the frequency of discrimination allegations, 29% come from not being hired, 24% come from discipline, and 22% come from being terminated. When looking at the frequency of the sources of discrimination, 41% of the claims are about a supervisor and 19% are about departmental policy. Overall, only 10% of officers who believe they are experiencing discrimination will take action (Slonaker, Wendt and Kemper 2001).

Griffin's (2006) study of female correctional officers found that they experience significantly more individual level job-related stress than do their male counterparts. Among the factors that increase job-related stress are poor supervisory practices and little trust in supervisors, poor coworker support, male resistance to female officers, safety concerns, fear of victimization, and work-home conflict (Griffin 2006; He, Zhao and Ren 2005; Wells, Colbert and Slate 2006).

Personal stressors include officers' relationships with other officers, or what we refer to as colleague support. Female officers often experience less colleague support, particularly when they must juggle their careers with family obligations (Wells, Colbert, and Slate, 2006). Some researchers argue that coworker support is important to officers because officers' lives depend on one another in dangerous situations. Work related stress

may only be comprehensible to other officers, and for this reason, colleague support is critical for male and female officers alike.

Our argument for this paper uses two elements of Hirschi's (1969) social control theory that argues bonds of commitment, attachment, involvement, and belief can shield officers from deviant and illegal behavior. We focus on the first two elements and make the assumption that officers are already involved and believe in their work. Strong bonds to the department and colleagues support job satisfaction despite perceptions that sexual harassment is current in the workplace. We focus specifically on the effects of attachment to colleagues, both male and female, and officers' perceptions that their department works well together and that promotions are clear and fairly applied to everyone. Using social bond theory in this way is the first of its kind to understand sexual harassment trends in law enforcement.

Attachment. Attachment is defined as a psychological or emotional connection with significant others and represents a core component of the social bond theory (Hirschi 1969; Hirschi and Gottfriedson 1993; Kempf 1993; Leppel 2006). When officers are insensitive to the feelings of other officers, the risk of deviance increases because they lack the moral restraints of the larger moral order (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth and Jang 1991). Studies that focus on children's attachment, for example, can predict healthy behavioral development (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care 2000; Vuchinich, Ozretich, Pratt and Kneedler 2002). In this study, we look for positive relationships between the officer and his or her colleagues, which in turn can minimize emotional distress and is thought to increase job satisfaction through social cohesion. Moreover, attachment can provide a safe context in which new relational skills

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can develop (Haight, Kagle and Black 2003). We ask officers to respond to the following statement: "I enjoy the fellowship of the other officers I work with." According to this theory, attachment to colleagues will reduce sexual harassment. Therefore, officers with strong relationships with both male and female colleagues are more likely to demonstrate attachment to their work and peers, and overall, perhaps be more satisfied with their career choice.

Commitment. Commitment is the second tenet of Hirschi's (1969) control theory and refers to an individual's investment in conventional institutions. Although prior research focuses on religious organizations or a commitment to education, in this study we use officers' perceptions and commitment to his or her law enforcement agency and department as an agent of social control. Respondents rate the following three statements on a four point Likert scale: "I believe it's important to have a department that does things together." And "I believe the process for earning a promotion is clear and fair." And "I have a good rapport with my supervisor." Earlier research with this variable indicates that a lack of commitment is associated with low aspirations, unpleasant relationships with teachers, rejection of authority, and disregard for policies and rules (Agnew 1985; Agnew and Petersen 1989; Gottfredson 2001; Maguin and Loeber 1996). In this study, we test their commitment to their department, supervisor, and perceptions of clear and fair institutional procedures in which a strong bond will reduce the risk of sexual harassment.

<div align="center">METHODS</div>

Using a systematic, random sample from alphabetical lists supplied by department chiefs or the correction facility research department, 109 semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2008 and May 2009. Our response rate during the data

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collection phase was 60%. With administration permission, the interviews occurred during work shifts and officers were selected randomly - every 10th name on list was contacted for inclusion. For correctional officers (n=48), one-on-one interviews were authorized during their work shifts at the state prison complex. For police officers (n = 61), the same semi-structured interview was conducted during their work shift at a local precinct or substation. No individual identifying characteristics, such as name, address, date of birth, or exact age were recorded on the questionnaire in order to protect the disproportionately low number of females who worked in each department. Each survey consisted of 29 four point Likert-scale questions, 11 open-ended questions, and 9 socio-demographic questions. The four point Likert scale was coded as 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Only two female correctional officers, two female police officers, and 3 male police officers declined to participate during the time that was available for data collection.

With a systematic random sampling method, this design did have substantial drawbacks. We did not use a standardized instrument; instead it was generated by identifying areas in the literature that were underdeveloped or absent. We also failed to include officer rank or race as identifiable characteristics. Because every 10th name was selected from an alphabetized list of names, we could not identify officer race or ethnicity from the list. Only 15 officers of color and 8 officers with rank appear in the sample.

Hypotheses   1) Female officers experience lower levels job satisfaction compared to male officers due to sexual harassment. 2) Strong social bonds (commitment + attachment) mediate the sexual harassment-job satisfaction relationship.

Dependent Variable A job satisfaction index comprises three Likert scale questions: "I enjoy working by myself," "I have a calling for this type of work," and "I plan to stay on this job until retirement." These three variables have a Cronbach's alpha score of .49. The index scores range from 3 to 12, with a mean of 8.83 and a standard deviation of 1.97.

Independent Variables To assess attachment, a one item Likert scale measure is used: "I enjoy the fellowship of the other officers I work with." To measure commitment, a three item scale of 1) "It's important to me that my department does things together;" 2) "I think promotional procedures are clear and fair;" and 3) "I have a good rapport with my supervisor." The Cronbach's alpha for this index is .59. We use a social bonds index, which iare the variables attachment + commitment. This index has a mean of 10.91, with range of 5 to 16 and a standard deviation of 2.69.

The sexual harassment variable is based on a single Likert scale question that asks them to think about their work environment and respond to this statement: "I believe that sexual harassment is something of the past." For all Likert scale measures, respondents select: 4 = Strongly Agree; 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

Other Variables Gender is coded as 1 = male and 0 = female. Law type is coded 1 = police, 0 = correctional officers. In the sample, correctional and police officers are similar on many measures, and for this reason they are combined into one sample for statistical purposes. Non-white female correctional officers are more likely to have lower job satisfaction scores than the other three types, so this is an important area for future study (see Table 1). Other independent variables, such as age range, race, marital status,

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educational attainment, or the number of years on the job are not significant in stepwise

regression analyses. These socio-demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Quantitative results from the Likert-scale questions demonstrate significant (p <

.05) and substantive (p < .10) differences between males and females.   Table 1 provides

descriptive statistics, and several Likert scale variables of interest are shown in Table 2.

Some substantive differences between the two law enforcement types indicate that police

may have slightly stronger colleague support (X^2 = 40.26, p = .06) and are more apt to

say that they have "a calling" for their profession (X^2 = 7.95, p < .10).

(Table 1 about here)

Female police officers are more likely to have a four year college degree as compared with

others in the sample. Female correctional officers are racially more varied when compared

to the other groups, and female correctional officers are slightly less likely to be married or

partnered. Male correctional officers have served their profession significantly longer than

any other group, with a mean of 15.4 years.

In Table 2, gender differences on key variables of interest show that correctional

officers have a significantly lower social bond index than do their police counterparts. Male

police officers are different from the others in that they are more inclined to agree that

(Table 2 about here)

Sexual harassment is not a current problem in their work place ($p < .10$). Male correctional officers believe that they can perform some aspects of their job better than their female counterparts ($p < .01$). Substantive discrepancies were most evident with female correctional officers. They perceive that they are more likely to be overlooked for promotions and also to perceive that the public does not treat them the same as their male counterparts ($p < .10$).

What is interesting about these comparisons, however, is how similar males' and females' perceptions are across several perspectives: There are only subtle differences in job satisfaction scores; colleague support; views on sexual harassment; how the public treats officers; engendered law enforcement styles; having 'a calling' for their work; and a consensus exists that they will stay in their current job until retirement.

Given these similarities, do men enjoy their work more than women? Can social bonds predict job satisfaction? More importantly, can social bonds alleviate the gender divide by reducing the effect of sexual harassment? In the traditional sense, strong bonds prevent individuals from deviating from acceptable social norms in part by creating group cohesion within normative activities and with law-abiding friends and colleagues (Hirschi 1969). Support of the positive effect of social bonds on the deviant behavior variable, sexual harassment, is shown in Table 3.

Stepwise regression in Table 3 shows the mediating effect social bonds have on the gender-job satisfaction relationship. Table 3 provides results for four different models in which the partial effects of gender, law enforcement type, social bonds, and sexual harassment effect levels of job satisfaction. The findings indicate that male police offers are generally more satisfied with their work than any other group; yet strong social bonds

have a positive impact on job satisfaction for both male and female officers that reduces the gender divide (b = .891, p < .05), shown in Model C. Perceptions that sexual harassment is not current, however, remains significant by gender. Female officers who perceive the problem to be current experience lower job satisfaction scores than their male counterparts (b = .680, p < .01), shown in Model B. The model, job satisfaction = a + b(males and females) +b(police) +b(social bonds) + b(sex harassment is not current) + e accounts for 22% of the variation in job satisfaction.

(Table 3 about here)

DISCUSSION

This analysis reveals that current sexual harassment in the workplace is a predictor of decreased job satisfaction for female law enforcement officers. Fortunately, strong social bonds can repair some of that damage with attachment to fellow officers and commitment to their departments. These social bond measures mediate the sexual harassment-job satisfaction divide that female police and correctional officers experience in their workplace.

What is interesting about these analyses is that sexual harassment does not appear to affect just female officers. Its presence is potentially an issue for both males and females who recognize that harassment affects their entire work environment and not just individuals within it.

This research is an important contribution to understanding one of many obstacles that female law enforcement officers face, but it also provides some hope. It reinforces the value of social support in a high risk work setting, and at the same time, illustrates the damage that sexual harassment can do to officer cohesion to both genders. Perceptions of current sexual harassment on the job weaken social bonds among colleagues that can

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reduce morale and influence other work related factors. The good news is that females can enjoy their careers in this male dominated profession by developing strong ties with coworkers and feel supported within their departments.

Research Limitations

The relatively small number of respondents is a concern for these analyses. Additional analyses that specifically target sub-samples for race/ethnicity and rank should also be included. Another limitation is the single item measures for sexual harassment and attachment, which as a general rule, should be discouraged in this type of analysis (Wanous, Reichers and Hudy 1997). The use of a multi-item scales is recommended for future research (see Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand and Magley 1997).

Conclusion

This paper has successfully evaluated two elements of social bond theory among a small sample of law enforcement officers. It demonstrates that strong social bonds mediate the effect sexual harassment has on gender in two types of law enforcement environments. These findings are of particular importance for the retention of women in law enforcement and illustrate the need for mentoring and continuous ways to build group cohesion and solidarity in departments. On a theoretical note, this research provides a relevant addition to the discussion between gender and job satisfaction by using social bond theory in a way that has never been used before.

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TABLE 1. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS FOR POLICE AND CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS	POLICE OFFICERS (n = 61)		CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS (n = 48)	
	MALES (n = 25)	FEMALES (n = 36)	MALES (n=24)	FEMALES (n = 24)
MEAN AGE RANGE	31-40	31- 40	41-50[*]	31-40
MARRIED/DE FACTO	77%	71%	79%	57%[*]
RACE (% white)	96%	92%	83%	65%[*]
MEAN # of DEPENDENTS	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.2
MEAN HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL DEGREE EARNED	2 yr Associate Degree	4 yr College Degree[*]	2 yr Associate Degree	Some College
ACTIVE DUTY (YRS)	11.9	11.9	15.4[*]	8.5

Based on chi square analysis: [**]p < .01, [*]p < .05, [^]p < .10

Table 2: GENDER DIFFERENCES OF OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS ON SELECTED VARIABLES:

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS	POLICE OFFICERS (n = 62)		CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS (n = 46)	
	MALES (n = 25)	FEMALES (n = 37)	MALES (n = 23)	FEMALES (n =23)
JOB SATISFACTION	9.86	9.04	8.67	7.70
COLLEAGUE SUPPORT	6.70	6.88	6.50	6.05
SOCIAL BONDS INDEX (attachment + commitment)	12.6	12.5	9.2[*]	8.2[*]
SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS NOT CURRENT	2.26[^]	2.00	2.04	1.74
FEMALES ARE OVERLOOKED FOR PROMOTIONS	2.02	2.25	1.92	1.04[^]
PUBLIC TREATS MALE AND FEMALE OFFICERS THE SAME	1.91	2.09	2.04	1.78[^]

MALES CAN DO SOME ASPECTS OF THE JOB BETTER	2.70	2.44	3.03**	1.91
POLICING STYLES ARE DIFFERENT BY GENDER	2.74	2.78	2.83	3.09
OFFICER STATES S/HE HAS 'A CALLING' FOR THE JOB	3.18	2.90	2.21	2.35
OFFICER PLANS TO STAY UNTIL RETIREMENT	3.52	3.38	3.38	3.09

Note: chi square analysis: $^{**}p < .01$, $^*p < .05$, $^\wedge p < .10$

Table 3   UNSTANDARDIZED MULTIVARIATE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR THE EFFECTS OF GENDER, SOCIAL BONDS AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON JOB SATISFACTION

Variable (n = 105)	Model A	Model B With Sexual Harassment	Model C With Social Bonds
Gender (female =0)	.891* (.366)	.671* (.354)	.542^{NS} (.368)
Law Enforcement Type (correctional officers = 0)	1.28** (.366)	1.09* (.351)	.908* (.378)
Perception that sexual harassment is not current	_____	.707** (.204)	.729** (.207)
Social Bonds Index	_____	_____	.257$^\wedge$ (.116)
Adjusted R^2	.119**	.203**	.220**

N.S. = not significant
( ) = standard error
$^\wedge p < .10$; $^*p \le .06$, $^{**}p < .01$